Edgar Allan Poe finally getting proper funeral

By BEN NUCKOLS (AP) –

BALTIMORE — For Edgar Allan Poe, 2009 has been a better year than 1849. After dozens of events in several cities to mark the 200th anniversary of his birth, he's about to get the grand funeral that a writer of his stature should have received when he died.

One hundred sixty years ago, the beleaguered, impoverished Poe was found, delirious and in distress outside a Baltimore tavern. He was never coherent enough to explain what had befallen him since leaving Richmond, Va., a week earlier. He spent four days in a hospital before he died at age 40.

Poe's cousin, Neilson Poe, never announced his death publicly. Fewer than 10 people attended the hasty funeral for one of the 19th century's greatest writers. And the injustices piled on. Poe's tombstone was destroyed before it could be installed, when a train derailed and crashed into a stonecutter's yard. Rufus Griswold, a Poe enemy, published a libelous obituary that damaged Poe's reputation for decades.

But on Sunday, Poe's funeral will get an elaborate do-over, with two services expected to draw about 350 people each — the most a former church next to his grave can hold. Actors portraying Poe's contemporaries and other long-dead writers and artists will pay their respects, reading eulogies adapted from their writings about Poe.

"We are following the proper etiquette for funerals. We want to make it as realistic as possible," said Jeff Jerome, curator of the Poe House and Museum.

Advance tickets are sold out, although Jerome will make some seats available at the door to ensure packed houses. Fans are traveling from as far away as Vietnam.

The funeral is arguably the splashiest of a year's worth of events honoring the 200th anniversary of Poe's birth. Along with Baltimore — where he spent some of his leanest years in the mid-1830s — Poe lived in or has strong connections to Boston, New York, Philadelphia and Richmond.

With the funeral angle covered, the Edgar Allan Poe Museum in Richmond staged a re-enactment last weekend of his death. Those with a more academic interest in Poe can attend the Poe Studies Association's annual conference from Thursday through Sunday in Philadelphia.

Visitors in Baltimore for the funeral can enjoy a new exhibit at the Baltimore Museum of Art, "Edgar Allan Poe: A Baltimore Icon," which includes chilling illustrations to "The Raven" by Edouard Manet.

Baltimore has a decided advantage over the other cities that lay claim to Poe, notes BMA director Doreen Bolger. "We have the body," she said.

This week, that's true in more ways than one. Jerome said he's gotten calls from people who thought he was going to exhume Poe's remains and rebury them.

"When they dug up Poe's body in 1875 to move it, it was mostly skeletal remains," Jerome said. "I've seen remains of people who've been in the ground since that time period, and there's hardly anything left."
Instead, Jerome commissioned local special-effects artist Eric Supensky to create an eerily lifelike — or deathlike — mock-up of Poe's corpse.

"I got chills," Jerome said Monday upon seeing the body for the first time. "This is going to freak people out."

The body will lie in state for 12 hours Wednesday at the Poe House, a tiny rowhome in a gritty section of west Baltimore. Visitors are invited to pay their respects.

Following the viewing will be an all-night vigil at Poe's grave at Westminster Burying Ground. Anyone who attends will have the opportunity to deliver a tribute.

On Sunday morning, a horse-drawn carriage will transport the replica of Poe's body from his former home to the graveyard for the funeral.

Actor John Astin, best known as Gomez Addams on TV's "The Addams Family," will serve as master of ceremonies.

"It's sort of a way of saying, 'Well, Eddie, your first funeral wasn't a very good one, but we're going to try to make it up to you, because we have so much respect for you,'" said Astin, who toured as Poe for years in a one-man show.

The service won't be a total lovefest, however. The first eulogy will come from none other than Griswold.

"People are asking me, 'Jeff, why are you inviting him? He hated Poe!'" Jerome said. "The reason is, most of these people defended Poe in response to what he said about Poe's life, so we can't have this service without having old Rufus sitting in the front row, spewing forth his hatred."

Eulogies will follow from actors portraying, among others, Sarah Helen Whitman, a minor poet whom Poe courted after his wife's death, and Walt Whitman, who attended the dedication of Poe's new gravestone in 1875 but didn't feel well enough to speak. Writers and artists influenced by Poe, including Arthur Conan Doyle and Alfred Hitchcock, will also be represented.

Jerome expects to cry — one reason he won't be speaking. Even his rivals are impressed with the scale of the tribute.

"Annoyed as I am with Baltimore sometimes, I have to give them credit," said Philadelphia-based Poe scholar Edward Pettit, who argues his city was of greater importance to Poe's life and literary career. "Baltimore has done an awful lot to maintain the legacy of Poe over the last 100-some years."
Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), American poet, critic, short story writer, and author of such macabre works as "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1840);

I looked upon the scene before me - upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain - upon the bleak walls - upon the vacant eye-like windows - upon a few rank sedges - and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees - with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium - the bitter lapse into everyday life - the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart - an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it - I paused to think - what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher?

Contributing greatly to the genres of horror and science fiction, Poe is now considered the father of the modern detective story and highly lauded as a poet. Walt Whitman, in his essay titled "Edgar Poe's Significance" wrote;

Poe’s verses illustrate an intense faculty for technical and abstract beauty, with the rhyming art to excess, an incorrigible propensity toward nocturnal themes, a demoniac undertone behind every page. ... There is an indescribable magnetism about the poet’s life and reminiscences, as well as the poems.

Poe’s psychologically thrilling tales examining the depths of the human psyche earned him much fame during his lifetime and after his death. His own life was marred by tragedy at an early age (his parents died before he was three years old) and in his oft-quoted works we can see his darkly passionate sensibilities—a tormented and sometimes neurotic obsession with death and violence and overall appreciation for the beautiful yet tragic mysteries of life. They who dream by day are cognizant of many things which escape those who dream only by night.—"Elonora". Poe’s literary criticisms of poetry and the art of short story writing include "The Poetic Principal" and "The Philosophy of Composition". There have been numerous collections of his works published and many of them have been inspiration for popular television and film adaptations including "The Tell-Tale Heart", "The Black Cat", and "The Raven". He has been the subject of numerous biographers and has significantly influenced many other authors even into the 21st Century.

Edgar Poe was born on 19 January 1809 in Boston, Massachusetts, the son of actors Elizabeth Arnold Hopkins (1787-1811) and David Poe (1784-1810). He had a brother named William Henry (1807-1831) and sister Rosalie (1811-1874). After the death of his parents Edgar was taken in by Frances (d.1829) and John Allan (d.1834), a wealthy merchant in Richmond, Virginia.

Young Edgar traveled with the Allans to England in 1815 and attended school in Chelsea. In 1820 he was back in Richmond where he attended the University of Virginia and studied Latin and poetry and also loved to swim and act. While in school he became estranged from his foster father after accumulating gambling debts. Unable to pay them or support himself, Poe left school and enlisted in the United States Army where he served for two years. He had been writing poetry for some time and in 1827 “Dreams”—Oh! that my young life were a lasting dream! first appeared in the Baltimore North American, the same year his first book Tamerlane and Other Poems was published, at his own expense.

When Poe’s foster mother died in 1829 her deathbed wish was honoured by Edgar and stepfather John reconciling, though it was brief. Poe enlisted in the West Point Military Academy but was dismissed a year later. In 1829 his second book Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems was published. The same year Poems (1831) was published Poe moved to Baltimore to live with his aunt Maria Clemm, mother of Virginia Eliza Clemm (1822-1847) who would become his wife at the age of thirteen. His brother Henry was also living in the Clemm household but he died of tuberculosis soon after Edgar moved in. In 1833, the Baltimore Saturday Visiter published some of his poems and he won a contest in it for his story "MS found in a Bottle". In 1835 he became editor and contributor of the Southern Literary Messenger. Though not without his detractors and troubles with employers, it was the start of his
career as respected critic and essayist. Other publications which he contributed to were Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine (1839–1840), Graham’s Magazine (1841–1842), Evening Mirror, and Godey’s Lady’s Book.

After Virginia and Edgar married in Richmond in 1836 they moved to New York City. Poe’s only completed novel The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym was published in 1838. The story starts as an adventure for a young Nantucket stowaway on a whaling ship but soon turns into a chilling tale of mutiny, murder, and cannibalism.

It is with extreme reluctance that I dwell upon the appalling scene which ensued; a scene which, with its minutest details, no after events have been able to efface in the slightest degree from my memory, and whose stern recollection will embitter every future moment of my existence.—Ch. 12

Poe’s contributions to magazines were published as a collection in Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque (1840) which included “The Duc de L’Omelette”, “Bon-Bon” and “King Pest”. What some consider to be the first detective story, “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” was published in 1841;

Now, brought to this conclusion in so unequivocal a manner as we are, it is not our part, as reasoners, to reject it on account of apparent impossibilities. It is only left for us to prove that these apparent ‘impossibilities’ are, in reality, not such.

Poe’s collection of poetry The Raven and Other Poems (1845) which gained him attention at home and abroad includes the wildly successful “The Raven” and “Eulalie” and “To Helen”;

Lo, in yon brilliant window-niche
How statue-like I see thee stand,
The agate lamp within thy hand,
Ah! Psyche, from the regions which
Are Holy Land!

Poe continued to write poetry, critical essays and short stories including “Ulalume”, “Eureka” and “The Cask of Amontillado” (1846);

It must be understood, that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good will. I continued, as was my wont, to smile in his face, and he did not perceive that my smile now was at the thought of his immolation.

Now living in their last place of residence, a cottage in the Fordham section of the Bronx in New York City, Virginia died in 1847. Poe turned to alcohol more frequently and was purportedly displaying increasingly erratic behavior. A year later he became engaged to his teenage sweetheart from Richmond, Elmira Royster. In 1849 he embarked on a tour of poetry readings and lecturing, hoping to raise funds so he could start his magazine The Stylus.

There are conflicting accounts surrounding the last days of Edgar Allan Poe and the cause of his death. Some say he died from alcoholism, some claim he was murdered, and various diseases have also been attributed. Most say he was found unconscious in the street and admitted to the Washington College Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland. He died soon after, on 7 October 1849, and was buried unceremoniously in an unmarked grave in the Old Westminster Burying Ground of Baltimore. On this original site now stands a stone with a carving of a raven and the inscription;

Quoth the Raven, Nevermore
Original Burial Place of
Edgar Allan Poe
From
October 9, 1849
Until
November 17, 1875

Mrs. Marian Clemm, His Mother-In-Law
Lies Upon His Right And Virginia Poe
His Wife, Upon His Left. Under The
Monument Erected To Him In This
Cemetery

In a dedication ceremony in 1875, Poe’s remains were reinterred with his aunt Maria Clemm’s in the Poe Memorial Grave which stands in the cemetery’s corner at Fayette and Greene Streets. A bas-relief bust of Poe adorns the marble and granite monument which is simply inscribed with the birth and death dates of Poe (although his birthdate is wrong), Maria, and Virginia who, in 1885, was reinterred with her husband and mother. Letters from Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Lord Alfred Tennyson were read, and Walt Whitman attended. The mysterious Poe Toaster visits Poe’s grave on his birthdays and leaves a partially filled bottle of cognac and three roses.

All that we see or seem
Is but a dream within a dream.—A Dream within a Dream

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Jan. 14, 2002 -- Edgar Allan Poe is easily remembered for such stories as "The Pit and the Pendulum," "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Tell-Tale Heart."

But late in his career "The Raven" made Poe so popular that children would chase the author until he would turn around, raise his arms and yell "Nevermore." Yet despite the popularity of that dark and haunting poem, Poe remained a poor man.

Jeffrey Savoye works for the Edgar Allan Poe Society of Baltimore, Md., and has been studying Poe for nearly 20 years. He says one of the reasons the author was so poor is that he would often spend months working on a poem, only to be paid a few dollars from the reviews or newspapers that would publish it. Poe sold "The Raven" in 1845 for around $15.

But how and when Poe wrote the poem remains a mystery, Elizabeth Blair reports for Morning Edition in the first installment of Present at the Creation. The new NPR series explores the origins of American cultural icons.

"He told different stories to different people," Savoye says. "He told someone he'd written it in a feverish passion over a couple of days... and someone else that it had lain on his desk for 10 years."

In an essay called "The Philosophy of Composition," written a year after "The Raven" was published, Poe implied that writing the poem was a methodical process, like solving a math problem, and that he wrote the end of it first. But Savoye says he and other scholars doubt that "that cold mechanical approach" was used.

"He doesn't seem to have written anything that way," Savoye says. "Writing was a more difficult process than that. It's interesting we have very few manuscripts that are working drafts. We only have final copies. It's almost like he didn't want anyone to see all the work that went into it."

And it has been speculated that the poem's Lenore, the narrator's deceased lover, is actually a reference to Poe's wife Virginia, who was dying of tuberculosis at the time of the poem's writing. But Savoye is convinced that's not the case.

"There's this incredible dogged optimism in Poe... how could you possibly have gotten up and faced another day under his circumstances without some incredible strength of 'today will be better'? Opportunity was always just around the corner for Poe and he just never quite got there."

Just four years after "The Raven" made him an international celebrity, Poe died, nearly broke.
In the summer of 1838, Edgar Allan Poe left the city of New York, where he faced criticism and minimal recognition, and moved to Philadelphia, where he would soon gain profound success (Quinn 268). Just a year prior to this move, Poe married his cousin, Virginia Clemm, who accompanied him to Philadelphia (Wagenknecht 18). Little is known of Poe’s time in New York other than the fact that he faced severe poverty with total earnings amounting to under one hundred fifty dollars (Peeples 31). Therefore, since Philadelphia shared the prestige with New York as a publishing center, it offered Poe new publishing opportunities and opened the doors to success (Quinn 268). He found this success editing Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine from 1839-1840 and then Graham’s Magazine from 1841-1842 (Peeples 74). During this time, Poe delivered lectures on American poetry, published thirty-six tales including "William Wilson," "The Masque of the Red Death," and "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," and also released a collection of stories in 1840 entitled Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque (Peoples 74). It was during this peak of Poe’s publishing career that he published "The Fall of the House of Usher." This tale relates to various aspects of Poe’s life including his occupation as an editor, his battle with alcohol and drugs, his psychological and emotional well-being, and the impact of death on his life and work.

Although Poe found success while working for Burton and Graham, he did not find contentment, for neither Burton’s magazine nor Graham’s met Poe’s expectations of his ideal publication. Poe was frustrated with his career and aspired to edit a magazine of his own, a magazine of a higher class than that of Burton’s or Graham’s (Peeples 75). He strove towards the publication of his own magazine, which he would call the Penn and later change to Stylus, but Poe soon discovered his endeavors would be in vain. He blamed his failure on George Rex Graham, Poe’s employer, who agreed to financially support the Penn, but then withdrew his backing. Although it was during this time that Poe was most successful in terms of publishing his work, he was not financially prosperous. According to Scott Peeples, author of Edgar Allan Poe Revisited, "[i]n 1841, his best earning year, he probably made about $1,100, just above poverty-level wages by the standard of the time" (75).

One aspect of Poe’s life that may have been very influential in "The Fall of the House of Usher" was his drinking habits (Wagenknecht 30). Like many dimensions of Poe’s lifestyle, the severity of his drinking problem is often debated (30). It has been said that a single glass of wine would get Poe drunk and although this may not be exactly accurate, it can be said that one drink would affect him visibly (30). Poe was raised in a drinking society and an inclination for alcohol also seems to have been prevalent in his family (31). Although Poe was certainly a drinker, he did not revel in the bars or taverns (32). According to Edward Wagenknecht, author of Edgar Allan Poe: The Man Behind The Legend, Poe "had neither the virtues nor the vices which flourish in the tavern atmosphere" (32). The immediate effect of such drinking habits was the endangerment to Poe’s health, but it also "made him an easy target for his literary enemies throughout the
In addition to his drinking practices, Poe’s use of opium has also been an issue of suspicion. Much of this suspicion is directly connected to "The Fall of the House of Usher" when Poe likens Roderick’s voice to that of an "irreclaimable eater of opium." According to Wagenknecht, this is "[o]ne of the most widely believed legends about American writer's," but he asserts "the evidence is quite unconvincing" despite the arguments of other biographers to the contrary (41). Wagenknecht bases his position on the testimony of "friends and associates" and the fact that "no medically-trained person who ever saw Poe supports the hypothesis of drug addiction" (42).

Arthur Quinn, author of *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography*, shares Wagenknecht’s position that "Poe was not a drug addict," and supports his argument with an account of an alleged suicide attempt by Poe in 1848 (Wagenknecht 43; Quinn 693). Poe is professed to have taken an ounce of a drug, which was rejected by his stomach. Quinn asserts that if Poe was a drug addict, he would have correctly calculated the proper lethal dosage (694). Quinn also notes the fact that opium was "frequently given in small doses for pain, and Poe may well have taken it in that form" (694).

Yet, another area of Poe’s life scrutinized by critics and readers was his psychological and emotional wellbeing, which also may have been influential in the writing of "The Fall of the House of Usher." Wagenknecht contends that "if [Poe] was mad, his whole generation was mad with him. Fascination with death was typical of the Romantic movement; so was the attraction of incest; so was the association of death with love" (57). Therefore, the historical context in which Poe published his work must be taken into consideration. Scott Peeples argues that Poe’s works were "written to appeal to popular tastes, and some elements that seem bizarre and grotesque to modern readers were in fact conventional" (77). They were written "for a mid-nineteenth-century American audience, whose frames of reference were in many respects different from those of late-twentieth-century readers" (77). Wagenknecht then contends that in addition to the cultural understanding of Poe’s subject matter, an exploration of the methods by which Poe presents this material must also be considered (57). Poe’s material and subject matter may have often been aberrant, but his methods were not according to Wagenknecht (57). "His heroes analyze their obsessions in a sane, perfectly logical way, and he presents the analysis in terms of a highly finished style" (57). Therefore, Poe’s work is less a reflection of his psychological state and more a reflection of his "immersion in his own place and time" (Peeples 77).

Finally, the theme of death in much of Poe’s work, including "The Fall of the House of Usher," may have been a direct reflection of Poe’s personal encounters with death. According to Peeples, "[e]ven the briefest biographies of Poe emphasize the impact that the deaths of loved ones – women especially – had on his work..." (46). His natural mother died when Poe was only two and his stepmother, France Allan, died in 1829 when Poe was twenty, but the most influential experience of death for Poe was that of his wife, Virginia in 1847 (Wagenknecht 19). Virginia contracted tuberculosis in 1842, which was followed by five years of "physical exhaustion and nervous collapse" for Poe (19). In addition, Peeples examines the cultural shift in general attitudes towards death during the nineteenth century from a focus on the finality and grimness of death to the hope of everlasting life (46). Nineteenth century America "emphasized the hope of keeping alive a person’s spirit and in some ways denied the physical fact of death" (46).
Peeples contends that amid this shift, "Poe constructed allegories that explored the death experience" (46).

Poe’s work, including "The Fall of the House of Usher," was influenced by many experiences throughout his life and also by the culture in which he lived. His employment at *Burton’s Gentlemen’s Magazine* and *Graham’s Magazine* in the early 1840’s proved to be one of the most prosperous times of his publishing career, yet Poe faced many obstacles in his private life during this time including poverty and alcohol abuse. Although his alleged alcohol and drug addictions are issues yet to be settled, they were clearly an influence in his life and work. In addition to his habits regarding alcohol and drugs, his psychological stability has also been called into question. The impact of death, which was prevalent throughout his life, was tremendous. Regardless of the many struggles Poe encounter, he has emerged as one the greatest Romantic writers in American history.

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When Edgar Allan Poe wrote “The Fall of the House of Usher,” two factors greatly influenced his writing. A first influence was John Locke’s idea of Empiricism, which was the idea that all knowledge was gained by experiences, exclusively through the senses. A second vital influence was Transcendentalism, which was a reaction to Empiricism. While John Locke believed that reality or truth was constituted by the material world and by the senses, Transcendentalists believed that reality and truth exist within the spiritual or ideal world. They believed that the external world was dependent solely on the conscious. Beverly Voloshin suggests that “Poe presents transcendental projects which threaten to proceed downward rather than upward” (19). Here it becomes obvious that there is a strong connection between John Locke’s Empiricism and the resulting ideas of Transcendence, and the powerful effect that they had on Poe and other emerging Romantic writers of that time. In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Poe establishes a new type of literature, one that emphasizes aspects of Empiricism as well as the idea of Transcendence. Poe uses this unique literature to introduce the Usher mansion and its intriguing and very troubled inhabitants.

Locke wrote the “Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” which was published in 1690, and is credited with opening up the period of Enlightenment in Europe. Its strongest connection to Poe was that it had a “late popularity in New England” (Voloshin 18). With this popularity in New England, many of the writers of the time either voiced their approval of Empiricism, or took an opposite stance in their literature. Locke believed that the mind was a “Tabula Rasa,” or blank slate, and that man gained knowledge not by divine revelation or because he possessed innate ideas, but only because his senses allowed him to learn from the external world, which would then put him in touch with reality. The idea of the senses controlling all that we are able to learn and understand became the backbone for the Romantic writers of the 19th century. Certainly, Edgar Allan Poe was part of the intellectual elite who considered Locke’s theory of Empiricism and the idea of the senses controlling all knowledge when contemplating the creation of his own works.

Indeed, the introduction John Locke’s Empiricism changed the way in which man viewed himself, as well as the very ideas behind how knowledge was acquired. As Bevery Voloshin states, these beliefs were obvious, “especially in Locke’s denial of innate ideas and his conception that all knowledge is built up from atomistic sensations through the mind’s power of reflection” (18). Innate ideas were introduced by Descartes’ earlier in the 16th century, and Locke was quick to disagree with the Cartesian doctrine of innate ideas – “the doctrine that man is born with clear and undeniably true ideas” (Sahakian 21). Locke thought that only through reflection could knowledge be gained, and that human beings were not equipped with certain
inborn knowledge. “Locke felt that for people to be receptive toward his empiricism, it was necessary to eliminate the stronghold of innate ideas” (Sahakian 36). Only through our experiences (which are driven by our senses) and then reflection could we understand the world around us. Locke considered reflection an internal sense that receives ideas from a source that is within a person (Sahakian 36).

For Locke, knowledge contained two types of ideas: simple ideas that we experience each day, and more complex ideas, which are created by our minds (Sahakian 20-21). In addition, he strongly believed that the mind was passive as it received new ideas. The more complex ideas were created while we analyzed and compared the simpler ideas. Therefore, our sensations were the key to acquiring knowledge and information, and then by using our reflective powers, humans would actually be able to make the connection between simple ideas and more complex ideas. He considered that “true knowledge discloses the relationships between ideas and reality” (Sahakian 21). Therefore, true knowledge was gained solely through the mind experiencing and then analyzing the situation. This was the point where simple ideas mated with complex ideas, and lead to "knowing."

In addition, Locke remained a Christian as he was writing his “Essay Concerning Human Understanding”, although he was somewhat negative toward traditional ideas of Christianity. He maintained that our minds are not capable of comprehending reality, so in turn, we had to use faith where knowledge was not available. Still, while Locke backed a number of Christian doctrines, he also sought to find a meeting point between Christianity and deism. Deism was centered on the thought that God created the universe, but once he was done, he was no longer a part of the world. He then “allowed it to be governed by rationally determined natural law” (Sahakian 34). The idea of a transcendent God, who essentially stays out of this created universe, is based on nature, reason, and also on morality. Nature then has the ability to reveal God through human reason, and then man would be able to find out the will of God by using the intellect. This belief disagrees with miracles or supernatural powers, as it “implies the disruption of natural laws” (Sahakian 35).

Therefore, Locke’s Empiricist psychology basically halted any possibility of transcendence. The ideas behind Empiricism eventually led to the Transcendentalist philosophy, which emerged in the 19th century, as a reaction to the empiricism that Locke introduced. “It was precisely Locke’s theory, in its late vogue in American Intellectual life, against which the Transcendentalists revolted…” (Volshin 18). Transcendentalism began as result of the Unitarian break from Calvinism in the beginning of the 19th century. With the advent of Unitarianism, many began to believe that it was possible to have a closer, more personal relationship with God. On September 19, 1836 a group of Unitarian ministers led by Reverend George Ripley met in Boston (Koster 5). The men were dissatisfied with the Unitarian religion and its reliance on the bible. As a result of the meeting the Transcendentalist movement had begun. The Unitarians and Transcendentalists now had very different views. The Unitarians had a belief in total depravity and predestination, while the Transcendentalists believed that by connecting to the natural world one could become Christ-like or divine.

During this time the Unitarians and Transcendentalists became split over their views on miracles and Lockeian Empiricism. The Unitarian belief was that Christ’s miracles were
supernatural. Quite the opposite was the Transcendental belief that Christ’s miracles were natural, but appeared supernatural because humans were detached from nature. The Transcendentalists also questioned the reliance on Lockean Empiricism, in which reality or truth is constituted by the material world. Transcendentalists suggest that reality or truth does not dwell in the physical world, but in the spiritual world. Beverly Voloshin states in her article “Transcendence Downward: An Essay on ‘Usher’ and ‘Ligeia’” that “while Locke’s empiricism created a barrier to a transcendent reality, it also pointed the Romantics in a new direction, down into the realm of sensory experience” (19).

Transcendentalists emphasized the ability to become Christ-like or divine. Through a close connection with the natural world and the spiritual world a person could have a true connection with God. This connection would then lead to a personal connection to the oversoul, in which an ultimate truth or reality is achieved. Voloshin states that:

In Nature, Emerson bases his transcendentalism partly on a refurbished empiricism—that is, a purifying of the sensory apparatus...for Poe too sensation is virtually spiritualized, and sensation replaces spirit or reason as the privileged faculty, but for Poe the natural process which promises transcendence is preeminently—and paradoxically—that of decomposition or decay.

Herein we see Poe using both theories as the basis for his story, “The Fall of the House of Usher.” He takes us into the world of the Ushers, a world that revolves around sensory experiences (from Locke) but also includes transcendence (from Transcendentalism). Poe’s use of language included words which intimated strong sensations, such as “a pestilent and mystic vapour” which is “leaden-hued.” These sensory experiences enable the reader to transcend, although it is downward rather than upward. “The tales have a paradoxical structure in which transcendence is figured as an outward or downward movement, as the method for going beyond the universe of Lockean empiricism is to go through it” (Voloshin 19). Poe brings this out with the narrator’s “depression” and the “unredeemed dreariness of thought.” The language that is used in “The Fall of the House of Usher” presents a connection between the mental and the physical world, which then correlates with the debate between Transcendentalists and the empiricism presented nearly two centuries before.

Works Cited


According to Beverly Voloshin in "Transcendence Downward: An Essay on 'Usher' and 'Ligeia,'" Poe presents transcendental projects which threaten to proceed downward rather than upward in his story "The Fall of the House of Usher" (19). Poe mocks the transcendental beliefs, by allowing the characters Roderick Usher, Madeline Usher, the house and the atmosphere to travel in a downward motion into decay and death, rather than the upward transcendence into life and rebirth that the transcendentalists depict. The transcendence of the mind begins with Roderick Usher and is reflected in the characters and environment around him.

The beliefs of transcendentalists are continuously filled with bright colors and ideas, and heavenly-like tones. The character Roderick Usher suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses which refers to his transcendental beliefs (Poe 1465). Usher finds his transcendental connection with the oversoul but instead of brightness he finds gloom with black, white and gray colors. Madeline Usher suffers from "a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character" (Poe 1465). This results from a loss of contact with the physical world, again a characteristic of a transcendentalist, yet negative instead of positive. According to Voloshin "Madeline matches her bother's pallor, but her special mark is red-a faint blush when she is interred and blood on her garments when she emerges" (22). Both characters differ from transcendentalists with their disintegration of the body and mind instead of a rebirth of the body and mind of a transcendentalist.

Because of his connection with the oversoul Roderick Usher finds it difficult to communicate with words, so instead he uses paintings and writings to describe his inner thoughts. Voloshin describes how in "The Haunted Palace," a writing by Usher, he explains his own "fall of order into chaos, reason into madness, innocence into experience" (20). Representing another downward and deathly transcendence is Madeline, who is painted in the "vault or tunnel" by Roderick. In the painting, Roderick portrays Madeline in a tomb, and gives her no chance to have her own beliefs by locking her in. By doing this, Roderick breaks the transcendental belief that says being locked into the past is wrong, and each person should break free to create beliefs of their own.

Just as the transcendence into decay is found in the characters of "The Fall of the House of Usher" it is also found in the actual house and the environment around it. The story begins in the autumn of the year with an extremely gloomy appearance and ends even more gloomy with the "full and blood-red moon" radiating down (Poe 1474). Voloshin compares an example from the environment to the idea of downward transcendence. The narrator's account begins with his feelings of 'depression,' which finds its parallel in the setting: the day is 'dull, dark and
soundless,' without ordinary sensory stimulation, and similarly, the scene is oppressive and melancholic, without vitality" (19). Transcendentalists feel as though life and light is found when a complete connection with the oversoul is made, yet Poe displays opposite feelings with the gloomy environment he portrays. Usher's house fills with gloom as it reflects on Usher's illness, or his connection with the oversoul. The house resembles Usher with it's head shape, "bleak walls and vacant eye-like windows" (Poe 1461). The downward transcendence Poe uses to describe the environment and the decaying mind of Usher connect together to give the house it's gloomy outward appearance.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" represents a continuous opposition to the transcendentalist views. The mockery of the transcendentalist views are found through the characters, the environment, and the house; instead of light and life, Poe displays a continuation of darkness and death. The complete decay of Usher is found in the house as the narrator witnesses "my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder" (Poe 1474). Voloshin describes the end of Roderick, Madeline and the house as "falls together, into the abyss, though in a paradox typical of Poe, Roderick's destruction may also be that supreme moment of transcendence..." (23). Poe views the transcendentalist thoughts as much too bright and unrealistic, and the ultimate transcendence downward displays his opposite opinions. The decaying mind of Usher, the gloomy environment, and the downward structure of the house all work together to destroy the traditional bright transcendentalist ideas, and to complete the final "Fall of the House of Usher."

Works Cited


Images and Symbols
by Kip Koh

First paragraph

“Poe presents transcendental projects which threaten to proceed downward rather than upward” (Voloshin 19). This first paragraph, which describes the sense of decay permeating the House of Usher, is for Poe the promise that “transcendence is preeminently—and paradoxically—that of decomposition or decay” (Voloshin 19). “[t]he narrator’s confession that he is ‘unnerved’ by the sight of the House of Usher,” where the nerves are the “connection between consciousness and physicality,” sets up a later connection to the narrator’s “depression” which “recasts the experience of Coleridgean dejection or visionary dreariness of Romantic poetry for dejection is a psychological or spiritual state, but depression nicely blends notions of psychological and physical cause” (Voloshin 21). These references to the connection between body and mind strongly suggest the relationship and representation of Roderick as mind, Madeline as body, and their draw to become one, rather than remain apart. Return to text.

“A valet, of stealthy step"

Riddel states that “The library...is a pure house of fiction, hermetic yet multi-centered. It represents the ‘madness’ of a will to truth, the obsessive search for the ‘same rare and remarkable volume’ which is at the same time a search for a maximum luxury and security, a doubling of death” (Johansen 1). Johansen in relation to the Haunted Palace and the Mad Tryst shows that “while the library should, ideally speaking, be a place of refuge to the characters, its potential dangers...are actually brought out into the open in Poe’s story. Where one text interferes with or ‘crosses’ another, that is, where the ‘framed’ and the ‘framing’ text come together in a kind of liaison dangereuse, the breakdown of continuity or narrative order is really on the agenda” (Qtd. in Johansen 1-2). Return to text.

Roderick Usher

"Roderick himself is associated with the abstract, atemporal, and ideal. Roderick's world is one of abstract pattern in black, white, and gray...He himself is a man of ideality, as the narrator remarks, and as shown in phrenological terms by the expanse of his temples; that is, in the nineteenth-century contrast of ideal and real, Roderick is a person who seeks or perceives the truth beyond merely mundane phenomena" (Voloshin 21). Voloshin continues to state that “Roderick vibrates to all motion and change, the whole outward universe” and being so acutely sensitive creates an awareness in Roderick of all "matter and decay" (21). Return to text.

“If ever mortal painted an idea”

Voloshin interprets Roderick's paintings as an allegory of Roderick's fate “which gesture towards a transcendence to be achieved through a movement downwards into pure sensation...” (22). Voloshin asserts that the narrator refers to “idea” here in the Lockean sense as being that which “is given in
perception or what is present in consciousness, but there is simultaneously the sense of the ideal or mystic, that is, what lies behind appearance or phenomena...” (22). The painting itself while somewhat unrecognizable appears to be a “‘vault or tunnel’ (that) presents the real, the tomb of Madeline...The painting in its ‘ghastly and inappropriate splendor’ suggests Roderick’s fear of Madeline. In the recesses of Roderick’s spirit is a fear of the recess which [sic for with] the womb and tomb of life. We might say that Roderick transcends his horror of Madeline and the real not by rising above it but by living through it” (Voloshin 22). Return to text.

The Haunted Palace

This poem inserted into the narrative as suggested by Voloshin is a representation of the fall of thought: “It is a fall of order into chaos, reason into madness, innocence into experience” (20). Voloshin continues to explain that this ballad expresses Roderick’s belief in the “sentience of matter...(and) ‘the kingdom of inorganization’” (22) a doctrine, which Voloshin describes as “the organization and rise of thought” (22). More importantly to the finale and fall of the House of Usher, Voloshin points out that “[t]he evidence for the ordering of thought is Roderick’s experience of his own disintegration, as represented for example in his ballad, so that he is brought into relation or harmony with the whole by losing his original ordered and harmonious functions” (22). This explanation strongly supports the ending paradox of Roderick’s necessary demise, which is at the same time his transcendence. Return to text.

“An irrepressible tremor”

Poe’s earlier mentioning of the artist Fuseli, accompanied with their mutual “preoccupation with the realm of the subconscious” (Shackelford 19) connect this scene with Fuseli’s famed work The Nightmare. This painting portrays “a beautiful woman, dressed in virginal white, lying prostate upon a bed; an incubus, or demon, crouched maliciously upon the woman’s breast; and a horse’s head with fiery eyes emerging from a shadowy background” (Shackelford 19). “Poe’s narrator assumes the exact position of Fuseli’s dreaming damsel” which, with the narrator’s similar reference to the presence of an incubus on his heart or more superficially his breast, “suggest(s) strongly that his final vision of Madeline and Roderick’s embrace of death is, in fact, a nightmare” (Shackelford 19). Return to text.

The Reading of the Mad Trist

The demise of the House of Usher could be interpreted as a direct affect of the narrator’s reading of “The Mad Trist.” The reading of the "Mad Trist" also presents itself as an instance of Tzvetan Todorov’s “pandeterminism” “a sort of ‘generalized causality’ that links any event in the universe to (virtually) any other event, making it impossible for anything to happen by sheer chance...reading aloud from a medieval or pseudo-medieval romance may cause events to happen in the real world (or represent a comment on such events)” (Johansen 3). Return to text.

Madeline Usher
“As Roderick is aligned with the ideal, his twin Madeline is associated with the material and temporal—in other words, the real. Madeline matches her brother’s pallor, but her special mark is red—a faint blush when she is interred and blood on her garments when she emerges, this matched by the blood-red light of the emergent full moon at the moment of the destruction of the House of Usher” (Voloshin 22). Thus “Roderick’s destruction may also be that supreme moment of transcendence, of passing from the limited self to the unlimited whole, which Roderick has been seeking” (Voloshin 23). Return to text.

Blood Red Moon

During the final destruction of the House of Usher, "the breakdown of order is present on a cosmic as well as individual level—the visual correlate of the all-encompassing madness being the final breakthrough of the (feminine) ‘full, setting, and blood-red moon’" (Johansen 2). The moon Johansen continues is "the planet of madness" which represents the chaotic change from a masculine to feminine text (Johansen 2). It is in fact the feminine light of the "blood-red moon" that spills through the fissure of the house of Usher and seems responsible for it being torn asunder. Return to text.

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Annotated Bibliography of Criticism

By Stephanie Taylor


In this article, Quinn challenges G.R. Thompson’s claim in his book Poe's Fiction:Romantic Irony in the Gothic Tales (1973) of the narrator’s unreliability. As an explanation for the narrator’s shortcomings Thompson offers the idea that perhaps Poe intended for us to view the narrator as unreliable. Furthermore, Thompson insists that the story itself is mainly an account of the narrator’s mental deterioration, a contention that Quinn cannot uphold without sufficient evidence, of which he claims there is none. Quinn attempts to prove here that it is perhaps the critic and not the narrator whose veracity should be in question. He claims that “Having long believed that Poe wanted his readers to give credence to, indeed to the [sic] identify with, the visitor to Usher’s house, and finding myself unpersuaded by the opposite proposals Thompson’s book, I should like to review the matter in some detail” (303-04). Not only does Quinn not concur that the narrator was acting in a “frenzy of terror,” or that he was “completely untrustworthy,” but he finds Thompson’s reading to be contradictory in regards to his own statement of theme. Quinn contends that only if the narrator’s mental faculties are fully functioning can there be any grain of truth to Thompson’s thematic theory and critical examination of the text.

Quinn then testifies against Thompson’s versions of the house’s appearance, the narrator’s own experiences, what happened to the house, and even Thompson’s take on the story’s theme. The crux of Quinn’s disagreement with Thompson’s reading ultimately lies in their very different takes on the narrator’s sanity. By dissecting Thompson’s critical analysis of the story, Quinn is setting up his final point in an effort to undermine what he sees as a flawed reading. Quinn relies on an assumption concerning Poe himself and claims that “Surely it was as obvious to Poe as it is to us that a deranged mind, mired in its own subjectivity, is unable successfully to perceive objective reality, much less cope with it. There would be no point, ironical or otherwise, in mocking such inability” (312). In this case, it would only make sense that Poe intended the narrator to be lucid and sane, and in order to substantiate Thompson's thematic claims the stability of the narrator is essential.

Quinn pits his reading of “The Fall of the House of Usher” against readings done by G.R. Thompson, who in turn claims to be indebted to an essay about “Usher” by Daniel Abel. He points out that while Thompson no doubt admires Abel’s reading, he does not, in fact, build on Abel’s proposals and ideas, but instead veers off into original territory and gives a reading that Quinn finds far less convincing than Abel’s. Quinn summarily attacks Thompson’s stance that the narrator (whom he sees as the story’s key figure) is unstable and therefore gives an unreliable account of his experiences throughout. Conversely, Abel feels that Usher himself is the most important figure in the tale, and that it is really a “contest between life and death for the possession of Roderick Usher” (qtd. in Quinn 342). This contradiction of theory makes Thompson’s reliance on Abel’s essay seem misguided.

Point by point, Quinn deconstructs Thompson’s reading and questions his statements of Poe’s intentions. For instance, Thompson’s description of the house as a “death’s head” and a “skull-like face” do not sit well with Quinn, who hotly contends that Poe may have intended the reader to have this dark image of the house, but that he did not dwell endlessly on this image as Thompson suggests. Rather than the narrator allowing himself to succumb to his fears, Quinn feels that each source of terror on the final night of the tale provides the narrator with an opportunity to prove his level-headedness and to keep his wits about him. The narrator is confronted on three separate occasions with situations that could easily have driven him to distraction, and yet he remains sane and reasonably calm, making him a very reliable source for the reader.


Shackelford argues that Poe is continually urging his readers to see the narrator’s experiences as if they were merely a dream. She makes this argument through demonstrating the relation between what happens in “The Fall of the House of Usher” and a reference to a painting by Fuseli. The narrator’s final encounter with the Usher twins just before the destruction of the house is a terrifying situation akin to a nightmare. Shackelford proposes that the components of Fuseli’s (appropriately titled) painting The Nightmare are reassembled here and personified in the narrator’s terror. “The Nightmare is an unforgettable, to many viewers even shocking, canvas composed of three key elements: a beautiful woman, dressed in virginal white, lying prostrate upon a bed; an incubus, or demon, crouched maliciously upon the woman’s breast; and a horse’s head with fiery eyes emerging from a shadowy background” (19). According to Shackelford, Poe may have alluded specifically to Fuseli and compared his art to that of Usher because “Fuseli shared Poe’s preoccupation with the realm of the subconscious” (19).

In this critical review Diane Hoeveler suggests Poe’s intention in “The Fall of the House of Usher” is to implore its readers to question each mysterious aspect of the House of Usher. Hoeveler claims that our human nature provides us with the motive to follow the lead of Poe and to try to discover “the heart of meaning that must exist somewhere within the confines of the text” (386). In the essay Hoeveler argues that “Poe suggests that both history and religion can only be understood primarily as discourse systems, dialogical constructs that sacrifice male strength and creativity to the female-embodied powers of life and death, in other words, the cyclical nature of generation” (388). Hoeveler posits that the Usher twins are a product of Poe’s wild imagination. Their abstractive existence is at the end of a “cultural cycle.” They are simultaneously hyperaware of the “fictional nature of both history and religion” (388). It is because of the knowledge that, “like their creator, they longer have the will or desire to sustain themselves. They only have the energy to self-destruct” (389). Poe’s tale becomes a conduit for the “extremely cryptic” expression of his “frustration and anger toward the female” domination in the battle between the physical and the cerebral (389). The self-created “fantasy of the purely masculine” universe that is Roderick’s utopian fantasy is, in the end subverted by his “self-projected fantasy of a female double”(389). Hoeveler suggests that Poe’s implication is that this self-defeating “compulsion...informs all institutionalized religions”(389).

Hoeveler demonstrates her thesis by deconstructing the religious symbolism employed in the tale; the first symbol Hoeveler deconstructs is Roderick Usher’s favorite “the Vigiliae Mortuorum” (386). She posits that the books’ iconographic and ideological importance is the main reason for using this particular text. Her impetus is to prove that “there must be a hidden meaning implicit in the use of the book” (387). A second point of support is built upon the repressed misogynistic impulses continually evidenced by Roderick in the text. She points to common parallels between this type of repressed anger and the impetuses’ of “all institutionalized (and presumably patriarchal) religions as we have known them” (389). Hoeveler makes a third point regarding the implied unnatural relations between Roderick and his sister Madeline, a strange, unnatural “family that never put forth collateral branches” (390). Hoeveler explores the characteristics of Madeline as they relate to Roderick’s own physical traits. This leads to her next observation on the author’s textual commentary, a dialogical discourse on worship, which ultimately provides the individual with false sense of security. Religion, Hoeveler points out, functions primarily to “ institutionalize female power and status” (391). Roderick through his worshiping is ultimately motivated by a need for self-preservation-the preservation of the patriarchy.

The next point Hoeveler makes is her largest in regard to the readers' understanding of Roderick Usher as an abject hero. She argues that Poe employs the literary device of polyphony in the
This final point leads her to a transition into the second section of the essay where she explores the relationship of Roderick to Madeline. In this section Madeline is described as a created projection of the diseased mind of her brother. Hoeveler states that the house itself is like a self-created grave, wherein Roderick “literally walls his abjected self/his ‘sister’ into”(394). All of this is related to Roderick’s narcissistic arrogance. She concludes the second major section with an explanation of the symbolism of Roderick’s reading as being on par with “a purification rite” (394). Roderick is, according to Hoeveler operating from a position of fear. She supports this claim with critical support from a number of credible sources. Her final section focuses on Roderick and his validation of fear, and the purging of the unclean desire. In the end he inscribes his own madness. The obvious conclusion is that Poe has used the mind of the reader to allow such a creation to exist, if only for a while.


In her essay on Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Louise Kaplan explores both the story’s “currents and undercurrents” as well as the authors’ impetuses for writing the classic horror story (47). She structures her Freudian argument under the context of sexual perversion. Kaplan posits, “[p]erversion is a complex strategy of mind”; this psychoanalytic finding is one Poe, knowingly and deliberately, employed in his own life and in several of his tales (46). She states in her thesis that the intention of the essay is to exhibit “Poe’s mastery of the perverse strategy, with its mystifications and concealments, its ambiguous relationship to the moral order, [and] its pretense of a fundamental antagonsim to representational reality” (47). Her argument is “guided by the principles of the perverse strategy,” and includes her own “interpretations of the moral and aesthetic plights of the artist protagonist, Roderick Usher…” (47).

She begins her argument suggesting that the strange “specters of incest and necrophilia [that] hover in the background” are representational of the “sexual aberration” of perversion (47). Poe, Kaplan claims, employs these images intentionally because they transgress the “laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion” (48). These intentionally created “illusions…are employed to preserve the borders of the moral order, even as they render a picture of moral disintegration”; this is Poe’s perverse strategy (48-9). She continues to build her argument focusing on the intentional undercurrents of the poetry and music created by Roderick Usher, which “enable…moral nihilism” (51). Kaplan next claims that Poe’s “perverse strategy is an unconscious method that regulates the life of Desire…”and does not undermine authority; rather, it “is an attempt to preserve the moral order” (52). Her argument is extended into a deep exploration of the characteristics of perversion. Kaplan continues to suggest “there must be an undercurrent beneath the current so easily and ingeniously detected by our reasonable narrator” (58). In the conclusion she reiterates the various points of her argument and supports them with popular and similar critical views. Overall, the essay is cogent and well developed. Kaplan makes a number of textual discoveries and brings in appropriate critical support where necessary.

In her essay on “The Fall of the House of Usher” Leila May focuses on the implications of the brother-sister relationship in 19th century America. May establishes a context by exploring the “complicated and contradictory conception of the [larger] family” in the early nineteenth century (388). May frames her argument by examining the environment of the typical post-industrial, nuclear family paying specific attention to the “typical” values and mores of the day. She highlights the many contradictions in the “hyperreal and hypersensitive organization” that comprised the family unit (388). May exposes the “demarcated and strictly disciplined” roles, which had to be maintained in order to reinforce the patriarchal standard. Specifically, May focuses on the role of the sister as the “sanctorum of moral virtue” (389). May argues that in “literature of the fantastic” such as Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” “the principle of individuation itself collapses, taking along with it the very possibility of the family and the social system that it sustains, and prefiguring a release and discharge of feminine desire in new and revolutionary forms--hinting at the subversive forms of sisterhood that may have been precisely the ones that lay hidden and smoldering in the deepest fears of Victorian patriarchy itself” (390). Madeline is symbolical of the Victorian sister; her body “is the very site upon which [the] ideology [of patriarchy] is enacted” (394). Her sonorous uprising in the end of story from her inscribed and literal entombment within the House of Usher causes complete chaos and total destruction of the family structure.

In her argument, May establishes an analogous connection between the structure of “the House of Usher” and the typical 19Th Century family. She points to several contemporary “Victorian” novels that place great emphasis on the role of the sister to uphold the strict social standards of the era. May next suggests that the image of Roderick Usher mirrors the House. She acknowledges how both of them are “in the same terms of degeneration” (392). Her argument crests with the declaration of what she sees as the reason why the story functions so well. May posits that the “unraveling (hierarchical) distinctions between male/female” is the reason the story is at once “simultaneously terrifying and…liberating” (393). May posits that Poe was aware of what he was doing when he wrote this story. This is evidenced in the emphasis placed on the “terrifying” aspects of the increasing character tension. May highlights another important theme in the story: the symbolic sibling relationship itself and what it seems to represent. She points to the “sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature” that phenomenally occur between the Roderick twins (393). May makes her final supportive point regarding the nature of the “nineteenth-century bourgeois domestic ideology” that she sees being textually represented and physically embodied in the sister, Madeline. Madeline—the nineteenth century every-sister is the focal point for the “perpetration of patriarchy” (394). Through the textual act of burying her in the “foundation of the familial edifice” Madeline is momentarily silenced. The isolation, while temporary, ends and with it the so to does the House.

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