Overview

Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” can be better interpreted if one examines the physics that Poe studied throughout his life and Foucault’s interpretation of madness and the asylum in the 19th century. Poe studied the scientific theory known as mesmerism and manipulated it to fit his personal beliefs and ideas. He expresses his ideas and theory of physics in the poem entitled “Eureka – A Prose Poem.” The poem gives us insight to his complex notion of physics and the “collapse” of the human form, resulting in the ultimate unity with God. Just as Foucault focuses on the fear and confinement of the mental institution and asylum, Poe believed the human form, in particular the human mind, to be equally restrictive. The boundaries of human consciousness keep us from comprehending the true infinity and “unity” of the world; therefore we must eliminate the individual form and finally become one general consciousness with God. Reading “The Fall of the House of Usher” through the historical lens of Foucault and Poe’s own interpretation of mesmerism allows the reader to understand the text on a substantially deeper level.

I believe my thesis to be sound because it emphasizes the importance of the historical elements surrounding “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Poe’s interpretation of mesmerism obviously influenced him to write “Eureka,” the notions of which we can trace through his entire body of work. Poe’s physics and his theories that he presents in the poem are glaringly obvious in “The Fall of the House of Usher” if the reader knows to interpret them as such. Foucault’s
definition of madness and the fear of the asylum in Poe’s time period support the idea that Poe feared confinement of both the institution and the human form.

Outline

My introduction will be similar to my opening, but I will perhaps arrange it more carefully as I begin drafting my essay. As of now, my thesis is as follows: Reading “The Fall of the House of Usher” through the historical lens of Foucault and Poe’s own interpretation of mesmerism allows the reader to understand the text on a substantially deeper level.

In the 1830s and 1840s, Poe studied mesmerism: a scientific theory founded by Franz Mesmer; in reaction to the theory, Poe wrote what he believed to be his greatest literary and metaphysical achievement, “Eureka – A Prose Poem.” Poe used the concept of mesmerism as the foundation for his beliefs and ideas about spiritual life and existence. His theory can be traced back through his entire body of work, but it is found in its most saturated form in “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Sources: Mesmer, Poe, Taylor, Woodberry

Foucault’s Madness and Civilization gives us insight into Poe’s favorite subjects to apply his theory to: the human mind and madness. Foucault focuses on the rise of the asylum and institution to confine the mad or insane. In the 19th century, Poe would have been very aware of the institutions and the fear and anxiety that surround them. In the story, we can see the reflection Poe’s fears of the institution, but also of the confinement brought on by the human mind and the limited human consciousness. Sources: Foucault, Taylor, Woodberry

In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Roderick’s human form and the house itself collapse; therefore following Poe’s theory of the attraction of all atoms to one another and the haunting restrictions of the institution and the mind itself. Sources: textual evidence, Taylor, Poe, Foucault
Reading “The Fall of the House of Usher” through the theories of Poe and Foucault, the reader gains deeper insight and understanding of the text. Through the character of Roderick Usher, the historical concerns of the devolution of the individual and the confinement of madness are apparent and bring new understanding to the story.

**Abstract of Mesmer**


The Encyclopaedia Britannica entry on “Franz Anton Mesmer” (1732-1815) states that he was a German physician whose scientific theory was that human beings were affected by the gravitational attraction of planets due to an invisible fluid in our bodies and throughout nature. Though he was accused of fraud, his theories are known as mesmerism and were studied at length in the 19th century.

Clearly, Poe responds to mesmerism in “Eureka,” and uses Franz Mesmer’s theory as a starting point for his own physics. Mesmerism is important to the composition of my paper because Poe’s reaction and expansion of Mesmer’s theories are clearly traced through his body of literary works, especially in “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

**Abstract of Poe**


“Eureka – A Prose Poem” is Poe’s expansive metaphysical theory that expresses his belief that all atoms, including those that make up human beings, are drawn to one another and therefore the entire world (and human form) must end in a final collapse. Nothing is independent, stable, or fixed in the universe. Poe states that “individual Intelligences become blended… into One…the general consciousness.” Therefore, all humans are essentially aware of
their impending collapse into one another. In death, we lose our human form and comprehend “what God is” and essentially become God ourselves.

I am referencing “Eureka – A Prose Poem” because it reveals Poe’s own personal feelings on mesmerism and makes substantial statements that are clearly played out in “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Also, the poem reinforces Foucault’s statement that in the 19th century, madness was “to believe oneself to be God,” or at least the desire to eventually be. Being that “Eureka – A Prose Poem” was Poe’s final work, I am assuming we can trace its development over his entire collection of works but I am focusing entirely on its importance of the interpretation of “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

Abstract of Foucault


Foucault traces civilization’s reaction to madness beginning in the Renaissance and ending in the rise of the asylum or institution. In the Renaissance period, the mad were thought to hold answers and intelligence that “reasonable” people lacked. In the mid-17th century, or the Age of Reason, people who were considered mad were subjected to confinement and separation from society because they were believed to be “unreasonable.” By the end of the 18th century, the insane were “placed in a special house…to be treated by the doctor or by trained assistants…and by punishments immediately inflicted” (186). Foucault points out the fear that surrounded the asylum, and the insistence that the insane man must know that he is under constant surveillance and judgment. Throughout the work, Foucault also traces what is defined as “madness,” and finally settles on its contribution to art. In conclusion, Foucault states that “madness is the absolute break with the work of art; it forms the constitutive moment of
abolition…it draws the contour against the void” (287). Therefore, the institutionalization of those we perceive to be “insane” creates fear and anxiety over the dangers of the human mind. Foucault states that Freud’s psychoanalytic theory allows us to understand certain strains of madness and we can therefore process the idea of the mad or unstable mind as something to be less feared and more admired in its relation to art.

Foucault’s definition of madness and the exploration of the fear that surrounds the institution or asylum are critical for my essay on Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” because they will help me explain the general belief about the “insane” in the 19th century. Also, the asylum or institution can be seen as another metaphor for the house itself in the story, and another confinement of the human consciousness that Poe writes about in “Eureka – A Prose Poem.”

**Abstract of Taylor**


Matthew Taylor further expands on Poe’s conclusive studies of mesmerism in the 1830s and 1840s and an interpretation of “Eureka – A Prose Poem” by pointing out Poe’s rejection of the optimistic powers of the force that drew all animate or inanimate objects together (a concept of mesmerism). Taylor states that to Poe, mesmerism reveals “the self’s identity” as being “disturbingly fragile if not altogether illusory.” Using the ideas expressed in Poe’s “Eureka,” Taylor draws the conclusion that in Poe’s physics, all unions are incestuous and must result in death. Taylor’s conclusion is a re-wording of the conclusion that Poe makes in “Eureka,” and Taylor’s statement is best reflected in “A Fall of the House of Usher.” We can better understand the story by applying Poe’s physics (his interpretation of mesmerism) to the text.
Taylor’s article is extremely useful for me in regards to my paper because I agree with many of his references to “The Fall of the House of Usher” and the application of Poe’s interpretation of mesmerism to the story. I will also use Taylor’s deep interpretation of Poe’s “Eureka” to further my argument that “The Fall of the House of Usher” not only reflects Foucault’s notions of the institution and madness but also Poe’s own beliefs on physics, the mental confinement that is the human mind, and the final God-like unity of all matter in the universe.

**Abstract of Woodberry**


Woodberry uses letters between Poe and his beloved friends and family to help the reader understand his final years of life and literary achievement. He extensively covers the death of Poe’s cousin-bride Virginia Clemm in 1842 and Poe’s following sickness and near-suicide. Most importantly, the volume contains letters that Poe wrote to his mother in 1848, the year of his death. By reading the letters and reflecting on his final works, the reader can understand the ill and destitute state that Poe died in, and the sheer genius that he had to have maintained to complete his poem “Eureka” in 1848.

Woodberry’s volume on the last years of Poe’s life is very helpful to my paper because it contains a letter that Poe wrote to his mother regarding his death and his completion of “Eureka – A Prose Poem.” The letter states that Poe “must die” and that he has “no desire to live since [he has] done ‘Eureka’.” I believe that Poe’s final peace that he found in finishing “Eureka” is crucial when interpreting the poem and Poe’s devotion to his own take on mesmerism and physics.
Timeline

Begin drafting Friday, November 9

Finish preliminary draft on Sunday, November 11

Oral presentation of proposal on Monday, November 12

Revision of draft on Wednesday, November 14

First draft completed and due on Friday, November 16