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CONTAGIOUS FRIENDSHIP IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S *THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER*

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ABSTRACT

In this study, I aim to trace the narrator's transformation from someone whose purpose is to alleviate the desperate mood of his friend Roderick Usher, with his positive energy, to becoming a psychological host for Roderick Usher's emotional instability. I argue that the narrator's immediate and prolonged exposure to Roderick's anxiety, combined with the dreadful atmosphere of the mansion and his own empathetic nature, lead to erosion of the boundaries between their opposite emotional states. This dissolution is reflected in the narrator's inability to maintain rational detachment or to establish a stabilizing anchor capable of preserving either his own psychological coherence or the symbolic integrity of the house. While this study refers to popular literary interpretations of *The Fall of the House of Usher*, it also approaches the text through a psychological framework. By applying contemporary research on emotional regulation and stress transmission, the paper moves beyond symbolic or aesthetic readings that analyze the interpersonal dynamics that lead to the narrator's mental deterioration.

Keywords: emotional transmission, fragmentation, co-rumination, psychological decline

INTRODUCTION

Edgar Allan Poe's 1839 *The Fall of the House of Usher*, published in the *Burton's Gentlemen's Magazine*, is still one of the most read short stories representing the Anglo-American Gothic tradition. The adaptation journey of the story has been and is still thriving in popular culture due to its depiction of psychologically disturbed characters, the decaying lineage of Roderick Usher and his sister Madeline, and the gloomy and sinister atmosphere of the Usher mansion. Most of the literary criticism focuses on the story's representation of

madness, the uncanny connection between Roderick Usher and Madeline, and the symbolism of the house. Arguably, these are themes that are very much present in the existing academic interpretations; however, the changing psychological state of the narrator has not received much scholarly attention. Gruesser (2004), in *Madmen and Moonbeams: The Narrator in 'The Fall of the House of Usher'* argues that, "For some readers, only the existence of a supernatural connection between the Usher family and the mansion in which they dwell can account for the coterminous demise of Roderick and Madeline Usher and their ancestral home" (p. 80). In the story's exposition, the reader finds out that the narrator's relationship with Roderick Usher is long-standing, even though the narrator "knew very little of [his] friend" (Poe, 1839 p. 4) a fact that has been largely overlooked by the scholars. Consequently, the emotional involvement between the narrator and Roderick Usher becomes a trigger for the instability of the story.

The Gothic atmosphere, the notion of duality, and narrative unreliability have been extensively examined by critics, very little attention is given to the narrator's mental deterioration that comes because of his sudden and intensive exposure to the emotional fragility of Roderick. According to Bruno Zerweck (2001), the concept of narrative unreliability depends on interpretive approaches and as such can vary across cultures and historical periods, as a result, it mirrors significant developments both within a particular moment in time and place. Roderick invites the narrator, his only friend, believing that his presence will improve his depressive emotional state, yet his intention to lift the spirit of his friend fails to overcome the negative energy of the house, and instead he surrenders to the dark atmosphere of the House. Recent psychological research shows that close emotional proximity can cause "emotional contagion", a condition in which one person unconsciously absorbs the feelings of another (Hatfield et al., 2014). The story, from this perspective, reveals a gap in interpretations of *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

Although many traditional readings of *The Fall of the House of Usher* interpret the narrator as a stable and rational observer whose role is to witness the decline of Roderick Usher, the text itself offers evidence that complicates such a view. Throughout the narrative, the narrator repeatedly acknowledges his own growing fear, nervousness, and inability to maintain rational control. His admission that he felt the "wild influences" of Roderick's superstitions creeping upon him and his struggle to "reason off" the nervousness that dominated him suggest a gradual erosion of emotional and psychological detachment. Rather than functioning solely as an objective witness, the narrator becomes increasingly implicated in the atmosphere of fear that surrounds the Usher household. This study therefore proposes an alternative reading in which the narrator's instability is not an incidental consequence of the plot but a central element of the narrative, revealing how prolonged emotional exposure can transform an apparently rational individual into a participant in the very psychological collapse he observes.

In this study, I aim to trace the narrator's transformation from someone whose purpose is to alleviate the depressed atmosphere with his positive energy to becoming a psychological host for Roderick Usher's emotional instability. Furthermore, I argue that the narrator's immediate and prolonged exposure to Roderick's anxiety, combined with the dreadful atmosphere of the mansion and his own empathetic nature, lead to the erosion of the boundaries between their opposite emotional states. This dissolution is reflected in the narrator's inability to maintain rational detachment or to establish a stabilizing anchor capable of preserving either his own psychological coherence or the symbolic integrity of the house. Instead, as a result, "From that chamber, and from that mansion, [he] fled aghast. The storm was still abroad in all its wrath as [he] found [himself] crossing the old causeway" (Poe, 1839, p. 25). With this approach, I put forth the narrator at the center of the narrative in order to provide a new way to

understand and interpret the interpersonal dynamics that are somewhat neglected by scholarly interpretation.

While this study refers to popular literary interpretations of *The Fall of the House of Usher*, it also approaches the text through a psychological framework. By applying contemporary research on emotional regulation and stress transmission, the paper moves beyond symbolic or aesthetic readings that analyze the interpersonal dynamics that lead to the narrator's mental deterioration.

Given the existing gap, this paper aims to investigate theories in modern psychology, especially the notion of emotional contagion, which Hatfield et al. (2014) identify as the unconscious transfer of affective states from one person to another, particularly in circumstances that reflect empathy, proximity, and long exposure to the emotions of the problematic person. Even though this theory was not established in Poe's time, it can be applied to the interpretation of the story and can offer alternative vocabulary for articulating the narrator's gradual absorption of Roderick's anxious agitation, fear, and hypersensitivity. Applying the theory of emotional contagion focuses on revealing how the narrator's friendship with Roderick becomes a means through which psychological disturbance is executed, a reading that has been overlooked in the existing literary scholarship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A large body of scholarly criticism reads the story with a focus on its horrific motifs, the symbolic elements, and the dynamics of reason and irrationality; yet very little has been written on the interpersonal tendencies between the narrator and his friend Roderick Usher. The majority of Gothic literature scholarship agrees on the significance of the setting and its role as the emitter of a tense atmosphere that creates the gloomy tone of Poe's fiction. Hogle (2002) argues that Gothic spaces operate as psychological extensions of the characters who inhabit them, noting that houses, landscapes, and rooms both reflect and intensify emotional states. This approach has influenced many readings of the Usher mansion as a spatial representation of Roderick's mental disintegration.

Whether *The Fall of the House of Usher* is read as an allegory for the poet's mind (Wilbur, 2016), or mental illness can be seen as a fissure in the wall, revealing the personality and illness of Roderick's mind (Langhoff, 2009), these studies reveal the positive role of spatial narrative in the development of the novel's plot (Xie, 2023).

As Mathew (2021) observes, "The deliberately capitalized primary letter personifies the grotesque mansion to the lonely and sickly Roderick himself, and so the narrator refers to the House as a 'mansion of gloom' and the windows as the 'eye of a scrutinizing observer'" (p. 423). Even though this argument alludes to the interaction between the psychology of the characters and the symbolism of the architecture, it does not entirely address the shift in the mental state of the narrator, as the infected subject to Roderick's overwhelming psychological distress.

The Usher family lineage and the theme of degeneration have been another theme that has attracted critical attention. Kennedy (1978) reads the Gothic aspects of the story, particularly focusing on the uncanny Usher lineage, where repetitive traits across generations result in familiarity and disturbance. His study focuses on the limited nature of the Usher family and the way its isolation leads to physical and psychological decay. Even though this interpretation reveals the origins of Roderick's illness, it positions the narrator mainly as an

observer and not a participant who is affected by those same forces. Therefore, the narrator's emotional transformation due to Roderick's psychological condition remains unexplored.

Another group of literary scholars has continued to point out the psychological fragmentation and the notion of the double in Poe's fiction. In *Struggling with Madness: The Schizophrenic Limit in "The Fall of the House of Usher"*, Wan-shuan Lin (2017) puts the story in a Deleuzian framework, interpreting Roderick's condition as a manifestation of artistic and ontological self-division. Lin argues that the narrative dramatizes the tension between creative consciousness and physical disintegration, thus focusing on the themes of madness, doubling**, ** and the symbolic collapse of the house. This perspective truly sheds light on the philosophical and aesthetic dimension of fragmentation; still, the progressive destabilization of the narrator is secondary to the internal crisis of Roderick. In his study, *House of Mirrors*, John H. Timmerman (2003) argues that Poe uses mirror imagery, such as the reflection of the mansion in the tarn and the connection between the twins, Roderick and Madeline, to show the link between the physical and mental worlds.

Similarly, Fernandez Santiago (2013) argues that Poe frequently constructs relationships in which one character functions as a psychological mirror for another. Although this framework has been applied to the narrator and Roderick, those analyses still focus on the symbolic aspect rather than on affective transmission. Rincy V. Mathew (2021) suggests that the narrator and Roderick exist within a "psychological feedback loop"; however, the reason for the narrator's deterioration is not closely looked at. All these studies recognize the structure of their relationships, but do not really investigate how sustained emotional proximity may contribute to the narrator's psychological decline. As a result, the aim of this study is to focus on the interpersonal aspect to investigate how the notion of instability moves between subjects.

According to the American Psychological Association (2023) and research in psychology studies, the importance of friendship is clear, especially when it comes to its relation to emotional regulation and the amount of stress transmission. APA reports that close social relations have a significant reflection on the mental state of a person, therefore creating similar emotional responses among friends. This framework can be used as a perspective for understanding the narrator's gradual adaptation to Roderick Usher's state of anxiety and despair.

THE NARRATOR'S SUSCEPTIBILITY TO USHER'S EMOTIONAL EMISSIONS

It is worth turning to psychological research in order to understand the narrator's susceptibility to Roderick's emotional influence. Schwartz-Mette and Rose (2012) argue that internalizing symptoms such as anxiety and depression may spread within close friendships, particularly when individuals engage in co-rumination, that is, the repeated and emotionally intense discussion of distress. In their study, they show that emotional closeness can be a cause of harm and can also increase the limits of vulnerability instead of the commonly accepted notion that it provides protection to emotionally disturbed individuals. Following this finding, such a dynamic is evident in the position of the narrator in the story. Namely, from the moment of his arrival, the narrator is directly exposed to the emotional instability of Roderick and his fears. He is obliged to participate in long and dreadful conversations about his illness and anxiety, thus remaining physically and emotionally engaged in Roderick's episodes of extreme agitation. Such intensive exposure creates a condition of emotional synchronization. The reader would expect the narrator to reflect emotional detachment; on the contrary, he absorbs Roderick's anxieties, suggesting that the mental instability is not always generated internally, yet it may occur as result of continuous affective interaction.

Roderick's "earnest desire to see [the narrator], as his best, and indeed his only personal friend, with a view of attempting, by the cheerfulness of [his] society, some alleviation of [Roderick's] malady" (Poe, 1839, p. 4) initially introduces the narrator as a stabilizing presence, invited to counterbalance illness with rational companionship. Yet, instead of maintaining the detachment, as is expected of him, the narrator gradually absorbs Roderick's anxieties. As a result, the emotional boundary is disturbed by the continuous dread and the intensive sensitivity of Roderick, showing that his instability is not self-generated but, is a result of being dramatically exposed to the anxieties of the host. In this sense, Poe's story anticipates what modern psychology identifies as emotional contagion, fictionalizing the notion of susceptibility within friendship and showing how it can enable the transmission of distress rather than its alleviation.

The narrator's susceptibility is clearly seen when he says, "I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions" (Poe, 1839, p.18). The metaphor of something "creeping" suggests a gradual psychological invasion. Later, the narrator admits that he "struggled to reason off the nervousness which had dominion over me" (Poe, 1839, p. 19), letting the reader know that he can no longer control his emotional state. These scenes suggest that the narrator is unable to remain detached; instead, Roderick's anxieties are transferred to the previously cheerful narrator.

In addition, emotional contagion is described as a two-step replicative process in cognitive science. Here, the perception of another's expressive behavior leads first to covert imitation and then to shared affective experience (Dezecache, Jacob, & Grèzes, 2015). According to this model, emotional propagation—or the process through which emotions are reflected from one person to another during social interaction—is not merely metaphorical but operates through automatic mirroring and internalization. In this regard, Poe's narrative clearly anticipates this mechanism in the narrator's progressive alignment with Roderick's agitation. At the beginning, the narrator recognizes Roderick's hypersensitivity "He suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses" (Poe, 1839, p.9), soon after, he acknowledges of an uncontrolled replication of Roderick's emotional intensity within himself. The narrator also reports that he "struggled to reason off the nervousness which had dominion over me" (Poe, 1839, p.19), indicating that Roderick's expressive distress has moved beyond observation into shared affect. In this sense, the source of the narrator's susceptibility is not grounded in some supernatural forces, yet it derives from the interpersonal emotional mirroring. First, he perceives the agitation of Roderick, later, he mimics it and eventually he experiences it as if it is his own agitation.

RODERICK AS AN EMITTER OF DESTABILIZING AFFECT

J. O Bailey (1964) identifies the narrator as a person "who was a rationalist and a skeptic regarding the supernatural, he is a man who habitually dismissed any explanation not in accord with commonplace fact" (p 445). Based on this definition, an image of a stable and unsusceptible objective narrator is created. It is due to his "rationalist" stance that Roderick invites him with the hope that his presence will "alleviate his depressed state," the assumption that positive social contact will improve Roderick's emotional distress is not accomplished. Namely, Roderick expectation to have his spirits lifted by the narrator's companionship is a failure. Instead, the narrator becomes the subject of Roderick's fear and anxiety. Psychological studies have identified such a pattern, showing that negative emotional conditions are more effective than the positive ones, particularly with interpersonal influences. Contrary to the general perception that positive effects are stronger than negative has been proven to be false. In fact, research on affective dynamics shows that negative effects have a stronger contagion impact and a greater effect on the relational well-being in comparison to the positive effect.

This is a phenomenon that often occurs in the processes of emotional transition, and it is usually referred to as the “negativity bias”.

For example, in a study of emotional contagion among adults, Verduyn et al. (2017) found that negative emotions such as anxiety and sadness were not only more easily transmitted between close partners but also more resistant to regulation in comparison to the positive emotions, which, according to them lead to “stronger and longer-lasting affective convergence”. At the beginning, the narrator takes the role of comforter with the intention to instill cheerfulness in Roderick. Yet, he gets “pulled” into the dread of Roderick thus, slowly becomes dominated by the affect that he initially hoped to eliminate. The narrator’s claim that he “struggled to reason off the nervousness which had dominion over [him]” (p 19) highlights how the pervasive negativity of Roderick’s state neutralizes the potential benefits of positive companionship. This suggests that negative “vibrations,” can overpower attempts at positive influence once rooted within a social dyad, emphasizing how susceptibility, rather than “rationality” characterizes the narrator’s psychological transformation.

A study by Vopson et al. (2021) shows that anger is associated with increased ultra-weak photon emission from the human body, indicating that strong negative emotions can manifest in detectable physical outputs. It could be argued that the findings of such studies are not relatable to literal energetic transmission reflected in literary texts, nevertheless, they support the idea that emotional states are not simply contained, but they are very often radiative and “contagious”. We see that Roderick Usher, repeatedly appearing as a source of “affective disturbance” that is hardly contained within his own physical boundaries. This can be seen when the narrator describes him as if he is suffering from “a morbid acuteness of the senses” (Poe, 1839, p. 9), a condition that makes his nervous agitation hyper-visible and hyper-expressive. Roderick’s fear is not an isolated condition; it rather spills outward and slowly infiltrates the emotional stability of the narrator. The storm scene adds to Roderick’s contagious potential and the narrator rightly so says that : “an irrepressible tremor gradually pervaded my frame” (Poe, 1839, p. 19), reflecting Roderick’s agitation, supporting the idea that Roderick is merely a madman, but he functions as an “affective emitter” whose intense agitation radiates into his immediate relational circle.

A study conducted by Hazel et al. (2023) further supports the contagion model showing that the emotional impact of “co-rumination” depends on the regulatory capacities within the friendship dyad. They found that co-rumination predicts increased depressive symptoms particularly when one friend demonstrates low use of cognitive reassessment, that is, when the friend fails to reinterpret or regulate negative affect in a constructive manner. In cases like these, prolonged distress intensifies the condition of emotional vulnerability. This approach can serve as justification to the narrator’s susceptibility to Roderick’s emotional “radiation”. The narrator visits Roderick to “attempting, by the cheerfulness of my society, some alleviation of his malady” (Poe, 1893, p. 4), however he is unable to sooth or regulate the escalating anxieties of his friend. On the contrary, he becomes dragged in “many solemn hours” spent alone with Roderick (Poe, 1839, p.11), during which their interaction is dominated by fear, sickness and doom.

CONCLUSION

In this study I have argued that *The Fall of the House of Usher* can be reread as a narrative of contagious friendship in addition to the interpretations of the story as a Gothic allegory of hereditary decay or architectural symbolism. While previous scholarship has

focused on doubling, madness, and the symbolic collapse of the house, the psychological transformation of the narrator hasn't received the same attention. By applying contemporary theories of emotional contagion, co-rumination, and affective mirroring, I try to demonstrate that the narrator's deterioration is a result of sustained emotional proximity to Roderick Usher. Roderick invites the narrator with the aim to bring positive energy or restoration to his emotional balance, instead this act starts a process of a so called "affective convergence". This circumstance is reflected in the words of the narrator when he says that he felt "creeping upon me... the wild influences" of Roderick's superstition, pointing to the fact that the narrator is no longer capable of objective and detached judgement and observation, leading to gradual internalization of Roderick's condition. As a result, the narrator becomes a secondary source of instability. In this regard, the collapse of the house does not represent physical ruin only, it also represents the dissolution of the emotional boundaries between Roderick and the narrator.

Reading the story through an interpersonal psychological framework does not replace symbolic or philosophical interpretations; rather, it supplements them by foregrounding the mechanisms through which instability moves between subjects. Revealing that intimacy can function not only as consolation but also as a canal for psychological contagion; Poe's story thus anticipates a modern understanding of emotional transmission.

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