Madness and Horror in Edgar Allan Poe's Short Stories

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Završni rad

Mentorica: izv. prof. dr. sc. Biljana Oklopčić

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Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Biljana Oklopčić, Associate Professor

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Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe is an author whose contributions to American Literature are great. He is known for his creative short stories and poems, but also for the invention of crime fiction. His unique style of writing stems from Gothic fiction, which is known for its dark and symbolic setting, horror atmosphere, mysterious characters and events as well as evoking fear. Furthermore, the peculiarity of his work is seen through his fascination and desire to explore the secrets of human psyche, especially madness as the dark and macabre side of human mind. Thus, he expressed this fascination through his short stories. Some of his most famous and eerie stories that deal with madness, and which are analyzed in this paper, are undoubtedly "The Black Cat," "The Tell-Tale Heart," and "The Fall of the House of Usher." They evoke feelings of horror within the readers through portraying the narrations of individuals whose ill mind has control over them and thus makes them do the most repulsive deeds possible. The detailed portrayal of madness and its manifestation through the narrators' behavior, the horror, the suspense, and the first person narrator is what makes these stories so terrifying, yet so stirring. Consequently, this paper will offer the portrayal of some of Poe's most prominent features of writing, the analysis of the stories in terms of madness and horror, and, lastly, the comparison of the stories.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, madness, horror, "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," "The Fall of the House of Usher"

Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe can be considered as one of the most prominent and versatile authors of the Romantic period, having written a great number of short stories, intriguing poems as well as inventing the genre of modern detective fiction. In his work, led by the Romantic interest in human mind, he was particularly intrigued by human psyche and its processes, exploring madness as a dark side of human psyche. Thus, his curiosity for the psyche manifested in his literary works, especially in his short stories "The Black Cat," "The Tell-Tale Heart," and "The Fall of the House of Usher" where the unsettling atmosphere sends chills down the readers' spine.

"The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart" are also known as the stories of the psychotic personality where the characters fall into the state of madness and, consequently, carry out the most abominable deeds possible. The unnamed narrator in "The Black Cat," led by a sudden loathing towards his once admired cat, decides to torture it and ultimately kills it by hanging it on a tree. "The Tell-Tale Heart," similarly, deals with an unnamed narrator who falls into madness because he is bothered by an old man's sick eye. The sight of that eye triggers him to the point of suffocating the old man. What is especially ghastly about these stories is the fact that the characters try to give a sensible interpretation of their insane and uncontrollable acts in a confident way.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is Poe's famous Gothic horror story, which encompasses some of the crucial elements of Gothic fiction such as the setting in an old, deteriorating mansion isolated in a far-away countryside, the atmosphere of mystery and the supernatural as well as the deteriorating state of Roderick Usher, caused by his beloved sister's death.

Consequently, the aim of this paper is to discuss how madness, accompanied by the horror atmosphere, manifests itself and differs in these stories through the analysis of the two unnamed narrators in "The Black Cat" and "The Tell Tale Heart" and through Roderick Usher in "The Fall of the House of Usher" in order to get a better understanding of Poe's exceptional literary work. The paper consists of four parts, the first one being the features of Poe's literary work; the second part is dedicated to the analysis of "The Black Cat"; the third part deals with "The Tell-Tale Heart," and finally, the fourth part will focus on "The Fall of the House of

Usher.” Finally, the conclusion will offer the comparison of the stories in terms of how madness, accompanied by horror, manifests itself.

1. The Features of Poe's Literary Work

Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) is an American writer who is well-known for his accomplishments in the area of short stories, poems, and detective fiction. In other words, he is praised for refining the short story genre as well as inventing famous detective fiction. To be precise, his respectable literary work includes "the publication of more than 350 poems, short stories, and critical reviews and essays, and his influence in creating a uniquely American form of literature" (Sova 3). However, Poe did not have an easy childhood as his father abandoned their family, leaving the three children with their ill mother who soon died due to tuberculosis. Thus, Poe was "orphaned at an early age" (VanSpanckeren 41). In addition, according to Sova, his life was marked by "gambling, drinking, addiction to opiates, and other profligate behavior, combined with his marriage to a 13-year-old cousin" (3). As a result, "he was doomed to live a lonely and miserable life all his lifetime. His creation reflected his unique life experience, which laid a strong foundation to the unique style of his work" (Sun 97).

Poe was especially intrigued by Gothic fiction whose main features are mystery, evoking fear and terror, supernatural occurrences, horror atmosphere, and dark setting. Consequently, these Gothic features are present throughout his works. Moreover, Poe was fascinated with the human psyche and, thus, presented this fascination in his works. More precisely, he was intrigued by the dark and eerie side of human mind: madness. As VanSpanckeren notes: "to explore the exotic and strange aspect of psychological processes, Poe delved into accounts of madness and extreme emotion. The painfully deliberate style and elaborate explanation in the stories heighten the sense of the horrible by making the events seem vivid and plausible" (42). When it comes to the characters, it can be said that Poe writes about individuals whose madness creates complexity, but also makes them intriguing and mysterious:

> Poe's characters are undeniably complex; goaded and tormented by imps of the perverse, inspired by vengeance yet racked with guilt, fascinated by and attracted to death yet fearfully and frequently grotesquely repelled by it, they display an ambivalence that is beyond the too often reductive psychological or physiological explanations of insanity - though insanity, or near insanity, is often a product of this ambivalence. (Stahlberg 16)

Another prominent feature of Poe's literary expression is the use of the first person narrator. According to Sun, unlike other American writers who used the third person technique, Poe decided to use the first person perspective with the aim of familiarizing the readers with the narrator's thoughts and his overall inner state of mind. He also maintains that Poe's aim was not merely stating the reasons for all the heinous crimes, but rather he wanted to depict characters' inner worlds and their psychological processes while they share their eerie stories. What is impressive about the way that he depicts these processes is the fact that he is very detailed and creative, which makes it easier for the readers to truly indulge in the mysteries of the stories. Moreover, by choosing the first person narration, the readers get the feeling of intimacy. In other words, the readers feel as if the narrator is disclosing the story and his feelings to every single reader personally, which consequently has a stronger effect on the readers and thus creates a sense of reality and vividness (Sun 95).

Moreover, according to Sun, suspense and mystery are also the features that make Poe's work so captivating. In other words, Poe's unique style of writing creates suspense among the readers. In this suspense, the readers often wonder what happened, if it was real or just a product of the narrator's mind. The intriguing fact is that Poe never revealed an explicit answer to the readers' suspense, which consequently gave space for various explanations and theories. Thus, this makes his stories so mysterious (Sun 95). Also, what makes some people so attracted to his stories is the curiosity. Namely, from Sun's point of view "the readers and the people who have a normal life have an intense curiosity about those hardly intelligible and weird things. This curiosity comes from a timid, proper, and disciplined man who wants to pry into the inner heart of those who are wicked and violent" (Sun 97).

It can be said that Poe's stories evoke feelings of horror among the readers. Normally, feelings of horror have negative connotations, but Poe wanted the readers to experience beauty in horror. As a writer, his aim was evoking emotional response in readers and, in this sense, he wanted the readers to experience the thrill and tension that comes from the horror:

> Under the condition of no real danger, Gothic fiction creates lots of horrible scenes which bring a strong thrill to people and make people feel safe while experiencing the extreme danger and death. People are provided with a particular relaxation and pleasure. That is where the endless charm of Gothic fiction lies in. (Pang, Wang, and Hu 19)

2. “The Black Cat”

According to Sova, the beginning of the story is marked by contradiction and irony as the narrator refers to the events that have happened as “a series of mere household events” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 3) and “nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects” (Poe 3), yet he is in jail with a death sentence (Sova 34). Here, the readers can see that something about these statements is strangely uncommon and even slightly frightening, considering the fact that the narrator is imperturbably speaking of something terrifying he had done, otherwise he would not have ended up in prison, sentenced to death. Nonetheless, he continues in sharing the story in detail, starting from his early childhood when he was known as a loveable child who was particularly affectionate towards animals:

> From my infancy I was noted for the docility and humanity of my disposition. My tenderness of heart was even so conspicuous as to make me the jest of my companions. I was especially fond of animals, and was indulged by my parents with a great variety of pets. With these I spent most of my time, and never was so happy as when feeding and caressing them. (Poe, “The Black Cat” 3)

Even in his manhood, the narrator did not lose these virtues, in fact, as he grew older, his love towards animals grew stronger and, after getting married, he and his wife acquired a great amount of various animals: “birds, gold-fish, a fine dog, rabbits, a small monkey, and *a cat*” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 3). One animal in particular held a special place in his heart: “Pluto—this was the cat’s name—was my favorite pet and playmate” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 4).

However, his cordiality suddenly shifts and he “grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 4). Unfortunately, his wife and animals suffer as he becomes violent and unrecognizable. The first instance of his madness is clearly visible when, upon coming back home one night “much intoxicated” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 5), he cold-bloodedly cuts one of the cat’s eyes from its socket. The description of his inner state of mind upon committing the wrongdoing gives away the notion that he has lost his reason, but he rationalizes it by blaming it on the large amounts of alcohol he had consumed earlier that night: “the fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, ginnurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame” (Poe, “The

Black Cat" 5). Gradually, his psychological state worsens and he hangs his once so beloved cat on a tree blaming "the spirit of PERVERSENESS" (Poe, "The Black Cat" 5) for his deed. Furthermore, Elswick notes that the narrator uses perverseness as a means of rationalization for his madness, explaining how all people have experienced it (2). The narrator wonders: "Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or a stupid action, for no other reason than because he knows he should not?" (Poe, "The Black Cat" 6). By doing this, Elswick argues, the narrator uses the bandwagon effect to make himself more relatable:

> He uses the bandwagon effect to make his story believable, strongly reinforcing the idea that he is not mad. Doing this, the narrator attempts to connect with his readership, or the person he is confessing to, in order to conceal or overpower the idea he may be under the influence of madness and tilt the listener's beliefs toward the unexplainable and out of the fault of the narrator. (2)

The series of events that follows further incite the feelings of horror and disbelief. Namely, soon after the mutilation and murder of the cat, the narrator's house burns down and the detail that shows up on a remaining bedroom wall leaves the readers truly appalled: "the figure of a gigantic cat. The impression was given with an accuracy truly marvellous. There was a rope about the animal's neck" (Poe, "The Black Cat" 7). It can be assumed that any sane man would question this chain of events with true fear and incredulity, even wondering if there might be something supernatural going on, but the narrator again has a "hectic urge to establish a kind of reason in the story" (Adhikari 182) and thus he "offers an explanation so preposterous that it ranks among American literature's all-time whoppers" (Amper 480):

> The cat, I remembered, had been hung in a garden adjacent to the house. Upon the alarm of fire, this garden had been immediately filled by the crowd—by some one of whom the animal must have been cut from the tree and thrown, through an open window, into my chamber. This had probably been done with the view of arousing me from sleep. The falling of other walls had compressed the victim of my cruelty into the substance of the freshly-spread plaster; the lime of which, with the flames, and the ammonia from the carcass, had then accomplished the portraiture as I saw it. (Poe, "The Black Cat" 7)

After the terrible misdoing, the narrator soon gets a strong desire to acquire a new cat, as similar to the maimed one as possible, "as a mark of repentance of his misdeed" (Adhikari

182): “I went so far as to regret the loss of the animal, and to look about me, among the vile haunts which I now habitually frequented, for another pet of the same species, and of somewhat similar appearance, with which to supply its place” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 8). The cat he comes across one night, strange as it seems but as he confidently claims, looks like Pluto: “it was a black cat—a very large one—fully as large as Pluto” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 8) that “also had been deprived of one of its eyes” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 9). Yet, there is a notable difference between the two cats: namely “this cat had a large, although indefinite splotch of white, covering nearly the whole region of the breast” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 8). Elswick claims that the narrator’s madness is manifested here through hallucinations because the chances of finding a cat almost identical to the cat he ruthlessly murdered are almost impossible (3). Another instance of hallucinating is the strange white spot on the back of the new cat. Seemingly, it was just an indeterminate white spot, but as the narrator later suddenly claims:

> It was now the representation of an object that I shudder to name—and for this, above all, I loathed, and dreaded, and would have rid myself of the monster had I dared—it was now, I say, the image of a hideous—of a ghastly thing—of the GALLOWS!— oh, mournful and terrible engine of Horror and of Crime—of Agony and of Death ! (Poe, “The Black Cat” 10)

The sudden shift in perception can be considered as a clear sign of madness in which he “hallucinates an image of his guilt onto the cat, a seeming twin of his first victim” (Elswick 3).

After the heinous discovery, the feeling of loath towards the creature consumes the narrator: “Evil thoughts became my sole intimates—the darkest and most evil of thoughts” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 11). One fateful day, as he was accompanied by his wife into the cellar, the cat cut through his way almost making him fall. This action, as he claims, drove him “to madness” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 11) and he wanted to slaughter the cat with an axe, but the interference of his wife enraged him even more. Consequently, with “rage more than demoniacal” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 11), he murders his wife with an axe. The horror that follows leaves the readers utterly appalled. Namely, the narrator does not feel any remorse for brutally murdering his wife. What is more, after the “hideous murder” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 11) was “accomplished” (Poe, “The Black Cat” 11), he moves on to concealing her body. Frightful as it is, it seems as if the whole process of concealing the body is like an adventure for him, as his mind was teeming with different ideas:

> Many projects entered my mind. At one period I thought of cutting the corpse into minute fragments, and destroying them by fire. At another, I resolved to dig a grave for it in the floor of the cellar. Again, I deliberated about casting it in the well in the yard—about packing it in a box, as if merchandise, with the usual arrangements, and so getting a porter to take it from the house. (Poe, "The Black Cat" 11)

Finally, the narrator decides to place his murdered wife into a wall. The action was successfully executed, the cat was also gone, and the narrator was ecstatic. His "happiness was supreme" (Poe, "The Black Cat" 13) and "no guilt mars his conscience or disturbs him" (Elswick 4). Similarly, when the police arrive to investigate, they are unable to find any evidence of the murder. Ultimately, the narrator's pride and self-satisfaction destroy him when, upon the failed police investigation, out of pure happiness, which "was too strong to be restrained" (Poe, "The Black Cat" 13), he decides to knock on the same wall he placed his wife into, which marks the beginning of his downfall:

> No sooner had the reverberation of my blows sunk into silence, than I was answered by a voice from within the tomb!—by a cry, at first muffled and broken, like the sobbing of a child, and then quickly swelling into one long, loud, and continuous scream, utterly anomalous and inhuman—a howl—a wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the dammed in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation. (Poe, "The Black Cat" 14)

Everybody present is filled with terror and disbelief, the atmosphere of horror rising with every sound, until the wall finally collapses and reveals the motionless body of the narrator's wife accompanied by another creature:

> The corpse, already greatly decayed and clotted with gore, stood erect before the eyes of the spectators. Upon its head, with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman. I had walled the monster up within the tomb. (Poe, "The Black Cat" 14)

Moreover, it is interesting to note how Poe connects the techniques of crime confessions to expose the crime in the story: according to Kassin and McNail (qtd. in Adhikari 182-83), there are two ways to make the suspect confess the crime: the first one by

exercising power and the second by using the method of befriending the suspect. These techniques, which are regularly employed in criminal investigation, can be beneficial because the suspect may assume that the investigators will be tolerant towards the crime and thus confess the misdeed. The police also show no conjecture with the aim of alleviating the suspect from the feeling of fear (Adhikari 183). Similarly, in "The Black Cat," "the narrator seeing the calmness and satisfaction of the police rapped heavily with his cane on that very portion where he has deposited the body of his wife that ultimately brings the crime into light" (Adhikari 183).

Another essential aspect to analyze is the narrator's consumption of alcohol. In other words, he blames the numbing effects of alcohol or, as he calls it "Fiend Intemperance" (Poe, "The Black Cat" 4), for his sudden change of attitude and behavior towards the cat. However, as Elswick claims, alcohol cannot be the reason for committing such heinous deeds because it is introduced as "a momentarily lapse rather than a lasting addiction" (Elswick 4). That is, he mentions being under the influence of it only upon mutilating Pluto, but there is no direct mention of it when it comes to his murder, as well as the murder of his wife (Stark qtd. in Elswick 4). In fact, Elswick claims that "no reasonable excuse can account for his murder of the animal other than he wished to kill it and therefore did so" (4). Therefore, "his madness, goaded into a frenzy by the cat and his wife's intrusion in his attempted murder of it, is the true reason behind his actions" (Elswick 4).

Furthermore, for the purposes of understanding the symbolism behind the title, it is important to analyze some of the meanings behind the term "the black cat." It is widely known that there are various superstitions present when it comes to black cats. Namely, some cultures believe that seeing a black cat represents good luck, while others consider them to be a sign of calamity or death. According to Lazim, the first instances of symbolism can be seen in the beginning of the story when the narrator's superstitious wife expresses her belief on the meaning of black cats. Namely, she "made frequent allusion to the ancient popular notion, which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise" (Poe qtd. in Lazim 58). The narrator confidently dismisses this belief, not realizing that this same black cat will eventually embitter his life. Therefore, "the *black cat* as *sign* powerfully represents, not only the mammal beast in the physical world, but also the concept of death which is organically rooted in the veins of the story" (Lazim 58). Furthermore, there is another intriguing symbolism behind the name of the cat – Pluto. In "Greek and Roman mythology, Hades, god of the dead and the underworld [is] also called Ades; Aides, Aidoneous, Pluton" (Mercatante and Dow qtd.in Lazim 58).

The horror is present throughout the entire story, namely “the maiming of Pluto, its eventual murder, and the horrifying murder and stashing of his wife are such brutalities that they become effective subjects of horror. Even with these topics, however, the true terror in ‘The Black Cat’ is the narrator’s madness and his lack of reason” (Elswick 5).

3. “The Tell-Tale Heart”

“The Tell-Tale Heart” is one of Poe’s shortest Gothic horror stories. Nevertheless, it manages to portray the deterioration of a madman in a truly startling way. Similarly as in “The Black Cat,” there is an unnamed narrator who determinedly presents a strange and terrifying chain of events. Consequently, the first person narration “allows the reader to see into the mind of the madman who commits so heinous a crime” (Sova 173).

Right from the beginning of the story, the narrator strongly rejects any possibility of him being mad: “TRUE!—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?” (Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” 3). He even provides the reasons for his alleged sanity –namely, he claims that a madman would not have been able to tell this story so clearly and in detail as well as carry out his plan so carefully and thoughtfully: “Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution— with what foresight—with what dissimulation I went to work!” (Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” 3). Therefore, “the narrator seeks to convince readers that his ability to engage in systematic action must prove him to be sane, despite the fact that such action is directed toward committing a heinous crime” (Sova 174). It can be said that he is being overly protective towards himself, so much so that his statement creates a contradictory effect and “only increases the reader’s conviction about his lack of sanity” (Sova174).

The narrator begins his alarming story by stating that there was really no particular reason for committing such a ghastly murder. He lived with a friendly old man whom he cherished very much: “object there was none. Passion there was none. I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire” (Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” 3). However, there was one thing that started aggravating him to the point of insanity: the man’s strange-looking eye: “I think it was his eye! yes, it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture—a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye for ever” (Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” 3).

The unduly loathing towards the old man’s eye is “the first sign of his madness“ (Sova 174), which gradually deteriorates to the point of plotting a murder. Every night for seven days straight around midnight, the narrator goes to the old man’s room with a lantern and

points the light towards him, but the old man remains asleep and the narrator cannot execute his plan because "it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye" (Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart" 4). Moreover,

> there is a tension between love and hate capacities of the narrator; he loves the old man but he hates his vulture's eye. This paradox explained by Poe half a century before Freud made it a leading concept in his theories of mind and explored the psychological complication of human mind that people sometimes harm even those persons whom they love or need in life. (Amir 604)

However, on the eighth night the narrator feels something special. In his madness, he feels powerful, his mind is clear, and he is determined to execute the deed: "Never before that night had I felt the extent of my own powers—of my sagacity. I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph. To think that there I was, opening the door, little by little, and he not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts" (Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart" 4). The horror of the statement lies in the fact that he seems to enjoy his madness and the urge to kill. Finally, on the eighth fateful night, the old man wakes up and the narrator points the lantern towards him, revealing the eye. Upon seeing the eye, the narrator "grew furious" (Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart" 5). Moreover, except the eye, there is another thing that infuriates him even more, driving him deep into uncontrollable madness: "there came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I knew that sound well too. It was the beating of the old man's heart. It increased my fury, as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage" (Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart" 6).The narrator's madness reaches the level of hallucination as he is suddenly able to hear the man's heartbeat. However, he denies any possibility of madness and repeatedly tries to cleverly convince the readers that he is sane: "and now have I not told you that what you mistake for madness is but over-acuteness of the senses?" (Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart" 6). The narrator's constant need to secure himself and his sanity points out the innovative nature of Poe's story:

> The innovation of the story is that with all its genre, subgenre and philosophy, it remains a masterpiece of narrative art and the narrator as if always conversing with the reader, trying to clear even the slightest vagueness that they might attribute, justify the breaks between the activities and thoughts that they might term as insane or incomplete and thus always providing the psychological reasons behind his acts. (Adhikari 181)

When the sound of the old man's heartbeat becomes insufferable, the narrator finally suffocates the old man by throwing a mattress over him and pressing it until he cannot hear the sound of the heartbeat. After murdering the old man, the narrator is relieved as "there was no pulsation. He was stone dead. His eye would trouble me no more" (Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart" 6). The process of hiding the dead body brings terror to the readers as the narrator "becomes satiated and quite complementary at his own sagacity, how wisely and cunningly all had been done" (Adhikari 181):

> First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs. I then took up three planks from the flooring of the chamber, and deposited all between the scantlings. I then replaced the boards so cleverly, so cunningly, that no human eye—not even his—could have detected any thing wrong. There was nothing to wash out—no stain of any kind—no blood-spot whatever. I had been too wary for that. A tub had caught all—ha! ha! (Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart" 7)

The arrival of the police prompted by loud noises heard by the neighbors does not trouble the narrator at all. In fact, he is completely serene because, as he claims, "for what had I to fear?" (Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart" 7). His pride and self-satisfaction are at its peak when he decides to take the officers to the crime scene where he places his chair right under the spot where he deposited the old man's body. They are chatting and everything is going well until the narrator suddenly starts feeling uneasy and hearing strange noises: "My head ached, and I fancied a ringing in my ears" (Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart" 8). Furthermore, as the time goes on and the sound is getting more distinct, he becomes more and more irritable with "violent gesticulations" (Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart" 8). He figures that if he can hear the disquieting sound, then the officers must hear it too: "They heard!—they suspected!—they knew!—they were making a mockery of my horror!" (Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart" 8). Finally, the narrator, "overwhelmed by guilt" (Sova 174), breaks down with paranoia, his madness taking over him: "I felt that I must scream or die!—and now—again!— hark! louder! louder! louder! louder!— 'Villains!' I shrieked, 'dissemble no more! I admit the deed!—tear up the planks!—here, here!—it is the beating of his hideous heart!'" (Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart" 8).

Consequently, the feeling of guilt plays a crucial role in the narrator's downfall. Sun claims that the sound of the heartbeat was just a projection of his own feelings. The fact is that the officers did not hear the sound of the heartbeat because the sound was non-existent as the

man was murdered. He goes on to conclude that the sound was just an illusion prompted by horror or the narrator's culpable conscience (Sun 95).

Another important theme in the story is the theme of time. Even though it may not be so apparent, it bears an intriguing symbolism. Sova argues that Poe uses flashbacks to hint that the narrator was planning the murder, i.e. the time span of seven nights of observing the old man and the killing on the eighth night. It is also important to mention that the narrator did not perform the murder until he felt that everything was perfect (Sova 174). The sound of the heartbeat, according to Sova, is also an important symbol because the heartbeat whose sounds resemble that of a watch "leads him to confess the crime" (174).

4. "The Fall of the House of Usher"

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is by many considered to be one of the best literary works of Gothic fiction, which, in its complexity, "explores the capacity for experiencing fear, hysteria and madness. All that lies on the dark side of the mind; what lurks on and beyond the shifting frontiers of consciousness" (Amel 5). Furthermore, Sova notes that the popularity and the success of the story may emerge from Poe's own identification with the characters:

> Many critics believe this tale reveals the most about Poe's life—from one critic's assertion that the description of Roderick Usher is "the most perfect pen-portrait of Poe which is known" to another's suggestion that references to "the morbid condition of the auditory nerve" and the shifting visual imagery in the mansion unmistakably reflect a familiarity with the effects of opium. Certainly, the wasting away of Madeline Usher strongly calls to mind the sufferings of Poe's child-bride Virginia Clemm, though Virginia suffered her first serious illness in 1842, after the story's publication. (Sova 68)

One of the most prominent features of Gothic literature is the portrayal of the setting, namely a dark, frightening setting, usually accompanied by an old, deteriorating and mysterious mansion that carries deep, dark secrets. Consequently, this setting creates an atmosphere of fear, horror, and discomposure. This feature of Gothic literature is also very prominent in the short story and carries an important meaning as "the atmosphere is used extensively to do many things. The author uses it to convey ideas, effects, and images. It establishes a mood and foreshadows future events. Poe communicates truths about the character through atmosphere" (Pang, Wang, and Hu 17).

Moreover, the narrator opens his detailed testimony by describing the setting as he approaches the Usher mansion with the aim of visiting his old childhood friend Roderick Usher who is in a desperate mood and, thus, needs a friend to comfort him. The choice of words Poe uses in the description of the landscape sets the atmosphere of the story. Namely, the narrator arrives on "a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 3). The use of adjectives and the fact that the story is set in the autumn season when the nature is slowly dying immediately sets the atmosphere of bleakness. Similarly, when it comes to the choice of adjectives in the story, Pang, Wang, and Hu notice that Poe "uses descriptive words such as decayed, strange, peculiar, gray, mystic, gothic,

pestilent, dull and sluggish to create the atmosphere. Poe's meticulous choice of words creates a very effective atmosphere in the story" (17). Furthermore, an even more apparent indication of a horror atmosphere is the House of Usher itself. Upon arriving and seeing the house, the narrator is suddenly struck with "a sense of insufferable gloom" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 3). He notices that something about the house is unsettling, even terrifying, but cannot grasp the reason for feeling so uneasy:

> I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features 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 more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium—the bitter lapse into every-day life—the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart—an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 3)

Furthermore, the Gothic interior of the house leaves a similar impression on the narrator: while walking "through many dark and intricate passages" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 6), he notices "the carvings of the ceilings, the somber tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies which rattled" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 7). The detailed description of his passage through the house gives away a similar atmosphere of darkness, chilliness, and decay. Also, upon entering Roderick's room the narrator again gives a rather detailed description of everything he notices in the dark, gloomy room. Again, he is struck with a similar feeling of strange discomfort: "dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene. I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 7).

In his paper, Dali Amel notices that Poe, comparing the windows of the house to an eye, personifies the house, but also, through lengthy, detailed and eerie descriptions of the exterior as well as the interior of the house, hints that there is something dreadful about to

happen (33). Consequently, this kind of detailed description with many carefully chosen adjectives incite feelings of interest, tension, and suspense as readers are eager to find out what happens next in this eerie and horror story. Similarly, Sun asserts that "it is the curiosity we showed toward the unknown things that we are attracted" (Sun 97) to.

As has been mentioned earlier, the narrator's visit to the Usher house is prompted by Roderick's plea for help and companionship because he has found himself in a state of "an excessive nervous agitation" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 8).Roderick is the narrator's boyhood friend, the last of the Usher family, who lives with his beloved sister Madeline in the old, decaying Usher mansion. Upon arriving at the house, the narrator is alarmed by Roderick's negligent and intimidating appearance:

> The now ghastly pallor of the skin, and the now miraculous lustre of the eye, above all things startled and even awed me. 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, I could not, even with effort, connect its Arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity. (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 8)

Interestingly, Roderick's unkempt and lurid appearance reflects the same frightful appearance of the house:

> Roderick is the human reflection of the house, which has "eye-like windows" and doors like "ponderous and ebony jaws." Comparable to Roderick's hair, described by the narrator as "of a more than weblike softness and tenuity," the top of the house is covered with "minute fungi" that hang "in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves." (Sova 72)

Such a literary technique is not unusual for Poe because, according to Benjamin F. Fisher, he uses settings to portray the characters and their inner state of minds as well as their appearance (30).

The first instance of Roderick's peculiarity and illness is the fact that he is a loner. He lives far away in a desolate countryside with no family but his ill sister. He spends his days alone, confined by the dark, macabre walls of his decaying house. The only person Roderick knows outside of the house is the narrator, his old boyhood friend. However, they have not seen each other in a long time. Apart from a neglected appearance, the narrator also notices

that Roderick's "behavior was remarkable for the sudden changes of mood" (Amel 15), which can also be attributed to his mental illness. Namely, as the narrator vividly describes:

> His action was alternately vivacious and sullen. 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, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 9)

Another instance of Roderick's ill and overly-sensitive mind is manifested through his strange behavior, namely through his episodes of being finicky:

> He 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, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 9)

Furthermore, what sets Roderick apart from the narrators in the previous two stories is the fact that he admits that there is something wrong with him. According to Amel, even in the beginning, in the letter he sends to the narrator, does Roderick admit that he is not well (14). In his later conversation with the narrator, Roderick informs him about his life's burden, i.e. his constant feelings of nervousness, anxiety, turmoil, and fear:

> I must perish in this deplorable folly. Thus, thus, and not otherwise, shall I be lost. I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results. I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial, incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation of soul. I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect—in terror. In this unnerved, in this pitiable, condition I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, Fear. (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 9-10)

The reader further discovers that Roderick is especially fond of arts, namely music and painting. In his, and other similar case(s), art serves as a source of expression: his paintings "show a close relationship to his gradually crumbling sanity" (Sova 72).

The source of Roderick's fear, as Amel claims, might be attributed to the influence of the house. Namely, even the narrator has strange feelings about the house upon arriving and feels that there is something bizarre and odd about it. Consequently, Roderick is under the strong influence of it and "is refrained from leaving and does not make the attempt to defeat this enduring power that holds him captive. The House causes the fears that control Roderick Usher's mind" (Amel 27). Similarly, Hill adds that Roderick "believes in 'the sentience of all vegetable things' (Poe qtd in Hill 398) and connects this belief with the House itself. Thus he can believe that the House has the power to dominate the lives of within" (Hill 398). Additionally, Roderick's poem "The Haunted Palace" is highly symbolic as it describes the downfall and the deterioration of the house as well as the people who inhabited it (Amel 28):

> But evil things, in robes of sorrow,
> Assailed the monarch's high estate;
> (Ah, let us mourn, for never morrow
> Shall dawn 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. (Poe 14-15)

Another contribution to his ill state can be attributed to the peculiarities of his family. In other words, "he is the end product of in-breeding" (Hill 398) as it is possible that "Usher cousin married Usher cousin and, to employ a phrase of that time, no new blood was introduced to reinforce the family tree. In such a line of descent strong traits are very often replaced by weaker ones" (Hill 398). However, an even more apparent reason for Roderick's anguish is: "the severe and long-continued illness—indeed to the evidently approaching dissolution—of a tenderly beloved sister, his sole companion for long years, his last and only relative on earth" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 10). His sister Madeline is the only family he has, but her strange illness, which "baffled the skill of her physicians" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 11), is slowly taking over her. Madeline is undoubtedly a mysterious character who does not talk nor is present throughout the story much. One day, as she passes through the hallway, the narrator is again struck by a strange feeling:

> lady Madeline (for so was she called) passed through a remote portion of the apartment, and, without having noticed my presence, disappeared. I regarded her with an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread; and yet I found it impossible to account for such feelings. A sensation of stupor oppressed me as my eyes followed her retreating steps. (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 10)

The strange feeling and uneasiness that the narrator feels throughout his visit to the Usher house is nothing compared to the chain of events that unfold that same night, inciting the feelings of dismay and terror. Namely, Roderick suddenly informs the narrator "that the lady Madeline was no more" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 16) and that he expects the narrator's help in "preserving her corpse for a fortnight (previously to its final interment), in one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 16). Uncanny as it is, the narrator accepts Roderick's plea for help and they place Madeline in a "small, damp" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 17) vault, also described as a "region of horror" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 17) by the narrator. In addition, before leaving, they take one last look at Madeline, but the way that the narrator describes her incites suspicion as her appearance does not resemble that of a dead person: "the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 18). Consequently, this eerie description may suggest "that lady Madeline cannot be dead if she possesses the features of someone who is alive" (Amel 29).

After the burial, the truly terrifying and ghastly things start to happen. Roderick's mental state deteriorates and his demeanor becomes almost unrecognizable to the narrator:

> His ordinary manner had vanished. His ordinary occupations were neglected or forgotten. He roamed from chamber to chamber with hurried, unequal, and objectless step. The pallor of his countenance had assumed, if possible, a more ghastly hue—but the luminousness of his eye had utterly gone out. The once occasional huskiness of his tone was heard no more; and a tremulous quaver, as if of extreme terror, habitually characterized his utterance. (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 18)

In addition to Roderick's declining state, the narrator too starts having certain issues. Namely, about a week after Madeline's entombment, one night he "struggled to reason off the

nervousness" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 19) and eventually "an irrepressible tremor" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 19) takes over him. It is evident that the gloom and horror are slowly taking over him as well. In addition, the fact that there is a raging storm outside contributes to the already strong atmosphere of horror. The narrator, in dire hope of calming his nerves, leaves his room, but is appalled at the appearance of his friend stating that "there was a species of mad hilarity in his eyes—an evidently restrained hysteria in his whole demeanor" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 19). Throughout the night, Roderick claims to have seen some strange apparition, but the narrator, still having a somewhat reasonable mind, "attempts to present an unbiased account that avoids ascribing the sense of foreboding to supernatural forces" (Sova 70) and claims that it was just an "electrical phenomena not uncommon" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 20). To soothe Roderick's agitation, the narrator decides to read him a romance named "Mad Thirst" about a knight named Ethelred who, in hopes of avoiding a storm, comes across a palace of gold guarded by a dragon. In order to win the shield, it is necessary to kill the dragon, which, ultimately, the knight does. The dragon dies "with a shriek so horrid and harsh" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 22) and, suddenly, the narrator seems to have heard the same exact sound somewhere in the house:

> Here again I paused abruptly, and now with a feeling of wild amazement—for there could be no doubt whatever that, in this instance, I did actually hear (although from what direction it proceeded I found it impossible to say) a low and apparently distant, but harsh, protracted, and most unusual screaming or grating sound—the exact counterpart of what my fancy had already conjured up for the dragon's unnatural shriek as described by the romancer. (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 22-23)

After this gruesome event, the narrator still tries to remain calm, but everything soon "becomes increasingly difficult as the story progresses and the narrator begins to doubt his own perceptions" (Sova 69).

Furthermore, upon reading about the shield that falls from the wall and produces a "terrible ringing sound" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 23), a similar sound is heard in the mansion: "no sooner had these syllables passed my lips, than—as if a shield of brass had indeed, at the moment, fallen heavily upon a floor of silver—I became aware of a distinct, hollow, metallic, and clangorous, yet apparently muffled, reverberation" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 23-24). Consequently, the sounds full of consternation aggravate

Roderick's mental state who becomes frenzied and claims how the sounds are produced by his sister Madeline whom he buried alive:

> We have put her living in the tomb! Said I not that my senses were acute? I now tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I heard them—many, many days ago—yet I dared not—I dared not speak! And now—to-night— Ethelred—ha! ha!—the breaking of the hermit's door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangor of the shield— say, rather, the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault! (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 24)

Suddenly, the door of the bedroom opens and the sight of "the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher" (Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher" 25) covered in blood leaves both the narrator and Roderick utterly appalled and horrified. Madeline then approaches her brother and throws herself at him, ultimately killing him by shock. The narrator, struck with disbelief and terror, flees the house and witnesses a truly gruesome event: the literal fall and the collapse of the house of Usher, which symbolizes "the anticipated final destruction of the family" (Sova 69).

The complexity of this remarkable piece of literature lies in the fact that the story can be interpreted in more than one way. According to Stahlberg, the story can be understood as a supernatural story as well as a psychological story where the events are merely an invention of the human mind. Consequently, the majority of critics have accepted the psychological interpretation and analysis of the story (Stahlberg 15). In addition, in his article, Hill posits a theory about dual hallucinations, i.e. the impossibility of Madeline's resurrection and it being the result of both Roderick's and the narrator's hallucinations. Furthermore, he states the reasons and evidence for the impossibility of Madeline fleeing from the vault. Namely, there is a shortage of oxygen, the air passage is made difficult due to copper, Madeline is locked in the coffin, and the door is made of iron. Thus, a person ill and weak as her, abandoned without life necessities such as food and water as well as being in a place with a deficiency of air, is unable to break the coffin and the iron door and perform a murder. However, the fact that the narrator, who is supposed to be sane and realistic, has witnessed the horrifying event makes this theory hard to believe, yet Hill insists on the viability of his theory by emphasizing the following reasons: the narrator's gradual succumbing to the evil influence, the atmosphere of the house, Roderick's madness, and the narrator's hallucinations (397). Moreover, there is

also a theory that Roderick did not actually bury his sister alive, but that it was all just a product of his mad mind:

> One of Roderick Usher's abnormalities is an acute auditory sense; couple this fact with the statement that a "favorite volume" was *Directorum Inquisitorum*; blend these two facts with a third supplied by the narrator: Roderick is mad. The result is an insane man whose interest in torture might well make him imagine he had perpetrated one the most fiendish of tortures - burying someone alive. And this insane man, if he possessed very acute hearing, might well listen for the sounds which would confirm what his unbalanced mind set forth as a fact. In short, Roderick hears the sounds from below because he *wants* to hear them, and a shattered mind can hear whatever it wishes. (Hill 400)

Consequently, "everything attributed to Roderick Usher indicates mental instability: his extreme nervousness, his belief in the sentience of vegetable matter, his fixation about being ruled by the House itself, his wild music, and, most indicative, his fear of fear itself, which is actually fear of his incipient madness" (Hill 398).

On the other hand, there is the supernatural approach to the story with Fisher analyzing the story in terms of vampirism. Similarly, Fisher also wonders how Madeline, who has been presented as seriously ill and weak, is able to flee from a sealed coffin. Unlike Hill, Fisher proposes a theory about Madeline being a vampire. In other words, the explanation lies in the fact that vampires are neither dead nor alive, but something in between. They are able to remain alive without any kind of food for a long period of time, which would explain the fact that Madeline managed to survive a week without food. Another interesting fact, according to Fisher, is the fact that vampires hunt their families and beloved ones first before concentrating on other victims (79). However, there is no definite answer as to what actually happened and "the story leaves unanswered questions as to whether Roderick's strange behavior is the result of psychological disturbance or whether he is truly the victim of supernatural forces" (Sova 70). Nevertheless, the indefiniteness of the story and Poe's remarkable literary expression create space for further creative interpretations and many literary discussions.

Conclusion

Despite a rather short literary career, Edgar Allan Poe managed to offer so much to the world of literature that he has secured himself a place among the most famous writers of American literature. His interest in the dark side of human mind as well as Gothic literature resulted in some of the most respectable works of literature, which keep evoking the feelings of shock and surprise among the readers to this day. The short stories such as "The Black Cat," "The Tell-Tale Heart," and "The Fall of the House of Usher" are considered to be among his most famous and respectable works, dealing with individuals whose inner states of mind are troubling and whose lives are consequently plagued by murder, guilt, and death.

"The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart" are fairly similar stories, but also have their respective differences. As for the similarities, they both feature the insane first person narrators who commit ghastly murders and place the dead bodies within the house. Interestingly, both narrators are disturbed by the eyes, either the eye of the cat or the old man's. Moreover, both narrators seem to be experiencing hallucinations. Namely, it can be said that the narrator of "The Black Cat" hallucinated an image of the gallows on his second hat, which drove him to uncontrollable madness. Lastly, both narrators seem to be denying the fact that they are mad. The narrator of "The Black Cat" desperately tries to establish reasonable and logical explanations for his misdeeds, while the second narrator claims that his ability to plan the murder as well as his ability to disclose everything so clearly is the proof of his sanity. As for the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart," in his hallucinations and paranoia, he hears the dead man's heartbeat. As for the differences, the most notable one is the reason for committing the crimes. The narrator of "The Black Cat" blames the overconsumption of alcohol for his behavior while the second narrator simply blames his sudden rage towards the eye. Also, the ends of the stories differ as the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart," plagued by guilt, confesses the crime, while the second narrator destroys himself with his pride and self-satisfaction.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" features a complex, overly-sensitive individual whose madness stems from different factors – his family history, the influence of the house, his isolation, and the attachment to his sister. Unlike the previous narrators, Roderick admits and is aware that he is not well. The story is considered to be one of the most famous Gothic stories with the setting having an immense influence on the characters and creating the atmosphere of horror. Due to Poe's unique style, there is no definite answer as to what

happens in the end so there is a lot of room for various theories, from supernatural theories and vampirism to the psychological interpretations claiming that the narrator of the story, once realistic and logical, cannot resist the dark, eerie, and depressing atmosphere and soon starts delving into Roderick's world of madness. Consequently, they are both unable to distinguish reality from hallucinations. Nevertheless, in his stories, Poe managed to portray human mind as a truly complex entity that holds many deep secrets. Consequently, Poe's unique style, which he accomplishes through suspense, mystery, detailed descriptions, horror atmosphere and his interest in the complexity of human mind, makes him a truly intriguing writer whose works will be read and discussed for a long time.

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