

# Mind-body dualism in poe's "the fall of the house of usher"



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The mind-body divide, or mind-body dualism, was a philosophical theory that gained popularity in the seventeenth century and flourished thereafter. In this theory, the mind and body are separate entities, and in literature, this meant that men were normally representative of the mind and women were normally representative of the body. One example of this can be seen in Edgar Allan Poe's gothic short story "The Fall of the House of Usher." Through analyzing Descartes' idea of substance mind-body dualism and the subsequent idea of interactionism, it becomes apparent that the characters of Roderick and Madeline Usher are representative of the mind and body respectively and influence one another accordingly.

Classically, the idea of mind-body dualism originated with the ideas of Plato and Aristotle; however, the more modern versions of dualism, known as substance dualism, are more firmly grounded in René Descartes' Meditations. In this work, he argues that there are "two kinds of substance: matter, of which the essential property is that it is spatially extended; and mind, of which the essential property is that it thinks" (Robinson). In simpler terms, Descartes believed that humans possess a physical, material body and a contemplative mind, both of which are separated from one another. Similarly, because matter and mind are two separate forms of substance, they can function independently of one another. Descartes believed, "Bodies are machines that work according to their own laws. Except where there are minds interfering with it, matter proceeds deterministically, in its own right" (Robinson). Basically, Descartes argued that the body and the mind can function independently: the mind can think without the help of the body, and the body can operate without thought. Descartes' theory of

substance dualism eventually morphed into the theory of interactionism. Interactionism has the same general principles of substance dualism but additionally posits, "mind and body—or mental events and physical events—causally influence each other" (Robinson). With interactionism, the mind and body are separate entities; however, they can also interfere, and therefore influence, one another when need be.

If, as Descartes argues, the mind and body are two separate substances, the characters of Roderick and Madeline Usher represent these two features respectively. In Roderick's letter to the narrator, he states that he has a "mental disorder which oppressed him" (Poe 104). On arriving at the house, the narrator learns that, Roderick has "a mere nervous affliction" and that "He suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses," meaning that all of his senses are heightened, causing him to have adverse reactions to particular scents, sights, sounds, textures, and tastes (Poe 107). One's senses are registered in the brain and made sense of by the mind. If all of Roderick's senses are heightened, there is cause to believe this is a mental, or at least a neurological, issue. Additionally, Roderick is not only plagued with a vulnerability of the senses but also an ever-growing terror. He explains to the narrator, "I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results. I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial, incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation of the soul...I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon all life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR" (Poe 107). Roderick is increasingly paranoid and is fully aware that he may soon lose his mind. This paranoia stems from mental

distress and culminates in fear, only causing Roderick more distress. Both his paranoia and his "acuteness of senses," are unable to be seen or experienced by anyone other than himself, implying that his illness is entirely mental. Because his disease inhabits his mind as opposed to his body, Roderick is able to become the physical representation of the mind.

Alternately, Madeline's illness is entirely physical. The narrator states, "The disease of the lady Madeline had long baffled the skill of her physician. A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character, were the unusual diagnosis," (Poe 108) and that Madeline has a "malady of a strictly cataleptical character" (Poe 112). In order to determine the exact nature of her illness, one must look further into the term "cataleptical." According to Peter Wolf, "Epilepsy and catalepsy were not clearly separated in the minds of people in the early 19th century, and catalepsy may have been used as a diagnostic euphemism for epilepsy" (288). From this definition of the term, one can infer that Madeline was suffering from frequent seizures. The most notable element of seizures is convulsions, which cause the sufferer to shake or jerk uncontrollably. These convulsions are undoubtedly a bodily symptom, as they can be seen and experienced by others. Both Madeline's "gradual wasting away of the person" and tendencies toward seizures lend themselves to the idea that Madeline's illness is entirely in the body, allowing her to represent the body as Roderick represents the mind.

Roderick and Madeline represent the mind and the body respectively, asserting themselves as an example of substance dualism; however,

Roderick's state after Madeline is entombed introduces the idea of  
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interactionism. Almost immediately after Madeline is laid to rest, Roderick begins to change drastically: And now, some days of bitter grief having elapsed, an observable change came over the features of the mental disorder of my friend. His ordinary manner had vanished. His ordinary occupations were neglected or forgotten. He roamed from chamber to chamber with hurried, unequal, and objectless step. The pallor of his countenance had assumed, if possible, a more ghastly hue - but the luminosity of his eye had utterly gone out. The once occasional huskiness of his tone was heard no more; and a tremulous quaver, as if of extreme terror, habitually characterized his utterance. (Poe 112) Whether it is because he does not know how to function without his twin or he possibly suspects she is not dead, Roderick begins to literally go mad. With the body trapped and decaying in a tomb, the mind is influenced to act accordingly. His "nervous affliction" continues to grow worse and is reflected in both his actions and his appearance. As time goes on, Roderick's mental state begins to decline even more so. In the final pages of the story, both the narrator and Roderick begin to hear screaming, grating noises, and the narrator states, "I saw that his lips trembled as if he were murmuring inaudibly. His head had dropped upon his breast - yet I knew that he was not asleep, from the wide and rigid opening of the eye as I caught a glance of it in profile. The motion of his body, too, was at variance with this idea - for he rocked from side to side with a gentle yet constant and uniform sway" (Poe 115). At this point, the narrator and the reader can infer that Roderick has completely lost sight of reality. Both the body and mind are slowly dying, and each one is influencing the other. Roderick's paranoid state caused him to entomb Madeline in the first place, an example of the mind influencing the body, and, because of <https://assignbuster.com/mind-body-dualism-in-poes-the-fall-of-the-house-of-usher/>

this, Madeline is fighting in her grave causing Roderick to go mad, an example of the body influencing the mind.

With the theories of substance dualism and interactionism in mind, one can draw parallels between the characters of Roderick and Madeline Usher and the mind and body respectively and more easily determine how they influence one another. The mind and body are independent of one another, but, when they deem it necessary, they interact and influence each other. This is the case with Roderick and Madeline and their chilling final moments. In the end, both the mind and the body are destroyed due to this power-struggle, ultimately causing the fall of the house and the Usher name.