

The Ideal Ego vs. the Ego Ideal: Fictionalization of Lacanian Perversion in Poe's "The Imp of the Perverse"

İdeal Ego Ego İdeal'e Karşı: Poe'nun "The Imp of the Perverse"
Hikâyesinde Lacancı Perversiyonun Kurgusallaştırılması

Elzem Nazli

Middle East Technical University, Turkey

Abstract

In Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845), the narrator/protagonist gives us his account of how he commits a murder, but he does not provide a fully defined, convincing reason for his vile action. He speaks like a commonsensical man when he philosophizes on "perversity" in a clinically distanced tone of voice. He makes inferences and highlights the implications concerning perversity. With the same tone of voice, he also gives the readers a cold-blooded account of how he killed an old man. The insanity in the act and the way he narrates it are complicated enough for us to make sense of his situation. However, to make the issue more complicated, he gives himself away and is imprisoned to be hanged. The co-existence of these triangular dynamics has triggered a zealous hermeneutic process by/for the critics. However, none of these readings can exhaust the narrative and hermeneutical implications embodied in the story. Each of them can cover some aspects of the narrative while leaving some others untouched like the psychodynamics of the main character. In that sense, this essay attempts to make a psychoanalytic interpretation of the story by giving a Lacanian hearing to it as it might offer an explanation for certain details which otherwise remain as a rupture like the narrator's drive to give himself away or his impulsive act of killing the old man. Using the Lacanian concepts of the ideal ego and the ego ideal, jouissance, perversity, the imaginary, and the symbolic as the conceptual backcloth, this essay claims that Poe fictionalizes Lacanian psychoanalytic concept of perversity, which refers to the partial accession to castration, in "The Imp of the Perverse".

Keywords: The Imp of the Perverse, the ideal ego, the ego ideal, jouissance, perversity, the imaginary, the symbolic

Öz

Edgar Allan Poe'nun "Zıtlık Şeytani" ("The Imp of the Perverse") hikâyesinde, anlatıcı/ana karakter, bize bir cinayeti nasıl işlediğini anlatır ancak bu menfur eyleminin ardındaki nedeni tam olarak tanımlamaz ve ikna edici bir neden sunmaz. Klinik olarak mesafeli bir tonla "perversiyon" üzerine felsefe yaptığında sağduyulu bir kişiymiş gibi konuşur; perversiyon ile ilgili çeşitli çıkarımlarda bulunur ve bunu örneklerle açıklar. Daha sonra benzer tonla yaşlı bir adamı nasıl öldürdüğünü de okuyucuya soğukkanlılıkla anlatır. Anlatıcının gerçekleştirdiği eylemdeki çılgınlık ve bunu anlatış şekli, onun durumunu anlamamız için oldukça karmaşıktır. Anlatıcının kendini ele vermesi ve asılmak üzere hapsedilmesi meselenin okuyucu için daha karmaşık hale gelmesine sebep olur. Bu üçgen dinamiğin bir arada bulunması eleştirilenler açısından zahmetli bir hermenötik süreci tetiklemiştir. Fakat, bu

CUJHSS, June 2021; 15/1: 122-134.

© Çankaya University ISSN 1309-6761 Printed in Ankara

Submitted: Oct 26, 2020; Accepted: May 22, 2021

ORCID#: 0000-0001-9255-3881; enazli@metu.edu.tr

okumaların hiçbiri, hikâyede yer alan anlatısal ve hermenötik çıkarımları tüketememiştir. Çalışmaların her biri anlatının bazı yönlerini ele alabilmiş ve kahramanın psikodinamiği gibi bazı konulara derinlemesine incelenmemiştir. Bu bağlamda makale, hikâyenin kahramanı Lacancı psikanalitik yaklaşımla analiz etmeye çalışmaktadır. Bu yaklaşım bizim belirli ayrıntıları daha iyi anlamlandırmamıza katkı sağlar, aksi takdirde anlatıcının teslim olma güdüsü ya da yaşlı adamı öldürmek gibi dürtüsel eylemi okuyucuda bir muamma olarak kalır. İdeal-ego, ego-ideal, zevk, perversiyon, imgesel ve sembolik gibi Lacancı kavramlarını kavramsal arka plan olarak kullanan bu makale Poe'nun "Zıtlık Şeytanı" başlıklı hikâyesinde Lacancı anlamda kısmi kastrasyona denk düşen perversiyon kavramını kurgusallaştırdığını iddia eder.

Anahtar Kelimeler: The Imp of the Perverse, ideal-ego, ego-ideal, zevk, perversiyon, imgesel, simgesel

Introduction

Poe's stories offer fertile ground due to his employment of intricate plot structure and psychological depth, therefore, a psychoanalytical reading of his stories embodies as much material to explore as a generic analysis of them. As Olivera and Indrusiak argue, "the very narrative structure of many of his [Poe's] tales mirrors a psychoanalytical method," and they continue, "the interference of the protagonist's unconscious leading him towards an unwanted and dreaded path of self-destruction" appears as a recurrent theme in his short stories (48). Poe's fiction systematically explores the inner working mechanisms of the mind to such an extent that, as Scoot Peoples suggests, "he dramatized to a startling degree a number of the concepts Freud would name and establish as the fundamentals of modern psychoanalysis" (38). In *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study* (1926), the psychoanalyst Otto Rank even claims further that Poe employs "the theme of the double" in his short story "William Wilson" in such a way that it becomes "a model for several later treatments" (25). More recently, in 2009, Daniel M. Wegner has revisited "the imp of the perverse," borrowing the term from Poe's story, under the light of "ironic process theory." He conducts a bulk of laboratory research and demonstrates that as people want to suppress a thought, it pops out into the consciousness, which he terms as "ironic errors" (Wegner 48). So deeply entangled with psychology, Poe's stories offer a highly fruitful ground to make a psychoanalytic inquiry, and this essay is another attempt to make a psychoanalytic interpretation of Poe's another well-known story, "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845).

"The Imp of the Perverse"¹ begins with a long passage allocated to the philosophical discussion on an undefinable human impulse which is, as the narrator states, the "*PRIMA MOBILIA*² of the human soul," perverseness (Poe

¹ All the references to "The Imp of the Perverse" are taken from *Edgar Allan Poe: Fiction and Poetry* (2006).

² *Prima mobilia* means "a constitutive feature of existence" (Cleman 639).

720). As the narrative reveals later, the unnamed narrator, who is in jail in present moment, aims to convince the audience that he is “one of the many uncounted victims of the Imp of the Perverse” (Poe 723). After telling how he has committed murder with the help of a poisoned candle, a case which has long remained uncovered, the narrator relates how he inherits the rich victim’s estate and enjoys his wealth for years. However, this peaceful condition is disturbed due to an unidentifiable reason. Pleasure that he increasingly enjoys gives way to “a haunting and harassing thought” after a certain point, and he finds himself repeating the phrase “I am safe” (Poe 723). One day while he is strolling through the street, he murmurs, half-aloud, that “I am safe – I am safe – if I be not fool enough to make open confession!” (Poe 724). However, he eventually publicizes the crime he committed just as he abstains from and is put into jail to be hanged.

The narrator/protagonist gives us his account of how he commits a murder, but he does not provide a fully defined, convincing reason for his vile action. He speaks like a commonsensical man when he philosophizes on “perversity” in a clinically distanced tone of voice. He makes inferences and highlights the implications concerning perversity. With the same tone of voice, he also gives the readers a cold-blooded account of how he killed an old man. The insanity in the act and the way he narrates it are complicated enough for us to make sense of his situation. However, to make the issue more complicated, he gives himself away and is imprisoned to be hanged. The co-existence of these triangular dynamics has triggered a zealous hermeneutic process by/for the critics.

An early analysis of “The Imp of the Perverse” focuses on the creative aspect of it because the introduction part of the story brings the question of Poe’s failure of craftsmanship into discussion. Zimmerman asserts that “the essay-like introduction” is not a failure but an indication of Poe’s craftsmanship (37). Kanjo scrutinizes the story through the lens of a romantic tale in which creativity and destructiveness are paradoxically intertwined (41). Drawing on what Stanley Fish suggests, Bieganowski dwells on the narrator of “The Imp of the Perverse” and reads it as an example of “self-consuming narrator,” where the attention is transferred from the content of art to its effects (175). Koçsoy compares Poe’s and Kant’s ideas of the sublime by discussing “The Imp of the Perverse”. In relation to the crime the narrator commits, Koçsoy argues that the narrator in “the Imp of the Perverse” “crave[s] for self-transcendence by experiencing the terror of the sublime” through pleasure while doing evil (146). The critic John Cleman takes the narrator’s account as “the insanity defense” in his study on Poe. As it is foregrounded by Cleman, in the first half of the nineteenth-century, insanity defense was among the most controversial issues of the legal system (624). A number of critics has approached the text as a tale of confession. Arthur A. Brown, for instance, by relating the act of telling to death, argues that “[a] tale of a murderer’s confession gives us two deaths – the victim’s and the murderer’s – both inextricable from the act of telling” (198). Lorelei Caraman, on the other hand, focuses on the narrator’s confession by using Peter Brooks’s concept of the “narrative desire.” She notes that the text incorporates a force of ambivalence within itself: on the one hand, there is

the desire of the narrative which is "the confessional urge to tell," and on the other, there is "the desire to conceal" which causes the "undecidability' of meaning," which, in the last analysis, resembles the structure of the unconscious (Caraman 106). In a similar line of thinking, Sandra Whipple Spanier analyzes the paradoxical formal structure of "The Imp of the Perverse" that is, the narrator's exaltation of "*inductive* reasoning" as opposed to his method of deductive narration (308) in order to explain Poe's emphasis on "Unity" (307).

None of these readings can exhaust the narrative and hermeneutical implications embodied in the story. Each of them can cover some aspects of the narrative while leaving some others untouched like the psychodynamics of the main character. The narrator leaves such a small textual space to the crime story that it seems hard to elaborate on the reasons behind his vile action. The reader is only provided with scarce details about how he kills the victim and how he confesses his crime and, consequently, gets himself caught. The story bears some suggestive piece of evidence which justifies a psychoanalytic approach in relation to the protagonist's seemingly unreasonable acts. For instance, there are some loopholes in the flow of plot which need to be deciphered. There arise many questions in the mind of the reader concerning the reasons why the protagonist wants to murder the rich man, or why the protagonist develops an anxiety after some time which will lead him to shout the testimony of his crime. Since the story does not offer satisfactory answers to these questions on the surface level, some story elements remain as an enigma to the reader. There are two important studies which give a psychoanalytic hearing to the protagonist of "The Imp of the Perverse". One of the early analyses of Poe's stories is offered by Mary Bonaparte in her work *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (1949), in which she psychoanalyzes Edgar Allan Poe himself against the backdrop of his work drawing on Sigmund Freud's theories. In relation to "The Imp of the Perverse," Bonaparte mentions the "confessional urge" which refers to the simultaneous action of "the pressure of conscience which demands punishment for our sins" and "our instinctual urges towards criminal activities" (463). In addition to that, comparing Freud's and Poe's understanding of perversity, Oliveira and Indrusiak explores "The Imp of the Perverse" by using the Freudian concept of the uncanny. They suggest that while one's struggle to scrutinize what is concealed within one's mind is "a road to destruction" in Poe's fiction, the same movement is "a key to sanity, provided it be conducted by a skilled psychoanalyst" (Oliveira and Indrusiak 55). According to them, the reason for the protagonist's vile action is that the murderer is not able to confront the unconscious successfully or dare to face what is repressed in his mind, so he falls prey to the imp and is surrendered to the self-destructive impulses in the end (Oliveira and Indrusiak 56). Diverging from these psychoanalytic studies, the current study aims to look at the complicated psychodynamics of the narrator (the main character) and aims to give some possible answers to the questions raised in the story from a Lacanian vantage point. My intention is not to offer a totalizing frame of reading but to offer just another alternative

reading that might help the readers dig up further resonances in the story. Reading the story by taking all the elements on a rational ground cannot exhaust some of the implications of the narrative. That is, the story spills over the interpretive frame and demands more in-depth analysis. A Lacanian vantage point might offer an explanation for certain details which otherwise remain as a rupture like the narrator's drive to give himself away or his impulsive act of killing the old man.

In "The Imp of the Perverse" there are two distinct voices coming from the narrator, which dramatizes an inner conflict. In Lacanian epistemology, this conflict can be taken as the lack of convergence between one's ideal ego identifications and the ego ideal in the symbolic, which is the vantage point we view ourselves. There is lack of convergence between them as one is an element of the imaginary and the other is constituted in the symbolic. That is, they work through two different logics: logic of the images and of the signifiers, respectively. In the story, the unnamed narrator kills the old man who obviously assumes a position of power in his eyes after a long process of planning and enjoys his wealth in the aftermath of his murder. This old man triggers in him an uncanny anxiety, which we might associate with Oedipal rivalry and castration anxiety as he is a man of power and as after killing him, he relocates himself in the position of the old man. Rather than acknowledging his authority, the narrator overpowers him, which is the reversal of the Oedipal drama and a form of psychic regression. However, the drama does not end there as this regression takes place after being positioned in the symbolic, which implies the constitution of the ego ideal, though in a weak form. As the sense of omnipotence, he enjoys through the old man's wealth gets weaker, his ego ideal, which is also an abstraction of the Law, gives him away and he is in prison in the living present. From a Lacanian vantage point, the feeling of omnipotence that the murderer experiences can be claimed to be an instance of *jouissance*, "painful pleasure". After killing the fatherly figure, the protagonist suffers from excessive *jouissance*, but it should be regulated. The reason why he gives himself away to the authorities can be read as his desperate attempt to set limit to *jouissance*. He, the pervert, wants the Law to come to his aid and desperately attempts to make the metaphorical father accomplish the paternal function in order to restrain *jouissance*. Due to the significance attached to the conflicting voices in the narrator, this paper aims to look at the story from a Lacanian vantage point using the Lacanian concepts of the ideal ego and the ego ideal, perversity, *jouissance*, the imaginary and the symbolic as the conceptual backcloth.

Theoretical Framework

A brief look at the Lacanian view of subjectivity would prepare a better ground for a thorough analysis of the story. Rewriting Freud from a structuralist perspective, Jacques Lacan mentions "three fundamental dimensions of psychical subjectivity"; namely the imaginary, the symbolic, and the real. Although these registers do not allow us to make a neat and rigid classification, they have certain characteristics. In a Lacanian formula, the infant moves from

the imaginary register to the symbolic register through the resolution of Oedipus complex. The symbolic refers to the register in which the infant enters into the domain of language, accepting "the Law of the father". In a sense, the infant gets involved into the cultural and the social life through language. This is a crucial entry for Lacan because, if the infant does not accomplish this transition properly, there may occur some problems ranging from psychosis to perversion.

The imaginary register is crucial in Lacanian epistemology because it is central to the ego formation. This register is the pre-linguistic, pre-Oedipal state of being. This is the realm in which the infant is in a symbiotic relation to its mother's body. The main feature of this dyadic child/mother relationship is that "the infant makes no distinction between self and other, itself and the outside world" (Elliott 103). As Elliott states, "the imaginary is a peculiar realm of ideal completeness, merging all that is inside with which is outside" (103). The basis of imaginary register is the mirror phase because the ego is formed by identifying with its specular image. The infant sees its image in the mirror and develops an illusionary identification with "the imago of the counterpart," as Lacan contends in his essay called "The Mirror stage as Formative of the Function of the I" (4). Its image in the mirror is the first constitutive image for the infant, therefore, its first imago. The infant conceives itself as a unified and autonomous being by looking at its image in the mirror. It is a phase where the subject moves from a feeling of incompleteness into a vision of totality. On the one hand, this is a "*misrecognition*" for "it gives him the illusion that he has control over his body when he has not" (Sarup 65-66). As Lacan claims, "alienation is constitutive of the imaginary order" (Seminar III 146). On the other hand, the infant attains this sense of unity in the other, the other in the mirror, which explains its dependency on the other. "Lacan's point is that the ego is constituted by an identification with another whole object, an imaginary projection, and idealization, the 'Ideal-I,' which does not match the child's feebleness" (Sarup 66). Therefore, the ideal Ego, "the Ideal-I" originates in the "jubilant" relationship established between the ego and its specular image (Lacan, "The Mirror" 2). It gives the infant a sense of narcissistic omnipotence. It comes into being through the narcissistic identification with his first constitutive image, Imago, in which we appear to be likeable to ourselves representing "what we would like to be" – the ideal in the mirror. The primary narcissism is always accompanied by certain amount of aggressivity as well. Lacan contends that "The mirror stage is far from a mere phenomenon which occurs in the development of the child. It illustrates the conflictual nature of the dual relationship" (Seminar IV 17, qtd. in Evans 115). Unlike its reflection in the mirror as a whole being, the infant feels threatened by a sense of disintegration/fragmentation and a lack of control in its real body, which, in turn, makes way for the feeling of aggression.

This identification with the mother which is established in the imaginary register is disrupted by the father as the third element and the infant's acceptance of his castration marks the resolution of his Oedipal complex. However, the father here is not the biological father as in Freud's formula,

rather it is what the father symbolizes, a position, “the Law of the father,” or “the Name of the father”. The infant understands that what satisfies or orders the desire of the mother is not something physical, rather it is ordered by a Law. The father symbolizes a body of social conventions. When the infant accedes to castration and accepts the sovereignty of what the father represents, he is positioned symbolically into the logic of language: “Accepting his authority and phallic status is the precondition of the child’s having a place within the socio-symbolic order, a name and a speaking position” (Sarup 127). At this point, the imaginary identifications are supplemented by symbolic identification. The symbolic identification is achieved through the words, norms and directives of its given cultural collectives. It is at this time that the infant enters into the domain of the language, “the social world of Law, morality, religion and conscience” (Habib 589). In a sense, language, or rather the logic of language, castrates the male infant and regulates the desire in the Oedipus complex, so the infant is positioned in the Symbolic and identifies itself with the father. The infant forms the ego-ideal at the time when castration complex is surmounted and, in corollary, the male infant starts to identify himself with the father. The ego-ideal is the very place from where we are being observed, from where we look at ourselves so that we appear to ourselves likeable and worthy of love – the position from which we look at ourselves through the gaze of the Symbolic. It is through this “secondary identification” that the aggressivity the infant experiences in the mirror phase is transcended (Lacan, “Aggressivity” 17).

In Lacanian understanding, perversity does not carry any derogatory connotations such as abnormal sexual behavior, “an aberration in relation to social criteria, an anomaly contrary to good morals” (Evans 141), it rather appears as a clinical structure. It is described as one of the three psychoanalytic categories i.e., neurosis, psychosis, and perversion, all of which concern the paternal function. “Whereas we see an utter and complete absence of the law in psychosis, and a definitive instatement of the law in neurosis (overcome only in fantasy), in perversion the subject struggles to bring the law into being” (Fink 165). Paternal function has two important moments of interference. The first refers to “the father’s prohibition of the child’s pleasurable contact with its mother (prohibition to *jouissance*)” (Fink 179) while the second indicates “the symbolization of the mOther’s lack – that is, its constitution as lack due to the fact that it is given a name” (Fink 179). The first function is called “alienation” while the latter is “separation.” Reading Lacan, Bruce Fink puts that although pervert undergoes alienation, he does not surpass separation (179). In first instance of paternal function, the father, or the fatherly figure other than the mother, prohibits the infant from the *jouissance* it gets from its physical connection to its mother, which can be called “primal repression” (Swales XIV). However, the infant should also separate himself from his mother with the help of father as the paternal metaphor, the Law, the name of the Father. When it fails, the infant imagines itself as being the imaginary phallus for his mother’s *jouissance*, which is associated with “secondary repression” (Swales XIV) or “symbolic castration”

(Fink 176). If the infant cannot surpass separation, it cannot attain a symbolic position. Thus the infant, the pervert, assumes that it is what the mother lacks, making itself the object of her desire. Therefore, he is not claimed to "make a name for himself" (Fink 176). As a result, he terribly needs the Law come into being to set the limit to *jouissance*.

Fictionalization of Perversion in "The Imp of The Perverse"

If we locate the narrative elements of Poe's "Imp of the Perverse" within a Lacanian frame of thinking, the loopholes in it make more sense. The biggest question lingering in the story is: Why does he kill the old man? If one can answer this question, the story reveals itself more coherently. In the story, the unnamed narrator kills the old man who obviously assumes a position of power in his eyes after a long process of planning and enjoys his wealth in the aftermath of his murder. The protagonist is acquainted with his victim and knows the place where he lives. He knows that the man has "the habit of reading in bed" (Poe 723). He also knows that his apartment is "narrow and ill ventilated" (Poe 723). The narrator easily substitutes the candle with the poisoned one he made. The rationale behind his murder seems to be the victim's estate. Having inherited his [the victim's] estate, all went well with me for years," says the narrator (Poe 723). By possessing the old man's estate, the narrator, as Arthur Brown puts it, takes "the victim's place, assuming his identity and possibly his name" (201). From a Lacanian perspective, it is possible to argue that this old man triggers in him an uncanny anxiety, which we might associate with Oedipal rivalry and castration anxiety as he is a man of power and as after killing him, he relocates himself in the position of the old man. The narrator sees the victim as a rival, wants him dead, and finally achieves it. The gaze of the old man triggers an uncountable feeling in the narrator and leads to a psychic regression in him. The protagonist in the story kills the old man because the old man reminds him of the imaginary father, not the symbolic father. The imaginary father is an imaginary construct that the infant builds the images around the figure of the father (Evans 64). In his fourth seminar, Lacan states that it bears little resemblance to the father in reality; it can be an ideal or a monstrous figure. It is an "omnipotent" figure which imposes limits to the infant such as incest taboo (qtd. in Evans 63). The protagonist in the story reduces the symbolic father, which is a position imposing the Law, to the imaginary father. Therefore, he takes the old man as a threat, a source of aggression. He cannot see that the old man too has submitted himself to the Law, thus, is castrated. Once he relocates himself in the position of the old man by killing him, saying that he has "inherited his estate" (Poe 723), the narrator enjoys the place he now occupies:

It is inconceivable how rich a sentiment of satisfaction arose in my bosom as I reflected upon my absolute security. For a very long period of time, I was accustomed to revel in this sentiment. It afforded me more real delight than all the mere worldly advantages accruing from my sin. (Poe 723)

The “absolute security” he feels is significant in psychological terms as it implies relief from something disturbing, like castration anxiety. This seems to be the reversal of the fall from grace for the narrator because he enjoys pure bliss for a while. The word absolute also implies timelessness and universality of the experience. In the process of Oedipus complex, the male infant is constantly under the threat of the Law because he is afraid that he will be castrated by the Law of the Father. Realizing that it cannot defeat it, he submits himself to the Law. However, in case of “The Imp of the Perverse” the narrator reverses the Oedipus drama because he overpowers him. That is, he literalises the biggest infantile phantasy of a male infant. The narrator, by assuming the place of the old man, thinks that he has relieved himself of castration anxiety.

In a similar line of thinking, the fact that this murder gives him more delight than anything else brings to mind the Lacanian concept of “*jouissance*.” The French word *jouissance* means basically enjoyment. In the castration period, the infant is in the pursuit of *jouissance* in its attempt to be the imaginary phallus for the mother. Once the infant moves into the realm of the symbolic, s/he acts in accordance with the pleasure principle and the initial *jouissance* is rejected. “Castration means that *jouissance* must be refused so that it can be reached on the inverted ladder (*l'échelle renversée*) of the Law of desire” (Lacan, “The Subversion” 247). However, the subject constantly attempts to transgress the limits imposed on him/her by the reality principle, the logic of the signifiers, or the Law, in order to experience the feeling of *jouissance*. However, going beyond the reality principle does not bring more pleasure; it turns into pain: “*Jouissance* is suffering” (Lacan, Seminar VII 184). The simultaneous existence of pain and pleasure is what Lacan calls *jouissance*. Therefore, it is possible to claim that the extreme form of delight that the protagonist experiences corresponds to what Lacan terms as the *jouissance*, the transgression which injects a different kind of energy to the subject.

However, this blissful, secure, and omnipotent state does not last long as the protagonist experiences this “delight” after being positioned in the symbolic. “There arrived at length an epoch, from which the pleasurable feeling grew, by scarcely perceptible gradations, into a haunting and harassing thought” (Poe 723). He has a vague awareness of the reality principle or the dictates of the Law. *Jouissance* has to remain elusive, otherwise it loses its status as *jouissance*. This is exactly what happens in this case. As there is no other limitation to his delight, or in the absence of a barrier that requires transgression, his delight loses its status as a source of “absolute” delight. This pleasurable feeling that he enjoys by overpowering the man after a point awakens in him another odd feeling again. The narrator becomes estranged from the idea of being secure, therefore, he repeatedly utters the phrase “I am safe” (Poe 723). “In this manner, at last, I would perpetually catch myself pondering upon my security, and repeating, in a low undertone, the phrase, ‘I am safe’” (Poe 723). This word “safe” can be interpreted as the narcissistic omnipotence felt in the absence of the symbolic dictations. Narcissism is closely related to the mirror stage in a Lacanian thinking. The infant’s imaginary identification with its own image in the mirror is a form of imaginary mastery. “[The infant’s] joy is due to his

imaginary triumph in anticipating a degree of muscular co-ordination which he has not yet actually achieved." (Lacan, Seminar I 79). Identifying with its specular image, the infant experiences a sense of narcissistic omnipotence, a sense of wholeness, or "the illusion of autonomy" (Lacan, "The Mirror" 5). In the story, the protagonist tries to establish an imaginary plane of "safety" through the repetition of the word itself. Since the narrator is in the symbolic register, his ego ideal is already constituted. It is his ideal ego that constantly tires to assure himself of being secure. He is able to look at himself from his position in the symbolic but because of his troubled position or troubled identifications in the symbolic, he cannot repress the pull of his imaginary drives. Lacan claims that in perversion "the subject positions himself as object of the drive, as the means of the other's *jouissance*" (Seminar XI, 185). The excessive repetition of the phrase "I am safe," in other words, the voice of the ideal ego, creates the feeling of uncanniness in him. It seems that he has to resort to his imaginary consolations to turn the gaze (symbolic) back on itself.

This uncanny condition that he experiences for the second time can also be explained by relating it to the reversal of Oedipal drama. By taking the old man's place, the father's, the narrator cannot adapt to this place. In a Lacanian context, after surmounting the Oedipus complex properly, the boy becomes a gendered and acculturated being who submits himself to the Law of the Father and the logic of the signifiers. However, in "The Imp of the Perverse" the protagonist does not submit to the Law but rejects it by killing the old man who he takes as the incarnate form of the Law. Therefore, taking the father's place does not bring him an ever-lasting state of bliss that he awaits so this situation creates another uncanny condition in him. If the expression, "I am safe," that the narrator repeatedly chants is read in the light of all this, it is possible to reread it as follows: "There is not any threat of castration anymore because there is no Law, so you are secure." However, the *jouissance* he experiences cannot last long and he has the reminiscences of the dictates of the Law in his consciousness.

No matter how hard he tries, the narrator is not able to resist the excessive pressure coming from his consciousness. He publicizes the testimony just as he was afraid of confessing the crime by himself. "I am safe – I am safe – yes – if I be not fool enough to make open confession" (Poe 724). The narrator does not know why he chants the same phrase, so he names it "perversity." As Charles May asserts, "by thinking that he is safe if only he does not confess, he is perversely drawn closer and closer to making a confession.... The man confesses only because he knows he should not, not because he feels guilty. He is caught only because he says, 'I am safe'" (74). In the long philosophical discussion at the beginning of the story the narrator comments on the nature of the perversity which is "an innate and primitive principle of human action ... a *mobile* without motive, a motive not *motivirt*" (Poe 721). Therefore, he relates this condition to his perversity because he is not capable of giving any rational explanation to his paradoxical act:

At first, I made an effort to shake off this nightmare of the soul. I walked vigorously -- faster -- still faster -- at length I ran. I felt a maddening desire to shriek aloud. Every succeeding wave of thought overwhelmed me with new terror, for, alas!... I still quickened my pace. I bounded like a madman through the crowded thoroughfares. At length, the populace took the alarm, and pursued me. I felt then the consummation of my fate. Could I have torn out my tongue, I would have done it, but a rough voice resounded in my ears -- a rougher grasp seized me by the shoulder. I turned -- I gasped for breath. For a moment I experienced all the pangs of suffocation; I became blind, and deaf, and giddy; and then some invisible fiend, I thought, struck me with his broad palm upon the back. The long imprisoned secret burst forth from my soul. (Poe 724)

The narrator is terribly afraid of this uncontainable feeling which is caused by the clash between his ideal ego and his ego ideal. He cannot stop himself from running in the street aimlessly because he has transgressed the Law, which means that he has experienced the narcissistic omnipotence of the imaginary, on the other hand, he is aware of the absurdity of the situation. But the *jouissance* he experiences does not last long; he does not have any limit enabling him to move beyond the pleasure principle. In addition to that, the dictates of the Law, which are in communication with his ego ideal, force him to get punished for his “inhuman” act. As a result of this frightening and opposing experience, he tells what he has done to the public gathered around her. Thus the conflicting voices coming from his ideal ego and his ego ideal give himself away and he is in prison in the living present. Although the narrator cannot exactly name what he experiences, it can be argued that this is the fictionalization of perversity in Lacanian sense. The protagonist is not claimed to be fully acceded to castration. By annihilating the Father, he imagines that he will be what the mother lacks, that is the phallus. However, suffering from excessive *jouissance* which must be prohibited, he wants to the Law to castrate himself so that limit can be set to *jouissance*.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in “The Imp of the Perverse” if what the narrator does is taken as the actualisation of the biggest infantile phantasy, the story opens itself up for a more comprehensive reading. In such a context, the old man who symbolizes power in his eyes reminds him of the imaginary father which forbids him the initial *jouissance*. He therefore sees the old man as a source of threat, thus, a source of aggression, which hinders him from attaining narcissistic omnipotence. By killing the old man, he experiences a short term *jouissance*, for he transgresses the Law. However, he cannot cope with this new condition because there is not any limitation to his extreme delight which may enable him to have *jouissance* once more. The dictates of the Symbolic pose a threat to this omnipotence. The ending of the story also testifies to the Lacanian idea that *jouissance* has to remain elusive, it is the paradox it embodies. When it becomes constant, it loses its position as *jouissance*. As a result of his double consciousness which becomes a psychic battleground between the imaginary

drives and symbolic dictations, the protagonist gives himself away. In this battleground, his ego ideal dominates, but interestingly the narrator is still mystified about what is happening in his (un)consciousness and tries to theorize on his "uncanny" practice. Moreover, although Poe is fictionalizing the dictates of his imagination in this story, he seems to dramatize what Lacan means by perversion. Indeed, he actualizes what is supposed to stay as a "drama".

Works Cited

- Brown, Arthur A. "Death and Telling in Poe's 'The Imp of the Perverse.'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 31, 1994, pp. 197-205.
- Bieganowski, Roland. "The Self-Consuming Narrator in Poe's 'Ligeia' and 'Usher.'" *American Literature*, vol. 60 no. 2, 1988, pp. 175-187.
- Bonaparte, Mary. *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Psycho-analytic Interpretation*. Trans. J. Rodker. Imago, 1949.
- Caraman, Lorelei. "The Urge to Tell vs. the Need to Conceal: Confession as Narrative Desire in Poe's 'The Black Cat,' 'The Tell-Tale Heart' and 'The Imp of the Perverse.'" *American and British Studies Annual*, vol. 7, 2014, pp. 98-108.
- Cleman, John. "Irresistible Impulses: Edgar Allan Poe and the Insanity Defense." *American Literature*, vol. 63 no. 4, 1991, pp. 623-640.
- de Oliveira, A. L. and E. Indrusiak. "The Uncanny Imp: An Analysis of Freud's Uncanny in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Imp of the Perverse' and 'William Wilson.'" *Abusões*, vol.10 no. 10, 2019, pp. 40-63.
- Elliott, Anthony. *Psychoanalytic Theory: An Introduction*. Duke UP, 2002.
- Evans, Dylan. *An Introductory: Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*. Routledge, 2006.
- Fink, Bruce. *A Clinical Introduction to Lacanian Psychoanalysis: Theory and Technique*. Harvard University Press, 1997.
- Habib, M. A. R. *A History of Literary Criticism: From Plato to the Present*. Blackwell, 2005.
- Kanjo, Eugene R. "'The Imp of the Perverse': Poe's Dark Comedy of Art and Death." *Poe Newsletter*, vol. 2 no. 3, 1969, pp. 41-44.
- Koçsoy, Gül F. "The Transgressive sublime in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart' and 'The Imp of the Perverse.'" *The Journal of International Social Research*, vol. 11 no. 58, 2018, pp. 142-147.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique*. Ed. Jacques-Alan Miller. Trans. John Forrester, W.W. Norton, 1991.
- . *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book III: The Psychoses 1955-1956*. Ed. Jacques-Alan Miller. Trans. Russell Grigg. W. W. Norton, 1993.
- . *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book IV: The Object Relation*. Ed. Jacques-Alan Miller. Trans. L. V. Roche. Unpublished. Retrieved from <https://www.scribd.com/doc/143580546/The-Seminar-of-Jacques-Lacan-Book-4-The-Object-Relation>. 02.07.2020.
- . *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alan Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan, W. W. Norton, 1973.

- . *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alan Miller. Trans. Dennis Porter, W.W. Norton, 1997.
- . "The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience." *Lacan Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. Routledge, 2005. pp. 1-6.
- . "Aggressivity in Psychoanalysis." *Lacan Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. Routledge, 2005. pp. 7-22.
- . "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious." *Lacan Écrits: A Selection*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. Routledge, 2005. pp. 223-249.
- May, Charles E. *Edgar Allan Poe: A Study of the Short Fiction*. Twayne, 1991.
- Peeples, Scoot. *The Afterlife of Edgar Allan Poe*. Camdem House, 2004.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Imp of the Perverse." *Edgar Allan Poe: Fiction and Poetry*. Barnes & Noble, 2006, pp. 720-724.
- . "William Wilson." *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*. Penguin, 2006, pp. 168-186.
- Rank, Otto. *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*. Trans. & Ed. Harry Tucker. University of North Carolina Press, 1971.
- Sarup, Madan. "Jacques Lacan." Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1992.
- Spanier, Sandra W. "'Nests of Boxes': Form, Sense, and Style in Poe's 'The Imp of the Perverse.'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 17, 1980, pp. 307-316.
- Swales, Stephanie S. *Perversion: A Psychoanalytic Approach to the Subject*. Routledge, 2012.
- Wegner, Daniel. "How to Think, Say, or Do Precisely the Worst Thing for Any Occasion." *Science*, vol. 325, 2009, pp. 48-50.
- Zimmerman, Brett. *Edgar Allan Poe: Rhetoric and Style*. McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005.