

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher"-first paragraph

During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country, and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was--but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any other than half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. 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 eyelike windows--upon a few rank: seciges--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 afterdream of the reveler 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? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. 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. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify~ or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled luster by the dwelling, and gazed down--but with a shudder even more thrilling than before--upon the remodeled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the J5hastly tree stems, and the vacant and eyelike windows.

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PROMPT: HOW DOES POE CREATE A SENSE OF DREARINESS, DOOM, AND HORROR?

Look at these rhetorical devices: diction, syntax, repetition, tone, and parallelism.

Key

Rhetorical Devices in "The Fall of the House of Usher" First paragraph

PARALLELISM

Poe uses parallelism to repeat groups of words and phrases in a piling up of images designed to show the death and dreariness of the Usher house.

-the day is "dark, and soundless" -the images in the mind are "desolate or terrible" -he looks "upon" the scene of the "bleak walls," "vacant eyelike windows," "few rank sedges," "few...decayed trees" --he feels upon merely gazing at this scene an "iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart" -- thinking he could alter his perception of the scene, he "reined" his horse and "gazed" down (always down into the abyss with Poe) into the "lack and lurid tarn" --but he "shudders" even more as he sees the "remodeled and inverted images of the gray sedge and the ghastly tree stems, and the vacant eyelike windows"

REPETITION

Poe repeats the description of the windows--"vacant and eyelike"--to emphasize the dual nature of the house--it is both a structure and a symbol of the ruined Usher family. Truly this is a "vacant" family, with one remaining member buried alive and the other losing his tenuous hold on sanity. The gloom the narrator feels is "insufferable," and this upon merely glimpsing the building for the first time, having no knowledge of the surreal goings-on inside the house. The narrator asks himself twice "What was it?" that so "unnerved" him in simply viewing this house. Truly this mansion possesses a power and a "sentience" as Poe later writes.

DICTION

The picture is one of oppression, depression, and loneliness, a lack of any form of life. -even the vegetation mirrors this desolation-trees are "decayed" and "ghastly," the sedges are "rank," the tarn is "lack and lurid" -- The narrator reins his horse to the "precipitous brink" of the tarn and indeed to the precipice or his own sanity as he finally flees the collapsing House of Usher, fearful for his own life.

SYNTAX

Poe uses dashes freely to continue a sentence, multiplying the images of doom. Take the one long complex sentence beginning with "I looked upon the scene before me." Poe separates the independent clause listing the physically eerie components of the house from the dependent clause beginning with "which I can compare to no earthly sensation." This dependent clause recounts the "hideous" crash back to cold hard reality after reveling in

opium. Thus the dashes illustrate and punctuate both the strangeness of the house and the drug-like unreality of the whole situation for the narrator.

TONE

The diction, parallelism., syntax, and repetition all combine to create a foreboding, dreary tone, promising and foreshadowing the horrific ending of the short story.