

A Comparative Study of Identity Construction and Identity Anxiety in Allan Poe and Pu Songling's Novels

Yiming Xu

School of Foreign Languages and Literatures, Lanzhou University, Lanzhou, Gansu, 730000, China

xyiming2023@lzu.edu.cn

Abstract. Though Pu Songling and Edgar Allan Poe possess distinct cultural backgrounds, they are both renowned horror novelists and compose a series of stories showing identity anxiety and the identity construction process of marginalized people. This essay conducts a comparative study of Pu Songling's *Grace and Pine* and Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* by adopting case study, close reading, and cross-cultural hermeneutics. Pu employs identity problems and successful solutions of Kong Xueli, a descendant of Confucius, as an emphatic expression of his personal Confucian ideals, showing a supportive attitude towards traditional ethical codes. In comparison, Poe emphasizes the aesthetic functions and blurred moral stance through the inner struggle and identity anxiety of Roderick Usher, challenging the long-held belief in rationality. These differences reflect the distinct views of Chinese and Western writers about the conflict between individual will and social rules and characteristic authorial intentions.

Keywords: Identity Anxiety, Identity Construction, Marginalized People, Horror Novels.

1. Introduction

Identity construction and identity anxiety are common themes in literary works, which reflect the efforts of people of different cultural backgrounds to establish self-awareness and value systems. Likewise, it is prevalent in horror novels. Though they are not included in the mainstream of world literature, such fictions have been constantly gaining popularity in recent years, with subsequent studies gradually developing. Pu Songling and Edgar Allan Poe are representative authors of Chinese and Western horror novels, whereas studies concerning their works are mainly within the national literature, lacking a worldwide perspective under the view of comparative literature [1]. Current comparative studies mainly focus on comparing female characters or literary devices in the works of Pu and Poe. When it comes to analyzing the characters' psychology, identity anxiety, and values, most studies have been limited to the works of one author, especially Pu. There has been no comprehensive comparative research integrating these findings. Therefore, this essay aims to fill this academic gap by taking the novel *Grace and Pine* of Pu Songling and *The Fall of the House of Usher* of Allan Poe as examples. The main characters Kong Xueli and Roderick Usher of the two fictions are both excluded by the mainstream society, while they confront divergent forms of identity anxiety and respond to such a dilemma differently. The former struggles with poverty and a unique experience, eventually opting to follow conventional Confucian ethics, whereas the latter grapples with mental derangement and the collapse of rationality but ultimately succumbs to psychological disintegration. In *Grace and Pine*, Kong Xueli's maturity can be seen as a presentation of orthodox Confucian ethics, as the author describes him as a "descendant of Confucius." His experiences and choices reflect the author's Confucian morality. *The Fall of the House of Usher* is one of Edgar Allan Poe's most renowned short stories, and certain research tends to use it as a basis for analyzing Poe's values and psyche [2]. These differences stem from the two authors' distinct interpretations of what constitutes human and life philosophies. To address this issue, methodologies involving case study, close reading, and cross-cultural hermeneutics will be taken to analyse differences in conveying identity anxiety and constructing identity. The discussion below will further uncover how people from Western and Chinese civilizations respond to conflicts between individual will and general values.

2. Literature Review

The comparative analysis of the works of Edgar Allan Poe and Pu Songling started with Zou Yingping, whose study focused on their psychological depiction. She argued that the grotesque carried more aesthetic significance in the works of Poe, while that of Pu was grounded more in reality [3]. Some scholars choose a macro-cultural perspective for analysis. In 2010, Xie Zhiqin claimed that the elements of horror in Pu Songling's works served as reflections of social norms, whereas Poe delved into permanent topics such as death and madness [4]. The research of XING Ruitong developed over pure textual interpretation, associating the two authors with their cultural backgrounds to seek their reflections on conventional conventions in their works [5]. Their findings reveal how writers from Chinese and Western backgrounds design characters as well as themes differently in horror novels.

Additionally, a major portion of studies focused respectively on *Grace and Pine* of Pu and *The Fall of the House of Usher* of Poe. For instance, Dimitrova, Radina, and Lien-Tan Pan argued that Pu tended to satirize weaknesses in human nature by fox spirits. Kong Xueli 's loving Grace was thereby a reflection of human weaknesses [6]. Regarding *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Faiz, Muhammad Arslan, and Arooj Fatima pointed out that it enabled a glimpse into the spiritual world of the author [7]. These studies delve into symbols and links between characters and authors, indicating the probability of exploring Poe and Pu's inner world by analyzing their works.

Chinese culture is deeply rooted in Confucianism, and Kong Xueli 's decision to give up Grace and marry Pine symbolizes the author's adherence to Confucian ethics, acknowledging but not praising the instinct of lust. In contrast, Western culture demonstrates a stronger spirit of skepticism and reflection. The ultimate collapse of the narrator, who is judged as a rationalist [2], and can be interpreted as a symbol of rationality, reflects the author's rebellion against the Western rationalist tradition.

3. Different Ways to Demonstrate Identity Construction and Identity Anxiety

3.1. Different Perspectives

One of the most salient differences lies in perspective choices: Allan Poe adopts the first-person perspective, whereas Pu Songling uses the limited third-person perspective. The limited third-person perspective in *Grace and Pine* can be interpreted from three levels. Generally speaking, Pu adopts the perspective of Kong Xueli to construct the whole story. Existing research points out that Kong Xueli's surname "Kong" indicates that he was created as a typical Confucian scholar [8]. Thus, it can be inferred that Pu intends to convey his understanding of Confucianism and how to be a Confucian scholar through Kong Xueli's choices. Secondly, from this perspective, Pu delves into Kong Xueli 's inner world, demonstrating how he grows from immorally loving Grace to a mature and qualified Confucian scholar in detail. In the first part, his mindset when meeting Grace is phrased as "his spirits suddenly lifted. He at once forgot his pain and ceased his groans" [9] ("嘖呻顿忘，精神为之一爽" [10]), "not only was oblivious to the pain but dreaded more than anything else the completion of the operation, since it threatened to bring with it her departure and a premature end to their short-lived intimacy" [9] ("不惟不觉其苦，且恐速竣割事，偃傍不久" [10]), indicating his improper love and yielding to natural desire instead of upholding Confucian codes. This is changed to "Once the ritual had been completed, their love was joyfully consummated [9]" ("合卺之后，甚惬心怀 [10]"), "Kong for his part expressed his heartfelt thanks to Grace for having saved his life" [9] ("生拜谢曩德" [10]), a sign that he is capable of treating Grace with mere gratitude after marrying Pine to satisfy natural desire. Likewise, Pu expresses his acknowledgement of Kong Xueli 's growth by setting a satisfactory resolution: "Kong joined Huangfu and his sister for occasional games of chess, a cup of wine, a convivial conversation. They were like members of a single family" [9] (生与公子兄妹，棋酒谈宴，若一家然" [10]) for him. Furthermore, the third-person perspective assumes the direct final

comment “As for Kong Sheng, I envy not his gaining a beautiful wife, but his gaining an intimate friend” (“余于孔生，不羨其得艳妻，而羨其得膩友也” [10]), showing a positive attitude towards Kong Xueli's behaviors. Since Confucianism highlights restraint and despises indulgence, this can be regarded as Pu's identification of Confucianism.

In contrast, Allan Poe adopts the first-person perspective for his writing. Remarkably, there is a turn from external focalization to internal focalization in *The Fall of the House of Usher*. At the beginning, the narrator objectively introduces the outlook of the house and Usher as a spectator. However, this is gradually changed to an internal focalization after his entering the house and witnessing peculiar phenomena, like the resurrection of Lady Madeline and the blood-red moon. Psychic activities of the narrator replace objective observation and comments as the major description. By this means, Poe artfully displays the collapse of both Usher and “I”, the latter being a rationalist [2]. Thus, such a collapse can be viewed as the collapse of rationality. While first-person narration is widely taken as unreliable, “I” in this novel represents rationality. Such contrast probably reflects Poe's skeptical stance against rationality. Additionally, compared to Pu, the first-person perspective rids Poe of straightforwardly showing attitudes towards characters or their behaviors, diminishing the moral function of the work while focusing on exposing the dark side of human nature, which is against the mainstream ideology at that time. Though excluded, Poe refuses to identify himself as an adherent, but as a pioneer to delve into negative themes like madness beyond moralization, which distinguishes him from Pu.

3.2. Differing Inner Struggles of Characters

Although *Grace and Pine* and *The Fall of the House of Usher* are both regarding marginalized people, Kong Xueli and Roderick Usher possess distinct psychological pain and identity anxiety, which contain different meanings to them. Kong Xueli is excluded from the mainstream society mainly due to poverty and failing to gain a government post, a harsh situation faced by many Confucian scholars in ancient China. Thus, his identity anxiety is likewise a common challenge for a large portion of unsuccessful Chinese scholars, which can be expressed as “How can I be an ideal Confucian scholar?”, carrying a sense of worthlessness. To address this problem, he turns to love and achieves mental growth in this process to construct a new identity. By marrying Pine, he is released from struggling with sexual lust and able to adapt to the Confucian code of conduct by changing immoral love into spiritual friendship. His becoming a champion of Grace's family fills life with purpose, contributing to his sense of meaning [8].

In comparison, Usher is marginalized because of “excessive nervous agitation” [11]. The identity anxiety he confronted is “How to be sane enough to be accepted by the mainstream society?”. It is not a problem concerning how to make life meaningful, but regarding consciousness. His seeking help from the narrator can be seen as an attempt to solve identity anxiety by rationality, yet fails as the narrator ultimately collapses. As a consequence, it seemingly turns out to be a desperate situation for Usher, with an identity problem and madness that are insoluble and doomed.

The two characters' identity problems differ in nature, for Kong Xueli is required to explore the purpose and meaning of life, whereas Usher needs to address the theme of consciousness. The former attains maturity through positive interaction with others, while the latter is tragically ruined by madness. Causes of such differences are probably rooted in authors' differing worldviews, authorial intention, and cultural heritage.

4. Reasons Behind Differences

4.1. Authorial Intention

The creation of *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio* aims at criticizing contemporary Chinese society, whereas Poe challenges the authority of rationality. *Grace and Pine*, like other stories in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, assume features of traditional Chinese historical documents,

with Pu adopting third-person narration and offering comments marked by "The chronicler of the tales comments:" ("异史氏曰:" [10]) to introduce characters and reveal his values. LI Yu - jie points out that Chinese historical narration originated from witchcraft, carrying features of the prehistoric construction of moral order and demonstration of "Tao" [12]. As a result, Pu's works can be regarded as playing a role in Confucian moral education. In *Grace and Pine*, Kong Xueli's identity anxiety and ultimate resolution can therefore be understood as the author's interpretation of Propriety, one of the Five Constant Virtues.

However, for Allan Poe, moral education is not the major subject of his composition; rather, he emphasizes aesthetic value - especially Unity of Effect - of literature instead of seeking truth [13]. From this point of view, the identity anxiety of Usher can be interpreted as serving the aim of creating a horrifying atmosphere to a certain extent. Through expressions like "darkness... poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe in one unceasing radiation of gloom," and "An excited and highly distempered ideality threw a sulphurous luster over all. His long, improvised dirges will ring forever in my ears" [11]. Usher's madness and nervous agitation are elevated to a type of power that is capable of endowing the environment and surrounding objects with a kind of dark beauty, therefore going beyond mere mental illness. Thus, the identity anxiety of Usher might be used as one of the aesthetic elements by the author, rather than containing a strong moral education connotation as that of Kong Xueli.

4.2. Differing Origins of Story Material

The material of Pu Songling's works is mainly from folklore, while Poe's stories mostly stem from his own imagination and experience. Research shows that to compose *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, Pu collected and processed folklore [14], a reflection of the commonly accepted value system, frequently taken as educational resources and a way to construct social identity as well as to realize socialization. Thereby, the successful identity construction of Kong Sheng is presumably designed to provide an example of socialization. Additionally, due to folklore's special educational function, the bulk of it aligns with the mainstream values, Confucianism in ancient China, including *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. Instead of being taken merely as Pu's personal expression of sentiments, the work displays collective ethical codes of a country.

In comparison, scholars point out that Poe's novels are mainly based on personal experience and creativity, which endows his works with more personal judgment and artistic treatment [11]. Therefore, Poe possesses adequate freedom to blur moral stance and interpret identity anxiety from a brand-new angle, regardless of conventional or popular literary theories to a large extent. That is why Usher's failure of identity construction is found to be a challenge of rationalism, going beyond exploring the relationship between the individual and society.

4.3. Different Cultural Traditions

Ancient Chinese culture is navigated by Confucianism, but Western culture stresses self-reflection and skepticism. During the Ming Dynasty, people were mainly guided by Confucianism, especially the Five Constant Virtues. Under such a value system, literature and historical documents mostly revolve around concepts such as righteousness, propriety, and benevolence, as in *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. Thus, considering Pu's personal background of being a Confucian scholar, although there is criticism about social injustice, oppression, and hypocrisy [5], these stories, involving *Grace and Pine*, can be considered as a presentation of conventional Confucian thoughts, because what such criticism mostly displays is how people fail to pursue the ideal code of conduct suggested by Confucianism. The identity construction of Kong Xueli likewise aligns with the spirit of Confucianism, especially propriety and righteousness.

Yet in Western culture, especially in the early 19th century of America, self-reflection and skepticism are found to be more prevalent. Poe abandons religious and moral traditions, turning to challenge the seemingly dependable rationality [15]. As mentioned above, the narrator failing to save the insane patient Usher out of an identity struggle reveals that, on certain occasions, madness is

beyond redemption, rationality being limited. Different from Pu's following dominant values by horror novels, Poe chooses this type of narration and the writing of identity struggle to convey personal and characteristic understanding, which is fairly divergent from popular ideas.

5. Conclusion

By case study - taking *Grace and Pine* and *The Fall of the House of Usher* as examples, close reading, and cross-cultural hermeneutics, it is found that, though both Pu Songling and Edgar Allan Poe comprise horrific novels and depict marginalized people, the identity anxiety and identity construction of their characters contain distinct meanings. Pu adopts the limited third-person narration and demonstrates Kong Sheng's sense of failure to objectively review characters and convey his Confucian values. Poe uses the first-person perspective as well as the portrait of the process of Usher's grappling with nervous agitation to decrease moral judgment and focus on exploring the dark side of human nature. Behind this phenomenon are the different ways adopted by Pu Songling and Edgar Allan Poe to settle conflicts between individual will and ethical codes and social rules. The former chooses to adhere to Confucian cultural values while the latter holds his personal stance, questioning the prevailing belief that rationality is dependable. This leads to divergent fates of Kong Xueli and Roderick Usher: Kong Xueli fulfills the process of socialization and identity construction, whereas Usher is doomed to mental collapse and annihilation.

The comparative study contributes to deepening the analysis of differences between horror novels written by Pu Songling and Edgar Allan Poe, especially about the main characters. In addition, this study points out how differences between Chinese and Western individual-collective values can influence the writing of identity problems of writers of diverse cultural backgrounds.

Future studies can choose other horror novels of Pu Songling and Allan Poe for comparison, since *Grace and Pine* and *The Fall of the House of Usher* are not able to represent the entire body of works of the two writers. Moreover, researchers can delve further into the reasons that cause different types of identity anxiety and construction writing, despite the three reasons listed above. For instance, it is recommended to explain how cultural tradition leads to featured expressions of identity anxiety under a broader perspective.

References

- [1] Ju-rim.: A Comparative Study of Edgar Allan Poe's Gothic Fiction and Pu Songling's Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio. Diss. Chosun University Graduate School (2023).
- [2] Bailey, J. O.: "What Happens in 'The Fall of the House of Usher'?" *American Literature*, 35 (04), 445–66, (1964).
- [3] Zou, Y.P.: "The Art of Painting the Heart in Literary Eccentrics: A Comparison of the Fiction of Pu Songling and Edgar Allan Poe." *Foreign Languages and Literature*, (01): 2–8, (1998).
- [4] Xie, Z.Q.: Beauty in Nightmare and Meditation upon Horror--Comparison between Pu Songling's Strange Stories and Alan Poe's Horror Fictions. *Journal of Xi'an Shiyou University (Social Science Edition)*, 19 (02): 68-72, (2010).
- [5] XING, R.T.: Ethic Obedience and Ethical Rebellion--Comparison Between Pu Songling's and Allan Poe's Ghost Novels. *Comparative Study of Cultural Innovation*, 8 (16), 1-4, (2024).
- [6] Dimitrova, Radina, and Lien-Tan Pan. "Jiao Na Liao Zhai Zhi Yi: Pu Songling." *Estudios de Asia y África* 47 (1), 119-132 (2012).
- [7] Faiz, Muhammad, A., and Arooj, F.: "ECHOES OF THE UNCONSCIOUS: A PSYCHOLOGICAL READING OF MENTAL DISINTEGRATION IN POE'S THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER." *Contemporary Journal of Social Science Review* 3 (2), 1177-1187 (2025).
- [8] Sing-Chen Lydia Francis, "Body and Identity in Liaozhai zhiyi," *Nan Nü*, 4 (2), 207-218 (2002).
- [9] Pu Songling, John Minford, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*, Penguin Classics, (2006).

- [10] Pu Songling, Selected Stories from Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio, People's Literature Publishing House, (2024).
- [11] Edgar Allan Poe, Selected Tales of Edgar Allan Poe, Yilin Press, China, (2012).
- [12] LI, Y.J.: History from Witch: Using History to Carry "Tao" and Central Plains' "Orthodox" Historical View: Take Sima Qian's Historical Records as a Reflection. Journal of Northwest University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition), 51 (05): 121-131 (2021).
- [13] Poe, E. A., & Gardner, G. The poetic principle (pp. 175-211). BiblioBytes, (2013).
- [14] Ma Ruifang. Despite a lifetime of ridicule, he authored a masterpiece for eternity to acclaim - Exploring the Creative Origins of Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio. Social Science Journal, 1985 (01), 132-141 (1985).
- [15] Casale, Ottavio Mark. Edgar Allan Poe and transcendentalism: conflict and affinity. University of Michigan (1965).