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Complete Contamination: The Theme of Madness In Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher"

In his short story "The Fall of the House of Usher," Edgar Allan Poe utilizes the theme of madness by injecting it into every literary device working in his short fiction. Madness creeps into every aspect of the story such as settings, characters and the narrative. In doing so, Poe creates an atmosphere of madness, in which all literary devices and objects are affected by complete degradation. I believe this injection of madness is Poe's most powerful tool, which renders him a master of storytelling, imagery, and foreshadowing. In the following, I wil`l discuss the many ways in which Poe makes use of this atmosphere of madness in order to strengthen elements of the story, foreshadow its ending, and perhaps show us his own sense of the world.

Throughout "House of Usher" countless objects, characters and settings are intimately connected to the story's bleak mood of instability and decay. It is as if Poe is applying a mental state to the entire story. Each and every element reflects the overarching mood, so that no matter where the reader turns, they cannot escape Poe's atmosphere. This theme of madness is global, inescapable, and has contaminated the entirety of the story. Through this complete contamination, the readers themselves are exposed to the workings of an ill mind, finding no solace or alleviation from madness, it is everywhere.

Poe finds a way to reflect the mental state of the story into each of it's elements, but by far the most prominent and powerful, is his use of madness within the setting. Here, Poe is expressing his interest in our emotional responses to our physical surroundings. Poe clearly knew the power visuals and images can hold over our psyche, and he uses the narrator's emotions to guide us through our own emotional response to the setting.

The narrator's vivid descriptions of the landscape surrounding the House of Usher instantly feed us the overall mood of this story. Intense images of death and decay envelop the mansion, and the narrator immediately sheds light on the depressing feelings it casts over him. Even if we did not have this narrator to identify the emotions we are meant to feel, a setting of this fashion incites discomfort within any reader instantly. The mansion rests within dying woodlands and towers above a dark and reflective mountain lake. As the narrator approaches the mansion, he describes "an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees and the gray wall, and the silent tarn" (120). This speaker can only identify this place as the opposite of how he believes heaven would feel to step into. He goes on to identify "a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn." (120). In other words, the narrator notices a small crack cutting through the center of the mansion.

This fissure foreshadows the looming destruction of the mansion, and proves that Poe is using the narrator's unsettling emotional response to point us towards a potential ending. Madness is placed into the setting as the narrator identifies the maddening effects these images have on his mental state, such as fear and anxiety. Madness and insanity is often closely linked with a heightening of the senses. Those considered mad are often found to be very sensitive to

their surroundings, as if the physical things around them are contributing to their mental discomfort. Therefore, images and the emotional responses that stem from them, are quite important to a diseased mind. Gothic literature is well known for it's excessive use of symbolism through images, especially in setting.

In *Madness and Civilization*, Michel Foucault criticizes Gothic literature's use of madness within its imagery. Foucault argues that images in Gothic literature fail "to teach anything but their own fantastic presence" (18). In other words, Foucault believes the symbolic imagery used in Gothic literature never states anything about madness and how it works, but rather only exists to give the reader some glimpse of the mental discomfort madmen feel, and to fascinate us rather than to educate. I also believe these images exist to give the reader a peek into how the insane mind processes imagery, however I disagree with Foucault's claim that these images state nothing about how madness works. It is the sheer amount of images, like the decaying trees, the crack of the mansion, the color of the sky, that truly speaks to how madness works. The narrator is completely overwhelmed not by his physical surroundings, but the uncomfortable emotions they ignite within him.

This is what truly defines madness in my opinion, the ability to gain some kind of debilitating mental state from a physical inanimate object, all within one's own head. Foucault himself even states, "In a general way, then, madness is not linked to the world and it's subterranean forms, but rather to man, to his weaknesses, dreams, and illusions" (26). Here, Foucault is stating that madness is displayed, not in the physical images themselves, but the imaginary and delusional conclusions a madman can draw from them. Madness is sensitive and inescapable, as it infects one's perception and how they sense the world, their thoughts become distorted and morals are blurred.

The narrator of "House of Usher" cannot deny the impressions this setting has pushed upon him. After questioning why he feels such powerful sorrow from these simple objects of nature, he ponders whether "a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene" would lead him to feel something other than this instant depression (118). He attempts to test this by staring at the landscape's reflection in the lake. However, as madness has infected the entirety of this atmosphere, he claims to then feel "a shudder even more thrilling than before" from the inverted reflection as well (118).

As he states in his essay titled, "House of Mirrors: Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher," John H. Timmerman notes that "this use of a mental landscape is nothing new to Poe" (163). The term "mental landscape" signifies the connection between the appearance of a place, and human emotions. As Timmerman and other scholars have noticed, there often appears a "close interconnectedness between the physical and psychological, the external environment and the internal mind" within Poe's fiction (164). In other words, when it comes to literary devices being the driving force of his fiction, Poe's settings are the most prominent. The setting reflects the feelings of the characters, which reflect the premises of the storyline. Timmerman refers to these devices as "mirror images" (163). These images all reflect one another in order to contribute to one sole meaning or symbol.

For example, in "The Fall of the House of Usher" the weather is relatively calm for the time the narrator stays at the mansion, until the nights that follow Roderick and the narrator's accidental premature burial of Madeline. After this event, "a whirlwind had apparently collected its force…for there were frequent and violent alterations in the direction of the wind"(132). A raging storm has enveloped the House of Usher and shakes it's foundations, bringing its uncontrollable wind inside the windows at times. The mental landscape outside of the mansion is

reflecting the turmoil happening inside it's walls, and inside Roderick Usher as well. From this point on, the narrator notices great change in Roderick's personality. His mental state grows more unstable, just as the mirror image of the weather outside reflects.

The mental landscape was an essential tool to Poe's process of writing fiction. As much of his short fiction begins by painting a distinct setting for us, potential meanings and overall tones of a piece can be deduced within the first page. In "House of Usher" Poe hints at the mansion's destruction in the very first sentence of the story. "During the whole of a dull, dark and soundless day in the autumn of the year…within view of the melancholy House of Usher" (117). Poe immediately identifies the hopeless "melancholy" of the mansion along with the season of the year. As autumn is a time of decay and death, this story truly describes the Fall coming to the House of Usher. The trees surrounding the house are bare and dead, the "leaden-hued" sky is gray and dull, and "the shades of the evening drew on" (117). I found this to be a crucial mirror image within this story, although Timmerman himself does not shed any light on the significance of the autumn season. All of these aspects of the landscape that surrounds the mansion are tropes of a day in Autumn, all life and health has shriveled up and died. The season of destruction has arrived, and so too will the physical fall of the mansion, it's inhabitants, and of course, the Usher family name as well.

The narrator also takes notice of the decrepit state of the interiors of the Usher mansion. Besides the obvious fissure that cracks through the center of the house, he describes the furniture and atmosphere of the rooms within it. When the narrator is first guided into the room in which Usher resides, he describes "dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique and tattered" (121). The interior of this home does in fact reflect it's incredibly bleak and lifeless exterior. In addition, there is an interesting observation of "many

books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene"(121). As we later learn that Usher attempts to combat his depression through indulging in various forms of media and art, this line hints at his ongoing struggle against mental illness. Although Roderick Usher attempts to surround himself with artistic expression and liveliness, the narrator still feels that he "breathed an atmosphere of sorrow" as he entered the room (121).

Clearly, Roderick is hoping to fully immerse himself in art, literature or music in order to stop his feelings of boredom and monotony, but his books and instruments are scattered about the floor, as he lays on the sofa by himself. He is failing to use his combat devices against his condition. The narrator himself even states, "An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all" (121). Poe's use of the verb "pervaded" gives us the sense that these feelings of gloom and torment are overpowering any positive energy this bleak room could potentially convey. This theme of darkness and illness overcoming Roderick's attempts to live out the rest of his life peacefully is incredibly prominent in this story.

Roderick's setting at the start of the story holds an intense grip on his spirit and senses. In fact, he tells the narrator directly that the atmosphere of the mansion is a particularly clear reason for his great mental discomfort. Although the narrator writes this off as "superstitious impressions" about the mansion, the reader is able to feel the desperation in Roderick(123). Usher, a character of extreme sensitivity, is attempting to explain his intense neural functions to the narrator, a character of reality and rationality. As a reader aware of the valid truth of this settings power over Roderick's psyche, we are able to identify this as Poe's careful use of foreshadowing.

Roderick describes the rooms power over his mental state as "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" (123). Here, Roderick confirms that the interior of the room has some effect on him, but it is his mentioning of the tarn that is most interesting. Each time this tarn is mentioned in the story, there is always an interest in the lakes reflective properties, as The House of Usher is perfectly mirrored within the lake in front of it. Roderick is clearly attributing this reflective lake to his illness, and the reflection could potentially be working as an actual and literal mirror for him. Through this lake, he is able to see his own home, which he has not left in years. Roderick Usher is able to see into his own life from the reflection, the exterior, and is constantly reminded of the miserable place he is encapsulated in. He is able to see, as the narrator in the first pages sees, the many aspects of setting that contribute to his torturous existence.

Insanity can be related to running in circles. Those who are affected often experience fixations, obsessions, and feel intense fear or anxiety at any slight deviation from their expected schedule or lifestyle. The insane mind is one that encases itself, to the point where any outside influences could be considered harmful and promote the mind's complete collapse.

After reading the letter Roderick sends him before the story begins, the narrator briefly shares with us his knowledge on the history of the Usher family. From this letter, he learns "that the stem of the Usher race, all time honored as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch"(119). In other words, the family has rarely bred with any outside influences in the past centuries. They are enclosed within barriers, and this isolated mindset carries onto their two sole heirs to the mansion, Roderick and Madeline. The two descendants do not leave the House of Usher, and rarely interact with anyone outside of it. The reclusive lifestyle of it's inhabitants, the physical condition of it's interior, and the isolated history of it's family all closely relate to the mental illness which hangs over this mansion. As an insane mind becomes lost within itself, so

does the Usher family. The many years of inbreeding have led their family tree to a singular, ending branch.

In *Madness and Civilization,* Foucault claims that "self-attachment is the first sign of madness"(26). I believe the mainly inbred Usher family is a perfect example of this self-absorption that sparks madness. Roderick's life of complete isolation has rendered him terrified of any world outside the safety of his home. This is everything he knows, he was raised to reject the outside. He has been completely entrapped in the ideology of his ancestors. As Foucault continues he states, "it is because man is attached to himself that he accepts error as truth, lies as reality"(26). Roderick is a product of his family history, it governs his perception and sense of the world, just as the madness within him does.

We can infer that Roderick begins to become aware of his mental state, and the isolated life he has led all this time, at some point before the story begins. Otherwise, he would never have invited the narrator to the mansion and would continue his lonely days. When Roderick reflects on his life, he feels great sorrow and anxiety, due to the fact that he is the final link on the Usher chain. As a result of his family's deep-seated history of isolation, Roderick is convinced that this is his sole destiny, he lacks any motivation to alter fate. This shows the intensity of the madness his family has ingrained within his mind, he is essentially programmed to live in this certain way.

As Foucault described, lies have become reality and errors are truth, Roderick has totally accepted his fate as the final Usher, following the imaginary laws of his long passed ancestors. A madman is unable to reflect on himself properly, he is unable to deviate from the usual processes of his mind. This process of reflection within madness is what is truly killing Roderick Usher in this story. Foucault even adds, "Madness deals not so much with truth and the world, as with

man and whatever truth about himself he is able to perceive"(27). Therefore, Roderick will never truly be able to see himself from the outside, as the only truth he knows is error. He believes the long line of self-attached Ushers that came before him will not allow it, when in reality these dead ancestors have no say in his individual life, but he allows them to govern him.

I believe Poe is aware of this inescapable, cyclical nature of madness that can entrap people so tightly. He has created the character of Roderick in order to show us how powerful an ideology can be. Roderick is experiencing this deep mental pain because he believes he has deviated from the ideological norms forced upon him over time. Poe has used Roderick, and the madness that infects him, to create a greater message on individuality. Roderick Usher is a martyr of madness, his mental degradation teaches us the dangers of being too intimately involved in anyone else's beliefs. If Roderick disregarded the beliefs and laws his family had invented in the past, he would not see himself as a failure. He would not see the world through the Usher family's eyes, but rather his own.

Roderick has feared the other his entire life, and now, once he realizes the desperate situation of the Usher line, he calls upon the only other he can potentially stand; the narrator. In *Edgar Allan Poe: The Design of Order,* Mark Kinkead-Weekes points out, "Roderick's terror of anything 'other': a terror both physical and psychological…would be bound to affect the possibility of any relationship" (26). The "relationship" Kinkead-Weekes refers to is that of Roderick and our narrator. Although the two were "boon companions in boyhood", the circumstances of this story place too much pressure on their friendship, and by the end this relationship comes to a brutal end (118). Roderick clearly does not fear the narrator, and perhaps we can infer he considers him one of his only true friends, as he is the sole person ever invited to

the Usher mansion. However, as the self-absorbed madness of the Usher family has existed within the mansions walls for centuries, it will continue not to accept any outside influences.

The mansion itself seems to fear the outside world as well. It is clear that no furniture has been replaced, or any work has been done to make any repairs on the increasing decay of the building. Even in it's architecture, it upholds this law of isolation, as the narrator describes "specious totality of old wood-work which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of the external air" (120). In *The Design of Order*, Kinkead-Weekes identifies the relation here: "the first breath of air from outside will bring instant disintegration – and there is the narrator entering" (20). I certainly agree with him in believing that this "breath of air" is the narrator himself, stepping into the formerly isolated world of Usher. He is the deviation from the norm that sparks the complete collapse of the House of Usher.

Poe uses the narrator as a messenger from the outside world, and sends him to this enclosed bubble his friend resides in. The sane narrator's time spent with the ill Roderick acts like treatment, as they attempt to find the source of the illness, fighting off the depression with the distractions of music and art. However, as the narrator attempts to alleviate his friend, he gradually incites self-reflection within Roderick. The narrator unknowingly pushes Roderick to see his own life from another perspective, which shakes him to his core. Poe has placed this entrapping madness and rejection of the outside into Roderick, the mansion, and the Usher family line, only to have it's blissful ignorance be violently disrupted by the narrator's arrival. The results are, by the end of the story, the complete destruction of these three subjects. Therefore, Poe has taught us yet another lesson about madness through this story, that it cannot be shaken too violently, or forced into a cure. The madman will always be unaware of his

madness, until it is identified by the sane. This story not only paints a powerful scene of battle between sane and insane, but also enlightens us on the incredibly sensitive nature of an ill mind.

From the moment his character is introduced, we are able to distinguish many unique aspects of Roderick Usher's personality and appearance. Rodrick's state of mind is immediately addressed as "a mental disorder which oppressed him" (118). This description is stated in Roderick's own words, in his initial letter to the narrator, when he invites the speaker to his home. When face to face with Roderick, the narrator notices his dark complexion and sickly features. The speaker mentions a distinct lack of "simple humanity" in Roderick's face, and he is shocked that this is the same person as his boyhood companion (122). He states, "Surely man had never before been so terribly altered, in so brief a period, as had Roderick Usher!" (122). In this sentence the narrator describes the time between their childhood and the present to be "so brief a period" although they are surely grown men. This speaks to the severity of Usher's illness and shocking appearance, he greatly contrasts the narrator's memory of Roderick as a child, which is not a long enough time to suggest this level of alteration. We can infer that Roderick's unkept appearance is reflective of his mental state, as his silky hair floats around carelessly, his skin is pale, and his eyes are bright and startling. The narrator points out various aspects of Roderick that contribute to his nervous and uncomfortable persona, including his shaky voice and awkward mannerisms. It seems as if nearly every part of Roderick's physical appearance strengthens the notion that his mind is severely ill.

Through Roderick's disheveled appearance, Poe is utilizing the physical world, to prove that madness has crept into the inner, or mental plane. Just as he does with his mental landscapes, Poe is attempting to translate the complex emotions of madness into as many concrete objects and people as possible. Madness slowly chokes the characters and their relationships into a point

of complete destruction. The vivid description of Roderick's shocking outward form not only reveals the deeper workings of his character, but also the inherent interest that the narrator has in analyzing his old friend. From this moment on, the narrator of "House of Usher" begins to show an infatuation with Roderick's psyche, as he carefully watches his friend's every move.

Upon first meeting Roderick Usher, the narrator explains that Roderick approaches him with "an overdone cordiality-of the constrained effort of the *ennuyé* man of the world" (121). This strange greeting is described as being overly-friendly and uncomfortable, as if Roderick is attempting to hide his actual state of extreme boredom and depression, through forced friendliness and hospitality. It is extremely difficult for the narrator to understand how sincere Roderick's greeting really is. As he struggles to find any trace of the childhood companion he once knew, he uses the word "cadaverousness" to describe Usher's face (121). A cadaverous face is one that is corpse-like and signifying decay, often being very thin and pale. It is strange for the narrator to feel any positive energy being transmitted from Roderick, especially given his appearance, and he does not believe it at first. At first, it seems as though Roderick is trying to carefully deceive his old friend, and attempt to create some reassurance that he is not completely lost in this illness. Roderick's attempted illusion does not hold for long, as he begins to explain the actual symptoms he has experienced as a result of his approaching madness.

Shortly before Roderick's explanation begins, the narrator doubts whether or not his friend is being honest in his vivacious greeting, until he states, "A glance, however, at his countenance convinced me of his perfect sincerity" (121). His countenance, or facial expression, appears to be excited by a potential end to his desperate search for companionship. Usher is genuinely thrilled to have someone accompany him and alleviate his pain and boredom, therefore his overly friendly greeting can be justified. Poe includes this strange interaction between long

lost friends as a way to immediately highlight the inherent difference between Roderick and the narrator. The narrator's genuine shock towards his friend's abnormal appearance allows us to identify him as a normal common man. This is essential to understanding Poe's use of madness, as it will be the force that drives this friendship apart.

Through the narrator's intimate connection with Roderick, Poe makes use of another aspect of madness to drive his story further; contagion. As madness is instilled into each device working within "House of Usher," it also infects the relationship between Roderick and the speaker. The narrator stays in the mansion for a number of weeks, and his mental state gradually begins to descend to Roderick's level. The narrator begins the story in a rational and quite normal mindset, and ends the story in complete nervous terror.

Early in the story, Roderick begins to explain what he believes to be a major cause of his mental illness. Madeline Usher, Roderick's twin sister, will certainly pass away soon, and leave him the sole surviving Usher. In this peculiar scene, the narrator somehow instantly commiserates with Roderick, as he feels his friend's emotions quite empathetically. Soon after, the narrator catches a glimpse of Lady Madeline wander through a distant hallway like a ghost. He does not know this woman, and in fact was, until now, completely unaware that Roderick had a twin sister. However, once the narrator sees Madeline he is immediately met with the same profound gloom we find in Roderick. He claims, "I regarded her with an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread…A sensation of stupor oppressed me as my eyes followed her retreating steps"(124). The intensity of this moment is very odd, especially that the narrator claims to be affected by a "sensation of stupor." Stupor is a state of complete unresponsiveness, in which a person can potentially only be roused by pain. This level of sensitivity and intense emotional response caused only by seeing this woman for the first time, closely resembles Roderick's

sensory abilities and constant tendency to associate his physical surroundings with his mental state. Roderick is consistently emotional and sensitive to the physical world around him, and in this moment, that seed may have been planted into the narrator's mind as well.

This clear contamination of the narrator's psyche is Poe's way of truly roping him into the misfortune of this story. The narrator being dragged into the depths of Roderick's insanity is a critical arc in "House of Usher" that also further contributes to Poe's atmosphere of madness. The narrator has stepped into this atmosphere, and completely integrated into it. His once rational and sane mind has now deteriorated into a nervous and sensitive mess due to consistent exposure to Roderick.

Later in the story, when Madeline Usher is thought to be dead and buried, Roderick begins to show his greatest signs of hysteria yet. This is the moment Roderick has confirmed he is the final Usher, the anxieties of his failure to carry on his family name have all crashed down upon him as a result of his sister's apparent demise. The narrator, due to his consistent analyses of Roderick, instantly notices this chilling difference in his demeanor. "His ordinary occupations were neglected or forgotten. He roamed from chamber to chamber with hurried, unequal, and objectless step" (130). Roderick is in a completely frantic state, that the narrator will soon experience himself.

In *A Psychology of Fear: The Nightmare Formula of Edgar Allan Poe,* David R. Saliba also makes note of this contagion. He believes that the reader also plays a part in this spread of disease, and states, "Roderick's change in manner forces the reader to stick close to the narrator, and in so doing, he too becomes a victim to irrational fear" (184). Now that both Roderick and the narrator possess this "irrational fear" Saliba believes it will spread to the reader as well, as they attempt to grab hold of a story that is clearly about to be derailed.

The infection of the narrator is an interesting decision from Poe, as he begins to force the only rational character into a sensitive character of delusion, equal to Roderick. I believe Poe is attempting to reveal the infectious nature of madness, and that even the most intelligent minds, no matter how situated in reality, can also succumb to it. He subtly reveals to us that the mental state of Roderick and the narrator are now one, as the speaker also begins to nervously pace about the mansion.

Poe also uses this scene as a way to rope even the reader into the madness of this story. The reader is now left alone, without a sane person to guide them through the events of the narrative. While the narrator attempts to comfort the grieving Roderick by reading some of his favorite tales, he begins to hear a loud crashing sound from within the mansion, and he states, "I at once concluded that my excited fancy had deceived me" (134). The narrator is attempting to block out his own senses, and maintain his rationality, but in doing so, the reader can immediately question his sanity.

We are left the responsibility of being the only rational one in the room, and Poe leaves us to distinguish what is real and imaginary. We are placed into the narrator's role from the beginning of the story. The reader is asked, as a sane person, to expose ourselves to madness, just like the narrator. The narrator came to care for Roderick and was infected by him, and now we must care for the narrator, and perhaps Poe intends for us to be infected by him as well, to understand and experience the pain and power of madness.

Roderick's mood shifts back into a dark corner when he begins to explain the symptoms hanging over him. There are countless aspects of Roderick Usher's life that torment him, but the one most noted here is the fact that "he suffered from a morbid acuteness of the senses" (123). The use of "morbid acuteness" in this sentence is a very interesting way of stating that

Roderick's perception is so honed that it keeps him uncomfortable and agitated. Much of this "morbid acuteness" is based on his interpretations of the world around him, the narrator describes, "he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odors of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light" (123). The sensitivity of Roderick's psyche is something unique, as the narrator goes on to explain that even the sounds of musical instruments can insight some terror within him.

The narrator, after hearing Roderick perform a short poem he wrote about the mansion, also begins to think about Roderick's tendency to personify objects and locations. He claims that Roderick has a strange opinion "of the sentience of all vegetable things" (128). In other words, Roderick claims to feel an intimate connection with the inanimate, in which he finds no trouble applying human emotions to these objects, and identifying his own feelings through them. This phenomenon of Roderick's character is most prominent in his vision of the mansion. Roderick insists that the sole reason for his intense depression is the Fall of his family name. He relates his feelings of helplessness and defeat to the mansion, which is literally crumbling and falling to pieces. At the very beginning of the story, the narrator describes the mansion as a common passerby would, a dark dying building that could incite unease in anyone. However, in this later scene, Poe speaks through the narrator to bring us a much more intimate description of the mansion, or perhaps how it is seen through Roderick's eyes.

In Rodericks debilitating mental state, we find him capable of finding misery or anxiety in any everyday object around him. He analyzes parts of the physical world, and responds with the feelings of gloom and despair which they convey within him. These inanimate objects and pieces of setting seem to speak to Roderick as if they are alive, instilling strong emotions and reactions into him. Giving the reader a clear image of Roderick's madness is essential to Poe's

telling of this tale. Here, Poe is providing a further example of mental landscape. The reader can grasp the sensitivity of Rodericks mind as we witness him find discomfort in the decayed furniture, anxiety from the unpredictable weather, and comfort from his books and music.

Now that the reader is fully aware of Roderick's tendency to personify his setting, a later description of the mansion we are given is clearly written with mental landscape in mind. Roderick identifies the fungi of the stone walls, the bare ness of the trees, and the reflection of the tarn, as blights "which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family" (128). Making use of Roderick's tendencies, Poe further expands his mental landscape idea. Here, he is not only using setting to strengthen the mood, but also to clear up character motivations, and further foreshadow the stories conclusion. In this particular scene, Poe allows us to jump between the narrator's mind and Roderick's. We begin within Roderick, and as we start to understand his relationship with the world around him, and how it has "made *him* what I now saw him – what he was" (128). However, at the end of this scene, we can infer that the narrator brushes this aside as just another one of Roderick's ramblings and Poe yet again, makes the difference in these two character's psyche very clear.

Throughout Roderick's explanation of the workings of his mind, the narrator continuously states that Roderick's opinions on this matter are very set in stone. The narrator does not bother to argue with his friend because of this, but why would he? He later states, "Such opinions need no comment, and I will make none" (128). As this line closes the scene, we can infer that the narrator is seeing the relation between Roderick's emotions and the state of the mansion, as a great coincidence, and he does not want to give into Roderick's unnerving superstitions.

This is where the speaker's narration could be considered by some to be unreliable. At this point in the story, the narrator seems to be denying or avoiding contact with Roderick's madness. The two men spend each and every day reading or listening to music, in an attempt to distract themselves from the overarching mental pain that haunts them. Roderick is certainly guilty of this, however he occasionally (like in the scene above) will pour his heart out and attempt to share his theories on what is happening to him. Here, the speaker momentarily fails as a narrator.

The narrator of "The Fall of the House of Usher" is a type of a speaker referred to in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative* as a "reflector" (245). In his essay, "Cognition, Emotion, and Consciousness," David Herman defines a reflector as "a center of consciousness through whom situations and events told about by a heterodiegetic or third-person narrator are refracted"(245). If the reflector narrator of this story has the responsibility of always reflecting his thoughts and emotions on certain events or situations, this is one he fails to share with us.

When compared to the very beginning of the story, the speaker's narration on Roderick has changed quite a bit. In his very first meeting with Roderick, the narrator is fixated on describing each aspect of Roderick's appearance, his posture, his manner of speaking, as if every detail could play a part in his task to dissect the source of Roderick's mental state. The narrator is clearly interested in discovering the reason for Roderick's deteriorating mental state. However, here Roderick shares his own theory on the subject, and essentially tells the narrator what he believes the main reason to be, but the narrator fails to make any response or conclusion.

I believe Poe's intention here was to shed light on how much these two men's relationship has changed in the past weeks. At their first meeting, the narrator sees Roderick as a sort of patient, closely watching his health and making note of it's patterns and fluctuations.

Here, the narrator, although he may fear this truth, is seeing Roderick as an example of what he himself could, or already has become; an intensely sensitive and nervous hypochondriac.

In his rare moment of silence, the narrator's role as a reflector is pushed aside, so that he may silently observe, rather than consciously reflect to us his thoughts on the scene. When speaking on the role of reflectors, David Herman states, "unless a text or a discourse registers the pressure of events on a embodied human…then that text or discourse will not be construed by interpreters as a full-fledged narrative, but rather as (at best) a report or chronicle"(256). The narrator is not registering the "pressure of events" but "reporting" on Roderick's beliefs, never adding his own thoughts or interpretations. Poe makes use of madness in order to shake the narrator from his typical narration style for a moment, regardless if he does or does not believe Roderick's ideas, he accepts them as possibility. The narrator is slowly becoming much less grounded in rational fact and reality, and begins to see the world through Roderick's sensitive eyes for a moment. As I have stated, overexposure to Roderick's nervous state of mind gradually infects the narrator throughout the story, and in this scene, we see the negative effect it has on his personal and descriptive telling of this story.

In my opinion, the narrators complete lack of commentary on Roderick's theory on the sentience of these vegetable objects, is evidence that he shuns it from his mind, as if it was a truth he did not want to hear. Poe could potentially be smoothing out the transition between the rational speaker of the beginning, and the nervous paranoid speaker of the ending. Poe wishes for us to make note of his narrator brushing aside the worries that, he too could be like Roderick. As he dives deeper into the literature and music, he is distracting himself further from his potentially diseased mind. In another way, this is Poe, making use of madness to take hold of another literary device, the narrative.

In John C. Gruesser's essay "Madmen and Moonbeams: The Narrator in 'The Fall of the House of Usher," he argues that the narrator is completely unreliable by the ending, entirely due to madness. Throughout the story, he is a very rational man, often ignoring Roderick's thoughts on the supernatural state of all things. At the end of the story as he flees, the narrator claims that a large storm is enveloping the mansion, dense enough to block out the clouds, stars and the rest of the sky. However, the narrator quickly contradicts himself by identifying, "the full, setting, and blood-red moon, which now shone vividly through that once barely discernible fissure"(137). Gruesser also notices this and believes Poe purposely included this error, in order to make a statement about madness, and open the story to further interpretations.

Gruesser states that this scene can stir up two potential interpretations of "House of Usher." The first interpretation states that, the rapid, consistent nature of the strange occurrences at the story's end "have compromised the narrator's ability to distinguish what is real from what isn't"(83). In this interpretation, Gruesser suggests that the events at the end of the story have sparked madness within the narrator. Seemingly supernatural occurrences such as Madeline's appearance, who was thought to be dead, have shaken his rationality, and left him questioning himself during his frantic exodus from the mansion.

The second interpretation Gruesser claims can be derived from this scene also has to do with the narrator's tendency to contradict himself. The narrator describes the intense blinding storm that blocks out the sky, at the same time as his description of the bright shining blood moon. These two images simply cannot exist together, but this scene is far from the first time the narrator has gone back on his word. Gruesser brings up the beginning of the story, when the narrator is amazed by the bleak emotional response he gains from the nature surrounding the House of Usher. Roderick later expresses the same exact emotions from the setting, but as

Gruesser also notices, “even though he had a similar impression about the mansion, the narrator adopts the pose of an ultra-rationalist here, suggesting that Usher’s beliefs do not even merit consideration” (83). This is an important scene where the reader can infer the narrator is attempting to bury his madness further into his mind, he uses his own narrative to convince himself that he cannot possibly be mad like Roderick. This would then render his entire narrative unreliable, as he may be hiding his true feelings in any scene, in order to alleviate his own fears on the degradation of his mental health.

I believe this second interpretation is much more fitting for what Poe is attempting to convey within “The Fall of the House of Usher.” If he truly shed light on the mental state of his characters through their emotional responses to setting, this narrator can instantly be identified as a sensitive depressed madman, as skilled at finding human emotion within inanimate objects as the mad Roderick. The objects and physical things of this story are of great importance. In their essay “Edgar Allan Poe’s Gothic Aesthetics of Things: Rereading “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Tang Weisheng claims that the nearly frustrating and highly interpretable nature of the story does not matter “if we read ‘The Fall’ as a text mainly about how the ‘superstition’ of things invades and eventually circumvents the ideal of human beings” (6). This further supports my claim that Poe is using the madness of these characters to share with us his sense of the world.

I believe Poe is attempting to show us that our minds are all victims to our surroundings, just like those of these men. Whether it’s a place in nature or a family ideology, these parts of our existence deeply impact our minds, how we see ourselves, and the world. Poe is interested in identifying for us the pieces of the physical world that can incite pain and discomfort within us. From “The Fall of the House of Usher” Poe asks us to understand that the world around us does

not define our state of being. This story is a call to arms to fight against the sensitivity of our human brains. Unlike the characters of this story, we must not let our minds be negatively affected by the beliefs of others, the atmosphere of nature, or even our own anxieties. Poe uses the misfortune of these men as a sacrifice. He begs us all to live as individual beings, free to determine our own destinies, rather than be driven mad by them.

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