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# "The hideous dropping off of the veil" Instances of abjection in three short-stories by Edgar Allan Poe

Bachelor's thesis in Comparative Literature
Supervisor: Sofie Anker-Møller Damgaard
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**Bachelor's thesis**

**NTNU**
Kunnskap for en bedre verden

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# Introduction

The psychology of horror is to me one of the most interesting instances in which literature can display its power: excavating the anatomy of fear and the frightening. The elucidation of these darkest aspects of the psyche: the fear, hate and disgust, are most firmly articulated in those instances where literature can surpass reality. Here, an author can give these concepts a range of expressions, transforming the abstract into something almost tangible. This bachelor-thesis will trace one such concept, that of *abjection*: Julia Kristeva's term for that which dissolves the Subject and the borders of the Self, articulated in great detail in *Powers of Horror* (1982).

The abject is a phenomenon of some complexity, and so, to display it, one needs to find it. As a source for abject motifs, I have chosen three short stories by American gothic writer Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), whose psychologically themed horror is well-suited for this type of examination. Each of these three stories contains central elements and plot-devices which outline a collapse in meaningful individuation and subjectivity. The subversive disease of *The Masque of The Red Death* (1842), the extension of the life into the lifeless in *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), and the mirror-image Self in *William Wilson* (1839) (for all of these I am using Poe-expert Thomas Olive Mabbott's comprehensive *The Complete Works of Poe*, containing excellent introductions to each text which I will occasionally draw from). Initially, I will go into Kristeva's source-material in abbreviated detail, to outline what constitutes *abjection*. Then, with a tentative definition of the *abject*, the *grotesque*, and the *sublime* established, I will perform three separate analyses, displaying three different incarnations of the *abject*.

Aiding me in the exploration of these motifs, I have employed a selection of additional theoretical works. For *The Masque of the Red Death*, this is primarily literary scholar Geoffrey Galt Harpham's *On the Grotesque* (1982), which contains, in addition to the titular definition, a chapter outlining grotesque imagery in *The Masque of the Red Death* in particular. For *The Fall of the House of Usher*, I employ consumer-researcher Russell Belk's essay *Possessions and the Extended Self* (1988), as well as philosopher Francesca Rigotti's essay *The House as Metaphor* (1995). Finally, for *William Wilson*, I will employ Sigmund Freud and his own horror-theory of *The Uncanny* (my copy as published in *The Monster Theory Reader*, 2020), as well as excerpts from another psychoanalyst: Otto Rank's *The Double: a psychoanalytic study* (1971). For comprehensively addressing psychoanalytic terms, I will refer to Lionel Bailly's aptly titled *Lacan: A Beginner's Guide* (2009). For

clarification on certain literary terms, I will occasionally refer to *A glossary of literary terms* (2015), by Meyer Howard Abrams, my edition edited by the aforementioned Geoffrey Harpham.

The order of my three analyses is based around the accessibility of the phenomenon, and the amount of theoretical material which facilitates this access. The shortest (albeit perhaps densest) work, *The Masque of the Red Death* is first, as it has an immediacy to its connecting motifs which, albeit elaborate, might be considered accessible. *The Fall of the House of Usher* is second, again owing to its balance of length and complexity. Last is *William Wilson*, the work which is less fantastical and more closely tied up with the psyche, and the theory of psychoanalysis. This thesis is not a work of psychoanalysis, but the key to the elucidation of the motifs in *William Wilson* lies firmly in that theoretical framework, and so we will spend some time with its terminology. Psychoanalytic terms are complex, and endlessly branching into variants, so I will continuously try to keep them at a relatively intuitive level, and in service to the greater project of the thesis.

Finally, my employed method of analysis can be most accurately described as *close reading*, defined as: "the detailed analysis of the complex interrelationships and ambiguities (multiple meanings) of the verbal and figurative components within a work" (Abrams & Harpham 242-243). This choice mirrors the concept around which the thesis is centred, as *abjection* is found not in structural terms, but as Abrams' definition states: in the ambiguities, which need to be unveiled.

# Regarding Abjection

Julia Kristeva's foundational *Powers of Horror* (1982) veers into the obtuse with alarming frequency. This is as much owing to its project of charting a theoretical frontier, as to internal complexity. The *abject* is, by Kristeva's own admission: "The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Her approach, then, is to open with an attempt at depiction, followed by a tracing in various psychological and historical instances. This abbreviated introduction will seek to emulate that same structure. We will also attempt to differentiate *abjection* from certain terms that are in even measure conflicting and complementary, specifically, the *grotesque* and the *sublime*.

In brief summary: *abjection* is a state that, when it emerges, leads to a psychosomatic collapse of borders. We are exposed to it through that which recontextualizes us and makes us question our structuring of the world: the way we section and border it. It is the destruction

of what we thought were safe and foundational indexes: the Subject, and the Object. We approach the *abject* with fear and revulsion, but also fascination because it is alien and transformative. And possibly a threat. For Julia Kristeva, it: "draws (her) toward the place where meaning collapses." (2) One basic example is the ingestion of food, and the excretion of waste. That which is introduced into and accepted as part of the Subject, the union of body and mind, is then rejected, or *abjected*, and now nauseates that which it belonged to (Kristeva 2-3): a revulsion that operates on the border of the Self.

## Abject Avatars

The *abject* is without agenda, and without signifiers. It changes what surrounds it, but itself eludes observation or categorization. Its quintessential avatar, the corpse, is: "A border that has encroached upon everything." (Kristeva 3), transforming the border into an object, and questioning how *I* can be, if nothing separates *I* from *Other* (4). The corpse is a visualization of the fact that once the border is made visible, nearly tangible, it also becomes malleable: changing the way we engage with and understand the sectioning of Self. In Kristeva's own words, Corpses do not *signify* death, they: "show (her) what (she) permanently thrust(s) aside in order to live" (3). In condensed terms: the corpse exposes its beholders to the fragility of their Self and their being, leading to the state of *abjection*.

The traumatic parting of the child from the mother, a core principle of psychoanalysis, is intrinsically tied to the primary effect of *abjection*: the dissolution of presupposed parameters; the shattering of preconceptions and the status quo. No less than: "the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separate from another body in order to be." (Kristeva 10). The deep-seated and inherent trauma that lies at the base of the formation of the subject re-emerges in the abject and posits to us that our framing of the world, the sectioning that lets us navigate it, is brittle and transparent.

## The Grotesque

The same year as *Powers of Horror* was released in English translation, Geoffrey Galt Harpham published *On the Grotesque*, outlining a loose definition that is profoundly similar in scope to that which Kristeva labels abject. Harpham frames the *grotesque* as: "another word for non-thing, especially the strong forms of the ambivalent and the anomalous" (4). Similarities to the definition of the *abject* abound throughout Harpham's work, and while his particular extrapolations are not the definitions that currently follow the term *grotesque* (the *Oxford English Dictionary* mainly referring to the artistic representation of fantastical forms,

"grotesque" 2022), they remain an effective illustration of how closely the idea of *abjection* is tied to *grotesque* motifs.

To distinguish the *abject* from the aforementioned definition of the *grotesque* we can look at the following passage from Harpham: "within an instant of (the mind) being exposed to such forms it starts to operate in certain ways, and it is these operations that tell us that we are in the presence of the grotesque." (Harpham 4) These: "certain ways", are closer to the abject than the *object grotesque*, which is outside of the mental state it provokes. Returning to Harpham's loose definition, with the phrases *non-thing* and *form*, solidifies this crucial detail: the grotesque remains fundamentally the state of an object. The abject, as Kristeva outlines, is the breaking down of the boundary of Subject/Object; a state erupting within the subject, erasing it from the inside.

## The Sublime

Finally, we must address the *sublime*. "The abject is edged with the sublime", Kristeva tells us (11). "It is not the same moment on the journey, but the same subject and speech bring them into being." (Ibid) Continuing, she specifies that the *sublime* is an addition, something that expands the Subject. This contrasts the abject casting away, the rejection. A further parallel by way of Immanuel Kant is that the *sublime*, like the *abject*, is not found in the "Object of nature", but rather in the perceiving instance: the Subject (Abrams & Harpham 391). The *sublime*, Abrams and Harpham paraphrase: "scatters the subjects like a bolt of lightning" (389-390). The distinction from the *abject* lies in the response: a joyful horror, a transcending. Expanding on this connection in the realm of the figurative, we may consider the *sublime* as expanding out and upwards, and the *abject* as collapsing inwards, or: the *sublime* lifts us up off the ground, and the *abject* is the ground opening up, and swallowing us.

Kristeva and other analysts, in her own words, lift: "the veil of the communitarian mystery", which is the foundation upon which one acts out the Self, the Other, and the love one can hold for each (209). Behind the veil, however, lies: "the abyss of abjection with which they are underlaid." (Ibid) From here we draw our parallel to the excerpt from Edgar Allan Poe which headlines this thesis. It is precisely the dropping off of the veil which serves to provide horror, in the many scenes through which Poe's tormented dramatis personae act out their tales. With this tentative definition in place, we will examine these scenes closely, and attempt to use our understanding of the *abject* to reach some insights on the deeper psychological levels of Poe's various motifs.

# The Masque of the Red Death

*"The "Red Death" had long devastated the country. No pestilence had ever been so*
*fatal, or so hideous. Blood was its Avatar and its seal — the redness and the horror of*
*blood." (Poe 670)*

With the Red Death, Edgar Allan Poe conjures an adversary out of thin air. The presumed last bastion of life in an unspecified country lives in lavish luxury, in a fortress-abbey, waiting out the sick and twitching end of the world. After nearly half a year, the prince Prospero hosts a magnificent masquerade. In the middle of the celebration there appears a figure, in the guise of the Red Death. The figure makes his way through the colourful rooms of the abbey, and the prince draws his dagger to strike it down for the insult. Before he can, he falls to the floor dead. The revellers attempt to unmask the figure but find that there is no body behind the mask. One by one, they succumb to the disease.

In this analysis, we will look at the unknown encroaching upon presupposed safety, and what it means to be separate from the world. We will look at disease as an inherently abject motif, and we will, with the help of Geoffrey Hartman, assess the *grotesque*.

## The Disease

In our initial definition, we touched on food as a core image of the abject: that of the integration with and then rejection from the self. We will now consider disease: the foreign threat integrating itself within the walled and closed off self. The central motif of *The Masque of the Red Death* is certainly that of disease, even with its movements into the realm of the fantastical. The Red Death is classified as "pestilence" (670) and "pest" (Ibid), and the name is a clear allusion to plague. While Kristeva does not assess disease in her initial definition of abject, she later places it side by side with the corpse and the refuse:

*"Excrement and its equivalents (decay, infection, disease, corpse, etc.) stand for the*
*danger to identity that comes from without: the ego threatened by the non-ego, society*
*threatened by its outside, life by death." (42)*

The immediate parallels in Poe are obvious: the bastion of society (though in truth desperate denial and decadence) is under siege. Like Nero and his fiddle, Prospero dances while the world ends.

Discussing leprosy, Kristeva tells us that: "the disease visibly affects the skin, the essential if not initial boundary of biological and psychic individuation" (101). In the case of

leprosy, this is particularly poignant in the acknowledgement of the self by the collective: Lepers are othered, secluded, removed; they are denied partaking and denied agency, much like the Red Death and the "pest ban which shut (the infected) out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men" (Poe 670). By the stage of disease in which we enter the story, the time of aid and sympathy is also long since passed. Hilde Bondevik and Knut Stene-Johansen (respectively associate professor of interdisciplinary health sciences, and professor of comparative literature), in *Sykdom som Litteratur*, equate the image of the leper to the fantasy of the living dead (85). The image of decay is certainly part of this, but so is the denial of partaking, of being "dead to the world" (Which returns in *William Wilson*).

The scene of The Masque of the Red Death is a carnivalistic mirroring of the leper-colony: the living elite displaced into isolated confinement. The world has died, and those that remain are clinging on to an 'unlife'. Doubly, they are in a monastery, which leprosariums in the Middle-Ages also tended to be (Byrne 351). The position is one of subversive irony which the revellers find themselves wholly unaware of. They are, for all their denial of the fact, trapped and isolated in self-imposed exile from the world which is now no longer theirs.

## Separation as Individuation

The castellated abbey walls serve as a very literal border: that of the living within and the unimaginable without. The outside of the walls is a realm so hellish and foreign as to be denied depiction beyond the presence of the disease: "(Excess) and security were within. Without was the "Red Death." (671) It is a capitalized "Red Death" which now controls the space, a space not defined by death and dying, but by its having been taken over by something Other. It is no longer the realm of prince Prospero, nor that of men in general, it is defined only by how unavailable it has become to those that insist on being the living, on some degree of individuation.

The dismissal of the outside world is exemplified in the hedonistic apathy to which the living dedicate themselves: "The external world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve, or to think." (671). The acceptance of the new situation suggests a tremendous adaptability, one which is close to the acceptance with which we may approach the *signifiers* of Death (Kristeva 3). The acceptance is based on the continued enforcement of sectioning, the bordering off of the encroaching Other. Within the stable constant of the border, there is room for the revelers to persist.

The agency attributed to the Red Death, its active devastation of the country (670), and its possessing an "Avatar" (Ibid) in blood constructs a presence that attains a degree of active malice, a personification with personifications of its own. Even the symptoms serve to mythologize its presence: the expelling of blood from the pores seems an almost transcendental tableau, a ritualistic end. It is an end so grotesque as to seem like a story to scare children. A bogeyman, lurking just outside the walls, serves to contain the inhabitants in a captive sanctuary. Personifying, and even mythologizing, the disease in a manner such as this enforces more firmly the image of the Outside as something to define oneself against: by virtue of being separate from it may the revellers continue to live.

The "entering into" that takes place is a violation in several senses. Traditionally, a prince belongs in a castle. The sanctum of the abbey should not be considered accidental: it is a defiling of the presumed divine and sacred that takes place with the intrusion of the Other. The breaching of that divine trust is subversive, the message seeming profoundly atheistic. A two-sided preconception of safety is at play: high walls, and higher will. The crumbling of that foundation demonstrates a callous disregard for the sacred, if we subscribe to the notion of agency and will, or simply an abject unmasking of that trust as hollow.

The masquerade-revellers are subjected to a fundamental threat to their separate being: Something is in here, now, in the place we thought unreachable and unassailable. The body-as-temple has become body-as-tomb, and the revellers now possess, essentially, one body. As the only meaningful difference in being becomes *inside* versus *outside*, the distinction of the *Self* and the sanctuary becomes less and less meaningful (More on this in discussing *The Fall of the House of Usher*). This life, however, is one denied agency and greater partaking. Harpham calls the scene a *dance macabre*, wherein the revellers are larval corpses (113), not alive in any meaningful sense of the word. The revellers occupy a dual-state, whereby they are simultaneously dead and alive. Alive, in that they remain, but dead, in that the world is denied to them.

## The Sacred

To Kristeva *signifiers* of death may, through effort, be accepted, whereas *abject* displays bypass the barriers of structure and acceptance, crafting a confrontation which dissolves stability on a foundational level. The masked figure of the Red Death is that display, made exceptionally literal (and manifest). The appearance of the Red Death at the masquerade is a confrontation so total, so complete and immediate that there is no window in

which to prepare, adapt or brace for it. Within an instant, the walls are figuratively shattered, and the *body* (as-temple) is penetrated.

The theme of religious sanctuary resurfaces when prince Prospero is made aware of the masked figure. He demands: "Who dares insult us with this blasphemous mockery?" (675) The prince feels the statement in two parts: sacrilege, and ridicule. We may read the instance of sacrilege as a continuation of the breaching of presupposed sacred safety, as we have already touched on. We may also, however, push further down the line of the mythologizing of the disease:

The use of "Avatar" in the initial paragraph of the text is of particular note, "Avatar" is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as: "The descent of a deity to the earth in an incarnate form", or a: "Manifestation in human form; incarnation" ("Avatar" 2022). For the Red Death, this avatar is "Blood" (Poe 670). The use of this term infers a divine will on the disease itself: making the Red Death something akin to a malicious deity, like the Demiurge of Gnostic faith (Oxford English Dictionary "Demiurge" 2022). Thus, Prospero gives credence to the figure of the Red Death as an object of worship, whose presence in the abbey is a defilement which he seeks to correct.

The Red Death as it appears in the masquerade is certainly grotesque, in its mimicking of the bloodstained corpse. As we know, the corpse is the quintessential source of *abjection*, and the confrontation with the instance of the corpse is a harrowing one for the revellers. We see here, however, a source of *abjection* which goes beyond the confrontation of a living being with a dead body. Harpham has told us that the revellers are partaking in what is essentially a *dance macabre*, as walking corpses. The Red Death shows the revellers in a highly literal sense, what they "permanently thrust aside in order to live" (Kristeva 3). They are all already walking corpses, and what they see among them is no more than what they already are.

## Signifier as structure as border

We have spoken of the close relationship between the *grotesque* and the *abject*, and we should think of them as complementary rather than overlapping terms. Harpham compares the *grotesque* to the *paradox*: "a way of turning language against itself". It is useful here to think of language as the system of designation/signification to which one adheres, rather than simply words. This is also the approach of prominent psychoanalysts like Jacques Lacan, as Lionel Bailly clarifies in his chapter on "Language as the Other" (60).

Disruptions to this system of designation could be something like the *familiar, but not quite right* of Sigmund Freud's uncanny, or the *I but Other* of Otto Rank's doppelganger (Both of which we will return to in discussing *William Wilson*). In Poe's tale, the revellers create a designation of their own: a collective projection of the presence of an adversary. It does not, in essence, make a difference whether or not the Red Death as masquerade-goer, is real. The core of the tale remains fundamentally unchanged: Disease breaks through the walls and enters the body. The defilement of sanctuary, of body and of individuals is the essence of the abject, being a pervasive disintegration of all these incarnations of borders.

# The Fall of the House of Usher

*"I know not how it was – but, with the first glimpse of the building, an insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit". (Poe 397)*

An unnamed friend, our narrator, arrives at the urging of Roderick Usher, to the latter's family home. Roderick has fallen ill, and seeks the companionship of an old friend, even though his friend has not seen him for many years. Roderick and his sister are sick, and their house stands them atop a desolate, weathered plot of land by a lake. Roderick tells his friend that he believes the house is, in some sense, alive. Shortly after, the barely seen Madeline Usher, Roderick's sister, dies, and by her brother's insistence she is interred in the family tomb which lies on the premises of the house. The narrator notes that the Ushers were twins. Over the next week Roderick remains agitated, until he reaches hysterics during a violent storm. The narrator attempts to calm him down by reading the tale of Ethelred, but as he reads, the house seems to respond to the plot of the tale. Roderick tells the narrator that his sister was still alive when they entombed her. As Madeline appears in the bedroom door, and with great effort throws herself at her brother. The moment they touch each other, they both collapse to the floor, dead. The narrator barely manages to escape the house in time to see it sink into the ground, and be covered by the black tarn.

In this chapter, we will consider the way that the house is brought to life. We will look at Rodericks understanding of the house as an entity, and we will consider the relationship between him, the House, and the ghostly Madeline.

## House and Consciousness

Professor of Norwegian literature Mark Sandberg, discussing the prominence of the house and home in Henrik Ibsen's (1828-1906) plays, tells us that numerous Ibsen-characters share a preoccupation with the "linguistic distinction between house and home" (85), splitting

the two into "its factual basis (and) its attendant emotions" (86). To home, we feel an attachment, an investment of identity. House is more clinical, perhaps because it is more firmly tied to the material. One can "feel at home" practically anywhere, soothed and at ease with one's surroundings. The house, in isolation, without the heavy overhanging association of home, can be an eerie instance.

The house, in the case of *The Fall of the House of Usher*, is only once referred to as "home", and then only as "the home of (Roderick's) forefathers" (408), an imagined more idyllic previous state of being at ease. Francesca Rigotti, in a discussion of the prevalent metaphor of *house*, tells us that: "Living in a house is: "... a primary condition of human life …" (419). Property-right has long been considered a prerequisite for full citizenship, acknowledgement as an independent, a subject. A distance has nonetheless grown between the Usher's and the world at large.

In *Possessions and the Extended Self*, Russel Belk describes the titular relationship between the Subject and the Object as *contamination*: "In contamination, both good and bad aspects of objects are seen to attach to us through physical contact or proximity" (2). His choice of words in this case is particularly interesting, *contamination* most frequently applying to infection or impurity, being in either case a physical instance imparting upon another. Both instances may also be either physical or mental, or indeed, psychosomatic. In the case of Roderick Usher, his physical condition is tied up with "a mental disorder which oppressed him" (Poe 398). To us, the looming presence of the house will be our entrance to this condition.

In short, the house is one of the defining instances in constituting the individual, and a powerful signifier of Self. In this discussion of the House of Usher, we will dwell on the dual relationship of possession, and possessor. Belk also cites the view that objects can be: "viewed as part of self when we are able to exercise power or control over them, just as we might control an arm or a leg" (2). We will consider, by way of the House of Usher, that the opposite may also be true. Roderick and Madeline may be seen as being as much property of the House of Usher, as the house is of them. Thomas Mabbott tells us much the same, citing readings by Richard Wilbur (1921-2017) and Howard Phillips Lovecraft (1890-1937) which touch on similar themes of the connection between Roderick, Madeline and the House (393). In our own reading, we will start with the instance of the House.

## The House of Usher

Upon his first meeting with the façade of the House of Usher, our protagonist describes it as "melancholy" (397). The placement of the house, a long ride through "a singularly dreary tract of country" (397), situates the house in isolation from outer instances to which one may belong. Isolation is an apt motif for this theme: the sense that no help is coming. It is also a potent image of the separation from the collective whole: when an individual acts in isolation, is it a Subject? Is that manner of demarcation of any relevance without an observable other from which to be different? The conditions in this case seem ideal for losing track of what makes up an individual, and what meaningful separation there lies between the face of Roderick, and the façade of the House of Usher.

The protagonist cannot lessen the initial impact of the experience of the House through: "half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment" (397). The house is singularly eerie and unpleasant to behold, and difficult to romanticize. To soften his discomfort, he wishes to draw upon the *sublime*, and situate the house in the realm of poetic beautification, elevating it to a source of inspiration and grandiosity. From its definition in *A glossary of literary terms*, a function of the sublime can be to:" experience what would otherwise be a painful terror as a delightful horror." (390) The quintessential sublime motifs in this definition are the most powerful and overwhelming "scenes and events in the natural world" (391), stars, volcanoes and hurricanes. Opposed to the sublime, that elevated, transcendent realm evoked by superior natural beauty, is the physical reality of the surrounding area of the House: the grounded, coarse and persistent.

The sedges, fungi and gnarled tree-trunks surrounding the mansion are a far cry from the splendid image of nature which the sublime is attached to. The life that is present may collectively be characterized as persistent, but decaying. In some sense, barely holding on. The plant life is emblematic of the overarching theme of life in the story: Life and death sustaining each other in a delicate balance. This cycle of rot and life is the literal foundation in which the House of Usher sits, a staging ground for the play of life and death.

Fungus grows on the face of the House, adding to the eerie life-like quality of the mansion. Interestingly, the widespread awareness of fungal infection on people was still a few years down the line (Homei & Worboys 21). To a modern reader, this parallel to the human body adds another quality to the house that is life-like, and also related to disease: another form of contamination. By making the house something that may be "infected", as well as infect, another parallel to the dual state of Roderick is established.

The façade, from the french *face*, makes it easy to latch onto the same observation as our protagonist: there is a quality to the house that seems to be lifelike, particularly the windows are: "eye-like" (397). Rigotti addresses the same motif in *The House as Metaphor*, adding: "are not the eyes also 'the windows of the soul'?" (427). The other adjective used for the windows is, notably, "vacant" (Poe 397). If these eye-windows display the soul, something, there too, is missing, not present. Either diluted, or for the time being incomplete, with the dispersal of Self now sharing too large of a space.

Upon the final collapse of the house, the protagonist feels he hears a "shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters" (417). Mabbott notes this as a biblical reference (422), which unfortunately is beyond the scope of this text to investigate. We shall note it instead for the uses of 'shouting' and 'voice', the House finally approaching something like individual expression in its death throes. In the moment of dying, which is triggered by the deaths of the last of the Ushers, the House can no longer sustain itself, not carry the whole of existing, of Self. We spoke of the eye-windows of the House being 'vacant', more an approximation of life than life complete. With the death of the Ushers, the fragile balance in which the three instances of Roderick, Madeline and The House (literally) coexisted, is broken.

## The Foundation of Self

Roderick is convinced of what he calls the "sentience" (408) of the House. It is his belief that this sentience arises from the arrangement of the stones of the house, the surrounding fungi and trees, and the water of the tarn (Ibid). Their arrangement, we recall from the introduction, all touch on the house. The mycelium of fungi and the roots of trees are noteworthy precisely for their depth, the tarn as well being described as "deep and dank" (417). The house keeps extending and growing, and by the time of the start of our tale it is firmly entrenched in the surrounding area.

The influence of the central instance, the House of Usher, moves deeper and deeper until it is entrenched with a finality that is near unavoidable. It also seeps into its own foundation, which clarifies the total collapse that occurs upon the titular Fall: The House went much deeper than it appeared, and once it fell so too did the earth which it took for its own. Made literal: "a border that has encroached upon everything" (Kristeva 3). The House and its realization of itself has extended from the instance of Self, to the walls of the house, to the earth and the stones.

The overtaking of the foundation is another instance that is inherently abject: the building stands on *its own foundation*: an internal logical fallacy in that the existence of the Self presupposes a Self from and upon which the Self can act. This is a fragile situation, and one that is deeply susceptible to any disturbance. The fragility of its self-assertion evokes the nature of the abject: the thin veil that can be pulled away to reveal: "the abyss of abjection with which (the Self and Others) are underlaid" (Kristeva 309).

Roderick traces the sentience of the House in the "influence" (408) which it has had on the fortunes of his family. *Influence* could of course be limited to the dreariness of the isolated house having an effect on the mental state of its denizens. Combining *influence* with *sentience*, which we have seen Roderick insisting that the House possesses on its own merits, transforms the word into something active. Sentience exerting influence implies the possession of something akin to motivation, or an agenda. This agenda can be seen in its most manifest form in the way the various decorations of the house convey both an authority, and a predetermined path. The "armorial trophies" (400) of the hall conveying an immediacy of oppressive authority and force; the painting of the claustrophobic vault prior to the interring of Madeline, hinting at the already unfolding chain of events (405-406), and the tales in the books, mirroring perfectly the climactic emergence of Madeline (405).

## Madeline and the trinity

While addressing Madeline, the *agenda* of the house ought also to be mentioned. The unfolding of plot-developments is continuously foreshadowed by instances which belong to (are possessed by) the house. The painting of the white vault is of particular note, the color white appearing a total of three times in the entire text: referring once to the trees (397), once to the vault (405), and once to the bloodstained dress of the risen Madeline (416). We will not dwell on the choice of colour, for the sake of brevity, but rather on the establishing of a connection between noteworthy representatives of various instances: The Ushers, the House and the surrounding area, but also; the flesh, the stone and the wood. Effectively 'color-coding' these instances solidifies their connection and their interwoven nature, and in a sense unifies them as being of a shared agenda. Madeline's movements through the House being pre-written in the tale of Ethelred is another unification, clarifying the predetermined, almost prophetic quality to the unfolding of the plot: the destruction of the threefold self.

# William Wilson

*"Oh, outcast of all outcasts most abandoned! To the earth art thou not forever dead?*
*(Poe 426)*

A man calling himself William Wilson describes his demise in the eyes of the world, in terms vague and cryptic. He tells of his noble heritage, and the assertive control he was able to exert over his family and peers. At school, he meets a boy, his "rival", who shares his name and birthday, unassumingly matches him at every step, can speak only in whispers, and who defies his control and his impulses. One night, William sees his rival's face close in the lamplight, and is horrified, wondering if the rival's imitation of him has led to this appearance. William leaves the school. In the following years, he has many encounters with his Double, who thwarts his attempts at petty crime. In Rome, a fit of rage at another appearance prompts William to challenge his Double to a duel, where William fatally stabs him. As he looks down, the room suddenly changes, and he is looking at a mirror. The figure in the mirror appears to be the Double, who, no longer whispering, tells William that he is now dead to the world, having murdered himself.

In this section, we will look at what is contained within a name. We will examine Freud's Uncanny in the motif of the Double, or Doppelganger, with Otto Rank's psychoanalytic approach. Finally, we will address Crime, and the Mirror-image.

## What's in a name?

For the novel-narrator, the obfuscation of the true name is a staging tool which can elicit a state of wariness from the reader. "Let me call myself, for the present, William Wilson" (Poe 426). It is a plea that opens this short-story, a plea of agency: *allow me to*, rather than *I will*. This preoccupation with the name, and the power of the name, is a key to understanding the *abject* fracturing of self that the protagonist experiences. We will therefore spend some time clarifying: what exactly is the power of a name?

The name contains within it the whole of the being; It is the essential signifier of *Self*. The reclaiming of agency also matters: "Let *Me* call *Myself*…" (Æ). If *I* am to have a modicum of control *I* must reclaim the signifier, forge it anew to maintain the borders within which *I* act and define *Myself*. This is a two-fold effect: both the removal of the name which now carries a sullied social character, and an endeavour to reframe and assert the Self anew, from the pieces into which it has collapsed.

The choice of Wilson is noteworthy for two reasons. The son of Will, or simply the creation of the present William? A prominent symbol for the indexing of the world within the

field of psychoanalysis is the *Name-of-the-Father*. Symbolically, the Name-of-the-Father stands for those restrictions and laws which govern the individual's interaction with and placement within the social and interpersonal world (Bailly 70-71). Though, as we have discussed, the *abject* is the destruction of the Subject, the dissolution of the demarcation of the *Self* as an independent and separate instance with inherent agency.

Thus, if one is to restructure the world by way of *the Name-of-the-Father*, post-abjection, one must become the father. By creating the signifier William Wilson, the symbol is: *I* birth *Myself*, *I* define and create a *Self*. By the power of *Me*, *I* am *I*. This is a fragile state, however, not unlike the aforementioned foundations of the House of Usher. William is locked in the paradox of establishing something on the foundation of itself: 'I am, therefore: I am'. By performing this allocation of authority in himself he also separates himself from the larger Other: the social-societal instance which may embrace or shun.

This is furthered in William's anger with his original name. He despises the name, and moreover dislikes the Other Self for being a constant reminder and physical presence of it. The Self made into Object is the motif, a reminder of and challenge to the individuality of the original William. "I had always felt aversion to my uncourtly patronymic" (434), *patronymic* meaning a name derived from the father, in another connection to the *Name-of-the-Father*. Anger with the (near-literal) *Name-of-the-Father* is a structural anger: the frames of pre-existing expectation and association hanging over William. Consistently, he rages against everything that seeks to frame and restrain him. The Double's "disgusting air of patronage" (435) hangs over William as another layer of authority, against which he is compelled to lash out.

## The Double and the Uncanny

The *uncanny* is another essential term in the psychology of horror, defined by Sigmund Freud in his work of the same name as: "...something which is familiar and old-established in the mind, and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression." (74). We will address how *repression* plays into the case of William Wilson, but initially it will be useful to separate the *abject* and the *uncanny*. These terms are more similar in essence than *grotesque*/*abject*, as they are not states of an object, but rather patterns of psychological reaction, responses to external stimuli, evoked by structurally irreconcilable observations rather than baseline characteristics.

It is not the aim of this thesis to argue that the image of the Double is not firmly related to the *uncanny*. What we will do instead is try to delve a step deeper. We may trace

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the initial discomfort of the doppelganger to the *uncanny*, but the deeper-set damage lies within the realm of the *abject*: the exposure to the Other Self, which makes foreign that which was thought to be the realm of only the individual. While the *uncanny* makes strange that which was safe, it does not, on its own, shatter the Subject. For William Wilson, what is destroyed is the signifier, the outward projection of the self: The name and the body. With that destruction so goes the self. With one final summarizing rhetorical: How can *I* be, if others can also be *I*?

It is important to note that, despite the anger and revulsion he feels toward his Double, William: "could not bring (himself) to hate him altogether". This matters because, as Kristeva points out, the abject is fundamentally something that attracts us to it, by way of something akin to (or deeper than) morbid curiosity: "as tempting as it is condemned" (1). For William: "some petulant animosity, which was not yet hatred, some esteem, more respect, much fear, with a world of uneasy curiosity." (Poe 433). Despite the uncanny revulsion, he cannot help but be drawn toward the Double.

Freud, in response to and dialogue with Otto Rank, touches on the Double as a safeguard of the Self, a preserver of the ego and the identity. He uses as an example the habit of ancient Egyptian to create lasting images of the dead, such as mummification or sarcophagi (70). To Freud, these images are attached to the narcissism of the ignorant, and a transformation takes place when they are introduced to the modern beholder: "From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death" (Ibid). Williams final exchange with the mirror is recalled: "see by this image (...) how utterly thou hast murdered thyself." (Poe 448) How precisely the Double is an assurance of immortality we may consider on a grander societal scale.

## Crime and Conscience

"Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject" (Kristeva 4). It is not a capitalized *Law* that Kristeva uses here, but it may as well be: Law as structure, as order, as Other. According to Bailly: "submission to the Name-of-the-Father allow(s) the child to situate itself within the Law". (70) Submission to the Name-of-the-Father is again a symbolic phrase, roughly meaning acceptance of a limited degree of individuating agency when faced with an overarching instructional and disciplinary instance.

Crime, and a general lack of adherence to structures, is one of the defining characteristics of Wilson. He defines himself by virtue of being: "the master of (his) own actions." (427), at a very young age. To William, a core principle of his being is the degree of

control which he can exert on the world around him, contrasted with the lack of control which can in turn be imposed upon him. The situation is made ironic, by virtue of the fact that what restrains William is, to some extent, himself (or rather: his Self). The Double refuses "implicit belief in (William's) assertions, and submission to (William's) will." (431) This is another mirroring, as all the Double does is refuse to comply with Williams law, as William himself does with the greater Law.

The Double primarily intervenes when William transgresses upon the Law, or the agency of others, as William lists in a long passage where he summarizes several instances where: "stepped he in between me and my ambition!" (445) The Double is a dual presence of rebellion and authority to William, undermining his authority and agency, and enforcing upon him societal consequence. Paradoxically, the Double is both an *abject* image, and an enforcement of firm structures. In some sense, William himself is the truly *abject* figure, being a malevolent criminal with a fractured sense of Self. The Double, for all its uncanny eeriness, is an avid enforcer of societal norms and boundaries. When he acts in response to the whims of William, he does so to prevent transgressions against these boundaries.

The preservation of the self, then, that Freud called the function of the Double, should perhaps be considered the living on in others. When William strikes himself down, he is not 'dead', but "dead to the World, to Heaven and to Hope!" (448). This statement implies an irrevocable detachment from the communal, both in (world) and after life (heaven). The final barrier that kept William attached to the world has fallen, and what he thought would be his liberation has instead become a catastrophic self-destruction. By destroying his tether to society, William has eliminated himself as a Subject, becoming detached and dismissed.

## The Mirror

The mirror is the site of the final confrontation William has with the Double, now revealed as himself, speaking for the first time in a full voice (448). The choice of the mirror once again entrenches us in psychoanalytic terminology, this time the *mirror-stage*. This refers to the psychoanalytic concept of the child in front of the mirror recognizing itself *as* Self, as a defined entity separate from its surrounding Others. From Lionel Bailly's formulation, the result is "the development of the individual human psyche as a whole entity comprising inseparable conscious and unconscious elements; in Lacanian terms, the 'birth of the Subject". (32)

'Inseparable' is key in our understanding, as William and the Double are indeed separate. If we imagine inseparability as being whole, then we may call them fractured.

While the Double is, presumably, born from William, he is separate from his inner workings. In the formation of William's Self, something has gone missing, and it is continuously trying to serve its purpose from without. It seems no coincidence that the Double first emerges when William attends school. From his unchallenged domestic life (427), the school is his first interaction with institutional control: a governing *body*.

The Double evokes feelings in William which frequently hurtle him back into the foundational era of his memory. In an argument, the Double's manner of speaking brings William "(...) dim visions of (his) earliest infancy – wild confused and thronging memories of a time when memory herself was yet unborn." (436) He feels as though they have been acquainted, long ago. The *abject* nature of the Double evokes in William a memory of a time before memory, meaning a time before there were terms, concepts, borders. In a sense, this feeling is a second mirroring: a memory of the failure of the first. William has become separate from Himself and seeing Himself as Other causes an *abject* collapse in the framework of his mind.

# Conclusion

Tracing the *abject* through the pages of Poe is a project that, to some extent, writes itself. His preoccupation with the fundamental functions of the psyche, and the struggles of troubled characters to navigate it, makes his work a rich field for psychological examination. His frequent tendency to push life and the psyche past their conventional borders solidifies his relevance for our phenomenon of choice. Returning to our analyses, we can retrace our steps out from the close readings and attempt to establish an overview.

In our examination of *The Masque of the Red Death*, we have seen the *abject* in the border-state of life: an undead condition masquerading as individuated existence. The unease we feel on behalf of the revellers comes from this elusive state: we do not recognize it fully, and this limbo-like middle-grounds denies life and death simultaneously. We have seen this state both through the ironic quarantine of the 'healthy', and through the simultaneously *grotesque* and *abject* reveal of the Red Death emerging in the masquerade. We have also seen disease as a quintessential motif of the *abject*, and the metaphorical state of the body-as-temple becoming body-as-tomb. The effortless transgression on presupposed structural and spiritual safety highlights the tendency to categorize, which is in turn revealed as hollow. In our introductory chapter we said the *abject* was without agenda, and this is highlighted in *The*

*Masque of the Red Death*: The imparting of an agenda unto it lies with the beholders attempting to structure, in order to understand.

In *The Fall of the House of Usher* we are in another variation of unlife, though more precisely there is an excess of life, spread thin over too wide a threefold body. Both Francesca Rigotti and Mark Sandberg's illustrations of the potent metaphor of home have contrasted with the looming presence of the House of Usher, exposing it as something disruptive to the ease of being, and to the house as a prerequisite to the full state of citizenship: existence as socially acknowledged Subject. In tandem with this, we have considered the reversal of Russell Belk's *contamination*: the house imparting itself onto the Ushers. We have also seen the isolated state of the Ushers doubling the degree of separation from the big Other, which is to say societal belonging. The connection between the body of Madeline, the halls of the House and the surrounding, decaying area which we examined, shows a state of shared consciousness and motivation. The eventual simultaneous collapse of the House, the sister and the brother accentuates both the fragility of the dispersed shared Self, and the common fate of all its participants. We have also seen the distance in motifs from the *sublime*, which we have heard Kristeva call another step on the same journey as the *abject*, and the way that the scene of the House stands opposed to the elevated destruction of the Self: collapsing rather than ascending.

Finally, in *William Wilson*, we see the clearest connection to the concepts of psychoanalysis. We examined the name as the signifier of Self, and the reclaiming of the name as a conscious move to reacquire control of that Self. We approached this by way of the symbolic *Name-of-the-Father*, to understand the renaming as a new positioning within the social structure of Law and the communal. William's categorizing of himself as outcast and dead to the world emerged as the driving-force of this. Freud made his entrance as we looked at the *uncanny*, the familiar turned distant and unsettling. We have seen how the *uncanny* gets us partway there, in its initial discomfort, but that to reach the deeper levels of unease enacted by what we called the Other Self, we had to consider Otto Rank's doppelganger as a disruption of what was assumed to be the dominions of the Self, and only the Self. Concluding, we have extended the psychoanalytic symbol of the mirror into the climactic final confrontation of the story, where we can see how William has facilitated his own destruction by way of denying his Self.

The *abject* does not emerge quite as often as the *uncanny*, at least colloquially, when it comes to the terminology of the frightening. By nature, it is more immediately accessible to

assess the familiar-made-frightening than that which destroys the Self: the former is easily grasped and identified, the latter hinges on more deliberate examination.

Regardless, the *abject* is an excellent tool for understanding the psychology of fear: as something rooted in our perception and realization of our Selves, and the fragility of that state. A fundamental disruption to individuation is a threat to the entirety of our understanding of what 'Us' means. In that sense it is less the familiar-made-frightening, and closer to making the familiar redundant, dissolving structures of recognition altogether. *Abjection* names a fear that sits at, or even below, the foundation of our definitions of our Selves, and reminds us of the fragility of certainty and structure. By that metric alone, it should be considered, perhaps somewhat ironically, foundational.

After all, even though what frightens us is subjective, our understanding of the frightening always starts with ourselves.

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