

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SELF UNDER THE LIGHT OF THE OTHER IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S "THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER"

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- **ABSTRACT:** The concept of identity has been broadly discussed in the Western Cultures since the threshold of the Enlightenment in the Eighteenth Century. However, before the advent of Multiculturalism at the end of the Twentieth Century, when the construction of identities achieved a diversity of expressions, it passed by a remarkable transformation in the Nineteenth Century, especially during Romanticism, whose shape was characterized by an individual centered on himself/herself, despite some attempts to take otherness into account. Therefore, this essay aims at focusing on the identities of the chief characters of Edgar Allan Poe's "The fall of the House of Usher" and their interaction with themselves and the environment where they are inserted. In order to achieve such objective, the Semiotics, with some help from the Freudian Psychoanalysis, will provide the theoretical support for the analyses that follow.
- **KEYWORDS:** Identity. Individual. Romanticism. House. Melancholy.

“Here the love is between brother and sister.
When the self is broken, and the mystery of the
recognition of otherness fails, then the longing for
identification with the beloved becomes a lust.”
(LAWRENCE, 1971, p. 81-82).

The narrator of "The fall of the House of Usher" starts his first person narrative describing the landscape he finds out when he arrives at the Usher's site. At first glance, it seems to be a nature working as a mirror in which the state of his soul is projected. It is "a dull, dark, and soundless day" (POE, 1949, p. 34). Some lines after it, he confirms the parity between the environment and his soul: "I looked upon the scene before me [...] with an utter depression of soul [...]" (POE, 1949, p. 34). These passages show the narrator looking at the environment in a way that allows him to interpret it in relation to a third thing, which is a

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‘meaning’ that addresses to something beyond the immediate environment, and this thing he imagines is the psychological condition of his friend Roderick who he is going to meet.

Indeed, such a meaning is not only constructed from his impressions on the landscape but there is a relation of complement in which the environment performs the role of a messenger who carries a meaning and the narrator is the receptor. Thus, the environment and the interior world of the narrator, from where his conception of Roderick emerges, form an ecological hermeneutic circle.

As someone who tells a story, the narrator installs himself in the place of the one who establishes a kind of contract with those to whom he addresses his story, i.e., we the readers. In this contract, the narrator occupies the place of the one who possesses a narrative, therefore, a place of someone who has plenty of conditions to do so. It is important to emphasize that his narrative concerns the memories he brought back from the episodes he had experienced in the House of Usher a long time ago.

We can observe that his first utterances are not acts of speech or, at least acts of speech addressed to someone else but acts of internal speech, which are in accordance with the situation of memories or reflections. However, we may regard them as pure acts of speech if we take into account that they are addressed to the readers, but in this case, it is necessary that we accept the narrator’s condition as being of a writer or a storyteller and we, the readers, the other part of the contract.

Considering that ambiguity is a figure of speech largely used in the romantic aesthetics, the beginning of the narrative still poses a situation in which the narrator exchanges the role with his own self. Better saying, when he stresses: “What was it – I paused to think – What was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher?” (POE, 1949, p. 35), he is clearly speaking to himself in a reflexive way. In this sense, that passage shows us that we create a self and the other when we talk to ourselves, without another interlocutor. It is exactly what happens to the narrator when he produces that question.

As the romantics used to personify nature, the narrator looks at it as his confidant, projecting his own somber and starting to construct his identity as the self in relation to the environment. Thus, his relationship with nature is the first mark of otherness contained in the story.

The letter Roderick sends to his friend, the narrator, is quite important in the plot as it inserts Roderick Usher in the narrative. Indeed, he is a central character not only in the story itself but in the process of construction of the narrator’s identity as Roderick will function as the other in this process.

It is known that friendship is a *sine qua non* for the romantics and the narrator does not hesitate in fulfilling its request. Before starting to talk to Roderick and to accomplish his demands, the narrator addresses us the records of Roderick’s family as if he wanted to justify what he and Roderick would do. It is important to note

that there is a connection between the landscape the narrator describes and the records about Roderick and his family. This conjunction integrates the scenery and the psychology of the characters generating a semiotic context and it is exactly this scenery that allows for the narrator to produce his efficacious formulations. The following passage provides support for such assertion:

I had so worked upon my imagination as really to believe that about the whole mansion and domain there hang an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity – an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of the heaven but which had reeked upon from the decayed trees, and the grey wall and the silent tarn – a pestilent and mystic vapour, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued. (POE, 1949, p. 37).

If we look up the word ‘silence’ in the Oxford Dictionary (WEHMEIER, 2010), we will find out “a complete lack of noise or sound” as its meaning. Nevertheless, in semiotic terms, silence appears in “The fall of the House of Usher” as a figure of speech whose meaning may be shock, apprehension or perplexity. These feelings may be deduced from the passage when the narrator turns up in the House of Usher and is conducted by the servant to Roderick’s studio. On one of the staircases, he meets the physician of the family who passes by him wearing “a minded expression of low cunning and perplexity” (POE, 1949, p. 38).

When the narrator sits before Roderick in the studio, a silent “psychoanalysis” takes place between them as some minutes of absence of dialogue give place to the narrator’s thought in relation to his friend. Before Roderick says anything, the narrator, as if he were a psychoanalyst, analysis Roderick’s condition, firstly from his complexion, which the narrator describes in detail (POE, 1949, p. 39), then, from some reminiscences of their childhood.

The narrator carries on constructing Roderick’s identity, modulating his views from Roderick’s complexion through his voice (POE, 1949, p. 40). This change is more substantial because the voice is the instrument through which the words and utterances are produced and the discourse, in turn, may be seen as a means of expression of both the self and the other.

In this process, it is essential to perceive the other in the person of Roderick whose profile allows the narrator to start constructing his own identity. The story shows the necessity of Roderick in opening up his soul and in demanding his friend’s help. But, the narrator also needs Roderick, considering that his narration is centered on his friend’s difficulties. So, the narrator organizes his message or narrative as an answer to Roderick’s will and necessity, and this interaction is fundamental for the social game to be set up.

Yet it is often thought that their difference in complexion and mental (dis)order is based upon a frame of likeness, in which difference and likeness are produced

by the narrator as a discursive stratagem. Given the beginning of their dialogue, it is reasonable to stress that Roderick tries to influence his friend while the narrator attempts to interpret Roderick's speech, and these procedures give origin to a polemic-contractual frame. As their conversation continued, Roderick unveils his malady as being "[...] a constitutional and a family evil, and one for which he despaired to find a remedy – a mere nervous affection, he immediately added, which would undoubtedly soon pass off. It displayed itself in a host of unnatural sensations." (POE, 1949, p. 40).

The narrator, performing the role of a "psychoanalyst", listening to Roderick's details, and referring to those unnatural sensations points out that they "interested and bewildered" (POE, 1949, p. 40) him. Then, the narrator concludes that Roderick "suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses" (POE, 1949, p. 40). The psychoanalysis of Roderick shows that his mental disorder, which is vital to understand the story, is close to a picture of schizophrenia. I base my argument on the fact that he became unable to balance his emotions and behavior and, consequently, he withdraws from reality and personal relationships.

The psychological forces struggle inside Roderick and he tells his agony to his friend as if predicting the awful end to come: "I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together [...]" (POE, 1949, p. 41). The narrator, as a confidant of Roderick, conjectures about the influence his friend picked up from "the dwelling which he tenanted", and also in the "form and substance of his family mansion" (POE, 1949, p. 41). Besides, the figure of the Lady Madeline is quoted for the first time in the narrative and she would be considered the cause of Roderick's illness.

In fact, the Lady Madeline is a crucial character in this story and her identity may be traced side by side with Roderick's one, not only for the reason that they are twins but also because both were brought up in the same sick environment. According to the narrator, "[...] the disease of the Lady Madeline had long baffled the skill of her physicians [...]" (POE, 1949, p. 42), and it is quite remarkable to underscore that she does not utter a word in the narrative and her first appearance before the narrator is very phantasmagorical as the following passage suggests: "[...] when he spoke, the Lady Madeline (for so was she called) passed slowly through a remote part of the apartment, and, without having noticed my presence, disappeared." (POE, 1949, p. 42).

The fact that the Lady Madeline is the only companion Roderick has for years may be seen as an evidence of the schizophrenia of both. The complexity of the twin psychology is still a topic to embarrass the psychoanalysts and those who work with psychology. In spite of not being at stake in this essay, this subject probably drew Edgar Allan Poe's attention so that he could use it as an aesthetic device. However, the narrator conjectures about her disease and concludes, as if he were a physician, that she suffers of a "[...] settled apathy, a gradual wasting away

of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character [...]” (POE, 1949, p. 42).

The Lady Madeline gets out of the scene, at least for a while, and both the narrator and Roderick spend many days leaving her alone. During this time, they carry on their game of “analyst” and the one who is analyzed, but what emerges from this attempt of the narrator to comprehend and alleviate Roderick’s pains is his absorption of Roderick’s features, as we can see in this passage: “[...] we painted and read together, or I listened, as if in a dream, to the wild improvisations of his speaking guitar.” (POE, 1949, p. 42).

The rules of the acts of speech are characterized as “constituent”. Thus, the narrator adopts an intentional behavior, which is ruled by Roderick’s strange requests. Those rules present a regularity that the narrator does not perceive once he obeys them with certain automatism. It is important to read Roderick’s speech as an act of violence as it forces his friend to deal with some facts from the past and he also compels the narrator to recognize them as such. In other words, the narrator is constructing his identity according to Roderick’s illness.

The narrator seems to be conscious that he has been commanded by Roderick when he says: “Yet I should fail in an attempt to convey an idea of the exact character of the studies or of the conditions in which he involved me or led the way.” (POE, 1949, p. 43). The narrator seizes the opportunity to depict the symbolism he reads in the artistic pursuits of Roderick’s mansion such as the last waltz of Von Weber and the paintings, which he connects with the idea of vagueness, which he attaches to the figure of his friend.

It is quite meaningful to stress how the external environment and the internal one perform important semiotic roles whose functions are to contribute to the psychological condition of the characters and the narrator’s impressions on the Ushers as well. I may argue that the dreary and dark sceneries work out as mirrors of the unhealthy condition of Roderick and the Lady Madeline. Yet I think it is possible to extend the whole picture to the narrator who is imbibing all of Roderick’s illnesses and portraying his own identity as someone who is apparently normal but, in the bottom of his soul, he is becoming as sick as Roderick.

Semiotics and the discourse analysis of our time show how important the places are in the construction of an individual identity, and for place it means both the geographical locus and the place where the individual produces his/her enunciation. Then, the topography of the House of the Usher, its external landscape and its external and internal architecture added to the artistic pursuits create the atmosphere of illness that characterize the environment and their reflexes on the personality and identities of the dwellers. Moreover, both the topography and the narrator’s speeches are part of a social relation that is transformed into language. Thus, the scenery is not a mask of the real but one of its shapes, and this reality is vested by the discourse.

“The fall of the House of Usher” is, in terms of form, a hybrid narrative, which consists of different forms of expression, and poetry plus music are some of them. Pondering that an illness and intelligent mind will search for music and poetry connected with his/her mental condition in order to portray his/her identity, which the narrator reminds “the words of one of these rhapsodies” (POE, 1949, p. 44), which are frequently sang by Roderick as a means to express his memories about the past events in the mansion. Notwithstanding, these reminiscences are other evidences, showing how the narrator absorbs those melodies, their verses and how they become his discursive *locus*, i.e., the place from where he addresses his own speech disguised as just a Roderick’s one.

The verses of “The Haunted Place” have a mood of melancholy as they address to the past, to an era when the beauty of the landscape and the exuberance of the palace were prominent, and those reminiscences contrast with the environment and architecture of the present day House of Usher as described by the narrator in the beginning of the narrative. If we peruse the language of the story and the one of the poem within it, we shall recognize that both forms approach the past events. But the contrast turns paramount as they provide a clash of paradoxes in the story whose predominant adjectives are dark, dreary, or those connected with the idea of something somber while in the poem, they are quite the opposite, for example: “In the greenest of our valleys, [...] Banners yellow, glorious, golden, [...] (This – all this – was in the olden Time long ago) [...]” (POE, 1949, p. 44-45).

On the one hand, the lyric of this rhapsody may be read as an expression of the psychological condition of Roderick who has a heritage of happiness and good days which remained in the past of the family, but that period is not recorded in the story. The choice of a rhapsody is not by chance as this kind of music presents two characteristics that fit Roderick’s temper and mood, i.e., nostalgia or sentimentality and an irregular shape. On the other hand, it is reasonable to admit, I think, that the narrator absorbs the rhapsody and its content not only because it brings some memories of the Usher family’s past that he probably admires but also as a discursive mechanism which shows that he, in fact, acquires and absorbs all the scenery besides the psychology of the Ushers and turn them into some aspects of his own mental condition.

The contrast between the landscape and the psychology of the Ushers continues in the third stanza. In between the “wanderers in that happy valley” (POE, 1949, p. 45), and “The ruler of the realm was seen” (POE, 1949, p. 45) is music, which, symbolically, stands for an intermediation between the two psychological conditions. Such symbolism depicts the double-edged status of music in this narrative, regarding that it provides a kind of luminosity that flares up to the environment and, paradoxically, portrays the background where porphyrogene developed.

The dichotomy life and death features the fourth and fifth stanzas and functions as a discursive stratagem to show how the atmosphere moves from the “voices of surpassing beauty” through “evil things, in robes of sorrow” (POE, 1949, p. 45). This shifting from happiness to disgrace is felt in Roderick’s mood and temper whose echoes would be heard in the narrator’s discourse and, later, in his own behavior.

The last stanza establishes, once and for all, the characteristics which would prevail in the environment described in the poem. The organisms reflected in the window would contribute to the unhealthy condition of the dwellers of the house and also of its visitors.

In approaching the narrator and Roderick’s identities side by side, it is reasonable to see Roderick as a typical romantic character. His pessimism in relation to life and his searching for his own destruction are feelings that show how he has divorced from reality, losing faith in life and escaping for an idealized world where his conflicts with the real world are at stake. His subjectivism and emotional form of behaving plus his links to his family’s past are other characteristics of his romantic and unhealthy identity.

The narrator, in turn, presents himself as a balanced person and centered on reason as he tries to persuade us through his narration, especially when he is telling us about Roderick’s behavior. Nonetheless, we see him absorbing Roderick’s habits in many passages, and he moves from observation of the environment and Roderick’s way of life through the practicing of music and readings in the same way his friend does. Based upon these and other features, I stress that the narrator has also a romantic identity, considering that he answers the appeals of his friend and we know that friendship is quite important for a person who portrays this kind of identity. The narrator feels attracted by Roderick’s narration, which is centered on his family’s past, and shares with Roderick the anxiety related to the Lady Madeline.

It is necessary, one more time, to link the environment to the psychology of the main characters. As the narrator is inserted in Roderick’s stronghold, this is the only place he has to describe and connect with Roderick. On the one hand, there is a gap in the narrator’s experience once the story does not present any environment related to him. On the other hand, in describing the site and the House of Usher, the narrator “appropriates” the environment in order to construct, discursively, Roderick’s identity and, as a consequence, his own, as the following passage shows: “The belief, however, was connected (as I have previously hinted) with the grey stones of the home of his forefathers.” (POE, 1949, p. 46).

The narrator shows us the connection between the environment and Roderick’s record and condition, and in doing so, he is creating the psychological conditions to absorb the frame and the features of his friend’s illness. Then, the narrator’s speech denotes the catastrophic trajectory of Roderick’s family whose characteristics

and influences the narrator does not feel necessary to remark. In addition to this comment without words, the silence of the narrator represents a form of respect to Roderick's history and a means to understand and appropriate Roderick's history. The passage below reinforces such impression:

The result was discoverable, he added, in that silent yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which made him what I now saw him – what he was. Such opinions need no comment, and I will make none. (POE, 1949, p. 47).

I have underlined the narrator's construction of his identity in accordance with Roderick's one, and their humanistic readings offer us clear evidences of this process. The narrator, in a Freudian slip, stresses: "*Our books [...] we pored together over such works [...]*" (POE, 1949, p. 47).

It is known that all intellectuals construct their identities through a dialogue with literary works, philosophical treatises and other humanistic corpora. Thus, it is possible to conjecture that the identities of the narrator and of Roderick are forged, in part, by their readings. It is not by chance that the works of authors like Machiavelli, Swedenborg, and the Dominican Eymeric de Gironne are among their readings. In terms of subject, adventures, mysticism and unscrupulousness are part of the content of those author's books and, consequently of Roderick and the narrator's set of ideas. I cannot avoid mentioning the gothic work *Vigiliae Mortuorum Secundum Chorum Ecclesiae Magnuntiae*, which, according to the narrator, delights Roderick. It is also dignified mention the attraction the narrator feels for this gothic book as he says: "[...] an exceedingly rare and curious book in quarto Gothic [...]" (POE, 1949, p. 47).

Yet the passage of the story that may be regarded as its bottom line is the announcement of the Lady Madeline's death made by Roderick to the narrator in an abrupt way. However, it is very meaningful to state that she is not dead but has been buried alive. It is the narrator himself who says: "[...] when, one evening, having informed me abruptly that the Lady Madeline was no more, he stated his intention of preserving her corpse for a fortnight (previously to its final interment), in one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building." (POE, 1949, p. 47).

Before continuing the approach on the construction of the identity of the self and the other, the passage involving the burial of the Lady Madeline requires a psychoanalytic digression. Freud (1974, p. 250) teaches us in "Neurosis and Psychosis" that the latter is fruit of a conflict in the relationship between the ego and the external world, and this is clearly the case of Roderick. I have already argued that Roderick portrays some characteristics of schizophrenia, but an

¹ The italics are mine.

unhealthy person like him, for sure, developed other mental diseases such as psychosis.

One of the characteristics of psychosis is that the external world is not realized in any way or its perception has no effect over the psychotic. Then, it is not difficult to verify that both Roderick and the Lady Madeline are completely divorced from reality and devoid of contact with the external world. On the one side, the story does not give voice to the Lady Madeline and the few pieces of information about her are given by the narrator. On the other side, there is no doubt that Roderick's ego created a new external world and an internal one in accordance with the wishful impulses from his id whose motivation is dissociation from the external world based upon a serious frustration of a desire. Such a desire, certainly, found an obstacle by the side of reality, which seems unbearable for Roderick.

Given the fact that the narrator's report does not present specific details about Roderick's frustrations, except that they are enrooted in the family's past, it is possible to infer that the Lady Madeline's burial is related to a frustrated desire of Roderick to possess his sister. The complexity of the twin psychology allows me to argue, as an inference, that a possible sexual desire of Roderick to his sister and a self-destructive feeling were dominating his spirit. In other words, in his attempt to "kill" her, he is, in fact, "killing" himself, and, at same time, destroying his unbearable desire for his own sister.

The narrator, in turn, does not do anything to impeach Roderick to give his sister an unusual burial. He himself ponders over: "[...] this singular proceeding, was one which I did not feel at liberty to dispute." (POE, 1949, p. 48). Taking into consideration that the process of construction of an individual identity is like an open book, i.e., it is something always opened to be permanently in construction, the narrator's process of construction of his romantic identity finds room in the aggressive thought of Roderick and, in this case, they act precipitously and wrongly.

It is also remarkable to underline that the narrator is strongly influenced by Roderick's illness, narrative and behavior, absorbing, one more time, some Roderick's discourses and actions. As a symptom of his attachment to Roderick's behavior, he says: "[...] I had no desire to oppose what I regard as at best but a harmless, and by no means an unnatural, precaution." (POE, 1949, p. 48).

The burial of the Lady Madeline is undertaken as a kind of ritual by Roderick and the narrator. The latter describes the environment where she is going to be buried and, through his description, we may feel the oppressive atmosphere that surrounds the place, reflecting on the actions of the characters. When the time of taking the coffin with the Lady Madeline's body in the tomb comes, the narrator discovers that Roderick and the Lady Madeline are twins, and such a discovery would be of paramount importance for his next analysis about the unhealthy condition of Roderick.

Regarding that every action generates a reaction, the narrator reports us that Roderick's behavior changed a lot after the burial of the Lady Madeline. The shift in the psychological condition of Roderick forces him to neglect his ordinary occupations, increasing his agitation and amplifying his anxieties as if something even worse would take place. In his attempt to explain the new picture, the narrator "[...] was obliged to resolve all into the mere inexplicable vagaries of madness [...]" (POE, 1949, p. 49).

As the identities of the self and the other are linked, the narrator feels that the changes in Roderick's unhealthy condition and behavior affect him, leading to a shift in his psychological condition too. He argues that "It was no wonder that his condition terrified – that it infected me. I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet uncertain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions." (POE, 1949, p. 49).

The theory of ecosemiotics advocates that an individual relates with the objects of his/her environment in such a way that he/she faces an immutable reality, crossing with them by chance or even when he/she knows them in the form of imposition or crude violence. In the case of the narrator of "The fall of the House of Usher", it is important to observe the change of his relationship with the objects and the environment of Roderick's house after the burial of the Lady Madeline. Before her burial, the narrator used to describe the objects and the environment of the House of Usher relating them to Roderick's psychological condition. After her burial, the narrator starts experiencing the consequences of that brutal event, in which he took part. At first, he tries to connect his perturbation with the

[...] bewildering influence of the gloomy furniture of the room – of the dark and tattered draperies which, tortured into motion by the breath of a rising tempest, swayed fitfully to and fro upon the walls, and rustled uneasily about the decorations of the bed. But my efforts were fruitless. (POE, 1949, p. 50).

The passage above is very suggestive as it shows the influence of the environment over the narrator's mental condition, despite he thinks otherwise. What we may reason about this episode is that the narrator acquires bad feelings when he helps Roderick to bury the Lady Madeline but these feelings remain latent in his spirit. Thus, the furniture, the proper architecture of the place, and even the storm outside work as instruments that turn the narrator's feelings manifest, and from that moment onwards, he is no longer the same.

As the objects in the room where the narrator is placed do not move, the feeling of horror he feels is clearly a projection of his psychological mood, which is also the cause of the change in the atmosphere of the place. The narrator seems to have absorbed Roderick's paranoia and, as a romantic individual, imagines that a supernatural enterprise is going to come about.

Instead of the supernatural agency, the symphony of noises the narrator hears is made by Roderick himself who enters the chamber abruptly and bearing a lamp, which, symbolically, represents the arrival of the light in the narrator's darkness. Given the sense of relief, the narrator returns to his condition of Roderick's analyst and conjectures that his friend portrays "[...] a species of mad hilarity in his eyes – an evidently restrained hysteria in his whole demeanour." (POE, 1949, p. 50). The only reason, I think, for someone feels relief with the presence of another person portraying a lot of mental disorders lies in the fact that he/she is already presenting a bit of psychological disorder too. So, one more time, the self and the other meet in their own unhealthy conditions.

One of the characteristics of psychosis, according to Freudian Psychoanalysis, is that the psychotic never admits that he/she suffers anything, in spite of the facts showing otherwise. The narrator's description of the environment outside is, apparently, a speech of a reasonable and balanced person. However, his attempts to provide a logical picture of the natural phenomena like the tempest, the whirlwind and "violent alteration in the direction of the wind" (POE, 1949, p. 51) disguise the sense of terror and the supernatural atmosphere he is creating.

The narrator, feeling himself responsible for his friend Roderick, realizes the otherness and organizes, psychologically, a message in response to Roderick's desire, generating a kind of stimulus so that the social game could be practiced again. The discursive mechanism the narrator uses is intermediated by literature when he says: "Here is one of your favorite romances. I will read, and you shall listen; and so we will pass away this terrible night together." (POE, 1949, p. 51).

As the act of communication requires the definition of the other in the process of alterity, the narrator discovers Roderick's romantic and unhealthy identity entering his world. Indeed, Roderick's world is permeated of contrast as it is, on the one side, sick and devoid of reasoning and, on the other, it is teemed with artistic and humanistic contents. In attempting to enter Roderick's internal world through his literary taste, the narrator continues the process of constructing his own identity from the reading of "Mad Trist" of Sir Launcelot Canning. In spite of being attributed to Sir Launcelot Canning, it is important to affirm that the poems "The Haunted Palace" and "Mad Trist" were written by Edgar Allan Poe himself.

All the reports contained in the narrative of "The fall of the House of Usher" come to us by the mouth of the narrator, including the construction of his identity and those of Roderick and the Lady Madeline. Then, it is easy to understand that their stories and identities lie in the realm of language, and it is in the breast of language that the narrator will search for new aspects of his identity and, by the same token, it is through language that he tries to comprehend Roderick's mind and behavior.

The narrator performs the role of an "analyst" from the beginning of the narrative through its end. Yet, from the event of the Lady Madeline's burial onwards,

he adds a new characteristic in his “spiritual curriculum”, i.e., more than a reader; he is going to become a literary critic. The reason that compels me to make such a statement is based upon the remarks the narrator produces at each interval in his reading of the novel “Mad Trist” of Sir Launcelot Canning.

One more time I emphasize the hybridism that characterizes this narrative, at least in the field of form, and the reading of “Mad Trist” by the narrator is a picture of *mise-en-abyme* featured by a story within a story, despite the latter has being written in verse. It is also known that the narrator’s reading and, especially, his criticism may be connected to the story of Roderick.

Considering that the narrator’s report starts describing the environment and follows with Roderick’s record, the story of Ethelred in “Mad Trist” begins in the same way, differing only in the order as in the latter the psychological profile of the main character anticipates the frame of the scenery. These descriptions are interrupted by the narrator so that he could make the first remarks on the story. Coincidentally, he hears noises that fit the narrative he is reading: “It was beyond doubt the coincidence alone which had arrested my attention [...]” (POE, 1949, p. 53).

The coincidences of noises continue in both the narrator’s reading and in the environment where he and Roderick are sat. This symphony of ghastly sounds not only generates a wild amazement in the narrator’s mind but also provides the scenery with the proper atmosphere for the upshot to come. It is not out of context, I reason, to make an analogy between the horrors, the dragon and other monsters the narrator reads in “Mad Trist” with those “dragons and monsters” presented in Roderick’s soul. In Launcelot’s story, Ethelred attempts at killing the dragon, and he succeeds. In the chief story, Roderick is compelled to “kill his monsters”, but differently than Ethelred, he fails.

Another characteristic of the narrator’s romantic identity is the feeling of protection he develops in favor of Roderick, and even when he feels horror and fear due to the mysterious sounds he is hearing, he “[...] retained sufficient presence of mind to avoid exciting by any observation the sensitive nervousness [...]” (POE, 1949, p. 54) of his companion. Yet the symphony of terror does not cease, and it allows for the narrator and Roderick to live in a psychological “harmony”, listening to the soundtrack up to the climax to come. In fact, the narrator reaches the terrible and unavoidable conclusion that they “have put her living in the tomb” (POE, 1949, p. 55). Thus, all of a sudden, the tale achieves its zenith, in other words: “[...] then without those doors there did stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the Lady Madeline of Usher.” (POE, 1949, p. 56).

The scene that follows is rather grotesque. The predictions of Roderick come true as the Lady Madeline falls heavily and violently upon her brother and kills him before she finally collapses. At that moment, the sadness and suffering of both are definitely over.

In the last scene, the narrator flees from the House of Usher by the same route he came. The difference now is how he departs, which is completely different from the way he arrived, and the difference is that he acquired an amount of experience, which transformed him into another person.

Conclusions

The first conclusive remark I may make upon the identity of the characters is that it seems that Roderick, as the other, has a sick identity, which is permanently in process of construction in connection with the internal and external environment of the House of Usher. The mansion has a double meaning in the story, and, consequently, in the identities of the characters. It means the house itself as a place built according to the Gothic architecture, which, in turn, produces the atmosphere of darkness, claustrophobia, and horror that shape the identity of the characters. As the other side of the coin, the house addresses to the Usher family that has no enduring branches, and seems to have been constituted through incestuous.

In spite of not having textual elements to state that Roderick nurtures an incestuous desire for his sister, the records of the family point towards this direction. So, it is fair to conclude that Roderick is a romantic character who lives and dies sickly. His taste for the Gothic architecture of the House and his delight in reading the medieval literature confirm this feature. As the pieces of information about the Lady Madeline are scarce, our understanding of her identity turns very difficult to portray.

The facts that she is twin of Roderick and that she was brought up under the same circumstances allow me to infer that she is close to him in terms of personality, i.e., she is also a sick person whose experiences and identity are forged by her unhealthy family and the environment where she was brought up and lived. Nevertheless, there are some important differences between them that must be underlined.

It is necessary to stress that the Nineteenth Century woman had her identity constructed by her relationship with her body as she was not allowed by society to work outside home. Then, the Lady Madeline, as a romantic feminine character, works as a counterpoint to Roderick who is an intellectual. Moreover, in the dramatic scene of her exit from the tomb, where she had been buried alive, she is seen in action against the passivity of Roderick, culminating in her attack against her brother, killing him at the end.

The identity of the narrator is a bit more complex as we have only his own report, without a critical perspective from outside. Another factor related to the complexity involving the narrator's identity is the absence of his name. The main characteristic of anyone's identity is his/her name and the narrator of "The fall of

the House of Usher” is devoid of such feature, which was an important reason for me to approach the process of construction of his identity.

As it was already pointed out, the narrative does not give any clue of why the narrator accepts the invitation to go in help of Roderick. One possible answer lies in the importance that characterizes the friendship for a romantic person. But his views on the environment and the other characters are quite remarkable. He sees the House of Usher, when he arrives, through its image in the tarn, which is an image shaped upside down, and this view is, symbolically, the form through which he will characterize Roderick and the Lady Madeline.

The role of the narrator is central to the upshot of Roderick, the Lady Madeline and the House of Usher itself. His position of friend and confidant of Roderick leads him to fall on the trap prepared by his friend. He is swallowed by the sickness and craziness of Roderick and the House of Usher, and he is forced by the circumstances to take part in the Lady Madeline’s burial alive. When she breaks out of her tomb and kills Roderick, the narrator witnesses the end of Roderick’s saga. Still, in his departure from the House of Usher, he completes the cycle of horror, witnessing the total collapse of the Lady Madeline, the mansion and their records of sickness and horror.

There is something mysterious in the narrator’s identity that allows for Roderick to trust on him. The narrator stands for security as he is the lone exception to the Usher’s fear of outside. And this fear, on the one hand, emphasizes the claustrophobia that characterizes the story and the two remaining members of the House of Usher, and, on the other hand, the presence of the narrator weakens the twins’ fear of the world outside. But, the narrator, unknowingly, falls down the whole structure.

As there is no post-scriptum of “The fall of the House of Usher”, it is for us to infer the further effects of the sickness of the Ushers in the mind and experiences of the narrator after his departure from the mansion. But one thing is for sure: anyone who lived those experiences could not remain the same.

Last but not least, I know that it is dangerous to see the narrator as Edgar Allan Poe himself disguised. However, it is remarkable to stress the coincidences between them. Both are attracted by the psychological phenomena which take place in a disordered mind. Regarding that Poe was brought up as a Southerner and that the origin of the narrator is a mystery, the Gothic tradition of the Old South is present in their experiences, and, perhaps, this fact may work out as a clue to unveil the narrator’s identity and it is possible that he is also a Southerner. Finally, the main characteristics of Poe’s work, i.e., narrative, verses, criticism and psychology plus the ability to analyze are also some of the features the narrator of “The fall of the House of Usher” exhibits. Thus, as a kind of quiz, I will let for the readers of my essay the task of admitting or not that the narrator of this story is really Edgar Allan Poe.

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■ **RESUMO:** *A Concepção de identidade tem sido largamente discutida nas culturas ocidentais desde o limiar do Iluminismo no século dezoito. Entretanto, antes do advento do Multiculturalismo no final do século vinte quando a construção das identidades alcançou uma diversidade de expressões, esta questão sofreu uma transformação de monta no século dezenove, especialmente durante o Romantismo, cuja forma era caracterizada por um indivíduo centrado em si mesmo, apesar das tentativas de se levar a alteridade em conta. Portanto, o objetivo deste ensaio é enfocar a identidade das principais personagens de “The fall of the House of Usher”, de Edgar Allan Poe, e as suas interações uns com os outros, bem como com o ambiente onde estão inseridas. Para atingir este objetivo, a Semiótica, com uma pequena ajuda da Psicanálise Freudiana, proverá suporte teórico para as análises que se seguem.*

■ **PALAVRAS-CHAVES:** *Identidade. Indivíduo. Romantismo. Casa. Melancolia.*

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