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GOTHIC ROMANCE AND POE'S AUTHORIAL INTENT IN "THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER"

by

ROBERT F. HIATT

Under the Direction of Dr. Mark Noble

ABSTRACT

In my thesis I will discuss Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" in relation to the expectations that scholars have of the gothic genre. I will break this project into four chapters, along with an introduction: (Ch.1) a critical review of scholarship on Poe's "Usher" that will demonstrate the difficulty in coming to a critical consensus on the tale, (Ch.2) a discussion of Brown's outline of Gothic conventions, (Ch.3) a look at Poe's "The Philosophy of Composition" juxtaposed with Aristotle's *Poetics* to illumine aspects of Poe's approach to writing and how it has been informed, and (Ch.4) a close reading of Poe's "Usher."

INDEX WORDS: Poe, Usher, Aristotle, Gothic, Ovid, Poetics

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ROBERT F. HIATT

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

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DEDICATION

To my teachers, my family, and my wife Lauren—infinite thanks and appreciation.

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"There are no vital and significant forms of art; there is only art, and precious little of that. The growth of populations has in no way increased the amount; it has merely increased the adeptness with which substitutes can be produced and packaged."

—Raymond Chandler

"If someone has chosen to imitate accurately but failed to do so because of incompetence, the fault is intrinsic; but if he has chosen not to do so correctly…the error is in respect to the particular art."

—Aristotle, *Poetics*

INTRODUCTION

In his essay "The Philosophy of Composition," Edgar Allan Poe argues that good short fiction materializes when an author constructs his or her plot in a way that continuously contributes to what he calls the story's "dénouement" (430). To do so "give[s] a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention" (430). According to Poe, the story should then produce a singular effect upon the reader. Poe maintains that this effect should be "*universally* appreciable" by every reader, regardless of the perspective one brings to the text (433). Nevertheless, an ironic tension arises between Poe and Poe scholars when it comes to the short story, "The Fall of the House of Usher." The multiplicity of critical responses to "Usher" appears to contradict Poe's suggestion that the tale sponsors a "totality, or unity, of effect" (432).

Careful attention to "Usher" demonstrates, however, that a plurality of reader responses and the idea of authorial command of a fiction-writing method are not mutually exclusive. Poe argues that writing is about the production of a singular effect, while Poe's readers register a bemusing range of responses. The level of varying critical responses to "Usher" will confuse a reader who holds Poe to his word in "Philosophy". A look at these critical responses themselves verifies the tension between Poe's singularity of effect and the multiple effects that readers report. These readings do not necessarily refute one another, although this occurs on occasion. I suggest that the presence of so many conclusions drawn from a single short tale amounts to a celebration of the story's complexity, not, as some critics argue, a failure to achieve a singular "effect." In this thesis I call attention to the critical anxiety frequent among readings of "Usher," establish the literary tradition of "Usher," demonstrate Poe's indebtedness to Aristotle's *Poetics*, and provide my own close reading of the tale.

In chapter one, I review major critical approaches to "Usher" in order to specify the key alternatives critics offer contemporary readers of the tale. I find that there are two dominating debates to be settled—the question of the story's genre and the question of Poe's competency as a writer with respect to intentions. Did Poe map out "Usher" from a "denouement" and then fashion his story in the gothic tradition? I believe so. A review of contemporary scholarship on the matter will illuminate the confusion that often follows from such questions and explain why it exists in the first place.

In chapter two, I examine Marshall Brown's theorization of the components of gothic fiction in order to locate Poe's contribution to the genre. This chapter shows why Poe belongs to the gothic genre, rather than to some other literary tradition as some critics have argued. Brown's outline of the genre's features makes it easy to support the

placement of "Usher," whereas previous positioning of the story occurred without the presence of research, instead offering generally accepted images that evoke notions of the gothic. Having properly defined a gothic romance and why it works well with Poe's literary goals, I turn from Poe's writing mode to his writing philosophy.

In chapter three, I argue that Aristotle's *Poetics* influences Poe's "Philosophy." I demonstrate this by comparing Aristotle's and Poe's language and by examining the similarities in their conception of the value of literary production. This insight into Poe's writing method factors into my close reading of "Usher" by suggesting that Poe meticulously writes a tale that only a competent writer could accomplish. Poe did not craft a multilayered story that has perplexed critics for over a century per chance.

Chapter four showcases my close reading of "Usher." With the discussion of Poe's debt to Aristotle in mind, I claim that Roderick Usher and the tale's narrator have a friendship forged explicitly through an appreciation of the arts. Poe's use of art as a medium within the tale provides him with the means to forecast what is to come in "Usher," as well as insight into the Usher siblings' troubled relationship. I claim in chapter four that the incestuous relationship between siblings Roderick and Madeline inspires Roderick's art and is also to blame for the Usher estate's destruction. My reading demonstrates that Poe suggests a necessary link between the Aristotelian conception of "poetics" and the generic elements that comprise the gothic—a link that he makes manifest in the fateful collapse of the "house" of Usher. Aristotle's *Poetics* focuses on the importance of ordered structure in writing. Roderick produces art with a childhood friend in order to revisit the ordered structure of his youth. The Usher home's collapse represents not only Roderick's failure to recapture order in his life, it also represents the "dénouement" in the ordered structure that Poe creates in "Usher."

CHAPTER ONE

The range of critical perspectives on "Usher" creates an almost vertiginous feeling of disconnect between the mélange of scholarly positions on the story and Poe's aspiration of a unified effect. In examining critical responses to "Usher," I noticed the tendency of some scholars to situate the story in a literary tradition before proceeding to their respective argument. Critics usually diagnose "Usher" as a gothic romance. At other times, however, critics will argue "Usher" belongs to a different set of literary conventions. There are two predominant issues with "Usher" scholarship: 1.) Is "Usher" a gothic romance? and 2.) Is "Usher" authored with a sense of authorial deliberation? Reviewing the range of responses to these two questions grounds an informed critical approach.

Craig Howes argues that "Usher" fits in with the tradition of the elegiac romance—as opposed to the gothic romance. The reasons he gives are as follows: the story involves a quest; the narrator writes about the story's hero—Roderick Usher, according to Howes—after this hero has perished; and the absence of "insistence on true friendship between hero and mourner" (70). And at this point Howes has a good start—textual support from "Usher" accommodates his conclusions. As the argument progresses, though, Howes relies more on suppositions of character behavior in "Usher" in order to shoehorn the narrative into the tradition of the elegiac romance. This argumentative procedure comes about, I believe, due to the fact that Howes piggybacks on the work of Kenneth Bruffee, who attempts to define the genre of the elegiac romance. Bruffee, in his book *Elegaic Romance: Cultural Change and Loss of the Hero in Modern Fiction*, examines a wide range of canonical pieces of literature—from *Heart of Darkness* to *Moby Dick* to *The Great Gatsby*, i.e.—and Howes inherits Bruffee's classificatory

distinction with his reading of "Usher." The charm to Howes' work extends from his enthusiasm for branding "Usher" as an elegiac romance, but the elasticity of Bruffee's paradigm for an elegiac romance undermines the argument's authority. Howes' understanding of "Usher," which locates Roderick as the "true center" to the story and the narrator as a supporting character, joined with "psychological exploration" resulting from their dynamic, finally seems too generic to stake out a claim on "Usher" (76). Howes' closing argument also fails to persuade: "finally, the idea that the telling is a kind of therapy or rebellion gives the story an energy arising from more than narrative" (76). With the template that Howes borrows from Bruffee, it seem as though a great number of stories could fit into the mold of an elegiac romance. The value of Howes' work, though, comes from his opening remarks concerning the malleability of "Usher" in critical interpretations.

Howes' discussion begins with the proviso that Poe's tale enables multiple critical reactions that cover a range of topics. With this caveat, Howes demonstrates his awareness of the nuanced tale and also humbles himself before proceeding with his case. He illustrates that while "Usher" dovetails with his take on the elegiac romance, his essay makes no attempt to join "Usher" and the elegiac romance immutably. Howes responds to readings in which the character Roderick has been argued to be a "vampire, [a] practitioner of incest or necrophile, [a] heroic artist moving into the intense inane, or [an] object lesson in fatalism" (68). In like manner, Howes finds the narrator variously presented as either a "successful or defeated representative of reason, a portrait of mental collapse, or even a heroic figure" (69). This is not to say that either character cannot be many things at once. But Howes is anxious about this proliferation of possible readings. He hopes that the "kaleidoscopic effect" of so many approaches to "Usher" does not

permanently "contribute to an arbitrary, expanding mass" of opinion that will do harm to the story's legacy (69).

Conventional approaches to "Usher" often provide a quick primer on what a Poe story and the gothic genre at large usually contain. Casually sharing his own observations on the gothic as genre, Daniel Hoffman calls "Usher" a "thesaurus of Gothic clichés" with its "lonely wanderer," "dreary landscape," "decaying castle," and "reflective tarn" (301). He then attempts to move beyond these claims. Playfully citing what one would not expect out of a gothic tale, Peter Coviello notes that the genre is "not noted for its happy marriages, light-hearted couplings, or long and untroubled friendly allegiances" (879). Preambles such as Hoffman's and Coviello's presume a version of the gothic that is reflexive and instinctual. Modern readers know that the stories are grim; but painting a spooky melancholic picture is not enough in an academic conversation to demonstrate the application of the gothic settings. In the case of "Usher," the generic components of the scenery are especially important.

John Moldenhauer's inspection of Poe's stories brings him to the conclusion that Poe reveals shards of his personhood in each tale. He unintentionally defames Poe by calling him a "calculating exploiter of literary fads" (284). This charge, regardless of intent as a compliment, diminishes not only Poe's body of work, but also condescends to the literary potential—and lasting popularity—of the gothic genre. Were Moldenhauer to frame his allegation more properly, he would make his own case for what defines a gothic text, look at Poe's corpus, and then chart other fads that Poe had been capitalizing upon. Unfortunately, the set-up for his argument is that Poe takes advantage of an already commercial literary genre. So the urge to position "Usher"—and, to a larger extent, Poe as a writer of gothic stories—preoccupies many critics. Critics locate Poe's

work within the gothic canon, and then, like Moldenhaur, call him an opportunist. Regardless of the critic's motive, however, there remains this requirement that we situate Poe's writing within a genre.

G.R. Thompson accepts Poe's implicit command of the gothic. He contends that "Usher" emerged from a "satiric mode" in which Poe was lambasting the genre; and Poe adopts an "ironic philosophical concern" for perversity and the duality of man's mind with that of architecture (xii). By "purporting to take seriously what he does not take seriously," Poe unveils his verbal and structural mode as it relates to literary irony (9). Thompson provides a cogent close reading of "Usher," persuasively arguing what many critics touch upon: a duality exists between Roderick and the Usher home as Poe "imagistically merges the facelike structure of the house with [Roderick's] face" (96). Thompson takes this rather commonplace observation a step further, however, by indicating that the "interpenetrating levels or structures" that Poe deploys with his *mise en abyme*—"The Haunted Palace," "Mad Trist"—mirrors the levels of the Usher home, and "leads ultimately to Poe's ironic mockery of the human mind ever to know anything with certainty, whether about the external reality of the world or about the internal reality of the mind" (89). For Thompson, the Usher home doesn't just exhibit eerie physical parallels to Roderick, it also, much like the palace and prince in "The Haunted Palace," represents Roderick's mind. Roderick's art symbolizes the recessive layers of the mind in which one buries their fears, desires, etc.. Thompson could not have executed his thesis on literary irony in "Usher" without first understanding Poe's appreciation for generic conventions.

In these essays in which Poe is accepted as a writer of gothic fiction, however, no critic formally defines the gothic. As critics have vaguely marked what conventions they

feel comprise the gothic genre, and what conventions they feel Poe has incorporated into his writing, they have also attempted to describe Poe's writing technique. Scholars have questioned the level of authorial intent with Poe. The dilemma can be boiled down as such: his stories could not possibly possess high quantities of entertainment on a superficial level and *also* contain substance. Though not all scholars agree with this assessment of Poe's work. As Edward Davidson puts it, "even the farcical and absurd need order and design," which indicates that Poe first mastered a medium in order to subvert it (154). The "farcical and absurd" represent the entertainment, and the "order and design" comprise the substance. The ordered structure that Poe creates in "Usher" is possible due to his competency as a writer of gothic fiction. Poe's decision to write short stories instead of novels also represents a component in his mastering of the gothic form.

In his essay on how Poe accomplishes order by using physical objects, i.e., the Usher mansion, E. Arthur Robinson argues that "Poe prescribes only one method of writing the short story, that of selecting a single effect and developing a series of incidents to establish it" (68). Robinson catalogues every bit of sentience in "Usher" directed at the tale's climax: the Usher home collapsing and sinking into the ground. He constructs his reading carefully, with evidence organized in a way to minimize objections. He also has company. Scott Peeples views the house's destruction as "not an admission of failure on Poe's part but a further assertion of the writer's control" (184). According to Peeples, "what matters is that the writer or artist controls the structure, even when that means bringing down the house through what might be described as 'controlled demolition'" (184). The difference between Thompson's and Peeples' conclusions is that Thompson finds the sum of "Usher" to be an example of literary irony; Peeples does not. These related-yet-different accounts of "Usher" typify the

emergence of multiple conversations between scholars. But is this a reflection of Poe's failure to produce a singular effect upon the reader? Gavin Jones argues that "[t]he structural instability of the house is also the structural instability of a tale that resists final or full meaning" (6). But the thought of leaving the reader with a nebulous impression runs counter to Poe's argument in his "Philosophy of Composition."

In her essay, "Poe's Aesthetic Theory," Rachel Polonsky comments on Poe's acute awareness of structure. Polonsky writes of how "Poe's imagination was constantly drawn towards elaborate technical systems and deft scientific tricks that promise to solve the mysteries of existence" (43). She subscribes to the notion of Poe as an artisan, noting how "[m]echanical inventions—and theories that work like mechanical inventions—are the components of the fantasy world of his tales: home-made balloons that will ascend as high as the moon" (43-44). Polonsky's reading indicates that this depth of nuanced criticism on Poe suggests that he should receive credit for the generation of so many possible readings. There is something about "Usher" that confounds, perplexes, and eludes the scholar. Even while adopting many conventions of the gothic genre, Poe unintentionally dodges critics' desires to box him into any particular reading or generic category, while at the same time teasing them with clearly variegated and densely layered stories such as "Usher."

The critical convention of classifying "Usher" as a gothic romance, or as a short story of some other literary mode, leads me to do the same: I contend that "Usher" is a gothic romance. In support of this position, I turn to Marshall Brown's *The Gothic Text*. Brown's study of gothic romance allows for a concrete way of defining the genre and will anchor my reading of "Usher." Ancillary to his cause of identifying a gothic work,

Brown argues that the author must operate surgically and with intent in order to produce a tale that neatly fits into the model that he details.

CHAPTER TWO

In Brown's *The Gothic Text*, he argues for the necessity of narrative structure and authorial intent for the production of meaning in a piece of gothic fiction. Implicit in his premise is the idea that a work of fiction exists that may be categorized as *gothic*. So, what is gothic fiction? According to Brown, a gothic tale "emerges from an intentional structure," and from "technique rather than imagination" (xii). Without deliberation on the author's part, and without the ingredients that Brown lists, a piece of fiction exists then as "a mere supernatural diversion" (xii). While the dismissal of all other works as "supernatural diversion[s]" may seem suspiciously reductive, Thompson confirms the gothic genre's relegation to a shallow form of entertainment when he writes that "the word *Gothic* normally refers to the kind of work that seeks to create an atmosphere of mystery and terror through pronounced mental horror" (69). Seeking to elevate the genre, Brown provides three theses to diagnose whether or not a story belongs to the genre of gothic fiction: 1.) "Romantic gothic fiction is not exciting"; 2.) "Gothic novels are not ghost stories"; 3.) "Gothic novels are not women's stories" (3-6). The value I find in having a generic litmus test rests with its ability to distinguish participants in a culture of writing from dilettantish replications of a form. Knowing a genre's axioms, too, enables the reader to appreciate plays on or deviations from convention. The comfort that comes with literary expectations allows a reader to be surprised. As Brown puts it, "if a structure is created, a meaning comes to inhabit it" (xiv).

In order to justify the importance of Brown's work for my own research, I point to his third thesis—the one, per Brown, that is the "least integral" to his argument, and is most likely an attempt to thwart or mitigate the invectives he anticipates from such a superficially controversial claim (6). Brown wishes to call attention to common critical

approaches to the gothic. As he surveys the status quo of gothic scholarship, Brown correctly observes gothic criticism zeroing in on peripheral issues and then trying to turn pet projects on contemporaneous social matters into the essence of a genre, as opposed to the byproducts or unintended consequence of a genre's zeitgeist. Discussions of sexuality and gender can sometimes monopolize and potentially demonize a genre. And an unforeseen result of generic imperialism is that it can backfire. According to Brown:

> It unduly limits our sense of women's literary accomplishments to single out a polarizing mode like the gothic as their particular terrain, and an exclusive focus on feminist issues (or, in a related tendency, on "feminization" and hence gayness) limits our sense of gothic novels. (6)

In other words, the zeal for claiming provenance over a genre can not only be condescending to disciplines such as feminism and gender studies through transparent avarice of purpose, it can also close a genre to readers and scholars alike if the alternate history sells.[1] That is to say, a stigma can be attached to a genre that may be socially unsavory, making the study of that genre less desirable. Inquiries into depictions of females or gender roles when it comes to the gothic can be valuable, Brown concedes,

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[1] Take, for example, W.H. Auden's position on sexuality in Shakespeare's sonnets. As Katherine Duncan-Jones writes, "interpretation…almost always becomes entwined with the personality (and sexuality) of the critic, as well as his or her cultural location" (80). Auden, a gay man, denounced Shakespeare for his treatment of homoeroticism publicly but privately admitted that the world was not ready to look at the Bard's sonnets with lucidity. So the point remains that a contemporary bias in matters of antiquated literature can guide a genre towards extinction.

but in some cases he thinks that particular theoretical schools that neglect to address the range of its features have appropriated the genre. Brown works to return the gothic to an unalloyed, and non-agenda driven, condition. As he puts it, "There is more than one way to skin the black cat of the gothic novel" (7). Contradictory as it may seem—after all, Brown does establish a definitive way to explicate a gothic tale—the point is well taken. Much like the mansions and castles found standing shoddily in the stories under Brown's scholarly microscope, he wishes to demolish previous ideas that scholars and readers may already have in mind before cracking the binding of a gothic text.

Another misconception that Brown seeks to correct is the notion that the gothic is a uniquely English machination. When it comes to genre, qualities that transcend nationality and culture can prove their own objectivity. The romantic period's nationalistic trends pigeonholed many artists—and nearly permanently. As Brown puts it, "one looks long and hard for scholarly recognition of the romantic gothic as a common enterprise developed by an international community of writers" (1). Brown notes the artists who did in fact transcend national exclusivity such as Handel, Haydn, and Mozart, while also listing those such as William Wordsworth and Jane Austen, who, per Brown, are "pretty exclusively national treasures" (2). And where Brown contends that the gothic is the "one form of literary endeavor that was not then and should not now be divided into national schools," he indicates this reflects its objective generic tenets (2). The presence of the these generic tenets regardless of the text's national origin supports Brown's argument for an objective way to diagnose a gothic text. Internationally, from various titles throughout the romantic period, a preponderance of commonalities enforce Brown's position. In Brown's own words, "it is from the experience of reading romantic-era gothic fiction in its broad [international] extent" that he came to his theses (2).

So while Brown's apolitical pursuit of defining the gothic genre suggests that the value of his work derives largely his least integral claim, his claim that gothic novels are "not ghost stories" provides the bulk of his argument. Brown regards his second thesis as the "true foundation" of his work (6). Why, then, would stories replete with the supernatural not be considered ghost stories? The answer to this question is complex. In order to address this complexity, Brown turns to Poe's decision to write short stories rather than novels. A decision that Poe regards as "the initial consideration" before one begins in conceiving their "dénouement" ("Philosophy" 432). Brown contends, "the failure of [Poe's] apparently incomplete novel, *The Narrative of A. Gordon Pym*, shows how difficult it could be to imagine gothic fiction as a world of frenzy" (5). The implication is that even Poe could not sustain his signature prose and concurrent suspense over the course of a novel. Due to the gothic's concern for pacing, this action predominately "takes place offstage," as Brown describes Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, with "vast tracts of scenery [making] large pauses in the action" (4, 5). The absence of direct interaction between the reader and character conflict in the narrative buttresses Brown's first claim that the gothic genre can be a bore; but Poe discards this generic tenet for the purpose of achieving a singular effect upon the reader. Brown thus commends Poe's shrewdness. If there is a comprehensible reason why Poe dismissed long fiction as an inappropriate way to deliver his stories, "it is perhaps because the novels in *his* gothic mode do in fact constitutively lack the excitement he sought" (4-5). By condensing his stories, Poe packs in both the dramatic and physical conflict. This method not only keeps his stories fresh and exciting, but it also affords Poe the opportunity to exercise his writing philosophy; there are lessons to be found in Poe's short fiction. According to Brown, "[a]ll the better gothic writing has a method in its madness, an intent replacing

the empty theatrics of popular supernatural fiction" (6). While the casual reader can experience the anxiety of the narrator in "Usher" as he surveys the Usher estate, the more thoughtful reader explicates a tension between the artist and nature.

Like Brown, I contend that authorial command underlies a true gothic text. And I maintain this opinion for all masters of a genre. Aristotle's writing on the Tragic in his *Poetics* anticipates the sense of purpose in Poe's writing. Poe's conformity as well as his deviations from the generic gothic conventions suggest the need for a re-evaluation of writing practices that comprise a genre too often dismissed as fanciful or sensationalist. In order to understand the significance of Poe's "Philosophy" more fully, I will demonstrate Poe's indebtedness to Aristotle's *Poetics*.

CHAPTER THREE

Critic Daniel Hoffman conjectures that Poe wrote "The Philosophy of Composition" in order to embarrass George R. Graham, editor of *Graham's Magazine*, on account of Graham's rejection of Poe's famous poem "The Raven." After "The Raven" met with commercial success, Poe composed "Philosophy," according to Hoffman, to make a dig at Graham for his lack of faith in the work (81-82). Hoffman's speculation consequently fueled a perceived lack of credibility in the work. My aim in comparing Poe's and Aristotle's theories of poetics is to demonstrate the sincerity of Poe's thesis, even where his claims seem far-reaching and, at times, hyperbolic. Because even if Poe fails to achieve an Aristotelian model in his work, he nevertheless retains the influence. A philosophical preoccupation with "creative, artistic imitation," "questions connected with plot," "dramatic unity," and the "artistic merits of art and nature" permeate Poe's "Usher" and are also discussed throughout Aristotle's *Poetics* (Pritchard 81). Whether directly or indirectly, Poe's authorial philosophy absorbs and reflects Aristotelian principles. As Norman Foerster puts it in but one example, "in the entire history of criticism since Aristotle, no one has insisted more constantly on the importance of unity than Poe" (310).

The concerns of "The Philosophy" seem to be anticipated by the *Poetics*. Writing in 4th century BC, Aristotle emphasizes humanity's predilection to engage in artistic imitation, which in turn gives satisfaction to the audience. Aristotle then provides generic characteristics. John Paul Pritchard's essay "Aristotle's *Poetics* and Certain American Literary Critics" also calls attention to Poe's Aristotelian instincts, though Pritchard makes the claim that, given Poe's dearth of fluency in Greek, his understanding of *Poetics* could have been attained second-hand, either from *Blackwood's Edinburgh*

Magazine or *The London Quarterly*, or perhaps even from critical writings by contemporaries Schlegel or Coleridge, as revisiting neo-classical ideas about form was common in Poe's time (81). The indirect absorption of *Poetics* could account for Hoffman's failure to find Poe's "Philosophy" plausible, and for why Poe's Aristotelian musings over unity, effect, and his considerations of plot are spoken in general terms rather than specifically tied to *Poetics*. Nonetheless, my contention is that Aristotle's presence can be felt in Poe's "Philosophy," as well as in "Usher," and that we must account for this influence no matter how well Poe articulates his own authorial goals—as distinct from authorial methodology—in "Philosophy." Poe's discussion of Aristotelian topics, as opposed to his execution or demonstration of them, is my concern.[2]

Aristotle argues for a "Determinate Structure" that corresponds with Poe's contention that the writer should have a length and effect in mind before even proceeding with the task of writing. According to Aristotle, plots "should have a certain length, and this should be such as can readily be held in memory" (14). Poe ups the ante and radicalizes Aristotle's assertion. To support Poe's usage of the short story, he writes of what seems to be his idealized audience experience: reading a story in one sitting, which of course is more likely to occur with a short story rather than a novel. According to Poe:

> If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from

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[2] In a wise decision to place a disclaimer upon a negative argument, Pritchard states that while an "*argumentum ex silentio* is a dangerous weapon," Poe certainly would have used *Poetics* more explicitly in his essays were he to have been directly engaged in the work as opposed to, as Pritchard contends, absorbing it "second hand through various channels" (85).

> unity of impression—for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and everything like totality is at once destroyed. (432)

While wishful in his thinking, Poe romanticizes the perfect audience for his work, those who will participate in the unity of effect by completing a story in one sitting. The point, though, is that Poe maximizes his poetic effect through the short story. He argues for "mathematical relation" to merit in which "brevity must be in direct ratio of the intensity of intended effect" (433). And though no calculus is given to achieve a desired effect, Poe tries to measure his absolutist approach to writer-reader relations with the admission that "a certain degree of duration is absolutely requisite for the production of any effect at all" (433). So while the emphasis on concision is well taken, the underlying approach envisioned by Aristotle and adopted by Poe involves careful attention to the consequences of the length of a work—a principle of *not too much, not too little*.

Aristotle points out "If the presence or absence of something has no discernible effect, it is not a part of the whole" (15). This push for intentionality with respect to content finds its way into Poe's "Philosophy" as he plainly states that his preference for "commencing with the consideration of an *effect*"; Poe claims that the writer should be an artisan best equipped with premeditations and thoughtful musings so to find what "best aid [the writer] in construction of the effect" (430-31). For Poe to ponder an effect as exemplified in a short story such as "Usher" makes fine sense given the tale's climactic ending. "Usher" plays a game of stop-and-go that leads to an inevitably catastrophic climax. Such a conclusion, as found in "Usher," exemplifies Poe's approach to the construction of the tale, which requires envisioning an intended effect and then proceeding backwards from an ending:

> It is only with the *denouement* constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation, by making the incidents, and especially the tone at all points, tend to the development of the intention. (430)

Poe's ineluctable outcomes, then, follow Aristotle's concept of "Universality," in which "the function of the poet is not to say what *has* happened, but to say the kind of thing that *would* happen, i.e. what is possible in accordance with probability or necessity" (16). This rationale is algebraic and deterministic. Both Aristotle and Poe endorse a method of writing that requires a story's climax to be the *only* possible conclusion given the tale's preceding events; not occurring "above all when things come about contrary to expectation but *because* of one another" (Aristotle 17). To have an outcome wherein the sequence of events leading to a finale does run counter to an expectation would place a narrative outside the arena of gothic fiction and situate it more firmly in the realm of humor, where a chuckle to a punch line serves as anodyne to the reader after their brain attempts to reconcile what would be, given an attached or unnatural outcome, irreconcilable. Comedic stories, then, must have what Aristotle calls a Defective plot.

Defective plots contain literary devices and leaps of faith; they exceed their potential, and "are often forced to distort the sequence" of occurrences in a writing sleight-of-hand in order to deceive the reader into finding unity within the story (Aristotle 17). An author's deceit may not necessarily be intentional, either. Given that Poe writes in the gothic mode, he must find a way to unify events dealing with not just the unnatural, but the supernatural. So, how does Poe achieve this goal? Hoffman contends that the chief theme in Poe's writing is a struggle against time, and by time he means impending doom of some sort. "To conquer Time," he writes, "[Poe] uses 'science'" (162). Poe's

science usually amounts to the inexplicable self-exhumation of a character that the audience presumed to be deceased, such as Madeline Usher. A concrete, naturalistic reason for these characters' reappearance is hard to come by, but this is nonetheless a storytelling method that Poe employs from time to time. The audience, therefore, makes a leap of faith when it comes to how these characters are able-bodied, or, able-spirited. The use of this junk science functions as a clever way on Poe's part to incorporate ghosts into his narrative without having to explain their sudden vivification. Hoffman comments on the "denouement" extending from the reappearance of the once dead as he asks, "who conquers time but the ghosts, the spirits who live—well anyway they *exist*—free from the finite decrepitude of the human body" (162). And while Hoffman doesn't argue such, I will raise the question on his behalf as to whether ghosts work as a way for Poe to circumvent the linking of realistic situations. Do ghosts suggest, in other words, that Poe takes an easy way out when it comes to the production of his tales? To echo Brown, gothic fiction is *not* the same as ghost stories. The appearance, allusion to, and/or possible hallucination of a spiritual presence in Poe's stories comes directly from an anxiety-ridden narrator, one whom we may choose not to rely upon.

Aristotle urges the writer to pursue tragic plots replete with fear and pity. There is indeed little doubt that Poe delivers on this end. By adopting Aristotle's advice for the construction of tragedies for the stage to the demands of short fiction, Poe fuses the generic tenets of the gothic to the classical definition of the tragic. For the purposes of this essay, I limit my discussion of this fusion to the narrator in "Usher,"—briefly in this chapter, and then in more detail in the next chapter. If, as Aristotle states, "plots should be constructed in such a way that, even without seeing it, anyone who hears the events which occur shudders and feels pity at what happens," then does "Usher" fulfill this

demand (22)? The answer should be an unequivocal *yes*. There is an Aristotelian mandate for men of probity—or at least pretty good guys—"not to be seen undergoing a change from good fortune to bad fortune—this does not evoke fear or pity, but disgust" (20). The way that Poe sticks to this advice is by having his audience meet the characters *after* their shift in fortune. This approach to writing lends itself well to expediting the plot, and it also lends itself well to the short story, where ideally, in Poe's view, the reader can intake the plot in its entirety. Not coincidentally, Aristotle values plots in which "sufferings arise within close relationships,"—the narrator and Roderick, Roderick and Madeline—and "with a limited number of families" (23-24). In "Usher" we find a preponderance of Aristotle's maxims fulfilled with the precision of a dutiful pupil, and Poe remains faithful to his "Philosophy" too. "Usher" foreshadows its ending from the opening pages, and adheres to the three theses that Brown offers for classifying this tale as a piece of gothic fiction. The tale is also not without inconsistencies. These inconsistencies, though, neither preclude sincerity of intent nor invalidate Poe's "Philosophy," as the works are two separate entities that must be treated as such. Treatises on writing offer orthodoxies that, when followers do not adhere to them, do not somehow become invalidated.

As the chief skeptic of Poe's "Philosophy," Hoffman opines that Poe's aspirations of unity are "really obsessional," which in and of itself does not repudiate Poe's idealization of the craft of plot development and mechanics in writing, but, more so, places an unnecessary pejorative on Poe's own zeal in the matter (172). According to Hoffman, "Poe…insists upon the absolute necessity of unity of effect, yet…insists upon the absolute independence from each other of such human perceptions as Beauty, Truth, and Morality" (172). Admirably forthright in his frustration with classifying Poe's

corpus—the closest he comes is taking a chunk of Poe's Grotesque and Arabesque tales and calling them "Scientific ghost tales"—Hoffman relieves himself of the privilege of scrutinizing Poe's "Philosophy," using a false logic, according to which his own ability to unify Poe's oeuvre, implies the generic failure of Poe's pursuit of unification (162). It is Hoffman's own lack of success that compels him to call Poe's attempts at unification "arbitrary, willed, obsessional, incomplete" (162). An understanding of the disconnect between a critic's ability to index an author's work and an author's work itself can best be understood by acknowledging the Intentional Fallacy, where a critic's view of a work is displaced onto the author and/or the author's intention for that work. Taking issue with certain claims of Poe in his "Philosophy," coupled with the suspicion that the work itself may be a catty revenge piece towards an editor, does not, in itself, destabilize what may—and, I believe, *is*—Poe's very real intention of achieving a unification principle that guides his short stories and affirms his command of his craft—particularly his craft of short stories in the mode of gothic fiction.

By recognizing Poe's approach to gothic writing in an Aristotelian tradition, coupled with Brown's framing of the gothic genre, we can better understand why Poe chose to write short stories, why his characters behave the way they do, and also why Poe ends his tales in such a way. The following chapter will examine Poe's "Usher," keeping in mind both Poe and Aristotle's respective requisites for Unity and Effect. My goal is to point out the literary properties that Poe covets, to focus on Poe's characters usage of art, and also to highlight the tale's "denouement" in order to appreciate the preceding series of events. By the chapter's conclusion, I will have demonstrated the core reasoning behind the story's tragedy.

CHAPTER FOUR

When a reader bears in mind Poe's desired outcome, the connections between parts of "Usher" and the *Poetics* become easier to discern. The attempt to achieve "unity of effect" leaps from "Usher" at the tale's onset. Poe tells his story as an account of the narrator's stay at the Usher home. This distance in time from the event lends credibility to the narrator's recollection. Also, Poe's "limit of a single sitting" when approximating a story's length corresponds with the narrative's self-contained presentation ("Philosophy" 432). To have written the story in the present tense would invite a certain caprice and, by extension, suspicion, with respect to the fantastical situation in which the narrator finds himself. Instead, the story moves along poetically as the narrator matter-of-factly recalls what happened "During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn" and during the ensuing weeks (199). For all we know, the narrator could be a man in his twilight years laying out what most likely was his most terrifying adventure. A recollection rather than a real-time play-by-play account of the trip also emphasizes the story's Unity, because we have a designated block of time presented rather than fragmentary moments over the course of the narrator's life.

We know nothing of the narrator's occupation. Perhaps it would be heavy-handed were we to know that he was, say, an academic or an editor for a literary publication, but we can infer that the man has a mind for the arts. He describes his surroundings in a poetic fashion. The Usher home, at first mention, is reported as "melancholy" (199). This description contributes to mood and tone in the tale, but given the story's confessional monologue or story-like telling, the floridity of the narrator's language prepares us for an artistic testimony. The mansion itself seems to challenge this apparent predilection for the poetics, as the narrator readily admits. The home's

supernaturalism antagonizes the narrator's ability to aestheticize the natural, and the narrator opines the house's perceived agency: the "insufferable gloom" infects his spirit, and, while he "usually receives" relief out of analogizing "the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible," he discovers this ability has been temporarily neutralized due to the manor's supernatural properties (199). The house attacks the narrator's imagination, and in doing so successfully disorients him for a time. When the narrator surveys the estate, however, he conquers the house by poetically exposing its deterioration, thus making it earthly.

So jarring is his first encounter with the Usher home that the narrator requires a recalibration of his faculties in order to enter the residence. The narrator impressively composes himself in order to aestheticize the "features of the domain" (199). The "vacant eye-like windows," and "a few white trunks of decayed trees"—bringing to mind a mouth with unhealthy teeth—demonstrate that, even under supernatural duress, the narrator could not help but portray a pathetic representation of the Usher home (199).[3] The "shadowy fancies" are "insoluble" to our story-teller, but the house itself proves to be mortal, and therefore malleable when it comes to the narrator's interpretations of its appearance. By overcoming the house's supernaturalism, the narrator demonstrates an overall capability of evading—or at least combating—the estate's paranormal properties. The conflict between the narrative and the extramundane points to a central contention of

[3] As many critics have noted, the Usher home and Roderick Usher share physical characteristics. The narrator's ability to protect himself from the house's mystic qualities also denotes his shielding from any supernaturalism exhibited by either of the Usher siblings.

Poe's: the tale's protagonist must subjugate nature in order to be a victor in the struggle of art versus nature.[4]

The narrator has to strip away the Usher home's magical elements and view the house as a natural structure in order to subdue both the natural and the supernatural. Recasting a mystical home in one's mind first requires acknowledging its strangeness. The narrator realizes that he must "fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion" that there exist shades of nature beyond the poetic mind's understanding (200). This cognizance causes him to adjust. Desiring "different arrangements of the particulars of the scene," the narrator thinks that he can "modify" or even "annihilate" the oceanic confusion taking hold of him (200). Such quickness to treat the dilemma reveals the poetic mind at work. The narrator triumphs over the home and thereby controverts what the narrator calls the "paradoxical law of all sentiments having terror as a basis" (201). This law posits that when one confronts fear, the fear grows.[5] But the narrator's success against the home's supernaturalism suggests otherwise; his narrative devices for converting the house into an aesthetic object seem to challenge such a theory.

The set-up of the narrator as a character of artistic capability helps to substantiate the bond between him and Roderick Usher. We are to infer that being "intimate associates" with a man does not necessitate knowing him very well (200). A passion for the arts unites the two characters. The members of the Usher lineage, with their "peculiar sensibility of temperament," express themselves through "exalted art," and, most lately, through "musical science" (200). An interest in the arts—and incest—are all the narrator

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[4] See Poe's "Sonnet—To Science."

[5] The theory also lacks a source, which suggests it is likley one of Poe's inventions.

can recall of the Usher family. Perhaps a better recollection would be had if the Usher family could produce an "enduring branch" (200). We are unsure of just home many Ushers there were during the time of the narrator's boyhood.

The narrator foreshadows a bad occurrence to come, and this "trepidation" comes from a physician who appears to be of "low cunning and perplexity" (202). The physician sticks out because his profession serves as a proxy for science, or, more generally, a fidelity to the natural. This role contributes to keeping the story from feeling more supernatural than not. Poe toes the line between the natural and supernatural as he constructs a story around an ending. The narrator feels "accosted" by the physician's facial expression, and perhaps this is because the narrator senses the approach of another combative situation (202). What we come to next, though, is an instance in which the ability to aestheticize loses some of its protective strength.

Entering an "atmosphere of sorrow," the narrator finds Roderick Usher in his room (202). In direct contrast to the shelter that his artistic figurations afford the narrator, Roderick receives no solace from the "[m]any books and musical instruments" that can be found in the room (202). The relationship of antibiosis between the home and Roderick seems to be the reason for the impotency of the arts in his recovery. With the double entendre on the word "House" in the story's title emphasizing the Usher family's incestuous tendencies, "with very trifling and very temporary variation," we see not only the tie between the house and its master, but also their shared fate (200). Roderick indirectly affirms the incest hypothesis as he tells the narrator that his condition extends from a "constitutional and family evil" (203). He also confirms that his sister Madeline is his "last and only relative on earth" (204). The suggestion that there are two maladies ailing Roderick—one being "constitutional" and the other familial—leaves open the

possibility of an anathema on the Usher line. This suggests that the connection between incest and the house's supernaturalism is correlative and not causative. Without evidence of an imprecation on the Usher family, though, it seems that the home's eeriness extends from the unnatural activity of its masters.

Roderick is "enchained" by "superstitious impressions" having to do with his home (204). He hasn't left his estate in years, and the narrator fails to relate the rationale for this because they are "too shadowy" (204). At first glance, the elision of what seems to be a central plot point to the story—direct supernatural intervention on the manor's part—can come across as violating to Aristotle's maxim regarding the construction of a Defective plot. This is not the case, however, for three reasons: first, the narrator felt Roderick's story to be "supposititious," or disingenuous; second, to have the Usher home's supernaturalism be irrefutably culpable for the Ushers' mental and physical misfortune would diminish the tale's retributive implication with the house collapsing as both remaining Ushers perish; and third, such a reading would oversimplify the plot (204). According to Aristotle, "the best tragedy should be complex rather than simple; and it should also be an imitation of events that evoke fear and pity, since that is the distinctive feature of this kind of imitation" (20). The ambiguity of the Usher family woe seems more likely to arouse fear and pity than a house that centripetally exerts duress upon its inhabitants.[6] Even the first mention of Roderick's twin sister, Madeline, comes with implied uncertainty about her medical condition.

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[6] Later on in "Usher," the narrator reluctantly supplies a reason for Roderick's belief in the manor's consciousness. At this point in the story, though, the plausibility of his claim would be too easy to dismiss, recalling Poe's argument for "mathematical

Setting the groundwork for the tale's "denouement," Roderick reveals in embittered tones that were Madeline to pass away, he would be the last living Usher (204). On cue, Madeline passes by Roderick's room, and then "disappears" (204). Note the syntax that accomplishes the sense that Madeline is either already a ghost or will be part of a paranormal experience: "While he spoke, the lady Madeline (for so was she called) passed slowly through a remote portion of the apartment, and, without having noticed my presence, disappeared" (204). By postponing the action on Madeline's part, this sentence achieves a suspenseful effect and also temporarily makes it ambiguous as to whether or not Madeline is alive. We quickly learn, though, that at this point in the story Madeline is alive—a door closes behind her (204). The very sight of his sister elicits tears from Roderick, and we discover that Madeline too has an illness. But while Roderick's disease entails precipitous mental and physical decay, Madeline suffers from this same condition along with bouts of catalepsy (205). Poe's inclusion of these cataleptic bouts comes into play later in the story, as Roderick believes that Madeline has not perished, but rather that she has slipped into a cataleptic coma.[7] That Madeline's flagging health "baffled" her doctors recalls the narrator's passing impression of the family physician, evincing his "perplexity" and awareness of Madeline's inevitable death (205, 202). In another instance of syntactical effect, the narrator remarks that "the glimpse I had obtained of her person would thus probably be the last I should obtain—that the lady, at least while living, would be seen by me no more" (205). Madeline would rebel against the doctors' recommendation for rest and, as a result, she overexerted herself. Note the nonrestrictive clause used—"at least while living"—so as not to limit

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relation" in his "Philosophy" (433).

[7] As noted by G.R. Thompson (*Selected Writings* 205).

the noun phrase being modified; the narrator *will* see Madeline again, only she won't be living.

With Madeline seemingly out of the picture due to exhaustion, the two childhood friends get right to work on the reason for the narrator's visit—to provide succor to Roderick the only way he knows how, by painting, reading, and listening to music together (205). The problem, though, is that Roderick can no longer enjoy most forms of art. His aversion to art is due to his own mental unrest and his sister's illness as seen in his paintings, writings, and song. Roderick has become allergic to the fancies of nature that one might expect an artist to enjoy—the scent of flowers are "oppressive," light hurts his eyes, and the majority of musical notes "inspire him with horror" (204). The narrator creates a simile for Roderick's mind that provides insight into his infected world: "a mind from which darkness, as if an inherent positive quality, poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe, in one unceasing radiation of gloom" (205). The simile suggests that Roderick's mind now works in a backwards way—i.e., darkness has become a positive quality. Whereas the narrator's gaze into the "black and lurid tarn" renders "remodelled [sic] and inverted images," Roderick sees things as inverted through his own eyes (200). His mind's agency in polluting former joys such as art negates the purpose of the narrator's visit. Given the two friends' previous enjoyment of art, coupled with the body of evidence leaning towards incest between Roderick and Madeline, it seems a safe guess that Roderick and the narrator were pre-pubescent friends. While this point may seem obvious given that the narrator recalls their companionship during "boyhood," it's worth stating explicitly that the beginning of Roderick's mental decline may have coincided with his incipient—and later realized—libidinal desire for Madeline (200). Roderick's intense love for his sister not only made him cry with just a passing

glimpse of her, but he engages in "long improvised dirges" that the narrator admits he will never forget (205). These dirges are in anticipation of Madeline's death.

Roderick's art engenders strong reactions from our narrator. The paintings Roderick produces transcend even the conversion to words, instead representing pure abstract horror that the narrator describes as "paint[ing] an idea" (206). The only picture that the narrator can recount verbally is that of a catacomb with an unidentified source of "ghastly and inappropriate" light (206). This piece affords us yet another prognostication, that of Madeline's eventual entombment. If the painting is a symbol of Roderick's passionate affection for his sister, then she is the effulgent "splendor" within the underground construction (206). That the light is "ghastly and inappropriate" may be another admission of incest between the siblings. Moving from this portent, the narrator shares what he feels is the first bit of "full consciousness" from Roderick—a series of verses entitled "The Haunted Palace" that serve to display, according to the narrator, "the tottering of his lofty reason upon [Madeline's] throne," or, in other words, the flawed logic behind his elevation of—and corresponding guilt towards—his sister (207).[8] These verses will also display how Madeline pervades the entirety of Roderick's artistic output.

In "The Haunted Palace," Roderick reports a fable of a palace that has endured well past its halcyon days. The poem contains the conceit that the palace represents a human head. To the narrator, this head is Roderick's. The palace was "fair," "stately,"

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[8] As G.R. Thompson notes in *Selected Writings*, "The Haunted Palace" was published separately prior to the publication of "Usher." I explicate "The Haunted Palace" within the context of "Usher." The parenthetical citations occurring throughout the commentary on the poem refer to the poem's line numbers as opposed to the page numbers throughout "Usher." The poem, though, can be found on pp. 207-08 in *Selected Writings*.

and "[radiant]," even inhabited by angels to show further its allegiance to things that are good (3-4, 2). The structure "rear[s] its head" from the "greenest of…valleys," subtly suggesting a birth (4, 1). The perception of the past as somehow better than the present perpetuates the narrator's intentional fallacy, just as art was a refuge to Roderick as young boy. But surely times were never good for the Usher lineage, as Roderick has told us before with his "constitutional" and "family evil" (203). This faulty logic can account for why the narrator regards Roderick's reasoning as tottering.

A caesura occurs after "head," giving first evidence of the poem's main conceit. In a heavy-handed contribution to the conceit, the palace's monarch is named Thought (5). The palace's center hosts a guest who the poem refers to as "It"—we may extrapolate this to represent a brain (6). This brain's manufacturing of thought exceeds altitudes so high, that even the highest order of angels, the Seraphim, have never "spread a pinion" there (7). Through the enjambment of "And all with pearl and ruby glowing" and "Was the fair palace door," do we get an anticipatory sense that an important turn in the poem will occur shortly (25-26). In carrying the poem's conceit, the head that the palace represents had a gorgeous smile of "pearl" teeth with "ruby" red lips, and from this mouth came an outpour of beautiful words that just kept "flowing, flowing, flowing" (25-27). As these poetic words couldn't help but escape from the beautiful mouth, throngs of subjects—"Echoes"—perform their "sweet duty" of singing the praises of their monarch's "wit and wisdom" (29-30, 32). These beautiful words surely are Roderick's, and the impression is that he was a child prodigy of the arts. With the allusion to Echo, the evidence mounts that, as a young man, Roderick was deeply steeped in art, both as an appreciator and as a creator.

With the entrance of the Roman mythological character Echo, the narrator receives affirmation of his linking the author to the work, and the poem itself then provides insight into Roderick as a young man. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Narcissus' mother, Liriope, asks the blind sage Tiresias if her son will enjoy a long and satisfying life.[9] Tiresias responds with the cryptic, "'If he shall himself not know' (61)." Narcissus lives sixteen years before these words come to haunt him. Echo, a "strange-voiced nymph" capable of magically captivating conversation, was formerly employed by Jove to keep his wife Juno engaged in conversation while he committed adultery with other nymphs (62). When Juno deduced as much, she stripped Echo of her power, leaving the strange-voiced nymph only capable of "doubl[ing] each last word, / And echo back again the voice she's heard (62)." Unfortunately for Narcissus, Echo falls hopelessly in love with him, and a staggered conversation between the two lead Narcissus to a lake, where he gazes at his own reflection until he dies.

The allusion to the story of Narcissus and Echo aligns Roderick with the ill-fated Narcissus. Such an analogy insinuates that Roderick was a vainglorious child, prideful in his intellect and embracing of the coddling that his servants and perhaps even family members showered upon him. To continue the correlation between Narcissus and Roderick, let us suppose that Roderick undergoes a misfortune regarding love at sixteen too. Rather than falling in love with his own image, the next-closest image seduces the young man—his twin sister Madeline. It is Roderick's own narcissism that impels him to

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[9] All quotations from and comments on the story of Narcissus and Echo are taken from pp. 61-66 in the Oxford edition of *Metamorphoses* found in the Bibliography.

have incestuous relations with his sister.[10] This violation of the incest taboo no doubt inspires the ensuing verses of "The Haunted Palace."

The kingdom's decline marks the poem's turn, where "evil things, in robes of sorrow, / Assailed the monarch's high estate" (33-34).[11] The monarch, Thought, will never have another day "dawn upon him" (36). The death of Thought may double for inspiration, given the poem's conceit, and we could expect Roderick's muse to be Madeline. The "glory / That blushed and bloomed," in like manner to Roderick's painting of the catacomb with the mysterious light source, has now become "entombed," as Madeline will be later (37-38, 40). The poem's final stanza serves as an epilogue to the story of Thought's kingdom, wherein travelers observe "[v]ast forms that move fantastically / To a discordant melody" (41, 43-44). The palace's discordant melodies recall not only the kingdom's demise, but also Roderick's compositions and love for "peculiar sounds" as well (204). And where once redoubtable words poured from the mouth of thought—the palace door—now comes a "hideous throng" from a mouth that will "smile no more" (47-48).

By granting a palace human-like qualities, "The Haunted Palace" sparks a conversation between Roderick and the narrator that prompts Roderick to reveal his belief in "the sentience of all vegetable things" (208). The narrator is embarrassed by his friend's reasoning, stating, "Such opinions need no comment, and I will make none"

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[10] Compounding the allusion to Narcissus, think back on the narrator's disgust at looking into the lake upon his arrival to the Usher estate (200-01).

[11] As a matter of conjecture, the "evil things" in "robes of sorrow" could be referring to doctors who've come to examine the Usher siblings, perhaps even contributing to Madeline's catalepsy.

(209). Hardly a coincidence in timing, the narrator becomes increasingly phlegmatic in regards to Roderick. As he surveys the books that mean the most to Roderick, esoteric works of mental assessment and exotic creatures and treatment of the dead, the narrator refers to Roderick as "the hypochondriac" (210). All of a sudden there seems to be skepticism towards Roderick; or maybe the narrator can't stand to be in such a depressing atmosphere any longer. Roderick's "chief delight," a book detailing various burial practices, inspires him to bury the "abruptly" deceased Madeline within "one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building" (210). Plausible enough to the narrator, given his aforementioned distaste for the family physician and coupled with the fear of grave robbery, he agrees to assist Roderick in his desire. Like Roderick's painting of a catacomb, the elected burial spot is "without means of admission for light" (211). Madeline's temporary entombment site is situated just beneath the narrator's quarters, and it is revealed that the room was formerly used for the "worst purposes" of a dungeon; the room even once stored "highly combustible" materials (211). The prologue to this nefarious room, which describes a door made of "massive iron," serves four purposes: first, Madeline's entombment becomes commingled with that of a jail confinement, subtly suggesting that she is serving a term for a wrongdoing; second, having her confinement just below the narrator's room lends credibility to her return from the tomb later on in the narrative, perhaps vivified by overhearing the reading of a story pointedly entitled, "Mad Trist"; third, the "highly combustible" products in Madeline's room-sized coffin make the manor's eventual demolition imaginable to the reader; and, finally, the iron door of "immense weight" casts doubt upon how exactly Madeline did emerge from her confinement, if not through supernatural methods (211). Poe manages to thread these plot points into "Usher" in an impressively efficient manner.

Having completed their task of moving Madeline's corpse, Roderick and the narrator decide to take a last look at the girl. The narrator, struck by the "striking similitude" between the brother and sister, only now finds out—because Roderick tells him so—that the two siblings are twins (211). This seemingly harmless bit of familial information calls attention to what the narrator had already told us—he "really knew little of [his] friend" (200). Were the two characters intimate in their youth, it would seem that the narrator would have known his friend had a twin sister. The suggestion, too, is that the narrator never beheld Madeline prior to that moment. This scene also brings to mind Roderick's previous association with Narcissus. Neither character could stare at Madeline for too long, as both men could "not regard her unawed" (211). The awe derived from viewing Madeline surely came at each character for the same reason—the brother and sister's resemblance—but rendered different effects: sadness for Roderick, and surprise for the narrator. In the final glimpse of Madeline, the narrator notes "a faint blush upon the bosom and the face," creating a mote of doubt as to the finality of Madeline's passing, and also a "suspiciously lingering smile upon [her] lip," which brings to mind the final line in "The Haunted Palace," where the palace door/mouth may "laugh—but smile no more" (211, 48).

Following what appears to be our last encounter with Madeline, Roderick's condition worsens. His steps are "hurried," and his countenance adopts a more "ghastly hue" (211). His voice alters, too, taking on a "tremulous" timbre with undertones of "extreme terror" (211). The narrator suspects an "oppressive secret" held by Roderick and, over time, he fears that he too is being taken by "creeping" influences of "impressive superstitions" (212). During a night of inclement weather, when the narrator could not bring himself to sleep, he starts to frighten over "certain low and indefinite sounds" that

he associates with the storm outside (212). Joining him in his worried and sleep-deprived night is Roderick, opening a window to show the narrator of the "whirlwind [that] had apparently collected its force in [their] vicinity" (213). The "life-like" wind currents filled the room with an "agitated vapor," indicating a corroboration of Roderick's belief that the house itself is alive (213). The narrator, in a departure from his previous talent for taking the indecorous parts of nature and poeticizing them, assigns the strange characteristics of the storm to "'electrical phenomena'" (213). His willingness to take "life-like" natural phenomena and relegate it to more scientific language suggests that something more is at work. Poe seems to be signaling that the characters are in a tenuous situation as the tale heads to a close. The narrator makes the decision to calm Roderick by reading one of his "favorite romances," "Mad Trist," although the narrator admits that this accreditation is disingenuous (213). The story is too lowbrow for Roderick, but it was the only book readily available at the time.

The protagonist of "Mad Trist," Ethelred, uses a mace to break down a door. Ethelred is in pursuit of a shield. Paralleling Ethelred's actions, as read by the narrator, similar noises faintly permeate the Usher home. The narrator, dismissing the coincidence, continues to read Ethelred's adventure, coming to the story's climax in which the knight slays a dragon. The dragon cries a horrifying death knell that, this time unmistakably to the narrator, seems to carry over into the Usher estate, with a "most unusual screaming or grating sound" (214). In the interest of not exciting Roderick, the narrator composes himself and continues on with the tale, coming upon another instance of metal clanking within the narrative—the shield falls before the knight—and a "distinct, hollow, metallic, and clangorous" noise clangs throughout the Usher home (215). Just as we last left Madeline, a "sickly smile quivered about [Roderick's] lips,

forecasting the return of his sister (215). If we accept that the momentary breaks in "Usher" when a story is read hold larger implications for the rest of the tale's characters, then we can entertain the analogy between Roderick and Ethelred. That the knight pursues a shield symbolizes what Roderick too desires: protection, comfort, and safety.[12] The characters safety, as represented by the shield, falls to the ground. What happens to Ethelrod next we do not know—at this point the narrator stops reading "Mad Trist" and directs his attention to Roderick.

What the narrator first heard during this tempestuous evening, Roderick had been privy to during the seven or eight days after Madeline's entombment (212, 215). Roderick tells the narrator, "*We have put her living in the tomb!*" (215). As when Roderick first uttered Madeline's name to the narrator and she passed by Roderick's room, the mention of Madeline—this time without name—summons the sister once thought to be dead. In yet another reference to "The Haunted Palace," with "evil things, in robes of sorrow," Madeline suddenly appears in the doorway way with "blood upon her white robes" (33, 215). She throws herself "heavily" upon her brother, causing Roderick to die as he hits the floor (216). The image of the two merging in death brings to mind the fate of Narcissus, who met himself after staring at his own reflection in the lake. The narrator, fleeing the Usher home, observes a "wild light" and a "blood-red

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[12] Whether this safety that the shield would afford holds figurative currency for Roderick in the form of peace after having buried his sister and lover, Madeline, is unclear. To say that the dragon symbolizes the two characters incestuous relationship is tenuous without textual evidence; but the instinct here is to point out historically how art has functioned throughout "Usher" as both a foretoken of future events, and also as access to character insight.

moon," which evokes both the combustible materials in Madeline's entombment chamber and the inexplicable light as depicted in Roderick's painting discussed earlier (216). With a "burst" upon the Usher estate, the walls begin to crumble (216). In a final echo of "The Haunted Palace," the final lines of which recount a "hideous throng rush[ing]" from the "pale door," a "long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters" came from what was once the entryway into the Usher estate (39, 38, 216). The narrator observes this phenomenon while fleeing from the house. He notes that the "deep and dank" lake closed over the rubble of what was once the House of Usher (216). This final image suggests the earth as the victor of both the unnatural element to the story, incest, and also, by extension, Roderick's art that has become infected by an unnatural muse—his sister Madeline.

Poe uses Roderick's painting, his verses, "The Haunted Palace," and the story, "Mad Trist," to foreshadow and then execute the philosophical drama of "Usher." The narrator and Roderick's artistic aptitude demonstrate the value of such a complex writing technique. The characters' art contributes to the tale's "unity of effect" by demonstrating the futility in curing the Ushers' maladies. Whereas poetic aptitude sheltered the narrator's psyche in combating the perceived supernatural threat of the Usher home, Roderick Usher, tragically conjoined with his estate, can receive no such respite through art. Were Poe's reader not aware that two men's friendship is grounded exclusively in their love of art, the importance of so much art to perpetuate the story would be unconvincing. The evidence found in Roderick's art, along with his oblique testimony and references, present a strong case for the incestuous relationship between he and Madeline. Poe, in moralizing on the siblings' love, places the blame for the Usher

lineage's tragic fate on incest. Throughout the tale, art itself serves as the physical expression of this fate.

Poe thus follows Aristotle's advice in the *Poetics* regarding the definition of a tragic story: "look for…situations in which sufferings arise within close relationships" (23). At first Poe introduces a red herring by telling us of the narrator and Roderick's close relationship. This is meant as a diversion from the true tragic relationship: Roderick and Madeline. In like manner, Roderick's art works as both a foretoken of doom and a distraction from the physical destruction resulting in the tale's "dénouement." In Poe's case, the principles of Aristotelian tragedy and the tenets of gothic fiction are inextricably wedded: the works of art we employ to assuage our anxieties about our fates inevitably point us toward those fates. The physical destruction of the house, for instance, supports Brown's claim that the gothic text is not "mere supernatural diversion" (xii). With "Usher," Poe demonstrates his mastery of the gothic genre by fusing it to the Aristotelian demand that good plots adhere to tragic endings. The singular effect of "Usher" indicates that the family, like the gothic work itself, is inescapably determined by the "philosophy" of its composition.

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