

Breaking down the features of sonnet x and the fall of the house of usher



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In "Sonnet X" and "The Fall of the House of Usher", Frederick Goddard Tuckerman and Edgar Allan Poe, the respective authors, both argue that to be successful a person must have, as Richard Wilbur describes, rational and non-rational capabilities. Each work depicts a man distraught as a result of the detachment between the rational and non-rational components of his mind. The non-rational element manifests itself in a complete isolation from society and intense suffering. The narrator is obsessed with the non-rational manifestation and cannot rid his mind of it, struggling in vain to better comprehend it. Eventually, in both "Sonnet X" and "Usher", the narrator's misunderstanding of his non-rational side leads to the destruction of that part of his mind. The narrator lives on, though not as a complete person.

"Sonnet X" shares many similarities with Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher". As in "Sonnet X", Poe delves into the human mind to investigate its rational and non-rational components. In both stories, the narrator projects a character who is a figment of his imagination in order to represent his non-rational side. In both works, this projection occurs during the rational character's mid-life crisis, thus suggesting that the realization of time's passing affects the characters in such a way that they begin to neglect their non-rational identities. Because they are unable to properly interpret their non-rational counterparts, both rational characters reject them, causing the death of this piece of their identity.

"Sonnet X" is told through the perspective of a narrator observing the life of a recluse. The narrator describes a man who has completely isolated himself inside his own world, closed off from society in an "upper chamber." This man's life is miserable and desolate; he is trapped within it, "in a darkened
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house.” The narrator observes the man’s seclusion and explains that the man’s life has been riddled with hardships: “ Terror and anguish were his lot to drink”. The secluded man intrigues the narrator, who empathizes with the loner and thinks about him often; he quickly becomes infatuated with the idea of him, and says “ I cannot rid the thought nor hold it close.” It is implied that the narrator is not directly familiar with the man, does not know much about him, and can only “ dimly dream upon that man alone”, which in turn implies the two men have little or no relationship and the narrator is observing from a distance. The narrator dreams of the man in an attempt to understand him, but can still not fathom the wretched life the man leads; indeed, the very thought of it frightens him.

Symbolically, the withdrawn man is a projection of the narrator’s mind. The two characters are components of the same person, one representing the rational portion and the other the non-rational portion. The narrator, by observing and trying to comprehend the man, represents the rational. The man he watches, who is detached from society and living alone in a world distinguished by suffering, represents the non-rational. The narrator, by dwelling on this man, is attempting to understand the non-rational aspect of his own self. Before now, he has neglected this aspect of his being throughout his life, as again suggested in the lines: “ His footsteps reached ripe manhood’s brink; Terror and anguish were his lot to drink.” At this point in his life, the narrator rediscovers the non-rational part of himself, yet fails to comprehend it and is confused and unnerved by how neglected the non-rational aspect has become.

As time passes and the man ages, the rational narrator continues to misunderstand his non-rational projection. Throughout the poem, the passing of time is visible, signifying a transition through life. The narrator has reached middle age, and has thereby realized that his life is fleeting: “ now though the autumn clouds must softly pass.” He senses that time is slipping away and he feels he must make an effort to progress in life and enjoy the pleasures it has to offer: “ the cricket chides.” He begins to understand that, although he has reached the later stages of his life, it can still be appreciated and there is still time to live fully: “ And greener than the season grows the grass.” He cannot fully move on with his life, however. His thoughts still linger upon the miserable man of his dreams, his non-rational identity. “ Nor can I drop my lids nor shade my brows,/But there he stands”, he notes. He feels he cannot accept time and appreciate life until he has dealt with this persistent reminder of his dying non-rational self.

The years of mistreatment of the non-rational self reach a climax as the narrator finally realizes he has destroyed this fragment of his existence. He observes the tormented man standing at the open window of his “ upper chamber”, describes him as “[standing] beside the lifted sash.” Overcome with a rush of emotion, he suddenly realizes the man is contemplating suicide, “ and with a swooning heart, I think.” If this man, the non-rational piece of the narrator’s identity, dies, a piece of the narrator’s soul will die with him. The narrator describes the sloping, black shingles of the house meeting the limbs of a mountain ash: “ Where the black shingles slope to meet the boughs,/And, shattered on the roof like smallest snows,/The tiny petals of the mountain ash.” The shingles, sloping downward, represent

death and contrast with the living and upward-growing branches of the ash. Where life and death meet, shattered petals, cold and lifeless like snow, are scattered. These petals represent the narrator, his life shattered, as he finds himself trapped between life and death. With his non-rational element destroyed, he is no longer a whole human being.

There are many direct parallels in "Sonnet X" to Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher." The narrator of Poe's story describes a journey to visit a childhood friend, Roderick Usher. The writing suggests that the narrator's life is somewhat empty and lacking, for he can take time away from it to visit a lost friend, and he notes: "I had been passing alone... through a singularly dreary tract of country." The ensuing situation is similar to that of "Sonnet X", for here again the narrator obsesses over the reclusive man, interrupting his own life to think of him. Roderick Usher, a projection of the narrator's imagination, represents the non-rational being, and his plight corresponds to that of the man in "Sonnet X." Usher is described as suffering greatly, afflicted by "a mental disorder which oppressed him." The narrator travels to Usher's home to attend to his friend, and during the course of the story he tries his best to understand Usher's condition and to sympathize with his situation - just as the narrator of "Sonnet X" strives to comprehend the man in the chamber. In both cases, the rational character is unable to understand his non-rational counterpart and is simultaneously experiencing the uncertainty of reaching middle age: "in the autumn of the year, the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens." This in turn causes the narrator to examine the passing of time and his own non-rational self. Finally, both stories conclude with the death of the narrator's

non-rational identity. As Usher dies, the House of Usher crumbles and is destroyed, “ the deep and dank tarn [closing] sullenly and silently over the fragment of the House of Usher.” This climax is comparable to the shattered petals in “ Sonnet X,” and both instances represent the permanent destruction of the narrator’s non-rational self. Both rational characters live on, although their lives will remain, from then on, forever incomplete.