

Structural purposes
and aesthetic
sensations of the
narrator's language
of "fall ...



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The introductory paragraph of "Fall of the House of Usher" (90-91) is a sharp plunge into the deep, haunting tone of this story. The language of the narrative immediately brings the reader into the surreal and horrific world of the Ushers as the unnamed narrator describes his approach to the exterior of the House of Usher. The description is itself sensational, arousing feelings of apprehension and claustrophobia in the reader meant to both convey and support some of the story's larger themes and express a unified aesthetic feeling. And, irrespective of its particular function in this story, the passage is an example of Poe's working beliefs regarding the purpose and formation of literary art. The most immediately striking aspect of the introductory paragraph is its bleak, haunting tone expressed in a winding manner. The very first line has the narrator spit out dreary adjectives, establishing a "dull, dark, and soundless" cloudy autumn day and placing himself in this setting alone on horseback traveling through a "dreary tract of country" towards a "melancholy" house. The building arouses "insufferable gloom" in the narrator with its "sternest natural images of the desolate [and] terrible." The narrator dives into an evaluation of the house's exterior: it is "mere" and "bleak" with "vacant" windows, "rank" sedges, and "decayed," "white" tree trunks. The narrator feels an "utter depression of soul," comparable to an opiate's addict's "after-dream," a "bitter lapse," and "the hideous dropping off of the veil." He feels "an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart," "an unredeemed dreariness of thought" that could not be "tortured" into the "sublime." The narrator must "grapple with shadowy fancies" and is "forced" to accept an "unsatisfactory conclusion" with respect to the "simple natural objects" with a "power" to affect him.

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He hypothesizes that it's possible to "annihilate" this "sorrowful impression" and goes to a "precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn," the reflection in which causes him to "shudder" while gazing down upon images of "the grade sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows." All of these key words and phrases are thrust at the reader within the confines of the very first paragraph of the story. The existence of a frightening tone is unmistakable: at least a half dozen metaphors for some sense of the word "gloomy" appear, particularly "bleak," "decayed," "dull," "dark," "shadowy," and "ghastly." The narrator describes the House's in purely dark terms; there is no redeeming quality to be spoken of about the mansion's facade. He is almost hysterical in his description — how could one structure be quite so funereal? The extremity of this paragraph accomplishes the difficult job of fluidly establishing the irredeemably dismal setting and tone for the rest of the story. Much as the narrator is unable to see the House for anything other than a haunting apparition, there is no let up whatsoever in his tone throughout the entire piece, and his sheer, un-breaking pessimism reflects the later events of the story, in which there is no let up in the horrors of the House and its inhabitants. Poe thus crafts a morbid stage of unrelenting misery and bleakness, precisely the appropriate tone and backdrop for this piece. While the tone of the introduction is fittingly bleak, there is a noticeable over-the-top, nearly absurd aspect of the narrator's description. Many of the descriptive adverbs and adjectives in the paragraph are used in an unusual, metaphoric fashion. The clouds hung "oppressively low," implying an intentionally pernicious nature. The narrator also speaks in intense absolutes: the "dreariness of thought" he experiences

is “ unredeemed”; he approaches a “ precipitous brink,” a phrase that expresses dire anticipation. The narrator goes as far as to personify the House. He notes that it has “ eye-like windows.” The house is “ melancholy” — this can be read as either causing a gloomy state, yet it is more often interpreted as the state of gloom itself. He considers the possibility of the House simply being a series of “ simple natural objects” to be an “ unsatisfactory conclusion”: it could thus be complex, unnatural, living, or a combination of the three. In essence, the narrator’s large amount of concern about the House introduces the mansion as a character in its own right. The sheer extremity of the narrator’s hyperbole serves at least three visible purposes in the narrative. First, it implies that the narrator’s emotional state is relatively weak at the outset of the novel. Second, it braces the reader for the fantastic nature of the events to follow by credulously and seriously setting a mood that’s already both bleak and strongly surreal. It anticipates the connections between symbols, themes, and characters in the rest of the story. Third, the ambiguity and strangeness of the narrator’s descriptions elicit an appealing and artistic feeling of dramatic tension within the story. The House so strongly affects narrator that his spirit is pervaded with a “ sense of insufferable gloom”; he doesn’t know why the mansion is causing this feeling within him. He ponders whether a supernatural aspect could be causing his pain during his approach of the House and goes as far as to attempt to change his actual angle of view of it. The narrator makes several asides throughout the jerky rhythm of the passage, explaining when he reflects and pauses to think, as if the mansion’s exterior were a puzzle and he were describing his thought process while actively trying to solve it.

These stylistic elements form a valid question in the reader's mind about the narrator's mental and emotional health. Being so internally troubled by a dreary exterior seems odd to the reader, and the first view one gets of the narrator is that of a paranoid neurotic. Yet there exists another ambiguity here: is the narrator over-reacting, or is the House of Usher truly haunted? Or are the two symbiotic in their strangeness? The narrator is incapable of describing the House without injecting his own fear — the House is described in the context of its effects on the narrator. Similarly, the House's only strong effect in this paragraph seems to be on the narrator, and the reader only realizes the estate's woebegone nature through a singular character's apprehensive descriptions. This creates an almost symbiotic relationship between the House and the narrator, one that foreshadows the relationships between Roderick and Madeline Usher, degenerates who complement each other, and between the physical House of Usher and the Usher family line. On the latter relationship, the fact that the narrator is so clearly linked to the House by virtue of his explicit reaction to it eases the reader into considering the House to be mystical, symbolic, and deeply linked to Roderick Usher's own emotional state. At last, the narrator's apprehension to the House in the first paragraph sets up the final scene of the story, in which the narrator flees in justified terror. Two major motifs of circumscription of space and symmetry that help form the entire story are born in this paragraph. The action here takes place entirely outside the House. However, the exterior elements are burdensome: it is a "dull, dark, and soundless day" in Autumn, and the clouds are hanging "oppressively low." The narrator is traveling towards a "ghastly" House whose exterior deeply and adversely affected

him. Instead of leaving immediately, he instead continues — trapped by a commitment that would be revealed later in the opening paragraphs — and mentally fixates on his the misery the House causes. The exterior has, essentially, begun to threaten his mind. The steadiness of the rhythm and the depth of the diction in the opening paragraph itself represent a form of claustrophobia. The heavy, brooding language comes from the narrator's feelings towards the House, and the depth of the language even causes the reader to feel as oppressed as the narrator. This sensation of claustrophobia sets up the more serious cramped nature of the home's interior. It steadily lays the foundation for the deep effect the House has on its secluded inhabitants, while the complex language builds a barrier between the reader and Roderick Usher, further defining the depths of Usher's hermitage. There is, in addition, an element of symmetry in the opening paragraph. The narrator tries to see the House differently by looking at its reflection in a small lake, yet ultimately cannot see the House as any less horrifying. Symmetry is a major building block of the story as a whole. The House suffers from a fissure which, when extended, is the means of its physical destruction. (93, 109) The characters of Roderick and Madeline Usher are reflexive twins with complementary deformities: Roderick, a sensitive aesthete, lacks a physical connection to the world; his sister, a physically strong cataleptic, lacks a mental connection to the world, as evinced by her lack of presence in the story in contrast with Roderick's relative garrulousness. There is symmetry in the unfolding of the events of the story as well. The narrator begins with his apprehensive arrival to the House; he ends fleeing from it. The circumscription of space and symmetry extend past

their need to enhance the themes of the story, and can be understood as elements that enhance the story's structure and focus. On the matter of circumscription of space, Poe wrote in "Philosophy of Composition": "[I]t has always appeared to me that a close circumscription of space is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident- it has the force of a frame to a picture. It has an indisputable moral power in keeping concentrated the attention, and, of course, must not be confounded with mere unity of place. (438) Thus, Poe maintains the concentration and mood of the story by enclosing the narrator and other characters in such a restricted, dreary atmosphere. Poe also wrote of his meticulous planning of a work from beginning to end, arguing that "every plot, worth the name, must be elaborated to its denouement before anything be attempted with the pen" (430). The visible elements of symmetry in story as a whole nearly echo Poe's mathematical and systematic approach to the craft of writing. The structured order of the piece, which emanates from its composition, through its very form enhances the significant overtones of symmetry. The haunting flipped image of the House of Usher in a dark lake — perhaps through calculation on the part of Poe — neatly fits in with this structure. Perhaps the most significant function of the opening paragraph in "Fall of the House of Usher" is its effort in creating a strong sensation in the reader. As stated above, the extremity and the heaviness of the paragraph's language foster a powerfully dark mood at the story's outset and helps set off a steady tone, characterization, and major themes. This mood also has a calculated effect on the reader's emotions. The jarring, descriptive, and surreal nature of the tone along with the heavily personal, internal, and exact manner of the

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narration brings the reader deep inside the story's haunting atmosphere. This was almost certainly Poe's intention. In "The Poetic Principle," Poe also wrote about purpose of literary art with respect to "elevating the soul": I need scarcely observe that a poem deserves its title only inasmuch as it excites, by elevating the soul. The value of the poem is in the ratio of this elevating excitement. But all excitements are, through a psychal necessity, transient. That degree of excitement, which would entitle a poem to be so called at all, cannot be sustained throughout a composition of any great length. (449)The desire to skillfully create a unique sensation or excitement rests at the heart of Poe's aesthetic. While the mechanics of forming a layered, structured, and intelligent piece are spread out around the whole of "Fall of the House of Usher," every single paragraph, including the initial one, is replete with the strong, effective language of a dreary, ominous mood. Evaluation of the sum of the story's paragraphs is unnecessary to see the strength of this form in any one individual excerpt. It is overt in this paragraph, as in the specific Gothic language described above, which serves as more than a backdrop to the story's events. It comprises the flesh of the story, the language that deeply affects readers as much as the plot, conflict, and characters, which are fully developed in subsequent paragraphs. Poe's aesthetic incorporates the ideal of art for the sake of art. In "The Philosophy of Composition," he wrote "Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem" (433). He defined this Beauty as: excitement or pleasurable elevation of the soul. It by no means follows, from anything here said, that passion, or even truth, may not be introduced, and even profitably introduced, into a poem for they may serve in elucidation, or aid the general effect, as do

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discords in music, by contrast- but the true artist will always contrive, first, to tone them into proper subservience to the predominant aim, and, secondly, to unveil them, as far as possible, in that Beauty which is the atmosphere and the essence of the poem. (434)All of these aesthetic sensibilities are certainly evident in the opening paragraph. Here is a paragraph that sets an unmistakable mood, creates tension, offers characterization, echoes some of the overarching themes of the composition, and, at last, manages to create a beautiful and passionate sensation within the reader. The concept of sensation as evident here, and it is a key element of the Decadent aesthetic. Indeed, the narrator, almost impersonating the reader, describes the House of Usher in terms of his immediate perception of and emotional reaction to the exterior features: he “ paused to think,” says that he knows “ not what it was,” and bombards the reader with introspective rhetorical questions asking what “ so unnerved” him about the House. The narrator is, perhaps, nearly a Decadent reader himself, and the meticulous “ details of the picture” which Poe has painted into the House of Usher is nearly a work all by itself.