

METZENERSTEIN: A CHARACTER DOMINATED BY HIS OWN SHADOW

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RESUMO: O comportamento do ser humano é constantemente influenciado por vários elementos, sejam estes externos ou internos. Desse modo, alguns indivíduos, incapazes de se adaptarem a si próprios e ao ambiente que os circundam, vivem conflitos existenciais. Nesse sentido, este trabalho tem como objetivo analisar a personagem principal do conto “Metzengerstein”, de Edgar Allan Poe, visando des(velar) alguns mistérios da mente do homem e compreender a maneira como são moldadas as personalidades humanas. Sob essa perspectiva, os pressupostos teóricos da psicanálise, sobretudo os de Freud e de Jung, constituem fundamentos essenciais para o desenvolvimento da análise.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: literatura; psicanálise; conflito existencial; personalidade humana.

1. Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe, an American writer of the Romantic period, deals, in many of his works, with the nature and the values of the human beings, especially when

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the individual lives a personal conflict. In the short story “Metzengerstein,” the author reveals, through his main character, the importance of the knowledge of one’s own soul, of the inner world, emphasizing that the lack of it causes a disharmony in the individual and in the social environment, which may result in human tragedies.

This short story portrays a story of a young baron, Frederick Metzengerstein, who is used to do whatever he wants without being punished by his parents or anyone else. His family is a powerful one, and had been for centuries at variance with the rival family of Berlifitzing. However, after the death of his parents, there is a change in the young baron’s attitudes, although it does not signify improvement of it. Frederick becomes worse than he was. He is then able to do many more atrocities.

Four days after the death of Frederick’s parents, the Castle Berlifitzing is on fire. Some people say that it is an act of the young baron’s audacity. At the moment the castle is burning on fire, Frederick finds himself in a room of his palace contemplating a tapestry on the wall. There is in this picture an image of a horse and a Metzengerstein horseman with his sword looking at the carcasses of his enemy on the floor. Frederick has the impression that the animal is alive. So, he desperately runs out of this place and when he arrives out of his castle he finds his men trying to detain a huge and furious horse. He feels horror when he notices that this animal looks like the tapestry’s horse. He is terrified, but he decides to keep this horse as his property. From this day on, his behaviors become much stranger. He isolates himself from the society and he rides his new horse everyday. When he turns back from the rides, his face is full of fury.

One tempestuous night, he wakes up suddenly, mounts his horse and goes to the forest. Especially on this day, he

retards to come back and when he arrives his castle is on fire. He has an expression of agony and the animal looks like a demon. So, the horse controls the rider and takes him to the chaotic fire. Immediately, the tempest dies away and what remains is only a huge white flame, in which there appears a colossal figure of a horse.

The character Metzengerstein is an unhappy man because of his inability and incapability of knowing himself and of integrating himself in the social environment that he lives. Thus, dissatisfaction and unhappiness are natural consequences of the character's inability to interact with his companions and with the world around him. As a result, he isolates himself becoming a solitary person. Since he is unable to control his desires, he lives in his own microcosm, isolating himself and becoming an anti-social person.

2. A reflection on Metzengerstein's grotesque behavior

In the short story "Metzengerstein," Frederick is a young boy that accomplishes his desires without giving importance to other people's feelings. By the fact he doesn't follow the values and laws of the society, what hinders him from having a good relationship with people, he is seen as a cruel person.

When his father dies, he becomes completely lonely, as the father was the only person that tried to understand and help Frederick. As a consequence of this deficiency in his life, Metzengerstein develops a kind of psychic deformity, transforming himself into a grotesque figure. As he doesn't know how to deal with his impulses, they become huger and more powerful.

According to Jung (1973), the shadow is a system of the human's personality. It is a part of the unconsciousness that is

susceptible to bizarre and strange elements. Thus, Poe utilizes a horse that appears as a supernatural animal to symbolize the shadow of Frederick's character. Jung (1973) affirms that wild horses symbolize, many times, uncontrolled instinctive impulses that many people try to repress, which, nevertheless, can emerge from the unconsciousness at any moment.

The animal becomes Frederick's property. The young baron has fear of his own shadow which is symbolized by the horse, but he is also attracted towards it and curious about this strange animal that makes him feel agitated by a variety of emotions. Nonetheless, the conflict that the horse's incident created on Frederick's being, who pretends to be a huge and brave person, makes visible his weakness and real personality. In this way, the author degrades the character, inverting his nature and ridiculing him: "Stupefied with terror, the young nobleman tottered to the door" (POE, p. 674).

Since the character doesn't have knowledge about the systems that compose his personality, he is dominated by the shadow, that is, by the horse. Thus, the animal becomes each time more powerful over Frederick and gains human expressions while the baron acquires animal features. "The eyes before invisible, now wore an energetic and human expression, while they gleamed with a fiery and unusual red" (POE, p. 674). Poe is ironic when he reveals that the furious animal has human expression. The inversion of features illustrates Poe's ability to deal with the grotesque, as both animal and man become grotesque figures with the exchange of human and animalistic characteristics. By dehumanizing the man, the author degrades human's condition and behaviors.

The emphasis in the text is given to the young baron's ignorance about the origin of the horse; he has no idea from where and why the horse appears in his castle. Since the animal symbolizes the character's unconscious thoughts, it torments

him and it is strange to his conscious thoughts. If Metzengerstein doesn't know his own unconsciousness, no one will know it either. The origin of the horse is then totally unknown in the town, nobody knows to whom it belongs and where it comes from:

'He is your own property, Sire' – replied one of the equerries – 'at least he is claimed by no other owner. We caught him flying, all smoking and foaming with rage, from the burning stables of the Castle Berlifitzing. Supposing him to have belonged to the old Count's stud of foreign horses, we led him back as an estray. But the grooms there disclaim any title to the creature – which is strange, since he bears evident marks of having made a narrow escape from the flames.' 'The letters W.V.B. are also branded very distinctly on his forehead,' interrupted a second equerry – 'I supposed them; of course, to be the initials of Wilhelm Von Berlifitzing – but all at the Castle are positive in denying any knowledge of the horse.' (POE, p. 675).

The own Frederick thinks that this situation is very strange. The horse, that is, his unconscious thoughts are something prodigious, unexplained, untreated, beautiful and great, which cause on him astonishment and admiration: "Extremely singular!" said the young Baron, with a musing air, and apparently unconscious of the meaning of his words. "He is, as you say, a remarkable horse – a prodigious horse!" (POE, p. 675). Like the animal, his unconscious is instigating.

Before the horse has complete dominion of the man, Frederick tries to be conscious about it in an attempt to dominate the animal: 'Let him be mine, however,' he added, after a pause, 'perhaps a ride like Frederick of Metzengerstein may tame even the devil from the stables of Berlifitzing' (POE, p. 675). In this moment, his personality's systems still work together to try to find equilibrium to the personality as a whole. The self and the

ego, which, according to Jung (1973), are the personality's center, try to make the individual realize his impulses in a way that doesn't break the rules of society and his own rules. But his unconsciousness tries to overcome the other systems in order to accomplish his desires. As Frederick doesn't have knowledge about his unconscious mind, the people that work for him insist that the horse belongs to him. The servants want to make Frederick aware that the horse is Frederick's and as such, his responsibility: "You are mistaken, my lord – the horse, as I think we mentioned, is *not* from the stables of the Count. If such were the case, we know our duty better than to bring him into the presence of a noble of your family." (POE, p. 675).

On the other hand, when Frederick decides to take the horse, he seems to have realized that only he can understand the horse, that is, his interior, which is symbolized by the animal. So, he orders that the horse stay in a place separated from the other animals and that the place should be closed. With these measures, he would be the only one able to enter there. After this happening, his face retakes the perverse expression, because in isolating his unconsciousness as he does, his persona, which is a kind of masque used by the individual in order to live well in society, returns to dominate the character's personality. Since the individual has to accomplish the roles that society attributes to him, he has to renounce many of his desires, which contributes to intensifying his brutality. The masque has the purpose to create established impressions on the other individuals and also to hide one's intimate self.

Frederick doesn't get to adapt to the society because his unconscious thoughts, that is, symbolized by the horse, become more powerful and start dominating his mind. The consequence is his own isolation, since his behavior was not accepted by the people of that social environment. According to Freud (1961), to avoid suffering, when it is caused by the relationship between

individual and society, man tends to isolate himself, in an incessant search for happiness. Because of this, the young baron has a life completely different from his nobles and aristocrat neighbors:

While his habits and manner, still less than formerly, offered any thing congenial with those of the neighboring aristocracy. He was never to be seen beyond the limits of his own domain, and, in his wide and social world, was utterly companionless – unless, indeed, that unnatural, impetuous, and fiery-colored horse, which he henceforward continually bestrode, had any mysterious right to the title of his friend (POE, p. 676).

The horse becomes his unique companion, that is, the baron only hears, only obeys his own impulses, his unconscious thoughts. The animal is his dominion; he rides the strange and impetuous horse as a crazy person. He doesn't have a social life because this society doesn't make part of his reality anymore. Isolating himself, he is free from the oppression of the external world. Thus, Frederick Metzengerstein fulfills all his wishes, living pseudo-happiness. Otherwise, he seems to be astonished and unable, beyond all, to control his impulses, letting himself to be dominated by the horse.

When human being behaves in a different way from what is expected by the individuals of a certain society, he is considered by his companions as a crazy, unbalanced person. Thus, all people of Frederick's society try to attribute some reason to the baron's actions, suggesting a conflict between the particular world of the character and the universe that surrounds him.

The more the baron lets himself be dominated by his unconscious thoughts the more they become powerful. As the narrator affirms, the perverted relationship between the baron

and the animal develops each time. As the close bond between man and horse strengthens, the horse's ferocity increases:

Indeed, the Baron's attachment to his lately-acquired charger – an attachment which seemed to attain new strength from every fresh example of the animal's ferocious and demon-like propensities – at length became, in the eyes of all reasonable men, a hideous and unnatural fervor. In the glare of noon – at the dead hour of night – in sickness or in health – in calm or in tempest – the young Metzengerstein seemed riveted to the saddle of that colossal horse, whose intractable audacities so well accorded with his own spirit (POE, p.677).

In this last phrase, the ambiguity created by the narrator, through the words "his own spirits", shows that the baron and the animal form a unique element because the word "his" can either refer to the horse's spirit or to Metzengerstein's. Yet, it can also be observed that the horse, symbolizing the character's unconscious mind, becomes more powerful than Frederick himself and it passes to dominate the baron's actions: "There were circumstances, moreover, which, coupled with late events, gave an unearthly and portentous character to the mania of the rider, and to the capabilities of the steed" (POE, p. 677).

Frederick maintains the horse separated from the other animals, and he is the only one to enter the place where it stays in order to take care of it. The truth is that he avoids any possible commentaries about the situation. He doesn't want to admit that he is dominated by the horse, that is, by his own impulses. Similarly to the animal that is not identified by a name, his unconscious thoughts are distinguished by the other contents of the mind only by their pre-established denominated characteristics:

The Baron, besides, had no particular *name* for the animal, although all the rest in his collection were distinguished by

characteristic appellations. His stable, too, was appointed at a distance from the rest; and with regard to grooming and other necessary offices, none but the owner in person had ventured to officiate, or even to enter the enclosure of that horse's particular stall (POE, p. 677).

The animal seems to be so unreal, so abstract that even the men who were trying to contain the horse couldn't affirm that they put their hands in the animal:

It was also to be observed, that although the three grooms, who had caught the steed as he fled from the conflagration at Berlifitzing, had succeeded in arresting his course, by means of a chain-bridle and noose – yet not one of the three could with any certainty affirm that he had, during that dangerous struggle, or at any period thereafter, actually placed his hand upon the body of the beast (POE, p. 677).

The behavior of the animal seems not to raise any kind of strangeness to people, but there are circumstances which seem too outlandish and mysterious, and, as such, difficult to believe, since they cannot be rationally explained. The horse appears to be dominated by a supernatural force, analogously to what happens with the unconscious contents. They are so strange that the individual tries to repress them:

Instances of peculiar intelligence in the demeanor of a noble and high-spirited horse are not to be supposed capable of exciting unreasonable attention, but there were certain circumstances which intruded themselves by force upon the most skeptical and phlegmatic (POE, p. 677).

By the fact the character is influenced by the animal, that is, by his unconscious desires, he has reflected on his face an expression of cruelty, similar to that of the furious animal.

Frederick's facial expression is related to the animal instinct that every human being has inside of him/her and that the baron, without noticing, lets overcome in relation to his conscious mind: "Among all the retinue of the Baron, however, none were found to doubt the ardor of that extraordinary affection which existed on the part of the young nobleman for the fiery qualities of his horse" (POE, p. 677).

According to Jung (1973), the desires appear suddenly. If the subject doesn't have conscience about them he loses control of the situation, as it happens with Frederick when he suddenly wakes up, mounts his horse and goes to the forest in a desperate way: "One tempestuous night, Metzengerstein, awaking from a heavy slumber, descended like a maniac from his chamber, and, mounting in hot haste, bounded away into the mazes of the forest" (POE, p. 678).

Thus, when he turns back from his ride, it is very late. Just like his castle, which symbolizes his personality as a whole, he is destroyed by his unconscious. No one can help him from his self destruction:

As the flames, when first seen, had already made so terrible a progress that all efforts to save any portion of the building were evidently futile, the astonished neighborhood stood idly around in silent if not pathetic wonder. But a new and fearful object soon riveted the attention of the multitude, and proved how much more intense is the excitement wrought in the feelings of a crowd by the contemplation of human agony, than that brought about by the most appalling spectacles of inanimate matter (POE, p. 678).

3. Conclusion

The character Metzengerstein is presented by Edgar Allan Poe as a grotesque figure, which is a victim of his own instincts. The lack of knowledge about his own self allows his

unconscious mind to dominate the other systems of his personality.

Frederick isn't able to harmonize his conscious thoughts with his unconscious ones, so the unconscious contents of the character's mind manifest their unfavorable and negative aspects. Thus, his personality is controlled by his shadow, although he is not able to realize it. The shadow's elements, which are repressed by the individual in order to have a good relationship with his companions, make the character act against the social ideals and standards.

Metzengerstein's mental disharmony causes his isolation and consequent unhappiness because he is not aware about what he can do. His inability to understand himself is due to the fact that part of his psyche has already overcome the other ones. As Metzengerstein does not comprehend his own nature, that is, his inner world, his personality's systems aren't willing to participate in a vaster world of objective interests. So, he is surrounded by egoistic desires, fears, hopes, and ambitions of personal nature, which hinder him to have a communion with the external world. Therefore, Frederick is dehumanized and the destruction of his own self becomes imminent.

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ABSTRACT: The human behavior is constantly influenced by many elements, external or internal. In this way, some individuals, incapable of adapting themselves to their own selves and to the environment that surrounds them, live existential conflicts. In this context, this work intends to analyze the main character of Edgar Allan Poe's short story "Metzengerstein", with the objective to un(veil) some of the mysteries of the human mind and understand the mechanisms that mold men's personalities. Under this perspective, Freud's and Jung's psychoanalytical assumptions are essential to the development of the analysis.

KEY-WORDS: literature: psychoanalysis; existential conflict; human personality.