

## Dark Romanticism

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I rode over a short causeway to the house. A servant in waiting took my horse, and I entered the Gothic archway of the hall. A valet, of stealthy step, thence conducted me, in silence, through many dark and intricate passages in my progress to the *studio* of his master. Much that I encountered on the way contributed, I know not how, to heighten the vague sentiments of which I have already spoken. While the objects around me—while the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies which rattled as I strode, were but matters to which, or to such as which, I had been accustomed from my infancy—while I hesitated not to acknowledge how familiar was all this—I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up. On one of the staircases, I met the physician of the family. His countenance, I thought, wore a mingled expression of low cunning and perplexity. He accosted me with trepidation and passed on. The valet now threw open a door and ushered me into the presence of his master.

The room in which I found myself was very large and lofty. The windows were long, narrow, and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within. Feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way through the trellised panes, and served to render sufficiently distinct the more prominent objects around; the eye, however, struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling. Dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene. I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all.

Upon my entrance, Usher rose from a sofa on which he had been lying at full length, and greeted me with a vivacious warmth which had much in it, I at first thought, of an overdone cordiality—of the constrained effort of the *ennuyé* man of the world. A glance, however, at his countenance convinced me of his perfect sincerity. We sat down; and for some moments, while he spoke not, I gazed upon him with a feeling half of pity, half of awe. Surely, man had never before so terribly altered, in so brief a period, as had Roderick Usher! It was with difficulty that I could bring myself to admit the identity of the wan being before me with the companion of my early boyhood. Yet the character of his face had been at all times remarkable. A cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve; a nose of a delicate Hebrew model, but with a breadth of nostril unusual in similar formations; a finely moulded chin, speaking, in its want of prominence, of a want of moral energy; hair of a more than web-like softness and tenuity;—these features, with an inordinate expansion above the regions of the temple, made up altogether a countenance not easily to be forgotten.

And now in the mere exaggeration of the prevailing character of these features, and of the expression they were wont to convey, lay so much of change that I doubted to whom I spoke. The now ghastly pallor of the skin, and the now miraculous lustre of the eye, above all things startled and even awed me. The silken hair, too, had been suffered to grow all unheeded, and as, in its wild gossamer texture, it floated rather than fell about the face, I could not, even with effort, connect its Arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity.

In the manner of my friend I was at once struck with an incoherence—an inconsistency; and I soon found this to arise from a series of feeble and futile struggles to overcome an habitual trepidancy—an excessive nervous agitation. For something of this nature I had indeed been prepared, no less by his letter, than by reminiscences of certain boyish traits, and by conclusions deduced from his peculiar physical conformation and temperament. His action was alternately vivacious and sullen. His voice varied rapidly from a tremulous indecision (when the animal spirits seemed utterly in abeyance) to that species of energetic concision—that abrupt, weighty, unhurried, and hollow-sounding enunciation—that leaden, self-balanced and perfectly modulated guttural utterance, which may be observed in the lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium, during the periods of his most intense excitement.

It was thus that he spoke of the object of my visit, of his earnest desire to see me, and of the solace he expected me to afford him. He entered, at some length, into what he conceived to be the nature of his malady. It was, he said, a constitutional and a family evil, and one for which he despaired to find a remedy—a mere nervous affection, he immediately added, which would undoubtedly soon pass off. It displayed itself in a host of unnatural sensations. Some of these, as he detailed them, interested and bewildered me; although, perhaps, the terms and the general manner of the narration had their weight. He suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; the most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odors of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds, and these from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror.

To an anomalous species of terror I found him a bounden slave. “I shall perish,” said he, “I *must* perish in this deplorable folly. Thus, thus, and not otherwise, shall I be lost. I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results. I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial, incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation of soul. I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect—in terror. In this unnerved, in this pitiable, condition I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR.”

**Edgar Allan POE, “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839)**

# Suggested Outline

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## I. The House as Gothic Dungeon

### A. Confinement

The narrator is gradually caught in a Chinese-box structure as he crosses the various thresholds of the house (the entrance, l.1, and door to the master's chamber, l.10-11). The interior is characterized by the ever-growing “gloom” (l.19), as borne out by the semantic and rhythmic **gradation** (“dark” [1 syllable], l.2 < “sombre” [2 syllables], l.5 < “ebon blackness” [4 syllables, **pleonastic** phrase], l.5). This dark, oppressive atmosphere is captured by the **metaphorical** phrase “I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow” (l.18), which is meant to emphasize the contamination of the whole house by this literal and emotional dreariness, leading to a sense of **oppression**. The “tapestries” (l. 5) and “draperies” (l.16) even add a second layer of protection from the outside and **enclose** the narrator even further. The accumulation of the precise descriptions of the objects he notices leaves no **space** for the narrator to move in: the narrator's gaze is cluttered by all those enigmatic objects, just as the text is interspersed with various **enumerations** (e.g. “the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies”, l.5-6).

⇒ Sense of **claustrophobia** (see the lexical implications of the verbs and the indefinite pronoun “all” at the end of the following sentence: “And air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all”, l.18-19) which is evocative of the narrator's imprisonment.

### B. Imprisonment

Usher's studio is metaphorically associated with a **prison cell**<sup>\*</sup>: the already “inaccessible” windows (l. 13) are adorned with “trellised panes” (l.14) that are eerily reminiscent of prison bars. In that perspective, Usher's **portrait** can be read as that of a convict who spent too much time in prison: his corpse-like “pallor” (l.33; added to “pallid”, l.28, as part of a **polyptoton**) could result from long-term confinement in an unlit room. Tellingly, Usher is symbolically “constrained” (l.21) by his sense of decorum and later described as “a bounden slave” (l.55) to his fear, the **pleonastic** phrase serving as an elucidation of the **extended metaphor**. In that respect, the **framing** of Usher's tale, which is **embedded** in the narrator's own narrative<sup>†</sup>, could be construed a textual imprisonment of Usher's story, just as Usher's own words are typographically enclosed by the inverted commas (made necessary by the use of **direct speech**). Since the narrator echoes this sense of imprisonment in his own narrative, it could even be argued that the narrator himself becomes a prisoner of sorts: he is deprived of his “horse” (l.1) and he is never free to move as he pleases, since he passively follows the valet through the house (e.g. analysis of “the valet... conducted me”, l.2, a sentence in which the narrator is not at the origin of the action, but rather the mere passive object).

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<sup>\*</sup> The room could also be compared to a crypt or vault since Usher looks like a corpse, which could be read as the foreshadowing of Usher's sister's burial later in the short story.

<sup>†</sup> This is called a *mise en abyme* in English as well.

⇒ Symbolic **imprisonment** of the two central characters that derives from a novel use of the Gothic paraphernalia, and compounded by the architectural structure of the House, which is also the reactivation of a staple of Gothic fiction, the maze.

#### American Penitentiaries

It is to be noted that “silence” (l.2 and l.23) and separate confinement (the master has his own “studio”, l.3) were rules in early American penitentiaries, some of which made clever use of Gothic architecture to scare the local inhabitants into behaving properly.



Eastern State Penitentiary in Philadelphia (built in 1829)

## C. Disorientation

The house has a definitely **labyrinthine** quality (another traditional Gothic element), with its “dark and intricate passages” (l.2-3). This impression is further confirmed by the style, which is meant to mirror his **disorientation**: for instance, the long sentence in lines 4 to 9 contains multiple **anacolutha** (materialized by the dashes) and the **anaphoric** repetition of “while”. This sentence is meant to be as confusing as the maze-like house. Conversely, the sentences at the beginning of the text, when the narrator is still outside, are very short and very simple (l.1-2). The cause of his disorientation, therefore, must be the house itself. As a result, the narrator experiences a sense of **confusion** because of which he faces a form of **uncanny defamiliarization** that prevents him from separating the “familiar” (l.7) and the past, on the one hand, from the “unfamiliar” (l. 8) and the present, on the other. He is puzzled by the house, by the objects it contains, and even by its owner, since he recognizes that very “incoherence” (l.37) or “inconsistency” (l.37) in his old friend, the **epanorthosis** further conveying his inability to understand either the house or Usher himself (see also l.25-26 on Usher’s transformation being related to the opposition between the past and the present).

⇒ The maze-like structure of the house leads to a sense of **disorientation** and, ultimately, of **confusion** that can be interpreted as being representative of the narrator’s arduous **quest for meaning** when he experiences the ambivalence of both the house and its owner.

## II. Duality and Ambivalence

### A. The Elusiveness of Meaning

It seems that everything in the house, from the “carvings” (l.5), to the “vaulted and fretted ceiling” (l.16), contains curved lines. Even Usher’s countenance is described by the narrator as an “Arabesque expression”

(1.36). Symbolically, these curved lines (see also the “curve”, 1.28, of Usher’s lips) might be opposed to the regularity and rectitude of reason (cf. Usher losing all sense of “life and reason”, 1.60). It could therefore be argued that the house is the **objective correlative** of Usher’s madness: the maze-like architectural structure of the building is meant to mirror the workings of his ailing mind. That is exactly why the narrator ultimately fails to understand both the house and his friend; hence his mentioning this very inability to comprehend the place he discovers gradually (“I know not how”, 1.3-4) and his friend’s actual identity (“I doubted to whom I spoke”, 1.33).

⇒ In this place, meaning is **elusive**, and it is all the more difficult for the narrator to come to terms with this unexpected experience as meaning seems to be **unstable**, especially when it comes to Usher’s true identity and character.

## B. Usher’s Duality

Indeed, when he tries to describe Usher, the narrator remarks that his friend’s physical appearance is “terribly altered” (l. 24), meaning, beyond the explicit sense of the phrase [= Usher has changed a lot], that he has become **other** (the word “altered” being etymologically related to the Latin word *alter*). Tellingly, the word “altered” (l. 24) is echoed by the adverb “alternatively” (1.21), which associates Usher’s **otherness** with his **ambivalence** (or “incoherence” and “inconsistency”, as the narrator puts it in 1.37). Hence the impossibility for the narrator to find the right expression to describe Usher’s behaviour (as evidenced by the **epanorthosis** in 1.21-22: “of an overdone cordiality—of the constrained effort of the *ennuyé* man of the world”). Usher’s speech pattern is in fact representative of this **duality**. From the **epanorthosis** (“I shall perish... I *must* perish”, 1.55) to the outright **repetition** of “thus” (1.56), his own words seem to bear the mark of his constitutive duality. Through a sort of proximate contamination, even the narrator’s own feelings are ambivalent (as encapsulated by the **parallelism** in 1.23-24: “a feeling half of pity, half of awe”), just as the narrator recognizes a “mingled expression of low cunning and perplexity” (1.9-10) on the physician’s face. Everyone who comes in contact with Usher seems to be affected by this profound duality.

⇒ Faced with this **duality**, the narrator cannot find a way to reunite Usher’s opposite sides, and cannot find the right words to describe the state Usher is caught in, between life and death.

## C. Life and Death: The Apocalyptic Sublime

Although Usher is “lying at full length” (1.20), which could be construed as the symbolic evocation of death, when the narrator first comes into the room, the latter is immediately struck by how “vivacious” (1.21 and 41) and “energetic” (1.42) Usher can be at times. It thus seems that the **unspeakable** truth about Usher, and which the narrator recognizes almost despite himself, is that the former is caught somewhere between life and death, between vitality and lethargy. What strikes him most, however, is how **terrifyingly** dead Usher looks: described by the narrator as a “wan being” (1.25), he seems to be less than a man, perhaps a dead body (“cadaverousness”, 1.27) found in a spider-infested crypt (“web-like”, 1.30). Yet, there is an underlying beauty behind this all too Gothic description, as the narrator notes when he mentions the “surpassingly beautiful curve” of Usher’s lips (1.28), Usher’s nose (“a nose of a delicate Hebrew model”, 1.28), his “finely moulded chin” (1.29) or the “softness” (1.30) of his hair. In Usher’s portrait, life and death, beauty and terror cannot be dissociated, which is ultimately what motivates the narrator’s **morbid fascination**<sup>‡</sup> for a Janus-

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<sup>‡</sup> This fascination could be interpreted as the narrator’s **homoerotic attraction** for his old friend. This could be seen as proof that the narrator might be recognizing the feminine features of Usher’s twin sister, who ends up dying and coming back to life in

faced Usher. The “awe” (l.24 and l.34) the narrator feels because of his fascination is a feeling that has long been associated with the sublime. However, here, the sublime derives from the **aporia** the narrator faces as he explores the house and discovers Usher’s constitutive duality: he cannot put words on his indescribable appearance, just as he cannot find the right words to describe the house’s uncanny atmosphere (see use of **modalizers** in the text: “somewhat”, “It felt that I breathed”, etc.).

⇒ Prevalence of the **apocalyptic sublime** (a word defined by Morton Paley in a book entitled *The Apocalyptic Sublime* and published in 1986) as the narrator discovers the terrors of death while remaining unable to describe them precisely

### III. Uncertainty and Indeterminacy

#### A. The Failure of Perception

The whole passage is underlain by a reflection upon **perception**. The dominant perception in the passage is sight, but – despite the narrator’s gradual attempt at taking a closer and closer look at the things he sees (see the **gradation**: “the eye”, l.15 < “a glance”, l.22 < “I gazed upon him”, l.23) – his senses fail him, as underlined by the use of **modalization** (e.g. “I felt that I breathed...”, l. 18 or “It was with difficulty that...”, l. 25, or “lips somewhat thin and very pallid”, l.27) in the passage. The narrator himself mentions the inability of his senses – or perhaps of anyone’s senses – to grasp the complex reality he comes in contact with (see for example the transition from the narrator’s particular senses to a more general statement with the use of the definite article in the following sentence: “the eye [and not ‘my eye’]... struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber”, l.15-16). Since the text is characterized by **internal focalization**, meaning that only the narrator’s perceptions and thoughts are mentioned in the passage, this raises the question of the narrator’s possible **fallibility**. Since is all the more relevant as, on the other end of the spectrum, Usher’s own senses are failing him as well, albeit in a very different way: he is affected by “a **morbid** acuteness of the senses” (l.51-52). In other words, those who see too little fail to understand while those who see too much are struck by the possibility of death and might experience the most intense form of “FEAR” (l. 60; underlined by the use of capital letters).

⇒ The problem of the narrator’s possible **unreliability** is compounded by the fact that, even when he does reach a sufficient degree of precision during Usher’s portrait, his assertions border on contradiction (e.g. the use of two contradictory adverbs in the following phrase: “lips somewhat thin and very pallid”, l.27-28). Combined with the idea that the narrator’s senses fail him, his possible fallibility helps account for the general **vagueness** of the whole passage.

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the course of the narrative, as he describes his old friend. This is all the more relevant as the words he uses here (“beautiful”, l.28, “delicate”, l.28, and “softness”, l.30) are traditionally associated with femininity.

This passage could therefore be related to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), in which Victor Frankenstein’s description of the monster he created is equally ambiguous: “His limbs were in proportion, and I had selected his features as beautiful. Beautiful! Great God! His yellow skin scarcely covered the work of muscles and arteries beneath; his hair was of a lustrous black, and flowing; his teeth of a pearly whiteness; but these luxuriations only formed a more horrid contrast with his watery eyes, that seemed almost of the same colour as the dun-white sockets in which they were set, his shrivelled complexion and straight black lips.” (chapter 4).



## B. Vagueness

This idea is first formulated by the narrator, who mentions the “vague sentiments” (l.4) elicited by the house at the beginning of the short story. Strangely enough, although the description is meant to give the sense of an almost painstaking precision (with, for instance, enumerations of adjectives such as “profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered”, l.17, or “stern, deep, and irredeemable”, l.19), there is a striking lack of lexical precision in the description of the house (only general categories are used: “the sombre tapestries”, l. 5, “the general furniture”, l.17, “many books and musical instruments, l.17, for example), thus giving credence to the idea that the description is ultimately quite **vague** (see also the use of indefinite article to talk about the secondary characters: “a servant in waiting”, l.1, and “a valet”, l.2). Even the lexically precise – though very contradictory – portrait the narrator makes of Usher is interspersed with negative forms (“a countenance not easily to be forgotten”, l.31), as well as adjective whose meaning convey negativity because of privative prefixes (“unusual” [= not usual], l. 29, and “inordinate” [= not ordinate], l.30) and words evocative of his lacking a certain normality (“want”, l. 29 and 30, and “tenuity”, l.30). The narrator can only describe his friend **negatively**, thus proving his inability to put words on the truth hidden behind Usher’s appearance, the multiple **adversative structures** (see the use of “but” twice in l.28) underlining the narrator’s failed attempt at pinning down who or what Usher actually is.

⇒ Language fails to capture the exact reality the narrator is faced with. The text therefore fits E.A. Poe’s definitions of “**fancies**” (the word appears in l. 8): the experience is ultimately **ineffable** because it goes beyond what man can grasp given his understanding of the world he lives in.

### E.A. Poe on “fancies”

“There is, however, a class of fancies, of exquisite delicacy, which are *not* thoughts, and to which, *as yet*, I have found it absolutely impossible to adapt language. I use the word *fancies* at random, and merely because I must use *some* word; but the idea commonly attached to the term is not even remotely applicable to the shadows of shadows in question. They seem to me rather psychal than intellectual. They arise in the soul (alas, how rarely!) only at its epochs of most intense tranquillity—when the bodily and mental health are in perfection—and at those mere points of time where the confines of the waking world blend with those of the world of dreams. I am aware of these “fancies” only when I am upon the very brink of sleep, with the consciousness that I am so. I have satisfied myself that this condition exists but for an inappreciable *point* of time—yet it is crowded with these ‘shadows of shadows;’ and for absolute *thought* there is demanded time’s *endurance*.”

E.A. Poe, “Marginalia”, *Graham’s Magazine* (1846)

## C. Uncertainty and the Fantastic

There is in fact something otherworldly in Usher’s portrait, seeing as the narrator himself mention that some of his friend’s features are “**beyond** comparison” (l.27). This impression is substantiated by the use, throughout Usher’s description, of very ambiguous words that are ultimately evocative of the **supernatural** (there is something “miraculous”, l. 34, in the lustre of Usher’s eye and his sensations are described as “unnatural”, l. 50). Even some of Usher’s physical traits are reminiscent of ghosts or other ethereal beings (his hair “**float**ed rather than fell about the face”, l.35-36), which is why the narrator confesses his inability to connect his friend “with any idea of simple humanity” (l.36). Even some objects, like the “armorial trophies”, become “phantasmagoric” (l.6). Despite the rather realistic setting of the scene, therefore, the Usher’s physical description is implicitly associated with unearthly – or even monstrous – qualities which the narrator fails – or even tries – to explain. In that perspective, Usher’s “Arabesque expression” (l.36) could be the sign of the **grotesque** aesthetic that underlies the whole portrait, especially as the two terms

are often synonyms in art history. (Tellingly enough, the collection of short story in which “The Fall of the House of Usher” was included in 1840 after being first published in a magazine is entitled *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque!*) Usher’s almost deformed features and psyche (see for instance the gradation that leads from beauty to horror and fear: “surpassingly beautiful curve”, l. 28 < “inordinate expansion”, l. 30-31” < “exaggeration”, l. 32 < “excessive nervous agitation”, l.38-39) might explain why the narrator feels both “pity” and “awe” (l.24), **pathos** being often associated with literary depictions of the grotesque. The combination of supernatural and grotesque elements in the extract explains why Usher is both strange (in the strongest sense of the word; cf. *la littérature de l'étrange*) and unsettling. In the last analysis, it leads to a sense of **uncertainty** about Usher’s nature in the absence of any rational explanation, uncertainty being the core principle of fantastic literature as defined by Tzvetan Todorov.

⇒ The short story therefore shares some of the traditional features of both the **fantastic** and the **grotesque**, which might help define Poe’s transitional role in the history of American literature. While he includes traditional Gothic elements inherited from British literature in his short story, he also manages to transcend them and create a new type of short story. His aesthetic project can therefore be related to R.W. Emerson’s attempt at achieving America’s cultural and literary independence through his work, a project to which he gave a theoretical formulation in “The American Scholar” (1837).

#### Tzvetan Todorov on the fantastic

« Ainsi se trouve-t-on amené au cœur du fantastique. Dans un monde qui est bien le nôtre, celui que nous connaissons, sans diables, sylphides, ni vampires, se produit un événement qui ne peut s’expliquer par les lois de ce même monde familier. Celui qui perçoit l’événement doit opter pour l’une des deux solutions possibles : ou bien il s’agit d’une illusion des sens, d’un produit de l’imagination et les lois du monde restent alors ce qu’elles sont ; ou bien l’événement a véritablement eu lieu, il est partie intégrante de la réalité, mais alors cette réalité est régie par des lois inconnues de nous. Ou bien le diable est une illusion, un être imaginaire, ou bien il existe réellement, tout comme les autres êtres vivants : avec cette réserve qu’on le rencontre rarement.

Le fantastique occupe le temps de cette incertitude ; dès qu’on choisit l’une ou l’autre réponse, on quitte le fantastique pour entrer dans un genre voisin, l’étrange ou le merveilleux. Le fantastique, c’est l’hésitation éprouvée par un être qui ne connaît que les lois naturelles, face à un événement en apparence surnaturel. »

T. Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (1970)