

Decoding Binary Oppositions in the Fall of the House of Usher

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Abstract: *The Fall of the House of Usher*, written by Edgar Allan Poe, is an outstanding example of 19th-century American Gothic fiction. In this novel, the creation of binary opposition and its significance can be observed. My aim is to decode three sets of duality items based on the textual information about this story.

1. Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe, a 19th-century American writer, is renowned for his distinct contributions to Romantic literature. However, his themes, imagery, and style diverge significantly from those of mainstream Romantic writers. There is little action to carry the plot, no adventures into catacombs, no escape from chambers, and no crimes to be solved. "The story consists of imagery rather than plot, and description rather than narrative." It masterfully explores themes of binary oppositions, such as male and female, sanity and madness, and life and death to clarify various relationships.[1]

2. Definition of Binary Opposition

Binary opposition, a concept that originated in structuralism, is the practice of categorizing two ideas or concepts as opposites to explore how they interact and relate to each other. It is a literary technique that has been employed time and again to dissect the complexities of human thought and societal constructs. One prominent critic, Roland Barthes[6], has eloquently underscored the notion that "all language is imbued with a system of signs," suggesting that these binary oppositions are the building blocks through which we can unlock the subtle and often implicit meaning embedded within a text.

In the realm of literature, the application of binary opposition serves as a powerful tool for generating tension, conflict, and depth within a narrative. It allows authors to explore a wide array of themes and concepts, often leading to a more profound understanding of the human condition. By binary opposition, such as good versus evil, light versus darkness, or love versus hate, writers are able to create multifaceted representations that mirror the intricacies of real life.

There is no denying that the use of dualism in literary analysis is very beneficial. It provides a framework for critics and readers alike to delve deeper into the text, deciphering the layers of meaning and extracting the hidden gems that may otherwise go unnoticed. By adopting this

principle, one is able to gain a comprehensive understanding of the text's underlying messages, thus enriching one's interpretation and appreciation of the work at hand. In essence, the principle of binary opposition serves as a valuable key, unlocking the secrets of literary masterpieces and illuminating the intricate tapestry of human thought and emotion.

2.1 Male versus Female

The differentiation between the sexes, male and female, stands out as a vital binary opposition that runs throughout the narrative. This division takes on an enhanced significance when considering the fact that Roderick and Madeline Usher are twins. Roderick said Madeline's illness would make him "the last of the ancient race of the Ushers" upon her death. Because they are twins, there exists between them "a scarcely intelligible nature of her malady".

To be specific, the twins have long survived within the walls of the family mansion, cutting off from the outside world. Add to this Roderick's ongoing battle with chronic depression and the immense pressure he faces, and it becomes a subject of much speculation among critics. They have suggested that the intense emotional connection and shared isolation may have led to an incestuous relationship between the twins. Imagine if Roderick and Madeline were brothers instead of twins, the narrative would likely invite assumptions about a homosexual relationship. Such themes were nearly taboo for Edgar Allan Poe to explore openly in the early 19th century. Therefore, by presenting the twins as they are, Poe was able to use this binary opposition throughout the story. Under this circumstance, he creates the necessary tension and conflict that drives the narrative forward. This careful crafting of the characters' relationships and the implications they hold is a testament to Poe's skill in using binary oppositions to deepen the story's thematic complexity and emotional resonance.

Furthermore, the discord between the sexes is also exemplified through the interchanging of male and female characteristics between Roderick and Madeline. As a male protagonist, Roderick embodies features that are typically associated with the fairer sex, such as a "ghastly pallor of the skin," "silken hair," "delicate nose," and "beautiful curves." These attributes suggest a propensity for artistic pursuits and a fragile psychological constitution, which associated with feminine qualities. In contrast, Madeline exhibits a more masculine figure. She ultimately wages a fierce battle to liberate herself from the constraints of the tomb, a struggle that may be interpreted as a kind of masculinity. The transformation in the characteristics of the brother and sister challenges traditional gender stereotypes while creating a conflict to enhance the story's interest.

2.2 Sanity versus Madness

Another compelling binary opposition in "The Fall of the House of Usher" is sanity versus madness. Initially, the narrator is portrayed as a rational visitor attempting to comfort Roderick in his perceived madness.[3] He witnesses Roderick's "incoherent manner, a series of feeble and futile struggles to overcome a habitual trepidancy—an excessive nervous agitation." "Suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses", along with the fact that he buried his sister alive in the end, Roderick is undoubtedly going insane. By contrast, the narrator shows sanity as he makes an effort to control the situation. They "painted and read together, or I listened, as if in a dream, to the wild improvisations of his speaking guitar". Even in the climactic scene, when Roderick seems to have descended into madness, the narrator reads to him to calm him down.

However, Poe's genius lies not only in portraying Roderick's descent into madness but also in depicting the narrator's own madness. At the story's beginning, the narrator is overwhelmed by the oppressive atmosphere of the house. He describes the house as "oppressively," "insufferable," and "dark," which reflects his descent into a state of unease. Even the description "I can compare to no

earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveler upon opium”, suggests that the narrator probably has smoked opium and then has a sense of hallucination. By the time Madeline is entombed, the narrator has become so deeply affected by the house's gloom that he admits, "It was no wonder that his condition terrified - that it infected me." As a result, readers would be confused about who is rational or who is insane, grappling with the uncertainty along with the narrator.

2.3 Life versus Death

In "The Fall of the House of Usher," the opposition between life and death is notably precarious, as the text's imagery and rhetoric consistently blur the boundary between these states. Ultimately, death prevails over life, resulting in the subsequent collapse[4].

Firstly, Poe sets a blurred boundary between life and death with a description of the House of Usher and its surroundings. The house itself is a physical embodiment of this decay, with its "bleak walls," "vacant eye-like windows," and "decayed trees" contributing to a lifeless atmosphere. It is described as both ancient and decaying yet still standing, which shows a living entity trapped by death. The fissure in the house, which eventually causes its collapse, symbolizes the fragile boundary between life and death. Additionally, some textual information actually suggests that Madeleine did not die in the coffin. For example, the narrator notices the apparent bloom on her cheek, which means that Madeline might be in a cataleptic fit instead of being dead. Roderick and Madeline are in fact two sides of one, pointing to life and death respectively, neither of which can enjoy full life or suffer full death[5].

Finally, the fissure in the house, which eventually causes its collapse, symbolizes the fragile boundary between life and death. The deaths of Roderick and Madeline signify the disintegration of this boundary-death will eventually triumph over life.

3. Conclusion

The above three sets of binary antitheses forms the quintessential matrix of contradiction and conflict within the narrative tapestry of "The Fall of the House of Usher" penned by Edgar Allan Poe [7]. These diametrically opposed pairs serve as the literary embodiment of the duality inherent in the human condition, encapsulating the battles between light and darkness, life and death, sanity and madness. Poe adeptly employs these opposites to depict intricate and manifold relationships, thus providing a window into the complexities of human interaction. In so doing, he reveals not only his mastery of the narrative craft but also the depth of his comprehension-the subtleties and deeper layers of human experience. Through these binary opposites, Poe masterfully clarifies the inner workings of the human psyche, and also explores our innate capacity for both good and evil, clarity and confusion, hope and despair.

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