

The interrelationship between setting and characters in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, by Edgar Allan Poe

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Abstract^o

The purpose of this paper is to analyze how characters and setting are interrelated in Edgar Allan Poe's fiction. In order to achieve this aim, the short story "The Fall of the House of Usher" will be examined. Written in 1839, it belongs to Poe's collection "Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque". After reading this short story, one can perceive some similarities between the physical space, the antique House of Usher, the landscape around it, and its inhabitants. The linguistic choices made by the narrator for describing the setting - the outside of the building, with its natural scenery ("decayed trees" and "black and lurid tarn", for example), as well as its inside - are reflected on the character's appearance and their attitudes.

Resumo

O presente trabalho tem como objetivo analisar a relação existente entre as personagens e o ambiente povoado por elas, na ficção de Edgar Allan Poe. Com esse propósito, segue-se um estudo referente ao conto "The Fall of the House of Usher", que pertence à coleção de Poe, intitulada "Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque". A partir da leitura de "The Fall of the House of Usher", pode-se verificar a existência de características recorrentes no que diz respeito ao espaço físico, a antiga Casa de Usher, e aos seus habitantes. A maneira utilizada pelo autor para descrever o ambiente físico, isto é, o aspecto exterior da habitação, com o seu cenário natural, bem como o seu arranjo interno reflete-se na aparência e nas atitudes das personagens.

In order to show the effects of the "melancholy House of Usher" upon the behavior and feelings of the last two members of the stem of the Usher race - Roderick Usher and Madeline Usher - some passages will be mentioned through this paper to illustrate this assertion.

Besides, Poe's "theory of the universe" and his "theory of unity or dissolution", which have been remarked by critics such as the philologist and professor of literature John Douglas Seelye, will be considered during the study of this short story. This "theory of unity", which identifies "both the family and the family mansion" proves the idea stated before: setting and characters have something in common. According to Seelye (1969:120), "Usher attributes his condition to the effect upon him of the building, convinced that 'the mere form and substance of his family mansion' has had a destructive effect 'over his spirit' - matter over mind, body over soul".

Firstly, however, something about Poe's biography will be mentioned as well as the style used by "the first master of the short story form"¹. Based on some theoreticians, Poe's style can be identified by the sense of mystery, horror, darkness, melancholy, depression, gloom, sorrow and strangeness which pervade each short story written by him. According to Spanckeren (1994:41), "Poe believed strangeness was an essential ingredient of beauty, and his writing is often exotic."

Edgar Allan Poe - biography and literary works

Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1809. He was orphaned before he was three years old, and was adopted by John Allan, a successful businessman from Virginia. In 1827, Poe's foster father, displeased by the young man's drinking and gambling, refused to pay Poe's debts and forced him to work as a clerk.

Poe, who intensely disliked his new duties, renounced the job and went to Boston. There his

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first book, *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (1827), was published anonymously. Shortly afterward Poe enlisted in the U.S. Army and served a two-year term. In 1829, his second volume of verse, *Al Aaraaf*, was published. Poe's third book, *Poems*, appeared in 1831, and the following year he moved to Baltimore, where he lived with his aunt and her 11-year-old daughter, Virginia Clemm. In the following year, his tale "A MS. Found in a Bottle" won a contest sponsored by the *Baltimore Saturday Visitor*. Many of his popular tales appeared in his own papers, and were collected in a volume entitled *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*.

From 1835 to 1837 Poe was an editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*. In 1836, he married his young cousin, who was fourteen years old. In 1847, Virginia, who had been in a long state of illness, died and Poe himself became ill; his disastrous addiction to liquor and his alleged use of drugs, recorded by contemporaries, may have contributed to his early death. Edgar Allan Poe died when he was forty, in 1849.

Even today, nevertheless, the American writer is known as a poet and critic, but he is most famous as being the first master of the short story form, especially tales of mysterious and macabre events. According to Seelye (1969), "Poe's insistence on using the themes and voices of madness, sin, and death, brought perversity to a fine art". The literary merits of Poe's writings have been debated since his death, but his works have remained popular and many major American and European writers have professed their artistic debt to him.

Poetry and essays

Edgar Allan Poe was first a writer of poems; second, a writer of tales, and then an analytical critic. According to Seelye (1969:115), "Poe defined himself by contraries, constructing a literary personality which was at constant odds with so much that was in fashion, a cultural, eclectic Frankenstein's monster".

His own poems conform strictly to the canons of art which he taught in his *Philosophy of Composition* and *The Poetic Principle*. According to Poe (from Hull & Machado da Silva: 383-384), poems "should start with a novel or vivid effect; should be brief and sad in tone; should have refrains; should be set in a circumscribed space and should scrupulously obey conventional rhythms".

Among Poe's poetic production, about a dozen poems are remarkable for their perfect literary construction and for their mysterious themes and meters. In "The Raven" (1845), for

example, the narrator is overwhelmed by melancholy and omens of death. Poe's extraordinary manipulation of rhythm and sound is particularly evident in "The Bells" (1849), a poem that seems to echo with the chiming of metallic instruments, and "The Sleeper" (1831), which reproduces the state of lethargy. "Lenore" (1831) and "Annabel Lee" (1849) are verse lamentations on the death of a beautiful young woman.

In the course of his editorial work, Poe functioned largely as a book reviewer and produced a significant body of criticism; his essays were famous for their sarcasm, wit, and exposure of literary pretension. His evaluations have withstood the test of time and have earned for him a high place among American literary critics. Poe's theories on the nature of fiction ("cosmological scheme") and, in particular, his writings on the short story have had a lasting influence on American and European writers. According to Seelye (1969:122):

(...) for him the real world and the world of art were one, that existence depended upon a tenuous balance of forces, that all things were moving inexorably toward a perfect unity of annihilation (...).

Stories

Whether or not Poe invented the short story, it is certain that he originated the novel of detection. According to Spanckeren (1994:40), "He refined the short story genre and invented detective fiction". Perhaps his best-known tale in this genre is "The Gold Bug" (1843), about a search for buried treasure. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt" (1842-1843), and "The Purloined Letter" (1844) are regarded as predecessors of the modern mystery, or detective story.

Many of Poe's tales are distinguished by the author's unique grotesque inventiveness in addition to his superb plot construction. Such stories include "The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym" (1838), noted for its blend of factual and fantastic material; "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), in which the penetrating gloominess of the atmosphere is accented equally with plot and characterization; "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842), a spine-tingling tale of cruelty and torture; "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843), in which a maniacal murderer is subconsciously haunted into confessing his guilt; and "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846), an eerie tale of revenge.

The interrelationship between setting and characters in *The Fall of the House of Usher*

Since *The Fall of the House of Usher* is a short story, the concept of this type of literary production has to be known before starting any sort of analysis related to it. A "short story" can be understood as a "condensed fictional narrative, usually in prose. Typically concerning a relatively small number of characters involved in a single action with one thematic focus, short stories are aimed at exciting in the reader a single emotional response".²

These features can be found in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, which contains just three characters: the narrator himself - Roderick Usher's boyhood friend -, the proprietor of the mansion - Roderick Usher -, and his sister - Madeline Usher. Besides, the development of this short story is based on a main conflict: Roderick Usher's mental disorder associated with the gloomy atmosphere which pervades the House of Usher. It is relevant to mention that the "setting" affected two other characters' sentiments and behavior.

The Fall of the House of Usher also presents a unity of impression or effect. It means that each aspect reported or scene described in this short story contributes to produce the same effect: mystery and fear. Other characteristics such as imagination, compression and organization can be detected in this case as well.

One of the topics emphasized in this short story is the fact that Madeline was buried alive and returned to take his brother with her. This theme - "death in life" - appears in many of Poe's literary works. Due to this fact, Poe's stories have been described as tales of horror. *The Fall of the House of Usher* starts when Roderick Usher's boyhood friend decides to visit him because Usher is ill.

Roderick Usher writes a letter to his childhood friend, telling him about "an acute bodily disease", which has oppressed him. Through this letter, Roderick Usher reveals his desire to see "his best, and indeed his only personal friend". Usher believed that if he could see his friend again, he would get "some alleviation of his malady".

In order to attend Usher's request, his friend decides to go to the House of Usher to stay some time with him. At the beginning of the story, there is a description about the day chosen by Usher's friend to visit him, as well as the effect of the House

of Usher, identified as the "mansion of gloom", upon the visitor:

During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on a horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country, and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was - but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. (p. 942-943)

Through this passage, one could infer that "scenery", that is, both the physical structure and the natural environment, causes perturbation and fear to those who contemplate it. From beginning to end of this short story, it is possible to detect the way by which the characters have been influenced by the setting. The ancient mansion is apart from society and it suggests an atmosphere of mystery. Similarly, Roderick Usher is isolated from civilization and seems to be strange in comparison to other human beings. Even his friend knew little about him.

After the visitor had analyzed the outside of the house, he started to think about the terrible impression it had caused upon his soul, but he did not find an effective answer to his feelings. The narrator describes the House of Usher using a metaphorical language. He attributes some human characteristics to the house ("bleak walls" and "eye-like windows", for example). In a way, it contributes to reinforce the narrow relation between setting and characters, extremely correlated in this short story.

I looked upon the scene before me - upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain - upon the bleak walls - upon the vacant eye-like windows - upon a few rank sedges - and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees - with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium - the bitter lapse into everyday life - the hideous dropping off of the veil. (...) What was it - I paused to think - what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble (...). (p. 943)

Usher's friend, who is the narrator, became even more confused with the inverted images of the "gray sedge", the "ghastly tree-stems" and the "vacant and eye-like windows" reflected in a "black and lurid tarn" near the House. He thought the utter depression of his soul should be the result of "a mere arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture". The visitor

²"Short Story," Microsoft® Encarta® 98 Encyclopedia. © 1993-1997 Microsoft Corporation. All rights reserved.

perceived that "a strange fancy" had grown in his mind. Each time he looked at the House of Usher, he felt even more disturbed.

Through the following passage, one can observe that Usher's friend has been affected by the strangeness which characterizes the setting. This is part of Poe's style of writing. His major purpose is to produce an impression of fear on readers.

I again uplifted my eyes to the house itself, from its image in the pool, there grew in my mind a strange fancy – a fancy so ridiculous, indeed, that I but mention it to show the vivid force of the sensations which oppressed me. I had so worked upon my imagination as really to believe that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity. (p. 944)

The "unity of impression" is maintained throughout the story. Everything contributes to give the same effect of depression and mystery. The atmosphere inside the house is characterized as "a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, discernible, and leaden-hued". Such an atmosphere also affects Roderick Usher's appearance. His sister also suffers the effect of living in an ancient and isolated building. Since they are the last two members of Usher's family, they have been considered an essential part of this material structure. That way, the "fall" of both of them would mean the decline of the House of Usher itself.

The "theory of unity", proposed by Poe, can be applied here because, according to him, "the atomic particles were held apart by forces of mutual attraction and repulsion, but they were at the same time in a state of gradual return to the origin of their being, pulled by gravity toward ultimate annihilation" (Seelye:118:1969).

As a natural tendency, each atom that constitutes the universe will return to nothing because it came from nothing. Therefore, the destruction of the House of Usher can be seen as a consequence of the death of its two inhabitants. Besides, it is important to mention that the twins, Roderick Usher and Madeline Usher, died together and, according to Poe's "rule of the two", togetherness means annihilation. According to Seelye, "the reuniting of the pairs, body and soul, matter and spirit, result in annihilation for both, for duality is but oneness exemplified and oneness is death. The rule of two is the rule of separateness, of falling apart, of echo".

In *The Fall of the House of Usher* the "matter of twos" (Seelye, 1969:120) is noticeable. It begins with the narrator and his former schoolmate Roderick Usher, and it finishes with Roderick and

his twin sister who die in one another's arms. This union promotes the fall of their ancestral house. So, in a way, the decay of the characters is related to the decay of the House.

After those considerations, it is relevant to notice other passages that prove the way by which setting has been the motive of such perturbation on the characters' spirit. Usher's friend, for instance, became even more frightened when he entered the "Gothic archway" of the hall of the House. Despite the fact that the objects around him were ordinary, their ordinary images gave rise to his unfamiliar fancies.

Much that I encountered on the way contributed, I know not how, to heighten the vague sentiments of which I have already spoken. While the objects around me – while the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies which rattled as I strode, were but matters to which, or to such as which, I had been accustomed from my infancy – while I hesitated not to acknowledge how familiar was all this – I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up. (p. 944)

The passage above exemplifies Poe's style. Considering some theoreticians' points of view, Poe's characters never seem to work or socialize; instead they bury themselves in dark buildings, symbolically decorated with bizarre rugs and draperies that hide the real world. Moreover, the hidden rooms reveal ancient libraries and strange art works which contribute to the character's depression or melancholy.

The detailed description of the inside of the house, using adjectives and nouns such as "sombre", "blackness" and "phantasmagoric" denote an atmosphere of anxiety and dread. The same effect can be perceived when Usher's friend goes to the room where Roderick Usher is. At the same time the narrator describes the furniture and each object around him, he mentions the horrible impression that afflicts him.

Dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene. I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stem, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all. (p.945)

One can say that the way by which the narrator presents the setting is not merely decorative. It reflects the deathly interior of his character's disturbed psyches. It is a symbolic expression of the unconscious, and thus it is central

to Poe's art. According to Kehler (1975), the function of architecture in Poe's writings is to be expressive, not to cling to arbitrary notions of stylistic "purity".

When the visitor meets his childhood friend, Roderick Usher, he has the same impression – "an excessive nervous agitation". The House of Usher as well as its owner had signs of decay. Roderick Usher's "cadaverousness of complexion" was similar to the discoloration of the House.

I gazed upon him with a feeling half of pity, half of awe. (...) It was with difficulty that I could bring myself to admit the identity of the wan being before me with the companion of my early boyhood". (...) I doubted to whom I spoke. The now ghastly pallor of the skin, and the now miraculous lustre of the eye, above all things startled and even awed me. (...) I could not, even with effort, connect its Arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity. (p. 945)

Usher's building degradation was related to the effects of time. Its "excessive antiquity" could be noticed through every object of decoration inside it or even through its external aspect. Although the aspect of the building denotes decay, no portion of it had fallen. It can be explained by Poe's spatial theory which asserts that "the precarious condition of each stone does not influence the harmonic adaptation of the parts".

The House of Usher, which is a physical structure and a symbol of the gradual destruction of the Usher family, "is pictured in terms which prophesy the dreadful outcome of the tale", according to Seelye. For that reason, when the visitor first views the "decaying house" he is convinced that a peculiar atmosphere pervades that place. From that moment on everything inside or outside the building is pictured in order to cause "unity of impression". To a certain extent, one could say that the gradual decline of the House of Usher promotes its inhabitants' degeneration and vice versa.

Roderick Usher told his friend about the nature of his malady. Usher's friend understood that "fear" was the most probable reason of his intolerable soul's agitation. Usher was a victim of "an anomalous species of terror" because he had awful predictions regarded to the effects of future events: "I must perish in this deplorable folly. (...) I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results. (...) I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR".

The narrator noticed, however, that Roderick Usher's mental condition was related to the place he had lived in. Roderick Usher himself attributed his sorrow and affliction to the effect of the building upon him.

He was enchanted by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and whence, for many years, he had never ventured forth – in regard to an influence whose supposititious force was conveyed in terms of shadowy here to be re-stated – an influence which some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of his family mansion, had, by dint of long sufferance, he said, obtained over his spirit – an effect which the physique of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought about upon the morale of his existence. (p. 946)

Usher admitted, although with hesitation, that much of the unusual gloom which had tortured him was due to the severe and long-continued illness of his beloved sister, his last and only relative on earth. Indeed, Usher was conscious about the obvious dissolution of the matter, his own imminent destruction, and the House of Usher appears here as a symbolic representation of this annihilation. John Seelye (1969) asserts that "this condition of universal decay and imminent collapse is shared between the house with the 'eye-like' windows and its inhabitant, Roderick Usher, whose physical frame and mental control are declining rapidly".

Madeline Usher, victim of a chronic disease, has been also a victim of the gloomy atmosphere of the House of Usher. Even Usher's friend was affected by the depressing setting of which he had been a temporary member. In the first moment, the visitor was extremely touched by the sense of horror which pervaded the House of Usher and the natural scene around the building. Then, Roderick Usher's appearance made him even more confused about the impression of sorrow and melancholy that characterized that physical universe. Strangeness also put him in trouble because he could not find the real reason for Roderick Usher's mental disturbance.

In conclusion, one could infer that this sorrowful and monotonous setting controls the characters' attitudes, leading them to inevitable annihilation. As a result of it, the House is portrayed as the one responsible for the extinction of the Ushers. It was as if the building had conquered "sentience" through long years. According to Seelye, Roderick Usher suffered from the terror that the walls of his house, unified as they were by decay and the overspreading fungus, possessed a sentience, a life of their own.

(...) in that silent, yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which had made him (Roderick Usher) what I now saw him – what he was. (p. 950)

After some time, Madeline died and his brother decided to preserve his corpse for a fortnight, before its final burial, in one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building. The grave in which Roderick Usher and his visitor put the corpse to its rest was "small, damp, and entirely without means of admission for light". Moreover, it was located immediately beneath the portion of the building where the visitor's sleeping apartment was. Poe's style is clear in the last description. According to Spanckeren (1994:42), "the painfully deliberate style and elaborate explanation in the stories heighten the sense of the horrible by making the events seem vivid and plausible".

Usher's friend discovered Roderick Usher and Madeline were twins just when he looked upon the face of the deceased. Darkness and horror pervade all events in this specific section of the story (unity of impression or effect). Everything was involved in an atmosphere of fear and doubt. The following passage reveals Poe's ability to provoke awe and gloominess through a very well-elaborated language. He believed that "strangeness" was an essential ingredient of beauty and often used it to shock readers. The fragment that follows illustrates the way by which Poe describes the most horrifying events or scenes in order to achieve his purpose.

The disease which had thus entombed the lady in the maturity of youth, had left, as usual in all maladies of a strictly cataleptical character, the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death. (p.951)

After Madeline's death, an observable change came over Roderick Usher's mental disorder. His countenance had become even more frightful and his utterance had been characterized by a tremulous tone, as if extreme terror. His boyhood friend had noticed something very strange in Roderick Usher's attitudes. Sometimes he thought Usher's agitated mind was labouring with some oppressive secret, to divulge which he struggled for the necessary courage, but often he was obliged to believe it was the effect of madness.

Usher's friend started to believe he was being affected by the "wild influences" that pervade Roderick Usher's spirit because he listened indefinite sounds which came at long intervals and he could not control his state of fear and the intense sentiment of horror. It is possible to detect

how setting has manipulated the character's behaviour and feelings. The visitor reflects upon the cause of the uncontrolled fear that has pervaded his soul:

I endeavoured to believe that much, if not all of what I felt, was due to the bewildering influence of the gloomy furniture of the room – of the dark and tattered draperies, which, tortured into motion by the breath of a rising tempest, swayed fitfully to and fro upon the walls, and rustled uneasily about the decorations of the bed. (p. 952)

Some time later, Roderick Usher came to his friend, with such a cadaverously wan countenance, and asked him "And you have not seen it?" twice. The visitor did not really know what was happening and tried to calm his friend, telling him a story from "Mad Trist", by Sir Launcelot Canning. He also tried to explain him that the "unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion" was "merely electrical phenomena not uncommon", caused by the storm.

Nevertheless, a dreadful noise was heard by both Roderick Usher and his friend. Usher's friend could not avoid his extreme terror neither Roderick Usher his sensitive alteration. He confessed his friend he had heard that strange noises "long – long – long – many minutes, many hours, many days" because they had buried Madeline still alive ("I dared not speak! We have put her living in the tomb!). Due to this fact, Usher accused himself as "MADMAN" and told his friend about the presence of Madeline in that room. Usher's premonition had accomplished. Madeline Usher came towards her brother and, knocking over him, sent both the last members of the Usher race to their deaths.

As a result of the twins' death, the house itself collapsed in a ghastly finale. When the visitor was far from the House of Usher ("From that chamber, and from that mansion, I fled aghast"), he noticed that there was just fragments of that building, which had oppressed its inhabitants during generations and conducted them to death.

Suddenly there shot along the path a wild light, and I turned to see whence a gleam so unusual could have issued; for the vast house and its shadows were alone behind me. (...) I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder – there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters – and the deep dank at my feet close sullenly and silently over the fragments of the house. (p. 955)

Considering Poe's theory of unit, the annihilation of the House of Usher as well as of its inhabitants is explained by the fact that each atom that comes to universe, comes from nothing and

has to return to nothing. The reuniting of the twins results in annihilation for both, "for duality is but oneness exemplified and oneness is death". According to John Seelye, "Poe's theory of unit, of oneness (...) was a theory of dissolution, of ultimate annihilation, claustrophobically realized. Having sprung from nothingness, the universe would return to nothing (...)". Similarly, based on what Kehler (1975) states upon Poe's theory of art and his cosmological scheme, which sees the diversifying of primordial unit as "prognostic of death", one can justify the fall of the House of Usher as well as Madeline's and Roderick's degeneration.

Conclusion

After analyzing *The Fall of the House of Usher*, one can conclude that setting and characters are entirely correlated. The atmosphere of gloom, which pervades the House and the scenery around it, is described by the narrator as the most evident cause of the characters' melancholy and progressive degradation.

The last two members of the Ushers were largely affected by the sense of constant horror and fear promoted by the building. They both got ill and Roderick Usher attributed his sister's malady as well as his own state of sorrow and approaching dissolution to the effect of that depressing atmosphere. Even the narrator, who did not live in the House of Usher, but just visited his boyhood friend, suffered such influences upon his spirit.

The correlation between setting and characters is noticeable also by the way the narrator paints the isolated and ancient building, with its discolored wall and fungi overspread on the whole exterior, and the cadaverous countenance of Roderick and his phantasmagoric conceptions.

Finally, the House of Usher works as a symbol of the Usher's race annihilation. It is evident the interrelation between setting and characters when the structure of the mansion becomes fragments after the twins' dissolution. The decay of the house can be understood as a consequence of Usher's family degradation. The death of Roderick and Madeline, who were the last members of the stem of the Usher race, caused physical dissolution which can be justified by Poe's theory of unity: "all things were moving inexorably toward a perfect unity of annihilation".

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