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# Dual Structures in “The Fall of the House of Usher”: A Comparative Approach

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## **ABSTRACT**

Throughout this paper the detailed analysis of dualism in Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Fall of the House of Usher" is proposed with a comparative approach. Such dualism, on the one hand, focuses on the characters of Roderick and Madeline Usher, who constitute the separation between body and mind of the same individual. And on the other hand, in the rationality and emotions struggle within the figure of the narrator. This analysis encourages the reader towards a moral interpretation of the short story where both parts of the same being are portrayed as independent entities. The skilled use of language, visual and resounding elements also contribute to the depiction of such dualism.

**KEY WORDS:** dualism; body; mind; human nature; narrator; rationality; emotions; inner self; mirror effect

## **RESUMEN**

A través de este trabajo se propone el análisis detallado del dualismo en el relato corto de Edgar Allan Poe, "La Caída de la Casa Usher" desde un enfoque comparativo. Dicho dualismo se centra, por una parte, en los personajes de Roderick y Madeline Usher, que constituyen la separación de cuerpo y mente del mismo individuo. Y por otra parte, en la lucha entre racionalidad y emociones en la figura del narrador. Este análisis anima al lector hacía una interpretación más moral de la obra donde las dos partes de una misma persona se plantean como entidades independientes. El habilidoso uso del lenguaje, elementos visuales y sonoros además contribuye a la creación de tal dualismo.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** dualismo; cuerpo; mente; naturaleza humana; narrador; racionalidad; sentimientos; yo interior; efecto del reflejo

## INTRODUCTION

There are many critics and authors who have dealt with the problem of duality of human nature in Poe's short stories such as "The Tell-Tale Heart", "William Wilson", "The Man of the Crowd" and "The Fall of the House of Usher". In fact, Poe's writings have been widely recognized for portraying the idea of multi-personalities in the same individual in an atmosphere of terror and it may be seen as an expression of duality of the human nature. Inspired by this controversial topic, the academic purpose of this paper relies on the depiction of two types of dualism in the short story "The Fall of the House of Usher" in comparison to the other Poe's short stories mentioned above and Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

The personal interest of developing this idea with a comparative approach is the contribution to the easier understanding of the topic of dualism in the main story since its accurate analysis becomes extremely difficult with just one reading. Moreover, the projection of two-facedness in the same individual advises the readers about their double being and could achieve a self-reflection about who they really are. For this reason, the following analysis may be considered a more dynamic approach that encourages the readers to face the text searching for a moral implication.

Taking into account the two possible critical points of view in order to face this story, this paper will follow the one that embodies two connected evidences. On the one hand, it is assumed that the main character suffers from madness that leads him to think of the real existence of another person who in fact does not exist. On the other hand, it is supposed both characters portray the two-facedness of the same being.

This analysis will be divided into four different sections. The first one will study how Roderick and Madeline Usher may be considered the physical and mental

components of the same person. The second one will develop how rational and irrational forces change within the figure of narrator, who is considered as a representation of society. The third part will focus on how both the use of visual and sound symbols and language support the duality in human nature. Finally, the last part will present Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* in contrast to some features in Poe's story. To conclude, there is a final proposal in order to expand this paper.

## **I. THE DUALITY OF HUMAN NATURE: MIND AND BODY**

The disjunction between the physical entity and the mental state is clearly depicted in Poe's short stories. Such a relevant duality in "William Wilson" and in "The Man of the Crowd" is presented by two apparently different characters who represent two different faces of the same individual. While in "The Man of the Crowd" the narrator represents the emotional part as he is obsessed with observing people and follows his personal intuitions; the old man is the projection of the narrator's real physical appearance. "William Wilson" follows the same double structure. Whereas the narrator evidences the insanity of his own character, the reflected Wilson is depicted as the corporeal entity that follows the narrator. In both cases, the power of madness "betrays" its own body without knowing both mind and corpse contribute to the building of the self.

Regarding "The Fall of the House of Usher", it may be supposed Roderick is the corporeal entity of the human being – the real character of the story-, whereas Madeline Usher is only a mental imagination of Roderick. More significantly, Roderick and

Madeline are the representation of the two faces of the same person – the mental and the physical or even the natural and the supernatural.

Focusing on Madeline's figure, she seems to be a construct of Roderick's fears. All the terror Roderick claims he suffers, constitutes the mental state of the character depicted by his imaginary sister Madeline. Actually, Roderick, to some extent, anticipates the reader what is going to happen to him when he shouts

“I shall perish,” said he, “I must perish in this deplorable folly. Thus, thus, and not otherwise, shall I be lost. I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results. I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial, incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation of soul. I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect—in terror. (Poe 175)

Consequently, he is finally killed, supposedly, by Madeline as she represents Roderick's fear.

There is an analogy between the end of “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “William Wilson”. Both protagonists are prisoners of their own madness and not aware of their own other self. For this reason, they eventually kill themselves even though these incidents are committed in two different ways. In “The Fall of the House of Usher”, Roderick's intention is to kill his sister by locking her in the grave, although he finally kills himself in a very terrific scene. Nevertheless, in “William Wilson”, the protagonist commits suicide in an attempt to kill his hallucinatory double. By saying “thou also dead - dead to the World, to Heaven and to Hope!... in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou has murdered thyself” (Poe 165), Wilson realizes he has condemned himself.

Moreover, the conception of Madeline being a hallucination is supported by the fact that the narrator hardly sees her and they do not interact throughout the story. As

Haynes stands, “over and over again [Poe’s] stories revolve around a fascination between two men, which descends into either uncomfortable doubling or outright rivalry. This is clear in “The Man of the Crowd,” of course, but also in “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “William Wilson.” (81) Apparently, focusing on Roderick and Madeline Usher, they are witnesses of a violent rivalry at the end of the story when Madeline invades the room and falls “heavily inward upon the person of her brother” (Poe 184). Nonetheless, following the psychological argumentative line, Roderick struggles metaphorically against his sister in order to overcome his own intrinsic fear.

Taking into account Roderick Usher’s behavior, he seems to be a partly rational and conscious person at the beginning when he asked for help to the narrator. Notwithstanding, the narrator’s descriptions about his friend by saying “in the manner of my friend I was at once struck with an incoherence- an inconsistency” (174) it can be found a hint to understand Roderick’s true personality. As the story unfolds, both the narrator and the reader realize Roderick’s inconsistent surface, and his irrational and insanity portion of his self.

The duality between the body and the mind in the same individual is also projected in the short story “The Tell-Tale Heart” that “similarly centers on the effects of a guilty conscience, that of the narrator, who has murdered the old man with whom he lives.” (Haynes 87). This particular narrator attempts to demonstrate his sanity and rationality within his madness; notwithstanding, he is “betrayed by his “heart” (87). To sum, it has been demonstrated that emotions oppose to rationality creating an internal struggle – that will be developed in the next section – both in fictional characters and in human beings.

## II. THE NARRATOR'S RATIONALITY AND EMOTIONS

Apart from the dualism between the mind and the body presented in the previous section, the opposition between reason and emotions through the narrator's behavior and speech evince the existence of another sort of dual structure in human nature.

The narrator is depicted as another character who is composed by opposite ideas – which are going to be analyzed below – that develop throughout the story. To some extent, this figure may be seen as a metaphorical portrayal of the society that hides a moral purpose. Such purpose might be a strategy to make the readers realize about how every person can hide both the rational and the irrational part inside his/her own self. In fact, in *Tales of mystery and imagination* it is supported that in Poe's stories, his narrators try to establish their split identities and states of consciousness through the creation of settings that contribute to the psychological environment where his narrators live in (29). In consequence, Poe's aim may be encouraging the readers to examine their inner psychological state in relation to the narrator's behavior so as to discover how they really are.

Therefore, the figure of the narrator could seem reliable for the readers even though the events he is going to tell are more similar to a science fiction story (Auerbach 21). To some extent, he becomes the figure who reminds the readers what the "reality" is and how human beings harbor opposite ideas inside of them. Nonetheless, "if the narrator is tricked by Usher into believing what Usher believes, then he might well trick us" (Hustis 6). For this reason, the readers should distrust, in many cases, on the tone of the narrator and should focus on his actions and behavior towards the situation because they become more relevant and determining in the analysis of the story and the characters.



Focusing on narrator's rationality, "The Fall of the House of Usher", as well as "The Man of the Crowd", is told by an unnamed narrator whose rationality appears to change from a total rationality to a partial one. Such rational thought may be compared to the mental disorder of Roderick Usher, especially when he shouts "MADMAN! Here he sprang furiously to his feet, and shrieked out his syllables, as if in the effort he were giving up his soul- "MADMAN! I TELL YOU THAT SHE NOW STANDS WITHOUT THE DOOR!" (184), attempting to warn the readers that something terrible is going to happen. At this moment, irrational thinking full of fear of Roderick Usher overwhelms the narrator's rationality and creates a sense of terror and instability in the readers as the narrative figure is weakened.

In addition to the changing perspective of rationality, the dual structure in the narrative figure is supported by the contrast between the narrator's calm and nervousness. Certainly, although the narrator seems apparently calm from the very beginning, his behavior develops towards nervousness due to the events he has to deal with as the story unfolds. Probably because the narrator knows what is going to happen in the story he is about to tell (Botero 74), his descriptions reflect – from the very beginning – a sense of uncertainty, but at the same time, they reflect coherence in his own self, what allow readers to feel safe in relation to the ongoing events. This development is the same as "...in "The Tell-Tale Heart" [where] the narrator-protagonist displays typical symptoms of partial insanity or "moral insanity". On the one hand, he retains his rationality in "calmly" telling the story... cunningly carrying it out and trying to hide it; but on the other hand, he displays "dreadful" nervousness." (Shen 342).

To sum up, the controversial figure of the narrator is typical in Poe's writings since the narrator insists on his own sanity but, at the same time, he confesses himself to be a kind of madman (Cleman 631). As a result of this partial insanity the narrator says

he notices the presence of imaginary Madeline. However, this evidence might be better assumed as a narrator's sympathetic action as he is aware of Roderick's mental sickness. For all these reasons, rational and irrational thoughts and behaviors constitute the most relevant dual structure within the figure of narrator, whose implication in the story affects the readers' attitude towards the texts.

### **III. THE CONTRIBUTION OF SYMBOLISM TO DUALISM**

"The Fall of the House of Usher", as well as the other Poe's short stories, is full of symbols and metaphors that support the dual structures mentioned in the previous sections. Moreover, the skillful use of speech to describe the physical setting often reflects the inner personality or emotions of the central character, as is the case of Roderick Usher in relation to the murky environment. Notwithstanding, it will be relevant to consider the following Michael J.S. William's quotation so as to achieve a detailed analysis:

"The images of identity found in Poe's tales are quite different – fragmented or doubled rather than "invisible", haunted by difference in time rather than "continuous", and sometimes incoherent rather than coherent. And always the question of personal identity is implicated in the ambiguities of the relationship between self and language" (18)

From the first paragraph, the readers are aware, through the narrative voice, of how "the inhabitant of the house suffers from the most unusual malady, which, combined with the ghastly surroundings, creates a tension or fear that anticipates tragedy." (Botero 73) Likewise, the importance of language so as to contribute to duality also relies on the narrator's description of the house, that reflects anguish and inspires the reader senses of

fear and dejection through the skillful use of adjectives such as “dreary”, “vast”, “ancient”, etc. Nonetheless, the contrast between light and brightness and shadows contributes to the whole double perception that surrounds the story, especially in the final scene (Pruette 389). In Tompkins’ claiming about how “the romance-writers wished somehow to combine in their architecture the attraction of tyrannous strength and of melancholy” (267) is clearly evidenced what Roderick and Madeline Usher represent in the story and how such a skillful use of language contributes to the construction of dual structures.

In addition to the relevance of narrative voice towards the text itself and how the setting contributes to the character’s personality, the use of imagery hugely contributes to the creation of an ambiguous and deprived atmosphere that relies on duality and mirroring (Hustis 10). In fact, the recurrence of symbols such as mirrors and windows as in “William Wilson”, “The Man of the Crowd” and “The Black Cat” allows the characters to appreciate their two identities. Nevertheless, in “The Fall of the House of Usher”, mirrors’ symbolism is presented through Roderick’s eyes and the water of the lake.

Regarding the effect of mirroring the other self, Roderick Usher’s eyes reflect both the personality of the character and his feelings. Through such eyes, the narrator can infer in Roderick “his unceasingly agitated mind was laboring with some oppressive secret, to divulge which he struggled for the necessary courage.” (Poe 180). This quote evinces Roderick’s oppression by his fears and how Madeline’s “entombment” creates within him an anxiety disorder. To some extent, his eyes eventually become the mirror of his soul full of terror.

Likewise, this idea of mirroring is depicted through the water of the lake that reflects the House. As Roderick’s eyes reflect how his own mind is full of fear and guilt, the water of the lake reflects – metaphorically – the reality of the Usher’s family.

Therefore, in relation to the lineage of the family, it may be assumed from the first stage, the house of Usher does not suppose only the building itself, but alludes to the Usher's family (Botero 75). Consequently, when Roderick dies owing to the inability of assuming his fears and facing it, their family lineage ends, and the building also "falls".

Not only does the use of visual symbols contribute to the duality in the story, but also some sounds that remind Roderick about the existence of his other self. The sound of Madeline scratching the grave is associated not only to Roderick's guilt, but to his own fear as it is affirmed above. His conscience is advising him about his insanity and he finally verbalizes it by saying "I heard them – many, many days ago – yet I dared not – I dared not to speak! And now – to-night – Ethelred – ha! Ha! ... Do I not distinguish that heavy and horrible beating of her heart?" (184). This evidence about the scratching sound is connected to the intertextual verses entitled "The Haunted Palace" in which the protagonist Ethelred kills the dragon while it is producing weird sounds. Moreover, it will be established a parallel structure with "The Tell- Tale Heart" when the protagonist is hearing his own heart beating (Shen 341). The sounds' intentions – similar in all the mentioned stories – are supporting the existence of dual structures in human nature.

To conclude, by telling a story of a "fall", Poe refers both a psychic disintegration that predicts the association between emotional stress and physical illness; and a decline of Usher lineage due to the siblings' deaths (Haynes 91). Such symbolism contributes to the separation between the physical and the psychological state in the main character. In fact, the other self of Roderick Usher, embodied in his sister Madeline, only appears in such moments when the narrator is talking about her.

#### **IV. COMPARISON TO *THE STRANGE CASE OF DR. JEKYLL AND MR. HYDE***

The influence of the dualism of human nature portrayed in Poe's stories can be found in writers such as the Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson, whose story *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) deals deeply with this idea in a more explicit manner. While Roderick may be compared to Dr. Jekyll for being the corporeal entity, Madeline Usher may be seen as a reflection of Mr. Hyde owing to their common unreal nature. In fact, Dr. Jekyll claims that "[he] reached years of reflection, and began to look round [him], and take[s] stock of [his] progress and position in the world, [he] stood already committed to a profound duplicity of life." (Stevenson 42), assuming how the good and the ill, and the body and mind, separate and combine "man's dual nature...[because] man is not truly one, but truly two" (42). Stevenson argues through Jekyll's voice that both sides of man could coincide; however, this evidence is rejected because as soon as the feelings, desires and instincts are accepted, human beings become slaves of them and lose their rational part. For this reason, when Dr. Jekyll and Roderick Usher assume such emotional part, they began to be slaves of their own madness.

Such extraordinary stories suggest a self-reflection about how every human being is beyond the limits of reason. While Poe's stories challenge the readers to reach their own conclusion in an ambiguous sphere where the language contributes to the terror atmosphere and the uncertainty of the story itself; Stevenson's story explains more clearly the evidence of the duplicity of human nature. Although, the characters in "The Fall of the House of Usher" are described as sick characters, the aim of such stories is to encourage the readers to search in their inner self to feel sympathy for the characters instead of accusing them of committing insane performances. In fact, the readers may be

seen immersed in the distorted world of the character, and even feel their fears and emotions. However, the separation between the body and the mind into two distinct figures contributes to the ambiguity and gothic mood of the story.

## CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper several Edgar Allan Poe's short stories and other critics and writers have been read in detail in order to prove the main hypothesis. Dualism of human nature constitutes an important topic in Poe's works by evidencing Roderick and Madeline Usher are the two representations of the same being and how within the same character the conflict between reason and emotions is possible.

Roderick is considered the corporal entity of the human being, whereas Madeline constitutes the psychological part of the protagonist that has been created by Roderick own fears towards life. His violent struggle to defeat his terror conclude with his own death. Moreover, another type of duality of human nature within the narrator has been demonstrated, and how his figure may be interpreted as an allusion to society so as to encourage the readers to analyze their inner self. The use of visual and resounding elements and the detailed description of the environment also contributes to the dual effect. Finally, it is established a brief comparison to Stevenson's short story where duality of human nature is depicted explicitly. As a result, the importance of dual structures has been demonstrated through the detailed analysis of "The Fall of the House of Usher" in comparison to other Poe's short stories and Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

As a possibility to improve and expand this paper work, another American writer named Nathaniel Hawthorne could be taken into account. The theme of duality of human nature can also be found in Hawthorne's story "Young Goodman Brown" that, contrary to Edgar Allan Poe, reflects such dualism with the opposition between good and evil within the protagonist.

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