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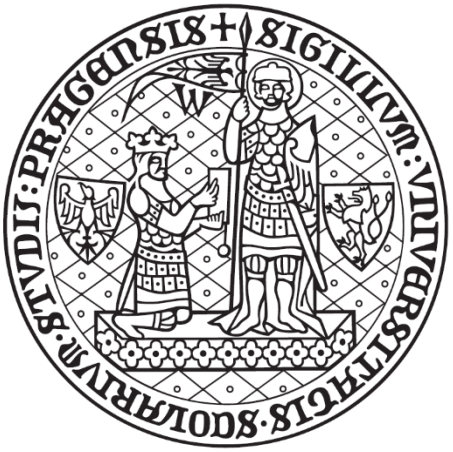

# Mental Illness in the Works of Edgar Allan Poe

BAKALÁŘSKÁ PRÁCE

Vedoucí bakalářské práce
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I declare that the following BA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

V Praze dne 15. srpna 2019 …….

I wish to express my gratitude to professor Martin Procházka for his guidance, patience and help in the course of the writing of this thesis. I would also like to thank my family and friends for their incredible support during this challenging time.

# Abstrakt

Tato práce se zaměřuje na duševní choroby v dílech Edgara Allana Poea, jejich využití v Poeových povídkách a jejich funkci jakožto nástroje pro navození pocitů děsu ve čtenáři. Práce se pokusí o vymezení jednotlivých typů šílenství, které budou založeny na šílených postavách z osmi vybraných Poeových povídek. Povídky vybrané pro účely této práce obsahují jasný popis psychicky nemocných postav a jsou to „Černý kocour," „Sud vína amontilladského," „Ligeia," „Eleonora," „Berenice," „Pád domu Usherů," „Zrádné srdce" a „William Wilson."

Tato práce se bude skládat ze čtyř hlavních kapitol. Dále bude také doplněna krátkou kapitolou věnovanou životu Edgara Allana Poea, neboť životní příběh právě tohoto autora je důležitý pro pochopení, ba i patřičný prožitek z jeho díla. Kapitola 1 se zaměří na Poeovy vypravěče v povídkách „Eleonora" a „Ligeia." Šílenství, které je u nich patrné, pramení z lásky, vášně a ztráty, především ale i z marného pokusu o dosažení ideálu krásy. To vše se poté odráží ve vypravěčově depresi nebo závislosti na opiu. Tyto postavy v podstatě propadají šílenství kvůli nešťastné lásce. Kapitola 2 bude sledovat, jak se šílenství v mysli přetváří na reálný čin, na vraždu. Tato kapitola se bude zabývat šílenými vrahy z Poeových povídek „Černý kocour," „Sud vína amontilladského" a „Zrádné srdce." V těchto povídkách se vypravěči snaží uhájit svoji příčetnost, zatímco nevědomky ukazují, že jsou ve skutečnosti zmítáni krizí racionality. Jejich šílenství pramení z nezdravé závislosti na specifické věci nebo touze, kterou potřebují uskutečnit. Ta je pak demonstrována vypravěčovou perverzitou a zuřivostí. Zde Poe využívá kontroverze týkající se obhajoby šílenství probíhající za jeho doby v Americe a poukazuje na tehdejší představu, že člověk schopný rozumného uvažování nemůže být zároveň psychicky narušený. Kapitola 3 bude analyzovat melancholický charakter Rodericka Ushera v povídce „Pád domu Usherů" a vypravěče v „Berenice" trpícího monománií,

s ohledem na rozpad jejich životních jistot. Duševní zdraví těchto postav je totiž spojeno se stabilitou světa, ve kterém žijí a jeho narušení tedy vede k jejich šílenství. To se později nepříznivě odráží na jejich jednání s ostatními postavami, konkrétně jejich pohřbení zaživa. Šílenství zde vlastně pramení ze samotářského života hlavních postav a jejich obsesí. Poslední kapitola se pak bude zabývat tématem dvojnictví v povídkách „William Wilson“ a „Ligeia.“ Zde se šílenství projevuje vražednými sklony, které vypravěči vykazují poté, co si v mysli vytvořili neexistující postavy. V jednom z příběhů šílenství pramení z nekontrolovatelné touhy, ve druhém z krize svědomí a rozštěpení osobnosti.

Přestože téma mysli a duševních chorob není v gotickém žánru neobvyklé, Poe se u svých postav soustředí zejména na rozštěpení osobnosti, a to ve smyslu rozum versus cit či racionální uvažování versus šílenství, čímž vnáší do gotiky opět něco nového. Jeho pojetí šílenství za užití rozumové analýzy s intenzivními emocemi jej činí jedinečným.

# Abstract

The focus of this thesis aims at mental illness in the works of Edgar Allan Poe, their incorporation in his short stories and their function as a means of inducing of horror in the reader. It will be attempted to establish a typology of madness based upon the insane characters from eight of Poe's stories. These stories, chosen for their clear depiction of mentally deranged characters, are "The Black Cat," "The Cask of Amontillado," "Ligeia," "Eleonora," "Berenice," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "William Wilson."

This thesis will consist of four main parts with a small additional chapter dedicated to the life of Edgar Allan Poe, since the author's life experience is also important for the understanding and appreciating of his work. Chapter 1 will focus on Poe's narrators in the stories "Eleonora" and "Ligeia." Their insanity, stemming from love, passion and loss, and especially from a vain attempt to achieve the ideal of beauty manifests in their later depression or drug addiction. In essence, the characters are driven mad by unhappy love. Chapter 2 will show the physical manifestation of madness into murder. It will deal with Poe's insane murderers from the tales "The Black Cat," "The Cask of Amontillado" and "The Tell-Tale Heart." In these tales, the narrators attempt to defend their sanity while in reality, they unconsciously show their crisis of rationality instead. Their insanity stems from their unhealthy fixation upon a certain object or a need they need to fulfill. This is then demonstrated with their perverseness and rage. Poe also makes use of the insanity-defense controversy here by showing the then common view that a person governed by reason cannot be driven by insanity. Chapter 3 will analyze the melancholic Roderick Usher in "The Fall of the House of Usher" and the monomaniac narrator in "Berenice," with respect to the disruption of the characters'

life certainties. Their mental balance is linked to the stability of their world which, upon crumbling, takes away the characters' sanity as well. That later leads to the harming of others, specifically to their premature entombment. Here the insanity stems from the characters' introversion and obsession. The final chapter will then discuss the theme of doppelgangers which can be found in the tales "William Wilson" and "Ligeia." The madness in these stories is seen in the narrators who are being driven to murder after dreaming up a nonexistent individual. Their insanity stems from an uncontrollable desire in one story, and in the other, it is a battle with one's conscience in a personality split.

Although the focus on mind and mental illness is usual in the Gothic genre, Poe's focus on the personality splits in his characters, the split between reason and emotion or the split between rationality and insanity, is described in extraordinary depth with the use of both rational analysis and emotional intensity and that makes his interpretation of mental illness in literature novel.

# Table of Contents

# Introduction

The main topic of this thesis is mental illness and its representations in the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe. Insanity and mad characters are certainly characteristic of Poe's writing and his use of these topics in his work is very frequent. Therefore, I would like to approach the topic with a focus on what the role of insanity and madness is in Poe's narratives. Why does he choose this theme? And how does he use it to induce the feeling of horror in the reader?

For the purpose of my thesis I have chosen the following stories; "The Black Cat," "The Cask of Amontillado," "Ligeia," "Eleonora," "Berenice," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "William Wilson." The selected stories handle a combination of themes typical for the Gothic genre, such as decay, melancholy, mystery, death, and murder. Apart from these, however, Poe also incorporates the mental problems as he often focuses on the mental state of his characters.

The aim of this work is to establish a typology of madness based on a variety of characters from Poe's stories, who show similar or even identical features and analyze the way he works with these types of insanity. In each chapter, the stories chosen will be compared in order to define the attributes the characters share and to discover how it altogether contributes to the creation of the atmosphere of horror, fundamental for the Gothic genre.

This work will consist of four main chapters which will successively cover a wide range of mental illnesses occurring in Poe's tales, moving from the psychological processes inside the madmen's mind to their physical manifestations, mostly affecting other characters. In the first chapter, I will focus on Poe's narrators in the stories "Ligeia" and "Eleonora," whose insanity stems from passion and loss,

as well as from their vain attempt to achieve the ideal of beauty. Following depression or drug addiction, they are driven mad by unhappy love. Chapter 2 will show the physical manifestation of madness into murder. It will deal with Poe's insane murderers from the tales "The Black Cat," "The Cask of Amontillado" and "The Tell-Tale Heart." In these tales, the narrators attempt to defend their sanity by unconsciously showing their crisis of rationality. Their insanity stems from their unhealthy fixation upon a certain object or entity, and is demonstrated with their perverseness and rage. The third chapter will analyze the melancholic narrator in "The Fall of the House of Usher" and the monomaniac in "Berenice," with respect to the disruption of the characters' life certainties. Their mental balance is linked to the stability of their world which, upon crumbling, takes away the characters' sanity as well, leading to the harming of others. Here the insanity stems from the characters' introversion and obsession. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the theme of doppelgangers in "William Wilson" and "Ligeia." The madness is seen in the narrators being driven to murder after imagining a nonexistent individual. Their insanity stems from an uncontrollable desire in one story, and in the other, it is a battle with one's conscience in a personality split.

# The Author

Initially, I would like to provide some biographical context to demonstrate the true brilliance of Poe's work. To fully understand the depth of Poe's stories, one must take a closer look into the writer's life. That is where a lot of what we know from his tales can be explained and therefore better understood.

It is widely known, that Poe himself would struggle with depression, especially after the death of his young wife, which he would treat with the abuse of alcohol.[1] In a letter to George W. Eveleth, Poe describes himself in these words:

> I am constitutionally sensitive – nervous in a very unusual degree. I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity. During these fits of absolute unconsciousness, I drank – God only knows how often or how much. As a matter of course, my enemies referred the insanity to the drink, rather than the drink to the insanity.[2]

These influences are undoubtedly reflected in his work, which makes his poems and tales more relatable and graspable for the readers. According to J. Gerald Kennedy "unlike most of his contemporaries, [Poe] refused to soften or idealize mortality and kept its essential horror in view."[3] As can be seen from all parts of this work, he would in great detail and in all of its morbidity describe the act of murder, dead bodies, and burials, and would not cease to do so or censor himself only because others did not share these narrative strategies. Furthermore, "Poe inflicts on the characters in his tales the high excitement he hopes to reproduce in the souls of his readers."[4] From the examples given above, it is evident that he

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[1] Edgar Allan Poe, *Eureka: an essay on the material and spiritual universe* (London: Hesperus Press, 2002) 109.
[2] James Albert Harrison, *Life and Letters of Edgar Allan Poe: by James A. Harrison of the University of Virginia*, Volume I, (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell & Co., 1903): 180, Internet Archive, https://archive.org/details/lifeletteredgarall01harrrich 13 Jul 2019.
[3] J. Gerald Kennedy, *Poe, Death, and the Life of Writing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) 17.
[4] Arthur A. Brown, "Literature and the Impossibility of Death: Poe's 'Berenice,'" *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 50, no. 4 (1996): 456, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2933923 14 Jul 2019.

succeeds in this aspect of his writing. That makes Edgar Allan Poe, indeed, a "master of the psychological thriller."[5]

[5] Poe, vii.

# Chapter 1: The Dying Beauty

The usual theme we frequently encounter in Edgar Allan Poe's gothic stories is, certainly, death, coming in many different ways and at the most terrifying circumstances. There is, however, one very specific theme in relation to death in Poe's work that occurs more often than other ones; the death of a beautiful young woman. Incorporation of this theme is, without doubt, another means of creating an atmosphere of shock, hopelessness, and terror. Poe uses the image of loss of a loved person, preferably a young female lover, as an instrument to induce the feeling of horror in the reader. The death of a young lady is the theme of the stories "Ligeia" and "Eleonora," which will be discussed in this chapter. It is also an important part of the plot of Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher," which will be more closely discussed in Chapter 3, where the themes of death and madness merge together again, although in a slightly different way.

## 1.1: Ligeia

The most important aspect of the stories discussed in this chapter is the impact a tragedy has on the narrator. In some stories, the theme of madness is closely connected to that of hallucination. In those cases, the hallucination can occur as a side effect of one's self-medication, often in order to overcome a bad state of mind or even mental illnesses. This is evident in the story of Ligeia. In this story, the narrator is still haunted by Ligeia even after her death. In a "moment of mental alienation" he marries another woman, Rowena, whom he does not love, and being in a poor state of mind, he sinks deep under the influence of opium.[1] Not

[1] Edgar Allan Poe, *The complete tales and poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, 9th reprint (London: Penguin Books, 1982) 660. All subsequent references to this edition are made by page numbers in brackets in the text.

long after, Lady Rowena also falls ill. The narrator takes care of her, but the state of her health still worsens until, eventually, she dies. The narrator, however, keeps hallucinating.

What strikes the reader as odd first in this story is the obvious imbalance between the description of Rowena and the environment. While the narrator dedicates pages to the description of the appearance of his abode, he only devotes a few sentences to Rowena. The indifference he feels towards her is evident, as he never desired to marry her in the first place. On the other hand, the vast description of the environment is crucial here, it is intended to induce the feeling of anxiety in the reader so that they can connect with how the characters feel. Stemming from his initial indifference, the feeling of hatred towards Rowena gradually floods the narrator's mind and he needs the power of opium more and more to be able to withstand the situation.

In the course of the tale, the narrator witnesses the death of two women, one of which comes back to life through the dead body of the other. At the end of the narrative, he sees the deceased Rowena rising from her deathbed, and as the shroud is falling off of her, he sees Ligeia emerging from under it. He admits he is still under the influence of the drug and in his hallucination, he clearly reaches the happy ending he had always wished for deep in his heart. This opium-induced state yet delivers a much darker and terrifying experience than the narrator would wish for.

After a closer reading of the story, however, it becomes evident that there is not and never actually was, any Ligeia. She is nothing more than an opium dream the narrator dreams. Jack and June Davis support this argument in their work "Poe's Ethereal Ligeia," where they argue that Ligeia is, in fact, only a projection of the narrator's deranged mind which becomes apparent when the narrator admits that he cannot tell what her last name is, or where and when they met, unlike Rowena,

whose full name he knows well, among other facts such as who her parents are and where she comes from.[2] There are other clues indicating Ligeia's nonexistence as well. The narrator describes her in generally exaggerated terms; of angelic beauty and incredible intelligence, as a woman of unrealistic perfection. He even says that "she came and departed as a shadow. I was never made aware of her entrance into my closed study." (654) That is because she only ever entered his mind, not his physical presence, her presence is only spectral. And once, he even admits, probably unconsciously, that "it was the radiance of an opium-dream — an airy and spirit-lifting vision more wildly divine than the phantasies." (655)

The true reason the narrator weds Rowena is, therefore, to give Ligeia a body through which she could enter the physical world. Jack and June Davis say that:

> In reality, there is no physical Ligeia: thus the horror of the narrator's murder of Rowena is intensified when the reader discovers that the deluded narrator has murdered her to bring back an entirely imaginary first wife. This recognition not only adds a new dimension to the story but reveals how perceptively Poe succeeded in penetrating the complex workings of a deranged mind.[3]

The terrible reality, therefore, is that in his attempt to bring his imaginary first wife to life, he loses the only real wife he has.[4] He is, however, unaware of all that, because, under the heavy veil of opium, he is unable to tell the two realities apart. In the end, he has everything and nothing in the form of just a drug-induced vision.

Finally, in "Ligeia," we find what Poe later wrote in *Eureka*, and what Beverly Voloshin refers to in "Transcendence Downward;" "The narrator of "Ligeia," narrating and recasting his past, would seem to live in pulsations of

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[2] Jack L. Davis, and June H. Davis, "Poe's Ethereal Ligeia," *The Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association*, vol. 24, no. 4 (1970): 175. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1346725 28 Jul 2019.
[3] Davis and Davis, 171.
[4] Davis and Davis, 175.

recollection, collapse, and recollection - much like the pulsating universe."[5] Matthew A. Taylor supports this idea in his essay on "Edgar Allan Poe's (Meta)Physics" by saying that the story "labors to de-individualize Ligeia by denying her qualities other than those of the universe; she is merely a corporealization of 'transcendentalism.' Embodying Eureka's 'Divine Volition' and 'Life—Life—Life within Life,' Ligeia is an abstraction made concrete."[6] This statement also supports the fact that Ligeia is only a vision born in the narrator's mind.

### 1.2: Eleonora

The second story to which this chapter is dedicated, "Eleonora," opens with an "insanity discussion" right away. The narrator first admits he had been called mad by others and subsequently invites the reader to perceive him so as well. He also wonders about the actual meaning and effects of madness and the possibilities it might offer in a short inspiring manifesto:

> The question is not settled yet, whether madness is or is not the loftiest intelligence – whether much that is glorious – whether all that is profound – does not spring from disease of thought … They who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only by night. In their gray visions they obtain glimpses of eternity, and thrill, in waking, to find that they have been upon the verge of the great secret. (649)

With this statement, the narrator, in fact, lets his readers know that there is nothing wrong with being mentally ill and that sometimes, it can even produce some positives. I believe that Poe makes a very important statement in this passage.

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[5] Beverly Voloshin, "Transcendence Downward: An Essay on 'Usher' and 'Ligeia,'" *Modern Language Studies*, vol. 18, no. 3 (1988): 25. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3194965 29 Jul 2019.
[6] Matthew A. Taylor, "Edgar Allan Poe's (Meta)Physics: A Pre-History of the Post-Human," *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 62, no. 2 (2007): 213. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/ncl.2007.62.2.193 29 Jul 2019.

Further in the story, the narrator divides his “mental existence” into two epochs; before and after Eleonora. (649) In the first epoch of the narrator’s story, his beloved Eleonora and he lived together in a surreal, magical place which they called the Valley of the Many-Colored Grass. Here the grass was “soft,” “green,” “perfectly even” and “vanilla-perfumed,” flowers never seen before bloomed there next to all kinds of lively animals, and in the center of it all, the most beautiful being was Eleonora. (650) Although his narration is hearty and clearly full of affection and happiness, the narrator describes everything in an overly fairy-tale and exaggerated manner. He created a dreamland in his head based on all the memories he had with Eleonora. In comparison to what came later, the memory of the carefree and happy times the two had, turns into a fantastic false reality.

The second epoch covers the time after young Eleonora’s premature death. Insisting on the truthfulness of the description of the first epoch, the narrator honestly expresses great distrust concerning the description of the second; “I feel that a shadow gathers over my brain, and I mistrust the perfect sanity of the record.” (652) The recounting of the second epoch is clearly partly influenced by the power of depression inflicted by Eleonora’s demise. With Eleonora leaving the Valley of the Many-Colored Grass, suddenly, all the extraordinary flowers and all the lively animals leave the land forever as well. The once cheerful world changes to void and silent.

The only thing that reminds the narrator of his lost lover is the signs he trusts she gives him in the whispers of the wind, her perfume in the air, indistinct murmurs at night, and something that feels like her invisible lips kissing him. (652) However, as long as these hallucinations persist, he is unable to recover from the trauma, so he leaves the dreamland forever in search for relief. Eventually, the narrator is given

a blessing from Eleonora from the beyond to find new love and fulfillment without feeling as if he betrayed the love they once shared.

In this tale, again, the narrator's story is strongly reminiscent of what Poe argues in *Eureka*, that is, "the birth, death, and resurrection of the Universe."[7] In "Eleonora," the creation of the Valley of the Many-Colored Grass is emblematic of "a novel Universe swelling into existence."[8] Eleonora's death followed by the narrator's departure from the dreamland resembles the point at which the Universe is "subsiding into nothingness" again.[9] When the narrator marries his newly found lover, that is when the Universe is reborn and all is returned to Unity. After all, as G. R. Thompson argues in his essay on "Unity, Death, and Nothingness," "the basic proposition of *Eureka* declares that inevitable annihilation is built into the structure of the Universe, man's belief in a designed Universe has to be reconciled with ultimate annihilation."[10]

In the two stories discussed in this chapter, we can observe that the "imaginative powers [of the narrator] may actually increase as his mind sickens," as David W. Butler states in his essay on Poe's Gothic tales.[11] That is evident in the way the narrator in "Eleonora" tells his story from his current, that is to say, distorted and maddened, perspective, after he had lost and eventually found love again. We witness the same thing happening in "Ligeia" as well, although the narrator's mind is not sick from a mental disease but from opium which, however, clouds his mind no less.

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[7] G. R. Thompson, "Unity, Death, and Nothingness. Poe's 'Romantic Skepticism,'" *PMLA*, vol. 85, no. 2 (1970): 299. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/1261405 28 Jul 2019.
[8] Poe, 103.
[9] Poe, 103.
[10] Thompson, 298.
[11] David W. Butler, "Usher's Hypochondriasis: Mental Alienation and Romantic Idealism in Poe's Gothic Tales," *American Literature*, vol. 48, no. 1 (1976): 5. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2925310 14 Jul 2019.

In “Ligeia” and “Eleonora,” we see the desire for the utmost beauty and perfection. The narrators’ desire for an ideal world is symbolic of the impossibility of its finding in poetry, especially Romantic, which is caused by the omnipresence of death. This precisely can be seen in both of the stories; as perfect and idealized as the narrators want their lovers to be, when death enters their lives and takes the women away, the idea of a perfect world crumbles apart. This is also reminiscent of Poe’s own desire for an ideal world, which can be seen in the author’s poetry, for instance in his most famous poem – “The Raven.”

The plots of both of the stories discussed in this chapter revolve around the death of the narrator’s lover. In both narratives, the ideal plays the central part. In “Ligeia,” it is the ideal woman; the divinely beautiful and extraordinarily intelligent Ligeia, who exceeds every ordinary woman in every way. In this story, the woman is the center of the narrator’s world. After her departure from this world, the world remains unchanged, but the narrator is unable to move on and the story ends with his slip into insanity. The story of “Eleonora” takes place in an ideal world for a change; here the woman makes the world and once she leaves it, it decays. Unlike Ligeia, “Eleonora” gives the reader a seemingly happy ending, but as discussed above, there is no such thing as pure happiness. In essence, by exaggerating the ideal, Poe demonstrates the real. He disproves the Romantic ideal of beauty, which cannot be achieved, by showing the inevitable doom of everything, later anticipated in *Eureka.*

# Chapter 2: The Insane Murderer

In this chapter, we shall take a closer look on Poe's insane murderers, specifically those from the stories "The Black Cat," "The Cask of Amontillado," and "The Tell-Tale Heart." What features do they share and how do they differ? And why does Poe use this kind of insanity in his stories? When studying this topic, the question also lies, whether the characters resort to murder for their madness, or whether the act of murder maddens them.

## 2.1: The Black Cat

The narrator in our first story, "The Black Cat," starts his narrative with a statement that he is not mad, and he most certainly does not dream. (223) He tries to convince the reader, and maybe even himself, that madness is not the answer to the deeds he had committed, and which lead to his death sentence. He continues with telling us about his fondness and love for animals, with a focus on his favorite one, a black cat, which appears to be quite sagacious and devoted to its master. (223) During the many years of their friendship, though, the character of the narrator changes for the worse, which he himself admits. (224) He grows moody, irritable, and even starts to behave violently towards his wife and the animal. Eventually, he slides into alcoholism and alcohol seems to be the trigger for his vile behavior.

In a moment of weakness, intoxicated and angered, the narrator admits that "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," describes the narrator his state before taking a penknife and cutting the cat's eye out of its socket. (224) Here we can see how the alcohol-induced attack of madness and violence swallows up a

person, who firmly insists on being otherwise sane. The narrator then wakes up in the morning with feelings of horror and remorse, but he soon resorts to alcohol again and his soul remains morally "untouched." (224)

After the incident, naturally, the cat avoids its master which unleashes a "spirit of perverseness" in him. (225) According to the narrator, this spirit is an inseparable part of human nature. He believes that, owing to this spirit, every person has, at some point, committed an evil act for the sole purpose of its being forbidden, "to do wrong for the wrong's sake only." (225) The narrator now makes the spirit of perverseness responsible for his deeds. This perverse force allegedly drives the narrator to hang the cat by the neck from a tree. Explaining the motives for this deed, he confesses he did it "because I knew that it had loved me, and because I felt it had given me no reason of offence … because I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin." The narrator thus goes against his reason and deliberately and intentionally murders an innocent creature, feeling great remorse and pain on the one hand, but knowingly jeopardizing the innocence of his soul on the other.

Soon after this happens, the narrator finds himself another cat, but he starts feeling hate towards this cat as well. (226) He even discovers, that the cat is also missing one eye, just as the former one did. The cat to him thus functions as a constant reminder of his dreadful deed as it moves wherever its master goes, it is always there with him. And the more he loathes it, the more it seems to show him affection. He is, however, unable to harm it because he fears it. Mostly, probably for the mark on its chest; apparently an image of gallows. It not only reminds him of his crime, but it also signifies the punishment for murder, which he had, in fact, committed. (227) Under the pressure of fear, the evil inside the narrator takes over and he now loathes everything and everyone more than ever before. The narrator's wife, who was once briefly mentioned above, thus soon becomes another victim of

his fury, when she tries to prevent him from killing the cat in an attack of rage. This is one of the chilling moments where a very technical manner of narration strikes us as completely emotionless.

To describe the murder of his wife, the narrator only says he simply "buried the axe in her brain." (228) The fact that he does not use the, probably anticipated, word "head," but he rather chooses "brain" strengthens the view of him as a person with a lack of emotion and a madman in general, which he tries to avoid from the beginning of the tale. This cold-hearted description of the deed also invokes the most dreadful feelings in the reader, because it shows yet another layer of the murderer's perversity. But it is not only the narrator's choice of words that strikes the reader as odd; it is his overall rational view of the world, that permits him to act out his deeds with unusual cruelty which he is therefore always able to justify to himself. There is a perceptible split of the narrator's personality into a strictly rational one and an emotionally dead one. We see the dead part of him clearly when he proceeds to wall his wife's corpse up so no one would suspect anything. "Here at least, then, my labor has not been in vain," says he after doing so, as if nothing out of the ordinary had just happened. If not, for some reason before, then now we see the true face of a psychopath and madman, showing no remorse and complimenting himself on a work well done.

The narrator then wants to kill the cat as well but it is gone. Again, he firmly believes that something other than he himself, this time the cat, is the true source of all his misery. When the police come to investigate at the place, he feels very confident and is not at all afraid of possible disclosure of the corpse, after all, he covered it so well. But at the last moment, an unexpected voice tells the truth; the voice of the cat entombed within the walls, next to the corpse.

This story shows a psychopath, a madman who appears to be quite untroubled by the crimes and the evil he commits. After acting violently, he first feels remorse, but soon again, he feels the need to repeat the act. Also, there is always some other entity at fault, responsible for the terrible deed. Other than that, the narrator seems to be terrified of being labeled as mad, so he keeps telling his readership that he is not, he is unable to acknowledge and own his illness. The source of the narrator's criminal madness seems to be both the split of his personality in two from which stems his moral derangement, but also the common belief that a rational mind cannot be driven by insanity. This view will be more closely discussed in the next subchapter dedicated to the story "The Tell-Tale Heart."

## 2.2: The Tell-Tale Heart

We see a very similar train of events in our second story, "The Tell-Tale Heart."[1] In this tale, the narrator also murders an innocent person, he also attempts to smartly hide the corpse, and he also fails to get away with the murder. As well as in "The Black Cat," from the very beginning, the narrator and our murderer, tries

[1] To give the reader a closer look into the issue of insanity in the mid nineteenth century, I would like to add the following: ""The Tell-Tale Heart" was produced in the context of the increasing controversy in the mid nineteenth century over the "insanity defense." Before the end of the eighteenth century, the most common test of exculpatory insanity was the loss of reason and the "knowledge of good and evil." As John Cleman writes, with "the equation between reason and the moral sense, any sign of rationality—such as appearing calm and reasonable in court, premeditating or planning the crime, or seeking to hide or avoid punishment—demonstrated the presence of an indivisible conscience and concomitant moral responsibility" ("Irresistible Impulses," p. 628). To qualify for legal exemption, the defendant had to be, in the words of Judge Tracy in 1774, "a man that is totally deprived of his understanding and memory, and doth not know what he is doing, no more than an infant, than a brute, or a wild beast." At the turn of the century, however, Benjamin Rush, the father of American psychiatry, distinguished the moral faculties from the intellectual faculties (represented by different areas in the brain) and developed a new theory of insanity—"moral derangement"—in which insanity was considered a disease affecting the moral faculties alone, without disordering the intellect."
Dan Shen, "Edgar Allan Poe's Aesthetic Theory, the Insanity Debate, and the Ethically Oriented Dynamics of 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'" *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, vol. 63, no. 3 (2008): 340, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/10.1525/ncl.2008.63.3.321 23 Jul 2019.

to defend his sanity. “Why will you say that I am mad?” he asks the reader in an attempt to find a reason for them to even consider such thing, and he is resolved to persuade them of his mental health in any way possible.

First, the narrator mentions a disease which allegedly sharpens his senses, “above all was the sense of hearing acute.” (303) He is therefore susceptible to preoccupation with details, especially sounds. According to what Dan Shen states in his “Insanity Debate,” “in this fictional world, the ‘over acuteness of the senses,’ which is a typical symptom of insanity in reality, is made to appear as a characteristic of sanity.”[2] It is thus an element which should somehow strengthen the idea of the narrator’s sanity, although it is most likely to cause the opposite. Returning to the narrator’s condition though, one of the key details the narrator focuses on in this tale is the eye of his old neighbor. The eye vexes the narrator to such an extent that he can no longer withstand its presence and sole existence, and he decides to get rid of it by killing the man. (303) Similarly to the previous story, the narrator very technically and without much emotion describes his decision to kill.

“You fancy me mad. Madmen know nothing. But you should have seen me. … how wisely I proceeded – with what caution – with what foresight;” at this point, the narrator demonstrates his, and possibly also the reader’s, view on madmen, that they must be dull. To persuade the reader to think the opposite, he presents the brilliance with which he orchestrated the murder, thus unintentionally accentuating his insanity. Throughout his narration, he keeps commenting on the fact that an insane person could never achieve the perfection he does when preparing the murder. Thus, he agrees with the idea that “madmen know nothing,” and by

[2] Shen, 330.

showing his excellence in crime he tries to prove his sanity. His excessive rationality, however, does not prove his mental stability, in fact, it points to the opposite.

The narrator admits there is no reason other than the eye for the killing of the old man. He reasonably comes to the conclusion that murder is the best way to get rid of the source of his vexation, which, obviously, only proves his madness. Upon the attempt to kill the man, he also hears the trembling of his heart which, stimulating the narrator's disease, increases his fury. The sound of it "excited [him] to uncontrollable terror" and thus, it becomes another key detail that the narrator obsesses about. (305) After killing the old man, the narrator admits smiling upon it and once again he disproves his madness. He tells the reader that they will no longer see him as a madman once they learn how wisely he concealed the dead body. (305) He seems completely convinced that a mad person is not able to act wisely or show intelligence, which is his biggest mistake since, clearly, he overestimates his own abilities.

Here, as well as in "The Black Cat" which shows similar features, Poe makes use of the insanity-defense controversy, discussed in John Cleman's "Irresistible Impulses," by demonstrating on the narrator the view that "a lunatic is one 'who has lost the use of his reason.'"[3] Cleman further describes this issue as follows:

> The problem was that up to the end of the eighteenth century the most common test of exculpatory insanity rooted in Christian morality was "the knowledge of good and evil." The equation between reason and the moral sense was nearly absolute, and therefore any sign of rationality - such as appearing calm and reasonable in court, premeditating or planning the crime, or seeking to hide or avoid punishment - demonstrated the presence of an

[3] John Cleman, "Irresistible Impulses: Edgar Allan Poe and the Insanity Defense," *American Literature*, vol. 63, no. 4 (1991): 629. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2926871 11 Aug 2019.

> indivisible conscience and concomitant moral responsibility. Thus, to qualify for legal exemption, the mentally defective individual needed to be, in the well-known opinion of one eighteenth-century judge, "a man that is totally deprived of his understanding and memory, and doth not know what he is doing, no more than an infant, than a brute, or a wild beast."[4]

It is evident that the narrator is using his reason to defend his insanity from the very beginning, as was at the time of Poe's writing of the story apparently common.

When the police arrive, the narrator, like the one in "The Black Cat," smiles, "for what had I to fear?" (306) Although the police suspect nothing, he eventually slips into paranoia which culminates when the dead man's heart allegedly starts to tremble again. As it becomes clear, it is only the narrator's auditory hallucination stemming from his disease and a symbolical expression of his suppressed emotionality. After all, a part of him, small as it may be, cannot bear the guilt of killing an innocent. Paralyzed by the idea that the police know the corpse is hidden in the floor right under their feet, he gets swallowed up by a fit of insanity in which he turns himself in. E. Arthur Robinson's comment on the character, mentioned in his essay on the tale, is quite accurate; throughout the story "he discloses a deep psychological confusion."[5] Also, as Shen very aptly says, "The contrast between the protagonist's being 'dreadfully nervous' as a rule and his being 'singularly at ease' in front of the policemen ironically and dramatically underscores the point that he is absolutely beyond the sense of guilt."[6] Eventually, the story ends almost identically to "The Black Cat," the murderer is caught even though he thought he was too smart to be captured.

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[4] Cleman, 628.
[5] E. Arthur Robinson, "Poe's 'The Tell-Tale Heart,'" *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1965): 369. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/2932876 24 Jul 2019.
[6] Shen, 335.

What these two stories have in common, the intense fascination and preoccupation with a specific detail or an oddity, is symptomatic of the crisis of rationality. The narrators' reason fails to fulfill its practical function and instead, fragmented, it makes them focus on disturbing phenomena. The characters first think about the object of their interest, but then the thoughts of it start creeping in their minds on their own. Their feelings towards the object turn from quite neutral to obsessive, which leads to rage and the need to somehow act to give way to the pressure. It is interesting that a mutual source of dread to the two narrators mentioned so far is an eye. It is a missing, mutilated eye in the first story, and in this story, it is the "vulture" eye of the old man that awakens the madness in the narrator. (303)

### 2.3: The Cask of Amontillado

The last tale discussed in this chapter is "The Cask of Amontillado." It tells a story of two friends out of which one, the narrator, had been wronged by the other, named Fortunato. Being overwhelmed by hatred, the narrator uses a clever lie to trick Fortunato into a deadly trap. During a conversation, he mentions he has just acquired a "pipe of what passes for Amontillado," apparently a rather rare kind of sherry, and since Fortunato is an expert on wine, it immediately catches his attention. (274) With the use of his intelligence, the narrator persuades his friend to enter the vaults where he keeps his wine. These are, however, filled with nitre[7] and therefore potentially dangerous.

[7] Potassium nitrate.

During their underground journey to the vault, the men have a drink from a bottle of Medoc[8] which should shield them from the dampness and reduce Fortunato's coughing. Ironically enough, the narrator toasts to Fortunato's long life, to maintain the atmosphere of safety. When Fortunato's cough worsens, the narrator hands him some more wine which impairs his attentiveness. That, combined with the dying flame of their torches makes him easy prey for the murderer. In a moment of surprise, the narrator fetters Fortunato and he walls his friend up in the catacombs, thus carrying out his vengeance.

In this story, the murderer's madness is not hindered or denied by the character, this time it is clearly confessed. And at the very end when the narrator is almost done with his act, he experiences a sort of auditory hallucination. He leads a conversation with an unknown voice, surely not that of Fortunato since Fortunato is already unconscious. (279) The two voices talk and, in the end, only the narrator's is heard, the other one is gone. This hallucination of the narrator's might be caused by the dangerous fumes poisoning the air in the catacombs, or possibly alcohol. It is, however, more likely a manifestation of his madness, which is given way by the strong feeling of hatred the narrator experiences and the successful completion of his revenge. Here again, the crisis of rationality draws the narrator into insanity.

As James W. Gargano puts it in "The Question of Poe's Narrators," the narrator's "abandonment of all his life-energies in one pet project of hate convict him of a madness which he mistakes for the inspiration of genius."[9] Thus, he completes the trinity of Poe's insane murderers who, in the conviction of their brilliance, lose everything. Gargano also adds that "the narrator cannot understand

[8] A type of red wine grown in a wine region between the left bank of river Garonne and the Atlantic Ocean.
[9] James W. Gargano, "The Question of Poe's Narrators," *College English*, vol. 25, no. 3 (1963): 180. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/373684 25 Jul 2019.

that his assault upon another person derives from his own moral sickness and unbalance."[10] These two statements, of course, apply to all three stories discussed in this chapter.

In summary, Poe makes all of his three murderers overconfident, overly rational and obsessed with a certain element. Their motive for murder is always anger or hatred, and they do not think twice about committing the crime. But the key to understanding Poe's tales of insane murderers, as well as his other work, can be found when looking at their historical context. According to Tony Magistrale, "The Age of Reason, or the Enlightenment, trusted that in the proper use of the intellect, humans could overcome the urge to commit random acts of evil against themselves and others."[11] It believed "in the powers of reason and enlightened rationality as a means for the governance of all human conduct" and had "faith that order and symmetry were superior to chaos and undisciplined emotion."[12] This view Poe shatters when he introduces characters governed by rationality, who then, however, turn to the vilest of actions. Rationality and the use of intellect, therefore, do not equal discipline and good behavior. Poe makes this very clear in making his narrators in "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart" use only reason and leave the emotional part of them behind.

The three stories show individual moral aspects of the crisis of rationality which subsequently leads to madness; it is cruelty and perversion, which can be seen especially in "The Black Cat" but partly also in the other two stories, the suppression of emotion, which is evident in "The Tell-Tale Heart," and finally the desire for revenge in "The Cask of Amontillado." It is important to note that "the

[10] Gargano, 181.
[11] Tony Magistrale, *Student Companion to Edgar Allan Poe* (Westport: Greenwood, 2001) 16.
[12] Magistrale, 16.

Gothic was born out of and as a reaction to, the Age of Reason … If the science of the Enlightenment emphasized the conscious, rational side of man, the Gothic suggested that the unconscious, irrational side is just as powerful — if not more so."[13] In the stories discussed above, Poe is hinting at the crisis of rationality in a reason-oriented American culture. He attempts to depict this crisis by the use of diverse types of insanity and their manifestation in the suppression of emotion and the rationalization of cruelty and perversity.

The incorporation of a theme such as the insane murderers induces yet another type of dreadful feelings in the reader. Being inside of a mad murderous brain is something the majority of people have never experienced. It is a strange and terrifying idea, and it fits into the Gothic environment perfectly. Not surprisingly are the tales such as "The Tell-Tale Heart" and ''The Black Cat" "descents into the darkest part of the human psyche," they even are "symbolically located in constricted basements and bedrooms."[14] This theme, right after the supernatural entities and ghosts, is probably the most effective one with which the feeling of horror can be induced. It gives the reader the shivers, and the suspense builds up to a moment of extreme tension. The reader is curious to know how the murderer will kill and whether there still is a chance for the victim to get away. But most importantly, it makes the reader think about how the insanity can originate within human reason and how it can lead to crime which is something the Enlightenment-based American political arrangement did not admit to be possible.

As was briefly indicated previously in this chapter, Poe makes use of the insanity-defense controversy and projects it into these three tales. All three narrators display "an attempt to provide a rational account of apparently irrational events and

[13] Magistrale, 16.
[14] Magistrale, xii.

behavior."[15] In his book on the works of Edgar Allan Poe, Magistrale gives an accurate description of what also seems to be Poe's response to the crisis of rationality:

> In place of reason's belief in order and self-discipline, the Gothic understood that both human nature and the natural world itself could not be so easily regulated, that we are essentially ambivalent and contradictory beings inhabiting a volatile world. Both man and nature itself, if given the alternative, appeared less likely to perform benevolent deeds than acts of perversity and destruction. So in most Gothic texts, anxiety stimulates pleasure, violence creates delight, horror shapes reality.[16]

In conclusion, what connects all the three narrators is the fact that they spend too much time alone hidden away from the society which then leaves a mark on their mental health in the form of "pathological distortion, obsessive behavior, delusions of grandeur, and a loss of psychic balance."[17] What makes them different is the way they do or do not realize their madness; two of the murderers deny it, the third one seems to be unaware of it. They also differ in the way their madness manifests and what triggers it; it is sometimes given way by the anger, sometimes even alcohol. In the words of Magistrale,

> Poe's homicidal men are in active rebellion against some restrictive moral or physical law that has denied them access to an imaginary realm associated with freedom and self-expression. … the obsessions of Poe's sociopathic criminals usually center upon a person or object that symbolizes personal oppression: an intrusive wife, an intolerable insult, a black cat, a vulturelike eye. … In order to obtain this desired state of tranquility, all symbols of outside oppression and propriety must first be destroyed.[18]

It is, however, most importantly their crisis of rationality which enables the murder to happen; their belief that reason excludes madness.

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[15] Cleman, 630.
[16] Magistrale, 16.
[17] Magistrale, 76.
[18] Magistrale, 77.

# Chapter 3: The Madman

Out of the stories mentioned in the Introduction, several involve madmen. This chapter concentrates on these characters in the stories "Fall of the House of Usher," in which Roderick Usher grows insane after the death of his sister, and "Berenice," where Egaeus's obsessive behavior drives him completely mad. Both of the stories handle the theme of physical and psychological deterioration and decay, eventually followed by the characters' alienation from the world around them and their slip into madness. Also, the act of burial followed by the discovery of the dead still being alive highlights the mad part of the characters.

## 3.1: The Fall of the House of Usher

One of the typical Gothic settings is usually a haunted old house situated in a far-away place. It is also often abandoned by the majority of its former inhabitants and only a few of them remain to live there. Usher's mansion complies with all the characteristics above, therefore it makes for a perfect Gothic setting. Similarly to Usher's house, Egaeus, the narrator in "Berenice," also describes his house to be gloomy and grey with his chamber being a witness to his mother's death. Therefore, when creating a Gothic story, Poe first presents the reader with a description of the setting, often with gloomy natural scenery or a scary house. By doing this, he establishes a proper ground for when he decides to take the horror a level deeper.

The first story, "The Fall of the House of Usher," opens up with exactly this kind of melancholic description of the scenery the narrator beholds and in which the house of Usher is situated, and already the first page gives the reader a chilling sensation. The whole area gives a gloomy impression with a feeling of decay hovering above the premises. Poe's use of imagery and his art of description

effectively create the proper horror atmosphere. The use of words such as "ghastly," "dreary," "decayed," or "sorrowful"[1] to describe the landscape and the environment immediately induces the feeling of gloom and dread in the reader.

But Poe tries to reach some even deeper parts of the reader's psyche and he continues to add expressions like "insufferable gloom," "utter depression of soul," or "unredeemed dreariness of thought" which do not apply to the environment anymore, but to a human being. The reader is then able to relate to these expressions because they describe feelings every person has probably experienced at some point in their life. It is, therefore, more effective to use these kinds of expressions in order to create a certain atmosphere than only using words not connected to human experience. This way, the effect on the reader is more amplified. Arthur A. Brown supports this argument when he states that "we would not be fascinated by [these tales] if they were not somehow true."[2] The truth is, in fact, the scariest thing, as becomes apparent further in the tale.

In this story, we are introduced to Roderick Usher and the Usher family mansion. The overall impression of Usher is very similar to his house, maybe even more perceptible because, according to the narrator, they have been quite close but now he struggles to even recognize Usher for all the change his malady has caused him. (234) Usher describes his condition as an "acute bodily illness," "a mental disorder which oppressed him," and later even admits the disease to be hereditary. (232) His family had been known for being "time out of mind" (232) and Usher himself believes the source of his malady to be "a constitutional and a family evil." (235) But as the story unfolds, terrible truths unfold with it and we learn that Usher's condition influences his actions and, evenly, his actions affect his condition.

[1] Poe, 231.
[2] Brown, 451.

Apart from his being prone to illness from a hereditary point of view, it is not only the environment he lives in; the, almost, empty family house which is falling apart, that has a great impact on his mental health, it is his company as well. The actual fact that he shares the mansion only with his dying sister would be depressing enough on its own but put together with the aspects mentioned before it makes his condition even worse. And as this condition worsens, we notice that the mental state of Roderick Usher is directly connected with the state of his house. As one slowly withers away, the other too falls into despair. As the former disintegrates psychologically, the latter starts to crumble apart as well. As John h. Timmerman argues in his article "House of Mirrors," "The house is rent by a zigzag fissure that threatens its stability. In his letter to the narrator, Roderick admits to 'mental disorder' that threatens his stability."[3] In fact, the two mirror each other which becomes most apparent later, at the end of the story.

Trying to distract his friend from his illness and worries, the narrator brings back Usher's artistic self. He then begins to use it as a means of psychological relief and expression of his mental states, which is most evident in his poem "The Haunted Palace," where his bad state of mind is clearly comprehensible. Usher seems to enjoy the creative activities but only until the point when his sister yields to her illness. According to Jonathan A. Cook and his essay "Poe and the Apocalyptic Sublime," "chief among the reasons for Usher's decline is the death of his tenderly beloved sister, a fact that causes Usher the greatest grief and melancholy."[4] And from this moment Usher's mental health starts to rapidly

[3] John H. Timmerman, "House of Mirrors: Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" *Papers on Language & Literature*, no. 3 (2003): 235, EBSCOhost, https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=edsglr&AN=edsgcl.110123291&lang=cs&site=eds-live&scope=site 15 Jul 2019.
[4] Jonathan A. Cook, "Poe and the Apocalyptic Sublime: 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" *Papers on Language & Literature*, no. 1 (2012): 3. EBSCOhost,

decrease. Another crucial fact that must be noted is that Roderick and Madeline were twins. (240) When a bond such as that between twins is severed like this, the sibling remaining must suffer a terrible psychological blow which can compromise even the last remains of sanity one, in this case, Usher, has left.

To put an end to his misery and suffering, Roderick decides to put Madeline into their family tomb immediately. But instead of feeling relief, Usher slips more and more into his madness. One evening when a storm approaches the house, terrifying noises begin to fill the mansion. While the narrator is only frightened, Usher bursts out in a fit of insanity and reveals the terrible truth: "many days, have I heard it … I dared not speak! We have put her living in the tomb! … Is she not hurrying to upbraid me for my haste?" (244-245) And as if he foretold the future, suddenly, Lady Madeline appears before them. She has escaped her vault and has now come for her brother.

It becomes evident, that Madeline must have suffered an attack of catalepsy which deprived her of her ability to move and thus let others know she is not dead yet.[5] Usher has been aware of her being alive, though, but knowingly left her to die in her coffin. Maybe he was too afraid that his premonition was right, maybe he tried to convince himself he was just imagining it, and maybe he was ashamed of his crime; knowingly burying a person alive so that he would get rid of them and the burden they constitute. As Cook puts it, Madeline refuses to truly die without her brother's company, because she as well shares the special bond between them, and simultaneously, she wants to punish him for burying her alive. As she reaches her petrified brother, she collapses on him and they both fall dead to the ground.

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https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=ip,shib&db=edsglr&AN=edsgcl.282955922&lang=cs&site=eds-live&scope=site 16 Jul 2019.

[5] "Catalepsy," Def. *Cambridge Dictionary*, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/catalepsy 15 Jul 2019.

She, therefore, becomes not only the source of Usher's insanity but also the cause of his end.

One last time the interconnectedness of the actors and the place becomes evident in that "the diminishment of the Usher family … precisely parallels the physical collapse of the house."[6] As Timmerman concludes, we see that "As the narrator flees, the house itself parallels the act of Roderick and Madeline, first splitting apart along the zigzag fissure and then collapsing together into the tarn."[7] In the end, Ushers premonitions and guilt, embodied by his twin sister, overpower him.

In his *Essay on the Material and Spiritual Universe, Eureka*, Poe says that "the two principles proper, attraction and repulsion - the material and the spiritual - accompany each other, in the strictest fellowship, forever. Thus the body and the soul walk hand in hand."[8] This supports the idea of interconnectedness between Usher, Lady Madeline and the Usher mansion. Although they are three separate entities, in the end, they become one. After all, Usher and Madeline being twins also makes them one, in a way. And since they were most probably born in the house, it has been a part of them as well since the beginning of their lives and it only makes sense that they all come to an end together, as one.

Finally, there is some more space for questions; does Roderick Usher really bury his sister alive, or is it all just a projection of his mind, simply caused by its inability to come to terms with the fact that Madeline is dead? Maybe, after burying his sister, he was unable to process the grief and his mind, in order to end his suffering, shuts down and the whole horrible ending is just a hallucination. And

[6] Timmerman, 235.
[7] Timmerman, 242.
[8] Poe, 51.

concerning the narrator, is it possible that he grew insane too? From the beginning, the narrator feels as if the place was haunted by some sinister entity, but he cannot find any foundation to base this impression upon. Maybe the narrator himself slowly starts to fall under the house's spell or a family curse and is gradually being swallowed up by the omnipresent madness which seems to devour every member and visitor of the house of Usher. Maybe by seeing and feeling his friend's grief, the narrator unconsciously joins the process and is overpowered by insanity as well. Or were the two men subject to a joint hallucination caused by the decaying house's miasma?

In some cases, the theme of insanity and hallucination intertwine. Even an otherwise mentally stable character, such as the narrator in this story, can become subject to hallucination under extreme circumstances. Hallucination can also be induced by drugs as the narrator himself correctly remarks as he first arrives at the house of Usher. He describes his feeling as 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." (231) Hallucination could, in that case, be the reason for the narrator's and Usher's strange visions they experience during the night of the "fall." (241-242) The narrator himself questions their realness and assigns them to common "electrical phenomena" and "rank miasma of the tarn." (242)

### 3.2: Berenice

The second tale, "Berenice," also handles the themes of insanity, crime, catalepsy, and premature entombment. The story is narrated by its main character, Egaeus, a man "ill of health" and "buried in gloom," suffering from a disease of a "monomaniac character." (644) The disease manifests itself in "nervous intensity

of interest" in "even the most ordinary objects of the universe." (644) The narrator would sometimes spend the whole night watching "the steady flame of a lamp," "the embers of a fire," he would "dream away whole days over the perfume of a flower" or "become absorbed … in a quaint shadow … falling upon the floor." (644) However, Egaeus is also a scholar and a man who, apparently, "turned to books and the realm of his own imagination for relief from his interminable loneliness."[9] As a reader of Latin church fathers and other theological writers, he is influenced by the misogynist views of Tertullian[10] which then project especially on the relationship to his wife, while demonstrating the teachings of Augustine[11] which he displays in his amoral behavior. He is living in an organized world governed by the values depicted in the literature he indulges in. This world, however, becomes disrupted by his growing obsession.

Although his cousin Berenice, who lives with him in his house, is tremendously beautiful, Egaeus is not in love with her. His feelings "had never been of the heart, and [his] passions always were of the mind." (645) That changes, however, when a fatal disease falls upon her and everything about her frame and character transforms dramatically. (643) As the manifestations of her disease become more apparent, she becomes not "an object of love but … the theme of … speculation" to Egaeus; he perceives her "not as the living and breathing Berenice, but as the Berenice of a dream; not as a being of the earth, earthy, but as the abstraction of such a being." (645) He now, more than ever, seizes to regard her as a person, she becomes a mere object to him.

[9] Magistrale, 57.
[10] Gregory Hays, "Ancient Classics," *Edgar Allan Poe in Context*, ed. Kevin J. Hayes (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013): 226.
[11] Frederick S. Frank, and Tony Magistrale, *The Poe Encyclopedia* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997): 28.

In an “evil” moment, the narrator proposes marriage to her. One day, he notices her teeth which he had never noticed before, but he regrets ever noticing them immediately, since he knows what effect they will have on him from that moment on: “Would to God that I had never beheld them, or that, having done so, I had died!” (646) Given his condition, he naturally becomes obsessed with them. He spends every moment thinking about them in every possible way and eventually, it comes to him that their possession could restore him to peace again. (647) This becomes quite possible, though, when one day, Egaeus learns that Berenice had died. Her last stroke of epilepsy turned fatal for her that morning and she is buried immediately.

An unspecified while after that, the narrator finds himself sitting in his library, perplexed, and feeling as if he has just “awakened from a confused and exciting dream.” (647) He also discovers a strange little box lying on a nearby table. Hearing a female voice screaming in his head makes him want to make sense of what is happening and what had been happening since Berenice’s burial, which he seems to not have any recollection of at all. His questions are answered when a servant comes to inform him about a terrible sequence of events. After seeking for the source of the female scream, the servants found Berenice’s distorted grave and body, still alive. Apparently, just as Madeline Usher, Berenice must have suffered an attack of catalepsy and was therefore perceived as dead. As if this event were not horrible enough, the servant continues to point out Egaeus’s muddy clothes, a nearby standing shovel, and human nail marks on his hand. The horrified narrator rushes to open the mysterious box only to find it full of Berenice’s teeth. (648)

Clearly, Egaeus’s disease is the reason behind his increasing separation from the real world since it keeps him immersed in trances. He even acknowledges that “The realities of the world affected me as visions, and as visions only, while the

wild ideas of the land of dreams became, in turn, not the material of my every-day existence, but in very deed that existence utterly and solely in itself." (643) His obsession with possession drives him even deeper into his insanity until he can no longer be without the objects of his interest. His untreated disorder forces him to dig up the buried young woman and rip her teeth out of her mouth to satisfy the urge. Here, as "in many of Poe's tales, death for the female is eroticized by the male, suggesting at least an unconscious link between sexuality and sadistic desire."[12]

The theme of the violation of a dead, or, in this case, alive, human body creates a combination of fear and disgust, which induce the feeling of horror and thus perfectly complements a Gothic story. The reason for the incorporation of such a morbid act is, according to Arthur A. Brown, that "it is the nature of literature to dramatize the terror we face, as human beings, of that which would make us not human."[13] Brown then continues to argue that:

> What we feel here - or what we are meant to feel - is the terror of our own exposure, of our own participation in a morbid and violent act. Our attention as readers to the details of the tale, our willingness to be told what should not be told, reproduces the narrator's obsession with the teeth of Berenice-with that which speaks of death and does not die.[14]

The idea of such a deed terrifies us, not only if done to us but also if done by us to others. As for the theme of premature burial, here again, we see that "what this terror … allows us to feel is the sense of our own mortality, our ability to die, our humanness in contrast to what the tales speak of," which in Poe's stories often is the coming to life after death.[15]

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[12] Magistrale, 58.
[13] Brown, 450.
[14] Brown, 452.
[15] Brown, 451.

The two stories discussed in this chapter differ in the point of view of the narrative. While the narrator in "The Fall of the House of Usher" is only relating his memories of the main character and his insanity, in "Berenice," Egaeus is both the narrator and the main character. The first narrator is, therefore, most likely influenced by Usher's hallucinatory states, he becomes "the immersed experiencer."[16] The insanity is filtered through the narrator and it is uncertain whether or how much Usher is actually mad. The narrator does not give a reliable account of what is really happening in the house, he only describes his view of the reality and he tries to make sense of the situation while only having pieces of information. Naturally, experiencing what he does not understand makes the narrator doubtful and the reader starts questioning his sanity too.

Pirjo Lyytikäinen supports the idea of the narrator's unreliability in a study on "Emotion Effects in Literature" as follows:

> Every phenomenon that the narrator pays attention to is seen through the filter of this dark melancholy. This contagious atmosphere seizes the narrator immediately on arrival, before he has met his friend. Not only the state of his friend but what he himself affirms to be a "superstition" about the house and its surroundings being haunted imposes itself on him.[17]

Essentially, "as the experiencing character, he gradually succumbs to the mystery, superstition and non-reason," following his friend Usher.[18] But as the narrating persona, "he is also the voice of reason and analysis, and is struggling (and failing) to understand the mystery."[19] Clearly, if Roderick Usher himself narrated "The Fall of the House of Usher," it would undoubtedly be a different story. Therefore,

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[16] Pirjo Lyytikäinen, "How to Study Emotion Effects in Literature: Written Emotions in Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" *Writing Emotions: Theoretical Concepts and Selected Case Studies in Literature*, ed. Ingeborg Jandl et al. (Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, 2017): 262. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv1wxt3t.16 12 Aug 2019.
[17] Lyytikäinen, 260.
[18] Lyytikäinen, 262.
[19] Lyytikäinen, 262.

Egaeus's first-person narrative in "Berenice" is then probably more objective, since he tells the story as it happens. It is evident that the reliability of the narrator changes with their position in the story.

In conclusion, "The Fall of the House of Usher" disproves the characters' reality with hallucinations and visions, while in "Berenice," the narrator's reality symbolized by Christian theology falls apart when his obsession distorts it. It is also the narrators' reliability that Poe experiments with when he uses different points of view in his tales.

# Chapter 4: The Doppelganger

In the last chapter of this work, the issue of doppelgangers will be studied. It often occurs not only in Poe's tales, but it is one of the favorite themes of Gothic in general. In connection to this theme, Poe's famous doppelganger story, the Schoolhouse Gothic "William Wilson," will be discussed. This chapter will, once again, consider the story "Ligeia," which will this time be studied in terms of doubles.[1]

## 4.1: William Wilson

The story of William Wilson makes the reader question the sanity of the main character as in previously discussed stories. Unlike them, however, "William Wilson" reveals a significant degree of the narrator's self-reflection. Right from the beginning, he admits his wickedness and his resolve to find its origin. (626) He, however, also believes that he was, to some extent, a "slave of circumstances beyond human control," and that he was a victim of "sublunary visions," and thus he is trying to absolve himself from a part of the responsibility for his behavior. (626)

One of the elements possibly leading to his upcoming trouble might be the narrator's inheritance of certain family attributes. The narrator says that he is a "descendant of a race whose imaginative and easily excitable temperament has at all times rendered [the sublunary visions] remarkable," and that he "gave evidence of having fully inherited the family character." (626) In regard to his mental health already as a young child, the narrator says, "I must believe that my first mental development had in it much of the uncommon." (629) We can thus observe that he

[1] Charles L. Crow, *A Companion to American Gothic* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2014) 165.

is actively searching for the reason behind his later behavior and that he is aware of the circumstances which possibly affected it. As soon becomes apparent, these features contributed to the narrator's later conflicts.

As a young boy, the narrator describes himself in less humble terms than at the beginning of his story. He sees himself as naturally getting "an ascendency over all [schoolmates] not greatly older than [himself]," all except one William Wilson; a boy with the same first and last name, of the same height and looks, who was born on the same day as our narrator. (629-630) This boy would dare to compete with the young narrator in every possible field and would "refuse implicit belief in my assertions, and submission to my will – indeed, to interfere with my arbitrary dictation in any respect whatsoever." (629) Nobody else seems to notice this rivalry, though, nor any of the boys' skirmishes which, allegedly, went on continuously day after day.

What catches the reader's attention is the fact that Wilson, as the narrator addresses him, "had a weakness in the faucial or guttural organs, which precluded him from raising his voice at any time above a very low whisper." (631) This is when we notice that, apart from all of the similarities between the two characters, there is more that is strange about Wilson. The narrator soon develops an aversion toward him and questions his intentions. These intentions, however, soon prove to be morally right, since what vexes the narrator is Wilson's "disgusting air of patronage" and "frequent officious interference with [his] will" in the form of advice, often also "embodied in those meaning whispers." (632)

In the course of the following years, the narrator turns to vice, alcohol, and hazard, which he himself voluntarily admits. But the more morally dissolute he behaves, the more frequently William Wilson happens to suddenly meet and confront the narrator to lecture him again about his morals. Wherever the narrator

travels across the world, Wilson apparently always follows him there to thwart his wicked plans. While doing so, however, the narrator never sees Wilson's face. (639) Eventually, the narrator decides to get rid of him once and for all. The two men engage in a fight which turns fatal for Wilson. But as it turns out, surprisingly enough, the narrator seems to have murdered himself. (641)

Finally, we witness the narrator's realization of the truth as he experiences a strange revealing vision:

> The brief moment in which I averted my eyes had been sufficient to produce, apparently, a material change in the arrangements at the upper or farther end of the room. A large mirror, - so at first it seemed to me in my confusion – now stood where none had been perceptible before; and as I stepped up to it in extremity of terror, mine own image, but with features all pale and dabbled in blood, advanced to meet me with a feeble and tottering gait. (641)

Although the narrator does not understand what he is seeing at first and he believes that the features of the room simply must have changed, he gradually starts to understand the sight; "It was Wilson; but he spoke no longer in a whisper, and I could have fancied that I myself was speaking" (641) It is when Wilson speaks up for the first time, that the narrator comprehends what has been happening for all those years and what he was not aware of until that day: "In me didst thou exist – and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself." (641)

When discussing the theme of doppelgangers, the important question is whether the doppelganger is real or just fictional. We can find evidence to support the idea of Wilson's nonexistence in several parts of the narration. Starting with a return to the beginning of the story, we notice that the narrator, apart from his effort to constructively find the source of his trouble, still describes his past encounters with Wilson as if he had been living in a dream. (626) A part of him clearly is not

able to comprehend the actuality of the events. Once, he also admits to having "discovered, in [Wilson's] accent, in his air, and general appearance, a something which first startled, and then deeply interested me, by bringing to mind dim visions of my earliest infancy." (633) It is, therefore, apparent that the narrator is subconsciously aware of a certain connection between him and Wilson, although he is yet unconscious of Wilson's physical nonexistence.

Regarding Wilson's physical nonexistence, it is important to note that he does exist in the narrator's mind and that he is, indeed, a part of the narrator himself. To say that there is no Wilson at all would, therefore, be false. The narrator, however, experiences some kind of visions or, again, hallucinations, which cause him to see Wilson as a real human being. These hallucinations stem from the narrator's family traits, such as the previously mentioned heightened imagination, as well as from the narrator's own deranged mind. His personality is, in fact, split into two separate characters, which becomes more evident in the second half of the story where Wilson is allegedly following the narrator during his travels.

The two personalities of the narrator are the morally good one, embodied by Wilson, and the morally wrong one, represented by the narrator himself in the story. Whenever the amoral personality intends to do harm or behaves in a wicked way, the moral personality suddenly emerges and acts in order to foil the deed. That is the reason why the narrator never sees or meets Wilson unless he does something inappropriate. He is first unaware of Wilson being a part of him since he believes that Wilson is his evil adversary who tries to compromise him. He does not discover the reality up until the very end of the story where he first must harm Wilson to see they are one. Also, in this story, we encounter something that we have already seen in "The Black Cat;" the narrator commits evil deeds simply because they are evil and should not be committed.

The narrator's violent action towards Wilson, in the end, can be understood in two ways. Firstly, as his realization of his hallucinations, and the final connection of the two personalities. Secondly, however, it can be perceived as the culmination of the evil inside the narrator and his murder of the other personality, the only remaining good and moral part of him, which prevented him from being able to fully submerge into perversion. In the first case, the narrator's split personality unites again. In the second case, only the morally good part of his personality dies, the morally wrong lives. Charles L. Crow supports this view in the *Companion to American Gothic*, saying that "the psychological dimension [in the tale] is revealed not only in a general detachment from self and reality but also in the self-destructive annihilation of an antagonist towards whom the protagonist feels deeply ambivalent."[2] He continues to say that "the double eventually becomes the [narrator's] conscience," so "to kill one's conscience implies killing one's better self" which is precisely what our second interpretation suggests.[3]

**4.2: Ligeia**

We can also observe the theme of doppelgangers in one of the stories previously discussed in this work; in Poe's "Ligeia." Although Ligeia is the center female character of the story, it is she who is the spectral doppelganger. The original persona is the narrator's wife, Rowena. While Ligeia is described as having a pale face with huge black eyes which are "larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race," and black curly hair, Rowena is quite her opposite. (655) She is simply described as "fair-haired and blue-eyed." (660) We could say that while Rowena is described

[2] Crow, 170.
[3] Crow, 157.

and generally treated by the narrator as a rather ordinary woman, Ligeia is depicted as almost inhuman.

In comparison to "William Wilson," in "Ligeia" the doppelganger is not a separate part of the narrator's personality but an alter ego of his wife who is, furthermore, only a creation of his deranged mind. According to James W. Gargano, "there is not even a hint that [the narrator] entertains a single gentle or chivalric feeling for his new wife. He loathes the reality she represents."[4] This supports the idea of the narrator's bad mental condition and his subsequent creation of hallucinations and visions, which he refuses to abandon; he chooses a dream over reality. After all, as Fred Botting states in his book on Gothic, and as have been discussed in Chapter 1, these hallucinations of Ligeia are the "external reflections of an imagination decayed by loss and opium addiction."[5]

Aside from the theme of doppelgangers, both stories also handle a covert act of murder, unforeseen end perhaps even unnoticed by the reader. Although the narrator in "William Wilson" is completely aware of murdering Wilson, he is not aware of simultaneously murdering himself during the action. In "Ligeia," the narrator's poisoning of Rowena is acted out rather subtly and there is not much attention being paid to it. More attention is, on the contrary, paid to the narrator's desire for Ligeia and his determination to do anything to be with her again, even to commit a murder. In his "Interpretation of 'Ligeia'," Roy P. Basler provides an accurate description of the force behind the narrator's actions. He says that

> the hero's obsession has taken the form of adoration and worship of her person in an erotomania primarily sensual … and hence projected into a symbolic realm of deity and forbidden wisdom. Following her death, however, his obsession becomes an intense

[4] James W. Gargano, "Poe's 'Ligeia': Dream and Destruction," *College English*, vol. 23, no. 5 (1962): 340. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/373801 4 Aug 2019.
[5] Fred Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996) 122.

> megalomania motivated by his will to restore her to life in another body through a process of metempsychosis.[6]

In summary, the narrator's "overbearing love destroys the female protagonist by violating her psychic—and … her physical—space" which then makes it easier for him to kill her.[7]

It can be said that both of the stories handle the theme of doppelgangers in an analogous way; they depict a subconsciously fabricated entity, yet each under unique circumstances. The narrators in these two stories are both mentally unstable and are experiencing some kind of a hallucination which causes them to see a nonexistent individual. While in "William Wilson" it is the moral downfall of the narrator which functions as the destructive force, in the words of Tony Magistrale, in "Ligeia," "The story's theme of a man's longing for his dead wife merges with his urge to bring her back, even at the possible expense of another woman's life and his own sanity."[8] Here, the destruction originates from the narrator's amorous desire which makes him commit evil. As becomes clear from the comparison of the two stories, the problem of morals and conscience in "William Wilson" seems to be comparable to the crime of passion seen in "Ligeia." After all, both guilt and passion eventually drive the narrator to murder.

[6] Roy P. Basler, "The Interpretation of 'Ligeia,'" *College English*, vol. 5, no. 7 (1944): 367. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/371048 12 Aug 2019.
[7] Magistrale, 73.
[8] Magistrale, 63.

# Conclusion

After an examination of all the stories chosen for the purpose of this work, it becomes evident that Poe deliberately incorporates mentally unstable characters in his stories in order to take the horror of a Gothic story to a new level. The usual Gothic elements we encounter in all Gothic stories are such as the "monstrous misfits, devils and demonic figures, perpetrators and victims, doubles and doppelgängers, freaks and the deformed, madness and mad acts, ghosts and kindly spirits, and physical and spiritual isolation," almost all of which can, after all, also be seen in the tales discussed above.[1] However, out of these motifs, Poe pays special attention to insanity and carefully integrates it into the characters of the protagonists of his narratives.

I believe that Poe focuses on madness in his human characters precisely because of the humanity in his readership; the mental state of a character is easier for the reader to connect with, unlike, for example, an act of murder or live entombment. It is because the majority of the readers have most likely experienced the feelings of sorrow, anxiety or grief, in contrast to, for instance, committing a murder. Poe describes the issues of the human mind in a way easily comprehensible and relatable. Although a mysterious murderer carefully orchestrating a killing, or a dead lover returning from the grave to haunt the bereaved are terrifying enough, an insight into a maddened mind is the highest embodiment of horror. As Tony Magistrale claims, "by depicting unstable psyches unable to discipline their darkest urges, [Poe's] best tales thrust even the most reluctant reader into the demented interior realms of his characters."[2]

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[1] Chad Rohman, "Awful Mystery: Flannery O'Connor as Gothic Artist," *A Companion to American Gothic,* ed. Charles L. Crow (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2014) 280.
[2] Magistrale, 19.

This was first demonstrated in Chapter 1, where both the narrator in "Eleonora" and in "Ligeia" slip into madness after the death of their beloved woman. Their insanity is deepened by their vain attempts to achieve the ideal of beauty, which is, however, naturally thwarted by the presence of death and can therefore never be accomplished. In Chapter 2, the insanity stemming from murder and murder from insanity has been seen in the crisis of rationality happening in the murderers in "The Black Cat" as well as in "The Cask of Amontillado" and "The Tell-Tale Heart." Their belief that reason excludes insanity allows them to do evil which they are able to defend, just as their alleged sanity. The theme of Chapter 3 where the artist Roderick Usher and the obsessive narrator in "Berenice" is the characters' separation from reality after their life certainties have been disrupted. Here, Usher's delusion and Berenice's cousin's unhealthy relationship with women lead to crime. Finally, as has been demonstrated in Chapter 4, a mad mind is also prone to the development of nonexistent doppelgangers. Following a split of one's conscience from the rest of their personality, the mentally deranged character resorts to murder, as well as the lovesick opium addict to a crime of passion.

To step into such a deranged mind and to only imagine acting out some of the insane acts as seen, for example, in "Berenice" or "The Black Cat" is not only inconceivable but also truly dreadful for an ordinary reader. Precisely this ability to draw the reader inside a different human mind makes Poe an extraordinary writer and his stories so remarkable and singular. Nevertheless, Poe's own experience is instrumental in the creation of his stories. His experience of alcohol and drug abuse as well as the loss of many of his loved ones made him exceptionally plausible when it comes to the description of emotion, feelings, and suffering. There is no doubt that experiencing these unfortunate events, beside his creativity and talent, enabled him to excel in the Gothic genre.

Poe was not the first Gothic author to incorporate insanity in his work. The American writer Charles Brockden Brown examined the "powers and terrors of the human mind," for example in his *Wieland*,[3] already before Poe's birth. There were also authors in Europe, such as Charles Robert Maturin, who also included the problems of the human mind in writings, which Maturin does in his most significant work *Melmoth the Wanderer*.[4] However, Poe makes his stories of madness novel in his focus on the personality splits in his characters. His split between reason and emotion or between rationality and insanity are described in extraordinary depth with the use of both rational analysis and emotional intensity, unusual in his forerunners.

[3] Botting, 116.
[4] Botting, 69.

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