

A Jungian Archetypal Analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's The Fall of the House of Usher

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Abstract: Jungian Archetypes, as proposed by Carl Jung, are universal, archaic and innate models of human knowledge, behaviors and thoughts which are firmly rooted in the “collective unconscious” inherited from human ancestors. In general, Jung identified four major archetypes as the “persona”, the “shadow”, the “anima” and the “animus”. According to him, whether the balance between androgynous personalities or the confrontation of the “persona” and the “shadow”, is the process of human self-actualization and individuation. Currently, Jungian Archetypes have been widely adopted to do literature analysis in which Edgar Allan Poe's instrument of Over-Soul seems to be a perfect match. In Poe's major works, *The Fall of the House of Usher* is one of the most impressive and prestigious one in exploration of the human psyche. Insofar, through the application of Jungian Archetypes, this essay aims to interpret the psychological states of Roderick Usher, Madeline Usher and the narrator in this short story to probe into the hidden recesses of human minds in Edgar Allan Poe's age.

1. Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe, as a poet, literary critic and short story writer with distinct personality, has cast a strong light on American literature to explore human psychology. With his unique aesthetic tendency and initiative detective genre, Poe has invited readers to a world without absolute order, reason and morality. Instead of telling the stories themselves, his works are trying to invoke humanity of its potential mental states and challenge the traditional definition of beauty. According to him, macabre beauty truly exists and it has something related to soul. In his response to the criticism from James E. Heath, he explained his interpretation of Pseudo-horror which was traditionally called “Germanic” on the opposite of beauty:

“If in many of my productions terror has been the thesis, I maintain that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul, —that I have deduced this terror only from its legitimate sources, and urged it only to its legitimate results.” (Walker, 115)

In fact, beauty is never a total equivalent to the emotion of pleasure. As terror probes into the deep corners of human soul, Poe's works are justifiable for his every attempt to reflect the truth of human nature so as to propose another criterion of the beauty in related to terror and death. That's the reason why his works always represent with horrible charm and irresistible magic with marvelous coexistence of insanity and rationality.

First published in 1839, *The Fall of the House of Usher* has since assumed its place as Poe's best-known story. The narrator visited the melancholy House of Usher in a dull and dark day. In his narration, his talented but depressed friend Roderick Usher buried his sister alive and finally perished with her in her day of resurgence. There exists a lot of ambiguity in this short story which leaves great room for readers to contemplate its theme and the psychology of the three characters. It's even not exaggerating to say that readers can also find themselves in its depiction.

Ever since the mix of psychology and literature grew into a coherent study field, Jungian Archetypes have been generously applied in myriads of literature analyses. Jung believed the human psyche is composed of three elements: the "ego", the "personal unconscious" and the "collective unconscious". He developed Freud's concept of "ego" into the individual conscious mind thus proposed the "personal unconscious" containing the thoughts and memories that had been suppressed. The "collective unconscious" originated from the cultural and psychological inheritance from human ancestors. According to Jung, archetypes are inherited potentials based on the "collective unconscious" which are inferred from myths, religions or dreams, and actualized in human's attempt to interacting with the outside world.

Among the four major archetypes, the "persona" is the explicit expression of one's ego in his or her socialization. The term "persona" in Latin has a meaning of "mask" referring to the different masks people wear in face with different groups and situations. The "shadow", as the counterpart of the "persona", represents human's weaknesses, desires, negative instincts and shortcomings which we try to hide from the outside world. The "anima" is a feminine image in the male psyche, whereas the "animus" is a male image in the female psyche. They are also called "androgynous personalities".

This essay is divided into three parts to interpret the mental states of the three main characters Roderick Usher, Madeline Usher and the narrator from the perspective of Jungian Archetypes. Through the analysis of Roderick's "shadow" and "anima", Madeline's "animus" and the narrator's "persona" in his unreliable narration, this essay aims to explore what had impeded them from individuation so as to cause their mental disorders and irreversible devastation in the end.

2. Roderick: The "Shadow" and "Anima" in Uncertain Balance of Terror

Based on Immanuel Kant's categories, Plato's Ideas, and Arthur Schopenhauer's prototypes, Carl Jung proposed that humanity is inherited with a combination of thoughts, behaviors, and feelings from ancestors which constitutes what he called as "collective unconscious". According to Jung, when human beings enter consciousness or manifest on their interaction with the outside world, the archetypes show up as the explicit forms of their inherited potentials. In human's socialization, a part of their true selves have been hidden as the "shadow". To seek reconciliation with the outside world and actualization in personality, humanity needs to keep a balance between the "persona" they show and the "shadow" they hide to prevent them from destroying themselves.

However, the protagonist Roderick Usher is a man living in his "shadow" for his whole life. His shadow has two major sources: the gloomy atmosphere in his living environment and the shatters imposed by his family tradition. He confined himself in a castle without light and bright colors. In the text, there is a description by the narrator:

"An atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn - a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued."

As depicted by the narrator, he entered this castle feeling "an utter depression of soul" with "an unredeemed dreariness of thought". Also, the house owner, Roderick Usher, suffered from a mental disorder which devours his marvelously decent look and perfectly modulated utterance. He was controlled by "a morbid acuteness of the senses" with which he could neither endure sapid food nor

the odor of all flowers. This super sensitiveness cut his way of interacting with the outside and searching for pleasure.

The other source of Roderick's shadow has something to do with his family tradition of incest. It was implied by the author in a subtle manner which accounts for Roderick's reason for burying his sister alive. To begin with, the narrator mentioned the "deficiency" of the family is "of collateral issue", indicating the family forced siblings with same blood to marry each other in case the family descent be smudged by collateral force. Roderick may have had an immoral love for his sister, but his incest with her had strong linkage with the family's "influence which the one, in the long lapse of centuries, exercised upon the other". Roderick wanted to end this cycle of exercising incest, so he sent his living sister into the coffin as a symbol of terminating this factitious "direct line of descent". The text insinuates this intention implicitly:

" 'Her death,' he said, with a bitterness which I can never forget, 'would leave him(him the hopeless and the frail) the last of the ancient race of the Ushers.' "

If there weren't a family tradition of incest, Roderick could marry another woman to pass down the descent of the Ushers. Nonetheless, Roderick asserted his sister's death would leave him the last one in the House of Usher, which means the descent of Usher could be inherited by no body but his sister. Hence, the tragedy of Roderick and Madeline can be traced back to their inhuman family tradition of incest.

The "anima", as defined by Jung, represents the feminine nature in the male's unconscious to help humanity reach a balance between its masculine parts and feminine parts. It is "the contrasexual part of a man's psyche, the image of the opposite sex that he carries in both this personal and his collective unconscious" (Guerin et al., 2004, p. 181). As for Roderick Usher, his "anima" manifests itself in his timidity and his female counterpart Madeline Usher.

As a man and brother, Roderick dare not to fight against his family tradition before his incest with his sister. Whether this incest originated from family oppression or his sexual desire, he let tragedy happen and terminated this tradition at the price of his sister's death. Even if he felt guilty after burying his sister alive, he had never tried to punish himself. Instead, he dare not to tell his friend the truth of Madeline's death. In the text, there is Roderick's monologue in the day of Madeline's resurgence:

"Yet I dared not - oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am! - I dared not - I dared not speak! We have put her living in the tomb!"

In fact, to put his sister living in the tomb is a form of torment even murder. For so long, Roderick lived in his shadow, oppressed by his family, burdened by the shame of secrets and distorted by his freaky love of his twin sister. Hence, he continuously searched for help and protection from his "anima" which consequently overshadowed his male part in psyche. His twin sister Madeline, who shared "a striking similitude" with his brother, can also be considered as the female counterpart of Roderick's "anima". After the death of Madeline, Roderick acted as if a part of him had gone, and there is proof in the text:

"His ordinary manner had vanished. His ordinary occupations were neglected or forgotten. He roamed from chamber to chamber with hurried, unequal and objectless step."

At the beginning of the narrator's visit, Roderick, even if suffered from mental diseases, had still welcomed him with organized utterance and tried to act normally. However, the death, or say, the inhumation of Madeline drove Roderick completely crazy. His "anima" died with Madeline, his love faded with Madeline and his unconscious mental protection diminished with Madeline. Additionally, the relationship between Roderick and Madeline has something in common with Poe's relation with his cousin. His poem for her can be compare with no earthly sensation which directs to another way of interpretation, namely, Poe's love of his cousin. Hence, certain guess expands the horizon of studying *The Fall of the House of Usher*. To take it as his imagination, emotional monologue or self-

criticism, requires further study and new points of view in future.

3. Madeline: The Oppressed Soul and the “Animus” for Vengeance

The “animus” represents the masculine nature in female’s unconscious to repel the oppression and discrimination from patriarchal society. In a traditional, ancient and noble family like the Ushers, women had neither respect from other, nor the rights of succession. As described in the text: “the consequent undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony with the name”, Madeline, whose blood merely functioned to deliver Usher’s children, wasn’t deemed as the person qualified for property succession. Whether for Poe’s Misogyny or his intention to reveal the harsh reality of noble women, there is even little description of Madeline herself in this story. From the description of the narrator, Madeline was ill, weak and motionless and her resurgence was considered as horrible as wizardry. Clearly, women could only be voiced in other’s description.

Nonetheless, what Madeline has shown in this story is more than the stereotype of noble women at that time. Her “animus” in blood awakened which encouraged her to battle with disease and seek revenge for her brother. Here is proof in the text: “Hitherto she had steadily borne up against the pressure of her malady, and had not betaken herself finally to bed.” She appeared strong will and courage to fight against death and the tragedy in destiny. Though faced with the oppression from family, incest with her brother and incurable disease, this woman never surrendered in life or committed suicide. Her life and soul was burning for good that not a single force in this world can destroy. Even death deprived her of blood and flesh, she could seek revenge in the form of ghost. At the end of this story, there is a description of her revenge:

“For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold - then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated.”

This scene enormously reveals Poe’s macabre beauty and beauty of death. Actually it’s not the death of beauty which shook people’s minds, but the beauty’s struggle for life and her stern resolution to revenge. “The death of beauty” is not equal to “the beauty of death”. “The beauty of death” lies not only in its uncertainty and unknowns, but also in human’s struggle for life at that moment. “The death of beauty” is amorally striking, touching and overwhelming, which constitutes the complexity and profoundness of Poe’s aesthetics.

4. The Narrator: The Deceptively Rational “Persona” in Unreliable Narration

In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, some readers may forget the existence of the third character, who was the narrator of this short story. For so many authors have permeated their opinions with the application of the first person point of view, it’s possible that readers may take the narrator as the equivalence of the author and fall into the cognitive trap. Apparently, Edgar Allan Poe is a master of unreliable narration in which the narrator is also one of his characters to unfold a part of the truth. Unreliable narration was first proposed by Wayne C. Booth in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* to explain the inconsistency between the narration and the intention of the author. This rhetoric can be achieved through the application of a narrator with limited knowledge, restricted social experiences or insufficient information of the whole story, so that its narration can only reflect a corner of the iceberg with a biased point of view. However, this ambiguity also leaves reader the room to think and guess for the author’s real intention so as to gain reading pleasure from distant aesthetics. Insofar, the narrator in *The Fall of the House of Usher* is a complex figure worth studying on.

The whole story was narrated in a rational voice, but it’s in conflict with the narrator’s unease and fear after he entered the House of Usher. If his fear truly existed, he could not have told the story in such a clear and organized way. Even when he witnessed the death of Roderick and Madeline and the

collapse of the House of Usher, he still narrated with decent utterance:

“While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened - there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind - the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight - my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder.”

In this text, the narrator tried to prove his narrative authenticity with a rational tone, but instead this part of narration showed the most subversive contradictory in this short story, which lay in the inconsistency between the tone of the narrator and the feelings he expressed. It was the narrator’s “persona” as his rational part to display in the outside that encouraged him to hide his true feelings as well as part of the truth. This could to some degree explain the vacancy of the plots in this story, such as the reason why Madeline succumbed to death and why Roderick had mental disorders. This vacancy can be owing to the limited information to which the narrator had access or to the narrator’s deliberate intention to hide some clues.

Hence, the origin and the nature of this story require further contemplation. Is it a true story or a dream of the narrator? The beginning of his narration turns out to be confusing and out of state: “I know not how it was - but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit.” As the narrator appeared to be in an unsound mind, but still tried to behave and utter normally, his narration seemed to lose its credibility in his attempt to retreat from this story. Insofar, there could be another interpretation that this story belongs to the narrator himself, or even it’s closely related to the ego of the author. If the story is a dream of the narrator, we can take the narrator as the rational part of Roderick and the Roderick the emotional part of the narrator, which indicates that the narrator is unfolding his “shadow”, his secret desire for his sister, as well as his sin and crime in this desperate life. Or if Roderick, Madeline and the narrator are the split and separated souls of the author himself.

In the first level, Poe shares similarities with Roderick, a talented but gloomy man, and also, he has special affections on his female relatives. In the second level, Madeline, as Roderick’s female counterpart, has striking similitude with him. In the third level, the narrator turns out to be Roderick’s only friend and last hope to help him survive. Hence, Roderick represents to be the core of the story which connects Madeline, the narrator and the author. Finally, all the characters acts as the part of the soul, or say, personality of the author. This speculation makes sense, because in the text, the narrator tried so hard to eliminate his connection with the House of Usher, but some details have put all his efforts in vain:

“While I hesitated not to acknowledge how familiar was all this - I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up.”

Clearly, the narrator was familiar with the House of Usher, but he tried to deny this fact so as to cut his relationship with this story. Therefore, we can come to conclusion that he displayed his “persona” in his unreliable narration, but hid his true intention in the story of the Ushers.

5. Conclusion

Through the analysis of *The Fall of the House of Usher*, we can dive into the psychological states of the three characters from the perspective of Jungian Archetypes. In this short story, Edgar Allan Poe creates a world without absolute reason and explores the recess of human psyche. Whether this story represents as his imagination or his monologue, it has initiated a unique genre of psychoanalysis and macabre beauty which bestowed him with an essential position in American literature. In Poe’s works, readers can always gain more insights and personal contemplation than mere feelings of terror or pain. Poe is a great writer always worth exploring, and our study on him will never be put in abeyance.

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