

Psychoanalytic Elucidation of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher": Exploring the Unconscious Mind

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Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe, a prominent Romantic writer of the 1800s, led a troubled life that significantly influenced his literary works. This study conducts a bibliographical analysis focusing on one of Poe's short stories, "The Fall of the House of Usher," to delve into specific psychoanalytic aspects of the characters, providing readers with a deeper understanding. The primary objective of this paper is to employ a psychoanalytic approach to uncover the distinctive elements in Poe's work and to explore parallels with other literary works. The specific goals of this analysis encompass understanding how the uncanny feeling is established within Poe's narrative and recognizing the manifestation of Sigmund Freud's three aspects of the mind in "The Fall of the House of Usher." The findings illuminate the house serving as a metaphorical shelter for the characters, mirroring the mind's role as a sanctuary for the conscious and unconscious elements in the story. Roderick Usher embodies the ego, Madeline is linked to the id, and the narrator represents the superego. Fundamentally, this study underscores the significance of psychology in the literary analysis of Poe's work. The psychoanalytical approach offers a fresh perspective, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the narrative. By identifying the characters as representations of the ego, id, and superego, respectively, the study contributes to a richer exploration of the intricate psychological dimensions embedded in "The Fall of the House of Usher."

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, The Fall of the House of Usher, Psychoanalysis, Unconscious.

Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe, an eminent figure in Romantic literature, unfolded the intricacies of the human psyche through his unsettling narratives during the 1800s. "The Fall of the House of Usher" is a profound expression of Poe's exploration of the unconscious mind amid the chaos of his turbulent life, which was marked by both

literary brilliance and personal tragedy. This 1839 story combines the physical decay of the Usher mansion with the breakdown of the family who lived there. Poe skillfully combines elements of gothic fiction with psychological inquiry as a childhood friend of the sick Roderick Usher recounts the sinister events within the crumbling estate.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" stands as a real example of Poe's ability to put together elements of gothic fiction and psychological inquiry. It was published in 1839. This tale untangles a narrative that interweaves the deteriorating physical structure of the Usher mansion with the disintegration of the family that inhabits it. As the narrator, a childhood friend of the ailing Roderick Usher, recounts the threatening events within the decaying estate, Poe crafts a chilling atmosphere of psychological unrest. The house itself becomes a mirror reflecting the disturbed psyche of its inhabitants, personifying the interconnectedness of external surroundings and the human subconscious. Through raveled symbolism, Poe draws upon his deep-seated understanding of psychoanalytic concepts, creating a narrative landscape ripe for exploration. The reader is invited to cross the blurred boundaries between reality and the uncanny, a domain where the nuances of repressed desires, familial trauma, and the spectral manifestations of the unconscious mind converge.

In order to understand the psychological nuances present in Poe's story, this study undertakes a psychoanalytic investigation of "The Fall of the House of Usher." Using Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic framework, the analysis explores the id, ego, and superego of the characters, revealing the subconscious themes that connect the story. A strong connection is made between the outside world and the subconscious of people as the mansion's decline into decay serves as a metaphor for the characters' collapsing psyches. Additionally, this study explores how Poe's life experiences might have shaped the growth of characters with complex psychological backgrounds, providing a more nuanced understanding of the story's profound psychological depths. Essentially, "The Fall of the House of Usher" becomes a work of gothic art as well as a vivid illustration of Poe's ability to capture the complex interactions between the frightening depths of the unconscious and the outside world.

Research Objectives

- To analyze characters and narrative elements in "The Fall of the House of Usher" using psychoanalytic principles, including Sigmund Freud's id, ego, and superego framework.

- To evaluate potential limitations in the psychoanalytic analysis of the literary text, considering factors such as subjective interpretation and the speculative nature of psychoanalytic approaches.

Literature Review

The works of Aristotle and other scholars demonstrate the longstanding and extensive field of psychoanalytic literary criticism, which has been studied by critics, rhetoricians, and psychologists throughout history (Habib, 2008).

According to Waugh (2006), psychoanalytic literary theory is not a uniform field but comprises diverse variants, illustrating the intricate connection between literature and the human psyche. While various critics acknowledge the roots of literary analysis in psychology, Sigmund Freud is credited with popularizing, systematizing, and theorizing this practice (Barry, 2017). Describing psychoanalytic literary criticism as an approach utilizing psychoanalytic methods to comprehend literary texts, Barry (2017) highlights its origins in Freud's techniques for treating mental disorders. Habib (2008) draws an analogy between Freud's treatment of hysteria patients and a critic's approach to literary works, emphasizing the parallel between analyzing speech and analyzing a literary text. Adams (Adams and Baker, 1994) and Tyson (2014) advocate for the application of psychoanalytic techniques in literature, asserting that understanding human behavior through psychoanalysis can enhance our comprehension of literary texts, which reflect human behavior. In comparison to traditional approaches like formalism, structuralism, and narratology, psychoanalytic literary criticism offers a unique perspective by delving into the psychological dimensions of literary texts (Brooks, 1987).

Unlike other methods that focus on text, characters, reader, or author, psychoanalytic literary criticism directly explores the origins of literature, providing a comprehensive focus on the source material (Mahesar and Mashori, 2018). Erdem (2010) concurs, stating that psychoanalytic criticism brings us closer to the essence of a text than any other methodology. The view that artistic expressions, including literature, stem from unconscious forces is supported by Tyson (2014). LončarVujnović (2013) emphasizes Freud's influence on the exploration of human consciousness in literature. The Freudian psychoanalytic framework encompasses various aspects such as the conscious and unconscious, id, ego, superego, repressions, dreams, sex, and the Oedipus and Electra complexes, each of which warrants separate discussion.

Theoretical Framework

Psychoanalytic Analysis

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) created the psychological system known as psychoanalysis. Apart from being an effective treatment for mental illness, psychoanalysis is a technique used to study human behavior and provides a theory explaining the human psyche. Literary texts, which are about human behavior, must undoubtedly be easier to understand if psychoanalysis can help us better understand human behavior, as stated by Lois Tyson (Tyson, 2006: 11).

Transitioning from this theoretical underpinning to its literary application—Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" in particular—highlights the dynamic interaction between psychological concepts and literary expression. The master of the macabre, Poe, deftly incorporates Freudian theories into his story. This study examines the id-driven impulses, ego-mediated rational responses, and superego-influenced moral conflicts that exist within the psyches of the characters using Freud's framework. A profound examination of the complexities of the unconscious mind is provided by the crumbling Usher mansion, which serves as both a gothic setting and a metaphor for the characters' disintegrating psyches.

The Conscious and Unconscious Mind

From the late 1880s to the early 1900s, Sigmund Freud explored one of the most important categories that he tackled, which is the ideas of the conscious and unconscious mind that arise from his exercise with his patients (Rennison, 2001).

Freud claimed that the mind divided into two parts. The part of the conscious mind that is aware of its own thoughts, wills, designs, or perceptions. In addition, there is the much larger part revealed by free association, "the unconscious mind," which is the opposite of the first part. It is a storeroom of transgressing and dark thoughts and desires. The conscious was the result of repressed thoughts, feelings, and desires, which are unacceptable for the conscious self (Ibid.).

Freud proposed two opposing principles that lay behind behavior: "the pleasure principle" and "the reality principle." The first governs the human at birth and pushes him towards the instant gratification of his wishes. The second is to live with and adapt to the natural world and society. He saw that libido, which is the sexual drive, is the main motive for most behavior. In order to improve mental health, people must re-direct libido into socially acceptable behavior. If people fail to find successful means of re-directing libido, their pleasure principles and reality principles will be in conflict, and the result will be their illness. By working through the repressed thoughts and

desires in the unconscious mind, it could solve the conflict and defeat their mental illness (Rennison, 2001).

Other signposts to the division between conscious and unconscious, which were dreams that happen when people are sleeping and the conscious system of censorship and repression are least careful, fascinated Freud. That is why dreams support Freud's theories of the unconscious (Ibid.).

Freud found that unconscious evidence appears in jokes and human mistakes. He saw that the inordinate thoughts and desires of the unconscious mind are seeking means of expression, burbling under the conscious mind, and searching for an outlet. He claimed that meaningless mistakes carry hidden messages from the unconscious mind. He also argued that jokes were freighted with relationship-conscious emotions of love, fear, and hate. Many of these jokes deal with subjects such as sexuality and family relationships. The tension that these subjects created, rejected expression in socially unacceptable behavior, and hence many jokes are examples of the unconscious working its way into the conscious (Ibid.).

In all of human behavior, dreams, and jokes, Freud discovered that much of mental life was unconscious and that only some individual acts and thoughts were conscious (Ibid.).

The repressed kind of unconscious is the third level and is referred to as the unconscious mind. This part of the psyche deals with unconscious, repressed data. It is a reservoir of feelings, thoughts, urges, and memories that are outside of our conscious awareness. Freud believed that most of the contents of the unconscious were unpleasant, such as feelings of pain, anxiety, or conflict; he also believed that the unconscious continually influences behavior and experience, even though there is no awareness of the influences. Freud links the unconscious to dreaming.

According to Freud, "the forces existing in our unconscious always determine what we do and how we behave, not the choices made by the conscious mind" (Siegfried, 2014: 2).

Upon discussing the unconscious, it is important to note hypnosis and its ability to bring repressed feelings and desires from the unconscious to a more conscious level of awareness. Under hypnosis, we enter a special psychological state with physiological attributes that resemble sleep but give rise to a level of awareness distinguishable from the ordinary state. Freud believed it to be possible to recover repressed memories

through the implementation of hypnosis. Hypnosis could serve as an instrument supplementing normal psychoanalysis by recovering repressed memories of past traumas that one may have experienced early in life, which could then allow for therapeutic breakthroughs to be made on the psychoanalytic level (Siegfried, 2014: 2).

Freud's conception of the unconscious moves from being one that is static to one that is dynamic because, within the psyche, the forces will enter into psychological conflict with one another. The static conception of the unconscious is descriptive. It indicates whatever is outside the field of consciousness, thus embracing both the unconscious and the pre-conscious as one. The dynamic approach to the unconscious allows for a distinction to be made between the two. It designates not only latent ideas but also ideas with a certain dynamic character, ideas keeping apart from consciousness in spite of their intensity and activity (Siegfried, 2014: 2).

Research Methodology

The psychological study of "The Fall of the House of Usher" and its investigation of the unconscious mind will make use of a multifaceted approach that combines psychoanalytic concepts with literary analysis. The goal of this method is to reveal the psychological nuances present in Edgar Allan Poe's story. The text will be closely analyzed in order to highlight important sections, symbols, and themes that allude to psychological components. This entails a thorough analysis of the descriptions, dialogue, and story developments between the characters.

The researcher will examine Poe's deft use of symbolism to reveal its hidden meanings and linkages to psychoanalytic ideas. For example, the crumbling mansion can represent the characters' collapsing psyches. The researcher will analyze the narrative structure to discern any shifts in perspective or focalization that may reveal psychological nuances. The choice of an unnamed narrator and their relationship with Roderick Usher will be scrutinized. The research will use the id, ego, and superego – three psychoanalytic concepts – to understand the actions of the characters. We'll apply Freudian theory to analyze unconscious tensions and desires that emerge in the story. An examination of Poe's biography and mental state at the time of writing will be conducted in order to bolster the theory that Poe may be projecting his own mental health issues into the narrative. Examining the potential impact of his personal experiences on the development of psychologically complex characters is part of this. The study will look into whether Poe critiqued the American culture of his day by using troubled characters. There will be a comparison between societal problems and the

psychological challenges faced by the protagonists. The hypothesis that Edgar Allan Poe represents his own mental troubles and unconsciousness in the story will be tested by aligning biographical information with narrative elements. Through the integration of these methodologies, the research aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the psychological dimensions of "The Fall of the House of Usher" and its reflection of unconscious processes.

4.1 Textual Analysis

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" is a captivating canvas for applying psychoanalytic principles, particularly Sigmund Freud's id, ego, and superego framework. Poe skillfully combines elements of gothic fiction with in-depth psychological research in this complex story to create a tale that speaks to the complexity of the human mind. Poe makes a conscious decision to leave out specific physical details in order to immerse readers in the narrator's spooky tour of the run-down Usher mansion.

This crumbling building serves as a metaphor for the Usher family's declining mental health, highlighting the close relationship between the outside world and the subconscious mind. Rich psychological depth is explored as the mansion turns into a symbolic reflection of the troubled minds that live there.

Id

Edgar Allan Poe skillfully uses the characters' emotional outbursts and innate reactions to their surroundings to highlight the id's influence. According to Freudian psychology, the aspect of the psyche motivated by baser impulses and desires is known as the id. Let us examine how these lines illustrate the id's existence:

"I do not know how it was – but, with my first sight of the building, a sense of heavy sadness filled my spirit" (p.1).

The protagonist's id is reflected in the quick and strong emotional reaction of "heavy sadness" upon seeing the building. This emotional response arises from the most primal, instinctual region of the psyche and is neither reasoned nor rationalized.

"I really believed that around the whole house, and the ground around it, the air itself was different" (p.2)

The idea that there is something different in the air around the house implies a perception that defies logic. It transcends logical analysis and is instead an innate and subjective feeling about the surroundings. This statement perfectly captures the character's instinctive reaction – the id frequently acts based on feelings and intuition.

"There was a coldness, a sickening of the heart, in which I could discover nothing to lighten the weight I felt" (p.1)

Physical experiences like "coldness" and "sickening of the heart" highlight a visceral, physiological reaction. These feelings, which are consistent with the id's emphasis on primal instincts and desires, originate deep within the character's subconscious rather than being the result of conscious thought.

To sum up, Poe uses these lines to create a character that reacts to things quickly, strongly, and based on instinctive reactions to their surroundings. The character's affiliation with baser instincts and desires is demonstrated by the profound melancholy, conviction in a different atmosphere, and bodily experiences, all of which allude to the influence of the id.

Ego

Let us examine how Edgar Allan Poe depicts the ego's influence in the chosen work:

"I stopped my horse beside the building, on the edge of a dark and quiet lake" (p.1).

The horse's decision to stop and take a close look at his surroundings is an example of a moment of sound judgment. According to Freudian theory, the ego is the portion of the psyche that strikes a balance between the needs of reality and the impulses of the id. Here, the narrator shows that pausing was a deliberate decision, indicating a wish to interact with the surroundings in a more deliberate and controlled way.

"Shaking off from my spirit what must have been a dream, I looked more carefully at the building itself" (p.3).

The narrator's attempt to suppress his initial emotional reaction and examine the building more closely and analytically serves as an example of how the ego functions. The ego aims to achieve equilibrium between the id's emotional responses and the ego's

logical evaluation of reality. The character makes a deliberate attempt to make sense of the situation by actively seeking further clarification and wondering if the initial feelings were just a dream.

"He had certain sick fears about the house in which he lived, and he had not stepped out of it for many years" (p.6).

Roderick Usher exhibits a degree of self-awareness and reason when he admits his anxieties and the fact that he has not left the house in many years. This self-awareness, which entails a conscious knowledge of one's own limitations and fears, is a hallmark of the ego.

"He said, however, that much of the gloom which lay so heavily on him was probably caused by something more plainly to be seen – by the long-continued illness – indeed, the coming death – of a dearly loved sister – his only company for many years" (p.7).

Usher's attempt to rationalize his melancholy by attributing it to his sister's illness and impending death is a reflection of his ego-driven attempt to understand and rationalize his emotional state. The ego looks for rational justifications and makes an effort to organize emotional experiences.

Together, these incidents draw attention to points in the story where characters use reason to identify and make sense of their feelings and the circumstances surrounding them—signatures of the ego's power. Collectively, these highlight the role of the ego in the psyche and highlight the narrator's attempt to balance between rational understanding (reality) and emotional responses (id). In order to help the character digest the experience in a more logical and cohesive way, the ego tries to preserve equilibrium and control.

Superego

In the following excerpts from "The Fall of the House of Usher," the superego is analyzed:

"The name had passed always from father to son, and when people spoke of the 'House of Usher,' they included both the family and the family home" (p.2).

This claim draws attention to the custom of the family name being passed down through the generations. The focus on maintaining the family lineage exhibits a sense of obligation and conformity to social norms, which is consistent with the superego's influence. Upholding tradition and meeting social expectations are issues that the superego is concerned with.

"Its owner was named Roderick Usher. We had been friends when we were boys; but many years had passed since our last meeting" (p.2).

The reference to the family's past, in particular the friendship that grew up between the narrator and Roderick Usher, suggests a bond based on similar upbringing and values. The superego, representing societal and moral standards, is often shaped by early socialization and shared experiences within a community. The reference to their past friendship suggests a shared background and common moral values.

These components all work together to show how the superego shaped the characters' perceptions of their upbringing and society norms. The emphasis on the family's continuity and the shared past contributes to the sense of duty and conformity to established norms, characteristic of the superego's role in psychological theory.

"He said, 'I have no fear of pain, but only the fear of its result – of terror. I feel that the time will soon arrive when I must lose my life, and my mind, and my soul, together, in some last battle with that horrible enemy: fear!' (p.5).

Here, Roderick Usher conveys a fear of the psychological and spiritual fallout in addition to the physical agony. This implies a superego influence since it displays a moral concern for his soul's welfare. The superego is preoccupied with moral principles and frequently experiences anxiety related to potential moral transgressions.

"When she dies,' he said, with a sadness which I can never forget, 'when she dies, I will be the last of the old, old family – the House of Usher' "(p.6).

Roderick Usher appears to be concerned about the legacy and customs of his family given his sadness over the possible dissolution of the Usher family lineage. This worry is consistent with the moral and social norms linked to the superego.

"For several days following, her name was not spoken by either Usher or myself; and during this period I was busy with efforts to lift my friend out of his sadness and gloom" (p.7)

The narrator demonstrates moral responsibility and compassion by making an attempt to console Roderick Usher and lessen his sorrow. This sympathetic reaction is consistent with the superego's observance of social norms and concern for other people's welfare.

Apart from the critical examination of the id, ego, and superego components in "The Fall of the House of Usher," it is imperative to acknowledge the deft way in which Edgar Allan Poe skillfully integrates these psychological concepts to enhance the intricacy of the story. Poe's deft use of the id is demonstrated by the protagonist's instinctive responses to the enigmatic mansion and its environs. The acute and instinctive nature of the id is further highlighted by the deeply depressing, intuitive perceptions of a different atmosphere and the bodily reactions of coldness and a sickening heart. By using these devices, Poe creates a character whose feelings are derived from instincts and desires that are fundamental to the story's overall unease and foreboding.

Poe's portrayal of the ego is just as powerful, especially in light of the narrator's purposeful actions and attempts to make sense of the unsettling experiences. The narrator's horse stops to study the building intently and then consciously analyzes it, showcasing the ego's role as a mediator between the impulsive id and the rational superego. The ego presents a complex picture of people trying to make sense of the hazy boundaries between the supernatural and reality by striking a balance between gut feelings and rational comprehension. By highlighting the characters' internal battles to preserve composure and reason in the face of the uncanny, this deft use of the ego deepens the story.

Poe uses the superego to influence characters' views and behavior by applying moral and societal norms. The emphasis on shared upbringing, family continuity, and the Usher name's transmission highlights how the superego shapes characters' morals and obligations. The way in which Roderick Usher worries about the family lineage and his fear of the psychological and spiritual repercussions emphasizes the role that the superego plays in creating moral anxieties. Furthermore, the superego's emphasis on interpersonal responsibility and social norms is supported by the narrator's kind attempts to comfort Usher during his grieving period. Poe skillfully adds superego

elements to the story to enhance it by presenting moral quandaries and social norms that add to the story's overall psychological complexity.

Conclusion

Conclusively, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" represents a superb blend of psychological analysis and gothic literature, exploring the mysterious depths of the human psyche. This study deftly employs Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic framework to reveal the characters' complex id, ego, and superego interactions. As a powerful metaphor, the crumbling mansion depicts the intricate dance between the unconscious and the outside world while also reflecting the characters' psychological decline. Poe's purposeful omission of the narrator's physical attributes enhances reader immersion and allows for a more thorough examination of Roderick Usher's inner world.

Poe unravels the actions, moral dilemmas, and dreams of the characters by incorporating Freudian principles into the story, adding a tangible psychological tension to the plot. Freudian analysis is repeated throughout the story, which highlights the characters' profound psychological struggles and the psychoanalytic elements' enduring influence. Further investigation into Poe's life also suggests a possible connection between his personal struggles and the deep psychological intricacies woven throughout the story.

Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" ultimately functions as a foreboding canvas on which he skillfully depicts the complexities of the human psyche, inviting readers to traverse the hazy lines dividing reality from the unsettling worlds within.

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