“The Fall of the House of Usher”: A Meticulously Crafted Short Story

For more than a hundred years, the critics of the literary world have been in disagreement over Edgar Allan Poe’s writing. T. S. Eliot finds Poe lacking sufficient wisdom to write anything beyond an appeal to the senses. He states:

[Poe] appears to yield himself completely to the idea of the moment: the effect is, that all his ideas seem to be entertained rather than believed. What is lacking is not brain-power, but that maturity of intellect which comes only with the maturing of the man as a whole, the development and coordination of the various emotions (Tate 456).

James E. Heath and Thomas White accuse Poe as being “too much attached to the gloomy German mysticism, to be a useful and effective writer” (Walker 585). In response to this criticism, Poe defends his writing style in his ‘Preface’ to Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque. He writes:

If in many of my productions terror has been the thesis, I maintain that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul - that I have deduced this terror only from its legitimate sources, and urged it only to its legitimate results (as qtd in Walker 585).

Poe’s assertion of writing things of the soul through legitimate sources seems like a bold claim. “The Fall of the House of Usher” hardly addresses life-changing issues of the soul. Some have claimed that Poe was very classical in his approach. Evert Duyckinck describes Poe’s writing as “mathematical, rather than pictorial or poetic” (as qtd in Unrue 113). George Bernard Shaw exclaims that Poe is “the most classical of modern writers” (as qtd in Unrue 113).

No matter whether the German style, the classical, the romantic, or the Gothic influenced Poe, he was unique in his approach to writing. Darlene Harbour Unrue mentions, “He was fond of puzzles and mental games, and both his fiction and nonfiction in these years [1835-1840] often
included mental exercises” (116). “The Fall of the House of Usher” written in 1839 is composed of several literary devices used to craft the story. I.M. Walker claims, “The purpose of the tale is to explore mental derangement rather than to present an elaborate Gothic horror story, and the terror it contains is psychological” (592). While Poe definitely uses the psychological aspect as one device, it is certainly not his only tool.

In “The Philosophy of Composition,” Edgar Allan Poe states, “It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition - that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid consequence of a mathematical problem” (2). While Poe was speaking specifically about the construction of his poem “The Raven” in this quote, it is logical to assume that he used this same methodical approach to construct his other works, including “The Fall of the House of Usher.” This story is filled with tension and fear, and Poe meticulously used word choice, imagery, symbolism, and point of view to create the Gothic effect of terror.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” has no resolution; instead, it is focused on the moment and appeals to the senses through exploiting the reader’s emotions with fear. Perhaps this appeal to the senses is immature. Perhaps Germans or classicists influenced Poe. Regardless, he achieves the effect he was after. He put the story together with interwoven devices and linked them in a unified way.

Poe’s word choice is fascinating. The words “love” and “joy” do not exist in the story. Some words that do occur repeatedly include horror, fear, phantasmagoric, phantasm, gray, gloom, ghastly, decay, suffer, and death, with terrible and terror each used six times. The following sentence in the opening paragraph is typical of the word choice throughout the story: “There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart—an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime.” Poe strings together several words with dark and negative
connotations. “Iciness” and “sinking” appeal to the physical sense of touch, while “sickening of the heart” and “dreariness of thought” appeal to the reader’s emotions. The word unredeemed as an adjective for “dreariness of thought” is an interesting choice. Most readers would associate the word redeemed with Christ, and unredeemed with the opposite of Christianity’s redemption. This helps delve the reader into a world without God and protection. The words goading and torture placed with sublime in the sentence serve to emphasize the contrast between the “world of Usher” and the “real” world where God exists.

Poe appeals to the senses throughout the story through his word choice. For example, when Roderick and the narrator enter the vault with Madeline’s coffin, the scene is described through sound: “The door of massive iron, had been, also, similarly protected. Its immense weight caused an unusually sharp, grating sound, as it moved upon its hinges.” The word sound or variations of it appear thirteen times in the story, including the first and last sentences. Besides physical touch and sound, Poe also appeals to the senses through sight.

The words dark or darkness occur six times in the work. Poe mentions the word light seven times; however, each time it is in a way to create fear in the reader through the sense of sight. For instance, the narrator describes Roderick’s painting and specifically mentions the lighting in the painting:

Certain accessory points of the design served well to convey the idea that this excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth. No outlet was observed in any portion of its vast extent, and no torch or other artificial source of light was discernible; yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendor.
In this example, “ghastly” and “inappropriate” describe the light. Never in the story does light convey comfort, learning, growth, or peace, that it might in another story. Each time it is “unnatural,” “wild,” lacking, or in some way unsettling.

The narrator relates Roderick’s description of his “malady,” which seems to plague him entirely through his senses:

He suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; the most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odors of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds, and these from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror.

This sensual description gives the reader a glimpse into Roderick’s world. Roderick’s mental health affects each of his senses. This hypersensitivity heightens the effect of terror on the narrator and, through him, the reader as well.

Poe also uses word choice in his extensive use of imagery in the story. Poe begins to create an atmosphere of suspense and fear through imagery from the first two sentences. The narrator’s words “dull, dark, and soundless” combine to grab the reader’s attention to pull him into a story that offers no trace of spring roses and butterflies. The reader is prepared from the beginning for a freakish, hair-raising story. Poe goes on to paint a picture through phrases like, “the clouds hung oppressively low,” “singularly dreary tract of country,” “melancholy House,” and “sense of insufferable gloom.” Before the narrator even enters The House of Usher, the imagery creates trepidation within the reader.

This trepidation, stemming from Poe’s imagery, sets the stage for the terror that builds throughout the rest of the story. The narrator describes the house and surrounding property with words such as “decayed,” “gray,” “dull,” “sluggish,” “leaden-hued,” “dilapidation,” “crumbling,” and “rotted.” These descriptive words illustrate a very clear picture of a house and property that are
uninviting, dark, and mysterious. The words “decayed,” “dilapidation,” “crumbling” and “rotten” create an even richer image of a house that was once grand. The inference from these adjectives that the house was once opulent and manicured produces the mystery. The unanswered questions leave the reader wondering why and how this grand house became run-down and neglected. This sense of intrigue builds tension and anticipation as the story unfolds.

The same pattern of imagery continues even with the description of Roderick Usher himself. The narrator describes Usher’s complexion as “cadaverous,” his lips as “pallid,” his hair as “web-like” and of a “wild gossamer texture.” An image of a barely living dead man (or barely dead living man) is formed in the reader’s mind. Usher is portrayed as dead enough to have cobwebs for hair. The image of a living dead man blurs the lines between reality and the paranormal, contributing to the Gothic effect and the sense of terror.

The tension and mystery continue to build throughout the story. Poe’s description of the narrator’s bedroom intensifies the suspense:

I endeavored 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.

If Poe had described the scene as “a room full of worn-out furniture with drapes that moved back and forth when the wind blew,” then the image of some dark, evil force creeping into the room and torturing the tattered and gloomy draperies and bedding would have been lost. There would have been no fear or terror associated with the natural elements. Through his word choice, Poe has generated images associated with uncertainty and dread.

Within the rich imagery of the story, Poe embeds symbolism to further the effect of fear. As the story progresses, the symbol of a door is repeated. Jacqueline Bradley through the
psychoanalytical approach claims that, “Physical and figurative barriers symbolize phallic imagery, the penetration of some body part, as barriers are eventually broken through and overcome” (55).

This sexual imagery seems inconsistent with the rest of the story. Poe seems more focused on terror than on anything else. It seems more logical that doors in general symbolize opportunities and new beginnings; however, Poe takes this symbol and reverses it to create a sense of vulnerability. In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” there is no sense of new beginnings or opportunities; instead, the doors represent a form of protection that is repeatedly violated. The story builds to the climactic night. A storm is raging outside. There are strange unexplained noises. The narrator is so frightened he cannot sleep and paces “rapidly to and fro through the apartment.” He desires protection behind his door. Then suddenly, in through the very door that should have protected him comes Usher, “His countenance was, as usual, cadaverously wan – but, moreover, there was a species of mad hilarity in his eyes – an evidently restrained *hysteria* in his whole demeanor.” The reader is unnerved by the entrance of a madman into what should be a place of safety. Next, the madman opens the casement which serves like a door of protection from the elements. The wild tempest enters into the chamber and physically accosts Usher and the narrator, “The impetuous fury of the entering gust nearly lifted us from our feet.” The narrator’s chamber provides no security at this point in the story. Finally, the almost dead Madeline breaks through the door of the vault and then in through the panels or door to the narrator’s bedroom:

> The huge antique panels to which the speaker pointed threw slowly back, upon the instant, their ponderous and ebony jaws. It was the work of the rushing gust – but then without those doors there *did* stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher.

With blood on her robes, Madeline enters the chamber. This entrance initiates the end of the Ushers in person and house. Madeline seems to have fought for life only to take her brother with her in death:
For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold – then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated.

Perhaps Madeline came back through the “door” of death to grab Roderick and take him back through it with her. Thus, not only does the door not represent opportunities, but rather violated protection and loss of opportunities.

In addition to the symbol of doors, Poe utilizes nature to add to the gothic effect. Poe uses the storm in the story to symbolize instability: instability within Roderick and instability of the Usher name or line. The storm the final night of the story becomes a reflection of the chaos and mental breakdown of Roderick. The tempest is described:

A whirlwind had apparently collected its force in our vicinity; for there were frequent and violent alterations in the direction of the wind; and the exceeding density of the clouds… they flew careening from all points against each other, without passing away in the distance. The storm seems to be fighting against itself rather than against anything outside of itself. This illustrates the wild clashes that are happening inside the mind of Roderick as he becomes more and more hysterical and agitated. This storm also illustrates the chaos and self-destruction of the line of Ushers. The remaining two members of the Usher family, brother and sister, seem to turn on each other: the brother burying the sister alive and the sister bringing death to the brother. The chaos and violence in the storm combine with the insecurity created by the useless doors. The results is a terrifying climax.

Critics agree that the “House of Usher” is symbolic of Roderick Usher himself. The word house occurs thirteen times within the story and the word mansion occurs seven times. Each time, the house mirrors the physical or mental condition of Roderick. Even in the initial description, Poe
helps the reader connect the symbol with the man by describing the windows as “eye-like.” The exterior is also described as discolored with “fine tangled web-work from the eaves.” Roderick’s physical description as having a “cadaverous” complexion and “web-like” hair further strengthens the symbolic connection. Gerhard Hoffmann observes that “[Poe] proceed from the delineation of space in the Gothic novel or story to develop narrative spaces in which physical elements combine with psychic ones in the sense of a genuine mutual relationship between space and dweller, or space and observer” (2). By using the house to symbolize Usher himself, Poe opens a window into Roderick’s mind through the narrative space and events within the house itself. Initially in the story, the characters are relatively stagnant in the space of the house, reading poetry, playing music, and observing art. Then as Usher becomes more distressed, the narrator and Usher begin to move more and more in the space and actually start interacting with the house itself, carrying the coffin to the basement, shutting up the vault door, closing the windows to the storm, until finally Roderick is crushed by the collapse of the house. The collapse of the house symbolizes the collapse of Usher’s mind. This frantic movement and final ruin create a feeling of chaotic fear in the reader.

Poe adds an additional tool, point of view, to enhance the feeling of fear within the story. By using a first person narrative, the reader has only the narrator’s limited perspective through which to “see” the story. This limited perspective heightens the mystery and tension in the story. If the reader was allowed to understand Roderick’s thinking process from within his mind, the reader could come to sympathize with him and the sense of fear that he creates would be lost. Conversely, the reader must see him, including his physical appearance as well as his behavior, through the bewilderment and subjective view of the narrator. By using first person, the narrator’s emotions are extended to the reader. The narrator interprets for the reader how to understand the scenes of the story, for example, “The now ghastly pallor of the skin…startled and even awed me,” and “I regarded her with an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread,” and “Overpowered by an intense sentiment
of horror, unaccountable yet unendurable, I threw on my clothes in haste.” In each of these examples, the narrator expresses what Poe wants the reader to feel. This point of view focuses the effect in the final scene when the narrator flees the house and alone watches the house and everything in it crumble and disappear under the “deep and dank tarn.” The sense of fear and loneliness would have been lost if Poe had chosen a different point of view.

Regardless of what critics may believe Poe was trying to say, they would have to agree that Poe was methodical in his methods of constructing the effect of terror in “The Fall of the House of Usher” through his use of word choice, imagery, symbolism, and first person point of view. Without the calculated use of these tools, the story would have been bizarre and strange at best. With them, the reader becomes immersed in a dark, Gothic world of mystery and fear. Poe should be acclaimed for his command of literary devices.
Works Cited


