Archetype and reality: Psychological approaches to "The Fall of the House of Usher".

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ARCHETYPE AND REALITY:
PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO
"THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER"

by

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"The Fall of the House of Usher" has received a variety of critical treatments, but despite the differences in approach, they almost always reflect a radical psychological duality—a very basic conflict between the forces of reason and certain opposing forces, whether they be the embodiment of pure external evil or the destructive and irrational contents of the human psyche. Most critical attention has been given to Roderick Usher himself and to his ambiguous relationship with his shadowy twin, Madeline, a relationship that D. H. Lawrence views as an expression of archetypal vampirism: spiritual consumption caused by the unconscious incest desire.

Subsequent "Usher" criticism can be divided most conveniently into the realistic and the conceptual approaches. The realistic, or literal, readings are concerned primarily with the death and resurrection of Madeline as an actual occurrence—a phenomenon explained as the result of various supernatural forces such as vampirism. The conceptual, or symbolic, readings view the entire story as an expression of an idea, whether it be Poe's cosmology and artistic theory, nineteenth-century determinism, or a theory or artistic psychology. Whatever the specific approach, however, "Usher" criticism seems always to fall back upon the dualistic tension of
the human mind, as Poe conceived of it. Roderick Usher is generally viewed as the central symbol of the hypersensitive (often hyperaesthetic) consciousness, struggling to create and to live between the conflicting forces of his own psyche.

The most satisfying criticism, however, does not view "Usher" as either a strictly realistic or a strictly symbolic tale but as something of both. It is certainly difficult, given the details of the story, to view Madeline's reappearance as anything other than an illusion or hallucination: that is, as a symbol. She represents, as Lawrence suggests, certain universal psychic residue intruding on the consciousness of Roderick Usher. But because the final hallucination is not Roderick's alone but also the narrator's, the meaning of the story lies in the relationship—the real relationship—between them. Madeline represents certain fantasy-contents of the collective unconscious, particularly the incest fantasy, that Roderick has projected on to his real world and failed to re-integrate into his psyche. Roderick has failed to mature psychologically—to recognize Madeline's symbolic nature and to come to terms with her as a symbol—and his neurosis is transferred, in the Jungian sense, to the analyst-narrator. They experience the final scene in a state of "mutual unconsciousness" from
which the narrator barely escapes. The story becomes, in a sense, a step in the narrator's own successful initiation, for he realizes the limitations of reason in a world not totally reasonable. It is with this new insight that he narrates the events of the story.
Chapter I

Realistic Approaches to "Usher"

The critical history of "The Fall of the House of Usher" is a reflection of Poe's precarious reputation as a writer. "There has never been even a temporary decline of his popularity among general readers," says Thomas Mabbott. "Among critics there was disagreement from the start." Among those who disparaged Poe's work was Henry James, who went as far as to say that an "enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive stage of reflection." Similarly, T. S. Eliot viewed Poe's intellect as that of "a highly gifted young person before puberty," although he did recant somewhat in recognizing him as a "landmark" of American literature. Poe's most merciless modern critic, however, has been Yvor Winters, who leveled against him a charge of "obscurantism" and finally dismissed him as a "bad writer accidentally and temporarily popular." V. L. Parrington typifies a particular critical stance, evaluating Poe specifically as an American writer: "The problem of Poe, fascinating as it is, lies quite outside the main current of American thought, and it may be left with the psychologist and the belletrist with whom it belongs."
It is significant that Poe has received more critical attention in Europe, particularly in France, than he has in America, that so much of the cause for his tenuous reputation is his failure to incorporate into his work American themes. The "problem of Poe"--and the critical problem of "The Fall of the House of Usher"--do lie, in a sense, with the psychologist. Almost all of the story's critical acclaim, in fact, has had its seed in the realm of human psychology. The earliest critical response to "Usher" is found in a letter from James Heath dated September 12, 1839--ironically a rejection notice from the Southern Literary Messenger. Heath, acting as a spokesman for Thomas White, the Messenger's editor, was most critical of the "German" substance of the tale, agreeing with White that "tales of the German school . . . of the wild, improbable and terrible class, can [n]ever be permanently popular in this country."7 Poe's defense of his work is well known. In his "Preface" to Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque (1840), in which "Usher" was included, he denied that his tales were marred by "German-ism and gloom":

If in many of my productions terror has been the thesis, I maintain that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul--that I have deduced
this terror only from its legitimate sources,
and urge it only to its legitimate results. ³

Fortunately neither the Messenger's rejection nor Heath's
critical tack has become the standard. "Usher" has
certainly received a just share of modern criticism; the
fact that the most satisfying approaches have been
psychological in foundation is explainable not only by
the modern reader's increased access to psychological
theory, but also by a recognition of Poe's own learned
interest in the human mind—not the American mind. It
was D. H. Lawrence, who recognized Poe's preoccupation
with "the disintegration-processes of his own psyche"⁹
and thus laid the groundwork for subsequent psychological
readings. Allen Tate, one of Poe's few defenders among
the New Critics, has labeled Roderick Usher "the prototype
of the Joycean and Jamesian hero who cannot live in the
ordinary world."¹⁰ Although never properly psychoanalytic
in his approach, Tate nevertheless gives Poe credit for
discovering "our great subject, the disintegration of
personality."¹¹ Roderick Usher, according to Tate, is a
"'Gothic' character taken seriously; that is to say, Poe
takes the Gothic setting, with all its machinery and
décor, and the preposterous Gothic hero, and transforms
them into the material of serious literary art."¹²
Usher's split personality and extreme acuteness of sense
are the two psychological characteristics that transform him from a stock Gothic prop into a kind of anti-hero, suffering in his psychic isolation.

Probably the most significant of Poe's modern deprecators are Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren, only because their dismissal of "Usher" in Understanding Fiction (1943) has given rise to much more valuable defensive criticism. The major fault with "Usher," according to Brooks and Warren, is that it "lacks tragic quality"—that it is merely "horror aroused for its own sake": "there is abundant evidence," they say of Roderick Usher, "that he is in love with 'the morbid acuteness of the senses' which he has cultivated in the gloomy mansion, and that in choosing between this and the honest daylight of the outside world, there is but one choice for him . . . the reader gets no sense of struggle, no sense of real choice at all." This commentary has precipitated, somewhat wastefully it seems, a long enduring critical argument, which hinges on the tragic quality of Roderick Usher. Hennig Cohen, for example, suggests that the "elements of tragedy are present in a struggle which occurs within Usher himself, a struggle between his will to live and the price he must pay in order to stay alive." Cohen's interpretation is based on a questionable, but frequently recurring,
idea—that the identity shared by Roderick, Madeline, and the House extends to the physical, and that the physical life of each consequently depends on the lives of the others: "Thus," he reasons, "Roderick knows that he has placed his sister 'living in the tomb' because he still lives and the house still stands." Madeline, says Cohen, forces her way from the vault and reappears as "a suppliant begging for death," and Roderick, "overwhelmed by pity and remorse," yields his life so that Madeline may find "release." The major thrust of the argument is that "Roderick, for all his physical and mental delicacy, strives intensely to live," a fact that, Cohen concludes, Brooks and Warren have ignored.

The problem with Cohen's reading is that, in an attempt to answer Brooks and Warren's dismissal of "Usher," it misses the point of Roderick Usher's struggle. There is the suggestion of an internal, psychological struggle within Usher, but by rooting that struggle in the fact of physical identity with Madeline and the House, Cohen has moved out of the realm of psychological realism into the realm of the supernatural. An interesting idea is the struggle, within Roderick, between his instincts for self-preservation and his sympathy for Madeline, but this demands the assumption of physical identity: the assumption that if Roderick lives, Madeline too must live. The
story no longer deals with human experience.

K. L. Goodwin has answered Cohen from a different angle, claiming that "there is no struggle because there is no will to live." He bases his rebuttal on the mood of the tale—"one of uniform, unrelieved gloom"—which Cohen ignores, and he goes on to state that Usher is "part of the source of this gloom" and therefore unable to even consider struggling against it. Although such a reading backhandedly supports the commentary by Brooks and Warren, it does not necessarily join in the New Critical disparagement of "Usher." It is encouraging that most of the critics who have responded to Brooks and Warren have, in fact, defended "Usher" not by arguing that the story is tragic, but by suggesting that it is not important whether the story is tragic or not, that there are other, more important, problems in the story. The gradual movement away from this approach to "Usher"—as a tragedy—and toward more conceptual approaches has produced a rich variety of readings: sociological, cosmological, scientific, as well as psychological.

One basic problem with the commentaries of Brooks and Warren, and of Cohen, Goodwin and others, is that they are general approaches to a story that is difficult to treat generally. It is in the tradition of Poe criticism to quote the definition of the short story that Poe
included in his review of Hawthorne's *Twice-told Tales*,
a definition that stresses the importance of detail:

A skilful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents—he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very initial sentence tend not to the outbringing of this effect, then he has failed in his first step. In the whole composition there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design.

If Poe had realized just how literally he was to be interpreted, he might not have been so exacting in his definition. Indeed, the critics of "Usher" have relied heavily on Poe's "unity of effect" theory, assuming in some cases that a reading is legitimate if it has taken account of several details. It is legitimate, of course, to approach "Usher" through the details, but through the patterns of details, through the relationships among the several "problems" that seem to demand analysis. As G. R. Thompson has pointed out, "most of the critical commentary returns obsessively to a few central points, compulsively repeating with slightly altered angles of vision the same set of haunting questions":

What is the significance of the close resemblance of Roderick Usher and his sister, and are the two the products of and, simultaneously, guilty of
incest? Did Roderick intentionally try to murder Madeline, and did Madeline actually return from her tomb, vampirelike, to claim her brother's life? Is the physical house actually 'alive' and by some preternatural force of will controlling the destinies of the Ushers? Or is the story not a tale of the supernatural at all, but rather a work of psychological realism? What then is the precise role of the narrator? And can the work be read in Freudian or Jungian terms? If the tale is a psychological or symbolic work, what is the meaning of the interpolated story of 'The Mad Trist' or Sir Launcelot Canning? What significance have the titles of the books in Usher's library, and what significance are we to attach to Usher's strange, neurasthenic art works?

To these we might add: What is the significance of the tarn, its reflection, and the overwhelming sense of gloom? What is the significance of the doctor, and of the elaborately detailed conditions of the burial? And, finally, how do we account for the fissure in the House of Usher, for the climactic whirlwind, and for the ultimate collapse?

The most serious oversight in Brooks' and Warren's reading of "Usher" is the function of the narrator. They insist that "Usher" is "obviously" Roderick Usher's story, viewing the nameless narrator as a peripheral observer with merely a "clinical" interest in Usher. And they also reject what they think might be the psychological element in the tale as inadequate justification for the horror:
One might reasonably conclude that the 'meaning' of the story lies in its perception of the dangers of divorcement from reality and an attempt to live in an unreal world of the past, or in any private and abstract world of thought. . . . [this] does not in itself justify the pertinacious and almost loving care with which Poe conjures up for us the sense of the horrors of the dying House of Usher.26

Roderick Usher, they conclude, "is a medical case, a fascinating case to be sure, a titillating horrible case, but merely another case after all."27 It is interesting, in light of this, that the most sophisticated "Usher" criticism has subsequently founded itself on either the role of the narrator or on the psychological condition of Usher and, in the best criticism, on both.

It is difficult to classify "Usher" criticism into traditional categories, precisely because of the psychological substance of the narrative itself: almost all criticism is, in one way or another, psychological. Whatever biographical criticism has been written, for example, has concerned itself with Poe's sanity (or, more properly, with his tendency toward insanity) as it is reflected in "Usher." The most convenient method of approaching the huge mass of criticism is not to separate it into sociological and cosmological classifications but to separate the literal readers from the symbolist readers—and finally from those who find realistic and
symbolic elements in the story. It is this last group that most satisfactorily considers the narrator's personality, his relationship to Usher, and his part in the psychic struggle.

Before dealing with the symbolic/psychological readings, however, it is necessary to consider the literal approaches to "Usher." There are several details that are certainly ambiguous but that are accepted literally by some critics. The most frequently analyzed detail, of course, is Madeline's death, burial, and apparent resurrection—a resurrection that demands either a belief in the supernatural or a belief in Madeline's extraordinary strength. Indeed, if we look closely at the conditions of Madeline's entombment, so painstakingly detailed by Poe, it is difficult to accept the possibility of her physical escape: "the air in the vault half smothers the torches—indicating a lack of sufficient oxygen; the floor of the vault and passageway to it are copper covered—making it even more difficult for air to enter; the lid of the coffin is screwed down—Madeline's body is secured within the coffin; the door is of iron and of immense weight and is fastened from the outside—it would be possible to open it from within, especially if one were weak from illness, left without food, water and light, and had an insufficient air supply." Critics
are further divided on the question of whether Madeline is actually dead when she is entombed or whether she is buried prematurely as the result of falling into a cataleptical state—a recurring motif in Poe's works. E. Arthur Robinson is one of the few critics who, in spite of the conditions of Madeline's burial, suggest the plausibility of "Madeline's burial alive and temporary recovery," resulting from the increasing "disorganization of her body, so that ultimately she reaches a state of death-in-life, in which the soul still inhabits the body but has lost all benefit of its sensory and perceptive faculties." This is an extension of his thesis that the "controlling 'idea of the tale' may be defined intellectually as the principle of 'order'... that the ordered arrangement of the 'House of Usher' has resulted in its 'sentience,' and the two have combined in a 'terrible influence' tending to duplicate that order, and its impending collapse, within the family of Usher." Robinson's source for these ideas is Poe's Eureka, a philosophical treatise and prose-poem combined, in which he suggests that "only through its ordered relationship within the universe is each 'creature'—whether Roderick or his house—capable of preserving its 'proper identity' and its appropriate degree of self-consciousness. Usher and his house can be bound together because animate and
inanimate become only a matter of degree, not of essential difference. This kind of reading is difficult for the modern reader to accept in light of scientific fact and consequent unbelief, but it is true that Poe believed in the sentience, in various degrees, of all matter.

Robinson's reading remains abstract, unfortunately, but his argument for Madeline's accidental burial is solid:

First, if the narrator is regarded as a real person (rather than a symbolic aspect of Usher's divided nature), the brother's intent to bury Madeline alive would be inconsistent with his revealing her face in the coffin. Secondly, Roderick's subsequent agitation is explicitly described as 'an observable change' occurring 'some days' later; the context identifies the secret, in retrospect, as his hearing Madeline's 'first feeble movements in the hollow coffin'. The sound appears to convey genuine knowledge to him, not merely confirmation of an expected state.

Madeline's burial, Robinson insists, must have thematic significance, and he goes on to suggest that "Poe assigns ultimate causation in the story to the mysterious house, and in his developing philosophy to cosmic tendencies in the universe itself." The story is, then, more than anything else, a study of the physical nature of the universe, but, in the context of Poe's cosmology, a realistic study.

Robinson certainly seems correct in saying that Roderick did not intentionally bury Madeline alive:
in fact, she was prematurely buried, it must have been accidental. But Robinson simply avoids discussing the incredible nature of Madeline's escape from her tomb, an act of supernatural strength that Madeline, in her state of "physical disorganization," could not have performed. Gerald M. Garmon, another critic who accepts Madeline's premature burial as fact, attempts to account for her escape, though he does say that "such questions as Madeline's method of escaping her tomb are actually rather unimportant." This is probably because his answer to the question is not a very good one. He approaches "Usher" as a tale of Gothic horror emphasizing the "horror of the unknown," and in this context he assigns to the house itself certain supernatural powers. The "constitutional family evil" of the Ushers is interpreted by Garmon as "an appetite for the sensuous life ... part of which is the incestuous relationships of Roderick's ancestors." Central to Garmon's thesis is the ironic "inability [of Roderick and Madeline] to consummate an incestuous relationship":

The Usher family has been given to heightening their sensitivities for generations, and part of that heightening seems to have been incest--partly and immediately because the sensations of intercourse are greater when the ultimate perversity of incest is added. But the sin of incest also produces offspring whose sensitivities become increasingly acute with each
generation until it produces the ultimately sensitive and finally effete Roderick and Madeline.\(^37\)

Roderick, as the male and "active principle," suffers a gradual loss of will, moving closer and closer to the passive female role, and finally, when he is no longer able to act at all, forfeits the male role to the House, in what Garmon calls "a stunning Gothic twist."\(^38\) The problem with Garmon's reading is that it too relies on the abstract concept of identity between the two Ushers and the physical House:

The House (that is, the building), because of this long life with the Usher family, has also taken on the hereditary trait of extreme sensitivity; and, since the family must die out (neither Roderick nor Madeline being physically capable of reproducing), the House has taken on the dominant, aggressive, male role and wills its own destruction with the last of the Ushers.\(^39\)

Roderick, however, is unable to accept the inevitability of his death and strives for individual existence. When Madeline appears to have died, he interprets her death as a hopeful "measure of freedom"--the individual freedom that is necessary for the artist but that the House, as a Gothic force, "cannot allow."\(^40\) In the end it is the House that, "in one tremendous display of will, tears open the coffin" and frees Madeline, allowing her to reunite herself with Roderick in death.

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If Garmon's commentary seems somewhat confusing, it is probably because he attempts to approach the story simultaneously as a tale of Gothic horror and as a quasi-psychological study of artistic sensibility. Thus "Usher" becomes, in a sense, a struggle between the artist's need for individuality and the will of the House. The "Gothic twist" is necessary to explain Madeline's reappearance in the final scene but seems disconnected somehow from Roderick's plight as an artist. Like most of the non-psychological interpretations of "Usher," Garmon's hinges shakily on the actuality of the final scene.

J. O. Bailey is probably the only "Usher" reader to accept Madeline's return as real and yet to insist on "the impossible conditions of Madeline's escape," suggesting that Poe intentionally established these conditions in order to imply a "supernatural agency." Unlike the vaguely supernatural House to which Garmon attributes Madeline's escape, the "supernatural agency" is specifically defined by Bailey as vampirism. Making frequent reference to texts on vampiric lore, Bailey presents a convincing argument for reading "Usher" in terms of Roderick's struggle against vampirism. Roderick's extreme sensitivity would, Bailey suggests, make him "easy prey to psychic or supernatural influence."
such "morbid acuteness of the senses" is a specific symptom of vampiric attack. Bailey pays particular attention to Roderick Usher's appearance, drawing a connection between his hair--"of a more than weblike softness and tenuity . . . suffered to grow all unheeded" and the fungi growing on and enveloping the house. His conclusion is that a "spiritual vampire, or psychic sponge"--which can "support his life and reenergize his frame by drawing upon the vitality of others" is living "upon the souls of the Ushers by sucking vitality through its fungi tuned into their hair."

Bailey does account convincingly for many of the problematic details of the story. Roderick's dread of "the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results"--an ambiguous detail often ignored--is explainable by his fear, not of normal death, but of dying and becoming a vampire, which as a victim he would according to vampiric lore. Roderick's theory of sentience, too, is "consistent with vampiric lore," which states that vampirism "leave[s] its trace throughout almost all nature. Just as we have parasitic men and women, so we have the parasitic plants." It is the House itself, then, that is possessed, but when Madeline dies and is possessed by the spirit, "it has added to its power as psychic sponge the control of a human body.
able to attack the jugular vein." Roderick's painting of the underground vault, a much analyzed symbol, is, according to Bailey, a "charm," an attempt to "purge the real vault," and Madeline's entombment is thus explainable as an attempt by Roderick to control the vampire while he seeks an effective curse among the esoteric volumes in his library.

The most valuable aspect of Bailey's supernatural interpretation of "Usher" is his skillful handling of the narrator-guest:

From our point of view as readers, the narrator is indeed obtuse; he explains away as nonexistent, as illusion, or as superstition every phenomenon that he considers unnatural or does not understand . . . . Therefore, to see what happens in "Usher" we must look beyond the narrator to the events he reports, and to understand what happens, we must observe Roderick and his theories.

Roderick has summoned the narrator to "seek the help of objective reason," but despite the evidence throughout the story "the narrator refuses to believe that the threatening power exists outside Roderick's imagination." Roderick Usher's poem, "The Haunted Palace," for example, is, according to Bailey, "one of Roderick's efforts to make the narrator see that the house has the demonic life of a vampire," and the whirlwind, caused by the struggle in Madeline's vault, is likewise misinterpreted
by the narrator as a natural phenomenon--"merely electrical phenomena not uncommon" (292).

The narrator will be dealt with much more fully in a later chapter, as a structural element in the psychological approaches to "Usher." Bailey's analysis is important, however, for it is the only literal, non-psychological commentary which gives the narrator any serious consideration. And of the three readings--Robinson's, Garmon's, and Bailey's--Bailey's is the only one to deal consistently with the final reappearance of Madeline, as seen and reported by the narrator. It is significant that the most successful treatment of the various details of the story takes as its premise the existence of vampires: it is a straightforward Gothic horror story (which, as Bailey suggests, Poe's readers would have recognized as a story about vampires). It is about Roderick Usher's struggle against the supernatural forces of vampirism and, beyond that, nothing.
Chapter I: Notes


8 Works, I, p. 151.


12 Tate, "Three Commentaries: Poe, James, and Joyce," Sewanee Review, 58 (1950), 2.


14 Ibid., p. 23.
Ibid., p. 25.


Ibid., p. 270.

Ibid., p. 272.

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 271.


Ibid., p. 174.


Brooks and Warren, p. 25.

Ibid., p. 24.

Ibid., p. 25.


Ibid., p. 69-71.

Ibid., p. 74.

Ibid., p. 77.

Ibid., p. 79.


Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid., p. 13.
39 Ibid.
43 Bailey, p. 450.
44 Ibid., p. 452.
45 Works, III, 278 (All further references to "Usher" will be to the Harrison edition, documented parenthetically).
46 Bailey, p. 452.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid. (Bailey quotes Summers, p. 135)
50 Ibid., p. 461.
51 Ibid., p. 455.
52 Ibid., p. 447.
53 Ibid., p. 448.
54 Ibid., p. 456.
Chapter II

Conceptual Approaches to "Usher"

Vampires have become part of a recurrent motif in "Usher" criticism, although they have not been treated in all cases so literally as they are in the reading of Bailey. A symbolic element, it is true, is implied in Bailey's concept of the "spiritual vampire," but in the end he chooses to approach the idea scientifically rather than symbolically. D. H. Lawrence, whose very unscientific reading contains the seed of modern psychomythic interpretations, was the first to recognize the element of spiritual vampirism in "Usher" as the "desirous consciousness": "To know a thing," he said, forming his own primitive psychological vocabulary, "is to kill it. . . . for this reason, the desirous consciousness, the SPIRIT, is a vampire."¹ For Lawrence "Usher" is a "love story," and his entire commentary hinges on his unusual definition of love:

the mysterious vital attraction which draws things together, closer, closer together . . . . each organism only lives through contact with other matter, assimilation, and contact with other life, which means assimilation of new vibrations, non-material. Each individual organism is vivified by intimate contact with fellow organisms: up to a certain point.²
That certain point is the vague point where "otherness fails"—where the "self is broken" and where profane, physical love yields to spiritual, nervous love. Roderick Usher, says Lawrence, "has lost his self, his living soul, and becomes a sensitized instrument of the external influences . . . vibrating without resistance with his sister Madeline, more and more exquisitely, and gradually devouring her, sucking her life like a vampire in his anguish of extreme love. And she asking to be sucked."

It is important to understand that this kind of intense desire, although not physical, is nevertheless a manifestation of the subconscious incest desire. Lawrence, indeed, believed that "every trouble in the psyche is traced to an incest desire," for incest is a tempting symbol that inhabits every human mind—it is "the getting of gratification and the avoiding of resistance." What Lawrence seems to suggest, in fact, is an incest archetype: a tempting yet potentially destructive symbol for the "heightening of life." Allen Tate was strongly influenced by the implications of Lawrence's commentary in his own treatment of the archetypal vampire: "If a writer ambiguously exalts the 'spirit' over the 'body,'" he suggests, "and the spirit must live wholly upon the spirit, some version of the vampire legend is likely to issue as the
symbolic situation."⁶ And all Poe's characters, according to Tate, "represent one degree or another in a movement towards an archetypal condition: the survival of the soul in a dead body."⁷ The meaning of Roderick's and Madeline's incestuous relationship, then, can be seen as an extension of Lawrence's view: "the symbolic compulsion that drives through, and beyond, physical incest [moving] toward the extinction of the beloved's will in complete possession, not of her body, but of her being."⁸ The psychological struggle, says Tate, is in larger terms between the individual's "sensibility" to the real, outside world, and his need for "sensation," which is totally self-directed and thus capable of ultimately locking him into the "void of the ego."⁹

Both Lawrence and Tate apply their psychologies to problems much larger than the private "medical case" of Roderick Usher. Each is concerned with universal forces, with the emerging archetypes that seem to control the dynamics of the life process. Each is also concerned with the artistic consciousness in particular, for in the psyche of the artist the struggle is most intense. In Poe's cosmology, according to Tate, "the hyperaesthetic egoist has put all other men into his void: he is alone in the world and thus dead to it."¹⁰ There is an ironic tension between the artist's need and desire for complete
individuation, through sensation, and his human need to exist in a social framework, to join in the general consciousness. Similarly, Lawrence views the disintegration of the psyche as the first part of the dual "rhythm of American art-activity"—the "sloughing of the old consciousness." The second phase of this creative process, however, is the "forming of a new consciousness underneath," a phase that, Lawrence states, Poe's artists never reach. With Poe there is "only the disintegrative vibration": the end product is the egoistic artist trapped in his own solipsistic vision of the world.

With Poe, and particularly with "Usher," it is difficult to separate aesthetics from cosmology from psychology, for, as the readings of Lawrence and Tate suggest, the three realms are fused. The universe itself is a reflection of the tension that controls every individual psyche—a reflection, that is, of the conflict between the self and the general consciousness. And for Poe, the universe is the artist's universe: the artistic consciousness where the tension is the most precarious. In this sense, too, biographical criticism cannot be surgically divorced from the main body of conceptual criticism, for "Usher" is auto-biographical only as far as it probes the psychic conflicts of Poe, the artist.
trying to exist in a delicately balanced universe.

There is a wide variety of conceptual interpretations of "Usher," and although most of them do share this interest in the artistic psyche, a few approach the problem from the opposite direction—from a sociological viewpoint. It is interesting to begin with what are apparently non-psychological readings, for even these approaches suggest a tension—between the self and the social realm—which is the foundation of psychoanalysis. Robinson's discussion of "order and sentience," for example, is concerned with the entropic movement of the universe, but deals ultimately with the individual's struggle to maintain an "appropriate degree of self-consciousness." Roderick Usher falls because his self is overdeveloped and isolated—he is obsessed with sensation and as a result has lost all sensibility to the world. James Hafley attaches importance to essentially the same idea, viewing Roderick sociologically as a "non-functioning aristocrat cut off from the peasantry." He approaches "Usher" as the narrator's story, in which the narrator experiences the horrible vision of everyday life: "the House, albeit a 'mystery all insoluble' for the narrator, is representative of the ordinary rather than the unusual. . . . It is with the terrifying, irrational phenomenon of everyday life
itself that the story is concerned." The narrator is the scientific mind, approaching experience rationally, analytically, and, thus, "confronted with a culture once powerful--in the medieval era--but now inbred, impotent, entombed . . . revisiting and thus seeing anew a person and an institution familiar to him from his childhood, [he] has a kind of Spenglerian vision of their rottenness and collapse." The style of the tale, says Hafley, reflects the narrator's ponderous attempts to rationalize in speech what is unspeakable, and his failure is therefore suggested by his silence in the final scene. This treatment of the narrator-guest is not new: he is commonly viewed as an analytical observer, experiencing something he cannot comprehend. What Hafley suggests is, it seems, a conflict between the rational human mind and irrational fact: the only difference is that the irrational content has been removed from the recesses of the human psyche and projected on to the social fabric. We, as readers, see beyond the narrator's failure to understand--we see the "nightmare of decadence" in Roderick and the inadequacy of reason in coping with the nightmare.

There are problems with such an interpretation. It is curious, first of all, that Poe would represent the social realm, however much "entombed," in such a
private and isolated condition: entombment and isolation are symbols of internal journeys throughout Poe's works. And if Poe were making a comment on the rottenness of society, the overly rational narrator would certainly be included in that society: in fact, the interpretation might be sensibly inverted, with Roderick-as-artist confronting the nightmare not only of his own soul, but of a purely rational social realm, incapable of artistic vision. The reading does, in a sense, touch on the agon archetype accidentally—the tension between the ego and the larger consciousness—but, removed from the psyche, it loses its power. The narrator's mind is uncreative: it may observe and attempt to comprehend the irrational, but it does not experience the attraction of these forces. Another critic, Harry Levin, does begin with a similar sociological interpretation but is able to draw a clearer connection to the psychological meaning. He suggests that there is a sociological meaning to "Usher" when "it is linked with the culture of the plantation in its feudal pride and its foreboding of doom," but he goes on to echo Lawrence and Tate in an expanded interpretation: "there is still another sense in which Roderick Usher with all his idiosyncrasies, awaiting his own death and hastening that of his sister, prefigures a larger and nearer situation: the accom-
plished heir of all the ages, the hypersensitive end-
product of civilization itself, driven underground by
the pressure of fear."\textsuperscript{16} Whether in the form of "feudal
pride" or "hypersensitivity," it is the aesthetic ego,
cut off from all social consciousness, that is the crux
of the sociological and psychological problem.

Leo Spitzer insists that "Usher" must be approached
conceptually, specifically as the "poetic expression of
sociological-deterministic ideas which were in the air
in 1839."\textsuperscript{17} Roderick Usher, Spitzer suggests in response
to Brooks and Warren, is the "embodiment of determinism"
and thus unable to avoid his physical and moral fall.
Both Roderick and Madeline fall morally as a result of
their involvement in an incestuous love relationship
that is their fate, for they are ruled "by the law of
sterility and destruction."\textsuperscript{18} Yet even with such a
sociological foundation, Spitzer's reading is ultimately
concerned with "the psychological consequences of fear."\textsuperscript{19}
Roderick, intensely and incestuously in love with
Madeline, dreads her death, and this "fear, by anticipat-
ing terrible events, has a way of bringing about those
very events ... it is this fear that makes him see,
in the figure immobilized by catalepsy, his dead sister--
whom he then buries with hysterical haste."\textsuperscript{20} Roderick
is motivated, to use Spitzer's psychoanalytic vocabulary,
by his "schizoid nature": his intellect and his nerves, that is, act separately. Thus after Madeline's apparent death, "the morbidly acute nerves and senses take exclusive possession of the schizoid, polarized of course around the idea of death." Although the events are, according to Spitzer, Roderick's fate, he is nevertheless haunted by the concept of incest and ultimately by the concept of life-in-death that Madeline seems to embody, a symbol reminiscent of Tate's archetypal vampire. And even though Spitzer insists that Madeline effects her own escape (never, unfortunately, explaining how), he does add that "it is as if by the intensity of his feeling [Roderick] had succeeded in conjuring up her presence," a psychological implication fascinating in itself.

This discussion is not intended to deny the value of the sociological approach to "Usher," but to show how the more important psychic element intrudes on every interpretation. Another example is the cosmological reading of "Usher" by Maurice Beebe, in which he treats the story as a symbolic expression of Poe's theory of the universe as put forth in Eureka. Poe's cosmology, Beebe suggests, is analogous to his theory of fiction:

The universe, Poe says in Eureka, derives from a tiny particle of perfect oneness,
matter in its utmost conceivable state of simplicity. From this initial state of unity are diffused spherically in all directions 'a certain inexpressibly great yet limited number of unimaginably yet not infinitely minute atome.' . . . The material-spiritual universe consists of tense relationships between the radiated particles—a continual struggle between attraction and repulsion, contraction and expansion.25

The universe is, again in Poe's words, "a plot of God," diffused from that single "particle of perfect oneness" as a story is diffused from the author's single preconceived effect. Roderick Usher is, then, the prototype of artist-as-God: "Because the literary theory behind the story is actually religious in essence . . . he is himself his universe."26 The artistic consciousness exists in constant tension, in cosmological terms between contraction and expansion: "Roderick's power to radiate [gloom] is intensified by his art. . . . As long as Roderick continues the diffusive power symbolized by his music and his painting, he can maintain the delicate balance between repulsion and attraction and save himself from annihilation."27 There is a "line of diffusion" which runs from the "tarn to the house to Roderick to Madeline" and, thus, "while his morale is affected by the physique of his surroundings, his own mind helps to determine the house and the tarn."28 And Madeline's "mysterious illness appears to be a reflection of his
mental affliction." Roderick's fall is a kind of psychic suicide: "When he can no longer stand to be a tense, suffering creature, attracting and repulsing, attracted and repulsed, he seeks a return to the unity of no-attraction-repulsion, no-matter, nothingness... By burying his sister alive, Roderick tries to halt the diffusion." He is sacrificing the extreme self-consciousness essential to artistic creativity for the general consciousness—for the collectivity of unconsciousness.

This conflict, which seems to have been so basic to Poe's world view, is certainly evident in the more properly psychoanalytic commentaries on "Usher." Although Roderick is generally approached as an embodiment of the artistic consciousness, suffering in order to create, he is sometimes viewed as simply mad. Jeff Davis, for example, interprets Madeline as merely a symbol of Roderick's undefined madness, as the "projection of Roderick's fantasies," and Joseph Gold suggests that Madeline is Roderick's alter ego and that "the timing and manner of her first appearance in the story force us to view her as personifying the unconscious fear in the mind of Usher himself." The burial of Madeline, then, is "an act of wish-fulfilment." Both readings view Madeline as part of Roderick's consciousness—-as the
fears or complexes that he tries to suppress—and the
final scene represents Roderick's unsuccessful mental
struggle to keep these complexes suppressed. In John
Marsh's "psycho-sexual" reading of the story, these
fears are specifically defined as "sexual guilt com-
plexes" and Roderick is a "sexual criminal."^34 Usher's
abstract painting of an underground tomb, says Marsh,
suggests nothing other than "a woman's sexual organs--
a region without outlet or source of light yet through
which (in the act of copulation) rolls a 'flood of in-
tense rays,'"^35—and the blood on Madeline's robe sug-
gests that her corpse has been raped by Roderick.36 He
"knows he has committed an unpardonable sin"37 and is
driven mad by his guilt-fantasies.

The meaning of "Usher," Marsh concludes, is that
mankind "dwells in the dark rather than the light,"38 a
theme that Darrel Abel also stresses in his quasi-psycholog-ical reading. Madeline and Roderick are not two
persons, says Abel, "but one consciousness in two bodies,
each mirroring the other, intensifying the introversion
of the family character"39—the psychological isolation.
"Usher" is a story of evil: "all the symbols express
the opposition of Life-Reason to Death-Madness. Most of
them . . . show ascendent evil encroaching upon decadent
good."40 Evil exists independently of Roderick—in an
absolute form—but channels itself through his artistic sensibility, taking shape in such symbols of evil as his abstract painting. It is actually the tarn that serves as "an outlet of a subterranean realm"\(^{41}\): the evil powers, from the "Plutonian depths," manifest themselves in the miasma that rises from the tarn, and eventually overcome the heavenly powers. Although Abel seems to suggest a very traditional religious agon, he does associate the forces of evil with Death-Madness, and many critics have taken his critical grammar as a foundation for subsequent psychological readings. Madness, it would seem, has its source not in a Plutonian realm below the earth's crust, but in a Plutonian realm below the consciousness. This is the implication of Abel's approach that had led other critics to view the house too as a segment of the single consciousness.

Edward Davidson is among those to view the house itself symbolically. He views the house as part of the "triparite division" of the self, a concept with which Poe, he suggests, was certainly familiar. The theory states, basically, that the "normal, healthy human being is one in whom these three faculties (body, mind and soul) are in balance."\(^{42}\) In "Usher," Roderick represents the "mind or intellectual aspect of the total being," Madeline "the sensual or physical side of the
psyche," and the House the spiritual side. The story is a study, then, of the self in disintegration, in all three aspects: "Roderick Usher suffers from a diseased mind which has too long abstracted and absented itself from physical reality; in fact, the physical world, and even the physical side of himself, fills him with such repugnance that he can maintain his unique world or self of the mind only by destroying his twin sister or the physical side of himself." This is, in a slightly different form, a familiar motif: the human mind torn between its intense but necessarily isolated existence, and the physical reality, which keeps encroaching upon that existence. Davidson does, in fact, suggest that the real events are only "an outward demonstration of some inner and cosmic drama." This inner drama is not the artist's alone, although, in Poe's view, it was at its intensest in the artistic consciousness. Most of the "Usher" criticism, in any case, concentrates on the psychology of the artistic ego. Two "Usher" commentators take a quasi-historical approach to the study of the artistic consciousness, discussing the story specifically in terms of the Romantic tradition. James D. Wilson interprets the tale as a "symbolic representation of the decaying Romantic artistic imagination," in which Usher "emerges
as a vision at the end of the narrator's solipsistic excursion into the recesses of consciousness." It is, according to Wilson, the narrator's story, although Usher too has his own personal psychic history: Roderick is important as a symbol because "he provides [for the narrator] a glimpse of the effects of solipsism on the artistic imagination. The narrator is able to escape the house and retreat back into rationality. . . . Poe's narrator survives and functions because unlike Usher he does not succumb to the prison of the self." Incest is also symbolically important in the story, suggesting Usher's Romantic and "narcissistic 'infatuation with his own psyche--a destructive involvement with his own unconscious which is at once the romancer's inspiration and his undoing." Michael Hoffman, likewise approaching "Usher" in light of the Romantic artistic tradition, suggests that the story is a symbolic representation of "Negative Romanticism," a state of consciousness resulting from the breakdown of Enlightenment values without modern values to replace them. He does add, however, that "this is a psychological state not necessarily confined to figures of a historical period." Like Wilson, Hoffman approaches the story through the narrator, who, he says, "must receive the title of questing Romantic hero. His consciousness is the one that attempts to
structure meaning into the circumstances of the story." Roderick Usher's poem, "The Haunted Palace," represents "the fall of the Enlightenment orientation," and the painted tomb, with "the light of reason shining on an underground tunnel without any source of ingress or egress," is "an ironic comment on the ability of that beacon to enlighten the world." Madeline, then, is buried because she is the "child of the Enlightenment," a kind of "alter ego" of Roderick's that he is unable to successfully bury. The narrator witnesses the collapse of reason--the total breakdown of the Enlightenment orientation--but is unable to prevent it: he is left "a lone individual without any sense of self." Hoffman's interpretation is unconvincing. It is unconvincing because Madeline, for one, is awkward as the "child of the Enlightenment." There is nothing in her sketchy character to even remotely suggest that she embodies reason. The entire Gothic atmosphere, in fact, that binds the symbol pattern together--the tarn and its miasma, the decaying house, the dark and intricate interior--denies association with the Enlightenment philosophy. Wilson states that the incest archetype is "central to the American artists' attempt to convey the self-destructive element in their nation's experiment in democracy." Whether we assign importance to the political
concept or not, the implication is that American artists were concerned with the will of the individual and with the limits of that will. Democracy, with its foundation in the individual will, is viable "if the soul is as the man of the enlightenment or the optimistic Romantic artist conceived it: a 'belle ame' governed by reason and divinely inspired. But if the self is a morass of psychological disorder too weak to bear scrutiny, then democracy becomes an experiment in terror." Roderick Usher is certainly a symbol of psychological disorder, but if there is a symbol of reason in the story, it is the narrator, not Madeline. The analytical narrator attempts to understand logically the nature of the psychic forces that have free play in the mind of Roderick. It is not an historical fact, but a psychological fact, that he confronts—if he comes to a realization at all, it is that his own rationality is inadequate for the understanding of a world not governed by reason.

It is interesting, as an extension of this approach, to view the story, as Daniel Hoffman does, as the narrator's experience with his own psychic forces: as his "journey into the darkest, most hidden regions of himself; and the fearful tableau therein enacted is a fable of his destiny dredged up from the regions of his deepest, most archaic dreams." "Usher" is ultimately a "testa-
ment to the autonomy of the unconscious, by whose inexorable powers are revealed the deepest truths of the soul." Roderick Usher suggests the Freudian artistic consciousness, transforming his own subconscious fantasies into art: "He could not become an artist until he had wished his sister dead ... It is as though her dying is a precondition for the exercise of his creative impulse." The "archaic memory" of the artist, and of any individual mind, as Freud suggested, is inhabited by "that most ancient tabu"—incest—Roderick's "deepest wish," which is the source of his art but which ironically makes him a committer of both incest and murder. The artist's erotic fantasies become his art: his guitar rhapsodies, his poems, his paintings. Roderick suggests Hoffman, is symbolically part of the narrator's consciousness, for Roderick's summons is, as with all letters in Poe, a summons from the soul, and the tale itself is a dream of the narrator. It is a study of the ability of the mind, through creative activity, to provide an outlet for dangerous psychic residue.

This idea is further developed by Richard Wilbur, who suggests that "all journeys in Poe are allegories of the process of dreaming, and [that] we must understand 'The Fall of the House of Usher' as a dream of the nar-
rator's, in which he leaves behind him the waking, physical world and journeys inward toward his moi interieur, toward his inner and spiritual self. That spiritual self is Roderick Usher. "Considered as a state of mind," he continues, "Roderick Usher is an allegorical figure representing the hypnagogic state . . . a condition of semi-consciousness in which the closed eye beholds a continuous procession of constantly changing forms." In this sense, Roderick's manic-depression represents the "wandering between consciousness and unconsciousness"—an attempt by the poetic imagination to escape the material world. The story, in the end, is "a triumphant report by the narrator that it is possible for the poetic soul to shake off this temporal, rational, physical world and escape, if only for a moment, to the realm of unfettered vision." Although these two readings are similar, Daniel Hoffman puts less emphasis on the escape from time-and-space consciousness and more on the balanced relation between the consciousness and unconsciousness: Poe, he suggests, is "telling us that consciousness alone cannot understand the inexorable donneé of the unconscious, but also that the unconscious, if unaided by consciousness, is the victim of the very forces among which it dwells." He attaches to this quest for balance a biographical
note, viewing the tale as "the result of the collaboration between the narrator-portion and the Usher-meed of the author's own mind." Patrick Quinn, in a similar extension of his psychological/aesthetic reading to the biographical, suggests that "Usher" represents the warfare taking place in Roderick Usher [between] his consciousness . . . and the evil of his unconscious—a reflection of the warfare within Poe himself. "There can be little doubt," he says, "that we can find the author in Usher rather than in Dupin, an indication that, despite his pretensions to a universal sort of mind, Poe's true bent was toward the darker regions of the psyche and not toward the clear and level areas of logic." The story, then, represents Poe's own struggle against the evil that inhabits the recesses of the human mind. Maurice Beebe, who views Roderick as an artist no longer able to stand the tension of heightened existence and his end as a suicide, also suggests a parallel in Poe's own life: "A few months before his death he wrote to Mrs. Clemm: 'It is no use to reason with me now; I must die. I have no desire to live since I have done Eureka. I could accomplish nothing more.'" Poe recognized, Beebe suggests, "such activities (drinking and drug taking) as a projection from the self, a form of diffusion not unlike the creating of art. No longer re-
belling at the sorrow which accompanies it, he solaces himself with the conviction that such activity, carried to its furthest extent, may annihilate an identity that has become repugnant to him." It is undeniable that Poe echoes Roderick's own sense of resignation: "'I must perish in this deplorable folly'" (280). To Arthur Hobson Quinn, too, Roderick represents Poe's own mental collapse--more precisely, his "fear of impending mental decay" and loss of spiritual identity. 70

The two most properly psychoanalytical biographical readings are those of Jean-Paul Weber and Marie Bonaparte. Weber interprets many of Poe's stories in terms of what he calls the "theme of the clock":

It has been observed that in the unconscious of the neurotic the rhythm of the clock is frequently associated with that of the sex act. It has also been observed that children who accidentally witness the sex act interpret it as a scene of struggle between the two partners. Finally we know that during his first years Poe was raised in a family of wandering players, whose poverty was so great that more than once, doubtlessly, in the course of their tours they must have had to content themselves with a single room for a lodging. Nothing argues against the assumption that little Edgar once chanced to witness the nocturnal romps of his parents and that his infant imagination would have mistaken their movements for combat struggle. 71

Weber's thesis--which works much better with other stories than it does with "Usher"--is that Poe subcon-
sclously wrote the symbol of the clock into his works as an expression of this repressed complex. The House of Usher, then, resembles a clock, and Roderick and Madeline the hands: as Madeline rises from the vault below the narrator's room, she represents the movement toward midnight, at which time she is "superimposed" upon Roderick in the "semblance of a fray." 

Marie Bonaparte approaches "Usher" as an expression of Poe's own sexual guilt-complexes and attempts to deal also with the symbols of the Mad Trist in a psycho-mythic reading of sorts. Poe is Usher. In the story, Poe "is punished for having betrayed his mother in loving Madeline-Virginia. . . . Usher-Poe is punished for his sadism, as shown in the way Usher treated his sister. Finally, Usher-Poe is punished for his infantile incestuous wishes toward his mother, as witness all the quotations from Mad Trist." The slaying of the dragon is an archetypal motif, a "perfect expression of the Oedipus wish: the dragon, symbol of the father, is killed and the mother set free to belong to the victorious son." Ethelred's act of forcing his way into the dwelling of the hermit--"another father-figure" according to Bonaparte--is a symbol of sexual attack on the mother, and Madeline reappears simultaneously because she represents "Poe's phantasy of the mother who will return from
the grave to find her son and claim him in death." Bonaparte is one of the few critics to seriously attempt an explanation of the obviously mythic events of *Mad Trist* in terms of the psychological situation. The commentary becomes unconvincing, in fact, only when it attempts to draw a direct parallel to Poe's own psychology. Bonaparte deals inadequately with such major symbols as the House itself, which she explains away as "Lady Madeline's double," and the narrator, who she says exists merely to tell the story. It is essential to confront the mythic content of "Usher," not only as it is presented in *Mad Trist* but throughout the story, and to relate it to the reality content of the story's final scene. To do this, however, one must understand the narrator and his relation to these details.
1 Lawrence, p. 70.

2 Ibid., p. 66.

3 Ibid., p. 76.

4 Ibid., pp. 76, 78.

5 Ibid., p. 76.


7 Ibid., p. 42.

8 Ibid., p. 43.

9 Ibid., p. 44.

10 Ibid., p. 46.

11 Lawrence, p. 65.


13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.


17 Leo Spitzer, "A Reinterpretation of 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" Comparative Literature, 4 (1952), 66.

18 Ibid., p. 58.

19 Ibid., p. 59.

20 Ibid., p. 60.
21 Ibid., p. 61.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid., p. 59.
24 Ibid., p. 62.
26 Ibid., p. 133.
27 Ibid., p. 128.
28 Ibid., p. 127.
29 Ibid., p. 124-5.
30 Ibid., p. 130.
33 Ibid.
35 Ibid.
36 Ibid., p. 9.
37 Ibid., p. 8.
38 Ibid., p. 9.
40 Ibid., p. 48.
41 Ibid., p. 50.
43 Ibid., p. 97.
44 Ibid.
45 Ibid., p. 98.
47 Ibid., p. 43.
48 Ibid.
49 Ibid., p. 44. Wilson quotes Joel Porter, The Romance in America, p. 66.
51 Ibid., p. 160.
52 Ibid., p. 162.
53 Ibid., p. 165.
54 Ibid., p. 168.
55 Wilson, p. 33.
56 Ibid.
57 Daniel Hoffman, p. 297.
58 Ibid., p. 311.
59 Ibid., p. 310-1.
60 Ibid., p. 312.
61 Ibid., p. 300.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid., p. 110.
65 Daniel Hoffman, p. 313.
67 Ibid., p. 83.
68 Beebe, p. 131.
69 Ibid.
72 Ibid., p. 88.
74 Ibid.
75 Ibid., p. 27.
76 Ibid.
Chapter III

The Narrator: Collective Experience in "Usher"

The nameless narrator-guest in "Usher" has received his just share of critical attention, although he has been assigned various degrees of thematic importance. Allen Tate, at one extreme, claims that the first-person narrator "merely reports" the action—that "there is not one instance of dramatized detail"; James Hafley, in contrast, claims that "the point of view is totally dramatized." The narrator, according to Hafley, functions as a valuable structural and thematic device: "The central drama of 'Usher' is surely to be found in the relation of the narrator to the experience he recounts: he has approached this experience, become involved with and almost claimed by it, then finally—to an extent—escaped it; he has 'fled aghast' and will 'never forget' something that he still cannot comprehend." Daniel Hoffman, although he agrees that "all is described rather than dramatized," suggests that this is the intentional point of view, for the tale is "the dream which [the] Narrator, at Roderick's behest, has travelled so far into the intricacy of the dreary darkness to dream." There is no general consensus on how to handle the
narrator's relation to the events he narrates. There is, however, a far-reaching agreement on the narrator's personality, as epitomized in Darrel Abel's description:

... he does lend the reader some acute, though not individualizing faculties: five keen senses which shrewdly perceive actual physical circumstances; a sixth sense of vague and indescribable realities behind the physical and apparent; a clever faculty of rational interpretation of sensible phenomena; and finally, a skeptical and matter-of-fact propensity to mistrust intuitional apprehensions and to seek natural and rational explanations. In short, he is an habitual naturalist resisting urgent convictions of the preternatural.

Whether it is, in fact, in reaction to supernatural forces, as Abel suggests, or to vampirism or physical disorganization, as Bailey and Robinson respectively suggest, the narrator is certainly at odds with the experience and fails, during the experience at least, to grasp it. And his failure to understand his experience is the result of his strictly rational personality. Those critics who view the narrator himself as the artistic mind and Roderick Usher as merely a symbol in what becomes exclusively the narrator's story ignore the most obvious personality traits that Poe has given his nameless guest. "Usher" is not exclusively the narrator's story; nor is it exclusively Roderick's story. It must be understood in terms of the relationship be-
tween Roderick and the narrator, as characters rather than symbols, and their common relationship to the events that take place.

What the narrator-Roderick relationship seems to suggest, given their personalities and the structure of the story, is the influence of Roderick upon the narrator-guest, an idea implicit but undeveloped in many critical readings. Robert Regan, for example, suggests that "Roderick suffers from an abnormal and utterly debilitating obsession, that this madman has by degrees drawn the initially sane narrator into a folie à deux; that while Madeline's body lies quiet in the tomb, the two friends share a series of hallucinations which culminate in their believing that they see the living corpse of Madeline in a dark and windswept hallway of the House of Usher." Floyd Stovall similarly suggests that "the strange invented episode of Ethelred and the dragon ... induces in both Roderick and the narrator (who has been affected also by his friend's theory of identity) the hallucination of Madeline's escape from the tomb and appearance before them" (emphasis mine). Stovall describes Roderick's hallucination as the result of his belief in absolute identity with Madeline: Roderick "will not believe that she can be dead while he himself still lives." This is, as we have seen, a recurrent motif in "Usher"
criticism, but more of a literary concept than anything else. The phenomenon of "identity" is never adequately explained. And more vague is the process by which the narrator is affected "by his friend's theory of identity." It is precisely the nature of this influence that must be understood, for the story, specifically the psychological aspect, hinges on this central relationship.

Even the interaction between narrator and Roderick has received various treatments. I. M. Walker, for example, offers a purely scientific explanation of the final illusion of Madeline's reappearance, which the two seem to experience mutually. Roderick's mental condition, Walker explains, is a result of the miasmata rising from the tarn. According to nineteenth-century medical texts, "odours and gases arising out of foul water or decayed matter were the causes of physical or mental illnesses." In those affected by this "febrile miasma," he states, the "creations of the imagination" would be "strange, spectral and terrifying," as Roderick Usher's certainly are. The story, then, is essentially a Gothic tale, showing the narrator's gradual loss of mental balance as he is "disturbed by his environment, and by Roderick's madness." It is a story of terror, for terror is one of the prime effects of the "febrile miasmata." The narrator, Walker
agrees, is basically a rational man, and he briefly "retains enough fragments of his reason to resist Roderick's hallucination, and realizes that the 'cracking and ripping sound' . . . is due to the coincidence of the electrical storm outside."[11] In the end, however, he too is overcome by madness and terror.

Walker suggests that the narrator's mental balance "is being disturbed by his environment, and by Roderick's madness," although he never explains exactly how Roderick's madness infects him directly. John S. Hill, taking a similar tack, suggests that "Madeline's final appearance is made as a ghost," a kind of "dual hallucination" of Roderick and the narrator.[12] Roderick, says Hill, is simply mad: "Everything attributed to Roderick Usher indicates mental instability; his extreme nervousness, his belief in the sentience of vegetable matter, his fixation about being ruled by the house itself, his wild music, and, most indicative, his fear of fear itself, which is actually fear of his incipient madness."[13] Roderick believes he has tortured his sister, according to Hill, and "is prepared to have her take revenge upon him," and thus his final hallucination is really a "wish to die."[14] And the narrator, in the course of the story, descends into the same insanity to the point where he too shares in the hallucination. His madness, Hill
maintains, is caused by the intensely gloomy atmosphere; yet he shares in the end Roderick's guilt and his death wish, symbolized by Madeline. There is no explanation of exactly how or why the narrator's madness is caused by Roderick's guilt, nor is there any hint concerning the precise nature of the transference. The central relationship of Roderick and his guest seems to demand that Roderick's madness itself is transferred to the narrator; yet both Hill and Walker offer alternative explanations: the influences of the gloomy atmosphere and the miasma rising from the foul tarn. They both imply, however, a psychological phenomenon not explainable in scientific terms.

Walker and Hill both make clumsy attempts to explain psychic phenomena in physical terms simply because they seem to lack the vocabulary for effectively treating the psychological situation. The narrator must ultimately be seen in relation to the forces of the subconscious mind that are affecting him through the deranged mind of Roderick Usher. But in keeping with Poe's literary theory, we cannot ignore the physical environment so carefully detailed in "Usher." Nor can we ignore the mythic element so carefully inserted in the final scene, through the narrator, in the details of the "Mad Trist." It is only in the relationship between the physical,
psychic, and mythic realms that "Usher" can be fully understood. It has been necessary, in reviewing the various approaches to "Usher," to toss around the vague concepts of material sentience and spiritual-material identity without investigating their psychological significance, for, although Poe may not have fully appreciated the significance of the matter-psyche relationship, he did take the metaphysic seriously: it was not, for Poe, merely a literary device but a scientific and psychological fact.

The implication of Poe's vague metaphysic is the alchemical belief that spirit inhabits matter, that it is, in fact, imprisoned in matter. This is, of course, an ancient concept and one with which, as Barton Levi St. Armand suggests, Poe was probably quite familiar. What is interesting, however, is not that Poe incorporated alchemical symbolism into "Usher" but that he anticipates the psychological ramifications of alchemical symbolism put forth by psychoanalyst and mythologist C. G. Jung a century later. St. Armand, in an extended analysis of the Hermetic symbolism in "Usher," suggests that Roderick Usher might be viewed as "a matter alchemist and as a hierophant of its mysteries," and thus in Jungian terms as a mind in the early stages of individuation. Escape from materiality, says St. Armand, is pos-

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sible "only through a supreme act of knowing, or gnosis, of the kind which Poe details for us in his last work, *Eureka.*"¹⁶ "Usher," then, describes the movement through the various stages of individuation, or liberation, as suggested by the metallic imagery in the narrative itself and in the "Mad Trist." As Roderick conducts his "experiment in transmutation," physically and psychologically, the myth of Ethelred images forth the same psychic "trials," ending in a simultaneous conjunction of opposites in the final scene. The slaying of the dragon is, in Jungian terms, an archetypal symbol for the "mortification" of the self in preparation for eventual union with the female symbol in the final stage of individuation.

The alchemical symbol of "mystic marriage," the *coniunctio,* is, according to Jung, an idea that "served on the one hand to shed light on the mystery of chemical combination, while on the other hand it became the symbol of the *unio mystica,* since, as a mythologem, it expresses the archetype of the union of opposites."¹⁷ Jung emphasizes the duality of the symbol that, applied originally to the "myth of matter," is "equally valuable from the psychological point of view: that is to say, it plays the same role in the exploration of the darkness of the psyche as it played in the investigation of the
riddle of matter.\textsuperscript{13} The significance of this radical duality between the material and the psychic cannot be overemphasized, for it is important to realize that the "equivocal appellation of the 'House of Usher'"---"the perfect keeping of the character of the premises with the accredited character of the people" (275)---is no mere literary device, but the controlling principle of the story: "archetypes do not represent anything external, non-psychic," says Jung, "although they do of course owe the concreteness of their imagery to the impressions received from without."\textsuperscript{19} It is in this sense that the narrator experiences his "strange fancy . . . that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity" (276). Primordial images, intruding upon the conscious mind, clothe themselves in real imagery, as in the dream process: "Shaking off from my spirit what must have been a dream," states the narrator, "I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building" (276). And to carry the idea one step further, the "wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones" also suggests a psychic fact: it suggests the disintegration of the individual, personal psyche, and the endurance of the collective, or racial, psyche. Roderick, it will be
remembered, is "the last of the ancient race of the Ushers" (281, emphasis mine).

Individuation is the psychological process whereby the mind is balanced. The immature mind is subject to the forces of the subconscious—both the personal and the collective subconscious—without the necessary control by the conscious mind. As a person matures psychologically, there is an increased participation of consciousness and of reason, by which the individual comes to terms with the unreasonable and primordial contents of the collective psyche. The problem with St. Armand's reading of "Usher" is the suggestion of a successful individuation process. The final scene clearly suggests a failure by Usher to control the destructive forces of his unconscious, rather than, as St. Armand states, the "liberation of the soul." Far more convincing is Colin Martindale's suggestion that "Usher" details an "unsuccessful attempt to escape from a regressive state of consciousness, to reach a more mature or differentiated level of ego development." According to Martindale, the House of Usher itself represents the whole personality and the occupants represent the "different aspects of the personality," an idea he supports by reference to the Jungian theory of archetypes:
Jung argues that the two basic aspects of the self—conscious and unconscious—tend always to be symbolized as male and female figures respectively, often as brother and sister or mother and son. The characteristics of the pair and of their relationship are dependent upon the level of ego development or regression which they symbolize. At the most mature level of development the unconscious is symbolized as a benevolent 'anima' figure which aids a strong and independent hero. At a less mature level, where the ego is still weak and subject to being overwhelmed and dominated by the unconscious, the latter is symbolized by the 'Terrible Mother' figures which on some level seduce and destroy a vulnerable hero such as Hippolytus, Pentheus, or Oedipus. Madeline, as evidenced by the inexplicable, numinous awe she engenders, is clearly such a symbolic figure; she seems to be a proto-anima figure rather closer to the Terrible Mother than to the anima per se.23

The most valuable aspect of Martindale's reading is his treatment of the narrator's relationship to the mythic/archetypal element in Roderick's neurosis. The narrator, Martindale suggests, is "summoned to serve as a sort of proto-psychotherapist in Usher's attempt to cure himself of his 'nervous affliction,'"24 and the fact that Madeline disappears precisely on the day of his arrival suggests "that the narrator has succeeded to an extent in bringing Usher out of his regressive trance, in allowing him to escape unconscious domination."25

Usher's problem, however, is that "he has not only interred Madeline too soon, but he has also interred too much of her": thus his listlessness and inability
to continue his artistic creativity. The narrator's reading of "Mad Trist," then, is a symbolic attempt to present Roderick with an "ideal" to follow: that is, with a symbol of successful initiation or, in Jungian terms, individuation:

If Usher's wish to be mature is to be successful, the unconscious must be conquered so that its vital and beneficent aspects may be salvaged. In the terms of the psychological symbolism, the Great Mother must be differentiated from the anima, a process which is, according to Jung and Neumann, depicted by the dragon fight. This mythic pattern involves the hero (consciousness) entering a valley, cave, or other symbol of unconsciousness, fighting and slaying a dragon (destructive aspects of the unconscious, the Terrible Mother), recovering some sort of treasure, and saving an anima figure which he almost invariably marries.

Usher is, in the end, overwhelmed by the unconscious contents because, being too weak psychologically to control his unconscious, he attempts to seek refuge there instead. He is ultimately the victim of the female aspect of his own personality, which he is unable to come to terms with maturely.

The treatment of the narrator as a psychoanalyst is certainly interesting, for, in its most basic form, "Usher" involves a patient, oppressed by a "mental disorder," and a friend who is summoned to attempt "some alleviation of his malady" (274). Martindale's analysis
does not, however, account for the narrator's own apparent insanity: that is to say, for his share in the final experience. The "dual hallucination" of Roderick and the narrator/analyst can be explained only as a collective psychological experience—the simultaneous intrusion of unconscious symbols on both minds. The meaning of the interaction between Roderick and the narrator, and of the final scene, lies in what Jung (and Freud before him) referred to as the "psychology of the transference." According to Jung,

. . . unconscious contents are invariably projected at first upon concrete persons and situations. Many projections can ultimately be integrated back into the individual once he has recognized their subjective origin; others resist integration, and although they may be detached from their original objects, they thereupon transfer themselves to the doctor. Among these contents the relation to the parent of the opposite sex plays a particularly important part, i.e., the relation of son to mother, daughter to father, and also that of brother to sister.29

These "unconscious contents" are the archetypes that inhabit and "represent the life and essence of a non-individual psyche."29 Jung is concerned, of course, with the role of the psychoanalyst in relation to his patient but states that the process is not confined to such a professional interaction: the active archetypes "emit a fascination which not only grips—and has already
gripped—the patient, but can also have an inductive ef-
fic to the unconscious of the impartial spectator." These interacting minds, those of the analyst and the patient, "find themselves in a relationship founded on mutual unconsciousness." It is precisely this state of "mutual unconscious-
ness" at which Roderick Usher and the narrator arrive in the conclusion of the story. In the initial scene, in fact, the process of transference begins, for the narrator is affected by "a sense of insufferable gloom" as he approaches the House of Usher. He is unnerved by a "mystery all insoluble" and finds himself unable to "grapple with the shadowy fancies" (274). In keeping with his analytical character, he rationalizes these "shadowy fancies" as the result of the physical house and landscape:

I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural ob-
jects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be suf-
ficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression. (274)

The source of the narrator's agitation is not, of course, physical in nature, but the insubstantial world of the
subconscious, suggested by the increased potency of the image reflected in the tarn.

The projection of these archetypal images on family members is a normal psychic process in the infant, and neurosis is the result only of the failure to re-integrate the images into the individual. At the root of Roderick Usher's neurosis, of course, is the activation of the "incest archetype," the fantasy contents of which he has projected on his sister, Madeline, and failed to withdraw. These fantasy contents are "partly concrete, partly symbolic": a fluctuating mixture of "spirit" and "instinct" that forms "an impenetrable mass, a veritable magma sprung from the depths of primeval chaos." Several critics, as we have seen, have suggested the possibility of "spiritual incest," but it is actually the ambivalence of the image that is important: "sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them" (289). Jung does stress that, because the fantasy contents of these archetypes "seldom or never lack an erotic aspect... an incestuous character does undoubtedly attach to them." The observer is "merely drawn into the peculiar atmosphere of family incest through the projection," (an image that, indeed, might suggest the "peculiar atmosphere" in which Roderick and his guest interact).
When the narrator first enters the House of Usher, he finds everything curiously familiar:

While the objects around me—while the carvings of the ceiling, 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. (277)

Roderick, of course, exists in a state of psychological infancy, for he is still under the influence of the primordial images of the collective unconscious, and the narrator, sharing in that consciousness, finds the images familiar. He is, in a sense, reminded of prehistoric images that have been latent since infancy, but he is unable to understand their meaning, for it is the very nature of archetypes to defy rational analysis. Jung describes these contents as "daemonic forces lurking in the blackness," as a "black blacker than black," in the same sense that the narrator perceives "the futility of all attempt at cheering a mind from which darkness, as if an inherent positive quality, poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe, in one unceasing radiation of gloom" (282).

Up until the actual burial of Madeline, the narra-
tor is merely "interested and bewildered" by these familiar yet incomprehensible forces. He speaks of the "occupations, in which he involved me, or led me the way" (282), with the emphasis on the self; but immediately preceding the burial he speaks of "suggestions arising from this ballad [that] led us into a train of thought" (286, emphasis mine.) The movement is certainly toward the "mutual unconsciousness" that is the foundation of transference. As with the formal doctor-patient relationship, that which is intended as therapy serves as the medium for the manifestation of the archetypes, for as they intrude upon the consciousness in dreams, so too do they take form in art. Roderick Usher thus paints "an idea"--"pure abstractions" (283)--and the narrator recognizes "the wild ritual" behind all the activities.

Occasionally, according to Jung, dreams will announce the actual transference--dreams depicting an "ambiguous situation"—and such is the ambiguous burial of Madeline. It is when the initial recipient of the projection is withdrawn, as Madeline is here, that the weight of that projection is transferred to the analyst. Architectonically, the burial takes place directly beneath the narrator's room, not Roderick's, and all the dramatized action that follows takes place in his room, previously unmentioned. And it is, of
course, only at the burial that the narrator learns of the "sympathies" between the twins, suggesting the transfer of the incest archetype to the narrator. A drastic change takes place in his character: "It was no wonder that his condition terrified--that it infected me. I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions" (290). Under the "full power of such feelings," he is unable to sleep and unable to reason off the nervousness. Sharing now in Roderick's neurosis, he experiences the fantasy-contents of that neurosis: mutually they fantasize that Madeline lives. Mutually also, they experience the "whirlwind":

A whirlwind had apparently collected its force in our vicinity; for there were frequent and violent alterations in the direction of the wind; and the exceeding density of the clouds (which hung so low as to press upon the turrets of the house) did not prevent our perceiving the life-like velocity with which they flew carerring from all points against each other, without passing away into the distance. (291)

The transference between patient and analyst, says Jung, "leads both of them to a direct confrontation with the daemonic forces lurking in the darkness," where the "activated unconscious appears as a flurry of unleashed opposites and calls forth the attempt to reconcile them."
This is the primeval chaos that the narrator experiences and that leads to his "direct confrontation" with the incest archetype. By allowing the unconscious fantasy to intrude absolutely into his consciousness, to the point of total reality, the narrator is able to come to terms with it. The archetype is thus accepted and integrated back into the non-individual psyche, and his psychic health is preserved. It should be remembered that the narrator clings desperately to his reason until the end, analyzing even the "activated unconscious" as "merely electrical phenomena not uncommon" (292). But in his confrontation with the absolute horror of the Ushers' incestuous death, he abandons his reason. He does not stop to analyze the scene but flees "aghast": his brain reels in response to the symbolic withdrawal of the House of Usher back into the insubstantial world of the tarn.

Unconscious symbols refuse to be analyzed and, in fact, demand an irrational response, and it is precisely this deficiency—this inability to respond irrationally—that characterizes the narrator in all but the final paragraph of the story. There is, however, a distinction drawn between the narrator-storyteller and the narrator-character, and in this subtle distinction lies the key to an understanding of the narrator's initiation. James Hafley, as I have mentioned, has called attention to the
dramatized point of view, but he judges the narrator unwise because "he doesn't even manage to explain what has happened." Patrick Quinn likewise claims that "Usher's guest never penetrates beyond the appearances; he lives this experience; its significance eludes him." Yet this is the narrator who can, in retrospect, judge his own "experiment—that of looking down within the tarn" as "childish" (276), realizing that reason is sometimes inadequate. He realizes the limitations not only of analysis but also of language: "these paintings (vivid as their images now are before me) I would in vain endeavor to educe more than a small portion which should lie within the compass of merely written words" (283). And when he says, "I lack words to express the full extent, or the earnest abandon of his persuasion" (286), it is with the realization that something other than words are needed to narrate his experience: that there are those things which are "too shadowy." It is the storyteller and not the character who distinguishes between psychic and material natures: "Shaking off from my spirit what must have been a dream, I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building." It would seem that the absence of an explanation is, if anything, the narrator's victory, for unlike the habitually analytic character who originally approached the House.
of Usher, the mature narrator speaks with an awareness and acceptance of things "beyond our depth." There is an undeniable contrast between the language of the telling and the actions of the narrator-character: it is only in the telling—in the re-evaluation of the experience—that the narrator admits to the force of "fancies" and dreams in unscientific phraseology. And this telling is, of course, an analysis—a critical re-examination of an earlier self—in light of a new consciousness.
Chapter III: Notes

1 Tate, "Three Commentaries: Poe, James and Joyce."

2 Hafley, p. 18.

3 Daniel Hoffman, p. 302.

4 Abel, p. 44.


7 Ibid.


9 Ibid., p. 589. Walker quotes Thomas Upham, Elements of Mental Philosophy.

10 Ibid., p. 590.

11 Ibid., p. 591.

12 Hill, p. 396.

13 Ibid., p. 398.

14 Ibid., p. 401.


16 Ibid., p. 1.


18 Ibid.

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19 Ibid.
20 St. Armand, p. 7.
22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
28 Jung, p. 6.
29 Ibid., p. 5.
31 Ibid., p. 15.
32 Ibid., p. 11.
34 Ibid., p. 18.
36 Ibid., p. 19.
37 Ibid., p. 18.
38 Hafley, p. 18.
39 Patrick Quinn, p. 238.
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