



FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Dubious Demeanours: Unmasking Poe's  
Untrustworthy and Delusional Narrators in  
“The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) and  
“Ligeia” (1838)

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## **ABSTRACT**

Imbued with the gothic literary tradition, Edgar Allan Poe introduces his readers into a world of horror where reality is constantly clashing with supernatural powers. This paper examines the construction of Poe's first-person narrators in order to prove their unreliability. Focusing on two of his most well-known tales, "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Ligeia," this study attempts to elaborate on the different techniques that Poe uses to construct his untrustworthy narrators. Firstly, several textual inconsistencies and incongruities are examined so as to verify the unreliable and deceitful nature of the two narrators. And secondly, the relation of these narrators to the other characters and physical setting is explored in order to expose the narrators' psychological unbalance and compromised credibility.

**Key words:** Edgar Allan Poe, "The Fall of the House of Usher," "Ligeia," unreliable/deceitful narrators, textual inconsistencies and incongruities, mental instability/psychological unbalance.

## RESUMEN

Influido por la tradición gótica literaria, Edgar Allan Poe introduce a sus lectores en un mundo de horror donde la realidad se funde con elementos sobrenaturales. Este trabajo analiza la construcción del narrador no fidedigno en primera persona en dos cuentos de Poe. Centrándonos en dos de sus relatos más conocidos, “The Fall of the House of Usher” y “Ligeia,” este ensayo pretende ahondar en las diferentes técnicas empleadas por Poe a la hora de construir unos narradores nada fidedignos. En primer lugar, se analizarán una serie de inconsistencias e incongruencias textuales con vistas a demostrar la sospechosa y poco fiable naturaleza de los dos narradores. Y, en segundo lugar, se estudiará la relación de estos narradores con respecto a otros personajes y al espacio físico para así advertir al lector de su desequilibrio mental y comprometida credibilidad.

**Palabras clave:** Edgar Allan Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “Ligeia,” narradores no fidedignos, inconsistencias e incongruencias textuales, inestabilidad/desequilibrio mental.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Whether in a crumbling mansion of dark narrow passages and gothic archways (“The Fall of the House of Usher” 1839), a decaying abbey in which the main chamber is profuse and grotesquely furnished and decorated (“Ligeia” 1838), or in some damp and gloomy vault where family tombs and bleached bones proliferate (“The Cask of Amontillado” 1846), Poe’s narrators shelter under an architectural complex naturally embedded within the Gothic tradition. Initially used to refer to a particular European style of architecture, the term “gothic” also came to gather together those stories dealing with, as Benjamin F. Fisher indicates, “vicious pursuit of innocence/innocents for purposes of power, lust, money . . . issues of identity and power, often relating to family situations of lineage or marriages . . . eerie settings . . . [and] emotional uncertainties and disturbances among the characters” (74-75). Nevertheless, this literary sensation that was introduced into English language in 1764 with Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* was inexorably approaching a dead end after almost a century, and Poe was aware of it. For this reason, Poe’s most acclaimed gothic tales (“Usher” and “Ligeia”) depict the category of the gothic, in Susan Amper’s words, “as a genre that refuses to die” (106) despite its gradual deterioration. In these two narratives the decadence of the gothic is clearly captured both in Usher’s collapsing gothic mansion which comes to epitomize the metaphorical death of the genre (Cox & Fisher qtd. in Amper 168), and the childish efforts to insufflate life on the traumatically dead English gothic (Lady Rowena) by clinging to the German gothic (Lady Ligeia), hoping that it would be revived (Griffith qtd. in Amper 113). In this respect, given Poe’s cultivation of the gothic as a resilient and lasting literary tradition, his contribution cannot be neglected. These tales have actually consolidated Poe’s reputation as an indisputable master of the

genre, capable of reuniting within his works the most relevant aspects of the gothic and effectively making the reader sink into such Gothicism.

On the other hand, it is worth noticing that Poe's extraordinary tales of mystery and imagination remain as intriguing as ever. Many readers still find themselves struggling to grasp the true meaning and purposes underlying the report of events made by Poe's first-person narrators. As readers follow the narrators' track of mind, they become frustrated because their comprehension is hindered by a series of unconvincing and implausible explanations which both fail to disengage the narrators from their responsibility towards the destructive plots they are recounting (Amper 11) and characterize them as mentally delusional. Situated around the death of one or more characters, Poe's unstable narrators typically offer an inconsistent and inaccurate description that leaves many mysteries unsolved (e.g. Lady Madeline's rare disease in "The Fall of the House of Usher") and alludes to the involvement of some external and supernatural forces in order to avoid suspicions against their persona and counteract the little information they disclose. All of this leads readers to consider the possibility that these narrators are withholding or even actively hiding evidence. Similarly, Poe's distinctive use of an "extreme hyperbolic language" (Amper 14) following the depiction of awkward situations (e.g. the narrator's sordid and meticulous details on Lady Rowena's decomposing body in "Ligeia") does not speak favourably of his narrators either. Instead of driving readers' attention far from their incrimination in the crimes, these character-narrators compromise their reliability and not only "block [readers'] attempt to read the stories as accounts by sane, truthful narrators" (Amper 11), but they also fail to bring the reader round to their point of view insofar as their narratives reveal another very different story that does not go unnoticed and which successfully points to their troubled minds. Accordingly, Poe's construction of these manipulative and

mentally deranged narrators is fascinating as it presents readers with a challenge in which they must decide what is true and what is a product of excessive imagination and evil intentions.

Focusing on the figure of the narrator, this study aims to verify and examine how the narrators' unreliability in the tales "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Ligeia" is constructed. For this purpose, not only will several textual inconsistencies and ambiguities be considered, but also the untrustworthy and delusional narrators' relation to the other characters and each respective setting will be carefully explored.

## **2. SITUATING EDGAR ALLAN POE'S "THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER" AND "LIGEIA"**

Before giving way to a thorough analysis of the unreliability in both of Poe's tales, it is essential to understand the important role that the narrators' untrustworthiness plays in the overall construction of the texts. In "Usher," the reader becomes acquainted with an outsider-narrator who is reporting the mysterious and paranormal events happening at the time he is staying at his friend's house. By adopting a more realistic and rational position, this narrator, who lacks both name and physical description, endeavours to restore his friend's mental health by occupying his mind with music, literature, and other activities. However, as the narrator himself concedes, Usher's incipient madness ends by contaminating and distorting the narrator's own perception of the circumstances to such an extent that what has initially been defined as Usher's "superstitious impressions" (142) is reported to have actually happened. Moreover, at the end of the story it is Usher who addresses his friend as "madman" (154) due to his efforts to remain unaffected and to ignore the information he is able to grasp with his senses. As John C. Gruesser explains, this behaviour is "a sign of delusion" (85) since he is transforming reality so as not to have to face an abyss of uncertainty for which his



rational thinking is unable to find any possible explanation. In the same way, “Ligeia” is told from the point of view of an unnamed first-person narrator who introduces to the reader the characters of Lady Ligeia and Lady Rowena as well as the circumstances surrounding their deaths and the phantasmagorical reincarnation of Ligeia in Rowena’s body – the latter having already been dismantled when he specifically refers to Ligeia as she “who is no more” (168). As the narrator later confesses, Ligeia’s death makes him inherit such an immense fortune that enables him to acquire a very expensive and impressive property. Furthermore, immediately after her death he becomes “a bounden slave in the trammels of opium” (175) and admits that his vision of reality has been considerably altered by this addiction. This confession, together with the striking similarities between the deaths of Ligeia and Rowena, clearly indicates that this narrator is not trustworthy and that he might be responsible for these appalling crimes. Therefore, a first and more general approach to the plot of “Usher” and “Ligeia” makes the reader succumb not only to the veil of secrecy surrounding the identity of the two narrators, but also to the very evident transparency with regard to their unreliability. These narrators’ untrustworthiness, then, is at the core of the two tales and, for this reason, will constitute the matter of debate in this work.

### **3. AN EXAMINATION OF THE TEXTUAL INCONSISTENCIES AND INCONGRUITIES IN POE’S “THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER” AND “LIGEIA”**

An effective narrative technique that Poe uses in order to undermine the credibility of his narrators is the introduction of several linguistic incongruities and ambiguities. In “Usher,” it is vital to refer to two key moments placed at the beginning and ending of the tale. After the powerful description of the atmosphere engulfing Usher’s mansion, the reader begins to feel skeptical about the narrator insofar as he fails

to provide the real motive that has led him to visit his friend. The narrator claims that “in this mansion of gloom [he] now proposed [himself] a sojourn of some weeks” merely to contradict himself later when mentioning that: “a letter, however, had lately reached [him] . . . a letter from [Usher] . . . [communicating] an earnest desire to see [him],” and which he “accordingly obeyed” (138). Therefore, due to the reader’s inability to determine exactly why the narrator has decided to make this visit, his trustworthiness becomes conspicuous in its absence. Similarly, in the last few pages of the story there are two other fundamental elements that reinforce his unreliability: the moon and the tempest. Scholars Amper and Gruesser have already posited that it appears to be impossible that, after commenting on “the impetuous fury of the entering gust” and “the exceeding density of the clouds” that results in his having “no glimpse of the moon or stars” (151), the narrator is perfectly able to contemplate the moon in spite of the fact that the tempest is “still abroad in all its wrath” (Amper 144; Gruesser 82; Poe 155). This lack of consistency in the narration leaves the reader considering the possibility that the storm never takes place and that, accordingly, it is a product of the narrator’s imagination as a result of his growing anxiety owing to the setting and his friend’s influence – all of which will be analyzed in the following section. Hence, it is reasonable to consider the possibility that the narrator might be telling a falsehood, and thus, endangering his reliability in a very similar way as the narrator in “Ligeia.”

The hints at the narrator’s dubious credibility are likewise brilliantly achieved in the construction of the text of “Ligeia.” By alluding to his “feeble” memory and emphasizing the limitations on humans’ capacity of remembrance (170), the narrator of “Ligeia” provides the reader with a scientific justification of the ambiguities and, as Dorothea Von Mücke remarks, “[the] mnemonic and linguistic limitations” (58) with which the text is riddled. Nonetheless, the narrator’s effort in hiding this vagueness

under a mask of rationality is not at all successful. Considering the character of his beloved Lady Ligeia, the narrator fails in his attempt to convince the reader of his faithful affection towards her. Firstly, he neglects his wife's family name despite confirming that "of her family" he "had surely heard her speak" (168), thus unconsciously unveiling his lack of attention and interest in his wife's life. More specifically, the fact that he later tries to redeem his ignorance by implying that he may have never been in possession of that information (Weekes 151), shows an important self-contradiction that strengthens the reader's distrust towards the narrator as he seems to be changing his discourse in order to give his readers a more favourable impression of himself. And secondly, the narrator's indifference towards Ligeia is likewise exposed when he expresses that her virtues "made their way into [his] heart by paces so steadily and stealthily progressive that *have been unnoticed and unknown*" (168. In emphasis). By emphasizing that all those qualities of Lady Ligeia have remained unperceived, the narrator leaves the reader wondering where his admiration and decision to marry her have come from since, as Terence J. Matheson has already noted, this revelation denies the possibility that this marriage has sprung out of love (qtd. in Amper 123). The narrator's struggle to hide himself behind a facade of veneration and endearment for Ligeia, therefore, collapses under the reader's eyes – as in "Usher," this narrator is no longer credible. Nevertheless, these narrators' unreliability is not only constructed by means of textual ambiguities and incongruities, but some attention should also be directed towards those passages that anticipate their mental instability, and thereby compromise their trustworthiness.

#### **4. AN EXAMINATION OF THE NARRATORS' UNBALANCED PSYCHOLOGICAL STATE IN "THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER" AND "LIGEIA"**

##### **4.1. A study of these narrators' mental instability in relation to other characters**

Another leading indicator of these narratives' unreliability refers to the artful introduction of the unbalanced psychological state of the narrators through their association with other characters. It is worth reminding the reader that in "Usher" the narrator himself admits that he has "eventually [become] 'infected' by his friend's condition" (Peeples 180), thus recognizing the enormous power Roderick Usher exercises on his persona. A perfect illustration of this is the transformation of the narrator's capacity to rationalize the irrational as a result of his friend's growing superstitions. Even though Elena Anastasaki argues that the poem "The Haunted Palace" comes to convey the "inevitability in the outcome" (207) in its depiction of the unavoidable fate awaiting both the mansion and its inhabitants, this supposedly family evil, which has become Usher's obsession and forced him to live a secluded life, lacks any solid reference except for this 'confession' about a man who has been described from the start as having "a mental disorder" (138). Anastasaki's hypothesis, therefore, however interesting, will not be considered. In this respect, it is crucial to allude to the narrator's ineffectual attempt to offer his friend (and himself) a rational and consoling explanation of what Usher firmly believes to be a manifestation of supernatural powers. Greatly affected by Usher's eccentricities, the narrator decides to make a final attempt to soothe his friend by rationally insisting that "these appearances, which bewilder [him], are merely electrical phenomena not uncommon" (151), and by reading aloud "The Mad Trist" in the hope that it will provide him with some distraction. The narrator, however, fails to supply any rational answer to the unusual circumstances he describes

insofar as he betrays his own words and embraces “the belief that the supernatural . . . [does] occur” (Gruesser 82). This submission of the narrator to the supernatural is clearly discernible in his confession that he hears the same strange noises as Usher does: “Here again, I paused abruptly, and now with a feeling of wild amazement for there could be no doubt . . . that . . . I did actually hear . . . a low and apparently distant, but harsh, protracted and most unusual screaming” (153). Lending himself to Roderick’s superstitions, the narrator finally rejects any rational clarification of the events. By doing this, he is compromising the credibility of his narration and the reader, in turn, is left increasingly skeptical.

Moreover, an examination of the narrator’s relation to the characters of Ligeia and Rowena in “Ligeia” proves that he is only a step away from madness. Regarding Lady Ligeia, Leonard W. Engel contends that she becomes an “all-consuming obsession” (141) that accelerates the narrator’s descent into insanity. This obsession can be located in that strangeness dwelling in Ligeia’s eyes that the narrator so persistently yet, apparently, so inefficiently tries to unveil, for it seems that her eyes make him confront the reality of his nature as a murderer and sexual pervert who takes pleasure in abusing and killing his female victims – two elements that the narrator wants to hide but Ligeia successfully unfolds through “The Conqueror Worm.” This poem reveals not only Ligeia’s awareness of the truculent past of her husband involving other women who have fallen victims to the narrator (Amper 130-131), but also her determination to openly report her long history of mistreatment and sexual abuse, which is captured through the symbol of the “Conqueror Worm.” Referred to in the poem as “A crawling shape . . . / A blood-red thing” (174), it carries very strong and explicit sexual connotations and, hence, should be read, as Amper has wisely suggested, as representative of the male sexual organ (131). Similarly, the narrator’s relation to

Rowena is also very revealing. While Rowena lies convalescent in the bridal couch, the reader is able to observe that her health varies from a sudden improvement to another “more violent disorder” (178). These changes, as some scholars have noted, are indeed of a very suspicious nature. For instance, Amper’s contention that the narrator, “delighting in her suffering and . . . terror, repeatedly sickens her and then lets her recover” (140), is quite feasible considering the awful effect that the wine has on Rowena. Having mentioned that the decanter of wine “had been ordered by her physicians” (178), the reader would expect some improvement of the patient, but the drinking of the liquid brings with it “a rapid change for the worse” (179). This deterioration of Rowena’s health is explained by the “fall within the goblet . . . [of] three or four large drops of a brilliant and ruby-coloured fluid” (179) that, surprisingly, only the narrator is capable of seeing, thus suggesting that he poisons the cup. In this sense, readers feel they are being deceived by this narrator whose intention towards Rowena seems to be far from that of recovery, but rather, as Amper puts it, a “sadistic prolongation of [her] death” (140) – an ideally convincing turn of events for the unsettled and agitated mind of a murderer. Nonetheless, the physical setting should be also examined since it appears rather simplistic to restrict the narrators’ mental instability to their relation to the other characters of the stories.

#### **4.2. A study of these narrators’ mental instability in relation to the physical setting**

As a master of description, Poe’s innate gift at building a physical setting that resembles and exposes the psychological state of his narrators is absolutely magnificent. In “Usher,” for example, the very first paragraph anticipates the connection between Usher’s gloomy mansion and the narrator’s mental state as he concedes that “with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded [his] spirit” (137). The house of Usher, therefore, is identified as the primary cause of distress and anxiety

in the narrator – emotions which are greatly intensified by the constant repetition of words and phrases such as “dull,” “dark,” “soundless,” “oppressive,” “terrible,” “ghastly” and “an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart” (137-138) that help to create a hostile atmosphere. This vivid description allows the reader to discern an invisible bond that seems to connect the narrator’s unsettled mind with the description of the setting, and which symbolically comes to epitomize the decay of the narrator’s mental health. In fact, the narrator’s agitation is not only instigated by external scrutiny of the house, but his mind also starts to be seriously affected by the “many dark and intricate passages,” “the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies” (140). All the objects and rooms of the mansion increase his sensitivity and frailty, and make him more vulnerable and easily disturbed – the longer he stays in Usher’s house, the more anxious he feels. The mansion of Usher, therefore, makes such a deep impression on his mind that it becomes perfectly plausible to assert the narrator’s descent into madness, a conclusion which is also noticed by Usher himself when he calls his friend a “madman” at the end. In this respect, as Gruesser has astutely pointed out, “although the narrator believes that he is merely chronicling Roderick’s precipitous descent into madness, he is also documenting his own more subtle mental deterioration” (80). And this deterioration is more evidently portrayed in the final destruction of the building which metaphorically represents, as noted by John A. Timmerman, “the mental disintegration of the [narrator’s] persona” (228). At the same time that the narrator loses his sanity and accepts the supernatural, the house, threatened by that zigzag fissure symbolically signifying the menace of insanity, succumbs and falls to pieces. The tale of “Usher,” consequently, makes the reader confront a delusional narrator whose psychological well-being is seriously challenged by “this mansion of gloom” (138).

As for the text of “Ligeia,” the physical setting likewise conveys the lack of sanity and mental instability of the narrator. Being the solitary English abbey distinguished by its “gloomy and dreary grandeur,” with “its verdant decay hanging about it” and placed in a “remote and unsocial region of the country” (175), the relevant connotations of physical decay and enclosure that this description of the scenery evokes and how it affects the characters cannot be neglected. For this purpose, the confined space of the bridal chamber is ideal because of what it reveals of the narrator’s personality. Decorated with a window of “an immense sheet of unbroken glass from Venice . . . tinted of a leaden hue, so that the rays . . . passing through it, [fall] with a ghastly lustre on the objects,” a ceiling “of gloomy-looking oak [and] excessively lofty, vaulted, and elaborately fretted with the wildest and most grotesque specimens of a semi-Gothic, semi-Druidical device,” “the bridal couch – of an Indian model, and low, and sculptured of solid ebony, with a pall-like canopy above” and “a gigantic sarcophagus of black granite” (176), rather than a bridal chamber, these ornaments picked by the narrator suggest a burial chamber. This decoration, therefore, implies a fusion between the two concepts. In this respect, as Amper indicates, the bridal chamber appears to be identified by the narrator “as a place conjoining sex and death” (127). And this association is translated into the explicit necrophilia underlying the very last pages when he is seemingly taking care of Lady Rowena. An attentive consideration of his assertions that his “limbs grow rigid where [he] sat” and that he “fell back with a shudder upon the couch from which [he] had been so startlingly aroused” (180-181) – the couch on which Lady Rowena was lying down – immediately demolishes his claims of worry due to the sexual explicitness of these sentences which hint at an experience of sexual abuse. In fact, this assumption is not entirely impossible as the reader has already become acquainted with the long history of abuse condemned by Ligeia. The reader,



then, can reasonably conclude that the narrator's depravity has ostensibly no limits and that this pathological behaviour considerably weakens the reliability of his narration.

## 5. CONCLUSION

By means of several textual ambiguities and incongruities, the narrators' attitude towards other characters and their connection to the physical setting, all of which strongly emphasize the classification of the narrators as mentally deranged, this work has aimed at discussing the unreliability of the narrators in two texts written by Edgar Allan Poe: "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Ligeia." As a result of the remarkably constructed narrators' untrustworthiness, Poe makes his readers confront the uncertainty and inexplicability of what is being reported in a way that evocatively reminds readers of Henry James and the ambivalent governess he presents in his novella *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). The final outcome corresponds to two complex works of literature that demand special attention given the fact that readers are completely entrapped within the lines of both stories and obliged to cross the threshold of reality and enter into the realm of the supernatural.

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