“The Fall of the House of Usher” -Reading

Having been previously familiar with the other works of the great Edgar Allen Poe, such as *“The Tell Tale Heart”* and *“The Raven”*, I predicted that *“The Fall of the house of Usher”* would follow in the same dark, melancholic, and essentially Gothic vein. It did not disappoint; “The Fall of the House of Usher” boasted intriguingly dark characters, an iconic Gothic 19th century setting, as well as sinister, despondent undertones to create a story that was, and is, quintessentially Poe.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” details the time an anonymous narrator spends at the unsettling home of his mentally ill friend, Roderick Usher, as well as Lady Madeline, his twin sister. The story follows the course of events which ultimately lead to the horrific deaths of both twins, the collapse of the mansion itself, and thus the subsequent literal fall of the house of Usher as it cleaves in two and sinks into the tarn below.

From my initial reading of “The Fall of the House of Usher”, I interpreted the primary theme of the text to be that fear of fear itself is a powerful and potentially destructive force. This idea is emphasised strongly throughout the story, but is also especially prevalent in the relationship between Roderick and Madeline. As I had understood the crux of Roderick’s mental illness to be his terror of *“the grim phantasm, FEAR”*, I deduced the ending, specifically Madeline’s resurrection and murder of Roderick, to mean that the physical and tangible embodiment of his fear itself (Madeline) had violently tackled him to the floor *“as a corpse”.* Thus, during my first reading I interpreted the final events of the story to mean that Roderick dies a victim of his own terrorised psyche, as he had previously prophesised by declaring, “*I must perish in this deplorable folly”.* It was also during this initial reading that I mistakenly interpreted Madeline’s resurrection literally; this was due to my leisurely perusal of the text, as opposed to an analytical perspective.

During my first reading, I began to sympathise emotionally with Madeline, as I perceived her to be the victim of various injustices throughout the story. As I consider myself to be a moral teenager heavily influenced by the primarily ethical society which I am party to, “The Fall of the House of Usher” elicited strong emotional responses of shock and distress from me. Specifically, Madeline’s burial in the eerie and typically gothic crypt with *“the mockery of a faint blush upon…the face”* physically sickened me: I was disturbed by the fundamentally wrong crime of attempted murder that was perpetrated against her. However, whilst I was shocked by the events of “The Fall of the House of Usher”, I was not entirely surprised: my previous experience with Poe’s works allowed me to predict certain elements of the story. As Poe’s texts are written in a uniquely dark and gothic style, many of the underpinning themes and motifs remain consistent among them: one example of a prediction I made is the central role of madness in both Roderick and the plot of “The Fall of the House of Usher”. Thus, my first reading allowed me to empathetically experience the events of the story as Madeline did, as well as determine if the predictions I had made based upon my previous experiences were accurate.

During my second reading, however, I favoured a more critical perspective towards “The Fall of the House of Usher”. I looked closely at the key textual features in order to gain a more thorough understanding of the text as a whole. One such feature is the significant recurring mirror motif, an example of which can be seen from the narrator’s description of the house from the *“inverted image of the grey sedge”*. This mirror motif foreshadowed the idea of a ‘oneness of person’ between the twins that I interpreted on my second reading, wherein Roderick, who is physically sound but suffers a mental illness represents the physical half of the entity, while Madeline, who suffers from the opposite, is symbolic of the mental and spiritual side. Madeline and Roderick are also an example of binary opposition themselves, because they are twins, yet male and female, as well as being mentally and physically ill respectively. Therefore, my preference for a more detached and clinical style of reading led directly to a more thorough understanding of the story.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” is clearly a classic example of the great Edgar Allen Poe at his finest, as well as the Gothic horror genre. The enthralling plot and decidedly insidious themes combined to create a richly melancholic story that I thoroughly enjoyed.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” -Defence

How do we read? Do we generate meaning solely from the words on the page, or do we bring something of ourselves when we read? If we make predictions and hold preconceived notions, how do those affect our reading? Is our interpretation of a text impacted in any way by the culture we inhabit?

Literary critics have long utilised critical theory in the construction of meaning from a text. Each of the different approaches that fall under this category have postulated that either the reader, text, or author play the dominant role in the process of meaning making. The first was the traditional author-centred approach, which suggested the author’s values, attitudes and beliefs were dominant in the construction of meaning. Furthermore, it was underpinned by the belief that the “Author-God” (Barthes, 1978) was *“transcending his or her own culture”* and *“being gifted with rare insights into the human condition”* (QSA, 2011, pg 5). This approach was problematized by the New Critics of the mid-20th century, who instead fostered the idea that *“the text’s meaning had to be deduced from closely examining its language and structure”.* Following this, the reader centred approach became popularised, for its affirmation of *“the reader’s central role in the meaning making process*”(QSA, 2011, pg 12). Thus, the reader-centred approach allowed for multiple interpretations as a result of the *“uniqueness of the individual’s engagement with the text”* (QSA, 2011, pg 12).

During my second reading, I employed a structuralist approach to construct meaning. Structuralism is the school of literary thought that is defined by the belief that a text is *“constituted of linguistic conventions”* (Structuralism, 2014). Its primary aim is to ensure the reader will *“discover the codes, the rules, the systems”* (Selden, Widdowson, Brooker, 2005, pg 78) from their knowledge of textual conventions. My use of structuralism is shown when I focused upon the *“key textual features”,* such as the significant *“mirror motif”*. This theory enabled me to grasp the implicit idea of *“a ‘oneness of person’ between the twins”*, as well as allowing me to shift from a superficial understanding, wherein I had *“interpreted Madeline’s resurrection literally”*, to a more implicit one- *“Madeline and Roderick are [also] an example of binary opposition”.* Thus, structuralism was useful in illuminating my reading style; however, it did not address the question of how my experiences as the reader, specifically my *“strong emotional responses”,* may have influenced the manner in which I perceived the text.

Saussure’s semiotic theories are closely linked to structuralism, and were also of reasonable use to me in determining my style of reading. To Saussure, language itself is *“arbitrary, relational and constructive”*, and the text’s *“meanings are maintained and established…on the functions of grammatical structures*” (Peter Barry, 2002, pg 41, 44). One of the principle concepts is that a sign-*“an object that stands for something other than itself”* (Ryan, S. Ryan, D, unknown) is comprised of a *signifier* *“the form which the sign takes”*, and the *signified*- the *“concept it represents”* (Daniel Chandler, 2013). In my reading, I was able to identify that “*Madeline and Roderick are [also] an example of binary opposition”* through the use of this model: the *signifier* is that they *“are twins, yet male and female”* as well as *“mentally and physically ill respectively”.* The *signified* is thus the dichotomy between the respective physical and spiritual sides of the entity; that is, Madeline and Roderick. As with the structuralist approach, my reader-oriented responses were overlooked in favour of the textual conventions, and thus Saussure’s theories were only partly useful as they pertained to the analytical aspect of my reading style.

Louise Rosenblatt’s theory of transactional analysis was of great use in illuminating my style of reading, because it emphasises *“the interconnectedness of reader and text in the process of meaning making”* (Shagufta Imtiaz, 2004). It suggests that a text *“remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into a set of meaningful symbols”* (Roen, D. Karolides, N, 2005). In my reading, my use of transactional theory is evident in my interpretation of Roderick’s death to mean that *“he dies a victim of his own terrorised psyche”.* Thus, my prior knowledge of textual conventions, in this case, symbolism, was used in conjunction with my personal responses, to construct meaning.

Additionally, Rosenblatt’s concepts of efferent and aesthetic reading were also helpful in the discernment of my reading style; this is because, much like transactional theory, they stress the shared role of reader and text in the generation of meaning. Efferent reading occurs when a reader is interested in *“obtaining information…that will remain…after the reading”* (Moore, M.R, 2014). By contrast, the theory of aesthetic reading posits that a reader *“explore(s) the work and oneself”* (Efferent Vs Aesthetic, year unknown) during their interaction with the text. During my first reading, my response was decidedly aesthetic, as it was a *“leisurely perusal of the text”* and *“elicited strong emotional responses…from me”*. However, my second reading demonstrates that I had employed an efferent reading, as *“I had favoured a more critical approach*”, and sought to gain *“a more thorough understanding of the text as a whole”*. Thus, Rosenblatt’s aesthetic theory allowed my personal responses to shape my interpretation, which led me to realise that I generate meaning through consideration of textual elements and my personal responses.

Jauss’ *“Horizons of Expectations”* (Jauss, H.R, 1982), postulates that a reader’s aesthetic interpretation of a text is dependent upon their previous experiences. As it balances the reader and text’s roles in the process of meaning making, it fit well with my ascertained reading style. In my case, my prior knowledge and understanding of Poe’s works, and his *“uniquely dark and gothic”* style, enabled me to formulate predictions, such as the “*central role of madness in…’The Fall of the House of Usher’”*. This prediction was made as a result of my assertion that *“many of the underpinning themes and motifs”* of Poe’s works *“remain consistent”.* Thus, my ‘horizon of expectation’ of “The Fall of the House of Usher” directly influenced my interpretation, as *“I was not entirely surprised”* by the events of the text. Furthermore, the fact that my reading, which was significantly affected by my ‘horizon of expectation’, may have been different from that of an individual with no prior experience of either the Gothic genre or Poe’s works, lends credence to Jauss’ belief that a reader’s past experiences will shape their interpretation of a text.

Fish’s concept of *“interpretive communities”* (Fish, 1982) suggests that the reader occupies the dominant position in the process of meaning construction. It also postulates that individuals reading from a collective discourse will *“share reading strategies, values and interpretive assumptions”* (McManus, B.F, 1998). In my interpretation of the text, the assertion that *“I began to sympathise emotionally with Madeline”* is indicative that the ‘interpretive community’ from which I read is “primarily ethical”, as evidenced because *“I consider myself…a moral teenager”.* Fish’s theory is based upon the belief that *“knowledge is…always socially conditioned”* (Lang, C. 2012),and thus it suggests that readers within the same ‘interpretive community’ will achieve the same interpretation. Given the individual nature of a reader’s interaction with the text, the concept of an ‘interpretive community’ may be flawed. However, it was useful in determining the reader-oriented side of my reading style, even if it did overlook the role of textual conventions in the construction of meaning.

It is clear that my preferred reading style actively utilises those theories which allow both text and reader to be weighted equally in the process of meaning making. Through my application of text-centred theories, such as structuralism, I realised that my interpretation and understanding of the text could not be solely derived from an analysis of the textual features. However, I was also unable to construct meaning on the basis of my reader-orientated responses alone; I required knowledge of the textual conventions in order to construct meaning. Therefore, my interpretation of “The Fall of the House of Usher” illuminated my personal reading style, and helped me to understand that I consider both the text and reader to be of equal value in the process of meaning making.

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