A Freudian Psychoanalytic Study of Causes of Usher's Abnormal Personality in *The Fall of The House of Usher*

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Abstract. Allan Poe is an excellent poet and novelist in the 19 century of America. In short novel, he is the pioneer of the modern detective novels and modern science fiction, which is comparable to Mark Twain and William Faulkner. He promotes the artistic status of Gothic novel through the creative means of mental horror. This thesis tries to interpret the psychology of the Usher under the framework of Freudian psychoanalytic theory. This thesis can be divided into 3 parts. Part one is a brief introduction to Poe’s literary career, providing a relevant background to the interpretation of the novel. Part two interprets the main character’s psychology from the perspective of the structure of personality. Part three is the conclusion part of the thesis. Through the analysis of the novel, we can draw the conclusion that environmental factor plays an important role in shaping one’s personality.

Introduction

Edgar Allen Poe is one of the most controversial and the most misunderstood literary figures in the history of American literature. He is a poet, short-story writer, and is considered as part of the American Romantic Movement. Poe is best known for his tales of mystery and the macabre, also he is regarded as the inventor of the detective-fiction genre. He is further credited with contributing to the emerging genre of science fiction. As one of the world's most famous and controversial writers, Poe is attracting more attention of literary critics in recent years. “Poe's challenge to moralistic strictures against literature, his confrontations with the New England literary establishment and his caustic and satirical critical style won him many enemies”(Hayes 7). And Valery asserted in a letter that “Poe is the only impeccable writer”(Bloom 1).

Analysis of the Psyche of Roderick Usher in *The Fall of The House of Usher*

Poe is in an “exemplary position" for psychoanalytical study. It's a good way to study Poe's psyche through Freudian theories. Freud proposes a structural model of psychic process in his “New Introductory Lectures", that is: the superego, the id and the ego. They are “the three realms, regions, provinces, into which we divide an individual's mental apparatus (Freud 104).

Horror, Desolate Environment- the External Factors that Cause Usher’s Psychopathology

The growth of people cannot be separated from their living environment, the construction of environment cannot do without people. Environment exerts profound influences on people’s personality, the condition of mental, thinking pattern and social values. Since Usher was born, he was living in horror and desolate environment. With the growth of him, environment gradually erodes and distorts his spirit, and what he thought and performed is the trace that environment has left on him. In fact, he has been swallowed by environment, and he becomes the best spokesman of the environment. Melancholy is always with him, and he cannot get rid of it, because it exists forever. It is his inherent appendage and his birthmark that he cannot erase and get rid of. Just because of his melancholy that is caused by the environment, he is distinguished from others. Living environment, without the doubt, has become the important factor that leads to his psychopathology and distorted personality. On this isolated and depressed oil, where it can breed
Usher - a genetic variation seeding. Here, his living environment includes Usher’s objective environment, Usher’s family tradition, the lack of friendship, variant kinship and barren romance.

**Usher’s objective environment.** The author uses the first person to enter the Usher’s world, and describes in detail the old mansion. “Bleak walls”, “white trunks of decayed trees” (Zhu 128), the first sight of the old house makes me “a sickening of the heart”. When steps into the inside of the house, I felt more insufferable. The old mansion of Usher is like a living hell, creating soul prisoners one by one. Here, people with abnormal spirit become more crazy, painful and despained just like Usher; however, a mental healthy person here would also compiled to the edge of nervous breakdown like the narrator. Objective environment and tangible depression leads to invisible terror and distortion to the survival. Usher’s mind split begins from here.

**Horrid Usher’s family tradition.** Usher family, with long history, has two traditions, which shape the personality of Usher and control his mind. Family traditions become the intangible guider of the prison-like old mansion. Besides, the personality passed down from his family makes him feel horrible and despair. All these cause the split of his mentality. One single generation passed down is the most obvious characteristic of his family. His name and family property are all passed down from father to son, so the initial name of the mansion is replaced by the house of Usher. Hence, the house of Usher has two meanings, it not only refers to family, but also means the old house. Usher family attaches their emotion to the old house, and the old house become the entity. The old house witnesses the rise and fall of the family. So the sensitive Usher naturally thinks that everything in the house reflects his emotion. In general, such kind of emotion is sincere, precious and reasonable. A healthy person will feel honor to be born in this family and will spare no effort to inherit the family glory tradition. However, to Usher, this kind of emotion goes to extreme, which is filled with fear, hate and disgust. Usher is the direct victim of this tradition. The old house and family tradition control Usher, and so he hates them, but he never thinks to escape from them.

**The shortage of friendship.** The extreme objective environment and family traditions are the determined factors that cause his blank emotion. Depressed and melancholic life makes him very cautious. He is isolated from the outside world, with only several servants, a family doctor and his sister accompanying him. He seldom goes out and nobody ever visits him, let alone social interactions. I, as the best friend of him, also lives far away from him. So the lack of friendship closes the door of his emotion to the outside world and gradual fear, depression find no where to vent, finally his spirit breaks down. Although, mental disorder Usher invites me to meet him many years later, which can be regarded as an implication he resorts to friendship to mediate his grievance, but it is too late. For Usher, I’m no longer the mediator of his disease, but the witness of his psychopathology.

**Variant kinship.** “A hidden source of or starting-point of very numerous crimes is sex” (Gross 322). Since they are born, they live in the solitude mansion alone. Madeline-his sister has always been his last kinfolk as well as his only companion in the world. She is Usher’s spirit supporter, and of course he pours all his emotion onto her. However, this kind of emotion not only includes kinship, friendship, but also mixed with affection. Tortured by the above three mentioned reasons, mad Usher falls in love with his sister and has immoral incest with Madeline. And Madeline thus becomes his object whom he can release his sexual desire. And the kinship between them has changed, which becomes another important factor to destroy him.

**Barren romance.** For Usher, romance is luxury, because of his living environment. However, his instinct and desire to love and be loved will not vanish. So, he treats his sister as the last stew, and mistakenly gives his love to the wrong object. It is a tragedy no matter to himself or to Madeline. Living in such an extreme environment, Usher is bound to become insane. The power of the horror old house, shocking family traditions, the shortage of friendship, variant kinship and barren romance are so strong that put him into an unbearable situation. The house of Usher is just like the place where being occupied by Satan, people there is like ghost. Terrified, desolate living environment is not only the external factor that causes his abnormal psychology and distorted personality, but also accelerate the pace of his self-destruction. Usher family is the symbol of the final production of the highly sensitive civilization, it is destined to be buried under the ground by horror.(Pang 17)
The Unbalanced Structure of Three Personalities- the Internal Factor of Usher’s Deformed Characteristic

Usher’s deformed psyche and distorted personality are caused by his unbalanced personality. According to Freud, a person has three personality parts, that is the id, the ego and the super-ego. Only the three parts achieve balance, can one’s life be normal. Otherwise, it will inevitably lead to his unbalanced psychology. Usher is the best example. And his incest with his sister pushes the unbalance to extreme.

Indulgent id. The prison and devil like living environment left him in the isolate situation. He has no choice but to stay with the old house all day long. Lacking of love made him into the situation of neurological disorder. The dilemma and variation of spirit caused by environment break the balance of id, ego and superego in his psyche world. His sexual instinct could not be satisfied, with the result that such kind of desire became more and more intense. “Sex is pleasurable; for Freud, sexual pleasure is the model for all forms of pleasure” (Klages 63). So, under the discipline of pleasure, he strives to gratify the dark desires. His physical body pursues the pure sex pleasure. So he commits sibling incest with his sister Madeline. At that time, the power of id is above ego and superego. Ego that represents ration and cautious cannot suppress it, while superego that represents prohibition leave it behind, and thus libidinal id begin to take hold. The indulgent id leads to his incest with his sister, his desire is satisfied. However, such kind of sexual satisfaction is temporary. He covets a moment of happiness, but he has to suffer overwhelming feeling of fear in his rest life. Because of the indulgent id, superego will severely punish the ego.

Painful ego and fatal superego. The poor ego has to serve for his three cruel masters: id, environment and superego.

Firstly, ego is spurred by id. The instinct desire of id compels the ego to satisfy its requirement. So in the novel, Usher needs to meet his needs even though it is temporary. In the process of the adjustment of the ego, because of the strong power of id, the ego is in the subordinate position, which evidences his behavior of sibling incest.

Secondly, the ego can contact with the outside world, so we have to take the reality into consideration. The environment that Usher lives in is terror and isolate. The only place and object that he can let off his emotion is his sister. For Usher, who has already the potential of mental disease, his ego of course know these truth, however, it is hard for him to make right judgment to the reality. So, instead of being responsible for taking care of his sister, he has sex with Madeline and even buries her alive.

Thirdly, the ego is oppressed by the restriction of ethics or conscience, superego guides and threat the ego. And superego prescribes the rule of the ego, if the ego fails to obey the rule of morality, the superego will punish the ego. The superego defines that there can only be kinship between brother and sister. However, Usher ignores such kind of regulations and turns their relationship from kinship to affection. This incestuous practice violates the moral standards. The ego fails to serve for his master- the superego. So, in the novel, Usher is surrounded by fear and guilty, and he suffers the condemnation of morality. In the novel, when he saw his sister come to him from the room, “but he had buried his face in his hands, and I could only perceive that a far more than ordinary wanness had overspread the emaciated fingers through which trickled many passionate tears.” Madeline reminds him of the crime that he has made. She is no longer his sister, but becomes the proof of his crime, so he can’t help to shedding his painful and regretful tears. His potential mental disorder also becomes more and more severe. The intensified horror and anxiety follow him as he has been caught into the abnormal horrors. Finally, the ego bears no longer, he tries to change and to destroy the root of evil, and he wants to escape, so he buries Madeline alive. Such kind of behavior also offends the super ego, and the super ego punishes the ego destructively, with the consequence that Usher is frightened to death by his sister.
Conclusion

For Usher, he is miserable and hateful. Miserable, because of his failure of controlling his own life. He is hateful because of his incest with his sister. In that terrified, decay and deformed world, a tender heart cannot resist the outside world alone. Besides, the external factors import huge influences gradually on him. Finally, he breaks down. In the novel, Usher’s destiny is doomed, since the power of mediation of his heart is far more weaker than the environment. Usher is the epitome of various abnormal inner world of most Americans, and his living environment is also the epitome of reality. Although the reality is not as extreme as the novel, there are many people become and is becoming Usher, because the id, ego and superego of personality are always in contradiction and both of the two fail to get balance. Poe’s depiction of extreme horror and objective environment makes readers fully know about the importance of good environment to the growth of personal personality and psychology, which includes family, school and social environment. Without a healthy environment, a person cannot grow up healthily. People’s self development and environmental influences are the two vital factors to the formation of personality. The tragedy of Usher and his sister is mainly caused by depressing environment, and the misplaced three personalities-id, ego and superego.

References


