

Fearing fear itself

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



Fearing Fear Itself Many students find themselves stressing the night before a big test, thinking about how they will fail the test. As a result, they spend more time worrying than actually studying for the test, causing them to, in turn, completely fail the test. In Edgar Allen Poe's, " The Fall of the House of Usher, " Roderick Usher does just this. He not only feels a sense of paranoia as mentioned above, but a sense of fear as well. Roderick becomes so overwhelmed by his setting and atmosphere that he too finds himself in a state of mental illness, which leads to his own downfall. Poe begins his story of terror by speaking of how the exterior of the House of Usher looks. After the narrator receives a letter of request from Roderick, he travels to The House of Usher. Upon approaching the house, the narrator sees " the simple feature 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 which I can compare to no earthly sensation" (Poe 1). This quote shows that the narrator first sees the house as perceived by the naked eye, not from an eye of a person knowing the story that lay behind it. Details such as " rank, " " utter depression, " and " no earthly sensation" foreshadow the lifestyle of Roderick and his sister, Madeline. Living in a house such as this one could only add to the gloom of one's life, just as it adds to Roderick's life. After overlooking his first impression of the house, the narrator " scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building" (Poe 2). He saw that " its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity" (Poe 2) with " discoloration of ages" (Poe 2). While all of the quotes above display what atmosphere the story occurs in, the second set of quotes, found on page two of the story, show exactly

how the house appears. The description of the house this time shows that the house is ancient and discolored from weathering over the years. A house such as this one can have an eerie feeling behind it. This is how Roderick feels about the house, which has also contributed to bringing him down into his mental state. The image of the house also foreshadows the lives of Roderick and Madeline who live inside the house. Once the narrator steps inside the house to speak with Roderick, he sees that the atmosphere plays a role in Roderick's mental illness. From not only living in the empty mansion but being a recluse for years, Roderick's image has dwindled. The narrator "gazed upon him with a feeling half of pity, half of awe" (Poe 3). He had never seen someone's physical appearance change in such a short time as Roderick's had (Poe 3). Roderick's "now ghastly pallor of the skin, and the now miraculous lustre of the eye, above all things startled [the narrator]" (Poe 3). Not only his skin and eyes but, "the silken hair, too, had been suffered to grow all unheeded, and as in its wild gossamer texture, it floated rather than fell about the face" (Poe 3). Dwindling of physical characteristics of a human is a tell-tell sign that their mental state is depleting as well. Poe uses these descriptions of Roderick's image to show Roderick's state of mind without coming straightforward and saying he is now gone into a state of madness. On pages six and seven of Poe's story, Roderick recites a poem, "The Haunted Palace," to the narrator that parallels Poe's story. The fifth and sixth verse resemble Poe's story almost identically as they read, "But evil things, in robes of sorrow, Assailed the monarch's high estate; (Ah, let us mourn, for never morrow Shall down upon him, desolate!) And, round about his home, the glory That blushed and bloomed Is but a dim-remembered

story Of the old time entombed. And travellers now within that valley,
Through the red-litten windows see Vast forms that move fantastically To a
discordant melody; While, like a rapid ghastly river, Through the pale door, A
hideous throng rush out forever, And laugh—but smile no more. Roderick
Usher's poem to the narrator parallels Poe's story to the reader in several
ways. It mentions a " monarch's high estate", " a disremembered story",
along with " a discordant melody. " A " monarch's high estate" is making
reference to the House of Usher, as the Usher family comes with a single line
of descent. The fact that Usher is the only male remaining in this line of
descent, he is expected to pass it on. Unfortunately, he fails to do so. This is
an element that also contributes to his diminishing mental state. The family
is a " disremembered story. " This is seen also through the line of descent
and the way Roderick and Madeline have shut out the world, leading to " a
discordant melody. " Roderick's tale of " The Haunted Palace" also mentions
an entombment. Roderick's sister, Madeline, is ill and dies during the story.
Roderick places her in a vault in their yard, which is very peculiar. The vault
is " small, damp, and entirely without mean of admission for light" with a
door " of massive iron" (Poe 8). This description adds to the eeriness and
gloom of the story's atmosphere. As Roderick continues to tell the narrator a
story of a hermit and a dragon, the narrator observes Roderick fall further
and further from reality, and they both soon realize that Madeline has not in
fact passed away, but has been placed in the tomb alive. This event parallels
Roderick's current state within the Usher mansion; he has been imprisoned
in the house for a long while, looking very near death but not dead. The real
episode of terror comes after Roderick's realization, when " the huge antique

panels to which the speaker pointed threw slowly back, upon the instant, their ponderous and ebony jaws... there did stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher" (Poe 11). Poe describes Madeline's bloody white robe, and how " with a low moaning cry, [she] 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" (Poe 11). This event shows the reader how Roderick's worst fears were acknowledged, and made true by his own sister, Madeline.

Roderick's mental illness and fear led to both the death of his sister, and himself, which is what kept him inside his own death-mansion, the thing he feared for so many years. To symbolize the downfall of Madeline and Roderick Usher, Poe describes, in the final paragraph, what happens to the dreaded House of Usher. He writes, " I gazed, this fissure [of which I have before spoken as extending from the roof of the building, in a zigzag direction] rapidly widened... and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the " House of Usher"" (Poe 11). These last words explain that with the fall of the last remaining heirs of the Usher fortune, the house itself split in two and sank deep into the ground. This creates the ultimate parallel between Roderick and the house itself, so much so that the two have become one in the same. When the house begins to deteriorate, so does Roderick. The death of the brother and sister signify the end of a long line of Ushers, and because no one is left to inherit the house, it sinks into the ground, much like the bodies of Roderick and Madeline Usher will be put back into the ground. The tie between the characters and the setting in " The Fall of the House of Usher" is so strong,

the reader cannot help but notice the parallel situations. By examining the setting and atmosphere of Poe's tale, the reader can better understand Roderick's declining state, Madeline's rapid descent towards death, and the significance of Roderick's story to the narrator. Without noticing the oppressing gloom that hangs over the house, The reader would not be able to fully understand the dark circumstances that are sure to unfold in this classic story. And with this dark tale comes an important lesson: the only thing worse than what you fear is fear itself. Works Cited Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Fall of the House of Usher." Edgar Allan Poe Complete and Unabridged. Ed. Dawn B. Sova. New York: Barnes & Noble, 2006. 301-317. Print.