

# A Psychological Study of the Narrator's Transformation in "The Fall of the House of Usher"

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## ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the psychological transformation of the unnamed narrator in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher". The investigation employs close textual analysis combined with Gothic literary theory. It demonstrates that the narrator's perceptions undergo significant change. Specifically, his views of the Usher mansion, Roderick Usher, and his own rationality evolve markedly over time. This evolution leads to a progressive decline in the narrator's objectivity. Furthermore, this decline parallels Roderick Usher's mental deterioration. The analysis incorporates key theoretical elements. These include Gothic literary theory, Freudian concepts concerning the uncanny, and discussions addressing narrative unreliability. This approach reveals how Poe utilizes the narrator's psychological journey.

## KEYWORDS

Edgar Allan Poe; The fall of the house of usher; Psychological decay; Gothic literature; The uncanny

## 1 Introduction

An American writer named Edgar Allan Poe (1809– 1849) was well-known as the "Master of Gothic Literature" and the "father of Detective Fiction" by the author, who also studied poetry and literary criticism. Poe's writing style centered on a "morbid aesthetic" and "psychological horror". Poe once said that the terror in his works is a spiritual terror. He places characters in a special environment created by himself, using the special power of "terror" to break through the shell created by society, thus entering the depths of human souls, revealing the hidden inner world of humanity, displaying the most basic requirements and primitive instincts of human beings, and finally exposing the ugly side that he is unwilling or afraid to face (He, 2007, p. 54-59). Despite facing controversy during his lifetime, Poe's works are now recognized as vital contributions to American Romanticism, with his innovations inspiring later writers such as Charles Baudelaire and Arthur Conan Doyle.

He uses the theme of "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), which is clearly depicted in, and he frequently looks at the fragility of human reason when faced with existential fear.

In this story, an unnamed narrator visits the crumbling Usher mansion to provide comfort to his mentally unstable childhood friend, Roderick Usher. As Roderick's twin sister, Madeline, rises from her premature burial, both the house and the narrator's sanity begin to collapse in tandem. While much scholarship has focused on Roderick's mental state (Bonaparte; Smith, 2018), the psychological transformation of the narrator has received less attention.

This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring three main research questions:

How does Poe use narrative unreliability to illustrate the narrator's mental decline?

In what ways does the narrator's psychological journey reflect the Gothic themes of decay?

What insights does this transformation provide about Poe's critique of rational thought?

The significance of this research lies in changing the way we view the narrator—from a passive observer to a crucial participant in the story's horror. Methodologically, this paper combines close reading with psychoanalytic theory (Freud) and narrative analysis (Booth, 1961) to achieve its goals.

## 2 Literature review

Scholarly analysis of psychological dimensions in "The Fall of the House of Usher" has primarily examined Roderick Usher's madness passed down through generations and the symbolic deterioration of the mansion. However, the narrator's psychological journey remains a vital yet insufficiently explored element. This journey offers new insights into Poe's storytelling methods and central thematic concerns. This section reviews existing scholarship concerning three connected areas. These areas are the Gothic tradition's use of narration that cannot be fully trusted. They also include

psychoanalytic interpretations of the story. Finally, they cover recent scholarly critiques focusing on the narrator's function within the text.

## 2.1 Gothic narration and unreliability

Wayne Booth's concept of the unreliable narrator (1961) provides an important framework for analyzing Poe's stories. Scholars have expanded this idea. Fisher (2002) further develops this concept. He emphasizes how the narrator's fixation on the mansion's "fungi-covered walls" (Poe, 1839, p. 4) uncovers underlying psychological problems. And, Smith (2018) examines the narrator's "rational facade," suggesting it acts as a defense mechanism against his hidden anxieties (p. 89).

## 2.2 Psychoanalytic approaches

Freudian theories are important in this area. They focus on the idea of the uncanny (*das Unheimliche*). Bonaparte's view is debated. It sees the mansion as a maternal figure. This view is influential, but it often ignores the narrator's own mind. More recent Lacanian studies, such as Robinson (2010), change how we see the narrator's emotional distance. He describes it as a shield against the harsh facts of madness.

## 2.3 Reassessing narrator agency

Newer scholarship questions the idea that the narrator is merely a passive character. Peeples (2004) explores the subconscious death drives that motivate the narrator to enter the mansion despite its "insufferable gloom" (Poe, 1839, p. 1).

Although there are advances, no comprehensive study examines how the narrator's mental state progresses in connection to Gothic tropes. Existing research isolates specific psychological motifs. Alternatively, it subordinates the narrator's journey to Roderick's pathology. This paper tackles this gap. It synthesizes narrative theory, psychoanalysis, and close textual analysis. This approach shows how the narrator's psychological changes structurally mirror the story's descent into chaos.

# 3 Textual analysis

## 3.1 The narrator's the narrator's rationality and calmness

The psychological changes of the narrator in 'The Fall of Arthur's Palace' begin with the disguise of reason, which he carefully constructs through objective observation. In this initial stage, from his arrival at the mansion to his first interaction with Roderick Arthur, a fragile barrier was established between his claimed detachment and the newly emerging unease.

### 3.1.1 Objective descriptions as psychological armor

When the narrator sees the House of Usher, he describes it very carefully. He notes its "bleak walls," its "vacant eye-like windows," and the "minute fungi overspread[ing] the whole exterior" (Poe, 1839, p. 1). These details seem objective, but they show he is trying to control his view of the place. Fisher (2002) states that Gothic narrators often use elaborate descriptions to distance themselves from emotional responses. The narrator looks closely at the building's decay, especially "the fissure extending from the roof to the base" (Poe, 1839, p. 1). This crack symbolizes his own breaking mind. But he reports it only as a neutral fact. This matches Smith's (2018) point that Poe's narrators "perform rationality to evade confronting their complicity in the horror" (p. 89).

### 3.1.2 Rhetoric of self-reassurance

The narrator's inner thoughts repeatedly emphasize his effort to defend the mansion's frightening atmosphere. After acknowledging he felt "an utter depression of soul" (Poe, 1839, p. 2), he quickly attributes this feeling to "the phantasmagoric influence of the gloomy furniture" (p. 3). This approach shifts responsibility onto inanimate objects. Booth (1961) notes this technique indicates the narrator's increased mental tension. It highlights the gap between the real situation and potential fear. The narrator also insists that he "struggled to reason off the nervousness" (Poe, 1839, p. 5). This further shows his unstable mind. In contrast, the act of denying irrational thoughts makes it more obvious.

### 3.1.3 Projection onto roderick usher

In his initial encounter with Roderick, the narrator frames his friend's madness as an external phenomenon, distinct from his own psyche. He catalogs Roderick's symptoms—"acute bodily illness," "morbid acuteness of the senses," and "constitutional and family evil" (Poe, 1839, p. 5)—with diagnostic detachment, positioning himself as an observer of pathology. However, when Roderick claimed that the mansion's sentience, his originally firm tone was no longer as firm as at the beginning: "The result of this disorder [is] a gradual usurpation of the [...] house over his spirit" (p. 7). The narrator dismisses this as delusion, yet his refusal to engage with Roderick's worldview hints at repressed recognition. As Peeples (2004) argues, the narrator's "diagnostic gaze masks his own susceptibility to the mansion's influence" (p. 73).

### 3.1.4 Contradictions in rational authority

The narrator's rational thinking is undermined by subtle contradictions. He states the mansion's oppressive terror "stemmed from natural causes" (Poe, 1839, p. 4), but his own descriptions suggest supernatural elements. For example, he mentions a "pestilent and mystic vapor" surrounding the estate (p. 2). Also, he chooses to remain even after sensing danger, noting "I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow" (p. 3). This decision suggests an underlying acceptance of Gothic conventions.

## 3.2 Rational wavering and self persuasion

The narrator's psychological change enters a second phase in "The Fall of the House of Usher." This phase shows his deepening involvement in Roderick's disturbed mind. Key features include mutual delusions, strong suggestibility, and a loss of logical thinking. This period occurs when Madeline is entombed. It demonstrates how the narrator's mental state becomes conflicted and unstable. Ultimately, it leads to a complete collapse of his psyche.

### 3.2.1 Shared hallucinations and blurred subjectivity

As the narrator resides longer within the mansion's confines, the progressively intensifying sense of dread he encounters through his senses reflects Roderick's own warped reality. For example, both individuals report hearing "an unusual screaming or grating sound" (Poe, 1839, p. 10) originating deep within the house. This sound is later understood as Madeline escaping her tomb. At first, the narrator blames "the storm" or "the peculiar gases of the tarn" (p. 11). However, his openness to supernatural causes demonstrates the erosion of his empirical reasoning. Fisher (2002) interprets this auditory hallucination as a metaphor for repressed truths, arguing that the narrator's "hearing becomes a conduit for the house's unspeakable history" (p. 67). Likewise, Smith (2018) observes that mutually experienced hallucinations in Gothic tales frequently symbolize the "contagion of madness" (p. 112). This compromises the narrator's perceived objectivity.

### 3.2.2 Narrative collusion in Madeline's entombment

The narrator's active participation in Madeline's premature burial marks a critical turning point. Despite recognizing Roderick's "hysterical agitation" (Poe, 1839, p. 13), he assists in sealing her coffin, rationalizing the act as a concession to Roderick's "terrible nervousness" (p. 14). This complicity, however, exposes his subconscious alignment with Gothic fatalism. As Peeples (2004) observes, the narrator's "clinical detachment during the entombment ritual paradoxically reveals his emotional investment in the Usher family's demise" (p. 81). He failed to confirm Madeline's death, which was a clear violation of reason and also foreshadowed that he would eventually succumb to madness.

### 3.2.3 The erosion of narrative coherence

Linguistic shifts in the narrator's tale reflect the decline of his mental state. Descriptions of the mansion once noting "discolored walls" (Poe, 1839, p.1) slowly give way to feverish figurative images of the mansion becoming a "living thing" (p.15), a place full of "the breath of death" (p.16). These fantastic imageries that are not part of the narrative beginning parallel Roderick's own artistic extravagance. Robinson (2010) connects the stylistic coincidence between narrator and character to Lacan's *méconnaissance*, referring to the narrator misidentifying his own madness by attributing it instead to shared feelings for Roderick. Likewise, the narrator's skewed sense of temporality can be observed from how the succession of events remain unspecified and disordered at times, such as when he remarks "I have no words to tell what

length of time elapsed like that" (Poe, 1839, p.12).

### 3.2.4 The uncanny double: narrator and roderick

By this phase, the narrator and Roderick function as psychological doubles. Both engage in rituals of artistic creation—Roderick paints abstract horrors while the narrator reads him a medieval romance—activities that Freud (1919) would classify as attempts to sublimate repressed fears. The narrator's recitation of *The Mad Trist*, a fictional tale within the story, becomes a meta-narrative device: as he describes the hero "breaking through a door" (Poe, 1839, p. 18), the actual sounds of Madeline escaping her tomb synchronize with the story's events. This simultaneity, termed "temporal doubling" by Bonaparte (1949, p. 217), breaks the boundary between fiction and reality, entangling the narrator in the Gothic nightmare he claims to have witnessed only.

## 3.3 The complete collapse of rationality

After the last step of the storytelling for the narrator, his total identification with Roderick Usher was a madness and the physical breakdown of the house. The narrator was completely surrendered to the Gothic absurdity he originally opposed and was marked by the dissolution of his rational identity because of the two literal and figurative symbiosis.

### 3.3.1 Madeline's return: the collapse of reality

Madeline Usher reappears, described as "bloody upon her white robes" (Poe, 1839, p. 20). This event destroys the narrator's last hold on reality. Her return happens at the same time as the narrator reads *The Mad Trist*. This coincidence breaks down the separation between the story and actual events. The narrator reports her "violent and now final death-agonies" (p. 20). His description shows his own mind breaking apart. He changes from watching the horror to joining it directly. Bonaparte (1949) sees Madeline's return as the result of hidden guilt. Bonaparte states that the narrator's "silent complicity in her entombment reflects his unconscious desire for the Ushers' annihilation" (p. 225). Furthermore, Freud (1919) would likely view this moment as uncanny—the return of the repressed in a grotesquely familiar form.

### 3.3.2 Narrative dissolution and linguistic fragmentation

As the mansion crumbles, the narrator's language becomes fragmented and hallucinatory. His account of the storm—"a wild light [...] flickered over the fabric" (Poe, 1839, p. 19)—abandons earlier attempts at scientific explanation, instead adopting Roderick's apocalyptic imagery. The phrase "I saw [...] the mighty walls rushing asunder" (p. 21, emphasis added) emphasizes sensory overload, paralleling Roderick's hypersensitivity. Smith (2018) identifies this stylistic shift as evidence of the narrator's "narrative unreliability reaching its zenith" (p. 145), as his voice merges indistinguishably with the story's Gothic milieu.

### 3.3.3 Flight as psychological surrender

The narrator fleeing the collapsing mansion represents his complete separation from reason. His escape is described chaotically—"I fled aghast" (Poe, 1839, p. 21). This description contrasts strongly with his earlier controlled observations. Importantly, he makes no effort to save Roderick. This suggests he unconsciously understood their shared fate. The mansion's crack, previously called just a "natural crack," now swallows the entire building. This event mirrors the narrator's permanent psychological break.

### 3.3.4 The house as psyche: structural parallels

Poe's architectural symbolism reaches its climax as the physical collapse of the house mirrors the narrator's mental collapse. The "fall" of the House of Usher operates on three levels: the family lineage (Roderick and Madeline), the mansion, and the narrator's psyche. Fisher (2002) notes that Gothic settings often externalize internal states, and here, the narrator's account of the mansion's destruction—"the deep and dank tarn closed sullenly over the fragments" (Poe, 1839, p. 21)—serves as a metaphor for his own submerged rationality.

#### 4 Symbolic collusion: art and architecture as psychological mirrors

The narrator's psychological entanglement with Roderick Usher is further evidenced by his increasingly uncritical engagement with Roderick's artistic creations, which serve as symbolic proxies for the mansion's decay. Roderick's improvised ballad "The Haunted Palace"—a poem embedded within the narrative—explicitly parallels the House of Usher's physical decline with the collapse of a monarch's sanity: "While, like a rapid ghastly river, / Through the pale door / A hideous throng rush out forever" (Poe, 1839, p. 9). The narrator's initial reception of the poem is notably detached; he describes it as "a mere rhymed fantasy" (p. 9), refusing to acknowledge its autobiographical implications for Roderick. Yet, his later recitation of *The Mad Trist*—a medieval romance whose plot synchronizes with Madeline's escape—reveals his subconscious absorption of Roderick's symbolic logic. As Robinson (2010) observes, the narrator's "performative reading" of the tale (p. 134) mirrors Roderick's artistic methods, blurring the line between aesthetic representation and lived horror.

This collusion extends to the narrator's interpretation of the mansion's architecture. Early in the story, he initially rejects Roderick's claim. Roderick believes the house holds "an influence which had moulded the destinies of his family" (Poe, 1839, p. 7). He views this as mere superstition. But after seeing Madeline return, his view changes. He then looks back and begins attributing consciousness to the building. He calls its "fissure" a "wound" (p. 20). This description matches Roderick's earlier personification. This change exemplifies what Todorov (1973) calls the fantastic moment, where the narrator's empirical worldview yields to Gothic ambiguity. The house, like Roderick's art, becomes a canvas for the narrator's psychological fragmentation.

#### 5 Conclusion

Poe's portrayal of a mentally ill patient as the protagonist in the novel is not blind or aimless, nor is it intended to entertain the public. No matter what era, the ideal work must be a microcosm of real life. "He paid close attention to and carefully observed and deeply analyzed the abnormal inner world of people in the social life of the United States at that time, and reflected it in the form of short stories with his own writing style to enlighten readers and warn future generations" (Liu, 2010, p.189-190).

This study examines the significant psychological change undergone by the narrator in "The Fall of the House of Usher." He moves from claiming a rationalist stance to becoming overwhelmed by Gothic irrationality. His experience involves losing authority over his own narrative. It also involves participating in Roderick Usher's madness. Finally, it concludes with his complete yielding to chaos. This transformation reveals Poe's critique of the fragility of Enlightenment rationality. The narrator's collapse is not just a minor detail; it is central to the story's themes of decay and hereditary doom.

The findings match Freud's concept of the "return of the repressed." This concept means hidden fears and guilt come back to harm individuals destructively. Poe uses this psychological collapse to test the limits of rational thought. He shows that external horrors can affect even those who try to stay detached. Baudelaire stated that Poe's works reflect real psychological conditions. They also offer insights that are still important today.

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