

Rachel Mininger

ERH-322WX

MAJ Knepper

14 November 2022

### Fall Into Madness

“From childhood’s hour I have not been, As others were- I have not seen, As others saw- I could not bring, My passions from a common spring” (Poe 1-4, 561-562). Edgar Allan Poe writes this in “Alone,” detailing the struggle of the “Romantic genius.” This concept was most pronounced during the Romantic period when this poem was written. However, the idea derives from English and German philosophers, specifically Kant, who “defined *Genius* as ‘the innate mental aptitude (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art’ (Otto). This was interpreted as the ability to create through imagination, rather than imitation. It was also seen as a special “union” between the self and nature. (Otto) However, the Romantic genius is often associated with seclusion from society and a fall into madness. This has made the tortured Romantic genius a perfect archetype for American Gothic literature and is found in many of Edgar Allan Poe’s stories and poems. “Alone” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” by Edgar Allan Poe contribute to the myth of the tortured Romantic genius by portraying characters with deep interest in study, mental and physical isolation, and erratic behavior and emotion.

The Romanic genius is seen as a direct opposition to the genius of the Enlightenment period. Rather than being driven by rationality, the Romantic genius is driven by extreme emotion, superstition, and irrationality. They sense a strong connection between the self and art, “bridging the gap between subject and object” (Otto). This is derived from German and English tradition, where genius included “both literary practice and aesthetic speculation” (Otto) and a strong tie between the two. They are seen as reaching a “primitive state” in which the mind is returning to its original state and becoming closer with nature and rebelling against social and political norms. They have a strong imagination and are driven by their

scholarly work, however they often become obsessed with their studies. This, therefore, often drives them into madness and social isolation, either intentional or unintentional. The Romantic genius often turns inward and becomes very individualistic by ignoring or dismissing opinions or facts of others in society. The madness they express also seems to take a toll on their nervous system and emotional stability, and the fear of a “crash” of mental exhaustion seems inevitable. (Whitehead)

This character archetype is then heavily used by Edgar Allan Poe in his Gothic Literature due to this element of isolation and “fall into madness.” In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the main character and friend of the narrator, Roderick Usher, embodies this archetype. He first displays the aspect of ‘genius’ in his family line, knowledge of literature, and practice of art. Roderick comes from an “ancient family” of “long ages, in many works of exalted art, and manifested, of late, in repeated deeds of munificent yet unobtrusive charity, as well as in a passionate devotion to the intricacies, perhaps even more than to the orthodox and easily recognizable beauties, of musical science” (Poe 580). His family is, or previously was, known as highly active in the intellectual community and engaged in literature and art. Roderick also spends most of his time in his study and has books and musical instruments strewn around the room. The narrator mentions that he is unsure of exactly what Roderick spends his time studying, but it is often how they would spend their time. Despite Roderick’s extremely erratic mood and behavior, his study and practice of music and art seemed to cheer his “mind from darkness” (583). He finds solace in his study and locks himself away to focus on it, despite this being what causes him to fall into madness.

This isolation that Roderick has created due to his studies is a main characteristic of the tortured Romantic genius. Roderick remains separate from society and the only person he regularly sees is his sister, who also lives in the house. The mental illness that seems to plague Roderick not only drives him into isolation, but also reinforces him to remain in seclusion and continue to fall into insanity. Roderick, however, recognizes his fall into delusion and the isolation he has placed himself in and attempts to remedy this by inviting the narrator to his home. However, since he has been in isolation most of his life, the narrator was “his only personal friend” (Poe 579). Roderick then believes that the narrator will bring “some

alleviation of his malady” by bringing with him “the cheerfulness of (his) society” (Poe 579). Even in this invitation, as Roderick is attempting to resolve his solitude, he is remaining in isolation since he remains unwilling to enter this “cheerful society” himself. He instead opts to remain in the house and have the narrator “bring cheerful society to him” so he can continue to remain in his studies. This then goes to show that Roderick’s isolation and mental illness was never remedied, despite the narrator visiting him, and still continues since he never truly ended his isolation.

As his isolation continues, Roderick’s instability and mental illness becomes apparent. The house seems to reflect Roderick’s persistent mood of solemnity, gloom, and despair that has been caused by his solitude and active mind. This has created an atmosphere that is unsettling to the narrator as soon as he begins approaching the house. Roderick’s emotions then seem to be erratic, sometimes being in a positive mood and then quickly shifting to extreme gloom and despair. However, Roderick is aware of his fall into the “tragedy of the Romantic genius”, proclaiming himself to be mentally ill. The narrator refers to him as a “hypochondriac,” defined as, “a person who is often or always worried about his or her own health” (Hypochondriac). However, they are often continually reassured that they are in perfect health. There seems to be nothing physically wrong with Roderick, however, he continues to obsess over his mental illness and fall into madness and uses it as an excuse to continue his isolation in the house. David W. Butler points out this obsession in “Usher’s Hypochondriasis: Mental Alienation and Romantic Idealism in Poe’s Gothic Tales” (Butler). Here, Butler discusses how doctors during the time this short story was written “recognized a relationship between the power of the creative imagination and insanity” (2). The scientific and romantic idealistic is often paralleled, as opposed to distinguished (3). This led doctors to consider hypochondriasis a mental illness that was caused by an overactive imagination, obsession of the academic world, and lack of physical movement and interaction with others (7). These characteristics are evident in Roderick and why the narrator continually identified him as such. As the doctors in this time period would explain, Roderick’s madness was caused by his obsession over his studies and his seclusion. This madness then

culminates with his death at the end of the short story and the cracking and breaking of the House of Usher, symbolizing the complete break of the Usher dynasty. This makes him a tortured Romantic genius.

Edgar Allan Poe also expresses this archetype of the tortured Romantic genius in "Alone." The poem immediately starts off with the narrator feeling as though he is in isolation. He states, "From childhood's hour I have not been/ As others were- I have not seen/ As others saw- I could not bring/ My passions from a common spring" (Poe 561-562, 1-4). Here, the poet feels a mental isolation from and inability to connect with those around him. He feels as if they see and experience the world differently and therefore derive their inspiration from different sources and subjects. As the poet continued through life, he was never able to find someone with a similar creative mind or passions, saying "And all I lov'd – I lov'd alone" (562, 8). Even at the end of the poem, the poet described his life as feeling as if a storm of lightning and thunder was passing over, but the "rest of Heaven was blue" (17-21). He felt as if he was living in a storm, while everyone else in society lived under a blue sky they provided peace and happiness. This then drove him into agony and "a most stormy life" (10), describing it with natural imagery that are associated with negative and positive emotions. Just as Roderick has an erratic temperament that quickly changes, so does this poet. He would describe his mood as deriving from a "torrent," and then in the same line describing it as being derived from a "fountain" (13). Then, he would describe his environment as a "red cliff of the mountain," (14) depicting the sublime. Then, he would compare it to the sun, "In its autumn tint of gold" (16), a scene of beauty. This mental instability and sudden change, caused by his isolation from society, is culminated in the final line, where he sees "a demon in (his) view" (23). This image is shocking to the reader and the unstable emotion of the poet is seen as paranoia and mania, causing the poet to visualize something that is, most likely, not real. This conveys a dissent into the madness that plaques Romantic geniuses.

We see here the same mental distress and isolation that is described more descriptively in "The Fall of the House of Usher." The mental instability of both characters caused by unusual creativity drives both into deep isolation. However, unlike the physical isolation of Roderick, the poet seems to describe a mental

isolation. He seems to be inwardly focused on personal emotions and passions, only describing environmental elements that affect these. It is unclear whether or not the poet interacts in public society and there is no mention of academic study and practice. However, Roderick seems to have a more physical isolation. He remains in his family home, locked away in his study reading or practicing music. While both are isolated, the poet is mainly isolated mentally, and Roderick is mainly isolated physically. However, this nonetheless causes them both to have erratic and drastically shifting emotions and portrayal of the environment around them. We see this madness already formed in Roderick prior to the beginning of the story as he attempts to remedy it by inviting the narrator to his home. However, in "Alone," we see the descent into madness as it is happening. Most of the poem simply depicts the poet's distress and disconnect with those around him. The poet does not seem insane until the very last line, where he claims to see a demon. While each work shows a different point of the fall into madness, both characters still depict the tragedy that befalls the tortured Romantic genius.

The use of the tortured Romantic genius archetype in "Alone" and "The Fall of the Usher" contribute to the expression of Gothic elements in both works. The extreme emotional turmoil creates a feeling of uncanny in the reader, making them feel uneasy and unsettled. This is due to the fact that the perception of the environment reflects the emotion in which they are in. In "Alone," the imagery of the environment depends on whether or not the poet is in a positive or negative mood. The house in "The Fall of the House of Usher" then reflects the gloom and sorrow of Roderick, becoming even more intense when he is in that mood. This instability of environment perception makes the reader feel unsettled and suspicious of change moving forward. It also expresses the idea of an unreliable narrator. Due to their isolation, the poet and Roderick are unable to express any true perception of the larger society in which they are in. Then, their changing emotions and fall into madness changes the readers trust in the narrator to make rational decisions and observations of the environment and events around them. While Roderick was not the narrator, his words and actions nonetheless drove the story. Because of this, Edgar Allan Poe frequently used this character archetype to convey the American gothic genre. This contributed to the creation of this

genre during the American Romantic era and continued the myth of the tortured Romantic genius in the broader scope of literature.

## Works Cited

- Butler, David W. "Usher's Hypochondriasis: Mental Alienation and Romantic Idealism in Poe's Gothic Tales." *American Literature*, vol. 48, no. 1, 1976, pp. 1–12. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2925310>.
- "Hypochondriac." *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/hypochondriac>.
- Otto, Peter. "genius" *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age*, Oxford University Press, edited by Ian McCalman, Jon Mee, Gillian Russell, Clara Tuite, Kate Fullagar, and Patsy Hardy, 2009, [file:///C:/Users/Rachel%20Mininger/Downloads/Oxford%20Companion%20to%20the%20Romantic%20Age\\_Genius.pdf](file:///C:/Users/Rachel%20Mininger/Downloads/Oxford%20Companion%20to%20the%20Romantic%20Age_Genius.pdf).
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "Alone." *The Norton Anthology: American Literature*, W. W. Norton & Company, edited by Marian Johnson, ed. 10, pp. 561-562, 2022.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Fall of the House of Usher." *The Norton Anthology: American Literature*, W. W. Norton & Company, edited by Marian Johnson, ed. 10, pp. 579-592, 2022.
- Whitehead, James. "Madness and the Romantic Poet: A Critical History." *University Press Scholarship Online*, July 2017, [file:///C:/Users/Rachel%20Mininger/Downloads/Whitehead\\_Intro%20to%20Madness%20and%20the%20Romantic%20Poet.pdf](file:///C:/Users/Rachel%20Mininger/Downloads/Whitehead_Intro%20to%20Madness%20and%20the%20Romantic%20Poet.pdf).
- HR: sources listed, google to look up word definitions, thesaurus to look up word alternative, personal annotations and notes, sources from CANVAS (listed in works cited)