

The Fall of the House of Usher Analytical Essay: How does Poe makes the opening so effective?

The opening of *The Fall of the House of Usher* is effective as it sets up themes of death, decay and mystery which run throughout the story. The trustworthy narrator uses an eldritch and macabre semantic field, causing the reader a feeling of gloom. The potency of the opening comes from the combination of multiple factors: the description of the surroundings and the house, the mysterious letter and the unnamed illness of Usher – altogether foreboding, foreshadowing and hinting at what is to come.

The theme of death and decay which runs throughout the narrative implies that some characters in this story are doomed to die, beginning with the word “autumn”, which has connotations of the falling asleep of nature and suggests rotting and dying. Poe describes how the “clouds hung oppressively low” and although in this instance “hung” indicates the suspension of the clouds in the air, the word’s alternate definition produces connotations of killing by hanging and associations with death. The author further emphasises the theme of execution with the use of verbs with painful and sharp connotations such as “torture” and “annihilate”. Poe’s description of the surroundings of the house, such as the “white trunks of decayed trees”, brings up images and sentiments of doom and death. The account of the “black and lurid tarn” also suggests the loss of life and disease and how the encircling nature mirrors the condition of the occupants. The adjective “rank”, used to describe the sedges near the tarn, can mean “overgrown” or having a foul and rancid smell and is often used to describe the smell of a human corpse – neither definition paints the house as welcoming. Also, the phrases “unruffled lustre” and “soundless day” present the atmosphere as windless and are suggestive of a tomb-like stillness. Overall, the theme of decay and desolation in the opening paragraph of *The Fall of the House of Usher* plants a troubled and sinking feeling in the reader’s mind, foreshadowing the events that may happen in this short story.

Poe also creates an air of mystery and gloom in this opening, backed up by the theme of doom and decay. Overall, the anonymity of the nonetheless credible narrator focuses the attention on other characters and author’s descriptions. The first sentence’s adjectives with long vowel sounds suggest an empty atmosphere of gloom. The narrator arrives at the house in the evening and directly states the “insufferable gloom” of the house, mentioning the word “shades”, with the dusk embodying darkness. The narrator realises he is entering a world of mystery and illustrates the surroundings as “simple” and the house’s walls as “bleak” – bringing up eldritch and macabre undertones. The narrator recounts the letter he received from Roderick and mentions a “mental disorder” but does not identify the illness, forming a sense of uncertainty and mystery. Later, the narrator mentions a “malady” but still does not name the illness, leaving it to the reader to decide and removing the element of predictability in the story. The mental disorder “oppressed” Roderick, just as the clouds hung “oppressively” over the landscape, strengthening the idea of nature mirroring the condition of the family within the house. There are no quotations from the letter sent by Usher, and thus the reader is forced to conclude that the letter was an extraordinarily compelling one, causing the narrator to come from a “distant part of the country”, adding to the mystery of the tale. Overall, the theme of mystery and ambiguity of the opening two paragraphs encourages the reader to side with the narrator as he enters the world of the unknown to help his childhood friend.

The house itself is a metaphor that represents the decay brought about by years of mental and physical health issues. As the narrator envisions his stay in the “mansion of gloom” and contemplates the house, he

assigns the house a human emotion when he describes it as “the melancholy House of Usher”. The “eye-like windows” symbolise the spirit of a person and further personify the house, suggesting it may be watching, although the adjective “vacant” suggests an absence of life within the mansion, causing the narrator fear – another theme in this story. The author poses a rhetorical question about what “so unnerved” him about the House of Usher, and emphasises this with the insertion of “I paused to think”. His account as a credible narrator creates a sense of strangeness, darkness and obscurity. Later the narrator points out that he is recounting the story rationally with the inclusion of the phrase “I reflected”. The narrator arrives at the house with the intention to bring “cheerfulness” and alleviate Usher’s illness. Despite the unsightliness of the surroundings and the house, he reasons that if there was a “different arrangement ... of the scene” he may well have had another response. The phrase “an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart” show how his soul weakened as he came into view of the house and the sibilance of the words emphasises the thought. Certain phrases in the second paragraph indicate that it was the narrator’s decision to visit Usher, such as “I know proposed to myself” and “a personal reply”. On the other hand, the letter “allowed [him] no room for hesitation” and it was of a “wildly importunate nature”, suggesting that perhaps in the letter Usher offers something or even threatens the narrator, thus somewhat prefiguring the story. On the whole, although the house’s state is alarming and hence the state of the Usher family, despite his fear, the narrator continues, unprepared for what awaits him.

In conclusion, the opening of *The Fall of the House of Usher* sets up the main themes of the story, such as death, mystery and fear. Poe’s mixture of the right amount of both ambiguity and details allows the reader to side with the narrator and feel sympathy, but prevents the story from becoming predictable and uninteresting.