

Trabajo Fin de Grado

Delirium and Drugs: Unreliable Narrators in Poe's
"The Fall of the House of Usher", "The Cask of
Amontillado" and "The Tell-Tale Heart"

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ABSTRACT

By deviating from the popular literary trends of the 19th century, Edgar Allan Poe centred his works on the exploration of the human psyche through his character narrators. This paper analyses the unreliability of Poe's first-person narrators in order to establish the truthfulness in their accounts, focusing on three of his short stories: "The Fall of the House of Usher", "The Cask of Amontillado" and "The Tell-Tale Heart". With this purpose in mind, this paper offers a close reading of the three texts and examines how the lack of credibility of the narrators arises from two main factors: their own incipient insanity, heightened by the stories' Gothic setting, and the influence of drugs on their accounts. Through a comprehensive exploration of these factors, this study aims at explaining the relationship between mental instability, drug-induced states of mind, and the subsequent unreliability of the narrators, offering a deeper understanding of the tales.

Key words: Edgar Allan Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher", "The Cask of Amontillado", "The Tell-Tale Heart", unreliable/untrustworthy narrators, mental instability, madness, Gothic setting, substance abuse.

RESUMEN

Al desviarse de las corrientes literarias populares del siglo XIX, Edgar Allan Poe centró sus obras en la exploración de la mente humana a través de sus narradores protagonistas. Este trabajo analiza la poca fiabilidad de los narradores en primera persona de Poe para establecer la veracidad de sus narrativas, enfocándose en tres de sus historias cortas: “The Fall of the House of Usher”, “The Cask of Amontillado” y “The Tell-Tale Heart”. Teniendo este objetivo en cuenta, este trabajo ofrece una lectura minuciosa de los tres textos y examina cómo la falta de credibilidad de los narradores surge a partir de dos principales factores: su propia locura incipiente, agudizada por el marco gótico de las historias, y la influencia de las drogas en sus narrativas. Mediante una rigurosa exploración de estos factores, este estudio tiene como objetivo explicar la relación entre la inestabilidad mental, los estados mentales inducidos por las drogas, y la subsiguiente poca fiabilidad de los narradores, ofreciendo así un conocimiento más profundo de las historias.

Palabras clave: Edgar Allan Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher”, “The Cask of Amontillado”, “The Tell-Tale Heart”, narradores poco fiables, desequilibrio mental, locura, localizaciones góticas, abuso de sustancias.

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INTRODUCTION

Edgar Allan Poe was a Gothic horror writer par excellence. His suspenseful style and his extensive use of morbid imagery permeate each of his short stories, effectively establishing the ubiquitous atmosphere of apprehension and mystery that defines Gothic literature. However, there is always one essential element in Poe's works of fiction that stands out among the rest: his vicious and deranged character narrators.

Poe channelled his lifelong fascination with the exploration of the human mind, in particular that which is unstable and on the verge of irreversible insanity, through the creation and development of manic narrators that allow the narrative to take dark and destructive turns, frequently ending in premeditated murder or a complete loss of control over oneself. These autodiegetic narrators, which serve as the means to construct "a remarkable investigation of abnormal psychological states and obsessional behaviour" (Whitley 15), are often based on the same archetype: an unnamed male character who offers his reader contradictory and inexact accounts of the occurrences that they narrate, all while suggesting the involvement of some external force, supernatural or not, in order to avoid being held responsible for his actions. The omnipresent theme of an inexorable mental deterioration in Poe's short stories perfectly illustrates the author's own compulsion to portray the more unnerving parts of the human psyche, arguably instigated by the bouts of depression that he suffered from throughout his life, and his subsequent "commitment to human psychological dilemmas" (Hidalgo 5), which his contemporaries often glossed over.

Through the employment of these neurotic character narrators, Poe sought both to construct twisted tales where morality and human understanding are stretched to a breaking point and to "deepen the limits of the psyche through murderers whose behaviour hides a truth that the readers need to discover: their insanity" (Hidalgo 4). This is precisely what takes place in "The Fall of the House of Usher", "The Cask of Amontillado" and "The

Tell-Tale Heart”, three short stories whose common denominator is a narrator who is driven to lunacy by his own mental instability and other external factors that only contribute to the deepening of his delirium. In “The Fall of the House of Usher”, an unnamed narrator recalls his visit to his best friend Roderick Usher, and his recount of the events are tainted by his own slow descent into madness. In “The Cask of Amontillado”, Montresor describes how he took revenge on his friend Fortunato by murdering him, although his is a crime prompted by his own distorted view of the grievances caused by Fortunato, for it lacks any real motive. Similarly, in “The Tell-Tale Heart”, Poe explores the limits and the detrimental effect of self-deception and obsession through another unnamed narrator who attempts to convince the reader of his own sanity while reporting the calculated murder of his neighbour. The main objective of this study is to analyse the unreliability of the narrators in “The Fall of the House of Usher”, “The Cask of Amontillado” and “The Tell-Tale Heart” as a direct consequence of the relationship between their own insanity and the effect of mind-altering substances in order to prove their influence on both the tales and the narrators themselves.

CHAPTER I: POE, THE ‘UNAMERICAN’ WRITER

Before giving way to the analysis of the selected short stories, it is necessary to situate Poe within his own social and literary context in order to gain a better understanding of his singular approach to the art of writing, as well as his renowned and condemning condition of ‘unamericaness’. Edgar Allan Poe, in spite of being widely regarded as a notable figure of literature in the United States today, was far from being considered an ‘authentic’ American writer during his lifetime, especially in comparison to his more patriotic and nationalistic contemporaries, who rose to international fame as key components of America’s literary history through the constant exploration and reassertion of purely American themes.

While Poe's contemporaries—among which Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, and Ralph Waldo Emerson are some of the most well-known names—aimed at the development of a truly American literature showcasing a unique American style, Poe focused his writing on the exploration of the depths of human psychology, tackling themes of brutal death, endless mourning, and mental deterioration. As stated by Seelye, “in an age dominated by adulation of Washington Irving's genial mannerisms and admiration of Fenimore Cooper's adventure stories, [...] Poe's insistence on using the themes and voices of madness, sin, and death, brought perversity to a fine art” (115). The ghoulish quality of his unconventional short stories settles Poe as an author particularly alien to the American literary sphere of the 19th century, given that his gothic creations were in direct opposition to the overabundant nationalistic literature of the era, whose main focal points were inwardness and domestic matters. Therefore, in a time when his counterparts penned narratives concerned with the American frontier, as seen in James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, the only frontier that fascinated Poe was the dangerously thin line that separates the sane from the nearly sane. This way, Poe managed to construct “a literary personality which was at constant odds with so much that was in fashion, a cultural, eclectic Frankenstein's monster” (Seelye 115).

The vast majority of Poe's works are most frequently considered part of the Dark Romanticism literary sub-genre that emerged as a reaction to Transcendentalism, one of the first currents of thought that developed and spread throughout the United States. From the beginning, Poe showed a strong dislike of this movement for “its naïve reformism and its aesthetic inadequacy” (Kopley 597), and, being the implacable critic that he was, he often defamed its followers by referring to them as “Frog-Pondians” (Royot 61–62). It was this self-inflicted isolation from the literary trends of the era and his subsequent critique of them, as well as the widespread negative perception of his character that was fostered by his editor

Rufus Wilmot Griswold, who branded Poe as an unfashionable writer. Although American authors and readers did recognise his evident talent for writing, their appreciation for Poe was always “grudging and hedged with reservations” (Meyers 269), thus it would take an entire century for Poe’s artistic reputation to finally be established in America (Meyers 278). In spite of this, his unpopularity in the United States was not entirely unproductive, for the reason that he was highly regarded in Europe during his time alive, where he was supported by prestigious authors such as Charles Dickens and Charles Baudelaire, becoming “the only nineteenth-century American writer whose poems and stories were valued more highly in Europe than in his homeland” (Meyers 258).

It can still be argued, nonetheless, that Poe was not entirely un-American, since he was fascinated by the new scientific discoveries that were secularising the world in the 19th century and he resembled “a text-book example of Tocqueville’s prediction that American democracy would produce works that lay bare the deepest, hidden parts of the psyche” (VanSpanckeren 42). However, while his contemporaries depicted America in a positive light, heightened by the emerging spirit of individualism that was prompted by the country’s relatively new emancipation from British rule, Poe brought attention to the underside of the American Dream by showing “the price of materialism and excessive competition—loneliness, alienation, and images of death-in-life” (VanSpanckeren 42). It was this unshakeable obsession with ghostly themes and the inner workings of the self that discredited Poe as a worthy author during his lifetime, but, ironically, it is precisely his fixation with the uncanny that is considered to be his trademark today.

CHAPTER II: THE UNRELIABILITY OF INSANITY

2.1 Setting and mental health

In order to establish the unreliability of Poe's narrators, it is crucial to bear in mind the role that environment plays in a person's ability to rationalise, judge, and act, for the reason that "our surroundings affect our mood, [...] our behavior, and, ultimately, our mental health" (Lovasi et al. 1571). Setting, a fundamental constituent of story-telling that is habitually outshined by other components, comes to the forefront in Poe's short stories to become a second main character with as much power over the narrative. In "Usher", "The Cask", and "Heart", the presence of the vivid, decadent Gothic atmosphere is so pervasive that its effect on each of the three narrators is beyond question.

An eerie, stifling sensation of utter isolation from the rest of the world is what characterises the setting of "Usher". From the moment that the unnamed narrator is within close proximity of the house of Roderick and Madeline Usher, he is convinced that what he encounters is "an atmosphere peculiar to the place" (Seelye 120), and he is instantly overcome by a bewildering feeling of unease: "I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit" (Poe "Usher" 148). The narrator, alone and standing in front of what gives every appearance of being a haunted house, is met with complete remoteness. The mere reclusiveness and dismal aura of the place disturbs the narrator early on in the narrative to the point where he fails to recognise the exact reason behind this unrest, already anticipating that what ensues inside the mansion surpasses the limits of human logic: "What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher?" (148). This withdrawal from society is heightened by the deliberate omission of any allusion to country, time and place, something that further alienates the narrator and establishes the house of Usher as a more

powerful entity in the narrative. The mansion, surrounded by a decaying forest and a grimy tarn, exists in permanent isolation, and this isolation is only briefly interrupted by an outsider, the narrator, who will later be engulfed by it.

Having felt “an utter depression of soul” (Poe “Usher” 148) upon regarding the outside of the mansion, the narrator enters the house of Usher only to find that “an air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all” (151). In fact, the Gothic house contains objects that are described as “sombre” and “phantasmagoric” (150), consists of many “dark and intricate passages” (150), and has a built-in underground vault and a family tomb. This maze-like death shrine makes the narrator feel as though he is a victim of his friend’s voluntary confinement and constantly breathing “an atmosphere of sorrow” (151). This is reinforced by the dark aspect of the chambers. Nothing but “feeble gleams of encrimsoned light” illuminates the place, yet the light is not strong enough, for “the eye [...] struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted ceiling” (151). The poor lighting inside the house creates an inescapable sense of infiniteness and claustrophobia, since the narrator cannot see the corners of the room or the details of the ceiling, and every room is bathed in a similar gloom. Moreover, the light in Usher’s house is candlelight, not natural sunlight. This contributes to the overall depressive mood that permeates the mansion, since a lack of sun exposure “may be associated with an increased risk or severity of depression” (Wong et al. 888). Roderick Usher, who is described to have a “ghastly pallor of the skin” (151), and his bedridden twin sister Madeline are weighed down by the sombre atmosphere of his mansion. This has the same effect on the narrator over the course of the narrative.

The stability of the narrator’s mental health is constantly put to the test by the house of Usher, which “increase[s] his sensitivity and frailty, and make[s] him more vulnerable and easily disturbed” (Bernal 15), until he ends up mirroring his friend’s insanity. Such is the

impact of the mansion itself on the narrator that, while chronicling his friend's descent into madness, he is experiencing his own incipient insanity, both of which culminate with the destruction of the mansion at the end of the narrative. This is the detrimental effect that the building has upon the narrator, an influence that Usher himself recognises, claiming that the mansion has had a destructive effect on his mental health due to the "silent, yet importunate terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family" (Poe "Usher" 157).

In "The Cask", the entire plot of the story revolves around Montresor and Fortunato's descent into the underground catacombs, where Fortunato is eventually walled up. From the onset of the narrative, there is a gradual yet evident migration from an open space (i.e. the street) to an increasingly smaller and more suffocating space: Montresor leads Fortunato from his house to the landing of the stairs and then into the catacombs, the halls of which grow narrower as the two men keep descending. Famous in Europe for holding the remains of the dead, underground catacombs are dark, labyrinth-like spaces that Montresor gives emphasis to through his description of the place:

We passed through a range of low arches [...] and [...] arrived at a deep crypt [...]. At the most remote end of the crypt there appeared another less spacious. Its walls had been lined with human remains, piled to the vault overhead, in the fashion of the great catacombs of Paris. Three sides of this interior crypt were still ornamented in this manner. From the fourth the bones had been thrown down, and lay promiscuously upon the earth, forming at one point a mound of some size. (Poe "The Cask" 205)

The further down that the characters walk, the darker the catacombs grow, until, in the vault where Fortunato is finally entombed, they are surrounded by utter blackness. This journey that Montresor and Fortunato make from light to darkness and from an open space to an enclosed one suggests two changes: a shift from physical freedom to physical confinement, as

is the case of Fortunato; and a shift from mental confinement to mental release, that is, Montresor's descent into madness. The lack of light and the absence of witnesses allow him to unleash his insanity as well as his true intentions, which had been kept under wraps from his friend until that very moment, and showcase "a certain relish for the plan, its locale, and the task of walling up his victim" (Engel 27). In fact, as Engel points out, there is an instance in the narrative in which Montresor pauses to take pleasure in the clanking of Fortunato's chain (27), as can be read in the following extract: "The noise lasted for several minutes, during which, that I might hearken to it with the more satisfaction, I ceased my labors and sat down upon the bones" (Poe "The Cask" 206).

In addition, "The Cask" is ironically set during carnival season in Italy. The carnival, an annual festival of public merrymaking and collective enjoyment, is a celebration in which both Montresor and Fortunato participate at the beginning of the narrative. The two of them are drinking alcohol and celebrating their own freedom. However, Fortunato is lured away from the carnival—his liberty—by his murderer to be trapped and chained up inside a crypt for the rest of eternity. This journey from the carnival to the underground catacombs, that is, the journey from a place where joy predominates to a place where murder ensues, perfectly mirrors and illustrates the decline of Montresor's mental health.

The setting of "Heart" is arguably the least vivid and memorable of the three stories, but it is by no means less relevant. This story takes place inside a house about which the narrator does not provide many details throughout the narrative: "His room was as black as pitch through the thick darkness (for the shutters were close-fastened, through fear of robbers)" (Poe "Heart" 222); the old man's house is not one that exists in complete isolation, like the house of Usher, since "a shriek had been heard by a neighbor during the night" (224); and it is most likely located in an urban area, for the reason that the police arrive at the crime scene in no time upon a neighbour's preoccupation—it is important to point out that, in order

to contact the police at the time that this story was published, one had to go to the nearest police station by foot, given that its publication precedes the invention of the telephone.

The murder in “Heart” thus occurs inside a house that is in total darkness. Nothing in the old man’s bedroom is described because nothing can be seen. This darkness, apart from targeting the common fear of the dark so as to inspire a feeling of dread in the reader, is a reflection of the narrator’s insanity: his rationality is obscured, just like the details of the room, by his own madness. The influence that the darkness has over the narrator goes as far as to give him a sense of ultimate power over the old man, given that he is perfectly concealed in the blackness: “Never before that night had I felt the extent of my own powers—of my sagacity. I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph. To think that there I was, opening the door, little by little, and he not even to dream of my secret deeds or thoughts” (Poe “Heart” 222).

From “the gray sedge” and “the ghastly tree-stems” (148) in “Usher” to “the dampness of the catacombs” (207) and the dark chamber in “The Cask” and “Heart” respectively, the settings of these three short stories have a very specific role. As expressed by VanSpanckeren, “Poe’s twilight realm between life and death and his gaudy, Gothic setting are not merely decorative. They reflect the overcivilized yet deathly interior of his characters’ disturbed psyches. They are symbolic expressions of the unconscious, and thus are central to his art” (41). These gloomy settings, cages that capture the narrators and worsen their mental ailments, not only accentuate the existence of the narrators’ incipient madness, but they also become active parts of the narratives in order to enhance the exploration and the analysis of the human psyche, which was Poe’s ultimate objective in writing.

2.2 Madness in unreliable narrators

Poe's trademark when it comes to the creation of memorable characters is that he infuses each with a madness that is more or less explicit, as well as more or less disturbing, depending on the story in question. Insanity is, nonetheless, always the main driving force in his tales of horror. Seelye argues that there exists an "air of hushed urgency, the confession of author to reader, of dark secrets imparted in a tense, perhaps [in a] slightly mad interview" (119) in Poe's stories, which is the result of a derangement that defines the narrators and controls both their actions and the accounts that they relate.

In "Usher", the narrator arrives at the mansion in a seemingly good state of mind, but his mental health ends up declining over the course of his stay with his friend. Roderick Usher is described as somebody with "an agitated mind" (158) and "inexplicable vagaries of madness" (159) who appears to listen to "some imaginary sound" as he gazes "upon vacancy for long hours" (158). In addition to his hallucinations, he suffers from a long depressive episode and experiences a high degree of paranoia, both of which are heightened by the fact that he is completely isolated from society. The condition of misery that haunts Roderick Usher is the emotional climate that the narrator is confined to for weeks. As time passes by, and he is increasingly affected by the desolation that dwells within the house, the narrator is capable of identifying the power that Roderick Usher exercises over him by stating: "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" (159). In isolation from others, a person's anxieties and delusions can become one's own. This phenomenon of 'infectious mental conditions' is explained by Shackelford:

Through the relationship between Roderick Usher and his childhood companion Poe depicts symptoms and conditions that fit the psychological reality of what today is termed shared psychotic disorder—in the nineteenth century, *folie à deux*—in which a seemingly healthy

person shares delusions with one who suffers from a psychotic disorder, usually schizophrenia. (110)

The fact that the two men in “Usher” are tormented by the same mental ailment casts doubt on whether the narrator is recounting events only as he believes that they happened, and not as they actually did. Towards the end of the story, the *folie à deux* even makes the narrator succumb to the idea that the supernatural participates in the strange occurrences that he witnesses: “Here again, I paused abruptly, and now with a feeling of wild amazement for there could be no doubt [...] that [...] I did actually hear [...] a low and apparent distant, but harsh, protracted and most unusual screaming” (Poe “Usher” 161). The narrator begins to hear what his friend hears as a result of his paranoia, and the rational explanations that he provided for each of Roderick’s preoccupations are forgotten. He even goes as far as to claim that Roderick and he behold the corpse of Madeline outside of her tomb, something that cannot be explained in a rational manner, but that perfectly fits the narrator’s neurotic conviction of the existence of the supernatural. The mirroring of Usher’s hallucinations jeopardises the narrator’s reliability, given that the only account that exists of Roderick and Madeline’s death and the collapse of the mansion is that of a man who is infected by the psychosis of another. Therefore, the reader encounters the chronicle of a narrator who, deep in a state of lunacy, manages to abandon his own sanity and begin to rationalise the irrational (Bernal 12). This puts into question if there is any truth to be found in the story recounted by the narrator, and it magnifies the narrator’s own trustworthiness, since the reader is met with the unreliability of madness.

The madness that controls Montresor in “The Cask” is just as perceptible. As expressed by Riggs, “by telling the story from the murderer Montresor’s coldhearted point of view, Poe presents Montresor’s calculating methods as a rational outcome of ‘the thousand injuries’ committed by his ‘friend Fortunato’” (Poe “The Cask” 22). However, although

rational for Montresor, to the reader his actions are far from justifiable. From the onset, the narrator exposes his emotional instability, which is driven by his prideful nature: “The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge” (202). Although the reader never finds out the gravity of Fortunato’s repeated offences, it can be argued that Montresor suffers from a highly distorted perception of these misdeeds. A sane individual is not expected to seek murderous revenge after being verbally abused, yet Montresor showcases an exaggerated emotional response to being wronged by Fortunato alongside a psychotic determination to go through with his plan: “I must not only punish, but punish with impunity” (202). He deceives Fortunato when he is under the influence of alcohol, that is, a state of vulnerability, and deliberately uses his “weak point” (202) against him to bait him into going to the catacombs. This requires some forethought and strategy; Montresor has not considered backing out once during his planning and he has prepared the death of Fortunato in advance: “I soon uncovered a quantity of building stone and mortar. With these materials, and with the aid of my trowel, I began vigorously to wall up the entrance of the niche” (206). Similarly, his plan is crueller than other forms of murder because he chooses immurement as his vengeance. Live entombment implies a slow and agonising death for the victim, yet Montresor does not care about Fortunato’s suffering, only about satisfying his own ego. In fact, as mentioned in the previous chapter, there is an instance when Montresor makes a point of delighting in the satisfaction that comes with having Fortunato chained and at his mercy. It can be said that, in a twisted way that perhaps can only make sense to Montresor himself, the crime committed in “The Cask” is the narrator’s subconscious battle against his own madness, which he projects onto Fortunato. As stated by Engel, “once his victim is walled up and Montresor’s neurosis is in a sense buried and out of sight, he believes he will probably regain some measure of sanity” (28). However, the crime that could have acted as closure for Montresor’s psychotic episode

haunts him for the following fifty years, since he can obsessively remember “the details of the crime and can recite them complete and intact after half a century” (Engel 28). When the influence of his insanity on the tale is analysed, Montresor’s unreliability as the narrator is uncertain, not because Fortunato’s murder can be questioned, but because the reader cannot trust that his offences were worthy of a punishment as severe as that of death.

Madness in “Heart” is similarly depicted through the narrator’s obsessive conduct and illogical reasoning. Montresor and this unnamed narrator share traits of insanity, such as irrationality and an absence of self-awareness, but, unlike Montresor, the narrator of “Heart” claims to love his victim: “I loved the old man. He had never wronged me. He had never given me insult. For his gold I had no desire” (221). This creates a striking contrast with the ghastly tale of murder that ensues, emphasising the key role that madness plays in the story. If the reader was considering trusting the narrator’s love for his victim at the start, that trust is quickly dismantled when he, despite having declared his love for the old man, relishes in the idea of killing him: “I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart” (222).

Like Montresor, who had his own warped motive for committing murder, the narrator of “Heart” is driven purely by his fixation with the old man’s “pale blue eye”, which has “a film over it” and resembles “that of a vulture” (Poe “Heart” 221). He believes the eye to be an “Evil Eye” (221) and he exhibits an exaggerated reaction, as well as an abnormal repulsion, towards it, failing to conceal the insanity that ultimately incites murder: “Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold; and so by degrees—very gradually—I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever” (221). In fact, Matthey Bynum claims that, in the nineteenth century, madmen were believed to be weak individuals afraid to look into other people’s eyes (qtd. in Amper 44). The narrator of “Heart” reveals a total lack of compassion towards his victim and a horrible greed, given that

his only justification for murder is freeing himself from the sight of the 'wicked' eye. He does admit, nonetheless, to being unsure if the eye was his actual reason for acting when he writes: "I think it was his eye! Yes, it was this!" (221). This illustrates his wavering conviction, emphasising the emotional instability which he suffers from and shunning his culpability, which "is far from being assumed and accepted" (Hidalgo 7).

All throughout the story, the insane narrator insists in vain upon his own sanity. He takes pride in his preparation and his consideration, "You should have seen how wisely I proceeded—with what caution—with what foresight—with what dissimulation I went to work! I was never kinder to the old man than during the whole week before I killed him", while asking, "Would a madman have been so wise as this?" (Poe "Heart" 221). As expressed by Hidalgo, "the criminal's praise of his delicacy and smartness and the justification of his *modus operandi* contrast with the reader's perception of his dementia" (8). Even while the narrator recounts "the wise precautions" that he took (Poe "Heart" 223), he gives away his mental agitation by admitting that he is nervous: "I have told you that I am nervous: so I am" (223). It can be argued that "the more the narrator describes, also the more he wants to escape his guilt" (Ni 29), yet perhaps his anxiety is simply a result of his attempt to prove himself sane and his realisation that he cannot. It is precisely his pretending to be sane that marks him as insane.

In short, the lack of self-awareness in these psychotic narrators when it comes to their actions and emotions is a crucial factor in the determination of their mental illness (Hidalgo 7). Therefore, it is rather impossible to believe that these gruesome stories that rely so heavily on traits of insanity are tales recounted by right-minded individuals, just as it is impossible to trust that the narrators are telling the truth when recounting the grotesque tales and events that haunt them.

CHAPTER III: THE INFLUENCE OF DRUGS ON THE TALES

Poe's fiction, known for dynamically engaging questions of drinking (Fisher 96), is plagued with narrators who, upon the abuse of mind-altering substances, recount tales whose narrative is influenced by them. The narrators of "Usher", "Heart", and "The Cask", as well as the tales themselves, are all affected by drug use and alcohol both literally and metaphorically. It is precisely their mind-altering effect that contributes to the unfolding of the tale and worsens the narrators' pre-existing lunacy.

The latter is most prominent in "Usher", the tale in which the narrator makes a direct reference to opium usage: "With an utter depression of the soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium" (148). The narrator's apparent close familiarity with the drug puts into question the clarity of mind with which he is experiencing and recounting the mysterious events that take place in the house of Usher, given that the reader cannot be sure if the narrator was under the effect of opium during the events that are being recounted. This possibility, therefore, leads to scepticism towards the narrator's reliability as such. It is the "consciousness-expanding, perception-altering qualities of drug use" (Berridge 655) that would explain the instances when the narrator hears "a distinct, hollow, metallic, and clangorous, yet apparently muffled reverberation" and other ghostly sounds, such as Madeline's "first feeble movements in the hollow coffin" (Poe "Usher" 162). The fall of Usher's house, and the "long tumultuous shouting sound" that follows are also questionable, since the narrator speaks of being dizzy during the catastrophe (163), and dizziness is the most common symptom of opium intake. Therefore, and given the textual evidence, the high probability of the narrator being under the influence of opium during his stay with Roderick Usher challenges the reliability of "Usher" and urges the reader not to trust what he is recounting.

In “Cask”, alcohol usage plays an important role in the tale, and it is portrayed as a negative substance throughout it. The story is set during the Carnival season, a time that promotes heavy alcohol consumption, hence why both Montresor and Fortunato’s actions and judgement are altered by drinking. This makes Fortunato, who addresses Montresor with an “excessive warmth, for he had been drinking too much” (Poe “The Cask” 202), more susceptible to the persuasion of his murderer. Therefore, alcohol is successfully used as bait by Montresor, leading Fortunato to his eventual death, given that the latter is lured by the promise of an exclusive taste of Amontillado. However, the intoxication of Fortunato eventually does wear off when his “low moaning cry” is described by the narrator as “not the cry of a drunken man” (206). Fortunato’s “long and obstinate silence” and subsequent “succession of loud and shrill screams” (206) illustrate the horror of decision-making under the influence and depict alcohol as a traitorous substance. Likewise, Montresor’s capacity to rationalise is impaired, his thirst for revenge is heightened, and his mental instability is worsened by the culture of alcoholism that surrounds him, denouncing its dangerous effect on the mentally ill. Alcohol is, in consequence, what allows the murder narrated in “The Cask” to ensue and what distorts the judgement of both Fortunato and Montresor, facilitating the fatal conclusion of the tale.

Neither alcohol nor drugs are mentioned in “Heart”, yet the term ‘drug’ denotes something which causes addiction. In the case of this narrator, his obsession with the old man’s ‘vulture eye’ acts as a powerful drug that clouds his judgement. The narrator is obsessed with the old man’s eye, rather than with the man himself, and this strange, irrational fixation with the eye is—according to him—his sole reason for murder. Not even his relative, although still questionable, liking of the old man can dissolve his urge to rid himself of the eye, which proves the blinding power of human obsession. In fact, the narrator even fuels his fixation through self-inflicted sleeplessness, sitting up “every night just at midnight” for eight

consecutive nights with the sole purpose of shining “a single thin ray [...] upon the vulture eye” (Poe “Heart” 221). This obsession is the mere result of the narrator’s insanity, given that a sane mind cannot forge such irrational emotions towards an eye. The tale is, therefore, a product of the worsening of the narrator’s pre-existing mental illness.

The literal and metaphorical repercussions of mind-altering substances in “Usher”, “The Cask”, and “Heart” is unquestionable. The narrators of the first two do, in fact, make explicit references to drug usage and, although it can be argued to be another form of deceit on their part, their lunacy and mental state are clearly intensified and worsened, respectively, a clear indicator that drugs and alcohol are, indeed, present in these tales. As for the narrator of “Heart”, it is impossible to deny that he completely loses his sanity and himself as a result of his irrational fixation with the old man’s eye. It is precisely this—the complete loss of oneself to substances and obsession—that takes part in the unreliability of these three narrators who, blinded by their own madness and other external factors, recount macabre tales that a reader should never trust.

CONCLUSION

It is no secret in the literary world that, throughout the course of his short life, Poe experienced “recurrent depression, suggesting a bipolar disorder, as well as alcohol and drug abuse, which in fact led to his death from complications related to alcoholism” (Teive 1). Therefore, readers will not be surprised to find that, as a result of his own personal mental health issues, an almost otherworldly gloominess characterises his works, making his literature brim with a very distinctive agony that is known as Poesque today. Moreover, his own first-hand, life-long battle with mental health and substance abuse provided the author

with enough direct experience to write extensively on it. Derangement on various different degrees is a recurrent topic in his works of poetry and especially in his short stories, and often there is an underlying possibility of substance abuse heightening the bouts of insanity that his characters suffer from, just like alcohol and drug abuse likely heightened Poe's own mental disorders. The author, nonetheless, never wrote about mental health in an autobiographical manner, but always through character narrators on the verge of delusion due to their own incipient madness. This enabled Poe to express his own mental instability through literature while distancing himself from his art at the same time, which allowed for less critique of his public persona in a time when his own contemporaries overtly showed a dislike for him.

Poe's unique portrayals of various mental health struggles are precisely what nowadays upholds him as one of the most relevant figures in North American literature, as well as Gothic and horror fiction. Despite their lack of popularity at their time of publication, Poe's works are more relevant today than ever before, so much so that scholars and critics continue to dissect and analyse them over a century and a half after his death. This is because, through an unscrupulous and crude portrayal of mental illness, and by straying away from the fashionable literary trends of 19th century America, Poe became a pioneer author on the topic of mental health. In this way, he effectively incited a discussion on a topic that was regarded as taboo and more commonly touched upon by female authors who suffered from the mental consequences of being treated as second-class citizens in Victorian times (e.g., Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*).

The unglorified depiction of mental health in Poe's works—his short stories in particular—creates an unmatched relationship between the narrators of these tales and the readers: that of deceit. In one way or another, the reader is deceived time and time again by means of the narrator's cunning internal monologue, which attempts to deny their own lunacy and rationalise the irrational, in spite of the fact that their actions often reveal their true

intentions (e.g., the narrator of “Heart” claiming to love the old man that he ends up murdering). The first-person narration of these tales enables the reader to step into the character’s shoes and be easily swayed by their homicidal, psychotic thoughts to the point where the reader must decide for themselves what they believe—these thoughts are, after all, the only account of the events that the reader can access.

The state of profound madness in which the narrators of “The Fall of the House of Usher”, “The Cask of Amontillado”, and “The Tell-Tale Heart” find themselves is undeniable, and their extensive nightmarish accounts of murder and delusion serve as proof of their lunacy. This, together with the external factors that contribute to the aggravation of their pre-existing mental illness, that is, setting and mind-altering substances, construct a narrative that is far from reliable. This is Poe’s most extraordinary achievement as an author: the fact that his readership continues to be misled and tricked by his character narrators, despite the notoriety of their unreliability. Although Poe was loathed and ostracised in his homeland during his lifetime, America and the rest of the world remembers him for majorly contributing to the genres of horror and psychological thriller, and for creating fascinating accounts of murder and lunacy that have continued to deceive readers over the decades.

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