

The Fall of the House of Usher | Themes

Sanity versus Insanity

Poe guides readers to speculate about how the characters' minds work (or don't work). This narrative pressure starts with the narrator's becoming aware of how the landscape and the [House of Usher](#) shape his mood: "with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit." It has more power over him than it should. This concern over sanity starts before he enters this landscape, though, as he reports that Roderick's letter asking him to visit communicated "nervous agitation." This concern for Roderick's sanity deepens once he sees his old friend again, as Roderick changes from one mood to another very quickly and reports some disturbing ideas, such as his belief about how his family house is shaping his mind.

The narrator questions the sanity of Roderick and Madeline as they slip further from reality, and he begins to worry about his own mental health. He has reason to worry. From the moment he enters the area around the house, the narrator feels it affect his spirit inexplicably. The longer the narrator stays in the house, the more his own mental state is affected. While the narrator tries to distract Roderick after Madeline's apparent death, Roderick even calls him a madman for not recognizing what is going on. Since Roderick may be correct in this moment, the question of who is crazy and who isn't shifts: maybe Roderick's senses truly are heightened and the things he hears are real.

Deterioration

Both the literal, physical house of Usher and the dynastic [House of Usher](#) are falling apart. The house's physical condition seems tied to the surrounding landscape, as if it is covered with fungus and cobwebs, in part because that's what the setting demands. The house's physical decay is mirrored in the state of Roderick and Madeline. Both twins are suffering from strange illnesses that parallel the house's condition. As the house is crumbling away, so Madeline seems to be wasting away. As the house is discontinuous and contradictory (according to the narrator's reports in the story's first chapters), so is Roderick warm and friendly, yet pale as a corpse.

Both Roderick and the house itself fall apart after Madeline's death. Roderick increasingly loses control of his emotional and mental faculties, growing more sensitive and nervous. He later dies when Madeline reappears and collapses on him. The house, in turn, then collapses, falling into the lake.

Fantasy versus Reality

Like the narrator's concern over how the landscape affects his mood, the question of what is real and what is fantasy emerges early in the story and continues throughout. The narrator compares his early impressions to the dreams of an opium smoker. There are multiple moments in the story when the blurry and confusing question of reality versus

fantasy is especially driven home. For example, early in the story the narrator looks at the literal house of Usher in its reflection in the lake, rather than looking at it directly, which results in odd impressions of the house. The narrator's description of the Usher family home seems impossible. How can a house be everywhere decayed, but still intact?

Reality seems to blur and shift in several directions, and there are multiple forces at play in shaping the characters' reality or encouraging escape into fantasy. Any death in a family can produce extreme emotion. The death of a sibling and one's last living relative is likely to be even more disturbing. Furthermore, people can entertain fantasies anywhere, but put them in an isolated and ancient location like the [House of Usher](#), and they are perhaps more likely to indulge in fantasy. Speculation and fantasy are even more likely if one is unfamiliar with a place, or if it is strange, as the Usher home is for the narrator. One's mind is shaped in part by one's surroundings, and the narrator himself speculates that the Usher library influences the odd turns Roderick's mind takes.

The real and imaginary become indistinguishable as Roderick's ballad comes true and the story of Ethelred mingles with the sounds of Madeline's escape from the tomb. Though the narrator says he chose the book he's reading essentially at random—it was the only one at hand—the sounds described in its pages synchronize with the events completely. The sound effects for the knight's battle work as the noises Madeline makes when she's fighting her way out of her vault.

However, given that Madeline has been extremely ill and the vault is sealed deep underground, the idea that Madeline could have escaped unaided is probably a fantasy of its own. If the reader understands the story in Jungian, psychological terms, then there is no "reality" to Madeline's "escape." In this reading, the story is a Jungian parable, a psychological analysis of Roderick's mind or perhaps the mind of the narrator, depending upon the identity of the true "madman" of the story.