The Fall of the House of Usher Study Guide

The Fall of the House of Usher by Edgar Allan Poe

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Introduction

"The Fall of the House of Usher," written by Edgar Allan Poe in 1839, is regarded as an early and supreme example of the Gothic horror story, though Poe ascribed the term "arabesque" to this and other similar works, a term that he felt best described its flowery, ornate prose. Featuring supernatural theatrics, which critics have interpreted a number of ways, the story exhibits Poe's concept of "art for art's sake," the idea that a story should be devoid of social, political, or moral teaching. In place of a moral, Poe creates a mood—terror, in this case— through his use of language. This philosophy of "art for art's sake" later evolved into the literary movement of Aestheticism which eschewed the symbolic and preachy literature of the day—especially in England—in an attempt to overcome strict Victorian conventions. Because of his emphasis on style and language, Poe proclaimed his writing a reaction to typical literature of the day, which he called "the heresy of the Didactic" for its tendency to preach, Condemned by some critics for its tendencies toward Romanticism, a literary movement marked by melodramatic and maudlin exaggerations, "The Fall of the House of Usher" was nevertheless typical of Poe's short stories in that it presents a narrator thrust into a psychologically intense situation in which otherworldly forces conspire to drive at least one of the characters insane.

Overview

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is one of Poe's most popular short stories.

Moreover, analyzing this story provides a basis for understandin g Poe's gothicism and his literary theories. As in all of Poe's short stories, "The Fall of the House of Usher" concentrates on a "single effect"—in this case, the degeneration and decay of the Usher house and family. In the story's opening, for example, the narrator comments upon the "insufferable gloom" that pervades his being as he notices the "few rank sedges," the "white trunks of decayed trees," the unruffled luster of the "black and lurid tarn," and the house's vacant "eye-like windows." Once inside, the details increase: the "antique and tattered" furniture and the other furnishings that "failed to give any vitality to the scene."

In addition, the narrator emphasizes Roderick Usher's wildly fluctuating physical and mental states and Madeline Usher's "settled apathy" and gradual wasting away. Not only do these details highlight the mystery on which the tale develops, but they also foreshadow the story's denouement when Roderick, Madeline, and the dark house itself, all crash into the dark waters of the tarn.

Indeed, with its unity of character, setting, tone, and action, "The Fall of the House of Usher" epitomizes Poe's literary skills and techniques.

Author Biography

Poe was born January 19,1809, in Boston, Massachusetts. His father and mother were professional actors who at the time of his birth were members of a repertory theater company in Boston. Before he was three years old both of his parents had died, and he was raised in the home of John Allan, a prosperous exporter from Richmond, Virginia. In 1915 Allan took his wife and foster son, whom he never formally adopted, to visit Scotland and England, where they lived for the next five years. While in England, Poe spent two years at the school he later described in the story "William Wilson."

Returning with his foster parents to Richmond in 1820, Poe attended the best schools available, wrote his first poetry, and, when he was sixteen years old, became involved in a romance which ended when Allan sent him to the University of Virginia at Charlottesville. There Poe distinguished himself academically, but as a result of bad debts and inadequate financial support from Allan he was forced to leave after less than a year. An established discord with his foster father deepened on Poe's return to Richmond in 1827, and soon afterward Poe left for Boston, where he enlisted in the army for lack of other means of supporting himself and where he also published his first poetry collection, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, which the cover stated was "By a Bostonian." The book went unnoticed by readers and reviewers, and a second collection received only slightly more attention when it appeared in 1829.

That same year Poe was honorably discharged from the army, having attained the rank of regimental sergeant-major, and, after further conflict with Allan, he entered the West Point military academy. However, because Allan would neither provide his foster son with sufficient funds to maintain himself as a cadet nor give the consent necessary to resign from the academy, Poe gained a dismissal by ignoring his duties and violating regulations. He subsequently went to New York City, where his book *Poems* was published in 1831, and then to Baltimore, where he lived at the home of his aunt, Mrs. Clemm.

Over the next few years, Poe's first stories appeared in the Philadelphia *Saturday Courier*, and his "MS. Found in a Bottle" won a cash prize for best story in the Baltimore *Saturday Visitor*. Nevertheless, Poe was still not earning enough to live independently, nor did Allan's death in 1834 provide him with a legacy. The following year, however, his financial problems were temporarily alleviated when he went back to Richmond to become editor of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, bringing with him his aunt and his cousin Virginia, whom he married in 1836. The *Southern Literary Messenger* was the first of several magazines Poe would direct over the next ten years and through which he rose to prominence as one of the leading men of letters in America. Poe made himself known not only as a superlative author of fiction and poetry but also as a literary critic whose level of imagination and insight had been unapproached in *American literature* until that time.

While Poe's writings gained attention in the late 1830s and 1840s, the profits from his work remained meager. He was forced to move several times in order to secure

employment that he hoped would improve his situation, editing *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine* and *Graham's Magazine* in Philadelphia and the *Broadway Journal* in New York. In addition, the royalties for *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym, Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, and other titles were always nominal or nonexistent. After his wife's death from tuberculosis in 1847, Poe became involved in a number of romances, including the one that had been interrupted in his youth with Elmira Royster, now the widowed Mrs. Shelton. It was during the time they were preparing for their marriage that Poe, for reasons unknown, arrived in Baltimore in late September of 1849. On October 3, he was discovered in a state of semiconsciousness. He died on October 7 without regaining the necessary lucidity to explain what had happened during the last days of his life.

About the Author

Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on January 19, 1809, the second son of David Poe, an actor, and his actress wife, Elizabeth Arnold Hopkins. Shortly after his birth, the family moved to New York City, where both parents pursued sporadic acting jobs. Eventually David Poe abandoned his wife, Edgar, and a daughter Rosalie, born in 1810. Edgar's older brother, William Henry, was living with the Poe grandparents in Baltimore. To support her children, Elizabeth accepted acting parts in Norfolk, Charleston, and eventually in Richmond, where her health rapidly declined. She died of tuberculosis in December 1811. Edgar and Rosalie were taken in by separate affluent Richmond families, Rosalie by the William McKenzies, and Edgar by the John Allans. Poe was never officially adopted into the family but took Allan as his middle name. Critics and biographers generally agree that the traumatic events of Poe's early life influenced his personality and his writing.

In 1815 John Allan moved his family to England where Poe attended Stoke Newington, a prestigious preparatory school, later used as a setting for his short story, "William Wilson." In 1820 the Allans returned to Richmond and in 1825 Poe enrolled at the University of Virginia, where he excelled in literature and languages. He also, however, accrued large gambling debts and was soon forced to withdraw from the school.

Poe moved to Boston in 1827, where he published Tamerlane and Other Poems and then enlisted in the army under an assumed name, Edgar A.

Perry. Surprisingly, he was such a good soldier that he was promoted to sergeant-major within eight months. After his foster mother, Frances Allan, died in 1829, Poe bought his way out of the ranks and, with the help and encouragement of John Allan, entered West Point, hoping to make a career as an army officer. Within a year, however, he tired of military life and, after a bitter quarrel with Allan, Poe deliberately had himself expelled.

Poe moved in with his Baltimore relations, Mrs. Maria Poe-Clemm and her daughter Virginia. In 1832 he published five stories in Philadelphia's Saturday Courier, and in 1833 he won a cash award from the Baltimore Saturday Visiter for his "MS Found in a Bottle."

This story earned him critical acclaim, and, with the aid of John Pendleton Kennedy, he became assistant editor and then editor of Richmond's Southern Literary Messenger. Under Poe's direction, this journal increased its circulation from five hundred to threethousand-five-hundred subscribers. On May 16, 1836, he married his thirteenyear-old cousin, Virginia Clemm.

Poe quarrelled repeatedly with the owner of the Southern Literary Messenger, for personal as well as professional reasons, and he was ultimately dismissed from the magazine. He then moved to New York, where he published The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym in 1838. In the summer of that year, Poe moved his family—Mrs. Maria Clemm lived with them—to Philadelphia, where he became the assistant editor of

Burton's Gentleman's Magazine; from 1841 to 1842, he edited Graham's Magazine and increased its circulation from 5,000 to 50,000 subscribers; in 1843 he published "Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Gold Bug." Other successful publications included 'Ligeia" in 1838, and "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "William Wilson," both in 1839.

In April 1844, the Poes moved back to New York where he became the owner and editor of the financially-strapped Broadway Journal in 1845, the same year he published The Raven and Other Poems. Tragically, after bursting a blood vessel in her throat while singing, Virginia's health declined, her condition aggravated by Poe's poverty. She died of malnutrition and tuberculosis on January 30, 1847, and some sources say there was not enough money to provide a fire for warmth as she was dying.

Not long after this tragedy, Poe attempted suicide with an overdose of laudanum.

In 1849 Poe returned to Richmond to court his childhood sweetheart, Sarah Elmira Royster, now a wealthy widow.

On September 27, 1849, he left Richmond for what was to be a short trip to Baltimore. Mysteriously, he was found unconscious on a Baltimore street six days later. He never recovered enough to say where he had been or what he had been doing, and he died in delirium on October 7, 1849.

Poe exerted a major influence on American Literature with his own works but also with his literary criticism, which included such essays as "Hawthorne's Twice Told Tales," "The Poetic Principle," and the "Philosophy of Composition." In this last essay he details how he wrote "The Raven," his most famous poem.

In addition, Poe originated the detective story formula in his tales of ratiocination about Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin, the scientifically and rationally superior detective who appears in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter" and who was a precursor of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. Poe's other ratiocination tale is "The Gold Bug" in which William Legrand, a Dupin-type character, deciphers a cryptogram and finds Captain Kidd's buried treasure on Sullivan's Island in Charleston Harbor.

Like his Romantic contemporaries Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne, Poe was interested in the dark side of man's soul and psyche. He crafted gothic tales of horror on subjects that ranged from revenge, reincarnation, and doppleganger tales to insanity, murder, and premature burial. Although he wrote in the gothic tradition established by Horace Walpole, Charles Brockden Brown, Ludwig Tieck, and E.

T. A. Hoffman, Poe's innovations and contributions raised gothic fiction to a new height.

Plot Summary

After a week, Roderick announces that Madeline is dead and that he needs assistance in burying her. The narrator agrees to help and they take her body, in a coffin, into a tomb that lies beneath the room in which the narrator has been sleeping. They view Madeline's body, noting the slight smile on her face and the blush on her cheeks, "Usual in all maladies of a strictly cataleptical character." They screw the lid tightly onto the coffin and close and seal a large iron door to the tomb.

During the next several days, Roderick's demeanor changes. He becomes more restless and his visage becomes more pallid. His voice grows more tremulous and he seems to be hiding some deep secret by his peculiar speech.

About the eighth day, the narrator experiences an intense fear and dread. He rationalizes it away by believing that it is just a consequence of staying in drab and dreary surroundings. He cannot sleep, so he dresses and paces about in his apartment. He notices a light under the door and soon Roderick knocks on the door. He enters looking "cadaverously wan" and possessed of "an evidently restrained hysteria in his whole demeanor." Roderick opens a window to a storm, letting the wind blow violently into the room.

In an attempt to calm Roderick, the narrator takes up a copy of *Mad Trist* and begins to read. At this point, the narrator hears noises coming from below, in the tomb, but he continues to read. Each of the passages from the novel foreshadows the events of that evening. As the noises get louder, Roderick says, "we have put her living in the tomb." He springs to his feet and shrieks, "Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door!"

The passageway in the room comes open from a strong gust of wind, and Madeline appears, bloodied and trembling. She lunges forward onto her brother, and they both fall to the floor, dead.

At this, the narrator flees quickly. As he passes over the bridge leading from the house there is a flash, the fissure in the face of the house widens, and the house crumbles "and the deep dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly over the fragments of the House of Usher."

The Fall of the House of Usher

The Fall of the House of Usher Summary

As the narrator comes to the House of Usher, he is filled with an inexplicable and overwhelming sense of gloom and foreboding. Nothing he does, no stretch of his imagination, can erase his black mood.

He explains that he is on his way to the House of Usher to spend a few weeks at the request of his childhood friend, Roderick Usher. Roderick had written to him detailing his current mental agitation and hoping that a visit might cheer him in some way. The narrator admits that, though they were close as children, he knows little of Roderick now except that his family has been very passionate about the arts. He also notes that, "the stem of the Usher race ... had put forth, at no point, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent" (pg. 108), which he feels may have led to the "House of Usher" standing for both family and family mansion.

After a more thorough look at the outside of the house and its surroundings, the narrator enters the home of his friend. He is greeted by a servant who leads him to Roderick's room. The narrator comments that the décor continues the theme of gloom; on the stairs, he meets the Usher family physician. Finally he arrives at Roderick's studio; his old friend greets him warmly.

The narrator is shocked at the appearance of his friend. Though his face is still made up of the features he remembers, they have changed so drastically that the narrator barely recognizes him. He also finds that Roderick is somewhat incoherent and suffers from an "excessive nervous agitation" (pg. 113), going from energetic to sullen with no real provocation.

Roderick explains to the narrator that he wrote to him in the hopes that his visit would bring him out of his mental state. All of his senses are heightened; sights, smells, and sounds drive him to despair. He is, he admits, in a life and death struggle with fear. He also says that part of his mental condition can be traced to the long illness of his sister Lady Madeline, also a resident of the House of Usher. She had, despite her sickness, resisted becoming bedridden, but upon the narrator's arrival she takes to her room and does not emerge.

For several days, the narrator attempts to rouse Roderick from his gloom, but the more he tries, the more he realizes it is impossible. He is, however, impressed by Roderick's paintings, and also of his original guitar songs - the only instrument he can tolerate with his heightened senses. Then one evening, Roderick informs him that Lady Madeline is no more, and that he plans to preserve her body for a fortnight in one of the house's vaults.

Once the body has been prepared for burial and placed in its coffin, the narrator helps Roderick entomb it in the vault, a small, dark and damp place behind a massive iron door. Before placing the coffin in the vault the two take one last look at Lady Madeline. The narrator remarks at how similar brother and sister looked, and Roderick informs him that they were twins. They replace the coffin lid and screw it down.

After Lady Madeline's death, the narrator observes a change in Roderick, and he seems even more agitated and unstable than before. His mood even begins to affect the narrator, who starts falling into the same kind of nervous despair. On the seventh or eighth day after putting the corpse in the vault, the narrator is unable to sleep. He tries to blame his feelings on the dreary furnishings of his room or the storm brewing outside, but he is unable to shake his nerves, especially when he hears, "certain low and indefinite sounds" (pg. 125) that he cannot explain.

Agitated, he begins pacing his room, and is soon joined by Roderick, also in a disturbed state. The narrator tries to calm Roderick by reading the *Mad Trist* of Sir Launcelot Canning. Though neither of them likes the volume, it is all they have in the room, and he is surprised at how interested Roderick is. As he reads, certain elements of the story, such as the breaking down of a door or the screaming of a dragon, seem to be occurring somewhere in the house in real time. Finally Roderick, who seems on the verge of a breakdown, admits that he has been hearing strange sounds for days but he dared not speak of them. He tells the narrator that he is sure they have buried his sister alive, and upon this revelation, he also cried that she is currently standing outside the door.

At this, the door flies open, and the bloody figure of Lady Madeline, looking as if she has fought her way out of the coffin. She enters the room, then falls upon her brother and they both topple to the floor, finally dead. The narrator flees from the house, and as he runs away, the House of Usher collapses and is swallowed up by the surrounding tarn.

The Fall of the House of Usher Analysis

This tale has all the major aspects of a Gothic horror story, with a scary house, a strange sickness, mysterious circumstances, and a sense of gloom. The element that Poe uses most impressively here, though, is his building of mood - in this case, an overwhelming sense of claustrophobia. From the moment the narrator sees the House of Usher, he feels an inexplicable dread, a feeling that grows the longer he stays at the house. But why *does* he stay? It does not sound as if he is enjoying his time there, nor does it seem he shares anything more than a friendship long past with Roderick. It is the house itself, we could assume, that keeps him there.

Then there is the issue of the "House"; not only is the physical building of a house claustrophobic, the House of Usher as a family line is closed up, too, as the entire family line lies in the branch of descent. Also, as twins, Poe uses Roderick and Madeline to represent the idea that they are two parts of a whole; Roderick fears death, and fear itself. yet Madeline is the one who "dies." She is the strongest character in the story,

fighting her way out of the grave only to "kill" her brother, finally bringing an end to the House of Usher; both structure and family.

Characters

Narrator

The unnamed narrator of the story is described as a childhood friend of Rodenck Usher's. However, the narrator notes that he does not know Roderick very well because Roderick's "reserve had always been excessive and habitual." The narrator visits the Usher family house after Roderick sends him an emotional letter begging him to come. While he seems skeptical of the supernatural and tries to find rational explanations for the disconcerting things happening around him, the narrator finds himself growing increasingly disturbed by the house and the Ushers. At the end of the story, when both Roderick and Madeline die, he flees and watches the house crumble and fall into a small lake. The narrator has been described as an objective witness to the events in the story, with some suggesting he represents rationality. Others, however, have concluded that he is unreliable and that he may, in fact, have helped Rodenck Usher murder his sister, or that the ending of the story is merely his hallucination.

Madeline Usher

Madeline is the twin sister of Roderick Usher and, along with her brother, is one of the only two surviving members of the Usher family. She is terminally ill and suffers fits of catalepsy, meaning she appears rigid and does not move for long periods of time. The narrator of the story, who sees her only briefly before she dies, regards her with "an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread." When Madeline dies, her brother and the narrator temporarily bury her in a vault on the first floor with "a faint blush upon the bosom and the face" and a "suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip." At the end of the story, she mysteriously emerges from her tomb, only to die with her brother. Madeline's fleeting appearance in the story serves to heighten the horror and suspense of the situation. Some critics have suggested that Madeline's illness is the result of a long history of incestual breeding in the Usher family; others believe that she possesses evil powers and is, in fact, a vampire.

Roderick Usher

Roderick Usher is the last surviving male of the Usher family. Like many of his ancestors, he has an artistic temperament, engaging in such activities as writing and playing music and painting. Described as extremely pale, with weblike hair and dark eyes, he is also a hypochondriac and is unable to tolerate such physical stimulation as bright light, the scent of flowers, and peculiar sounds. Believing that the Usher family estate is evil and that the Usher family is cursed, Rodenck lives in a state of constant fear and agitation. When his twin sister Madeline dies, Rodenck falls into even deeper despair and, according to the narrator, seems to be "laboring with some oppressive secret." At the end of the story, Madeline emerges from her tomb, and they both die.

Roderick's anguished mental state and odd behavior have been interpreted in numerous ways. Some have speculated that he is agonizing over the Usher family secret of incest while others have suggested that Roderick represents the troubled artistic temperament. Finally, those who read "The Fall of the House of Usher" as purely a supernatural horror story state that Roderick represents evil.

Objects/Places

Refers both to the actual building that is the house in which the remaining Ushers live and to the House of Usher as a family line. Both are dreary and unnatural, and both are destroyed at the end.

Setting

With the exception of "The Gold Bug" and "Murders in the Rue Morgue," Poe's settings are usually remote in time and space, enhancing the story's mystery and other-worldliness. "The Fall of the House of Usher" has no definite setting except for the "singularly dreary tract of country" through which the narrator must travel to reach the House of Usher.

Suits of armor and subterranean dungeons tend to suggest a European rather than an American locale, but these details were established trappings of the gothic genre. Typical gothic elements in the story include the Usher house, described as "this mansion of gloom" with its dark hallways and draperies, ebony black floors, "feeble gleams of encrimsoned light," and its eerie burial vault.

Complementing these elements are Madeline Usher's mysterious malady, death and burial, and her return from the grave, the latter heightened by the thunder and lightning of a violent storm, a gothic technique often adopted by modern films and stories dealing with the supernatural.

Social Sensitivity

Poe's literary theory repeatedly stressed art for art's sake, an idea somewhat removed from the era's general literary belief that literature should teach or preach a moral lesson. Furthermore, Poe advocated the "single effect" theory in his literary criticism and practiced it within his own poems and stories. It would be difficult to deduce any messages on Poe's part in his tales of horror and terror. He sought to frighten his readers or to intellectually entertain them, and thus introduces a full range of elements that straddled the line between science and the supernatural.

Literary Qualities

Poe's literary skill is readily apparent in "The Fall of the House of Usher," and one of his most vivid techniques is the story's tone. Poe chooses details that highlight the terror of near madness, premature burial, and death and destruction. Foremost is his description of the gloomy Usher house, and the fissure that seems to extend from the house's roof to the "sullen waters of the tarn."

Equally important in setting the tone is the violent storm on a night that is "singular in its terror and beauty." The thunder crashes, the lightning bolts flash, and the wind howls as Madeline makes her way from the tomb to the door of Roderick's study. Roderick's and Madeline's deaths are further heightened as the narrator notes that the "blood-red moon . . . now shone vividly through the once barely discernible fissure."

Another literary device used masterfully by Poe is foreshadowing. Roderick's terrible fate is foretold in the description of the house that totters on the brink of collapse. The details of the bleak exterior prepare the reader for the description of the house's interior and of Roderick and Madeline Usher. Two other foreshadowing devices are Roderick's painting of a vault which eventually becomes Madeline's tomb and the narrator's reading of Sir Lancelot Canning's "Mad Twist," the plot of which coincides with Madeline's return from the tomb.

Poe also reinforces the story's plot and theme with symbolism. The most obvious symbol is the Usher house, which stands now in stark contrast to its once vibrant history, a history alluded to in "The Haunted Palace." The house's windows, fungi, and fissure suggest Roderick's rapidly decaying physical and mental states. By extension, Madeline's barren womb also symbolizes the Usher lineage, house, and Roderick. When she dies, he is the last of the Ushers; when he dies, it will indeed be the fall of the House of Usher.

Themes

Sanity and Insanity

Poe uses the theme of insanity vs. insanity, and all the nuances in between, in many of his short stories, often charging his insane narrators with the futile task of proving that they are not mad. Often, in stories such as *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Imp of the Perverse*, though the respective narrators of each claim they are of sound mind and seem completely unremorseful, they are driven to confess by a persistent reminder of their crime. In other tales, such as *The Cask of Amontillado*, the narrator is unquestionably insane, and yet there is no remorse *and* no confession, and though his *actions* are insane, he is very levelheaded when it comes to their execution. Crime is not the only indicator of insanity, however. In *Ligeia*, the narrator commits no crime that is spoken of, yet there is an air of instability to his narrative. He does admit to heavy opium use, but it is his overwhelming grief and obsessive love for Ligeia that cast a questioning light on his state of mind. All this mental instability leads to a stable of unreliable narrators; Poe was a master at creating believable, unreliable narrators, so much so that many historians have cast him as much less stable than he was, instead of recognizing his skill at crafting first-person narration.

Death and Mortality

In almost all of Poe's works, death is a central issue. Whether a tale of murder (*The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*), a tale of horror (*The Fall of the House of Usher*), a Gothic horror romance (*Ligeia*), or an allegory (*The Masque of the Red Death*), Poe's stories, by nature of his preferred genres, are full of death. Though many of his stories deal with either the murder of someone, the solving of a murder, or the supernatural resurrection of someone who has died, it is his allegorical look at mortality, *The Masque of the Red Death*, which most clearly sums up Poe's themes of death. Here, very simply, death is seen as inevitable, something that can be avoided by no one, no matter what precautions they take or how wealthy they are. Poe used death to terrify people, as he was a writer of horror stories and most people are afraid of death. Yet he seemed fascinated by it, and with his use of dark and Gothic elements seemed to embrace it.

Isolation and Confinement

Throughout many of Poe's short stories, characters are placed in stifling, claustrophobic settings that add to the overall feeling of panic and fear. In some, such as *Ligeia* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*, most of the action occurs in one room or one house, closing off the characters to any outside influence. *The Pit and the Pendulum* takes this idea a step further, imprisoning the narrator in a dungeon. Poe highlights this theme in *The Cask of Amontillado*, in which the murderous narrator literally encloses his victim in

a tomb. In *The Masque of the Red Death*, the castle is completely cut off from any means of entrance or exit. The most intense confinement, however, can be found in the minds of Poe's narrators. While we as readers experience physical isolation (i.e. one, room, one house, one walled-up vault), the intensity of the confinement is exacerbated by the point of view of the narrators. We see the world through one set of eyes, and the thoughts of these narrators, often thoughts that are unstable at best, imprison us in a non-physical "prison" of panic and fear.

"The Fall of the House of Usher," told from the point of view of an unnamed narrator, is the story of twin siblings Roderick and Madeline Usher, the last surviving members of the Usher family.

Evil

"The Fall of the House of Usher" addresses the nature and causes of evil. Poe creates an atmosphere of evil in the story through the unnamed narrator's descriptions of the Usher family home, and of Roderick and Madeline. For example, the house is called a "mansion of gloom"; Roderick is described as having "a ghastly pallor of the skin" and hair of "wild gossamer texture"; and Madeline, who the narrator sees only briefly before she dies, stirs up feelings of dread. Although the narrator is unsettled, shocked, and taken aback by his surroundings from the very beginning of the story, it is not clear what is causing such trepidation. When Roderick attempts to explain the cause of his "nervous agitation," he states that it is "a constitutional and family evil," suggesting that he and Madeline are somehow cursed. Some have speculated that the evil behind this "curse" is a long history of incest or family inbreeding within the Usher line and that both Roderick and Madeline are suffering the physical and emotional consequences of behavior almost universally condemned as immoral. Others, however, have stated that the evil permeating the story is of purely supernatural origin and that Roderick's hysteria is not imagined but is a justifiable reaction to otherworldly forces.

The atmosphere of terror in the story is heightened by the ambiguity of Madeline's character— she can be viewed with sympathy, because of her illness, or with suspicion. Some critics have even suggested that she is a vampire attempting to sap the life force from Roderick. The narrator also heightens the aura of evil in "The Fall of the House of Usher" because while he tries to view the situation objectively and rationally, despite his increasing feelings of foreboding, he ultimately succumbs to the evil pervading the Usher home. Some critics have, in fact, stated that the narrator himself is evil and that he, along with Roderick, knowingly buried Madeline alive and that he is deliberately trying to deceive the reader about what happened.

Madness and Insanity

The themes of madness and insanity grow from Poe's depiction of Roderick's increasingly unstable mental and emotional breakdown. Roderick is afflicted with numerous mysterious maladies. He suffers, as the narrator states, from "a morbid

acuteness of the senses," and he is overwhelmed by feelings of fear and anxiety. Roderick's agitated mental state is also due, in part, to Madeline's fatal illness, which causes her to become cataleptic—a state of extreme muscle rigidity and apparent unconsciousness. As the story progresses, Roderick attempts to relate his fear to the narrator and engages in numerous activities—including playing the guitar, creating a disturbing painting, and composing a lyric entitled "The Haunted Palace"—in an attempt to calm himself. He also reads books on the supernatural and the occult. As Roderick becomes increasingly hysterical, both the narrator and the reader are left to speculate on the causes of such strange behavior. It remains unclear, however, if Roderick's malady is a psychological reaction to an incestual relationship with his sister or if he is, indeed, being possessed by evil forces. Nevertheless, Poe's portrayal of Roderick's deterioration raises important questions about the causes, stages, and effects of insanity.

Style

Point of View

Told from the point of view of an unnamed first-person narrator, this story does not use the unreliable narrator technique to expose unbelievable or horrific events. Instead, the narrator is more of an observer at first, bringing the reader along as he encounters the gloom and desperation of both the House of Usher and its inhabitants. As he stays in the house, he is drawn deeper into the spell of the house and his nervousness increases, as does the reader's.

Setting

Set in the dreary, woeful House of Usher, much of this story's tone and feeling of claustrophobic nervousness comes from its settings. The action takes place solely in the house in which the Ushers have sustained their illnesses of body and mind, and these close quarters seem to affect all who come in contact with them. The narrator says of Roderick:

"He was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and whence, for many years, he had never ventured forth - in regard to an influence whose supposititious force was conveyed in terms too shadowy here to be re-stated - an influence which some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of his family mansion, had, by dint of long sufferance, he said, obtained over his spirit - an effect which the physique of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought about upon the morale of his existence."(pg. 114-5)

Language and Meaning

Poe uses language in this story to very craftily evoke in the reader a sense of foreboding and dread. From the narrator's first impressions of the House of Usher:

"I looked upon the scene before me - upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain - upon the bleak walls - upon the vacant eye-like windows - upon a few rank sedges - and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees - with an utter depression of soul" (pg. 106),

We are given to understand that there is something almost supernaturally ominous about this house. Once inside, he encounters "sombre tapestries of the walls ... ebony blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies" that make up a classically Gothic mansion. The house itself seems to be alive, with windows like eyes and doors that open like "ebony jaws" (pg. 133).

Structure

The story's setting and structure play into each other, one adding fuel to the other's fire. As the narrator is dragged deeper and deeper into the curse that is the House of Usher, closing off the world to everything that is outside the house, the story itself closes off, going from its first section, in which he is outside of the house, to the middle, in which he is in the house but moving about freely, to the final scene, where he is confined to a single room. This closing off of the world is almost imperceptible, truly felt only when he is able to escape and be outside once again.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" centers on Roderick Usher and his twin sister Madeline, the last surviving members of the Usher family.

Setting

The setting of "The Fall of the House of Usher" plays an integral part in the story because it establishes an atmosphere of dreariness, melancholy, and decay. The story takes place in the Usher family mansion, which is isolated and located in a "singularly dreary tract of country." The house immediately stirs up in the narrator "a sense of insufferable gloom," and it is described as having "bleak walls," "vacant eye-like windows," and "minute *fungi* overspread [on] the whole exterior." The interior of the house is equally dreary, with "vaulted and fretted" ceilings, "dark draperies hung upon the walls," and furniture that is "comfortless, antique, and tattered." Roderick is also disturbed by the setting, believing that the house is one of the causes of his nervous agitation. The narrator notes that Roderick "was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and whence, for many years, he had never ventured forth."

Point of View

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is told from the point of view of the unnamed narrator, who, being skeptical and rational, doesn't want to believe that there are supernatural causes to what is happening around him. Although he tries to tell the reader that Roderick's anxiety and nervousness are simply symptoms of the latter's mental anguish, the narrator, and therefore the reader, becomes increasingly disturbed as the story progresses. By telling the story from the point of view of a skeptic rather than a believer, Poe increases the suspense as well as the emotional impact of the story's ending.

Symbolism

Poe uses symbolism—a literary technique where an object, person, or concept represents something else—throughout "The Fall of the House of Usher." The Usher mansion is the most important symbol in the story; isolated, decayed and full of the atmosphere of death, the house represents the dying Usher family itself. The narrator

emphasizes this when he notes that "about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity—an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the grey wall, and the silent tarn." The fissure in the house is also an important symbol. Although it is, at first, barely visible to the narrator, it suggests a fundamental split or fault in the twin personalities of the last surviving Ushers and foretells the final ruin of the house and family. Other notable symbols of death and madness are Roderick's lyric, "The Haunted Palace"; his abstract painting, which is described as a "phantasmagoric" conception by the narrator; and the "fantastic character" of his guitar playing.

Imagery

Poe uses imagery to create a foreboding atmosphere and to advance his themes in the story. An image is a concrete representation of an object or sensory experience; images help evoke the feelings associated with the object or the experience itself. For example, when the narrator briefly sees Madeline, he states: "The lady Madeline passed slowly through the remote portion of the apartment, and, without having noticed my presence, disappeared___A sensation of stupor oppressed me, and my eyes followed her retreating steps." Such images contribute to the perception that Madeline is ghostlike and mysterious. When the narrator sees the physician on the stair at the beginning of the story, he notes: "His countenance, I thought, wore a mingled expression of low cunning and perplexity. He accosted me with trepidation and passed on." This image of the doctor is much more effective than a mere literal description; it underscores the fear and anxiety pervading the Usher home.

Gothicism

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is considered a preeminent example of Gothic short fiction with its focus on such topics as incest, terminal illness, mental breakdown, and death. Gothic fiction generally includes elements of horror, the supernatural, gloom, and violence and creates in the reader feelings of terror and dread. Gothic fiction also frequently takes place in medieval-like settings; the desolate, ancient, and decaying Usher mansion is ideally suited for this story. In addition to creating an atmosphere of dread, Poe, some critics have suggested, incorporated into his story aspects of the vampire tale. J. O. Bailey, for example, contended in *American Literature* that Madeline is a vampire and that Roderick is fighting her powers "with all he has."

Historical Context

"The Fall of the House of Usher" was first published in 1839 in *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*. At a time when most popular literature was highly moralistic, Poe's stories were concerned only with creating emotional effects. Poe charged that most of his contemporaries were "didactic," that is, they were preoccupied with making religious or political statements in their writings to the detriment of the fiction itself. His own tales of terror, in which he often depicted the psychological disintegration of unstable or emotionally overwrought characters, were in sharp contrast to the works of more highly praised writers of the time. Because of Poe's disdain for didactic writing, he was little regarded by the literary establishment in his day.

But despite being dismissed by literary critics, Poe's tales were instrumental in establishing the short story as a viable literary form. Before his time, such short works were not regarded as serious literature. Poe's examples of what the short story could accomplish, and his own nonfiction writings about the form, were instrumental in establishing the short story as a legitimate form of serious literature. Poe had a strong influence in popular fiction as well. His tales of terror are considered among the finest ever produced in the horror genre. He also pioneered, some critics say invented, the genre of detective fiction with his story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue."

During the time Poe was writing, a distinct and mature body of *American literature* was beginning to develop with the contributions of such authors as Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, John Greenleaf Whittier, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry Wads worth Longfellow, and James Fenimore Cooper. Before this time, American readers considered British literature the only serious literature available. American writers wrote imitations derived from British models. But with the advent of a new group of American writers who were writing about specifically American subjects, settings, and characters, a distinctly *American literature* began to emerge. Poe was one of the American writers of the time who helped to formulate this national literature.

Critical Overview

While Poe's works were not widely acclaimed during his lifetime, he did earn respect as a gifted fiction writer and poet, especially after the publication of his poem "The Raven." After his death, however, the history of his critical reception becomes one of dramatically uneven judgements and interpretations. This was, in part, the fault of Poe's one-time friend and literary executor R. W. Griswold, who, in an obituary notice bearing the byline "Lud-wig," attributed the depravity and psychological peculiarities of many of the characters in Poe's fiction to Poe himself. In retrospect, Griswold's insults seem to have elicited as much sympathy as censure, leading subsequent biographers of the late nineteenth century to defend, sometimes avidly, Poe's name.

It was not until the 1941 biography by A. H. Quinn*, Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Autobiography*, that a balanced view was provided of Poe, his work, and the relationship between the author's life and his imagination. Nevertheless, the identification of Poe with the murderers and madmen of his works survived and flourished in the twentieth century, most notably in the form of psychoanalytical studies by such critics as Marie Bonaparte and Joseph Wood Krutch. Added to the controversy over Poe's sanity was the question of the value of Poe's works as serious literature. Among Poe's detractors were such eminent literary figures as Henry James, Aldous Huxley, and T. S. Eliot, who dismissed Poe's works as juvenile, vulgar, and artistically debased; in contrast, these same works were judged to be of the highest literary merit by such writers as George Bernard Shaw and William Carlos Williams. Complementing Poe's erratic reputation among American and English critics was the generally more elevated opinion of critics elsewhere in the world, particularly in France. Following the extensive translations and commentaries of French poet Charles Baudelaire in the 1850s, Poe's works were received with high esteem by French writers, especially those associated with the late nineteenth-century symbolist movement, who admired Poe's transcendent aspirations as a poet. In other countries, Poe enjoyed similar regard, and numerous studies have been written tracing the influence of the American author on international literature.

Today, Poe is regarded as one of the foremost progenitors of modern literature, both in its popular forms, such as horror and detective fiction, and in its more complex and self-conscious forms, such as poetry and criticism. In contrast to earlier critics who viewed the man and his works as one, recent criticism has developed a view of Poe as a detached artist who was more concerned with displaying his writing talents than with expressing his feelings. While at one time critics wished to remove Poe from literary history, his works remain integral to any conception of modernism in world literature.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Carl Mowery hold a doctoral degree in rhetoric and composition and has taught at Southern Illinois University and Murray State University. In the following essay, he calls "The Fall of the House of Usher" a cerebral story with little physical action and emphasizes the many interpretations the story inspires.

Of the many short stories Edgar Allan Poe wrote, "The Fall of the House of Usher" is likely the most cerebral. There is little action to carry the plot, no trips into a catacomb, no descent into a whirlpool, no crimes to be solved. Everything that occurs is told by the narrator. Despite this lack of physical action, this gothic story has remained one of Poe's most popular.

In "The Philosophy of Composition" Poe says, "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 unity of impression." Furthermore, he says, "It appears evident, then, that there is a distinct limit, as regards length, to all works of literary art—the limit of a single sitting—and that, (except in certain cases), it can never be properly overpassed." Poe developed and refined the genre of the short story based on this philosophy. His effort was so successful that this genre was taken up by authors from France as well as from the United States. This type of fiction is still popular among writers of today.

But if brevity is the rule, then intensity of presentation must accompany it. It is important to note that a short story is more a "style" than a "length," although most will have less than thirty pages of text. Short stories have few characters and the development of those characters will be limited and sharply focused.

When discussing a short story, or any piece of literature, several options may be considered. These include discussions of plot (the order of the events in the story), theme (what the story means), imagery (descriptions), dialogue (how and what characters say), historical context (its relation to events that occurred when it was written), characterization (who the characters are and how they got that way), literary techniques (the use of puns or binary oppo-sites), and even the reliability of the narrator (is he or she telling the truth?), especially one who is apart of the story itself. In the following discussion two of these options will be examined: the reliability of the narrator and the use of binary opposites.

Since this story is a first person narrative (it is told by a narrator from his, and only his, point of view), we have to make a decision about his reliability. (Remember, the narrator of a story is a creation of the author, NOT the author himself.) During the first passages of the story, the narrator gives us clues to his reliability. As he looks at the house he says that what he sees is more like "the after-dream of a reveller upon opium." Later, still looking at the house, he says, "Shaking off from my spirit what *must* have been a dream, I scanned ... the building." Taking these two statements together, the narrator seems to be dreaming more than dealing with the reality before him. By his own admission, then, his narration must be scrutinized with great care.

Additionally, as the narrator contemplates the purpose of his trip and the mystery that is before him, he says, "What was it—I paused to think— what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluable." Later he says, ".. .the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth.*' Now, despite his admission that the mystery is beyond solution, he enters the house and attempts to solve it for the reader.

Another aspect of the narrator's character which is cause for our concern is his shift from telling about Roderick's madness to revealing his own madness. During their first meeting, he describes Roderick's manner with the following words: incoherence, inconsistency, excessive nervous agitation, and "lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium." Alone, these would not describe madness, but together they create the image of madness. Add to this Roderick's inability to endure harsh sensations of any kind, and we have a more convincing picture of a madman.

The most compelling discussion of this madness comes in the final scene when Roderick comes to the narrator's room. He enters the room, very agitated, and opens a window to the raging storm. As the narrator reads from the novel *Mad Trist* Roderick sits sullenly in a chair looking at the door. They both hear noises outside the door and Roderick speaks, "Said I not that my senses were acute?"

Roderick explains that he has heard noises from the tomb for several days because of his acute hearing, and, like the narrator in "The Tell-tale Heart," claims to hear Madeline's heart beating. In one final cry, he screams, "Madman! I tell you she now stands without the door!" Madeline appears when the door is blown open. She lunges toward him and they fall to the floor, dead.

In these last scenes some of Roderick's madness is transferred to the narrator. In the beginning the narrator thinks that what he sees is a dream, yet for the first several days he is at the house, he seems sane and in control of his senses. But after Madeline is entombed, the narrator becomes more agitated, just as Roderick does, and on the evening of the "seventh or eighth day" he is so uneasy that he cannot sleep. He is nervous and bewildered but he rationalizes that this is the result of sleeping in a room with drab and gloomy furniture. As the night progresses, he loses more and more control. "An irrepressible tremor gradually pervaded my frame." The madness ascribed to Roderick is now afflicting the narrator.

As the final scene unfolds, the narrator also claims to hear the noises from the tomb. He dismisses this since the window was still open and there was a great deal of noise coming from the storm. As he reads more of the novel. *Mad Trist*, he stops abruptly and says, "I did actually hear... a low and apparently distant.. . sound." By his own admission, the narrator reveals his own acuteness of hearing, an aspect that he uses to define madness in Roderick. Now, the narrator himself has succumbed to the same madness.

Binary opposition is the literary technique of setting two situations, persons, or objects in opposition to one another. Some examples are good and evil, light and dark, open and

closed, near and far, or any set of items or concepts that can be reduced to two aspects. Of course, in most situations, things are more involved and complicated than this. But for our purposes, as well as for use in analysis of other literature, the use of binary opposites provides a focal point for discussion. But what is more important than just listing binary oppositions is determining the sense of conflict that the opposites create in the story. (Remember, if there is no conflict in a tale, there is no interest generated by it.)

In "The Fall of the House of Usher" one such binary opposition is the male/female opposition of Roderick and Madeline. This is especially intense knowing that they are twins. To demonstrate how this simple opposition works, imagine how different this story would be if Roderick's twin had been another male character. The tension of Madeline's passage through the comer of the apartment (possibly wearing a flowing gown, making her seem ghostlike), of her untimely death, and especially of her return from the tomb, would be lost. Additionally, since the two lived alone in the house, some critics believe that there was an incestuous relationship between them. If they had been brothers, this kind of sexual innuendo would have to include a homosexual relationship. For Poe, writing about that sort of relationship in the early 19th century would have been almost impossible. Therefore, the binary opposition of male/female served Poe well in creating tension and conflict.

Regarding the male/female conflict, we see certain aspects of Roderick that can be called "feminine." His delicate features, his aptitude for the arts, and his frailty, all add up to a feminine character. Madeline, on the other hand, summons up strength to break the bonds of the tomb and to slay her brother in the final scene. These qualities might be seen as masculine. It is in the subtle shifts in our expectations of the character that tension and conflict are developed. (The aspects of feminine and masculine should not be misunderstood in sexist or sexual ways. Rather, the broadest stereotypical definition of these terms is desired.)

Another important binary opposition is the difference between sanity and madness. At first the narrator seems to be a sane person going to visit a friend who (he believes) is going mad. During the first meetings he describes Roderick's personal and psychological weaknesses. Roderick is feeble, shaking, and his voice is unstable. He looks ashen and cadaverous. He is also described as "alternately vivacious and sullen" which is a description of manic depression, a mental illness.

In contrast, the narrator tells of his own calmness and control of the situation. He says that he tried to calm his friend as they painted, wrote poetry and read novels together. Even in the final scene, when Roderick appears to have lost all sanity, the narrator reads to him in a vain attempt to calm the storm in Roderick as well as the storm outside the window. (It is ironic that the narrator tries to soothe his "mad" friend by reading from a novel entitled *Mad Trist*.)

It is the binary opposition of sanity/insanity that is the main focus of this tale. Many critics and students have wrestled with the issue of who is or is not insane in the story. This question rests upon the reliability of the narrator. If the narrator is fully reliable, then

it is relatively easy to come to the conclusion that Roderick is mad. But if the narrator is not telling us the truth, or if the narrator is mad himself, then our conclusion will be somewhat less certain. The reader must grapple with the uncertainty along with the narrator. The issue of madness vs. sanity provided Poe with the grist for many of his stories, including "The Tell-tale Heart" and "The Black Cat."

As we can see, there are a variety of approaches to short story interpretation. None is exclusive of another; they may all contribute to our understanding. We cannot see binary oppositions in Roderick and the narrator without also seeing their characters and character development. We cannot examine the narrator alone without looking at his surroundings. The most important thing in any analysis is to trust the text itself. Two different interpretations may arise from one passage, as long as both derive from the text. We canot make up things, but we may interpret them.

Source: Carl Mowery, for *Short Stones for Students*, Gale Research, 1997

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Bailey raises several theories about "The Fall of the House of Usher," one of which is that it is a vampire story, citing as evidence the strange behavior of Madeline and Roderick and how their actions fit the conventions of other vampire tales.

What happens in "The Fall of the House of Usher"? This story contains many suggestions of psychic and supernatural influences upon the feelings of the narrator and the nerves of Roderick Usher. But the influences are not defined. No ghosts appear. Surely, Poe as craftsman intended the story to do what it does, to arouse a sense of unearthly terror that springs from a vague source, hinted and mysterious. Poe stated that his aim in tales of terror was to create "terror... not of Germany but of the soul," or not of the charnel but of the mind. He wrote to Thomas W. White, owner of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, that tales of terror are made into excellent stories by "the singular heightened into the strange and mystical." The influences that seem to drive Roderick Usher to madness, to kill him and Madeline, and even to destroy the House are certainly strange and mysterious. They seem rooted in some postulate of the supernatural, but the postulate is concealed....

Roderick seems engaged in a struggle against a power that he feels to be supernatural. Apparently, as in the strange books he reads, he seeks knowledge of this power and how to combat it. He has found some explanations in a quasi-scientific theory about the sentience of vegetable matter. He seeks the help of objective reason by calling upon the narrator, to whom he repeatedly attempts to explain the nature of his invisible foe. But the narrator refuses to believe that the threatening power exists outside Roderick's imagination....

Hints that may suggest a vampire appear in the first view of the House. The vegetation around the House is dead; though water is usually a symbol of life, the "black and lurid tarn" seems dead. It amplifies the House, reflecting it in "remodelled and inverted images." The narrator feels "an ICI-ness" and "a sickening of the heart." He sees "about the whole mansion ... a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible and leaden-hued." On entering the House, the narrator meets the family physician, whose countenance wears "a mingled expression of low cunning and perplexity." The physician accosts him "with trepidation."

Certain details about Roderick Usher seem significant. As a boy in school he displayed a hereditary "peculiar sensibility of temperament." This sensibility would make Roderick an easy prey to psychic or supernatural influence. His present illness has developed since he has lived in the House, "whence, for many years, he had never ventured forth." Thus, some influence in the House is suggested. It may be vampinc. Montague Summers's study of vampire lore states that when a person psychically sensitive even "visits a house which is powerfully haunted by malefic influences ... a vampirish entity may ... utilize his vitality," causing "debility and enervation" in the victim....

Let us turn to the events of the story to discover what [Roderick] possibly knew. As the narrator approaches the House, he observes that the windows are "eye-like." Roderick's poem later gives the palace the features of a human head. These suggestions seem to mean that the House itself has some evil, destructive life, manifest in a spirit faintly visible as a vapor. Can it be regarded as a kind of vampire? In vampire lore, places or houses may be possessed: "Even to-day there are places and there are properties in England which owing to deeds of blood and violence ... entail some dire misfortune upon all who seek to enjoy... them."...

Roderick's symptoms include "a morbid acute-ness 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." These are specific symptoms of vampiric attack. Vampires, if not always their polluted victims, seldom touch ordinary food. Though some vampires, for instance Ruthven in Polidori's *The Vampyre*, wear ordinary clothing, most vampires appear in the garments of the grave. If Poe had vampire lore in mind, why did he say "the odors of all flowers"? We may look first at odors. Disgusting odors are associated with vampires. A vampire's breath is "unbearably fetid and rank with corruption, the stench of the charnel." This is the very material Poe rejected. The House draws vitality instead of blood; flowers seem a similar substitute for heightening the gory into the strange and mysterious. Poe's "all flowers" had to be left vague. If Poe had mentioned garlic and its whitish flower, universally accepted specifics against vampirism, he would have given away the secret he sought to suggest, but conceal. It seems significant that Poe mentions flowers at all. No garden can grow near the House; no flowers would be ordered from a tenant or a market if Roderick finds them oppressive. The mention seems Poe's tauntingly deliberate effort to be faithful to the lore he was using, without defining it. Perhaps the odors of flowers were "oppressive," rather than welcome to ward off attack, because Roderick was already polluted to the extent that he shared the aversions of the vampire. Most vampires cannot endure daylight; they must return to the tomb at the first hint of dawn. Roderick's horror of all sounds except those of stringed instruments seems natural for anyone who senses the presence of a demon. Poe often associates stringed instruments with angelic forces.

After detailing his symptoms, Roderick cries out: "I *must* perish in this deplorable folly." What folly? for none is mentioned. Perhaps his folly is that, through living as a recluse in the House and through curious reading, Roderick had laid himself open to attack. A "Vampire was often a person who during his life had read deeply in poetic lore and practised black magic." Roderick says, "I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results." Perhaps he does not dread death, but fears becoming a vampire if killed by a vampire.

At this point Roderick states—specifies—that the attack upon his vitality comes from the House. The narrator, reporting with scorn, says: "He was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted ... in regard to an influence... which some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of his family mansion had ... obtained over his spirit—an effect which *Has physique* of the gray walls

and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they looked down, had ... brought about upon the *morale* of his existence."

Madeline seems a victim of the same attack, and she dies. When? On the evening of the first day Roderick tells the narrator "with inexpressible agitation" that Madeline had "succumbed ... to die prostrating power of the destroyer." But she is not declared dead, that she "was no more" and is ready for burial, until several days later. Perhaps in the interval she is undead, "living" as a vampire. All definitions say that a person killed by a vampire becomes a vampire with a craving to pass on the pollution....

During the entombment, the narrator notices a "striking similitude between the brother and sister." Roderick explains that he and Madeline "had been twins" and that "sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them." What were these sympathies? T. O. Mabbott has stated, I think rightly, that "Poe's twins share their family soul with the house, and Roderick knew it." If Madeline was destroyed by the House, she is now a vampire; a vampire attacks first its closest blood-kin. A French writer on vampire lore, Augustin Calmet, says: "Cette persecution ne s'arrSte pas a une seule personne; elle s'etend jusqu'a la derniere personne de la famille." This feature of vampirism is presented in Lord Byron's "The Giaour." A curse dooms an Infidel to become a vampire and to suck the blood of all thy race; There from thy daughter, sister, wife At midnight drain the stream of life?

Thus, just because he is a twin, Roderick has reason to be terrified of Madeline___

If Madeline were an ordinary vampire buried in a cemetery, she could dematerialize, escape through crevices, and rematerialize. But how could she escape from a sealed coffin in an airtight vault closed and secured by an iron door? I suggest that Poe established these seemingly impossible conditions because he had in mind a supernatural agency in Madeline's escape. If she is now a vampire killed by the House and therefore the agent of the House, the House might help set her free. To do so, it seems, required the total vitality of the House, with added draughts from Roderick's life, all redoubled in power by the full moon, and engaged in the violent effort manifested in the storm. How could the House help set her free? Let us observe below how it opened heavy doors for her to reach Roderick.

Roderick hears her approach and asks, "Is she not hurrying to upbraid me for my haste?" He may mean his haste in sealing her in the vault before his own death. Perhaps Roderick knows that when he dies—if he can die before Madeline sucks his blood—the House and Madeline must also die in "final death-agonies."

As Madeline approaches with a "heavy and horrible beating of her heart," typical of the vampire, Roderick speaks in his "gibbering murmur, as if unconscious of [the narrator's] presence." What is he saying? Perhaps part of his monologue is an incantation from the *Vigilia*. When Madeline reaches the "huge antique panels" of the chamber, she simply stands there waiting. The doors open. The narrator says, "It was the work of the rushing gust." How can this be? These doors face the interior of the House, not the storm outside. The casement has been closed. This gust may be the spirit of the vampire

House, rooted in Madeline's vault, and manifest in the forces of the storm. When the doors of the chamber throw "slowly back ... their ponderous and ebony jaws," between these jaws stands the "lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher," with "blood upon her white robes." Are these images a symbolist painting: between the jaws of the vampire House stands its white and bloodstained tooth poised to plunge into Roderick's life-stream?

For a moment, Madeline "remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold." Perhaps she wavered between remnants of human compassion aided by Roderick's incantations, and the evil power driving her onward. But she "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." Was Roderick's death heart failure? The narrator does not stop to observe: he "fled aghast." But the somewhat erotic embrace of its victim, the prone position for the kill, and the moan of pleasure are commonplaces of vampire lore. In terms of this lore, Madeline reached the jugular vein. But as Rodenck dies, Madeline and the House die, for their source of vitality is cut off. Does Roderick continue undead, a vampire by pollution, as "he had anticipated"? When a vampire is destroyed, it squeals or screams horribly. As the fragments of the House sink into the tarn, there is a "shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters." Perhaps, as both Madeline and the House die in the instant of Roderick's death, the curse is fulfilled, and Roderick's soul is, after all, saved by the finally innocuous water. The narrator observes no more except the "full, setting, and blood-red moon."...

Source: J O Bailey, "What Happens in 'The Fall of the House of Usher,' "in *American Literature*, Vol. XXXV, No. 4, January, 1964, pp. 445-66.

Critical Essay #3

In the following brief essay, Shackelford comments on the relationship between Henri Fuseli's painting, The Nightmare, andPoe's story.

In "The Fall of the House of Usher," Edgar Allan Poe entices his readers to view the narrator's experiences as a dream. Many critics have noted the tale's iterative images of water, mist, sleep, and descent, connoting the subconscious, as well as the explicit verbal clues Poe provides in such passages as "I looked upon the scene before me ... with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the afterdream of the reveller upon opium..., "Shaking off from my spirit what must have been a dream ...," and ".. .Ilistened, asifinadream, to the wild improvisations of his speaking guitar," No critical attention, however, has yet been given to the significance of Poe's allusion to the eighteenth-century artist John Henry Fuseh.

Describing the paintings of Roderick Usher, Poe's narrator observes:

If ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Rodenck Usher. For me at least—in the circumstances then surrounding me—there arose out of the pure abstractions which the hypochondriac contrived to throw upon his canvas, an intensity of intolerable awe, no shadow of which felt I ever yet in the contemplations of the certainly glowing yet too concrete reveries ofFuseli.

Why did Poe choose Fuseli as the one artist with whom to compare Usher? The answer is that Fuseli shared Poe's preoccupation with the realm of the subconscious. Indeed, he based his career upon his oft-cited aphorism: "One of the most unexplored regions of art are dreams___"

The work upon which Fuseli's fame rests and the work which Poe evokes in his tale is *The Nightmare*, which the artist painted in 1781 and exhibited at the Royal Academy in London. *The Nightmare* is an unforgettable, to many viewers even shocking, canvas composed of three key elements: a beautiful woman, dressed in virginal white, lying prostrate upon a bed; an incubus, or demon, crouched maliciously upon the woman's breast; and a horse's head with fiery eyes emerging from a shadowy background. Intending to depict a general rather than an individual experience of the bad dream, Fuseli combines evil spirits from Germanic folklore with an Enlightenment medical belief that the nightmare is caused by sleeping on one's back. This position creates a difficulty in circulation that induces frightful visions and a feeling of weight upon the chest.

That Poe knew Fuseli's painting is highly likely. The exhibition of *The Nightmare* became a cause celebre. Soon engravers disseminated prints of it throughout Europe and then America, while cartoonists amused the public with their vulgarized burlesques of Fuseli's demon-tormented sleeper. However, it is the text of "The Fall of the House of Usher" that provides the most compelling evidence of Poe's familiarity with Fuseli's composition; for shortly before the appearance of the specter-like Madeline, arisen from the crypt, Poe's narrator assumes the exact position of Fuseli's dreaming damsel.

Retiring to his sleeping apartment—a chamber directly above the vault in which Madeline has been buried, the narrator rests fitfully. He then reveals, "An irrepressible tremor gradually pervaded my frame; and, at length, there sat upon my heart an incubus of utterly causeless alarm." This description of a demon upon the narrator's breast and his subsequent feeling of "an intense sentiment of horror" suggest strongly that his final vision of Madeline and Roderick's embrace of death is, in fact, a nightmare.

Source: Lynne P Shaokelford, "Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher'," in fitpftcaror, Vol. 45, No 1, Fall, 1986, pp. 18-9

Quotes

These quotes are taken from the Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe.

"True! - nervous - very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad?" (*The Tell-Tale Heart*, pg. 13)

"'Villains!' I shrieked, 'dissemble no more! I admit the deed! - tear up the planks! - here, here! - it is the beating of his hideous heart!'" (*The Tell-Tale Heart*, pg. 21)

"As the strong man exults in his physical ability, delighting in such exercises as call his muscles into action, so glories the analyst in that moral activity which *disentangles.*" (*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, pg. 22)

"'The riddle, so far, was now unriddled.'"(*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, pg. 57)

"Of my country and of my family I have little to say. Ill usage and length of years have driven me from the one, and estranged me from the other." (*MS. Found in a Bottle*, pg, 77)

"When I look around me I feel ashamed of my former apprehensions." (*MS. Found in a Bottle*, pg, 92)

"The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could ; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge." (*The Cask of Amontillado*, pg. 94*)*

"*For the love of God, Montressor!*" (*The Cask of Amontillado*, pg. 104)

"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. What was it - I paused to think - what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher ?" (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 106)

"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." (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 133)

"While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened - there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind - the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight - my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder - there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters - and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the *House of Usher*." (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 133)

"Arousing from the most profound of slumbers, we break the gossamer web of some dream. Yet in a second afterward, (so frail may that web have been) we remember not that we have dreamed." (*The Pit and the Pendulum*, pg. 156)

"Amid the thought of the fiery destruction that impended, the idea of the coolness of the well came over my soul like balm. I rushed to its deadly brink. I threw my straining vision below. The glare from the enkindled roof illumined its inmost recesses. Yet, for a wild moment, did my spirit refuse to comprehend the meaning of what I saw. At length it forced — it wrestled its way into my soul — it burned itself in upon my shuddering reason. — Oh! for a voice to speak! — oh! horror! — oh! any horror but this!" (*The Pit and the Pendulum*, pg. 136)

"The 'strangeness,' however, which I found in the eyes, was of a nature distinct from the formation, or the color, or the brilliancy of the features, and must, after all, be referred to the expression." (*Ligeia,* pg. 163)

"That she loved me I should not have doubted; and I might have been easily aware that, in a bosom such as hers, love would have reigned no ordinary passion. But in death only, was I fully impressed with the strength of her affection." (*Ligeia,* pg. 168)

"I trembled not — I stirred not — for a crowd of unutterable fancies connected with the air, the stature, the demeanor of the figure, rushing hurriedly through my brain, had paralyzed — had chilled me into stone." (*Ligeia,* pg. 182)

"The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 184)

"But the Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious. When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 185)

"There are chords in the hearts of the most reckless which cannot be touched without emotion. Even with the utterly lost, to whom life and death are equally jests, there are matters of which no jest can be made." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 191)

"And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all" (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 193)

"The intellectual or logical man, rather than the understanding or observant man, set himself to imagine designs — to dictate purposes to God." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 195)

"Through its promptings we act without comprehensible object; or, if this shall be understood as a contradiction in terms, we may so far modify the proposition as to say,

that through its promptings we act, for the reason that we should not." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 196)

"They say that I spoke with a distinct enunciation, but with marked emphasis and passionate hurry, as if in dread of interruption before concluding the brief, but pregnant sentences that consigned me to the hangman and to hell." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 209)

Adaptations

"The Fall of the House of Usher" was adapted to film in 1952. Directed and produced by Ivan Barnett, this black and white, 70-minute film starred Kay Tendeter as Roderick Usher and Gwen Watford as Madeline Usher and is available from Vigilant distributors. It is generally considered to be a poor adaptation of Poe's story.

Considered one of the best film adaptations of "The Fall of the House of Usher," the 1960 version starred Vincent Price, Myrna Fahey, and Mark Damon and was directed by Mark Corman. It runs 65 minutes and is in color.

The story was also adapted to film in 1980. Starring Martin Landau as Roderick Usher and Dimitra Arliss as Madeline Usher, this 101-minute color film was produced by Charles E. Sellier, Jr. and directed by James L. Conway. It is available from Sunn Classic.

A dramatization of "The Fall of the House of Usher" was taped in 1965 as part of the "American Story Classics" series. Available from Film Video Library, this adaptation runs 29 minutes and is in black and white.

Another dramatization of the story was taped in 1976 by Encyclopaedia Britannica Educational Corporation. Also produced by Britannica in 1976, *The Fall of the House of Usher: A Discussion* features science fiction writer Ray Bradbury discussing the Gothic traditions of "The Fall of the House of Usher" as well as Poe's influence on contemporary science fiction.

Topics for Further Study

Examine the lyric "The Haunted Palace" written by Roderick Usher in' "The Fall of the House of Usher" and discuss how it reflects Roderick's mental and emotional state.

Read the short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman and compare and contrast the portrayal of mental breakdown in each story.

Poe's fictional works and critical theories greatly impacted nineteenth-century literature, particularly the French symbolist movement. Research and discuss Poe's influence on such French writers as Charles Baudelaire and Paul Valery.

Compare and Contrast

1830s: Common belief dictates that odors from water—such as the tarn outside the Usher house— could cause mental illness of the type suffered by Roderick Usher. Few, if any, effective treatments were available for mental illness

Today: Better understanding of the physiological causes of mental illness and a variety of medical therapies result in a vast improvement in the way the mentally ill are treated.

1830s: The deceased are commonly laid in-state at home for several days. Funeral homes are rare; families prepare and bury their loved ones themselves.

Today: Most people die in hospitals and wakes are most often held in churches or funeral homes.

1830s: Travel is difficult, slow, and sometimes dangerous. Railroads are in their infancy and most long distance travel is in horse-drawn wagons. It was not unusual for guests to stay several weeks or for an entire season when invited to a relative's or friend's house.

Today: Improved transportation—including railroads, airplanes, and automobiles—makes longdistance travel easier, while advanced communications technology like telephones and e-mail makes long visits with family and friends less popular than in previous eras.

What Do I Read Next?

Poe's epic poem "The Raven," published in 1845, centers on a young scholar who is emotionally tormented by a raven's ominous repetition of the word "nevermore" in answer to his question about the probability of an afterlife with his deceased lover.

Poe's "Ligeia" is a long poem in which a husband narrates the story of his beautiful dead wife who returns from the grave and assumes the identify of his second wife.

"Young Goodman Brown" is a story by Nathaniel Hawthorne, a contemporary of Poe. Written in 1835, it concerns a newly married Puritan in New England who ventures forth one night against the wishes of his wife, Faith, and encounters several of his neighbors conducting satanic rituals in the woods.

Stephen King's novel *The Shining* (1977) tells how the evil forces in a remote resort hotel manipulate the alcoholic caretaker into attempting to murder his wife and child.

The short story "The Shunned House" by H. P. Lovecraft centers on a house possessed by evil powers. The somewhat Gothic horror story was inspired by "The Fall of the House of Usher" and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *House of the Seven Gables*, in which a haunted house inflicts terror upon its inhabitants.

Topics for Discussion

1. Poe precedes his stories with prefatory quotations that relate to theme and plot. Explain how de Beranger's quotation applies to "The Fall of the House of Usher."

2. Poe's literary techniques include dramatic openings for his short stories. By noting word choices and descriptions, comment on Poe's opening technique for "The Fall of the House of Usher."

3. In his literary theory, Poe claims that a story must concentrate on a "single effect." What is the single effect in this story and how is it accomplished in the story's opening? How is the single effect evident in setting, characters, and symbols?

4. Obvious symbols within the story are the house and "The Haunted Palace." Specifically, what do these symbolize?

5. What physical descriptions of the house's exterior relate to Roderick? To Madeline? To the Usher family?

6. In the narrative's beginning are references to Roderick's eye as being bright and luminous, but at the end his eye is described as "the luminousness had utterly gone out." What would account for this? Does a similar condition apply to Roderick's countenance, and, if so, explain?

7. Although not as extensive as in "The Masque of Red Death," 'The Fall of the House of Usher" contains some color symbolism. What are the colors associated with the Usher house, Roderick, and Madeline? What colors appear in "The Haunted Palace" and what do these colors suggest?

8. One critic claims that Madeline is a vampire. By alluding to specific details in the story, agree or refute this idea.

9. Explain why at the end of the story, Roderick calls the narrator a madman: "Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door!"

10. How effective is the storm as a literary gothic effect at the end of the story? What other novels, stories, or films use a similar technique?

11. What opening details foreshadow the story's conclusion?

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. After explaining Poe's "single effect" theory, apply it to one or two of Poe's other stories by narrowing the focus and The Fall of the House of Usher concentrating on one or two plot details—for example, the story's opening and closing techniques; the symbols if any; the characters.

2. "The Cask of Amontillado" is one of Poe's perfect revenge stories and it begins, "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as best I could, but when he ventured upon insult I vowed revenge." Using either one or two of Poe's other stories, explain how the opening sentences establish tone, character, plot, and theme.

3. Compare or contrast 'The Fall of the House of Usher" with another Poe story by limiting the focus to one of the following suggestions: (a) the heroes; (b) the heroines; (c) the settings; (d) the gothic devices; (e) the color symbolism; (f) themes (e.g., premature burials, madness, murder).

4. Poe uses the doppleganger effect in "William Wilson" and "The Fall of the House of Usher." What is the doppleganger effect and how is it evident in one or both of these stories.

5. Explain the function of the "The Haunted Palace" in "The Fall of the House of Usher."

6. As with "The Haunted Palace," Poe uses a similar technique with "The Conqueror Worm" in "Ligeia." Do they share similar effects?

7. Choose a favorite horror film and discuss its use of gothic techniques. If these techniques are similar to ones Poe used, indicate the similarities by referring to specific stories; if they are different or innovations on Poe's techniques, explain by also referring to specific stories.

Further Study

Abel, Darrel. "A Key to the House of Usher," in *University of Toronto Quarterly*, Vol XVH, No. 2, January, 1949, pp. 176-85.

Abel talks about the setting of "The Fall of the House of Usher," and how the themes of isolation and self-destructive concentration are symbolized by the character of Roderick Usher.

Baym, Nina "'The Fall of the House of Usher," Character Analysis," in *The Norton Anthology of'American Literature*, W. W. Norton, 1995, p. 664.

Baym offers a brief analysis of the three characters and their mental disorders.

Bieganowski, Ronald. "The Self-consuming Narrator in Poe's 'Ligeia' and 'Usher'," in *American Literature*, Volume 60, No 2, May, 1988, pp. 175-87.

Bieganowski shows how the narrators in these two tales become enamored of their own rhetoric and therefore fail to tell the tale in the complete manner they intend. They fail because their desire to tell their story in the most ideal manner possible overwhelms the story itself.

Brennan, Matthew C. "Turnenan Topography: The Paintings of Roderick Usher," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Volume 27, Fall, 1990, pp. 605-8.

Brennan argues that Poe's descriptions of Roderick's paintings show a strong similarity to the paintings of Englishman Joseph Turner. He believes that both Poe and Turner reject the realist's approach to their art in favor of a more vague, expressionist approach called the "sublime style "

Brooks, Cleanth, Jr and Robert Penn Warren. "The Pall of the House of Usher," in their *Understanding Fiction*, New York, F.S. Crofts & Co., 1943, pp. 202-5.

Reduces "The Fall of the House of Usher" to a "relatively meaningless" horror story which serves principally as a case study in morbid psychology and lacks any quality of pathos or tragedy.

Evans, Walter. "'The Fall of the House of Usher' and Poe's Theory of the Tale," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Volume 14, No 2, Spring, 1977, pp. 137-44.

Evans contends that there are significant discrepancies between Poe's theory of the tale and his literary practice as exemplified by "The Fall of the House of Usher "

May, Leila S. "Sympathies of Scarcely Intelligible Nature-The Brother-Sister Bond in Poe's 'Fall of the House of Usher'," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Volume 30, Summer, 1993, pp 387-96.

May makes the relationship of the Ushers and their fall a symbolic representation of the fall of the family in the 19th century

Poe, Edgar Allan "The Philosophy of Composition" in Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe, edited by Edward H. Davidson, Houghton, 1956, pp. 452-61.

Poe outlines his philosophy of literary composition, discussing the proper length and content of literary works.

Rout, Kay Kinsella "The Unreliable and Unbalanced Narrator," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Volume 19, Winter, 1982, pp 27-33.

While this article is more about John Gardner's story, "The Ravages of Spring," Rout compares the narrator in it to the narrator of "Usher " She sees both as unreliable and emotionally unbalanced.

Voloshin, Beverly R. "Explanation in 'The Fall of the House of Usher'," in *Studies in Short Fiction*, Volume 23, Fall, 1986, pp. 419-28.

Voloshin argues that the story is a turning point in the development of the Gothic tale in the hands of Poe. She says it contains all the necessary ingredients-romance, mystery, darkness, supernatural, decay, a corpse, and even vampirism.

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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