

Portraying terror and
mirroring the
narrator's sense of
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Edgar Allan Poe was a writer during the 1800's and was well - known for his poems and short stories (biography. com editors). With his use of horror and mystery, Poe was the father of the detective fiction story (biography. com editors). In many of his short stories, the lines between life and reality are seen to be blurry, especially after his death in 1849 (biography. com editors). During the late 1830's, Poe published his first collection of short stories, the Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque. The Fall of the House of Usher and The Pit and the Pendulum were two of the many short stories published within the collection. Within these two short stories, and many of his other ones, Poe uses terror to tell the tale.

As he was writing, Poe was informed of many instances that were real life situations; he used these situations to tell his stories about them through a more fictional mindset. For example, Poe used James Campbell Usher and Agnes Pye Usher - sons of an actor who had previously performed with his mother - to tell the story The Fall of the House of Usher (Semtner). In the beginning of the story, the narrator visits the Usher house to visit his childhood friend, Roderick Usher. Roderick's sister has become ill with a very mysterious disease. She later then dies and is buried in a room of the house. Roderick confesses to the narrator that he has been hearing strange sounds and is afraid that he has buried his sister alive. As his fears are confirmed, Madeline, his sister, stands in the doorway and attacks her brother. Roderick dies of fear as the narrator quickly flees from the property. The real - life usher twins were believed to have been insane; this is where Edgar Allan Poe's inspiration for this specific story has come.

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He also used historical events, such as the Spanish Inquisition, and based *The Pit and the Pendulum* off of it. Pope Gregory IX called on the Inquisition to rid out the heretics in Europe. If the heretics did not want to confess to their crime, they were tortured until they did so. If they completely refused to confess, they were imprisoned and burned at the stake; the same goes for if they were guilty. Spanish leaders King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella asked the Pope's permission to remove all individuals who were not catholic to "purify the people of Spain" (Semtner). In Edgar Allan Poe's story, he writes the story of an individual telling his story of being convicted for heresy. He is brought into a chamber instead of being publicly prayed for and convicted and realizes he is not in a good situation. Although these stories are based on real - life events, Edgar Allan Poe is still able to make these stories dreamlike. By doing so, he portrays horror and uses them to mirror the narrator's sense of reality.

The anonymity of the first-person narration in *The Pit and the Pendulum* creates a fuzzy and gloomy - dream-like - effect which helps the story come off as more terrifying. For example, during the Inquisition, heretics were tortured to death or tortured until they confessed. This was, no doubt, a horrifying experience for all individuals that were put through the trials. This is expressed when the narrator explains the judges' lips to be "whiter than the sheet upon which [he] traces [the] words" and "thin even to grotesqueness" (Poe 3). When the narrator goes on to explain how "[he] saw them fashion the syllables of [his] name," the audience can then see that when his name leaves the judges' lips, it sounds as lifeless as he perceives

their lips to be with the words white and thin to the point of disgust. Later, during the time of his trial, he asks himself, “ Yet what business had I with hope?” (Poe 14). This reveals the obvious sense of hopelessness the speaker now has for his well - being and his thoughts on the chances that he has of making it out of the situation alive. The use of the unnamed narrator allows for any individual to be placed in the narrator’s position. This then helps the reader realize that Poe is using this story to imitate the fears and terror of any individual that was victim to the inquisition, especially with the use of the words “ I” and “ my” repeatedly.

In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the anonymous speaker also tells his story in a first - person narration. In this short story, the effect of anonymous first - person narration allows the speaker to be present during the occurrence or situation, but not all the way physically there. For example, Roderick Usher is very upset that his sister has fallen terribly ill; the illness eventually leads to her death. After they buried her, “ an observable change came over the features of the mental disorder of [his] friend” (Poe 18). The reader can also see that his friend has “ beheld him gazing upon vacancy for long hours, in an attitude of the profoundest attention, as if listening to some imaginary sound” (Poe 18). Here, the speaker is seen to be an observer, almost as if watching Roderick Usher behind a glass wall. There is also the instance as to where the narrator put his hand on his friend’s shoulder and “[the narrator] saw that he spoke in a low, hurried, and gibbering murmur, as if unconscious of my presence” (Poe 24). This brings attention to the fact that the narrator really has no effect on Roderick Usher, making it seem as if he is not really

present; he is just an observer. This is also seen throughout the multiple instances in which the narrator made an effort to lighten Usher's mood after the death of his sister by telling him a story, etc., but this has no effect on him. Lastly, when Madeline appears behind the door, covered in blood "and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame," the narrator becomes fearful of the angry girl (Poe 25). Instead of her acknowledging him, she walks right past him, as if he is not there in the first place, and "[falls] heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death - agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse" (Poe 25). One would think that she would be angry at both individuals for burying her alive, but she just kills her brother, instead of killing the narrator too. This makes it seem as if he was only metaphysically present, creating the dream like aspect of the role of the narrator.

The ability of the narrator to first handedly experience the situation creates the terror. In *The Pit and the Pendulum* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Poe uses personification to create a dreamy effect which, in turn, creates a more terrorizing environment and allows the audience to understand the narrator's sense of reality. To begin, in *The Pit and the Pendulum*, the speaker talks about seven tall candles that seemed as if they were "white slender angles who would save [him]" (Poe 3, 4). This right away represents that the narrator is looking for a resolution in this unreal and terrifying situation. The hope for a dream like resolution to his terrifying situation reveals to the reader that he is not able to process the fate of which his life faces. Throughout his tortuous stay in this dungeon, at one point, the

speaker is introduced to an endless pit. “ In the centre yawned the circular pit from whose jaws I had escaped” (Poe 11). The use of the word “ yawned” indicated that the circumference of this pit must have been very large. Adding on to this, the use of the word “ jaw” and using the word “ yawned” to describe it allows to reader to understand that the narrator makes this pit out to be a monster trying to devour him. After the speaker has avoided the pit, he later finds himself tied up with a sharp, swinging pendulum slowly descending from the ceiling. It is lined up to slice horizontal of his heart. “ The whole [pendulum] hissed as it swung through the air” (Poe 13). Again, Poe uses the word “ hissed” making this object seem like it is an animal trying to kill the narrator - this is seen in the previous example of the pendulum. Again, he tells the audience that that “ pendulum swept so closely over [him] as to fan [him] with its acrid breath” (Poe 13). Using the word acrid to describe the “ breath” or the wind coming from the pendulum swinging suggests that the narrator does not want it getting any close, but in this situation, he cannot really help that. As the narrator describes “ the hissing vigor of [the pendulum’s] descent,” the reader can see the reference again to the pendulum being thought of as some kind of angry animal trying to get to the narrator and harm him (Poe 14). As the speaker is contemplating death, he realizes that “ It was hope that whispers to the death - condemned even in the dungeons of the inquisition” (Poe 15). This is the first time since the speaker has been held captive that he brings up hope. Although the hope “ whispers” he realizes that there is still a chance to escape this possibility of death. The personification allows for an unreal

mindset of the narrator to be portrayed. Poe uses the personification to, not only create more terror and reveal what the narrator thought about the situation, but to make the situation more relatable so every reader can feel the terror those individuals were feeling throughout the Inquisition.

Although there is not much personification in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, there is still a small portion that allows for the creation of terror and the mirroring of the narrator's sense of reality. The observation of "the vacant and eye-like windows" suggests that the house has seen the fall of the Usher family, as the windows are "vacant" and the house is now mostly empty (Poe 3). The repetition of that "the vacant and eye-like windows" suggest that the house itself is alive and is awaiting - foreshadowing - the events that are to come. Also, the narrator realizes "the hideous dropping off of the veil" (Poe 3). This emphasizes the appearance in the narrator's eyes as disappointing and nasty. Through the use of personification, Poe uses this to symbolize the presence of an evil force. The personification allows the house to seem unreal and dream-like. This helps to create and set - up the terror in the beginning and also shows the reader perception of actuality.

The surrealism in *The Pit and the Pendulum* also helps create the dreamy effect. The author has been tortured to an extent to which he feels disconnected from his physical self. He opens with, "I WAS sick - sick unto death with that long agony; and when they at length unbound me, and I was permitted to sit, I felt that my senses were leaving me" (Poe 1). This

suggests that the narrator has been through such a traumatic experience that he cannot tell the difference between what is real and what is not real. For example, when the judges are saying his name, he “shuddered because no sound succeeded” (Poe 3). Also, when he speaks of “seven tall candles” being “white slender angles” reveals to the reader that the speaker is on the brink of insanity. Again, he cannot hear or see things correctly because he cannot perceive reality correctly. This is because the hope he had for being found innocent had been crushed when he was found guilty and given the death penalty, hence why he could not hear a sound.

In *The Pit and the Pendulum*, Edgar Allan Poe uses echoes to create terror. This is first seen when the narrator trips and falls, almost making his way into the endless pit in the floor of the room of the dungeon. As a small piece of debris falls into the pit, there is the sound of it hitting the water, and it is “succeeded by loud echoes” (Poe 9). Using this, Poe brings out a dreamy effect which also creates terror. In this case, the echo represents the emptiness of the well; the amount of them represents the deepness. This creates terror in possible ways that the narrator could fall in at any second, or that he did almost fall in. Considering that the room is very dark at this point, it is very possible for him to fall in, which would be very frightening.

In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the echo takes place when Madeline is mimicking the sounds from the book that the narrator is reading. This is dreamy in fact because it does not seem real – the narrator does not know how these sounds are repeatedly being produced every time he speaks of

one. This also suggests the presence of evil. Typically, whenever watching a ghost show on television and the word evil is said, the audience often gets a very uncomfortable feeling and terror then creeps into their minds. In this instance, the same feeling takes over the audience when the strange echoes are coming out of nowhere.

Many of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories are based off of real-life events. This being said, the way that he incorporates the dream like effect in each of his writing allows the possibility of more horror and terror to take place in the audience's mind as they read. His use of personification suggests that the narrator perceives a more unreal situation than what is taking place; this makes it more terrifying to the audience in ways that it becomes more reliable considering the different characteristics he is allowing these things in the story to have. The use of surrealism in *The Pit and the Pendulum* suggests that the reader is going insane and cannot tell the different between reality and a deception. This also creates terror because it allows the reader to realize the horror the narrator has been through to make him think like he does. Lastly, he uses echoes in order to create a sense of emptiness to emphasize the fact that there is a horrifying truth waited to be revealed. Edgar Allan Poe's use of dreams in his short stories allows the reader to feel more connected to what the narrator feels and allows them to feel more strongly about it.