

Essay on edgar allen poe's fall of house of usher

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Bipolar disorder affects many people today as well as in the time of Edgar Allen Poe when it was then called melancholia. Poe was diagnosed with this disorder and it plays an integral role in his story, "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839). This story is heavily influenced by this disorder or its presently associated symptoms and also describes one way that bipolar disorder can genetically affect an entire family. To fully understand a story involving this disorder, it is cardinal to know the exact definition of bipolar disorder, as well as its symptoms and previous aliases.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines bipolar disorder as: "a form of mental illness characterized by one or more episodes of mania typically accompanied by one or more episodes of major depression" (Cite?). Some terms used for what is now considered bipolar disorder include melancholia and manic depression. Melancholia is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as: "A pathological state of despondency; severe depression; severe endogenous depression, with loss of interest and pleasure in normal activities, disturbance of sleep and appetite, feelings of worthlessness and guilt, and thoughts of death or suicide. (Cite?). The first person to associate melancholia and madness as two parts of the same disease was Aretaeus from Cappadocia (30-90 AD) (Skeppar 8). Manic Depression is actually included as an equivalent term to bipolar disorder in the Oxford English Dictionary. (Cite?) There are four main stages of bipolar disorder: hypomania, mania, depressed, and mixed. Hypomania and mania share similar symptoms such as racing thoughts, increased physical activity, lack of sleep and hunger, and heightened sensitivity. Hypomania also has a distinct symptom labeled as an increase in goal directed activity.

The depression stage includes symptoms such as constant depression, insomnia or hypersomnia, psychomotor agitation, energy loss, trouble thinking, and indecisiveness. As expected the mixed stage has some common symptoms as the other stages and also more severe such as thoughts of death and suicidal ideations. These symptoms previously mentioned play an immense role in diagnosing the character of Roderick Usher. It is common knowledge that bipolar disorder has symptoms of mood swings both high and low which is why it is justly named.

Not commonly known, however, is the link between artistry and this disorder (Jamison). The wise Aristotle is quoted as saying, " Why is it that all men who are outstanding in philosophy, poetry or the arts are melancholic? " (Jamison 51). A side note to this is evident when Jamison states: " The manic drive in its controlled form and phase is of value only if joined to ability" (Jamison 55). The artistic tendencies frequently common with bipolar syndrome help the reader to diagnose Roderick Usher in the story " The Fall of the House of Usher".

It is overwhelmingly clear that throughout Poe's story, Roderick Usher suffers from bipolar disorder. It is clear from early on in the story that Usher is suffering not only from depression, but also from an illness in his mind as shown in his letter to the narrator: " The writer spoke of acute bodily illness — of a mental disorder which oppressed him — and of an earnest desire to see me, as his best, and indeed his only personal friend, with a view of attempting, by the cheerfulness of my society, some alleviation of his malady. " (Poe).

The narrator also notices his mood swings evidenced by the different ways in which he would talk displayed by this passage: " His voice varied rapidly from a tremulous indecision (when the animal spirits seemed utterly in abeyance) to that species of energetic concision — that abrupt, weighty, unhurried, and hollow-sounding enunciation — that leaden, self-balanced and perfectly modulated guttural utterance, which may be observed in the lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium, during the periods of his most intense excitement. " (Poe). Another way that Usher displays signs of bipolar disorder is through his artistic expression.

Not only does he paint, but he also reads heavily and plays musical instruments which shown a sign of increased goal related activity. Also, Usher " suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; the most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odors of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds, and these from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror. " (Poe). This heightened sensitivity is evidence of the mania stage associated with bipolar syndrome.

Also, a possible episode of mania would be the scene involving Usher's sister coming from the dead. This could surely be seen as an hallucination and sign of a manic episode. To recap, Usher has symptoms from the hypomania, mania, and depressed stages meaning the ailment that he suffers from is not melancholia, but instead a modern case of bipolar or manic depression disorder. One reason for a character in a story having a particular disorder

would be that the author has real life experience with it. Such is the case with Edgar Allen Poe and "The Fall of the House of Usher".

Poe most definitely suffered from what would now be considered a form of manic-depression disorder. During his final year on Earth, he showed signs of mania, constantly relocating to various cities (Meyers 244). Also during this year, he is reported as saying to a friend named Frederic Thomas: "You will be pleased to hear that I am in better health than I ever knew myself to be full of energy and bent on success." (Meyers 245). This evidence of a prolonged state of mania or even hypomania as he reports having an increase in energy, goal related activated, and seems to be experiencing delusions of grandeur.

He also experienced stages of depression including binges of drinking and even hallucinations (Meyers 252). Poe also had a recorded attempt of suicide in November 1848 (Meyers 252). According to Dr. Kay Redfield Jamison, "Poe was scarcely alone in suffering from both manic-depressive illness and alcohol and drug abuse" (Jamison 37). Jamison seems to have diagnosed Poe with manic-depression or bipolar disorder. From other places in Jamison's book, *Touched with Fire: Manic Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*, it's reasonable to believe that Poe's artistry most likely stems from his disorder allowing him to be even more creative.

Perhaps Poe's own psychological problems influenced his portrayal of Usher in this short story. As aforementioned, both Poe and his fictitious character Roderick Usher suffer from bipolar disorder. This was not by coincidence. It seems clear that Poe's reasoning for this is to give the public a way to see inside Poe's on diseased mind and better understand not only his works, but

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also himself. An author's best ways to display his own problems are to weave them into a story as is done in "The Fall of the House of Usher." One can better understand his mind through a story than with descriptions of his symptoms alone.

Bipolar disorder is a hereditary disease. According to Dr. Francis J. McMahon of the National Institute of Mental Health in regards to the genetic inheritance of this disorder, "about two-thirds of the risk for bipolar disorder can be explained by genes" ("NIH"). This information is known due to twin studies: if one identical twin has manic depression then it is a 60 to 80% likelihood that the other twin has it ("NIH"). The genetic inheritance of this disorder amongst sufferers is around 79 to 93% (Backlund 501). This means that most manic-depressive people acquired the trait from family members instead of from environmental factors alone.

The exact genes that cause bipolar disorder are not yet known but different genes have been isolated (Jamison 16). One of these possible genes could be the P2RX7 gene (Backlund 501). This gene affects the way in which dopamine is unleashed in the brain which brings about its association with the manic episodes of manic-depression (Backlund 501). The heredity of bipolar disorder plays an interesting role in "The Fall of the House of Usher". Roderick Usher inherited his manic-depressive disorder in a modernly bizarre way: through inbreeding.

Usher belong to a wealthy prominent family as shown by his massive, gothic style house. Many of these wealthy families practiced inbreeding in order to keep bloodlines strong and to prevent the spreading of wealth. This is shown when the narrator says "I had learned, too, the very remarkable fact, that

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the stem of the Usher race, all time-honored as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain" (Poe).

This quote visibly projects an image of inbreeding as it says the family tree was essentially bare of branches. Due to the influence that genetics plays on bipolar disorder, if one person in his family had it then he is also likely to have it. A lack of genetic diversity means that many other people in his family most likely suffered from the same disorder as him. It seems likely that his sister also suffered due to the constant presence of a doctor in the house.

Early on in the story, the narrator says that the family for generations had been interested in music and the sciences (Poe). When looking at this through a bipolar perspective, these interests could be a derivative of an entire family suffering from the same disorder. Another note is that the narrator says that "'House of Usher' — an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion" (Poe) Therefore, when the House of Usher crumbles at the end of the story; perhaps it is in reality the crumbling of Usher's mind.

The correlation between inbreeding in this story and bipolar disorder is strong. By knowing the way in which inbreeding affects bipolar sufferers, one can better understand the story. Also, the knowledge of Poe's melancholia can also explain why this story may have been written: to portray this disorder in a way in which people can better understand it. A better

understanding of these disorder not only helps people understand the mysterious mind of Poe, but also people they may encounter in real life.