

Here is now the whole of Walter Nash's approach as applied to *The Fall of the house of Usher*: 3     **The Short Story: *The Fall of the House of Usher* by Edgar Allan Poe.**

### **6.3.1 Introduction**

After the historical-literary document, we introduced a new genre: the short story because we wanted our course to also be an introduction to the different genres: the short story, the novel, the poem taking writers from a Puritan background from William Bradford to Nathaniel Hawthorne to Robert Lowell encompassing the centuries from the beginning of the 17th century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The short story was well illustrated by Edgar Allan Poe since he is said to be the father of the short story which he conceived as having a unity of time, place and effect. *The Fall of the house of Usher* was a good example of that: the action takes place at the end of the day and at the end of the year and takes place in the *melancholy house of Usher*. There is also a unity of action, the purpose of the narrator being to come to visit Usher in order to relieve his gloomy friend. The death and *the fall of the house of Usher* as both family and physical house are highly illustrated throughout the story through the many correspondences reinforcing the atmosphere. Even the twin-sister and brother are united in death at the end. The unity of effect is perfectly achieved. Here again, the same stylistic approach will be applied to the text.

The opening passage of *The fall of the house of Usher* (*The text is in the appendix*)

### **6.3.2 A Sample Text from the opening passage**

Our first reception of the text is that it deals with a close (something ending), gloom and strangeness. A narrator comes to visit his friend on the latter's urgent invitation on the ground that he is ill. This narrative text evolves around a description of the surrounding and of Roderick Usher: The study of a particular vocabulary and the special grammatical patterns will highlight the kind of intent the writer wanted to bestow on the reader. We shall focus our attention on the general patterning of the text as a narrative framework, the structuring of its content and the relevance of stylistic device to structural intention. The text is that of 'The Fall of the House of Usher' from *Major American Short Stories*, OUP, 1980, U.S.A, p 135-151. Lines are numbered for convenience of subsequent reference.

### **6.3.3 Setting and Symmetry**

An eminent feature of this passage is the symmetry of its scenic arrangement: it begins and ends with the description of the House of Usher and its surrounding and ensconced between the two is the description of R.Usher.

In the first part of the text, strangeness and mystery are combined with gloom. The predominance of the adverbial of time and place are striking and set the time of this short story: *During the whole of a dark and soundless day near the end of the year when the clouds were hanging low in the heavens.*

What is prominent is that we are at the end of the day therefore we already have the idea that something is finishing which will be the main theme of this short story. It is from the start an oppressing atmosphere since the clouds are hanging low in a dark and soundless atmosphere. The use of adjectives evolving around darkness, gloom, oppression, deterioration are striking and constitute the main semantic backbone of this story whether in the first or last paragraphs :

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|--|
| Adjectives are listed below according to their recurrent semantic purports.  |
| <u>Darkness</u> : dark (1 <sup>st</sup> §) gray, dark (3 <sup>rd</sup> §)  |
| <u>Silence</u> : soundless, quiet  |
| <u>Mystery</u> : strange, slow-moving (air)  |
| <u>Oppression</u> : heavy, sickly  |
| <u>Deterioration</u> : decaying, decayed   |
| Concerning <u>the verbal phrases</u> , they also contribute to reinforcing the above semantic meanings of <u>oppression</u> and <u>strangeness</u> . |
| ‘hanging low’  |
| ‘filled my spirit’ (with spirit as a recipient)  |
| (evening) fell   |
|  |
| Nominal phrases impart, gloom and sadness:   |
| ‘with little life or beauty’.  |
| ‘a sense of heavy gloom’   |
|  |

Table 2: The use of adjectives, nouns, and verbs in Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*

At the end of the first sentence, the ‘House of Usher’ comes last as end-focus after the long adverbials of both time and place. We can also notice the use of the negative being stressed: *I know not* to highlight the state of incomprehension. Besides, strong words are used, *gloom* instead of sadness *filled my spirit*; he could have said’: *I felt a sense of heavy gloom* . A series of adverbials of place follows one another (in a parallelism) to stress that the surrounding of the narrator was completely amazing in its strangeness and sadness (lines 4 and 5). It is if he was assailed by a series of unexpected, astounding feelings he could not control: he felt coldness, *a sickening of the heart*. These feelings are heightened as they cannot be explained: the narrator finishes the first paragraph with the idea of strangeness and mystery reinforced in a question *what was it?*

The author uses the 1<sup>st</sup> person narrator which makes us share his immediate response and overwhelming feelings at the first sight of the House of Usher.

The symmetrical paragraph three also begins with an adverbial of time and the same impersonal forms are used to introduce feelings as in the 1<sup>st</sup> paragraph: *There grew in my mind a strange fancy as in there was a coldness, a sickening of the heart* completed by a relative clause or an adjectival complement. The feelings of oppression, heavy weight and strangeness are also recurring and symmetrical with the 1<sup>st</sup>-paragraph. \*But this time, it was the air which was different, it was not ambient: it rose from the decayed trees, the gray wall and the quiet lake. The air is said to be sickly, heavy, gray, and slow-moving; there is a parallelism in the listing of the adjectives and the narrator personifies the air which he sees moving. End-focus is also used in this paragraph as in the first and is always related to the house: «The most noticeable thing about it seemed to be its great age». The building is presented as being in an advanced condition of decay: no stones had fallen but it states can crumble in an impending moment for a break is already noticeable in the front of the building from the top to the bottom of the house. In summary, the symmetrical devices appear to be similar in paragraph 1 and 3:

First, the focus is on the house and the surrounding; second, the use of adverbials of time and place with an outpouring of strong and strange feelings introduced by an impersonal form as *There grew in my mind...* are found in both paragraphs. Moreover, the use of parallel forms in the first and third paragraph has also been evidenced.

#### 6.3.4 The Development of the Scene: Phases and Modes of Narration

The passage develops through passages of narration and description as the narrator approaches the House of Usher where he is to meet his ill friend who has summoned him to come. The scene develops through passages of description which intermesh gradually with the human figure presented

Phase

I from : During the whole of a dark and soundless day...  
to : I could find no answer.

II from : I pulled my horse  
to : eye-like window.

III from : Nevertheless\in this house of gloom...  
to : the family and the family home.

IV from : when I again uplifted  
to : dark waters of the lake

| phases | lines | Mode        | Content   |
|--------|-------|-------------|---|
| I      | 1-8   | Description | Description of the surrounding of the House of Usher        |
| II     | 9-10  | Narration   | He stops at the house and looks in the lake (kind of pause) |
| III    | 11-19 | Narration   | Acquaintance with his strange friend.                       |

|    |       |                           |  |
|----|-------|---------------------------|--|
| IV | 20-29 | Narration and description | Description of the house and the air around it |
|----|-------|---------------------------|--|

### 6.3.5 The Actors

#### a) Roderick Usher:

Our feeling about Usher is that he forms one with his house since both inspire gloom, strangeness and collapse. The Fall of the HOUSE OF OF USHER is not only the physical house crumbling down but Usher himself collapsing but first of all it is the feeling of strangeness and mystery which is overwhelming in this passage about Usher.

After commenting on the decayed, gloomy house, the author puts a

stress on the adverb of place by positioning it just after the linking word of contrast *Nevertheless* to suggest his uneasiness at settling in this ghastly house for a few weeks. This second paragraph introduces R.Usher who is, as said earlier, ensconced within the two descriptions of the house both figuratively and literally. In a narrative mode, we learn that he was his friend as a boy. Already, the link between the first two sentences is that **its** owner was R.Usher, the owner of this house of gloom already linking the building of gloom with R.Usher. We also learn that he received a wild letter, the adjective *wild* qualifying the sender and not the letter and that he should come and visit his friend in person.

Here a parallelism of nominal phrases follows one another in an attempt at qualifying his illness and at underscoring the urgency of the call due also to the hyphens separating the nominal phrases. Very often, Poe will use impersonal form such as «It was» ... and complete it with a relative clause that exemplifies and gives new important information: *It was the heart in it which did not allow me to say no* And this hyphen also stresses the kind of sincere and excited emotion contained within the letter.

The idea of strangeness is strengthened and reiterated in ‘although’ and ‘yet’ although the ‘yet’ should not be in the following sentence: *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’, ‘but’, ‘although’, ‘yet’, ‘however’. They are used to set a contrast and stress strangeness as, for instance, when as boys, they had been much together and yet knew little of each other.

R.Usher is also known by tracing him back to the kind of family he belongs to: a family which has a refined knowledge of art and is known for its acts of charity and a unique family dwindling down to one member and its twin-sister. The House of Usher represents both the house and the aristocratic family which is coming to an end.

#### b) The Narrator

A first-person narrator is sharing his feelings and thoughts with the reader making this introduction to the house and Roderick Usher a thrilling moment to spend. Right from the beginning, he gives us the creeps by focussing on the gloomy house he is to spend a few weeks in. He partakes of his strangeness not only of the house but also of his friend and it is with this close narrator that we enter the ghastly house of Usher.