

Workshop on Stylistics and writing

Opening text from *The Fall of the House of Usher*:

The Fall of the house of Usher

During the whole of a dark and soundless day near the end of the year when the clouds were hanging low in the heavens, I had been passing on horseback through country with little life or beauty and at length I found myself as evening fell within view of the house of Usher. I know not how it was-but with my first sight of the building, a sense of heavy gloom filled my spirit. I looked upon the scene before me_ upon the house itself_ upon the ground around it_ upon the walls_ upon the eye-like windows_ upon a few decaying trees with a complete sadness of soul like no healthy, earthly feeling. There was coldness, a sickening of the heart, in which I could discover nothing to lighten the weight I felt. What was it?- I stopped to think- so fearful in my view of the house of Usher? It was a mystery to which I could find no answer.

I pulled my horse on the edge of a black and quiet lake that lay beside the building and looked there at the picture, upside down, of the ghastly trees and the vacant and eye-like window.

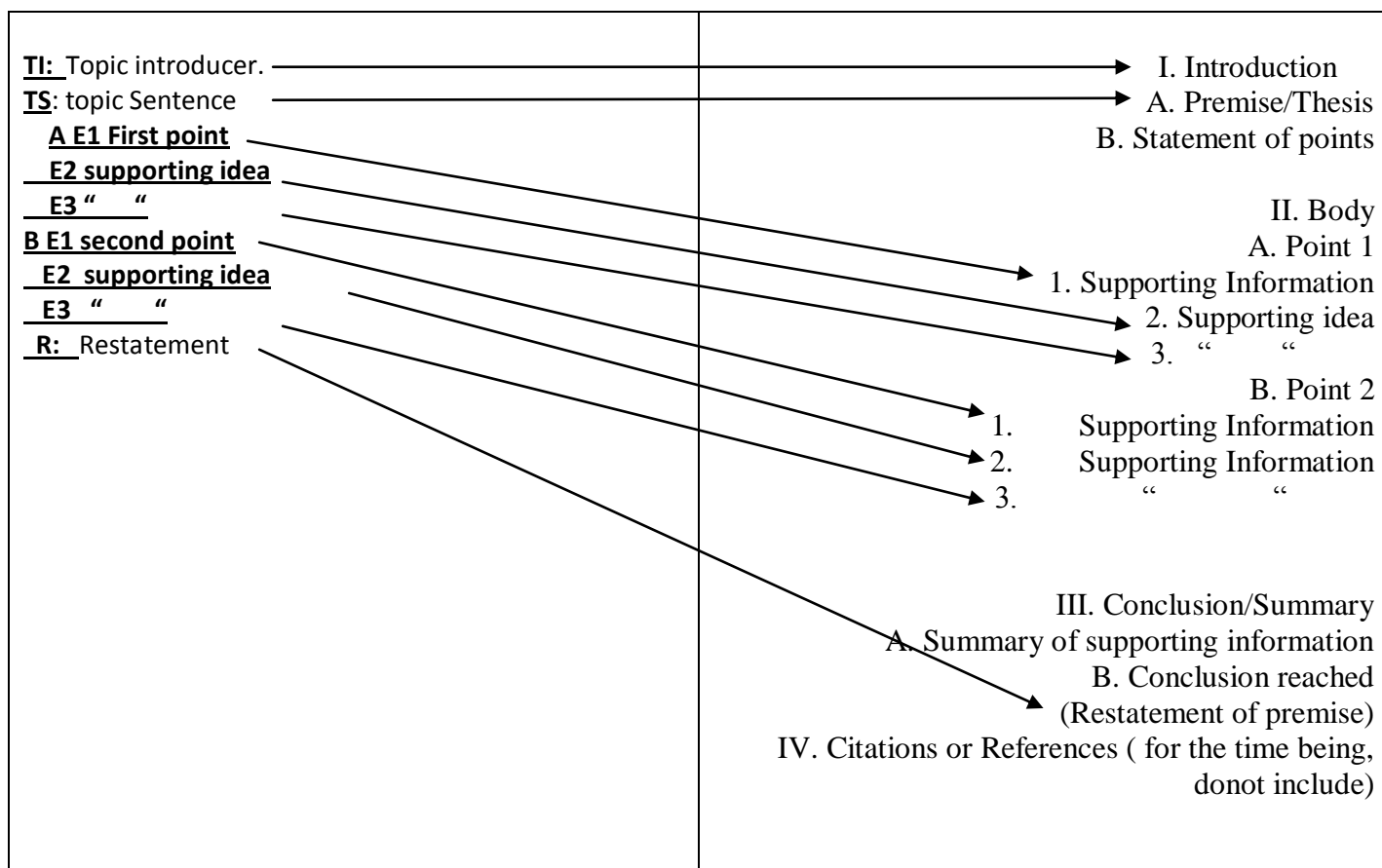
Nevertheless in this house of gloom, I was to spend several weeks. Its owner Roderick Usher, as a boy had been my friend, but many years had passed since our last meeting. A letter from him had lately reached me, a wild letter which demanded that I reply in person. He wrote of bodily illness, of a sickness of the mind, and of a desire to see me as his best and indeed his only friend. It was the heart in it_ which didn't allow me to say no. Although as boys, we had been much together, yet I really knew little of my friend. I knew, however, that his family, a very old one, had long been famous for an understanding of all the arts, and for many quiet acts of kindness to the poor. I had learned too that the family had never been a large one, with many branches. The name had passed always from father to son and when people spoke of the house of Usher, they included both the family and the family home.

When I again uplifted my eyes to the house itself, from its picture in the lake, there grew in my mind a strange fancy_ a fancy so laughable that it only shows the force of the feelings which laid their weight on me. I really believed that about the whole house and the ground around it, the air itself was different. It was not the air of heaven, but it rose from the decayed trees, the gray wall, and the quiet lake- a sickly air that I could see, heavy, gray, slow-moving.

Shaking off from my spirit what must have been a dream, I looked more carefully at the building itself. The most noticeable thing about it seemed to be its great age. None of the walls had fallen yet the stones appeared to be in a condition of advanced decay. Perhaps the careful eye would have discovered the beginning of a break in the front of the building, making its way from the top down the wall until it became lost in the dark waters of the lake.

Inspiring yourself from the given essay, write a paragraph following the outline below:

From Paragraph to Essay:



Now look at the comparative essay deriving from the paragraph we have just written following the outline on the left above:

The title *The Fall of the House of Usher* is fully illustrated in the opening extract of E.A Poe’s short story through a description of the house itself and its main occupant: R Usher. We are going to examine how the author succeeds in rendering the idea of sadness, mystery and collapse first in the house, and then in the main character.

To start with, the house inspires ‘gloom’ and ‘sadness’, a coldness’, ‘ a sickening of the heart’, an oppressing feeling the narrator cannot explain (E1). The house of Usher is given prime stress by being put as end-focus at the end of the first sentence. The prepositional parallelism of the second sentence shows that the narrator looked everywhere in complete dismay (sadness and shock) (E2). The nominal phrases are recurrent and evolve around the narrator’s feeling s at seeing the house: ‘a sense of heavy gloom’, ‘ a coldness’, ‘a complete sadness’.... .The house is also depicted as being in a condition of advanced decay with the beginning of a break in the front of the building from the top down until it became lost in the dark waters of the lake. Coupled with the feeling of sadness and gloom are the feelings of mystery and strangeness which can well qualify the tenant of the house: Roderick Usher. (E3)

We learn of Roderick Usher through his letter which is wild, referring to Usher’s state rather than that to the letter. Similarly, it is through the nominal phrases that Usher is depicted: ‘a bodily illness’, ‘a sickness of the

mind' (E2). Likewise, strangeness is expressed in the kind of relationship between Usher and the narrator through a linguistic deviation: contrast is reinforced through the use of the subordinating conjunction 'although' and in the middle of the sentence (paragraph 3, sent 6), the conjunction of coordination of coordination 'yet' which should not be. This grammatical deviation stresses the mystery of Roderick Usher: *Although as boys, we had been much together, (yet), I really knew little of my friend.* The linking words of contrast, coordinating conjunctions or subordinating conjunctions of opposition are plentiful in this paragraph: 'nevertheless', 'although', 'yet', 'however'. They are used to set a contrast and stress strangeness as with the fact he remains the sole member of the house of Usher. We can therefore easily make a direct relationship with Usher who is ill, the only remaining member of his family: the reader will easily infer that both are on the point of extinction or death. (E3)

His text shows E.A.Poe as a skilful writer using his principle of the unity of effect: how the place (the house), the action (relief of a diseased friend), the time (the end of the day, of the year) contribute to expressing the gradual deterioration and death of his friend and the fall of the house of Usher through a language marked by parallelisms, a linguistic deviation, the predominance of conjunctions of contrast as well as modifiers and nominal phrases.