Psychoanalysis and Subconscious Fears in Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher”

Understanding how a text is transformed by the reader is of utmost importance in reader response theory. Our identity as readers is what transforms the text; we apply our own mental processes to the work and therefore gain further understanding. A fixed, stable response to a text is an illusion. According to Norman Holland, our response to a text relies entirely on our perceptions of it, and therefore the reader transforms the work so it embodies a mental process (Holland). Because psychoanalysis requires strict emphasis on the language of the patient, a psychoanalytic response to a literary text is just as revealing as if the reader were psychoanalyzed. Instead of imagining the text as being separate from our perceptions of it, we as readers must carefully monitor our mental response to the work and therefore can draw conclusions about our own identity. It is our identity, then, that fills in the so-called “gaps” in the text and completes the work according to our psychological perception (Iser). My psychological readings of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” reveal my own disordered mental processes that I bring to the text with special emphasis on the reaction to the theme of madness.

Readings of texts change each time because we as individuals change. My initial readings of “The Fall of the House of Usher” differ greatly from the way I currently read it; my psychological process has shifted and my level of sophistication when reading has increased. Wolfgang Iser states: “The need to decipher [the text] gives us the chance to formulate our own deciphering capacity—i.e., we bring to the fore an element of our own being of which we are not directly conscious.” Therefore, upon my first reading of the text I was able to bring forth real fears from my subconscious even though I hadn’t the level of sophistication for reading and deciphering as I do now. I first read “The Fall of the House of Usher” when I was ten years old, roughly two years after I had been diagnosed with a severe anxiety disorder and a phantom sensory agitation. Certain sounds evoke intense anxiety attacks and feelings of rage, fear, and agitation. There was not a name for my condition at the time, so I subconsciously searched for understanding and comfort in literature. I was drawn to the narration and the eerie mental
haunting that the story showcased, and mainly I felt as though I could relate with Usher’s hypersensitivity to his surroundings. Immediately, I was drawn to the narrator’s reflection that Usher wrote to him concerning a “mental disorder which oppressed him” (Poe 110). I felt a flood of relief and familiarity flow over me especially after reading the word “oppressed”; finally, I felt, I have encountered an account (however fictional) of an individual being likewise oppressed by a mental burden. Furthermore, I was drawn to Usher’s following proclamation:

I must perish in this deplorable folly. I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results. I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial, incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation of the soul. I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect—in terror. In this unnerved, in this pitiable, condition I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR. (Poe 115)

The passage immediately roused feelings of exhaustion in my young self; feelings I had long hidden and simultaneously dwelt upon as I had felt their haunting presence for what seemed an intolerable length of time. The fixation on fear, especially of “events of the future” was all too familiar to me. As a child, I feared waking up in the morning to be confronted with anxiety-inducing sounds; I feared the classroom with such dread that it seemed to solidify like lead in my diaphragm and prompted bodily shakes and sweats. Most of all, I feared my future as an individual and my growing dislike of public places, of people, of everyday sounds, and of the disorder that had manifested itself in the tissue of my young brain. Like Usher, I felt I “must perish” one day in a state of anxiety that had, unfortunately, been all too familiar to me already.

Reading Usher’s account brought my fears to the surface and I pushed my defenses and subconscious anxieties on the character of Roderick. As Iser explains, I was filling in the “gaps” of the text; I completed the story by casting my own condition onto Roderick and relating to him on a deeply personal level. Because I did not understand my own condition at the time, I cast many defenses onto the text; as Holland explains, the defenses are ways of “coping with inner and outer reality, particularly conflicts between different psychic agencies and reality” (“The
Story of a Psychoanalytic Critic”). The conflicts between my psychic agencies and reality were extreme because I lacked understanding and the emotional depth required to cope with such acute levels of anxiety.

Currently, my readings of Poe’s story are much deeper and even more psychologically involved. The condition I was diagnosed with at ten years old now has a name: Misophonia. However, even though I now have a name to label my disorder, its effects are still just as severe, if not more intense, than they were in my early life. As Holland states, differences in readings stem from differences in “personal patterns of expectations, fantasies, defenses, and transformations” (“The Story of a Psychoanalytic Critic”). The said transformations are performed strictly by the reader and not the text. Because our expectations, fantasies, defenses, and transformations mirror literary techniques such as splitting, parallelism, repetition, contrast, omission, and poetic language, we are able to read into our subconscious and extract valuable information so that the process of reading greatly resembles psychoanalysis (Holland). Having undergone countless psychoanalyses in the past ten years, I understand my mental processes on a higher level and therefore can easily recognize them in the reading of a text such as “The Fall of the House of Usher.” As Holland states, “psychoanalysis demanded close attention to the language of the freely associating patient” just as reading demands close attention to language; therefore, in reading the text I probe deep into my subconscious to find my innermost fears just as efficiently as psychoanalysis would.

Now, upon reading the work, I feel Usher’s condition as realistically as I feel my own and I recognize my own fears in both the narrator and Roderick. The painting of the crypt especially rouses psychological response due to the feeling of entrapment it represents. The narrator describes the painting as presenting

…the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel, with low walls, smooth, white, and without interruption or device. Certain accessory points of the design served well to convey the idea that this excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth. (Poe 117)
The description of the painting evokes perhaps the deepest fear of my subconscious: the knowledge that I am forever trapped with my disorder that has rooted itself deep beneath the surface of my mind. Never will I find liberation from its smooth, white walls, and my defenses will forever be futile to its erosion of my everyday mental processes. Even the words “low walls, smooth, white, and without interruption” bring about chilling fears from my subconscious. When I am at the peak of my suffering, I often reach out a frail hand to walls just to touch them, to hold them, and remind myself that I am in fact contained in my mind. In my weakest, most deplorable state, I have struck walls repeatedly so my mind learns that I cannot escape my suffering; I can only hope to alleviate it. Repeatedly, I must beat down my own hopes and fantasies of ever escaping the confinements of my disorder. Continuing to read the story, I am moved by another passage in which the narrator describes Usher’s reaction to his own mental illness: “I beheld him gazing upon vacancy for long hours, in an attitude of the profoundest attention, as if listening to some imaginary sound” (Poe 122). Here, Usher is reacting to an “imaginary sound” in a way that I currently react to sounds. Immediately after reading this passage, my vision is clouded with memories of my own feeling of exhaustion; of times when I cannot find the strength to will away the anxiety and I find myself staring at inanimate objects, hoping I will fall in to sort of trance and find peace.

The most intense psychoanalytic perceptions brought forth from my subconscious come in the final scenes of the text. I am reminded of my own anguish in Usher’s distraught proclamation: “Not hear it?—yes, I hear it, and have heard it. Long—long—long—many minutes, many hours, many days, have I heard it—yet—I dared not—I dared not speak!” (Poe 127). Reading his distressed confession immediately brings my own feelings of panic to the surface. Desperately, I long to reach out to someone, or even God, and tell them that for years, many years, I have suffered from these sounds that I am confronted with every minute of every day; I want to stress to them the severity of my condition and its inescapable nature that has me entombed in my own mind, never to feel the liberation that I exhaustingly seek to find. When Roderick flees the scene as the house is collapsing and Usher lies dead I cannot help but feel
stabbing envy of the narrator’s ability to escape the house and escape the mind of Roderick. As Iser states, “expectations are scarcely ever fulfilled in truly literary texts,” and my expectations of a sort of release from my agony cannot be met. Not only do I feel envious of Roderick for escaping, but I, regretfully, at times, desire to feel Usher’s final liberation from his mind, one he only finds in death.

My psychological readings of “The Fall of the House of Usher” reveal my expectations of relief, my fantasy of finally finding liberation from my disorder, my defenses that hide my horrible struggle with everyday anxiety, and the transformation of identity that I use to fill the “gaps” in the text. The text does, in fact, replicate psychoanalysis because in reading it I pull my fears to the surface from the furthest corner of my subconscious. I realize my anxieties, my fears, and my longings through the words of the text and therefore transform the story to mirror my disordered mental process.
Work Cited


