Paradigms of reality in Poe's mad narrative

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PARADIGMS OF REALITY IN POE'S
MAD NARRATIVE

by

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ABSTRACT

Paradigms of Reality in Poe’s Mad Narrative

by

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This study focuses on an examination of madness in four short stories by American author Edgar Allan Poe: “Ligeia,” “Eleonora,” “The Black Cat,” and “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Using Walter Fischer’s theoretical communication framework, the Narrative Paradigm, the four stories are examined for narrative fidelity and narrative probability in an effort to more fully understand Poe’s treatment of madness in first person narrators.

“Ligeia” and “Eleonora” are compared as stories of a lost lover and the subsequent possibilities for madness due to guilt over marrying someone else. Next, “The Black Cat” is examined with a focus on the narrator’s madness driving him to seek more and more severe forms of self-punishment due to guilt over violent abuse of his pet cat. Finally, “The Fall of the House of Usher” is examined as a look into the process of folie a deux, or shared madness.
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INTRODUCTION

This study will focus on the significance of madness as exhibited by some of Poe’s first person narrators in his short stories. One of the important points to recognize, then, is the fact that a first person narrator’s recitation is colored by his experiences, attitudes, values, and, ultimately, sanity. These are the contributing factors which color one’s worldview – one’s reality – the way in which one perceives the world surrounding oneself. As such, each person’s perception of reality differs from his neighbors’, to a greater or lesser degree depending upon the compatibility of these forming characteristics. For most individuals, these differences in perceived reality are dealt with in one of two ways; either the discrepancies between realities are small enough to remain unrecognized or to be dismissed as insignificant, or one individual persuades another to change his view of the world to accommodate the first’s reality.

Most often this persuasion is accomplished via storytelling. Whether the story used to persuade is a complicated, lengthy affair printed in reputable periodicals (like a national political scandal) or a simple tale one man tells another (like the traffic citation the first received for speeding earlier in the day) is irrelevant. All stories are used to reinforce and/or redefine boundaries of shared realities. As such, stories become a form of social currency; they are used to raise, lower, and/or maintain social standing of oneself and others. Walter Fischer, a communication theorist, best describes this concept in a rhetorical theory known as the Narrative Paradigm.
This paradigm can be applied to better understand what stories mean to man and why he cannot live without them. The basic premise of Fischer’s paradigm is that “humans . . . are storytellers” (75). This means that man uses stories not only to share his life with others, but also to define his perceived reality. Fischer writes:

Rationality is determined by the nature of persons as narrative beings—their inherent awareness of narrative probability, what constitutes a coherent story, and their constant habit of testing narrative fidelity, whether the stories they experience ring true with the stories they know to be true in their lives . . . and the world is a set of stories which must be chosen among to live the good life in a process of continual recreation (75).

In essence, we use the stories others tell us to constantly justify, reaffirm, and/or reshape our view of the world. Narrative probability determines how well-constructed the story is— are there plot inconsistencies which interfere with the receiver’s understanding of the tale as a coherent story? Are there too many unanswered questions? Do the various elements of the story add up to a well-crafted tale? Similarly, narrative fidelity tests the plausibility of a story in comparison to what the receiver holds to be true in his reality— according to what I know, is it not only possible, but believable? We are always seeking more stories, and we long to share our own to help others see the world from our point of view. By sharing and rejecting or assimilating other’s stories, every person expands, adjusts, and reinforces his view of reality.

For example, let us consider the hypothetical supposition that I tell my friend Regina a story about how I saw a UFO. There are two starting points for Regina’s reality. If she believes in UFOs, and she believes my story, her view of me and the part of the world she
associates with me will be readjusted slightly, in this case probably favorably. If she believes in UFOs, but does not believe my story (perhaps due to flaws in narrative probability – the consistency within the story), she may believe me to be either delusional or purposefully lying to her. Either conclusion will force her to re-evaluate our relationship and the part of her reality that she associates with me. Likewise, based on her reaction, I will readjust my perceptions of myself and our relationship accordingly.

On the other hand, if she does not believe in UFOs, her possible reactions vary between believing me mentally unstable or changing her worldview to include the existence of UFOs, and by default, extraterrestrial life. Obviously the final option would cause the greatest alteration in Regina’s worldview. Now, suppose that I, as the storyteller, question the validity of my story prior to telling Regina. Perhaps I doubt my sensory perceptions. Perhaps others have doubted my story, making me no longer sure of its veracity. However, Regina’s acceptance of my tale gives credibility to me, my experience, and my mental stability – at least in the worldviews of Regina and myself. And, after all, it is often the opinions of those closest to us that are the most important to our view of ourselves, as well as the world and our place in it.

Sometimes, though, stories are fantastical enough, far enough beyond the boundaries of acceptable shifts in reality that the receiver (whether an audio listener – figurative or literal – or a visual reader) cannot accept the story and incorporate it into his reality. When such is the case, assuming that the receiver’s views conform more closely to the general populace’s than the speaker’s, the speaker is deemed insane, or mad.

However, this does not mean that every insane speaker shares the same reality. In fact, by definition, the consensus as to what is accepted as normal, or sane, is the narrow,
defined portion of reality. Anything that falls outside these socially accepted parameters becomes insane, regardless of which direction said insanity decides to shoot off in. So, insanity, or madness, is defined as any one or more of the multitudinous options existing outside the narrow confines of what society generally agrees upon as reality – that shared consensus which exists between the majority of the population.

The next question which arises deals with the difference between a story concerning real life, like the political scandal or the traffic stop, and a story intended as fiction, like Edgar Allan Poe’s tales. This concern is easily dealt with. The purpose of sharing these “real life” stories is to alter or reaffirm other’s reality, and by extension, reaffirm the validity and worth one’s own reality and beliefs. If the purpose of fiction was to similarly establish purely literal truths concerning plot points, then tales billed as fiction would not be eligible for consideration under Fischer’s Narrative Paradigm. However, the entire field of literary study, society’s common acceptance that fictitious tales can have value beyond simple entertainment, and humanity’s long association with telling stories – even before the written word, such as cave paintings and oral traditions of various ethnicities – all speak to the idea that fictional tales can and do have deeper truths waiting to be understood and assimilated into receivers’ realities.

Consider, for example, the popular American television show during the 1990’s, The X-Files. This show’s stories consistently focused on the supernatural and paranormal. However, that does not mean that the stories’ “truths” are the existence of the various monsters of the week or the idea that malevolent, scary aliens are planning world domination on Earth. Rather, the important message of the show, according to the Narrative Paradigm, is the idea that something beyond the bounds of “normal,” whether
supernatural, paranormal, or simply outside the accepted boundaries of believability, could exist.

When it comes to considering Poe, specifically in his short stories that deal with madness, the literal truths of the tales become relevant only in the clues they provide the receiver to help him ascertain the ultimate message of these stories in regards to narrative fidelity and narrative probability. In the case of the stories I will examine in this study, that truth deals with the experience of being mad.

This study will explore four of Poe’s short stories which focus on madness: “Ligeia,” “Eleonora,” “The Black Cat,” and “The Fall of the House of Usher.” While madness is often a theme with Poe’s narrators, it is equally common for the narrators to fervently work to establish sanity from the beginning of each respective tale, in order to help create and build credibility with the reader. The fact that a narrator simply claims sanity is not sufficient reason for any discerning reader to automatically accept this claim as truth. As a result, Poe carefully crafts his narrators’ words to reflect other characteristics that hint at sanity, regardless of the final impression readers take from the story concerning the narrators’ minds’ stability.

This study will examine the four short stories named above in regards to their narrators and their narrators’ respective mental states. Each examination will show the respective narrators’ individual struggles to establish his own sanity, or lack thereof, as well as the significance of said struggle.
CHAPTER 1

LOST LOVE AND MADNESS: “LIGEIA” AND “ELEONORA”

Two of Poe’s stories, “Ligeia” and “Eleonora,” are virtually mirror images of one another, albeit “Ligeia” is unquestionably longer than “Eleonora.” What is so interesting about these two tales, especially in comparison, is their final destination. This pivotal point deals with the narrators’ ultimate mental states.

In order to understand this point of difference, an extended examination of the two tales is necessary. First, in “Ligeia,” although the narrator does not outright claim that he is sane, he goes to tremendous effort in his narration to lead the receiver to believe him so. In this story, the narrator recounts to his reader the many positive qualities of his first wife, Ligeia: her beauty, intellect, grace, etc. He literally spends pages describing the wonder that was Ligeia and extrapolating upon his love for her. Sadly, the lady Ligeia dies. The narrator remarries to a woman named Rowena. Rowena quickly becomes ill, and dies shortly thereafter. There are hints that she is perhaps poisoned by a, literally, invisible hand. The narrator sits with his second wife’s corpse through the night following her death. Repeatedly, he is drawn to the enshrouded figure on the bed, hearing moans and, upon close inspection, viewing signs of life momentarily – breathing, color in her cheeks, her lips parting in a smile, etc. – before the figure once again resumes the form of the dead Rowena. Finally, though, the narrator not only perceives these
momentary revivals, but he also notices that the figure upon the bed has physically changed; it is no longer Rowena, but the lamented Ligeia.

These events, from the narrator’s perspective, lead to a popular conclusion when coupled with the epigram at the beginning of the tale, a quote Poe attributes to Joseph Glanvill. Glanvill was a philosopher who, according to endnotes by David Galloway, “partially embraced ancient Hebrew cabbalism, emphasizing spiritualistic manifestations of the immortality of the soul” (527). Interestingly, Galloway notes that while Glanvill is a likely and plausible source for this quotation, his authorship has never been proven; Poe could easily have invented the words to fit his needs (527). The epigram reads thus:

And the will therein lieth, which dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigor? For God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness. Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will. (110)

The common conclusion readers reach is that Ligeia was simply too stubborn to stay dead; her will was too strong, and she killed her successor so that she might replace Rowena and once again live with her beloved husband.

The readings of “Ligeia” are varied and diverse. They include ideas covering everything from the argument that

Her [Ligeia’s] eternal struggle with mortality leads her to assume the role of a demon who must enter the corporeal essence of some unsuspecting human victim. The power of her will corresponds with those descriptions (found in folklore) of the psychic commandingness allegedly possessed by vampires or devils... Poe uses his tale to treat further the subject of the afterlife. Terrorizing his readers, he describes
the possibility of a malign spirit preying consciously upon human souls (Burduck 66-67)
to the argument that “Ligeia” is representative of “Poe’s programmatic elimination of women” (Kennedy 113), a pattern which “raises troubling questions about an inherent misogyny” (113). Similarly, some argue that this tale “offers indisputable evidence that its title character is a dream figure” (Saliba 145).

While I will grant lady Rowena’s death is quite likely less than natural, I must agree with a reading presented by Roy B. Basler in 1944. This reading is that rather than the avenging spirit of her husband’s first wife, Rowena’s death is more likely attributable to the narrator. The receiver of this tale must remember that it is told in first person, from the narrator’s point of view. This means one must be wary of accepting his reality of the situation at face value. At the very least, his interpretation of events will reflect his values and beliefs, as well as the conclusions he has drawn about the events. The tale is told in past tense, implying a passage of some time between the events described and the present telling. Additionally, one definite, temporal clue is given indicating time has passed since the events related in the tale occurred. Near the beginning of the story, the narrator indicates that he is physically writing his story by saying: “And now, while I write...” (110).

After considering how the narrator’s mental state might have colored his interpretation of events, my claim is that careful consideration will show the following an equally, if not more, likely interpretation of the events in “Ligeia,” as presented by Basler:
Following her death, however, his [the narrator's] obsession becomes an intense megalomania motivated by his will to restore her [Ligeia] to life in another body through a process of metempsychosis. Murdering Rowena in his intense longing for the beloved, beautiful, pure, ethereal Ligeia, he imagines the actual poison to be ‘three or four large drops of a brilliant and ruby-colored liquid’ distilled from the atmosphere. (Carlson 178)

The narrator, consumed by grief over the loss of Ligeia and guilt about his choice to remarry, poisons Rowena. He does this for multiple reasons. The narrator is punishing himself for daring to remarry after Ligeia dies, a choice which, in some level of his mind, dishonors his first wife, her memory, and the love he felt for her. Guilt over subsequent relationships is quite common when a loved one, especially a spouse, dies. He is also punishing Rowena for the audacity of trying to take Ligeia’s place. Again, this belief in audacity on Rowena’s part lies within the narrator’s mind, helping to displace some of his guilt by giving Rowena part of the blame for the second marriage.

Additionally, the narrator distances himself from his second wife, allowing him to more easily place blame for the grief he still suffered over Ligeia on Rowena’s shoulders. He tells us that he would “call aloud upon her [Ligeia’s] name, during the silence of the night or among the sheltered recesses of the glens by day, as if through the wild eagerness, the solemn passion, the consuming ardor of my longing for the departed, I could restore her to the pathway she had abandoned” (120). Surely, we cannot be expected to believe that Rowena lived in ignorance of her husband’s continued (and often vocal) grief and mourning for his first wife. Her knowledge would have created tension in their relationship, another idea which the narrator reflects. “That my wife [Rowena]
dreaded the fierce moodiness of my temper – that she shunned me and loved me but little – I could not help perceiving; but it gave me rather pleasure than otherwise. I loathed her with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man” (120). Without doubt, Rowena was aware of her husband’s grief over Ligeia, as well as suffering the brunt of his temper when he blamed Rowena for usurping Ligeia’s place.

Rowena’s shoulders were not the only ones he placed blame upon, though. Clearly, the above passage concerning the narrator’s habit of calling aloud to Ligeia also reveals that he blamed his deceased wife for “abandoning” him. Moreover, those few words show that the narrator already had the idea of Ligeia returning to him in his mind, something that would be necessary in order for him to take action to make it so, namely the introduction of a poison into Rowena’s wine.

Further, the words the narrator chooses to describe the mysterious addition of something foreign (and probably harmful) to Rowena’s physician-prescribed wine specifically avoid giving anyone responsibility for their addition: “...as Rowena was in the act of raising the wine to her lips, I saw, or may have dreamed that I saw, fall within the goblet, as if from some invisible spring of the room, three or four large drops of a brilliant and ruby colored fluid” (122). Given the vague, passive introduction of this substance – especially considering how specific the narrator is in describing the drops’ striking resemblance to blood, an archetypal guilt symbol – the receiver must question whether the implausible “invisible spring” in the air contributed to Rowena’s decline. Or, if ultimately the more likely idea is that the narrator, in his guilt and grief, poisoned his second wife, even if he refuses to recognize his actions as his own. Also, this poisoning could be the final step in the narrator’s subconscious plan. Perhaps Rowena’s
continued and repeated illnesses, which so baffled her physicians were not illnesses at all. Perhaps the narrator was poisoning her all along. Ultimately, though, this is an irrelevant, albeit entertaining hypothesis. One might even go so far as to question whether Ligeia died of natural causes, because some complicity on her husband’s part would certainly contribute to and exacerbate his guilt. However, I do not find enough evidence of this to pursue it here as more than speculation.

In order to more fully understand why this interpretation concerning the narrator’s culpability in Rowena’s death is valid, one must examine the narrator’s words and how he chooses to present his tale, for within his word choice resides the truth of his narrative, which is ultimately not whether Rowena was murdered or whether Ligeia returned from the grave to commandeer her successor’s body, but concerns a look into the inner workings of a madman’s mind.

First, the narrator, while not outright claiming sanity, works very hard to establish his sanity. This works to his advantage for two reasons. Refusing to outright say “I’m sane! Really, I am!” is a much more authentic approach to telling a tale of questionable narrative fidelity, such as this one. Claiming sanity at the outset of the story would immediately raise the receiver’s suspicions as to the narrator’s mental state. After all, why would the narrator feel compelled to proclaim his sanity unless he felt is was threatened? Likewise, not addressing the issue is a much more realistic and reasonable response to the narrator’s threatened sense of sanity. It implies that the narrator is secure in his sanity and sees no reason why he or the receiver should question it – that to him, it is a non-issue.
Only the most suspicious and paranoid of receivers will not grant a tale-teller some leeway in believability and suspended disbelief at the beginning of a story. Suspended disbelief or outright belief may be retracted on the receiver’s part as the story progresses, and the receiver knows this. As a result, granting the narrator his sanity at a tale’s beginning seems a simple courtesy. In all honesty, it is a dangerous practice because later, if the tale veers into territory that pushes the bounds of narrative fidelity and narrative probability, the receiver has to reassess his position, based on the new information, possibly overlooking clues that seemed unimportant earlier. However, this initial grant of sanity and acceptance is basically a common courtesy and, ultimately, a necessary evil in a world where everyday interactions depend upon the constant sharing of stories between individuals to maintain definitions of reality. To approach every tale with suspicion from the outset would require too much time and energy on the receiver’s part, not to mention being downright rude.

Simply assuming the receiver will grant him sanity is not the narrator’s only ploy for gaining his audience’s confidence. He carefully chooses his wording and tone from the beginning of the tale to inspire confidence, as the first three sentences exhibit. The story begins as if the receiver has just asked the narrator the question: “How did you meet Ligeia?” This quick immersion in what seems to be an already ongoing exchange gives the receiver the impression that he and the narrator are already on friendly terms, as does the wording of the narrator’s reply: “I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia” (110). Clearly, the receiver to whom the narrator is speaking is supposed to have knowledge that, at the very least, Ligeia existed, if not her importance in the narrator’s life. The casual way in which
the narrator begins his narrative also subtly implies an air of familiarity and friendship between the narrator and the receiver. At the very least, the narrator is comfortable in sharing his tale.

His next statement will become a large clue to the narrator’s true mental state, but only in retrospect. When he says, “Long years have since elapsed, and my memory is feeble through much suffering” (110) the receiver has not yet had his narrative fidelity and probability tested sufficiently to cause him to question the narrator’s statement. Instead of being a blaring, neon sign with the word “MAD!” and a large arrow pointing to the narrator, this line reinforces the comfortable air the narrator is working to establish. After all, such sentiments that days long past are no longer sharp in one’s memory are not uncommon, especially among older contingents of the populace. And, in implying that he is aged, the narrator also draws upon societal norms the receiver most likely is aware of on some level – respect for elders and the belief that with age comes wisdom.

The third statement of this tale is especially crafty in that it reinforces the air of companionability between the narrator and the receiver. Since this line comes prior to the information that the narrator is penning his tale for the receiver, rather than giving an oral recitation, one can almost imagine the narrator leaning in to speak as he shares the following confidence:

Or, perhaps, I cannot now bring these points to mind, because in truth the character of my beloved, her rare learning, her singular yet placid cast of beauty, and the thrilling and enthralling eloquence of her low musical language, made their way into my heart by paces so steadily and stealthily progressive that they have been unnoticed and unknown. (110)
In addition to reinforcing the friendly air between narrator and receiver, thereby nudging the receiver farther and farther from the idea that the narrator might be insane, this line reinforces the impression of sanity by acknowledging a lapse in the narrator's memory. Such acknowledgement is significant because it purports to show that the narrator is aware of and willing to admit to his mental shortcomings. Once this impression is given, the receiver is likely apt to assume that if the narrator is aware of and can admit to one shortcoming, he can recognize and will admit to all shortcomings. Essentially, this becomes a diversionary tactic, which is repeated later in the tale when the narrator attributes some of his hallucinations to opium intake and/or dreaming, a point to which I will return shortly.

Having hinted at the friendly air between himself and his audience, the narrator uses that third sentence also as a segue into his elaborate and lengthy description of Ligeia’s merits. The narrator praises all aspects of Ligeia, starting with her maiden name, or rather the fact that he cannot recall it: “Was it a playful charge on the part of my Ligeia? or was it a test of my strength of affection, that I should institute no inquiries upon this point? or was it rather a caprice of my own – a wildly romantic offering on the shrine of the most passionate devotion” (110). This lack of knowledge about what wealth, influence, or social standing the marriage to Ligeia could have given or taken from the narrator is clearly designed to show that he loved her enough to marry her, regardless of her standing in society.

At this point it is also important to note the narrator makes reference to an Egyptian goddess, saying, “if ever she, the wan and the misty-winged Ashtophet of idolatrous Egypt, presided, as they tell, over marriages ill-omened, then most surely she presided
over mine” (111). Why would the narrator mention the idea that his marriage to Ligeia was ill-fated at this juncture, just after he has finished informing his audience of his magnanimous nature at not knowing her family name? Perhaps his reference has less to do with Ligeia’s maiden name and more to do with the narrator’s inability to remember the exact circumstances of his lack of knowledge on this point, implying that his memory would be clear as a bell if it was not more occupied by the subsequent happenings in the tale.

Also, if the average reader does not recognize the Egyptian goddess the narrator identifies, that is because Poe crafted her out of two other Egyptian deities to serve his purposes here, according to endnotes by Galloway:

Poe would seem to have invented this deity, as he may have invented his epigram; the word suggests both Ashtoreth, the Phoenician and Egyptian fertility goddess, and Tophet, a version of hell associated in the Old Testament with Egyptian worship of Moloch, a Semitic deity to whom children were burned in sacrifice. (527-528)

Also, this almost random aside in the text must not be overlooked, simply because it is in the story. Poe believed very strongly that any and all details included in a tale are necessary. If information is unnecessary, it ought not be mentioned. Poe clarifies this stance in a review of Nathiel Hawthorne:

a skillful artist has constructed a tale. He has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents, but having deliberately conceived a certain single effect to be wrought, he then invents such incidents, he then combines such events, and discusses them in such a tone as may best serve him in establishing this preconceived effect. If his very first sentence tend not to the out-bringing of this effect, then in his
very first step has he committed a blunder. 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. (qtd. in Buranelli 66-67)

This is a reasonable position on Poe's part, especially given his influence on the detective story, which requires all clues to be mentioned at some point before the crime is solved, thereby giving the reader the appropriate information to have reached the same conclusion. Of course, the best detective stories would have a climax unexpected enough to still be surprising and entertaining, regardless of having provided readers with the information necessary to solve the puzzle prior to the solution's disclosure.

Next, in his quest to convince his readers of Ligeia's numerous positive qualities the narrator focuses on her physical beauty. He says, "I would in vain attempt to portray the majesty, the quiet ease, of her demeanor, or the incomprehensible lightness and elasticity of her footfall" (111). Ironically enough, while he claims that he would be "in vain" to attempt to describe the beauty of his first wife, he then spends pages upon pages doing just that. Also, this passage plants the idea that the narrator's words alone will be insufficient to capture Ligeia's beauty, a strategy that reinforces the companionable and comfortable air he worked so hard at the beginning to establish between himself and the reader.

Further, the narrator describes her face specifically by saying, "In beauty of face no maiden ever equaled her" (111). This statement, like the previous one, serves two purposes. It Reinforces the level of the narrator's worship of Ligeia, and it puts the reader in the mind of other literary figures whose beauty was so enthralling it motivated
ventures of an epic scale, such as Helen of Troy, the literary figure over whom the Trojan war was fought.

The narrator continues to exalt Ligeia's features, including her mouth, her nose, etc. When it comes to discussing her eyes, though, his words become even more copious and significant. He speaks of a quality in them which eluded him:

The expression of the eyes of Ligeia! How for long hours have I pondered upon it! How have I, through the whole of a midsummer night, struggled to fathom it! ...What was it? I was possessed with a passion to discover. Those eyes! those large, those shining, those divine orbs! ... thus how frequently, in my intense scrutiny of Ligeia's eyes, have I felt approaching the full knowledge of their expression – felt it approach – yet not quite be mine – and so at length entirely depart! And (strange, of strangest mystery of all!) I found, in the commonest objects of the universe, a circle of analogies to that expression ... I recognized it ... in the contemplation of a moth, a butterfly, a chrysalis, a stream of running water. I have felt it in the ocean; in the falling of a meteor. I have felt it in the glances of unusually aged people ... I have been filled with it by certain sounds from stringed instruments, and not unfrequently by passages from books. (112-113)

These descriptions of this uncapturable and indefinable quality within Ligeia's eyes hints at the idea of the sublime, a feeling which most will agree exists, even if a general consensus of definition is difficult to reach. Of course, the narrator's description here only adds to Ligeia's mystique, as well as reinforcing just how high a pedestal her memory rests upon within his mind.
Also, the extended emphasis on Ligeia’s eyes and their intangible quality speaks to cultural ideas of being able to view another’s spirit via his or her eyes – the eyes being the window to one’s soul – and perhaps hints to an idea about the strength of spirit Ligeia possessed. Certainly, one who would purport to being too strong-willed to stay dead must have a strong spirit. This idea is further reinforced by the fact that the narrator’s long list of where else he had encountered the feeling he got from looking in Ligeia’s eyes ends with that same Glanvill quote, which serves as epigram to this tale and as Ligeia’s final words, a point which I will address shortly.

First, though, the narrator uses Glanvill’s words about man’s will to segue into a description of the strength of Ligeia’s will and character. He pens, “An intensity in thought, action, or speech, was possibly, in her a result, or at least an index, of that gigantic volition which, during our long intercourse, failed to give other and more immediate evidence of its existence” (114). By emphasizing how strong Ligeia’s will was and how well Glanvill’s words expressed her character, the narrator is again reinforcing his view of Ligeia, regardless of how skewed it might be in comparison to reality, and he is setting her up to have the capacity to will herself back into being, albeit using Rowena’s body as a medium.

Finally, the narrator’s discussion of Ligeia’s many attractive qualities is drawn to a close upon the point of her education. The significant and interesting points here concern the repeated ideas by the narrator that Ligeia’s learning was “immense” (114) and the idea that “I have never known her at fault” (114), meaning the narrator never knew her to have faulty information or flawed ideas, regardless of subject matter. In fact, the narrator even claims that Ligeia’s learning surpassed levels attainable by men, let alone women:
“where breathes the man who has traversed, and successfully, all the wide areas of moral, physical, and mathematical science?” (114). Furthermore, the narrator concedes that he was not then (during Ligeia’s life) aware of how truly great her knowledge was. “I saw not then what I now clearly perceive, that the acquisitions of Ligeia were gigantic, were astounding” (114). Again, this subtle reminder of the narrator’s supposed ability to distinguish between what he knew and realized then, as opposed to now, also serves to reinforce the idea of his sanity – for, if he can recognize that discrepancy, surely, his words falsely imply, we must believe he can and will do the same for any other recollections which have become blurred over time.

In addition, the narrator’s description of Ligeia’s learning focuses on her study “through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation at which I was most busily occupied during the earlier years of our marriage” (114). Such areas of study, metaphysics, the soul, etc., and an interest in them on the narrator’s part, combined with his assurance of Ligeia’s vast understanding of the field, all add up to the narrator believing Ligeia capable, if anyone, of achieving what he later details – a return from death by virtue of her spirit’s, her soul’s, determination.

It is clear from the details the narrator chooses to provide his audience with and the ways in which he presents those details that the narrator believes his affair with Ligeia to have been a highly romanticized love, probably built up far beyond reality in his memory. Further, the vast quantity of description alone is enough to make most readers choose to not question it too closely in a desire for the narrator to move forward in the actual plot of his tale. This desire, while certainly understandable on the reader’s part is dangerous because the longer the reader grants the narrator his ear without actively suspecting and
evaluating the tale, the more fully entrenched in believing the narrator one becomes. This, in turn, makes the later necessary process of detangling truth of plot (with a little "t") from Truth of the tale (with a capital "T"). The latter is, of course, the view into the workings of a mad mind Poe offers his readers.

Back to lengthy and detailed descriptions of Ligeia's assets this narrator provides—they all add up to proving the depths of the narrator's love for his first wife. Perhaps they even go so far as to illustrate that Ligeia, regardless of how she was when she lived, has been elevated in the narrator's memory to near god(dess)-like status, deserving of worship and undying adulation on the narrator's part. It is clear that this man worshiped his first wife (or at least her memory), and such an unrealistic portrait of his deceased love would only contribute exponentially to his guilt over remarrying.

Indeed, the narrator reports Ligeia declaring on her death bed the depths of her love for her husband:

For long hours, detaining my hand, would she pour out before me the overflowing of a heart whose more than passionate devotion amounted to idolatry. How had I deserved to be so blessed by such confessions? — how had I deserved to be so cursed with the removal of my beloved in the hour of her making them? (115-116)

Indeed, the narrator takes these words of love as a sign that "the principle of her longing with so wildly earnest a desire for the life which was now fleeing so rapidly away" (116). Then, with her dying breath Ligeia quotes the end portion of the Glanvill text Poe provides as an epigram, saying, "Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only though the weakness of his feeble will" (117-118). This is a foreshadowed hint to the audience of Ligeia's later return via Rowena's body. Also,
when the narrator’s state of mind concerning Ligeia’s ardent desire not to die is combined with these final words, a possible motive is provided to inspire the narrator to later poison Rowena, allowing Ligeia a vessel through which to return.

Let us return for a moment, however, to the line “how had I deserved to be so cursed with the removal of my beloved in the hour of her making them [her admissions of love]?” (116). This line, like others (his comment that perhaps he did not know Ligeia’s maiden name because he loved her too much to inquire how wealthy and/or influential her family was) is very telling in what it reveals about the narrator. While blaming one’s self for a loved one’s death is not uncommon – “how had I deserved to be so cursed” – the narrator’s despair is focused not on losing Ligeia, his beloved wife, but on losing her when she has just confessed the full depths of her love, as if her death is even more punishment for the narrator. This line reveals the narrator remembering this event from a selfish viewpoint. His reaction is not to marvel at the sorrow that she will die, even though he believes her to very much desire life. Rather, it focuses on the woman and the love he is losing. Understanding this point is pivotal because it exemplifies that this story is, as most are, about the narrator, whether he can recognize and admit to this fact or not.

At this juncture, let us return to the narrator’s admittance of drug use. Certainly the narrator’s casual references to his repeated and frequent opium intake will raise the eyebrows of a modern reader, as the hallucination-causing side effects of drugs is not uncommon knowledge today. Likewise, one might be tempted to dismiss the various implausible and often downright disturbing images and plot happenings within most of Poe’s tales, “Ligeia” included, as drug-induced.
However, such dismissal is a disservice to Poe’s genius and talent, as well as a failure to explore all venues of investigation on the reader’s part. Especially in this tale, the mention of opium use is utilized by the narrator to once again throw the reader off the scent, so to speak, in regards to the narrator’s sanity, or lack thereof. When recounting the drops of “a brilliant and ruby colored fluid” (122) the narrator saw fall into Rowena’s wine, he then says, “If this I saw – not so Rowena. She swallowed the wine unhesitatingly, and I forbore to speak to her of a circumstance which must, after all, I considered, have been but the suggestion of a vivid imagination, rendered morbidly active by the terror of the lady, by the opium, and by the hour” (122). The narrator’s admittance that the addition of the mysterious drops defies plausibility actually helps his credibility. This is because he knows the reader will recognize this event as beyond the bounds of reason, and thus he quickly attributes it to outside influence – his imagination, the lateness of the hour, even a fantasy induced by opium use. The fact that he can name these outside sources, and place the blame for the drops’ appearance on them is designed to give readers confidence in his ability to accurately decipher and attribute future odd occurrences. One must keep in mind, though, that the narrator’s perceptions of reality are colored by various factors, including his sanity. If, in his grief he poisoned Rowena to give Ligeia an opening through which to re-enter this plane of existence, an act which he cannot admit his participation in to himself, he must name outside sources, thereby reassuring himself and his audience of his supposed sanity. Such is the case with other mentions of opium use. His direct admittance allows him an unspoken claim of the ability to recognize opium-induced hallucinations for what they are.
Yet another way in which the narrator works to establish his credibility is by describing instances when Rowena experiences hallucinations that the narrator does not share. He describes one such instance during Rowena’s illness: “She partly arose, and spoke, in an earnest low whisper, of sounds which she then heard, but which I could not hear – of motions which she then saw, but which I could not perceive” (121). Plot wise this later serves to seem a clue that Ligeia was already present in spirit, waiting for her successor to pass on, thereby allowing the first wife to return to her husband. However, this passage also serves to build credibility in regards to the narrator’s sanity. By showing his audience that when Rowena was experiencing hallucinations he was not, the narrator again strives to set himself among the sane. For if Rowena’s actions put her outside the bounds of the completely sane, and the narrator can recognize this, he has not followed her around that bend.

Once one reaches the end of this tale, though, the apparent transformation of Rowena’s corpse into a living Ligeia clearly asks readers to consider this tale in regards to narrative fidelity and narrative probability. Since narrative fidelity deals with (in)consistencies within the story itself, let us first consider it. The only real consistency problem within the tale is the repeated revivification of Rowena’s corpse prior to the final resurrection. Prior concerns, like the apparently magical appearance of the mysterious drops out of thin air are seemingly attributable to the spirit of Ligeia waiting for her opportunity to return to life.

However, since narrative probabilities deals with how plausible the occurrences within a story are (according to what the receiver knows to be true in his reality), the concern of Rowena’s repeated revivification is just as much a problem of narrative
probability as it is fidelity. While one might accept Rowena "coming back to life" once, if it was shortly after her passing (as this could be attributed to the narrator being mistaken that she was actually dead), this repeated event is not so easily believed.

Likewise, the transformation of Rowena's corpse to physically resemble Ligeia's body is even more unbelievable. First, even if the reader grants the implausibility of Ligeia's spirit taking over Rowena's dead body, the spirit having the ability to remold the flesh into Ligeia's likeness is even more implausible. Adding all the events together leads the reader to the conclusion that this narrator's events stray too far beyond the bounds of narrative probability, regardless of how seamlessly the tale may or may not be constructed.

Thus, discerning receivers are left to try and make sense of the events in the tale. Here again, the distinction between stories concerning fact and those presented as fiction becomes significant. While a tale of similar narrative improbability as "Ligeia" may be dismissed easily enough if told in the context of "real life" as simply the ravings of a mad mind, when presented as fiction, one must work to uncover the deeper meaning of the tale. I believe that the hypothesis I have presented, of the narrator's grief over Ligeia's loss and guilt over remarrying, shows a carefully crafted look into the mind of a seeming mad man - but one who is mad in a disturbingly accessible way. While the average person would most likely vehemently reject his own ability to perpetrate the poisoning of a spouse, such as the narrator of "Ligeia" did, and then see a lost love resurrected via the victim's corpse, the emotions which led the narrator to his actions are terrifyingly common. Grief, guilt, sorrow, anger - these are emotions anyone could experience. And
if these are all that was needed to send the narrator over the edge from sane to chillingly 
mad, we must ask “Could that be me?”

As a psychological study, “Ligeia” is fascinating. As a literary work, it excels for its 
ability to be accessible by academics and non-academics alike. This trip into the 
homicidal, twisted mind is all the sadder for the motives it provides. Any ill-will the 
narrator bore Rowena pales in comparison to his fervent hope of Ligeia’s return, in 
regards to motive for his actions. His actions are then cast in a hopeful light, as opposed 
to a vindictive one.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, this story is also significant when 
compared to another of Poe’s tales, “Eleonora.” In order to understand this though, we 
must first examine the story of “Eleonora,” its narrator, and his mental state.

“Eleonora,” in plot, greatly mirrors “Ligeia.” The narrator first spends a fair portion 
of the story describing his first love, a cousin named Eleonora. According to the narrator, 
the two were raised together by Eleonora’s mother (the narrator’s aunt) and lived a nearly 
idyllic existence in a secluded valley, named the Valley of the Many-Colored Grass. 
However, Eleonora grew ill and expressed her fear that, after her death, the narrator 
would forget her and the love they shared. He swore vehemently that he would never 
marry another (although technically he had not married Eleonora), even calling down a 
curse so horrible that he could not repeat it for his receiver should he forsake his vows to 
Eleonora. Eventually, after Eleonora’s passing, the narrator left the valley in which he 
and his first love had resided, and he ultimately met another woman, Ermengarde. The 
narrator immediately fell in love with Ermengarde and married her without second 
thought. In direct contrast to the fantastical, horrific ending one might expect, simply by
virtue of Poe being the author of the story, the narrator does not suffer the consequences of the curse he willingly invoked upon himself should he marry one other than Eleonora. Instead, he hears Eleonora’s voice in the night absolving him of breaking his previous promise and wishing him well.

Obviously, the radical difference in consequences suffered by the narrator of this tale, in comparison to the man who narrated “Ligeia,” is the significant point of departure when comparing the two tales. First, though, a deeper understanding of the narrator’s mental state in “Eleonora” is necessary. Surprisingly, when Poe’s other narrators’ instances of sanity are considered, the narrator of “Eleonora” informs his audience within the second sentence of his tale that, “Men have called me mad” (243). While after this admission, the narrator does offer the idea in counter to the reported accusation that, “the question is not yet settled, whether madness is or is not the loftiest intelligence – whether much that is glorious – whether all that is profound – does not spring from disease of thought – from moods of mind exalted at the expense of the general intellect” (243), he shortly acquiesces to this stipulation: “We will say, then, that I am mad” (243).

Even though he has admitted, and seemingly embraced the idea that others, especially the receiver, as viewing him as mad, the narrator then tries to qualify his statement with the following conditions:

I grant, at least, that there are two distinct conditions of my mental existence – the condition of a lucid reason, not to be disputed, and belonging to the memory of events forming the first epoch of my life – and a condition of shadow and doubt, appertaining to the present, and to the recollection of what constitutes the second great era of my being. (243)
These two periods of the narrator’s life, between which he draws such careful distinction, directly relate to the two women in his life. The first period involves his youth and the time spent in the Valley of the Many-Colored Grass, much of which was dominated by Eleonora. The second great period to which the narrator refers is the time after he left the valley, and that which includes Ermengarde.

Not only does the narrator provide distinction between the two epochs in this passage, but he instructs his receiver about which era the narrator believes he remembers and herein reports more clearly, namely the first. He reinforces this idea by saying, “Therefore, what I shall tell of the earlier period, believe; and to what I may relate of the later time, give only such credit as may seem due; or doubt it altogether” (243). These instructions on the narrator’s part are familiar in form, if not in content. Like so many of the carefully crafted words belonging to the narrator of “Ligeia,” these words are too designed to imply rationality on the part of this narrator. Of course, if the narrator is truly mad, all of his memories must be colored by this, not just select ones which he doubts. This is especially true in this tale because, like “Ligeia,” it is written by the narrator after the fact of the events he describes: “She [Eleonora]. . .of whom I now pen calmly and distinctly these remembrances…” (243). Also, the narrator’s inclusion of the words “calmly” and “distinctly” in regards to his writing implies a rationality of thought, an understanding of why these recollections are validated by a calm and distinct recitation. In short, these words imply (rightly or wrongly) a stability of the narrator’s mind.

Additionally, by allowing the idea of madness to be planted, but quickly distinguishing which memories said madness can be applied to when considering its impact upon the narrator, the narrator attempts to give credit to what he will soon tell
receivers about the first period of his life. At the same time, the narrator tries to provide an easy explanation, even excuse, for the culmination of his tale – hearing the voice of his lost love, Eleonora forgiving him for his betrayal of his vow unto her. I contend that his attempt to give himself an out actually shows his ultimate sanity, rather than the expected madness.

As “Ligeia” contained two distinct portions of the narrator’s life – marriage to Ligeia vs. marriage to Rowena – so too does “Eleonora” – the narrator’s life with Eleonora vs. his marriage to Ermengarde. While the narrator’s descriptions of Eleonora and the beauty of their life together are nowhere near as lengthy as the praise the narrator of “Ligeia” heaps upon his first wife (nor is the entire tale of “Eleonora” anywhere as long as the recounting in “Ligeia”), he spends a comparable portion of his tale on his first love in comparison to his second, the way Ligeia merited nearly eight trade-sized paperback pages in comparison to Rowena’s few paragraphs. In this case, Eleonora and their love receive roughly three pages, their description heavily relying on comparison to the beauty of the valley, as opposed to Ermengarde’s few sentences of description. These parallels of structure become significant in highlighting the point of departure between the tales’ paths.

In the portion of the story describing the Valley of the Many-Colored Grass and his love for Eleonora, the narrator adopts an almost fairy tale-like tone. As the valley itself is named “the Valley of the Many-Colored Grass” (244), this paradisiacal location also contains the mythically-named “River of Silence” (244), a waterway from which “no murmur arose…and so gently it wandered along, that the pearly pebbles upon which we
loved to gaze, far down within its bosom, stirred not at all, but lay in a motionless
countent, each in its own old station, shining on gloriously forever” (244). Further,
the whole surface of the valley, from the river to the mountains that girdled it in, were
carpeted all by a soft green grass, thick, short, perfectly even, and vanilla-perfumed,
but so besprinkled throughout with the yellow buttercup, the white daisy, the purple
violet, and the ruby-red asphodel, that its exceeding beauty spoke to our hearts, in
loud tones, of the love and of the glory of God. (244)
Clearly, this valley, at least in the narrator’s memories, is Edenic – pure, pristine, and, as
such, any love which grows there must, one feels, not only be as true and pure as the
land, but also be ordained by God himself.

Also lending credence to this theory of divine blessing is the fact that once Eleonora
and the narrator fall in love, the valley blossoms even further:
Strange brilliant flowers, star-shaped, burst out upon the trees where no flowers had
been known before. The tints of the green carpet deepened; and when, one by one,
the white daisies shrank away, there sprang up, in place of them, ten by ten of the
ruby-red asphodel. And life arose in our paths; for the tall flamingo, hitherto unseen,
with all gay glowing birds, flaunted his scarlet plumage before us. The golden and
silver fish haunted the river, out of the bosom of which issued, little by little, a
murmur that swelled, at length, into a lulling melody more divine than that of the harp
of Æolus – sweeter than all save the voice of Eleonora. (245)
These graphic, pastoral descriptions give the valley and, more importantly, the narrator’s
tale, an almost mythic quality, thereby elevating it above Poe’s average story, and
allowing the narrator an extended suspension of disbelief from the receiver.
Of course, one must at this juncture ask why we are so quick to judge those of Poe’s narrators who claim witness to fantastical, supernatural events as mad, when at the same time, one such as the narrator of “Eleonora,” whose perceptions clearly push the bounds of narrative fidelity to the same degree, only in a different direction, is granted, at the least, further words to prove his state of mind, and at the most, an exemption from Poe’s collection of mad narrators. This is a fair question. While I cannot give a definitive answer as to the why, I unflinchingly maintain this to be the case. The only speculation I can offer is that those of Poe’s narrators we are quicker to condemn focus on horrific aspects, rather than an idealized memory of the past. Further, recollections positively colored by time are not unique to Poe’s narrators; in point of fact, a desire to remember times past with a fondness they most likely did not possess is, arguably, a component of human nature. In short, it is an accepted practice; it does not violate the generally agreed upon bounds of reality. As such, one who indulges in this practice does not infringe upon narrative fidelity, does not stray too far from the mainstream, and thus is not considered nearly as crazy as, say, one who claims his dead, first wife has reanimated and physically restructured the corpse of his second wife. In short, the Valley of the Many-Colored Grass is not a harmful fantasy of recollection, and it is thereby more allowable and excusable in the receiver’s eyes.

Eleonora’s beauty is also described, usually in reference to the beauty of the valley. When describing how smooth the bark on the trees of the valley is, the narrator says it “was smoother than all save the cheeks of Eleonora” (245). When first describing the River of Silence, the narrator tells that “there crept out a narrow and deep river brighter than all save the eyes of Eleonora” (244). And, when describing the sound the river
began to make after the two fell in love, the narrator tells us the murmur "swelled, at length, into a lulling melody more divine than that of the harp of Æolus – sweeter than all save the voice of Eleonora" (245). Æolus, one will remember, was the Greek demi-god keeper of the four winds, who provided Odysseus a satchel with adverse winds sealed tight inside to allow the hero quick travel home. Likewise, in the 19th century, an æolian harp was the equivalent of today’s wind chime. This comparison, then, of Eleonora’s voice to Æolus’ harp reflects her high elevation within the narrator’s mind. Truly, if the valley is Edenic, then Eleonora could be an Eve figure, but more likely, and this is a comparison the narrator himself makes, she is angelic: “The loveliness of Eleonora was that of the Seraphim” (246).

After detailing the beauty of the Valley of the Many-Colored Grass, as well as the beauty of Eleonora, the narrator explains the vow he makes. Eleonora comes into the knowledge that she is dying – how the narrator does not disclose – but her demise, as both a Poe heroine and a contemporary-day Eden inhabitant is unsurprising. She tells the narrator that she fears that “having entombed her in the Valley of the Many-Colored Grass, I would quit forever its happy recesses, transferring the love which now was so passionately her own to some maiden of the outer and every-day world” (246). In order to assuage her fears, the narrator tells us that,

then and there, I threw myself hurriedly at the feet of Eleonora, and offered up a vow, to herself and to Heaven, that I would never bind myself in marriage to any daughter of Earth – that I would in no manner prove recreant to her dear memory, or to the memory of the devout affection with which she had blessed me. And I called the Mighty Ruler of the Universe to witness the pious solemnity of my vow. And the
curse which I invoked of Him and of her...should I prove traitorous to that promise, involved a penalty the exceeding great horror of which will not permit me to make record of it here. (246)

Clearly, this vow on the narrator’s part would be sufficient fuel for the kind of guilt the narrator of “Ligeia” suffered from once Eleonora’s love married Ermengarde. In fact, he ought not only feel guilt, but suffer the consequences he mentioned, which were too great and horrible for him to repeat. Indeed, this guilt and the consequences, which might be enforced either by the spirit of the departed Eleonora, or the narrator’s own subconscious, could only have been reinforced by Eleonora’s parting words of promise on her deathbed:

because of what I had done for the comfort of her spirit [the vow], she would watch over me in that spirit when departed, and, if so it were permitted her, return to me visibly in the watches of the night; but ...[if not]...she should, at least, give me frequent indications of her presence; sighing upon me in the evening winds, or filling the air which I breathed with perfume from the censers of the angels. (247)

Aside from providing ample fuel for guilt-induced madness later in his life, Eleonora’s departing words to the narrator also plant the seed of the idea with him that her spirit will remain near him throughout his life. Unspoken is the implication that Eleonora’s ghost will be there to see if the narrator breaks his vow, and subsequently bring down the unspeakable penalty upon him.

Indeed, the narrator remains within the Valley of the Many-Colored Grass long after Eleonora’s death, and while the valley changes around him, losing its Edenic luster, he remains faithful to his vow and is seemingly rewarded for it:
Yet the promises of Eleonora were not forgotten; for I heard the sounds of the swinging of the censers of the angels; and streams of a holy perfume floated ever and ever about the valley; and at lone hours, when my heart beat heavily, the winds that bathed my brow came unto me laden with soft sighs; and indistinct murmurs filled often the night air. (247-248)

However, when the narrator does eventually leave the Valley of the Many-Colored Grass and meets Ermengarde, immediately falling in love with her, he does not suffer the ill-effects one might expect. On the contrary, he not only does not fear divine retribution for breaking his vow: “I wedded; - nor dreaded the curse I had invoked” (249), but he does not suffer said retribution: “and it’s [the curse’s] bitterness was not visited upon me” (249). In fact, the narrator experiences absolution:

And once...in the silence of the night, there came through my lattice the soft sighs which had forsaken me; and they modelled themselves into familiar and sweet voice, saying:

‘Sleep in peace! – for the Spirit of Love reigneth and ruleth, and, in taking to thy passionate heart her who is Ermengarde, thou art absolved, for reasons which shall be made known to thee in Heaven, of thy vows unto Eleonora.’ (249)

This nightly visit and the forgiveness it grants ends the story in an almost anticlimactic manner, especially for a tale penned by Edgar Allan Poe. However, the lack of horrific, fantastical consequences for the narrator is significant because of what it says about Poe’s views of societal definitions of madness.

Certainly, Eleonora’s final visit to the narrator can be attributed to a hallucination on his part, subconsciously designed to alleviate any guilt he might be experiencing for
breaking his vow to Eleonora. Why then, one must ask, does this narrator earn forgiveness while the narrator of “Ligeia,” who made no such fervent vow to his first love upon her deathbed, suffers so that he murders Rowena and believes himself to be reunited with the lost Ligeia? I contend that the answer to this is found in the narrators’ beliefs about their own sanity.

While Ligeia’s husband works very hard to appear sane, thereby remaining accepted within mainstream society, and more importantly able to trust his senses (because, if he is sane and can trust his perceptions, then his returned love will not depart with morning’s light, leaving him a widower twice over), ultimately very few would argue that this is a battle he actually wins. By trying to remain within society’s parameters, the narrator of “Ligeia” eventually loses the mental battle to stay sane and convince us of this, in a spectacular fashion nonetheless. Conversely, the narrator of “Eleonora” embraces society’s pronouncement of him as insane. He does not care if others think him mad; his reality does not solely depend on being verified by others. As a result of this security in his own reality, and a lack of concern about how much of his reality overlaps with others’ realities, he receives absolution (from any latent guilt) and, ultimately, is happy.
CHAPTER 2

GUILT AND SELF-PUNISHMENT: “THE BLACK CAT”

While grief and grief-driven guilt can be forceful motivators for one’s actions, grief-driven guilt is not the only variety of guilt which can have such a serious effect on the psyche. In another of Poe’s tales, “The Black Cat,” the narrator is driven beyond the conventional bounds of sanity by a different kind of guilt. In this story, the narrator, the night before his execution, pens a document that claims to be a confession, but in the end, it is actually a detailed look into the narrator’s psyche and an examination of the guilt-induced desire for punishment which led the narrator to murder his wife.

The narrator details how he grew up loving and respecting animals. When he married, his wife was of a similar disposition and the couple had a variety of pets – birds, fish, rabbits, a dog, a monkey, and a cat. As the title of this tale suggests, the cat is the key element in this list. One night the narrator comes home drunk and maliciously attacks the cat, gouging out one of its eyes with his pocketknife. Later, due to guilt at hurting the cat, the narrator hangs it from a tree in the back yard in an effort to damn himself. That night, the narrator’s house burns to the ground. While no one was killed in the fire, the house was destroyed. On returning to the house the next day, the narrator observes an image, created by the fire on the only still-standing wall, of a large cat with a rope around its neck. While the narrator tries to rationalize the image away, its similarity to the family pet the narrator had hanged the previous morning remains. Subsequent to
the fire, the narrator sees a large black cat reminiscent of Pluto, the original black cat, in a bar and takes the second cat home. The next morning, the narrator notices that this second cat is missing an eye, just like Pluto. Over time the narrator becomes suspicious, even fearful, of the second cat. This culminates in the narrator trying to kill the cat with an axe and burying the axe in his wife’s head instead, instantly killing her. In an attempt to conceal the murder, the narrator bricks his wife up in a wall in the cellar of the building they are inhabiting. When the police come searching for her, the narrator is given away by the howl of the still-living cat, which he unintentionally trapped inside the wall with his wife’s corpse. The police, following the cat’s cries, tear down the wall, and the man is arrested for his wife’s murder.

I contend that this tale is not, as a superficial reading of the narrator’s words would have one believe, a tale of an innocent man tormented by the vengeful spirit of a dead house pet, punished for his crimes against the animal by being tricked into killing his wife, and subsequently punished by human laws as he could never be punished by the animal while living. It is a tale of a man who, so consumed by guilt at his first actions towards the defenseless, loving animal, repeatedly acts against himself, seeking adequate punishment for his crime. It is a tale of a man driven so far beyond the point of sanity by his guilt that he ultimately resorts to murdering his wife in order to receive what he deems a fit punishment for his crime of first attacking Pluto.

This narrator, like so many of Poe’s other narrators, is not sane. And, like others, he believes himself sane, at least on a conscious level. He seeks to reassert his sanity by refusing to admit his instabilities and by trying to convince us of his sanity through his
word choices, the details he elects to include in the narrative, and the connections he
implies in the cause and effect relationship he seeks to establish in this tale.

First, the narrator seeks to prove his sanity by showing that he can distinguish
between sane and insane tales. He starts his narrative by writing, “For the most wild, yet
most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad
indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence.
Yet mad am I not – and very surely do I not dream” (320). By immediately explaining
that he knows the events he is about to relate will be questionable to his audiences’ sense
of narrative fidelity – how well a tale fits into what the receiver knows to be true about
the world – the narrator seeks to establish his own sanity. After all, if the narrator can
admit the events are implausible, maybe even impossible, his rational mind must still be
intact.

The narrator furthermore pursues this idea by later stating:

Hereafter, perhaps some intellect may be found which will reduce my phantasm to the
common-place – some intellect more calm, more logical, and far less excitable than
my own, which will perceive, in the circumstances I detail with awe, nothing more
than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects. (320)

This continued insistence on the idea that the narrator is aware of the questionable nature
of his tale only helps his credibility. Since it is logical to accuse anyone mad who would
demand belief for the events in this tale, it is equally logical to assume the reverse of this
statement true: anyone who does not demand belief must not be mad.

Also, by writing in his initial claim that “surely do I not dream” (320), the narrator is
establishing that he can distinguish between dreams (whether during slumber or
hallucinations in the waking world) and reality. Although he offers no proof of this claim, by stating it as fact and moving on, the narrator forces the reader to accept this as true, and thus accept the credibility it gives the narrator’s sanity. Further, one must remember that the beginning of a tale is the best place to make such claims because the reader has little to no reason to be actively questioning the narrator’s tale yet.

Next, the narrator continues to establish his credibility by claiming that his tale will be an impartial report of the events he experienced: “But to-morrow I die, and to-day I would unburthen my soul. My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events” (320). By asserting that this story will be an impartial report, the narrator builds his credibility. After all, if he is simply outlining the events, then the conclusions we, as readers, draw are those a rational, sane person would draw. More importantly, they have not been influenced by the narrator’s prejudices or interpretation. However, as I will explore, this story is hardly an impartial reporting; rather, it is a finely crafted confession of the narrator’s guilt-driven actions. By claiming impartiality, though, the narrator has planted this idea in his audience’s mind.

Moreover, by imparting to the audience the information that the narrator will die tomorrow and that he knows this, the narrator helps his credibility through the simple fact that he seemingly has no reason to lie. If tomorrow he dies, regardless of what he says today, then why not tell the truth? Further, this eleventh-hour confession is designed to appeal to readers of the Christian faith, who believe in confessing and seeking forgiveness as key to achieving a pleasant afterlife. Such an appeal would only help the narrator’s credibility in the eyes of said audience members because a false confession
would serve no purpose when dealing with God. Also, by trying to confess (and the implied seeking of forgiveness, a step which the narrator does not actually take) the narrator places himself in a favorable light by trying to do what is right – at least to the audience. As I will explore later, this is a false impression because the narrator does not desire or seek forgiveness.

The final implication of these lines is in the idea, repeated in the later section, which I have earlier quoted – "nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects" (320) – is the idea that all the events in the narrator's tale are linked, that they are but one long chain of cause and effect. A chain of events linked by cause and effect is not illogical, and therefore, neither are those who make such links insane. In addition to helping set the stage for the narrator's recitation of events to be logical, and therefore sane, this helps plant the idea in the readers' minds that the events can be linked. While I do not deny that the events are ultimately linked, I will show a stronger link than that which the narrator chooses to consciously recognize and believe in.

After the opening paragraph, the narrator immediately begins his tale, making no further obvious attempts to establish his credibility. The less obvious techniques involve such actions as how he chooses to report his actions when drunk. For example, when the narrator returns home and gouges out Pluto's eye with his pocketknife, the narrator states:

But my disease grew upon me – for what disease is like Alcohol! – and at length even Pluto... began to experience the effects of my ill temper.

One night, returning home, much intoxicated... I seized him; when, in his fright at my violence, he inflicted a slight wound upon my hand with his teeth. The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed,
at once to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled ever fibre of my frame. I took from my waistcoat-pocket a penknife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket! I blush, I burn, I shudder while I pen the damnable atrocity.

(321-322).

The narrator's emphasis on the wrongness of his actions, as well as the recognition of his drunkenness and Pluto's relative innocence, all serve to help the narrator's credibility as a sane man by showing that, even if he was less than sane when he committed these actions, his mental state now is stable enough to recognize the wrongness of his previous deeds. And since it is now that he is relating his tale, the logical, although faulty, conclusion is that its recitation will come from an equally sane source.

Within the tale itself, the narrator ends up relating a series of events that, upon close examination, point to the narrator's subconscious mind working continually to punish the narrator for his first attack on Pluto, which deprived the cat of one of its eyes. While this is certainly a horrible action, the connection between it and the ultimate murder of the narrator's wife is, at best, tenuous.

First, it is important to understand the narrator's background. He tells at the onset of the tale that:

From my infancy I was noted for the docility and humanity of my disposition. My tenderness of heart was even so conspicuous as to make me the jest of my companions. I was especially fond of animals... with these [childhood pets] I spent most of my time, and never was so happy as when feeding and caressing them. (320)
By establishing that his disposition in life, from infancy, was focused on being kind and gentle, the narrator paints a picture of a man one would hardly expect capable of the atrocities he later confesses to. The narrator’s recognition of the extreme difference between the man the narrator was from childhood and the man who tortures household pets and murders his wife helps to reaffirm the discrepancy between the two. This, in turn, lends credibility to the possibility that the narrator was mad when he committed the atrocities, but is once again sane, and therefore his story should be trusted.

Even more importantly, though, this bit of information gives readers an insight into the narrator’s psyche prior to attacking Pluto. This is significant because it helps to establish just how big a leap it was for the narrator when he first hurt his cat. While different people hold different values in regards to the treatment of pets, the narrator is clearly establishing here that he places pets equal to, if not above, mankind. Indeed, the narrator says, “There is something in the unselfish and self-sacrificing love of a brute, which goes directly to the heart of him who has had frequent occasion to test the paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere Man” (320). This elevation of pets, especially in comparison to humans, simply because of the almost holy nature of their affections (unselfish and self-sacrificing), I contend, is ultimately what drives the narrator to continually seek more severe forms of punishment for himself. His sin, in his mind, is all the greater for having acted against such a pure, helpless creature. This concept is further reinforced by the fact that the narrator feels that Pluto was especially loyal to him (322). The dynamic the narrator gives Pluto nearly elevates the cat to Christ-like levels. Just as Judas’ betrayal of Jesus was all the worse for all the unconditional love Christ had shown him, the narrator’s betrayal of the love Pluto offered is treachery of the worst kind. And,
just like Judas, the narrator ultimately seeks punishment in death – by hanging, even.
The difference here is that the narrator cannot quite bring himself to literally fashion his own noose, so he settles for doing so figuratively.

This idea of seeking punishment is clearly shown when the narrator hangs Pluto. He tells us that:

It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself – to offer violence to its own nature – to do wrong for the wrong’s sake only – that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute. One morning, in cool blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree; – hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart; – hung it because I knew that it had loved me, and because I felt it had given me no reason of offence; – hung it because I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin – a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it – if such a thing were possible – even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God. (322-323)

This is the most telling and significant passage in this story. This desire, on the narrator’s part, to place himself in a position to be punished in the worst manner possible – hell – clearly shows his overwhelming guilt. If the narrator was able to deal with his guilt, he would have admitted his wrongdoing and asked forgiveness, as is the Christian tradition to which the narrator here alludes. However, instead he kills the animal he has wronged “in cool blood.” This, unlike the altercation which cost Pluto his eye, is not a crime of passion, committed in the heat of the moment. This is a calculated move on the narrator’s part, one designed to accomplish a specific purpose. In this case that purpose
is eternally damning the narrator by placing him outside the scope of God’s power to forgive.

This passage is also significant because it gives readers further insight into the narrator’s psyche and an explanation for the remaining events in this tale, all of which the narrator tries to pin on the cat in one form or another. The next major event is a fire which burns the narrator’s house to the ground, destroying his worldly possessions, and ultimately forcing the narrator into destitution. The narrator tells of the fire: “The destruction was complete. My entire worldly wealth was swallowed up, and I resigned myself thence-forward to despair” (323). This is the point at which the narrator’s madness begins to appear in the tale. The madness is apparent because the narrator at this point begins to blame the spirit of his murdered cat for the fire, and all subsequent occurrences, rather than place blame on more likely and plausible culprits.

While the fire’s origins are not discussed, and it is likely to have been accidental, it is equally likely that the narrator subconsciously started the fire, or at least made it very likely to occur. While the narrator’s killing of Pluto damned him, in his eyes, that punishment would not be immediately apparent. Nothing outward in the narrator’s life would change. Perhaps this lack of immediate punishment drove the narrator to seek further penalty, one that would not only punish him as he felt he deserved for hurting Pluto, but also one which would reflect his status as irredeemable sinner. The only hesitation I have at placing the fire’s cause solely upon the narrator is the conspicuous lack of any information about how the fire started. Regardless of its cause, though, it did punish the narrator. However, as I will explore shortly, this punishment was not enough to assuage the narrator’s guilt.
The evidence of the narrator’s madness comes through in this passage in his description of what he observes when he returns to the burnt down house the following day. Only one wall remained standing in the house, an interior wall against which had rested the head of the narrator’s bed (323) – certainly a private and significant place. The narrator relates that as he approached the house he observed that:

About this wall a dense crowd were collected, and many persons seemed to be examining a particular portion of it with very minute and eager attention. The words ‘strange!’ ‘singular!’ and other similar expressions, excited my curiosity. I approached and saw, as if graven in Bas relief upon the white surface, the figure of the gigantic cat. The impression was given with an accuracy truly marvelous. There was a rope about the animal’s neck. (323)

The seeming message from the cat, a claim of responsibility almost, is reinforced by ideas previously planted by the narrator in the reader’s mind.

First, one must consider the name of the cat: Pluto. While some classicists argue that minor differences exist differentiating the two, Pluto is often associated with, and even viewed as synonymous with, the Greek god Hades, lord of the underworld. Within the name, then are all variety of hellish implications. Further, when first describing the cat, the narration seemingly wanders off into a tangent:

In speaking of his [Pluto’s] intelligence, my wife, who at heart was not a little tinctured with superstition, made frequent allusion to the ancient popular notion, which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise. Not that she was ever serious upon this point – and I mention the matter at all for no better reason than that it happens, just now, to be remembered. (321)
These associations of black cats with witchcraft and Pluto’s name with hell serve to plant suspicion about the cat. As previously noted, Poe was quite insistent that all details in a story have significance and importance. As such, this deviation from the main narration cannot be ignored. In fact, its very oddity, especially so shortly after the narrator claimed he would present an impartial report of the facts and allow readers to draw their own conclusions, makes it even more important that readers pay close attention to its inclusion.

Additionally, it is important to note that the narrator claims credibility for this unlikely image by claiming that others saw it, too. However, he only tells us that others were examining the wall and making exclamations of interest and surprise. He does not leave one of them to vocalize what image is portrayed upon the wall; rather he does this task himself. Further examination of the narrative probability of the tale, and the unlikely idea that the dead cat caused the fire, means that a discerning reader must question if this image is only seen by the narrator. For all we know, only having his questionable report to rely upon, the rest of the onlookers could have seen an image of anything from the Virgin Mary to a circus clown, or they could have simply been commenting upon the destruction the fire caused.

The narrator quickly, although not all that convincingly, rationalizes the image he perceives away by deciding that, the previous night, someone outside of the house had cut down Pluto’s hanged body and thrown it through the bedroom window in an attempt to wake the narrator so he might escape the fire. Consequently, “The falling of other walls had compressed the victim of my cruelty into the substance of the freshly-spread plaster; the lime of which, with the flames, and the ammonia from the carcass, had then
accomplished the portraiture as I saw it” (323-324). While this chain of events is possible, it is highly implausible. First, one must question who amongst the crowd would choose the hanged carcass of a cat to throw at someone to wake them, instead of virtually any other object that could be found lying on the street. Next, the idea that the animal carcass would end up positioned just right so as to create the image of the cat, as if he was still hanging, against the wall is nearly impossible to believe. Further, the chances of such an event occurring on the one remaining wall of a house which has burnt to the ground, a wall which also happens to have been a part of the narrator’s bedroom, his most private sanctum and therefore most significant for leaving such a “calling card,” are nearly astronomical. This hypothesis the narrator puts forth, while entertaining, is not at all likely or plausible.

While the narrator does not outright place the blame for the fire on Pluto’s spirit, as such a wild accusation would only hurt his claim to sanity, he does imply the connection, even as he rationalized the image of the cat upon the ruins of his house:

Although I thus readily accounted to my reason, if not altogether to my conscience, for the startling fact just detailed, it did not the less fail to make a deep impression upon my fancy. For months I could not rid myself of the phantasm of the cat; and, during this period, there came back into my spirit a half-sentiment that seemed, but was not, remorse. (324)

In addition to providing just enough references to the dead cat that the narrator hopes the reader will jump to the conclusion he desires – that the dead cat is responsible for the fire – the narrator also provides some curious information when he speaks of the half-sentiment that was almost, but not quite, remorse. These words are important to note
because they imply that the narrator is finished feeling guilty about killing Pluto. He seems to have dealt with his issues concerning that event and moved on. However, the very fact that he now refuses to recognize the guilt for what it is tells us that he has moved past the point of sanity and is a danger to himself and, as his wife will later be able to attest, others.

Next in the tale, the narrator finds another black cat at a bar that bears a striking resemblance to Pluto. The narrator takes the cat home, noting that night that the animal differs only from the original in that he has “a large, although indefinite splotch of white, covering nearly the whole region of the breast” (324), a detail which will become even more relevant later. It is not until the next morning that the narrator realizes the differences are indeed only limited to the animal’s white fur; this second cat is also missing one of its eyes. Shortly thereafter, the narrator reveals that he began to dislike the cat:

By slow degrees, these feelings of disgust and annoyance rose into the bitterness of hatred. I avoided the creature; a certain sense of shame, and the remembrance of my former deed of cruelty, preventing me from physically abusing it . . . I came to look upon it with unutterable loathing, and to flee silently from its odious presence, as from the breath of a pestilence. (325)

While the narrator claims his original intent in obtaining the second cat was to make up for his ill-treatment of Pluto, perhaps even to replace him, I argue that really, the narrator was not satisfied with the punishments already inflicted upon him. He desired a constant reminder of his cruelty, in order to feel that he was being punished enough – a self-imposed albatross.
Further, the narrator becomes paranoid of the cat:

With my aversion to this cat, however, its partiality for myself seemed to increase. It followed my footsteps with a pertinacity which it would be difficult to make the reader comprehend. Whenever I sat, it would crouch beneath my chair, or spring upon my knees, covering me with its loathsome caresses. If I arose to walk it would get between my feet and thus nearly throw me down, or fastening its long and sharp claws in my dress, clamber in this manner to my breast. (325)

Such actions are hardly uncommon for cats to engage in, although the narrator's tone and choice of descriptive words here vilify the animal, rather than recognizing its actions as natural, like the narrator did when describing Pluto's reactionary bite when the drunken narrator grabbed him.

Perhaps even more telling are the pronouns the narrator chooses to use in referring to the two felines. Pluto is always a "he," while the second cat is never a "he" or a "she;" the second cat is always an "it." While this difference may seem insignificant at first, it is actually very important. The use of the personified "he" for Pluto, the wronged animal in the narrator's mind, personalizes Pluto; "he" makes it easier for the reader to relate to the animal. At the same time, the use of "it" for the second cat helps to make that animal less personal, more of an object. As a result, it is easier to vilify this cat, to make him a scapegoat for the narrator's horrific actions. Just as in a courtroom, the prosecution will always refer to the defendant they want convicted as "the defendant" or "Mr. Smith" to make the accused less personal. On the other hand, the defense counsel will refer to his client by first name as often as possible because a jury can relate more easily to someone they know by first name as opposed to "the defendant." In this case, the readers are the
narrator’s jury, and he is subtly attempting to prejudice us against the second cat by using the impersonal “it.”

At this point, the white splotch of fur upon the second cat’s breast must be considered. When the narrator first comes into possession of the animal he claims that the splotch is of an indeterminable shape. However, later in the tale, as the narrator vilifies the animal more and more, he comes to recognize a shape in this white fur:

It [the white fur] was now the representation of an object that I shudder to name – and for this, above all, I loathed, and dreaded, and would have rid myself of the monster had I dared – it was now, I say, the image of a hideous – of a ghastly thing – of the GALLOWS! – oh, mournful and terrible engine of Horror and of Crime – of Agony and of Death! (326)

One must question why the white fur changed shape from an indefinable blob to take the shape of gallows, in the narrator’s head. It was a clue to him of what he must do – of the ultimate punishment he could suffer, one which would finally cleanse him of his crime in death. Even more, this change in the shape of the white portion of the animal’s fur could be a clue to the narrator as to how he might achieve his own trip to the gallows, via the animal.

Overall, the dislike and eventual hatred he felt towards the animal, coupled with his avoidance of it, show how this animal’s presence exacerbated the narrator’s guilt. However, instead of a situation he wanted to avoid, as he seemingly avoids the second cat, I contend that he desires this punishment. Ultimately, however, a damned soul, complete loss of worldly possessions, and a constant reminder in the form of a carbon copy of the mistreated cat are not enough. The narrator still desires to be punished
further. So, although he blames the cat, he kills his wife and provides the means necessary for the authorities to find him out in this deed.

First, though, it is necessary to examine why his wife, aside from being convenient, is an ideal victim for this homicide. At the beginning of the story, when the narrator is explaining how his disposition since childhood has centered around humanity and animals, he also comments that his wife was the same way: "I married early, and was happy to find in my wife a disposition not uncongenial with my own" (320). This is reiterated later when the narrator reveals that the second cat is missing one of its eyes: "This circumstance [the missing eye], however, only endeared it to my wife, who as I have already said, possessed in a high degree, that humanity of feeling which had once been my distinguishing trait, and the source of many of my simplest and purest pleasures" (325). That the narrator's wife not only shares his love of animals and gentle disposition (or at least the disposition he once possessed) and that the narrator claims this to be "the source of many of my simplest and purest pleasures" exhibits why the wife becomes an ideal target for murder. In killing her, the narrator is further punishing himself by killing this last vestige of the man he once was, of any hope within him that his soul might be salvageable. Additionally, in murdering his wife, the narrator is ensuring that he receives the ultimate punishment man's judicial system deals out: execution. Even more appropriate is that his execution will be via hanging. The narrator will suffer the same fate he forced upon Pluto.

Of course, in the tale the narrator cannot admit his desire to be punished. As a result he blames his actions upon the second cat. He describes the event thus:
One day she [his wife] accompanied me, upon some household errand, into the cellar of the old building which our poverty compelled us to inhabit. The cat followed me down the steep stairs, and nearly, throwing me headlong, exasperated me to madness. Uplifting an axe . . . I aimed a blow at the animal which, of course, would have proved instantly fatal had it descended as I wished. But this blow was arrested by the hand of my wife. Goaded, by the interference, into a rage more than demoniacal, I withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain. She fell dead upon the spot, without a groan. (326-327)

While not directly avoiding responsibility for the act (he could have claimed it an accident, that his wife placed her head in the way of his blow aimed at the cat), the narrator tries to claim madness that has now passed as he tells the tale. His choice to say that his wife’s interruption goaded him to kill her implies a temporary insanity, rather than the long-lasting one which still affects him even as he relates the story. This further implies that he is now sane and can tell that he was not then. This, of course, is not true. However, the cause and effect links the narrator wants his audience to draw, with Pluto’s spirit as the primary cause, are dependant on the narrator’s denial of the depth of his guilt and his responses to that guilt, albeit subconscious.

Indeed, blaming the murder on the cat was not enough. For while the murder was symbolic in destroying the last of the narrator’s innocence and demolishing any opportunity to return to the man he once was, without punishment, the act is ultimately futile. In order to ensure that this crime is discovered, the narrator does two things, one consciously, one subconsciously. The subconscious one is first. When he bricks up his wife’s corpse in a cellar wall, he traps the cat in with her. This walling up of the cat
would require some force on the narrator's part, as no cat would happily curl up and allow himself to be blocked in. I assert the entrapment of the cat was subconscious because the narrator openly states that he tried to find the cat after entombing his dead wife, not realizing he has already locked the cat away. In fact, he goes so far as to claim that he was ready to kill the animal:

My next step was to look for the beast which had been the cause of so much wretchedness; for I had, at length, firmly resolved to put it to death. Had I been able to meet with it, at the moment, there could have been no doubt of its fate; but it appeared that the crafty animal had been alarmed at the violence of my previous anger, and forebore to present itself in my present mood. (328)

Further, the narrator claims that the cat's absence was like a balm to his mind. He says “It did not make its appearance during the night – and thus for one night at least, since its introduction into the house, I soundly and tranquilly slept; aye, slept even with the burden of murder upon my soul!” (328). I contest the narrator's claim to the high quality of sleep was due to the absence of the cat. Or rather, that it was due to the cat having seemingly set off for parts unknown. On some level, I submit, the author knew where the animal was, and the seeming lightness of his soul was due to the knowledge that soon the animal would be the cause of him being found out and finally sufficiently punished.

In fact, while the narrator claims he was at peace with his murder, when the police are searching his home, and it appears that the narrator will get away with his crime, he goes out of his way to give the police the clues necessary to find his wife's corpse. He tells the reader that the police searched his property, descending into the cellar for the “third or fourth time” (328). When it appeared that they were ready to depart the premises, the
narrator claims that “I quivered not in a muscle. My heart beat calmly as that of one who slumbers in innocence . . . I burned to say if but one word, by way of triumph, and to render double sure their assurance of my guiltlessness” (328). However, this is a lie which the narrator tells himself, as well as his reader. His desire to speak to the police, to repeatedly tell them what a well-constructed house he has, even to go so far as to rap upon the wall behind which his wife is entombed, is rooted in the desire, the need, to be discovered, to be punished. If he truly wanted to escape punishment, all the narrator needed to do was keep his mouth shut. However, his boasts did not draw enough attention from the police, as evidenced by the fact that in the middle of his exaltations of the house’s construction he pauses to ask “are you going, gentlemen?” (329). So, the narrator takes it one step further by rapping upon the front wall of the tomb.

If, as I contend, the narrator purposely walled up the cat (although subconsciously) it was with the intent to use the animal just as he does, as a force to reveal his crime. When he raps upon the wall, the narrator tells us that the cat answers:

No sooner had the reverberation of my blows sunk into silence, than I was answered by a voice from within the tomb! – by a cry, at first muffled and broken, like the sobbing of a child, and then quickly swelling into one long, loud, and continuous scream, utterly anomalous and inhuman – a howl – a wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation.

(329)

Of course, the howl from within the wall spurs the policemen into motion, and they quickly discover the narrator’s wife’s corpse and the still living animal. The narrator’s
description of the cat's answering howl is a last-ditch effort to force readers to reach the
conclusion the narrator desires us to reach – that the cat is a manifestation of the dead
Pluto, and that he is finally taking his revenge upon the narrator. The particularly
gruesome image the narrator paints at the end, not only equating the cat's howl with all
the denizens of hell, but of the cat perched upon the head of the corpse, apparently having
fed upon it to stay alive during the four days the two were entombed together, is designed
to reinforce the narrator's portrayal of the cat as evil.

However, using the narrator's earlier admissions of a desire to punish himself for his
actions, as well as his transition from a calm, rational reporting of events to a morbid,
gothic tale of the spirit of a murdered cat driving the narrator to murder, show that
blaming the cat is too simple a reading. Further, such a reading denies audience members
Poe's crafty, captivating, and ultimately disturbing look into the mind of a man driven
mad by his own guilt.
CHAPTER 3

FOLIE A DEUX: SHARED MADNESS IN "THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER"

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is, as with most of Poe’s more grisly tales, a story of death, destruction, revivification, and, of course, madness. Unlike the previous discussion, we will not here focus on the cause of the madness. Rather, we will examine Poe’s use of madness from a new angle – that of shared madness, also known as folie a deux.

The narrator of this tale tells of his journey to visit a boyhood friend, Roderick Usher, from whom he has received a missive requesting his presence. Upon reaching the Usher estate, the narrator meets Madeline, Roderick’s sister, who is gravely ill. Both Roderick and Madeline suffer from a terminal, slow-progressing disease of genetic origins. The narrator meets Madeline the first day of his visit, just as the disease progresses to a point that requires her permanent consignment to bed. The narrator does not again see the lady Madeline until Roderick announces she has died and requests the narrator’s help in entombing her within a room situated in the lower levels of the Usher house. The narrator complies, and, again, time passes. One particularly dark and stormy night, Roderick’s own illness seems to progress to the point where he is experiencing auditory and visual hallucinations. He has a breakdown, and accuses the narrator of being mad,
just as the lady Madeline, now dead several days, appears to the two men, apparently having escaped her tomb. The bloody figure of Madeline falls upon Roderick. Both are dead by the time they hit the floor; Madeline is perhaps never truly alive again and Roderick succumbs to his own terror. The narrator flees the house, barely escaping being entombed when the house collapses in upon itself, sinking into the tarn and destroying all evidence of the fall of the House of Usher.

As “The Fall of the House of Usher” is one of Poe’s most popular, often anthologized, and critically evaluated stories, an examination of the patterns of past criticism is necessary in order to understand why another approach is needed. While the fantastical elements of this story most obviously suggest that it is not to simply be taken literally, numerous symbolic, allegorical, and other critical approaches have been exhausted over the years. Readings cover such ground as psychoanalytical analysis consisting of “personifying the narrator as the dream ego, Roderick Usher as his shadow, and Madeline as his anima” (Brennan 136) and the implication that “the analysis of some powers lies ‘beyond our depth’: it lies...in the open boundaries of the unconscious” (136). Also considered is the possibility that “Edgar Allan Poe entices his readers to view the narrator’s experiences as a dream” (Shackelford 18). On the other end of the spectrum, some criticism has looked at the idea that the house is and/or conceals a creature of vampiric nature, which accounts for Roderick and Madeline’s illnesses and subsequent deaths, as well as Madeline’s apparent rising from the dead (Bailey 449). Regardless of the variety of these readings, the common thread is that most focus on the relationships between Roderick and Madeline or Roderick and the narrator.
What these analyses are missing is that there is a fourth major player in this story, whose consideration is necessary for a thorough reading— the receiver: the reader, or possibly more accurately, the listener. At the most basic level, this is, after all, a tale one man tells another. More than one critic has suggested that the narrator of this tale is unreliable. However, such criticisms usually focus on proving that the narrator cannot be trusted, ignoring the implications of such a statement. I submit that “The Fall of the House of Usher” is an attempt, by the narrator, to create folie a deux — a madness shared by two. This shared psychosis occurs not between the narrator and Roderick Usher as has been suggested: “Why else does Roderick at the outset send for Narrator to join him, but that Usher fears he is losing his reason?” (Hoffman 319). Rather it is shared by the narrator and his audience, making the sharing between Roderick and the narrator allegorical of what is occurring between the narrator and his audience as the tale progresses. Through an examination of the inconsistencies in the tale and the narrator’s carefully chosen language, I will contend that the House of Usher— both the structure and the family— are a hallucination on the narrator’s part. Further, I assert that the narrator, at least on some level, knows this, and his reasons for sharing this tale are based in a desire to validate his experience. When one alone experiences an event, he has only his sensory perceptions to rely on to prove that the event occurred. However, if two or more people believe the same event to have occurred, whether they directly experienced it or not, the event’s validity exponentially increases. With this increase in validity of the tale, comes an increase in stability of the mental status of each believer in the event, both in their own minds and to society at large. In other words, if the narrator can convince even
one reader of his story, his place among the sane is nearly cemented as fact carved in stone, at least to his mind.

In order to more fully understand this concept, I again turn to Fischer’s ideas of narrative fidelity and narrative probability. I present the idea that the very fact that this tale is told in first person—from one man to another—as proof of its goal. This story is narrated by one who claims to have experienced the events in the tale. In fact, it is a testimonial, and as such, it becomes very personal. As previously mentioned, such personal stories are a form of social currency used to continuously reaffirm and redefine our perceptions of ourselves and the world and people around us, in short, our realities.

Such is the case with the narrator in “The Fall of the House of Usher.” While Fisher’s Narrative Paradigm could certainly be applied to what Roderick tells the narrator, it is more aptly suited to explore the tale the narrator is telling his audience—the reader. I contend that, ultimately, the narrator’s tale is suspect for a number of reasons, including the inconsistencies in the story and the narrator’s carefully chosen language, both diversionary and illusionary. As such, a discerning reader must question the narrative fidelity of the events the narrator relates. Did they occur in fact or simply in the narrator’s mind? If the latter is true, we must then question if this is an all or none situation. In other words, if at least some of these events occurred only in hallucinations experienced by the narrator, how do we determine if any of the events actually occurred?

While I ultimately suggest that the entire recollection is a fabrication on the narrator’s part, this is a point which can be legitimately and probably successfully argued against. However, the final understanding of this story as the narrator sharing his madness with the audience depends not upon where this line between literal truth and fiction can be
drawn, because ultimately, it does not matter how much of the story occurred only within
the confines of the narrator’s mind. This is not the important feature of “The Fall of the
House of Usher,” and, therefore, demarcating exactly where this line lies is unimportant.

I contend that the narrator is aware of the dubious nature of his claim, albeit at a
subconscious level. As such, he chooses the manner in which his story is delivered very
carefully, taking great pains to make his tale, and himself as narrator, as convincing as
possible. In this fact, he differs little from many of Poe’s other narrators.

The very fact that the narrator can only be called “the narrator,” and not by name,
lends credence to him. This is because the lack of detail grants him automatic status as
an average person, one who is believable because of his normality and similarity to the
receiver. Indeed, “the narrator is uncharacterized, undescribed, even unnamed . . . In fact,
he is a mere point of view for the reader to occupy” (Abel 72). However, there is danger
in assuming that this unknown narrator is an “everyman” – one becomes less evaluative
of his story, and therefore more likely to miss the abundant clues littering the story.

These clues are only apparent after a close examination of the narrator’s word
choices. However, in order to reach the point whereat the receiver of this tale embarks
upon such an investigation, we need to consider the large, glaring flaws in narrative
probability which will induce readers to instigate a careful inspection. The first signal to
readers that something is amiss in this tale is found in the inconsistencies in the story,
which are concerns of narrative probability. The largest example of this is, obviously, the
reappearance of the “lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline” (157) after being
entombed for “some days” (151). While the description of “some days” is vague and not
necessarily exclusionary of a period of time in which a human being could survive
without food or water, it does not likewise guarantee that Madeline could have survived. Moreover a further, more pressing concern would be lack of oxygen. The vault is either air tight or very nearly so, as evidenced by the lack of sufficient oxygen to feed the torches’ fire when Roderick and the narrator first open it: “[the vault] had been so long unopened that our torches, half smothered in its oppressive atmosphere” (150). And while one might successfully argue that a descent into a coma on Madeline’s part would mean she needed less oxygen to survive, lack ofhydration and nutrition is still unaccounted for.

Even ignoring these practical concerns, Madeline’s reappearance means that she must have escaped not only from a coffin that was screwed shut, with her on the inside, but also from the tightly sealed vault, with its large, heavy, iron door. Indeed, the narrator reports that the door’s “immense weight caused an unusually sharp grating sound, as it moved upon its hinges” (150). The supposition that a woman weak from a lingering, wasting disease could not only survive without food, water, or sufficient air, but also succeed in breaking out of a screwed-shut coffin and a vault, tightly sealed with heavy, iron doors, pushes the boundaries of believability. Indeed, “a Madeline in the vault is as well buried as a Madeline under six feet of earth. In short, Roderick’s sister cannot escape her burial place. Therefore the living Madeline cannot reappear” (Hill 55). In fact, “it is absurd to imagine that Madeline breaks open her coffin, unfastens the massive iron door, and goes up into the House” (56). As such, it makes one question the narrative probability (which then leads one to question the narrative fidelity) of the tale.

Similarly, but on a smaller scale, after the description of Madeline’s illness and the equally long description of howgrieved Roderick is by it, she drops out of the story until
the sudden announcement of her passing and subsequent entombment. Reasonably, one might expect Roderick, who was so grieved by the prospect of her passing, to desire to spend time with her before her death. However, his time is apparently occupied by the narrator, and Madeline is not mentioned. Indeed, after that description of Roderick’s grief, the narrator relates that “for several days ensuing, her name was unmentioned by either Usher or myself, and during this period I was busied in earnest endeavors to alleviate the melancholy of my friend” (145). This seeming contraction between word and deed causes even a casual reader to question the narrative probability of this tale.

Once the seed of doubt has been planted, a closer examination of the language choices made by the author from the very beginning of the tale reveal a concerted effort on his part to establish his credibility as a counter measure to the narrative improbability, which the inconsistencies cause to arise. The opening section detailing the narrator’s approach to the house and his initial meeting with Roderick Usher, up to the point where Roderick describes his sister’s illness, is especially important. This is simply because it is the beginning of the story. In the beginning, the narrator must not only captivate the audience, but also establish his credibility as narrator. By doing so, he opens the door for the acceptance of later, more fanciful events.

To begin, the narrator goes to great lengths to establish for the reader that he is reasonable, logical, and skeptical of the supernatural and fantastical in general. In fact, as a part of his everyman persona, the narrator lends 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 (Abel 72).

He relies on this persona to help in the establishment of his credibility in a variety of ways. For one, he often relies heavily on sensory descriptions and verbs (from the first five senses) to establish credibility (using concrete details) for both himself and his story. Indeed, “the criterion for error in perception is of course the sensory experience of other individuals . . . insanity is a ‘defect in the comparing faculty,’ so that one way to avoid complete madness is to compare one’s own sense impressions with those of other people” (Butler 3). In the case of the narrator, where there is no one else who can claim to have lived through the experience with which to compare sensory impressions, the narrator uses a glut of sensory description to convince receivers of his authenticity.

For example, while the narrator’s descriptions in the opening sentence of the narrative, when first approaching the house, do contain subjective adjectives (e.g.: oppressive, dreary, melancholy) (138), they also include a comparable number of more objective-seeming descriptions (e.g.: dull, dark, soundless, alone) (138). Similarly, the third sentence follows this pattern. While the core of the sentence is that the narrator experienced “an utter depression of soul” (138), an unarguably subjective impression, the narrator presents this idea in such a way that is seems much more objective. He begins the action of the sentence with a sensory verb – “I looked upon the scene before me” (138), which implies that the following description will be solely what he observed, not his own fanciful imaginings. Next, the narrator proceeds to give a very detailed, objective description: “upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the
domain—on the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees” (138). The sheer amount of objective, sensory details – things the narrator could have seen, heard, felt, tasted, or touched – serves to subtly reassure the reader that he or she is being presented with factual information.

This process is repeated with the initial description of Roderick Usher, although with a few more subjective descriptions. However, it is important to note that subjective descriptions are more easily acceptable when describing a person than an inanimate object; they always have been. The narrator describes Roderick thus:

A cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve; a nose of a delicate Hebrew model, but with a breadth of nostril unusual in similar formations; a finely moulded chin-speaking, in its want of prominence, of a want of moral energy; hair of a more than web-like softness and tenuity; these features, with an inordinate expansion above the regions of the temple, made up altogether a countenance not easily to be forgotten (142).

Like the house description, the sheer amount of descriptive language (large, liquid, thin, pallid, etc.) is designed to overwhelm the narrator’s audience so that he or she feels the need to accept the more subjective details and continue with the story.

However, this is not the only approach the narrator utilized to establish his credibility. In the primary description of the house, for instance, the narrator does not rely solely on overpowering his audience with sensory details to validate his story. He also is quick to dismiss subjective feelings which suggest he is not as impartial an observer as he presents.
himself to be by comparing such feelings to dreams or hallucinations, thereby making them easier to ignore when questioning the narrator's reliability. For example, in that third sentence, after his laundry list description of the house's appearance, the narrator says that he is left with "an utter depression of soul" (138). However, he quickly makes this a more "factual" feeling by comparing it to the "sensation ... [of] the afterdream of the reveler upon opium" (138). This comparison accomplishes two things. First, it gives credence to the narrator's feeling. This impression has a direct correlation in nature; anyone can experience it. (Although admittedly, this particular comparison is slightly suspect due to the fact that perception-altering drugs hardly make for the most concrete examples of realistic perceptions of the world. However, this is only revealed on close examination. A causal receiver is likely to miss the suspect nature of the comparison, allowing it to achieve the narrator's goal of lending him credibility.) The second accomplishment of this comparison is to plant the idea of irrational or excessively subjective perceptions into the reader's mind. The narrator repeatedly uses the comparison to some kind of dream state to dismiss any misgivings the audience may have about his credibility. After all, if the narrator can recognize these sensations as more dreamlike than realistic, he and his perceptions are still to be trusted as accurate, thereby attempting to preserve the narrative probability of the tale.

Yet again, the narrator utilizes this technique before he even enters the house. After a particularly long and vivid, yet mightily subjective description —

...there grew in my mind a strange fancy—a fancy so ridiculous, indeed, that I but mention it to show the vivid force of the sensations which oppressed me. I had worked upon my imagination as really to believe that about the whole mansion and
domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate
vicinity—an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had
reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn—a pestilent
and mystic vapour, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued (140)
— the narrator turns right around and states that it “must have been a dream” (140). By
again dismissing this fanciful impression as a dream, the narrator is once more
establishing that he is a rational man who knows the difference between reality and
imagination. Even the hesitant way in which he describes this “strange fancy” lends
reliability to the narrator as sane and cogent.

Another time that this tale’s teller attempts to establish that he knows the difference
between reality and imagination is in that primary description of his approach to the
Usher estate. He poses the question “What was it...that so unnerved me in the
contemplation of the House of Usher?” (138). His answer is that he simply does not
know: “I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond
doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of
thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our
depth” (138). By acknowledging that the understanding of this idea is beyond himself,
and presumably his audience, the narrator helps establish his rationality. Further, he
acknowledges that this conclusion is unsatisfactory. However, he offers nothing to
counteract this lack of satisfaction. Apparently, simply stating the recognition of this fact
is proof enough as to the veracity of the narrator’s statement. While this should not be
so, I contend that, in actuality, it is. The narrator’s seeming careful consideration of the
question is enough to establish his grip on reality, dissuade most readers from questioning this assertion, and maintain narrative fidelity.

Further, the narrator establishes his own grasp on the real at the expense of Roderick’s. By showing us that Roderick’s sanity is questionable, and that the narrator can recognize this fact, the narrator again substantiates his claim to sanity. First the narrator reports Roderick as “a bounded slave” (143) to fear and the belief that the house in which he dwells is adversely affecting his mental health. The narrator then turns around and testifies that Roderick “admitted, however, although with hesitation, that much of the peculiar gloom which thus afflicted him could be traced to a more natural and far more palpable origin—to the severe and long-continued illness” (144) and to the imminent death of his sister. The second explanation is ultimately more likely to the rational reader, and as such, we identify more with the narrator than Roderick and are more likely to believe the former when the two present disparate information.

Additionally, the narrator’s careful language choices lend credibility to his tale because he often presents information as factual when, in fact, the information is really his opinion, unproven or unprovable. For example, many times the narrator speaks in a tone which indicates the information he is imparting to his audience is cold, hard fact, regardless of offering no proof. For instance, when describing the long line of Ushers and how the title “House of Usher” became applicable to, “in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion” (140), it is the seemingly innocuous inclusion of the peasantry’s opinion in the history of the Usher family name that gives this entire passage credence. If, as I suggest, the narrator’s entire tale is suspect, one
would not expect such details as how the peasantry think of a fictitious family and estate, to be included in the hallucination.

Similarly, the details of Madeline’s illness are presented as statements of fact. The narrator attempts to neglect (I suggest purposefully) to indicate the source of his information. The most logical conclusion, and one unwittingly confirmed by the narrator, is Roderick; however, since the narrator had just finished decimating Roderick’s credibility in order to bolster his own, citing Roderick as the source of information concerning Madeline’s illness would cause the reader to question the validity of said information. The narrator does not want this, and, thus, he presents this information as fact:

The disease of the lady Madeline had long baffled the skill of her physicians. A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character, were the usual diagnosis. Hitherto she had steadily borne up against the pressure of her malady, and had not betaken herself finally to bed; but on the closing in of the evening of my arrival at the house, she succumbed (as her brother told me at night with inexpressible agitation) to the prostrating power of the destroyer; and I learned that the glimpse I had obtained of her person would thus probably be the last I should obtain— that the lady, at least while living, would be seen by me no more (145).

The narrator, by his own admission, was not present to observe the physicians’ diagnoses, nor Madeline’s decline, so his information must be second-hand. And, while he admits, albeit secondarily, to obtaining it from Roderick, this admission is disguised in phrasing designed to imply that Roderick’s influence is only through showing he is worried about
Madeline, as any brother should be. However, we must remember the narrator’s immediately previous ploy of bolstering his credibility by destroying Roderick’s, making Roderick a suspect source of information. Thus follows the narrator’s choice to present the data as straight fact, with no influencing, outside source.

The same style of information presentation occurs earlier when the narrator is detailing his reasons for going to visit Roderick, even though he had not seen him since boyhood. The narrator explains that “it was the apparent heart that went with his request” (139) that convinced him to comply with Roderick’s appeal. While the narrator claims the letter was written with such “heart,” he never presents any examples from the letter, leaving us to assume that the request was, indeed, made with “heart.” Despite the fact that this assumption seems innocuous on face value, it is the precedent it sets that is significant. When the reader starts to accept the narrative as truth, it becomes easier for the reader to accept the more questionable assertions the narrator makes later in the story.

Each of these rhetorical slights of hand, individually, does not pose that great a threat to the narrator’s credibility. However, the fact that patterns of them appear, coupled with the fact that the narrator implements these strategies right from the beginning of his tale, lead me to conclude that his tale is as well organized a campaign as the greatest military strategist could marshal. However, the assault is not being launched on enemy troops. Rather, it is an assault on the narrator’s audience, designed to convince them of his credibility and, ultimately, to persuade them of the truth of his tale.

If the story was told in third person by an omniscient, outside narrator who was not party to the events and whose mental health could not have been influenced by them, I would be more likely to believe any hallucinations which may occur towards the end of
the story to be the result of madness accumulated, transferred, and eventually shared from Roderick to the narrator. However, the narrator did take part in the events he described, and real or hallucinatory, the experience is real to him. The tale he tells is his perceptions of what happened, and, as such, clearly cannot be the objective reporting of events he tries to pass it off as. Further, this telling of the tale occurs after all the events have happened, meaning even his descriptions of the beginning of the story have been colored by his entire experience. I submit that the narrator is a very gifted storyteller, and although probably subconsciously, desires for us to support his belief in the events leading to the fall of the House of Usher. In other words, he wants us to believe – with our belief, comes a validation of his experiences, person, and sanity.

As such, I further submit that in addition to the previously mentioned rhetorical techniques, the narrator has, subconsciously, provided clues that point readers to the conclusion I draw – that the entire tale is a hallucination on the narrator’s part. If some small part of the narrator’s mind knows the entire event to be of a hallucinogenic nature, this knowledge could slip through. Most of these clues are centered on Roderick, as opposed to Madeline or the house, which I contend further supports the idea of subconscious hints about the validity of the story. Indeed, upon first seeing Roderick again and giving that lengthy description of him, the narrator says “I doubted to whom I spoke” (142). A cursory examination indicates the doubt is founded in the fact that Roderick looked nothing like the boy the narrator remembered from childhood. However, it is possible for a deeper meaning to be seen herein; the narrator doubted not only that it was Roderick to whom he was speaking, but perhaps the narrator doubted the man’s very existence.
Additionally, shortly after questioning Roderick’s presence, the narrator continues “In the manner of my friend I was at once struck with an incoherence—an inconsistency” (143). Just as the story has inconsistencies, and just as a careful reader must proceed through the tale with caution, the narrator’s mind is warning him to proceed with care.

Equally intriguing and telling as the narrator’s impressions of Roderick are the words Roderick speaks. His words often turn out to be prophetic, which becomes unsurprising when considering Roderick as the narrator’s hallucination. As a manifestation of the narrator’s mind, Roderick would know how the tale is going to play out. At that first meeting between the two, Roderick says “I shall perish...I must perish in this deplorable folly. Thus, thus, and not otherwise shall I be lost. I dread the events of the future, not in themselves but in their results” (143-144). Roderick’s death is obviously an accurate prediction. Too, though, one must consider the phrases following this pronouncement of impending death. Roderick says, “I must perish in this deplorable folly,” yet we are left unsure of what exactly this “deplorably folly” is. Certainly, the subsequent death and burial of his sister is not folly. Perhaps Roderick is referring to life in general. Or perhaps he speaks of the tale, the hallucination on the narrator’s part. In such a case, Roderick’s despair is centered not in the fact that he will die, but in what the hallucinated experiences will do to the narrator’s sanity, and what they might affect our sanity if we choose to believe the narrator.

Likewise, Roderick states, “I dread the events of the future, not in themselves but in their results” (143-144). It is possible that Roderick dreads the death of himself and his sister. It is possible that he dreads asking the narrator to experience these events. But, it is just as possible that Roderick, as a subconscious manifestation of the narrator’s
recognition of the events as hallucinatory, dreads the loss of the narrator’s sanity and, by proximity and through belief, our own. While our belief in a series of fictitious events as fact would not necessarily qualify us as insane, it would not be the most compelling evidence against insanity either.

The most telling clue, however, appears towards the end of the tale when a seemingly insane Roderick calls the, by contrast, seemingly sane narrator “MADMANN!” (156). While it is easy to dismiss this cry as the workings of a fevered, deranged mind, I contend that this is a last ditch effort by Roderick to reveal the true nature of the narrator before his (Roderick’s) death. As is the case with most eleventh hour revelations, this is the most blatant clue. Roderick knows his time in the hallucinated world grows short and he has only one last chance to warn us of the narrator’s instability; an instability which we ought to be wary of sharing with the narrator, as Roderick has seemingly shared his vision of a bloodied, still living Madeline with the narrator. “When Roderick calls his companion insane, he provides . . . [a] major key to understanding the narrator’s state of mind” (Hill 62). However, since the narrator is telling this tale after his escape from the Usher estate, not as the events occur, any memories must already be colored by his madness. Of course, if, as I suggest, the entire drama is a hallucination on the narrator’s part, the events already were, by nature, colored so.

Past readings have allowed for this shared psychosis—this folie a deux—to exist between Roderick Usher and the narrator. Some even claim that this is exemplary of Poe’s genius: “For his goal in this tale—a goal he reaches—is not just to show Roderick going insane but to show also the narrator’s own descent into madness” (61). This “adds a new dimension to the portrayal of madness” (62). I contend however, that Poe’s true
genius is evidenced by the fact that the narrator has successfully drawn audience upon audience into his delusion. By forcing the audience member to believe his story, the narrator has made him or her just as much a player in this tale as Roderick or Madeleine. Through his cunning language choice and utilization of the storytelling format to relate this tale, the narrator has shared his madness with the reader and provided a distinct experience that illustrates how easily crossed the line between "normal" and mad is.
CONCLUSION

In order to understand the conclusions that can be drawn from examining the mad narrators in Poe’s “Ligeia,” “Eleonora,” “The Black Cat,” and “The Fall of the House of Usher,” one must recall Fisher’s words quoted at the beginning of this study concerning the narrative paradigm and the ultimate purpose of stories. He argued that receivers test narrative probability and narrative fidelity in order to choose which stories to assimilate into their worldview. The reason behind this constant reshaping of one’s definition of reality is that “the world is a set of stories which must be chosen among to live the good life in a process of continual recreation” (75).

As such, when considering Poe’s tales, one must then consider what purpose lies in exploring the madness of these four narrators. What benefit does the receiver gain from this venture? The answer is unquestionable that, in these tales, Poe offers readers an insight into human nature in general, and specifically, into some of those minds society deems mad, or abnormal. However, since very few readers would claim a desire to understand these psyches better because of an aspiration to emulate them, we must still ask why such understanding is significant.

Perhaps, Poe offers these peep shows of the socially-defined insane simply to evoke compassion or empathy. Perhaps he offers them to show readers how frighteningly similar we are to these men, how easy it would be for us, too, to cross that line between sane and insane. Indeed, whether affected by grief, guilt, or the desire to validate one’s own reality, Poe’s repeated choice of employing an insane narrator must be read as a
suggestion that we could become those we ridicule for their lack of sanity more easily than we realize; the line between sane and mad is much thinner than previously recognized, and we are closer to crossing it than we have ever imagined.

Poe possessed an understanding of the interplay between society’s definitions of acceptable mental states and the process of defining them. More important, he was also honest and mentally balanced enough himself to recognize the sometimes harsh truths of these interactions, and he attempted to share his insight with others through his tales. His grasp of the significance of storytelling as a vehicle to convey these definitions is clear in his use of stories to attack socially defined and enforced boundaries of sanity. Through carefully crafted tales, which provide readers a glimpse into the minds of those we deem insane, Poe exhibits his genius as a writer, as well as providing the reader a unique opportunity to redefine his own reality.
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