

MENTAL ILLNESS, IDENTITY, AND PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY IN SUSANNA CLARKE'S *PIRANESI*¹

Andra-Iulia URSA²

1 Decembrie 1918 University of Alba Iulia

E-mail: andra.ursa@uab.ro

Abstract:

*Many modern readers, particularly those sharing reviews through blogs, social media, and personal channels, tend to interpret literature through a psychological lens. By relating characters' experiences to their own mental health struggles, these readers create deeply personal interpretations that reflect their individual challenges. This paper explores the various interpretations of Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi* (2020), focusing on how various readers have connected the novel to themes of mental illness, personal identity, and philosophical inquiry. While many have drawn parallels between the protagonist's experiences and psychological conditions such as dissociative identity disorder (DID) and schizophrenia, others see the novel as reflective of living with chronic illness, particularly long COVID-19. The analysis considers these interpretations while emphasizing Clarke's broader thematic concerns, such as enchantment, perception, and the philosophical conflict between knowledge and feeling. Drawing from sources like Rudolf Steiner's *Philosophy of**

¹ Article History: Received: 10.08.2024. Revised: 29.10.2024. Accepted: 05.11.2024. Published: 15.11.2024. Distributed under the terms and conditions of the [Creative Commons Attribution License CC BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/). Citation: URSA, A.I. (2024). MENTAL ILLNESS, IDENTITY, AND PHILOSOPHICAL INQUIRY IN SUSANNA CLARKE'S *PIRANESI*. *Incursiuni în imaginar* 15. *Magical Realism in Literature*. Vol. 15. Nr. 1. pp. 299-318

<https://doi.org/10.29302/InImag.2024.15.1.12>

No funding was received either for the research presented in the article or for the creation of the article.

² <https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=57211606656>

Freedom and Owen Barfield's theories on the evolution of consciousness, the paper argues that Piranesi transcends psychological readings, instead offering a meditation on the loss of an enchanted view of reality. Through an examination of key passages from the novel, the paper demonstrates how Clarke invites readers to contemplate deeper philosophical questions, suggesting that the labyrinthine House serves as a metaphor for the human mind and its intricate relationship with knowledge, freedom, and identity. The conclusion emphasizes that Piranesi resists singular interpretations, encouraging readers to engage with its mysteries on multiple levels.

Keywords: interpretation; mental illness; philosophy of freedom; identity; *Piranesi*.

1. Introduction

“Piranesi” refers to Giovanni Battista Piranesi, an 18th-century Italian artist and architect known for his elaborate and imaginative etchings of labyrinthine prisons and architectural fantasies (American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 2011). His work, particularly his series of prints titled *Carceri d’Invenzione* (Imaginary Prisons), often depicted vast, complex, and surreal structures filled with arches, stairways, and passageways, evoking a sense of mystery, confinement, and grandeur. Susanna Clarke’s interview about her new novel, *Piranesi: Susanna Clarke in conversation with Madeline Miller* (Waterstones, 2021) offers deep insight into her creative process and inspirations. Clarke’s connection to Piranesi’s art emerged early in her career, with references appearing in *Jonathan Strange & Mr. Norrell* and in one of her short stories. However, the idea for *Piranesi* came not from Piranesi’s work but from her admiration for Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges, who influenced her fascination with labyrinths and fantastical worlds.

Clarke revealed that Piranesi had been in her mind since her twenties, when she first tried to write about a huge building containing an ocean and two characters. Though it took decades to develop, the project eventually came together, and the name “Piranesi” seemed like a perfect fit for the character, given the thematic resonance with labyrinths and grand, mysterious structures (Waterstones, 2021).

Many readers of *Piranesi* have frequently drawn connections between Susanna Clarke’s chronic fatigue syndrome and the psychological elements of the novel. The author’s struggle with chronic fatigue syndrome significantly affected her writing process, making it torturous and frustrating. Clarke has described how, during her illness, her creative projects felt as if they were “flowing down a lot of alleys”, with ideas branching out uncontrollably in all directions (Jordan, 2020). A common feature of chronic fatigue syndrome, according to Clarke, is the inability to make decisions (Jordan, 2020). She found it impossible to choose between versions of sentences or to determine the direction of a plot. The illness left her feeling locked away, irrelevant, and unable to contribute meaningfully, a feeling worsened by societal pressures that value individuals based on their productivity (Jordan, 2020). This sense of isolation and purposelessness was a long-standing challenge for Clarke, though she acknowledges that the pandemic has led many others to experience similar struggles with their sense of purpose.

This has led to numerous interpretations that suggest the book addresses themes of mental illness or psychological struggle, particularly in relation to isolation and altered perception of reality. However, despite these interpretations, Clarke herself has never openly claimed that *Piranesi* specifically refers to mental illness. Instead, the novel’s ambiguity allows for various readings, including those that reflect the challenges of living with

chronic conditions, while also leaving room for broader philosophical and symbolic interpretations.

2. Key Turning Points in the Narrative

Through a series of journal entries, *Piranesi* recounts the story of a young man who has no recollection of his past and assumes that his name is Piranesi. He lives in a parallel universe, a vast labyrinth of halls, stairways, passages, and vestibules, all adorned with unique statues. These statues serve not only as landmarks to guide him through the immense House but also as something akin to companions. The House itself is divided into distinct levels: the upper level is shrouded in clouds, while the lower level holds a vast ocean. Occasionally, the ocean's tides surge into the middle level, following a pattern that Piranesi meticulously tracks and records.

The lower halls, constantly flooded by these waters, provide fish and seaweed, which sustain Piranesi. He views the House as a benevolent force, nurturing and caring for him as if he were its child: "The Beauty of the House is immeasurable; its Kindness infinite" (Clarke, 2020, p. 9). Having explored thousands of its halls, Piranesi understands the House better than anyone, cherishing its mysteries and finding solace in its vastness. The House not only shapes his physical reality but also his understanding of existence itself, reinforcing his isolation: "Outside the House there are only the Celestial Objects: Sun, Moon and Stars." (Clarke, 2020, p. 6) This observation from his journal suggests that while he is aware of something beyond the House, his understanding of the external world is minimal and abstract. The celestial objects could symbolize a higher, unreachable realm, contrasting with the labyrinthine world Piranesi inhabits.

Piranesi believes he has spent his entire life within the vast labyrinth of the House and that only fifteen people exist in the entire world. All but two of these

people are long-dead, reduced to mere skeletons. Piranesi meticulously records his daily experiences and observations in his journals, which form the narrative of the novel.

Twice a week, Piranesi meets with a man known as the Other, who is always well-dressed and enlists Piranesi's help in searching for a mysterious "Great and Secret Knowledge" that is supposedly hidden somewhere within the House. The Other occasionally brings Piranesi supplies that seem to come from outside the House, such as shoes, electric torches, and multivitamins. When Piranesi suggests that they abandon their fruitless search for the Knowledge, the Other informs him that they've had this conversation before. He also warns Piranesi that the House slowly erodes a person's memories and personality over time, causing them to forget themselves.

The Other also issues another warning, telling Piranesi about a potential sixteenth person, referred to as "16", who might enter the House with the intent of doing him harm. He instructs Piranesi to stay far away from 16 at all costs, as approaching this individual could cause him to lose his sanity. Later, Piranesi encounters an elderly man he refers to as the Prophet, who reveals that the Other's real name is Valentine Ketterley, psychologist and anthropologist, a rival who had stolen his ideas regarding the Knowledge. The Prophet explains that the House is a "distributary world" (Clarke, 2020, p. 63) a place formed from ideas flowing out of another world, and claims he will lead 16 into the House to harm Ketterley.

While going through his journals and organizing them, Piranesi discovers references to entries he cannot remember writing. These entries contain terms used by the Prophet and tell the story of an occultist named Laurence Arne-Sayles from the modern world, who had theorized the existence of other worlds and how they could be accessed. Ketterley had been one of Arne-Sayles'

students, and the occultist had built a cult-like following around his beliefs. Eventually, Arne-Sayles was imprisoned for kidnapping a man named James Ritter, who later recounted being held captive in a place resembling the House.

Piranesi soon realizes that 16 has indeed entered the House, and he leaves a message for her. However, he hesitates to read her reply, though later interactions with the Other reveal that 16 is a woman named Raphael. After learning that an unusual confluence of tides will flood the middle level of the House, Piranesi leaves a warning for Raphael. She responds with a question: “Are you Matthew Rose Sorensen?” (Clarke, 2020, p. 110) Upon reading the name, Piranesi experiences a vision of standing in a modern city, surrounded by “thousands upon thousands of people” (Clarke, 2020, p. 112) suggesting there is more to his identity than he previously understood.

As Piranesi continues his investigation through his journals, he finds that someone—likely Ketterley—has destroyed all entries related to Ketterley’s involvement. Determined, Piranesi pieces together the torn pages from scraps he finds in gull nests and uncovers the truth about how he came to the House. He was once Matthew Rose Sorensen, a journalist working on a book about Arne-Sayles. During an interview with Ketterley, the man used a ritual to trap Sorensen in the House. Over time, Sorensen lost his memories and developed a new identity, which Ketterley mockingly named Piranesi.

On the day of the flood, Piranesi confronts Ketterley, reclaiming his lost memories, just as Raphael returns to the House. Ketterley attempts to kill both of them, but he drowns in the floodwaters. Once the water recedes, Raphael reveals that she is a British police detective investigating disappearances linked to the Arne-Sayles cult. She invites Piranesi to return to the real world, explaining that his family has been searching for him ever

since he disappeared from London six years ago. After much contemplation, Piranesi decides to leave the House and return home.

In an epilogue, the narrator reflects on his life after returning to the real world. Although he has adjusted to his new surroundings, he frequently visits the House. He brings James Ritter back for a visit, tends to Ketterley's remains, and joins Raphael when she returns to the House. The narrator concludes that he is no longer purely Sorensen or Piranesi, but is now a combination of both, creating a third identity from the fragments of the other two.

3. Exploring the Idea of Mental Illness

In this section, we explore how various readers have interpreted Piranesi through the lens of mental illness. Many readers have drawn parallels between the protagonist's experiences and psychological conditions, offering personal insights that reveal how they connect with the novel. These reviews come from various sources such as articles, personal blogs, and YouTube channels, reflecting each person's unique interpretation shaped by their personal experiences and how they relate to the character's journey. To support these perspectives, we have selected passages from the book that may serve as supporting evidence.

Including these specific quotes aims to provide tangible examples that align with different interpretations, giving readers a clearer insight into how the text connects to themes like mental health, isolation, or identity.

3.1 Dissociative identity disorder (DID)

According to the psychologist Leanda Brooks (2022), Piranesi, the protagonist, may be imprisoned under extremely harsh circumstances, with his apparent brainwashing indicating the presence of Dissociative

Identity Disorder (DID), also known as Multiple Personalities Disorder (MPD). This condition is marked by the existence of multiple distinct identities or personalities, which can range from as few as two to over a hundred. These identities take turns controlling the individual's behaviour, leading to symptoms such as memory lapses, delusions, and depression (Utomo, Adnan & Susanti, 2023, p. 306). In more severe cases, dissociation can manifest as an inability to access specific memories (dissociative amnesia) or control motor functions (e.g., tonic immobilization), affecting sensory, emotional, and cognitive processes either voluntarily or involuntarily. Patients with DID typically dissociate from painful memories related to their traumatic experiences. They develop distinct identities, with some handling daily functioning, while others emerge as trauma-related states that serve as defensive mechanisms in response to the trauma (Utomo, Adnan & Susanti, 2023, p. 307).

This theory finds support in the text, particularly in the way the protagonist refers to different versions of himself. In one instance, Piranesi comforts himself, saying, "I placed my hand on my chest. Hush now! I said, Do not be afraid. You are safe. Go back to sleep. I will take care of us both" (Clarke, 2020, p. 131). This moment suggests a division within his identity, as he speaks as though managing separate parts of himself.

Moreover, Piranesi's detachment from his own physical characteristics—age, height, and build—could be seen as a reflection of this dissociative state, supporting the theory: "I believe that I am between thirty and thirty-five years of age. I am approximately 1.83 metres tall and of a slender build" (Clarke, 2020, p. 8)

Further evidence is provided when Piranesi contemplates sending a message to the outside world, stating: "Perhaps I should send them a message explaining that Matthew Rose Sorensen now lives inside me, that he

is unconscious but perfectly safe, and that I am a strong and resourceful person who will care for him assiduously, exactly as I care for any others of the Dead” (Clarke, 2020, 149). Here, Piranesi describes Matthew Rose Sorensen, his former identity, as a separate entity residing within him, highlighting the existence of distinct personalities, a key feature of DID.

3.2 Drapetomania

In another interpretation of mental illness in *Piranesi*, Alex Brown (2021) draws a parallel between Ketterley’s treatment of Piranesi and the historical concept of drapetomania, a fabricated mental illness used by pro-slavery Southern doctor Samuel A. Cartwright to pathologize enslaved Africans who attempted to escape (White, 2002, p. 41). According to this false diagnosis, the desire for freedom was seen as a disorder caused by insufficient punishment from slaveholders, and the prescribed “cure” was to treat enslaved people “like children” to prevent them from running away. Brown suggests that Ketterley’s warning to Piranesi that speaking with 16 (later revealed as Sarah Raphael) would drive him mad echoes this manipulative control. In this interpretation, if Matthew (Piranesi) is viewed as enslaved by Ketterley, then 16/Sarah Raphael represents the abolitionist figure working to secure his freedom, highlighting a dynamic of control and liberation in Ketterley’s manipulation of Piranesi.

The power dynamic between the Other and Piranesi supports aspects of the drapetomania analogy. The Other controls the relationship, summoning Piranesi at will: “If he requires my presence. [...] he calls out ‘Piranesi!’ until I come” (Clarke, 2020, p. 12). This suggests a hierarchical, almost master-servant relationship where Piranesi is at the beck and call of the Other. Additionally, the Other’s lack of concern for Piranesi’s well-being, such

as neglecting to greet him or ask how he is (Clarke, 2020, p. 19), echoes the dismissive attitude of someone who views another person as a tool rather than an equal. The control over time and interaction, as the Other ensures meetings never last more than an hour and discourages Piranesi from “getting too chatty” (Clarke, 2020, p. 34) reinforces this manipulative dynamic. Piranesi’s compliance with these constraints, and his eagerness to assist despite the Other’s aloofness, can be seen as a form of psychological conditioning, echoing the drapetomania narrative of domination and control.

However, there are aspects that challenge the direct application of the drapetomania concept. Piranesi does not express overt resistance to the Other’s control, and he admires the Other’s intellectual dedication “I admire his dedication to his scientific work” (Clarke, 2020, p. 19). This admiration complicates the idea that Piranesi is being oppressed in the same way as a slave seeking escape. Piranesi voluntarily engages in the search for the Great and Secret Knowledge, aligning his purpose with that of the Other. Additionally, his willingness to ask questions and offer assistance during rituals (Clarke, 2020, pp. 33-34) indicates some level of agency, albeit within a controlled environment.

3.3 Long Covid-19

Jodie Noel Vinson’s (2021) interpretation of Piranesi through the lens of her own experience with long COVID-19 is deeply personal and reflective, as she recounts in her article suggestively titled *Piranesi is a dispatch from the kingdom of chronic illness*. After contracting the coronavirus while traveling in early March, Jodie and her husband, Marc, found themselves struggling with lingering symptoms that made even simple tasks challenging. By the time Piranesi arrived in mid-September, they had been dealing with the long-term

effects of the virus for months. Soon, the novel became more than just a form of escape; it became a mirror in which they saw their own lives and struggles reflected.

Jodie, grappling with physical limitations, resonated with Piranesi's confined existence within the House. The sense of isolation and longing for connection that the protagonist experiences strongly resonate with those who have lived through the isolation of long COVID. For example, Piranesi gazes out of the windows of the House, which "look out upon Great Courtyards; barren, empty places paved with stone" (Clarke, 2020, p. 9). This barren emptiness mirrors the experience of those confined during illness or lockdown, who often feel disconnected from the vibrant world beyond their reach.

Just as Piranesi navigates his labyrinthine world with care, Jodie found herself restricted by her body's limits, forced to slow down and rest. In both the book and her experience, slowing down became a way to find meaning, to observe the small details of life, and to cultivate creativity within restricted spaces (Vinson, 2021). She also saw parallels between Piranesi's manipulation by the Other and her own dismissive treatment by medical professionals, who invalidated her symptoms and made her question her reality (Vinson, 2021). The Other's casual dismissal of Piranesi's identity, laughing and saying, "I have to call you something" (Clarke, 2020, p. 113), mirrors this external imposition of identity and the resulting self-doubt creates a psychological dissonance in Piranesi, much like Jodie's sense of being misdiagnosed or dismissed. The Other exerts similar control over Piranesi, manipulating him into believing he is mad.

As Jodie's illness persisted, time itself seemed to warp, echoing Piranesi's unique way of keeping track of time through events rather than traditional calendars. Days stretched out endlessly, with the acute symptoms of a virus expected to last two weeks lingering for months. In

the same way that Piranesi marks his days with significant discoveries: “the Year I Discovered the Coral Halls” (Clarke, 2020, p. 14) or “the Year I Named the Constellations” (Clarke, 2020, p. 15) Jodie found herself creating new ways to measure time in a world where conventional timekeeping no longer seemed relevant. For Jodie, 2020 became “The Year of Weeping and Wailing,” a fitting description for both the emotional and physical toll of her illness, as well as the broader context of the pandemic (Vinson, 2021).

While Vinson’s personal connection to Piranesi provides a rich, empathetic layer to the novel’s interpretation, her approach also highlights the potential limitations of reading the text primarily through the lens of individual experience. The power of Clarke’s work lies in its ability to resonate with a wide range of readers, and while the connection to long COVID-19 is compelling, it is important to balance this perspective with broader thematic interpretations that the novel offers.

3.4 Schizophrenia

Seth Tomko’s (2024) interpretation of Piranesi positions the novel as a metaphorical exploration of mental illness, drawing parallels to Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* as both works use fantastical elements to make inquiries into altered psychological states. Tomko suggests that, while not overtly allegorical, Piranesi can be read as an exploration of mental illness, particularly through the lens of the protagonist’s journals. Piranesi’s unwavering belief in the logic and coherence of his world is reminiscent of the thought patterns often observed in individuals experiencing psychotic episodes or delusional states, such as those seen in cases of paranoid schizophrenia or extreme manic or depressive episodes (Tomko, 2024).

Indeed, Kafka’s *Metamorphosis* and Clarke’s Piranesi share thematic similarities. In *Metamorphosis*,

Gregor Samsa awakens to find himself transformed into a giant insect, leading to his physical isolation from his family and society, as well as his internal struggle with his new identity. His metamorphosis symbolizes a profound psychological or existential crisis, highlighting themes of dehumanization, alienation, and loss of agency. Gregor's transformation is never fully explained, much like the surreal nature of Piranesi's labyrinthine world. Piranesi's confinement within the House, like Gregor's imprisonment in his insect body, reflects a deeper mental and emotional isolation. Both characters exist in environments that seem to defy normal logic, and both are cut off from the world they once knew, struggling with distorted perceptions of reality. However, while Gregor's transformation causes his complete alienation from humanity, Piranesi's journey is one of gradual realization, as he begins to question the reality imposed on him by the Other and seeks to reclaim his true identity.

Leanda Brooks (2022) also presents a perspective suggesting that Piranesi may suffer from schizophrenia. She argues that his difficulty distinguishing reality from hallucination, his disconnection from his identity, and his failure to recognize his own handwriting in his journals align with symptoms of schizophrenia. Unlike dissociative identity disorder, where individuals are aware of internal voices, schizophrenia causes a complete lack of awareness of external delusions. Brooks sees Piranesi's disorientation and fragmented identity as key indicators of schizophrenia.

The connection between these two interpretations lies in their shared focus on altered psychological states. Both Tomko (2024) and Brooks (2022) highlight Piranesi's distorted perceptions of reality and his struggles with identity, though Tomko frames this within a broader metaphorical exploration, while Brooks views it as symptomatic of schizophrenia.

4. Piranesi from a Philosophical Perspective

Susanna Clarke has crafted Piranesi's character by emphasizing his profound honesty and trust in the world he inhabits. Unlike modern people, who often experience a sense of alienation from their environment, nature, and other beings, Piranesi feels deeply connected to the world around him. Clarke wanted to portray a character who did not have this sense of separation but instead felt part of a continuous relationship with his surroundings, almost communing with the world itself (Waterstones, 2021).

Viewing the novel primarily through the lens of contemporary psychology, focusing on mental illness or dissociative identity disorder, may obscure deeper thematic concerns that Clarke skilfully weaves throughout the narrative. This perspective argues that rather than reducing the story to a psychological exploration of mental delusion or brainwashing, the novel is better understood within the broader history of ideas that Clarke explicitly invokes, particularly those related to enchantment, perception, and the loss of a more mystical or enchanted view of reality.

During a pivotal moment when Piranesi begins to uncover unsettling truths about his identity, readers are given a significant clue about what the labyrinthine story may actually represent. While indexing his journals, he comes across names and references that he does not fully recognize, such as Owen Barfield and Rudolf Steiner (Clarke, 2020, p. 74). These names seem foreign to him because they connect to a world and intellectual framework he has forgotten or been disconnected from, which contrasts with his current isolated existence in the House.

Barfield, a thinker often linked with C.S. Lewis, builds on the idea of the "evolution of consciousness", a concept that examines how human perception of reality

has shifted throughout history. In his work, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (1957), Barfield suggests that human understanding has evolved from a mystical, enchanted view of the world to a more rational and disenchanting perspective.

This shift is reflected in C.S. Lewis's quote from *The Magician's Nephew* (1955) that Clarke uses as a preliminary thesis in *Piranesi*: "I am the great scholar, the magician, the adept, who is doing the experiment. Of course, I need subjects to do it on" (Clarke, 2020, p. 4). Here, the figure of the scholar or magician is portrayed as someone who wields power over others, conducting experiments on them, perhaps a metaphor for how rationality seeks to control and dissect the world, removing the sense of mystery and enchantment that once shaped human consciousness. Barfield's theories challenge this modern perspective, advocating for a deeper recognition of the spiritual dimensions that have been lost in the rationalization of the world.

The allusions to *The Chronicles of Narnia* in *Piranesi* are abundant and hard to overlook. Beyond the similarities between the House and Charn, the cover of the first hardcover edition of *Piranesi* features a faun statue resembling Mr. Tumnus from *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. This connection is further deepened by the protagonist's reflection on the faun statue within the House itself:

The Statue that I love above all others – stands at a Door between the Fifth and Fourth North-Western Halls. It is the Statue of a Faun, a creature half-man and half-goat, with a head of exuberant curls. He smiles slightly and presses his forefinger to his lips. I have always felt that he meant to tell me something or perhaps to warn me of something:

Quiet! he seems to say. Be careful! (Clarke, 2020, p. 16)

The faun's gesture, pressing his finger to his lips, suggests an air of secrecy or caution, invoking a sense of warning or concealed knowledge. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Mr. Tumnus serves as a guide who both helps and warns Lucy about the dangers of Narnia, particularly the White Witch. Similarly, in Piranesi, the faun statue may symbolize the hidden truths within the labyrinthine House and the need for Piranesi to approach his surroundings with care. Nevertheless, the faun statue hints at a deeper thematic message that the story transcends mere knowledge and intellectual understanding. Piranesi's connection with the faun is one of intuition and silent communication, a gesture of caution that implies there are layers of meaning that cannot be fully captured through logic or analysis alone. This quiet warning suggests that the beauty of the House, and perhaps of the story itself, lies in its mystery and wonder. By focusing solely on the quest for knowledge, as the Other does, there is a risk of reducing the richness of the world, and the story, to something utilitarian or devoid of deeper significance.

Steiner (1984), too, with his focus on spiritual science and anthroposophy, explored the intersection between material and spiritual realities. According to this spiritual movement, established in the early 20th century, an objective spiritual realm exists that can be understood through intellect and accessed by human experience. Its followers seek spiritual understanding through a mode of thought that transcends sensory perception. His work *Philosophy of Freedom* (1894/1995) explores the concept of human autonomy, focusing on the individual's capacity to achieve moral and intellectual freedom through conscious thought and self-determination. Steiner emphasizes that

true freedom comes from acting based on one's own rational understanding and ethical intuitions, rather than being driven by external influences or unconscious desires (Steiner, 1894/1995, p. 81). This philosophical framework suggests that individuals can attain spiritual and moral freedom by developing inner clarity and thinking independently, which allows them to align their actions with higher moral principles.

In *Piranesi*, the protagonist's relationship with the House can be connected to Rudolf Steiner's distinction between knowing and feeling as instruments of knowledge. Steiner argues that a philosopher of feeling, or mystic, seeks to understand the world by immersing themselves in their individual, subjective emotions, rather than through objective, rational thought. This attempt to permeate the world with one's personal experience leads to a mystical outlook, one where feelings, which are inherently individual, are elevated to the level of universal truths.

However, Steiner critiques this approach by pointing out that feelings are subjective and cannot serve as a reliable basis for understanding the world at large, as they are too personal and limited (Steiner, 1894/1995, p. 83). This tension between knowledge and feeling is evident in Piranesi's relationship with the House. Piranesi does not merely observe the House; he feels a profound connection to it, describing it as a benevolent entity that nurtures him. His reverence for the House goes beyond rational understanding, as he experiences it emotionally, treating its vast halls, statues, and tides as part of his own self.

However, as Steiner suggests, this feeling-based connection may obscure a deeper understanding. Piranesi's emotional immersion in the House initially blinds him to the manipulation and exploitation by the Other. Only when Piranesi begins to question his identity

and the nature of the House does he shift from a purely emotional relationship to one that integrates knowledge, allowing him to break free from the Other's control. Thus, Piranesi's journey is not about being physically trapped, but about the internal conflict between emotion and intellect. His final realization, where he becomes a blend of both Piranesi and Sorensen, reflects Steiner's ideal of achieving freedom through the balance of feeling and conceptual thought. This interpretation suggests that the novel is a metaphor for the intricate workings of the human mind, where true freedom comes not from escaping external circumstances but from harmonizing our internal worlds.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, Piranesi invites a multitude of interpretations, with its themes resonating differently depending on the reader's perspective. By examining the novel through the lens of mental illness, isolation, and identity, readers connect their personal experiences to the protagonist's journey, seeing reflections of their own struggles and realities. Yet, as this paper suggests, these interpretations do not exhaust the novel's meaning. Piranesi also engages with broader philosophical ideas. By interpreting the House as a manifestation of Piranesi's mental illness or brainwashing, some argue, readers fall into the very trap that Clarke's novel seeks to avoid: viewing the mystical and surreal as mere symptoms of a disturbed mind.

This psychological reading dismisses the novel's exploration of how individuals might experience reality in ways that transcend modern, secular, and disenchanting worldviews. Instead, a more illuminating approach would consider how Clarke engages with ideas from Barfield, C.S. Lewis, and Rudolf Steiner, offering a critique of the secular

age and its limitations in understanding a reality that is imbued with more than just material meaning.

Thus, while interpreting Piranesi's experience as one of mental illness might align with a contemporary psychological approach, this view arguably misses the novel's central engagement with the loss of an enchanted worldview. Clarke's work invites readers to reexamine the boundaries of reality and to consider whether, in the modern age, we have lost touch with a deeper, more meaningful sense of existence:

I realised that the search for the Knowledge has encouraged us to think of the House as if it were a sort of riddle to be unravelled, a text to be interpreted, and that if ever we discover the Knowledge, then it will be as if the Value has been wrested from the House and all that remains will be mere scenery. [...] The House is valuable because it is the House. It is enough in and of Itself. It is not the means to an end (Clarke, 2020, p. 45).

References:

Barfield, O. (1957). *Saving the appearances: A study in idolatry*. Harcourt: Brace, and Company.

Brooks, L. (2022, February 11). *PSYCHOLOGIST reads PIRANESI | Book Review: Fantasy or Mental Illness?* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ekkmk_9fRPQ

Brown, A. (2021, November 30). Moving through trauma in Susanna Clarke's *Piranesi*. *Reactor Magazine*. <https://reactormag.com/hugo-spotlight-susanna-clarke-piranesi/>

Clarke, S. (2020). *Piranesi*. New York: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Jordan, J. (2020, September 12). Susanna Clarke: 'I was cut off from the world, bound in one place by illness'. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/sep/12/susanna-clarke-i-was-cut-off-from-the-world-bound-in-one-place-by-illness>

piranesi. (n.d.) *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition*. (2011). Retrieved October 7 2024 from <https://www.thefreedictionary.com/Piranesi>

Steiner, R. (1984). *The essential Steiner: Basic writings of Rudolf Steiner* (R. McDermott, Ed.). Harper & Row.

Steiner, R. (1995). *The Philosophy of Freedom: The Basis for a Modern World Conception*. Hillside: Rudolf Steiner Press. (Original work published 1894).

Tomko, S. (2024, January 12). *Review of Piranesi by Susanna Clarke*. Owlcation. <https://owlcation.com/humanities/Review-of-Piranesi>

Utomo, Y.P., Adnan, M.L., & Susanti, E.A.P. (2023). Understanding dissociative identity disorder: A literature review. *Archives of Psychiatry Research*, 59(2), 305-310. <https://doi.org/10.20471/dec.2023.59.02.14>

Vinson, J.N. (2021, January 28). "Piranesi" is a dispatch from the kingdom of chronic illness. *Electric Literature*. <https://electricliterature.com/piranesi-susanna-clarke-chronic-illness-long-covid/>

Waterstones. (2021, September 6). *Piranesi: Susanna Clarke in conversation with Madeline Miller* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cQHhFyQbLoE>

White, K. (2002). *An introduction to the sociology of health and illness*. SAGE Publishing.

~~~~~  
**Andra-Iulia URSA** is a Senior Lecturer at *1 Decembrie 1918* University of Alba Iulia. Her research and publications address translation studies and semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic strategies in literary translation, untranslatability, and world literature. Her professional experience includes teaching a diverse range of subjects, such as Simultaneous and Consecutive Interpretation, English Syntax, Technical Translation, English for Law, Kinesiotherapy, and Business Administration students. She is a certified translator for English and French, with eleven years of specialized experience in translating legal and technical documents.