Fear In The House Of Usher Edgar Allen Poe Essay, Research Paper

The Fear in the House of Usher

The short story, The Fall of the House of Usher, uses a rational first person narrator to illustrate the strange effects the house has on the three characters within it. Everything about the house is dark and supernaturally evil, and appears to convey some fear that is driving its occupants insane. The narrator enters the story as a man with a lot of common sense and is very critical of the superstitious Usher, but he himself senses these same powers only he tries to escape the reality of the phenomena by reasoning or focusing on something else. Edgar Allen Poe, the author of this short story, is trying to show through the narrator that the denial of our fears can lead to insanity, much the same way it has already turned Usher insane and is slowly but surely acting upon the narrator.

The House of Usher is described by the narrator in the beginning of the story as having life-like characteristics suggesting that the narrator is already receiving supernatural feelings from the house. He describes the windows as being vacant and eye-like , adding to the all around eerie feel the house gives off. The narrator, upon seeing the house, is immediately driven to superstitious descriptions despite his attempts to remain rational. Because the reader sees everything through the narrator, the evil supernatural imagery that is conveyed can only be interpreted as a foreshadowing of what is to happen to the narrator in the story. When he says things like the insufferable gloom pervading my spirit upon looking at the house, the reader has to sense something-sinister going on within the house and the fear that the narrator feels toward it.

After entering the house, the narrator discovers his boyish friend in serious mental illness, which has altered even his physical appearance. In fact the narrator hardly recognized him saying things like 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 childhood. (1377) After speaking with Roderick for some time about his condition, the narrator learned that he was bounded by some mental terror and that he was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted he had never ventured forth. (1378) By having the narrator make this connection, Poe is showing that perhaps the narrator himself is beginning to feel these same fears, that perhaps fear is contagious.

As the story progresses, the condition of Roderick Usher deteriorates and his insanity becomes even more evident, especially after the burial of Madeline. This is evident when the narrator notices that Usher now roamed from chamber to chamber with hurried, unequal, and objectless step. (1383) The narrator was very concerned with the development of Usher s condition and even went so far as to say that his condition terrified-that is infected me. (1384) The narrator was admitting that the superstitions of Usher were creeping upon him, but he refused to let go of his rationality and excused what he was sensing as nothing. Although his statements clearly show that he has also succumbed to the fears that Usher had, he does not recognize that his feeling are derived from a fear within him, something he has been sensing since arriving at the house.

The climax of fear for both Usher and the narrator comes late in the night of the seventh or eight day after the placing of the lady Madeline within the donjon. (1384) It starts out with the narrator in his room and he is unable to sleep, he had to struggle to reason off the nervousness which had dominion over me. (1384) He goes on to rationally explain his uneasiness, blaming the bewildering influence of the gloomy furniture of the room-of the dark and tattered draperies (1384) Eventually the narrator gave up sleeping to pace about his room until he heard footsteps outside which belonged to Usher. Usher had by this time gone completely mad, and insisted upon showing the narrator a frightening phenomena that had occurred about the mansion. Outside there was a distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion (1385) that could not be explained by any natural occurrences. But narrator shrugged it off by explaining it as an electrical phenomenon that was not uncommon, and then quickly closes the window so as to change the subject. He then takes up a book and begins to read it to Usher.

During the reading many different alarming sounds are heard but time and time again the narrator denies his fears by reasoning them away. Eventually it becomes too much for the narrator and he asks Usher if he heard it, and to this Usher explains what the sound really is. Both of their fears had been true, the sound had really come from Madeline Usher whom they had buried alive. Upon her startling entrance, Usher is overtaken with terror and dies, and the narrator fleas, escaping the house and presumably his fears with it. Luckily for the narrator, all of this happened when it did because his fear had brought him to the brink of insanity, the same insanity that had taken hold of Usher.

Poe uses a first person narrator so the reader could see that the narrator too was becoming bounded by fear, even though the narrator himself did not know this. The narrator could see what was happening to Usher, but did not know that he too was in denial and was slowly but surely becoming insane. On that last night especially, the reader is given strong evidence to suggest that the narrator was in deep turmoil. He had felt the terror ever since he arrived at the house, but always had a rational explanation to duck away from his fears. Given the time that Usher had to slowly go insane in the house, the narrator too would have suffered the same fate that Usher did.