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CHAOS, MADNESS AND THEIR CONNECTION TO THE SETTINGS IN
SELECTED STORIES OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

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Anotace

Šílenství a chaos patří k nejvýraznějším tématům v dílech amerického spisovatele Edgara Allana Poea. Ve své práci jsem se rozhodla zaměřit na tato dvě témata a jejich souvislost s prostředím, ve kterém se jeho povídky odehrávají, a to především proto, že prostředí hraje v Poeových dílech klíčovou roli. Vztah šílenství a chaosu k prostředí budu konkrétně zkoumat na čtyřech vybraných textech z autorovy prozaické tvorby. Cílem této práce je tedy analyzovat texty na základě těchto spojitostí a poskytnout tak nový pohled na věc.

Annotation

Chaos and madness belong among the most prominent themes in the work of the American writer Edgar Allan Poe. For this thesis, I have decided to focus on these two themes and their relation to the settings which they take place in, mainly because the settings are a key feature in Poe's work. The connection of chaos and madness to the settings will be examined through four selected texts from the author's prosaic work. The aim of this thesis is to analyze these texts on the basis of these connections and therefore to provide new points of view on them.

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Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe figures among the most famous writers of American literature, and he is also considered the master of the horror genre. In his works the themes of death, sorrow, madness and depression appear very prominently and the settings of his texts often play a significant role, too. Besides poetry, E. A. Poe wrote several short stories which represent no exception to these characteristics. In his short stories Poe uses certain techniques to instill the effects of fear and terror in his readers. He achieves that by implementing themes such as madness and chaos and also by the way he depicts particular settings. The connection between madness, chaos and the settings of certain stories is going to be the subject of examination in this thesis.

I have chosen this topic because in Poe's stories both the settings and the characters' psyches are often of a very peculiar character, so their combination provides an opportunity to find a relationship between them. Therefore, it is possible to discover new points of view on these stories and to uncover new meanings in them and that is also the aim of this thesis. The stories chosen for the analyses are "The Fall of the House of Usher", "The Pit and the Pendulum", "The Masque of the Red Death" and "The Cask of Amontillado".

The thesis is divided into five main parts. The first part consists of a theoretical background to the further examination. In this section I am going to introduce the methods Poe used in his literary works, using his essay "The Philosophy of Composition", where he reveals the key techniques of his writing, as a source. Also, I am going to discuss the reason for Poe's narrators' strange character traits.

The next section of this thesis is going to be divided into four parts, one for each story, and it is going to be dedicated to the analyses of the chosen stories as such. The order of the stories is chosen according to the type of settings they illustrate. The first two stories to be analyzed are "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "The Pit and the Pendulum". Both of these stories represent an example of an interior setting which influences the mental state of the characters immensely and, thus, the connection between these two aspects is the strongest in these texts. The other two stories subjected to analysis are going to be "The Masque of the Red Death" and "The Cask of Amontillado". These stories share a similar setting, too. However, in this case it is the scenery of a carnival, which represents a certain kind of chaos and distortion of the usual reality. Also, in these stories, there are various settings to be examined, including both interior and exterior.

Even though in these instances the influence of the settings on the mindset of the characters or the reader is not so obvious, it is present, and maybe even more interesting.

1. Theoretical background

Before this thesis proceeds to the actual analyses of the chosen stories, it is necessary to provide a theoretical background for the features examined further. Edgar Allan Poe wrote his stories with a specific attitude towards them, and none of the features present in the stories occurs accidentally. When reading his short stories, the reader quickly learns that the settings, the atmosphere and also the qualities of the characters create a complex of key features which influence the overall impact of the story.

Poe himself presented several theories and explanations of his writing, and thus revealed the methods he used while producing his most famous works. He published two essays which present these methods – “The Poetic Principle” and “The Philosophy of Composition”. The second essay serves best for my examination of Poe’s techniques as it describes not only methods of writing poetry, but also applies to general production of literary works, including the short stories. Poe introduces three important aspects in connection to the process of writing: the method, the effect, and the extent of the work. The most important of these aspects is, for Poe, definitely the effect which is created by the story. All of the stories analyzed in this thesis represent examples of literary works with a very strong effect on the reader created with the choice of “peculiarity both of incident and tone” (Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition” 1617). Of course, the effect that the author chooses is not the only important part of the writing process, and all of the techniques introduced by Poe are connected to each other. I will now examine all of the three to give a broader image of his writing intentions.

Poe argues that every literary work is a result of perfectly planned work and does not believe in spontaneous creation. He believes the authors who claim to be of capable of such thing only pretend:

Most writers – poets in especial – prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy – an ecstatic intuition – and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, at the elaborate and vacillating crudities of thought – at the true purposes seized only at the last moment – at the innumerable glimpses of idea that arrived not at the maturity of full view – at the fully matured fancies discarded in despair as unmanageable – at the cautious selections and rejections – at the painful erasures and interpolations . . . (“The Philosophy of Composition” 1618)

Poe, therefore, considers himself a different kind of author, as he admits the fact that his work is not a result of the spontaneous creation and he does not hesitate to show his readers the exact character of the steps he follows while writing. According to his opinion, every literary work needs a complex and rational method, a structured plan which it follows until it is completely finished.

Also, Poe considers the importance of length when it comes to a short story. According to him, it is absolutely essential for a story to be short enough to be read in one sitting and without interruptions. If the work is longer and thus must be read at several different times, the overall effect of the story is weakened and the reader's experience is, thus, not complete:

If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression – for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and every thing like totality is at once destroyed. (“The Philosophy of Composition” 1618)

In the case of this thesis, the length of the analyzed stories could be definitely considered a supporting factor to the overall effect they have. It also corresponds with the character of the stories. The first two, “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Pit and the Pendulum” are longer in comparison to the ones that follow them, and both of them also illustrate a slowly deteriorating state of a human mind, and in the case of Usher, also a building. The other two stories, “The Masque of the Red Death” and “The Cask of Amontillado” are very short and also the events happening in them are quite chaotic and rapid, as they both share a setting of a carnival. The effects of the stories are then maintained, besides other things, thanks to their corresponding length.

The next point discussed by Poe is the “impression, or effect” (“The Philosophy of Composition” 1619) as such. As “The Philosophy of Composition” is written to show the methods Poe used while writing one of his most famous poems “The Raven”, different topics than those examined in this thesis are introduced. However, the principle remains the same. Poe speaks about Beauty and Death being the primary themes chosen for “The Raven”. Beauty is, according to Poe, one of the strongest aspects in connection to emotions: “That pleasure which is at once the most intense, the most elevating, and the most pure, is, I believe, found in the contemplation of the beautiful” (“The Philosophy of Composition” 1619). It is necessary to have in mind that Poe describes Beauty as an effect in his essay, however, it is usually perceived differently. Beauty is primarily a cause of

an effect as it evokes pleasure in the reader. Combined with Death, which is, according to him, “the most melancholy” of all possible “melancholy topics” (“The Philosophy of Composition” 1621), it creates a very intensive effect on the reader of “The Raven” as an impression of both pleasure and terror is created. For the stories examined in this thesis, Poe, however, chose different topics and motifs. The aspects of depression, despair, insanity, and also the chaotic atmosphere of the settings seem to be the most prominent features of these stories, together with the unusual qualities of their characters. In his stories Poe used these themes to create an overall impression of fear, which is one of the primary subjects in the vast majority of his works. As it is mentioned in the introduction to Poe in *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*, “[h]e worked hard at structuring his tales of aristocratic madmen, self-tormented murderers, neurasthenic necrophiliacs, and other deviant types so as to produce the greatest possible horrific effects on his readers” (Norton 1531). Poe, therefore, creates a complex unity of motifs in these stories, and each of them has its own function. Although the overall atmosphere of the stories might seem chaotic and the impression left on the reader might be suggesting that such stories must have been created in that kind of a “fine frenzy” (Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition” 1618), mentioned in Poe’s essay, it is obvious that his work is a result of a very complicated and perfectly planned combination of ideas.

Concerning the characters that appear in Poe’s stories, very often the main protagonists are also the narrators. As I have said, Poe gives his characters very interesting qualities, and their mental processes are usually at least strange, if not directly insane – depending on the particular story. Many critics have argued that Poe’s narrators are so peculiar because they are directly connected to his own personality, which is known to be very strange, and that it makes him an inferior writer:

[T]he contention that he is fundamentally a bad or tawdry stylist . . . is based ultimately, on the untenable and often unanalyzed assumption that Poe and his narrators are identical literary twins and that he must be held responsible for all their wild or perfervid utterances; their shrieks and groans are too often conceived as emanation from Poe himself. (Gargano 177)

This supposition is, nevertheless, faulty with regards to the previously mentioned methods which Poe worked with. He emphasizes that all literary works are created with a rational method, and that every aspect of the story is thoroughly thought-out. No aspects of a story are, then, present accidentally – as Poe does not believe in spontaneous creation. Therefore, it would be in direct conflict with his beliefs to present his narrators in such a

way. It is obvious that even the deeds and thoughts of his narrators are a result of a well-planned process. As James W. Gargano mentions in his article “The Question of Poe’s Narrators”, for Poe, it is very important to keep the reader fully aware of everything that is going on in the story in order to make them capable of their own judgement:

The point of Poe’s technique, then, is not to enable us to lose ourselves in strange or outrageous emotions, but to see these emotions and those obsessed by them from a rich and thoughtful perspective. (178)

The natures of his narrators represent a part of the overall structure of the story which is later supposed to create an effect on the reader. Everything that appears in the story, the settings, the atmosphere, and also the qualities of the narrators, is, then, a product of the writer’s intention: “Poe . . . is conscious of the abnormalities of his narrators and does not condone the intellectual ruses through which they strive, only too earnestly to justify themselves”, which suggests that “though his narrators are often febrile or demented, Poe is conspicuously ‘sane’ . . . in his stories at least” (Gargano 181).

All of the insanity, chaos, and despair present in Poe’s stories is, as we already know, created with an exact method. It might be considered Poe’s greatest power to create such terrifying effects in his stories as he is capable to illustrate the darkest imaginations and possibilities that might arise in one’s mind:

Poe’s fiction succeeds to the extent that he can suggestively, precisely, and intensely illuminate the interior of the self, the powers and processes of the mind – and frequently, the destructive and irrational powers. (Shulman 250)

The settings of his stories are, obviously, an important part of his technique as they often mirror the mental processes of the characters and also represent an influential factor in connection to their thoughts and actions. As Robert Shulman suggests in his article “Poe and the Powers of Mind”, the settings of the darkest places, chambers, and buildings – and also the atmosphere they create – in combination with the disturbed minds of the characters show the most incredible states of mind which the reader could possibly imagine and which go beyond rational understanding:

In a typical story, through the swooning or dizziness of the protagonist and through symbolic setting-a journey to the interior of foggy, secluded ravines or the dark, inner chamber of a castle or the hold of a ship-Poe organizes a series of episodes to suggest his main theoretical concerns and to establish unconventional states of mind in which ordinary reason and

common-sense are superseded and strange mergings, suggestions and discoveries can occur. (250)

In conclusion, Poe's stories are also representations of his methods to create a "unity of effect" ("The Philosophy of Composition" 1619) in their readers. In the examined stories particularly, Poe used various means, as specific settings, and qualities of his characters – concretely their mental processes, to create an image of the darkest states of mind possible. By this he enables the reader to imagine the experience of having a destroyed mental health and also how such a disturbed person reacts to their surroundings. I will now proceed to the analyses of the chosen stories which all represent examples of the discussed features.

2. The analyses of the selected stories

2.1 The Fall of the House of Usher

“The Fall of the House of Usher” is a story which illustrates the connection between the mental state of the characters and the settings they operate in most prominently. From the very beginning of the story we are introduced into the gloomy and depressive environment of the House of Usher and its surroundings. As the narrator himself remarks in the first passage, “with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded [his] spirit” (Poe 199). Later on, when the landscape is described, it seems to us that it embodies a living creature, “a landscape with feelings of its own – a landscape with a soul” (St. Armand 37) as it evokes strong feelings in the narrator’s mind and thus seems to be speaking to him in a way. The house itself with “vacant and eye-like windows” (Poe 199) seems to be representing a very unpleasant state of mind in which an individual suffers from depression and anxiety, particularly compared to the “after-dream of the reveller upon opium—the bitter lapse into every-day life—the hideous dropping off of the veil” (199). From these introductory passages it is, therefore, quite obvious that the House of Usher is about to play a significant role in the following events that occur in the story.

As the narrator proceeds to enter the house, a description of the interior is given to us and we find out that it is of no different character than the exterior environment. The room where Roderick Usher awaits him strengthens the feeling of depression even more with its darkness and “atmosphere of sorrow” (202). Concerning the appearance of Usher himself, a significant change since their last encounter is noticed by the narrator as he remarks that a “man had never before so terribly altered, in so brief a period, as had Roderick Usher!” (202). At this moment, the narrator realizes that the mental illness that Roderick had informed him about in his letter is probably a serious issue as it has affected him so deeply. Although at first it might not be obvious, the appearance of Roderick Usher expresses a relationship between his personality and the mansion. According to E. Arthur Robinson:

Poe heightens the relationship by paralleling physical characteristics of the house with those of Usher personally; for example, Usher's ‘silken hair’ of ‘wild gossamer texture’ and ‘more than weblike softness’ resembles the ‘fine tangled webwork’ of fungi hanging from the eaves of his decaying mansion. All this serves, along with the ‘eye-like windows,’ to emphasize

the living quality of the house as well as its resemblance to Usher as an individual. (71)

As the mansion “is associated with the family name and line” (Robinson 71), it seems to have influenced its inhabitants over the centuries and regarding its gloominess and darkened atmosphere, the influence on the residents seems to be rather toxic, the same way as the “atmosphere . . . which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn—a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued” (Poe 201).

When the two characters start a conversation the comparison to opium consumption appears once again, this time in regards to Roderick’s expression as his voice and actions vary wildly and resemble an experience of “the irreclaimable eater of opium, during the periods of his most intense excitement” (203). This partly repeated comparison creates a strange impression of connection between his mansion’s powers to evoke melancholy and his own madness which also seems to have a strong effect on the narrator’s feelings.

As the story proceeds we learn that Roderick Usher himself believes that his mental condition is in direct connection with the mansion he lives in. When he tells the narrator that he feels “enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenant[s] . . . , an effect which the physique of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, ha[s], at length, brought about upon the morale of his existence” (Poe 204), we see that his thoughts seem to be utterly paranoid. Usher is paralyzed by a kind of fear which he himself is not able to describe, the only thing he is certain about is the fact that it is related to the house.

The fact that Usher believes that his house has mysterious powers over his mind and body might be explained by his theory of sentience. Usually, this sentience translates to the capability of perception that all animate objects have. Nevertheless, “Usher’s peculiarity lies in his extending this view to include the inorganic world” (Robinson 70). Roderick believes that his house has obtained a capability of sentience over the centuries and that it is particularly “fulfilled in the method of collocation of these stones—in the order of their arrangement, as well as in that of the many fungi which overspread them, and of the decayed trees which stood around—above all, in the long undisturbed endurance of this arrangement, and in its reduplication in the still waters of the tarn” (Poe 209). He also believes that this structure of the house and its surroundings create a

“gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere” which is responsible for the “the destinies of his family, and which made him what I now saw him—what he was” (209).

The strong connection that Usher feels to his mansion could be also transferred into his ballad which shows his own head as a building, in this case, a haunted palace. Even though it might seem that a motif of a palace does relate neither to Usher nor to his mansion, according to E. Arthur Robinson the “selection of a palace to image Usher's inner state is singularly appropriate” (72). As the beginning of the ballad describes a palace in times of its greatest glory when the “Banners yellow, glorious, golden, / On its roof did float and flow” (Poe 207) we might imagine it as Roderick's mind before it got infected with the dark influences. Also, the Usher mansion might be at certain times perceived differently than it was when Roderick spoke about its malignant powers. Towards the end, the state of the palace deteriorates as the “evil things, in robes of sorrow, / Assailed the monarch's high estate” (208) and so does the state of Usher's mind and his house. Therefore, as Robinson remarks in his essay “Order and Sentience in The Fall of the House of Usher”, “‘The Haunted Palace’ looks symbolically in two directions, toward Usher's turreted mansion and toward his present condition, and by so doing serves to bring together these two lines of action in the story” (72).

Usher's theory of sentience seems bizarre to the narrator which is seen in the passage that follows the ballad of “The Haunted Palace”. The narrator feels very uncomfortable with the feelings Usher's words and the ballad itself evoke and he obviously tries to distance himself from that influence, even with his remark “Such opinions need no comment, and I will make none” (Poe 209). Furthermore, he is convinced that Usher is heavily influenced by the books he has read, especially “the manual of a forgotten church—the *Vigiliae Mortuorum Secundum Chorum Ecclesiae Maguntinae*” (210) and refuses to believe that his madness could actually stem from the mysterious charm of his mansion. Nevertheless, soon his attitude is about to change.

Concerning Usher's condition, his mind experiences a noticeable change after the death of his sister Madeline. His illness worsens and, as the narrator remarks, “[h]is ordinary manner had vanished. His ordinary occupations were neglected or forgotten” (Poe 211). The tremendous deterioration of his mental disease might be explained in connection to the previously mentioned theory that Roderick believes in. Usher believed that his mansion and he were very closely connected and that it influenced him very greatly. In fact, as it has been already mentioned, even his physical appearance somehow corresponded with the house. As the house has been the residence of the Usher dynasty

for centuries, it might be, therefore seen by Roderick as a part of a “larger organism [that] somehow included him” (Smith 380). All the elements present in the story seem to contribute to the image of the House of Usher as being a complex entity including its inhabitants which functions on the mysterious principles of gloominess and depression. This theory is supported by Herbert F. Smith in his essay “Usher’s Madness and Poe’s Organicism – A Source” as he describes the process of the creation of this organism as following: “The algae of the house of Usher have organized themselves-the stones of the house, the air around them, and even the mind of Usher himself into what can only be described as a single unified organism” (387).

The death of Roderick’s sister Madeline is therefore an event which somehow breaks the complexity of the organism of the Ushers, it seems to bring an even more deep depressing feeling into the already very dysfunctional environment. As Smith implies, the whole structure is broken and “loses all its distinctiveness, its particularity with the death of Madeline” (388). The whole situation thus seems to be coming to a disastrous end as the mansion becomes even a more unbearable environment to stay in for Roderick.

The fact that the overall development of the story is worsening is later supported by the occurrence of weird sensations and perceptions experienced by the narrator who had, until a particular moment, not believed any of the theories about the mansion’s powers. The last night of his stay in the House of Usher the narrator realizes that he has already been influenced with the mysterious environment of the mansion and its owner. “I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions” (Poe 212). Due to this strange connection to the house and to Roderick Usher the narrator feels, he observes that even though he tries to maintain a realistic point of view, there are present certain powers which are stronger than him and which will not let him think rationally about the feelings he experiences. “[M]y efforts were fruitless. An irrepressible tremor gradually pervaded my frame; and, at length, there sat upon my very heart an incubus of utterly causeless alarm” (212). This change of the situation implies that the atmosphere of the House of Usher has already infected even the mind of the narrator who seemed to be “a rationalist to the end” (St. Armand 37).

When Roderick Usher appears in his room, the narrator seems to be partly shocked, however, despite the fact that even the mere presence of Usher evoked terror inside him, he “welcomed his presence as a relief” (Poe 212). Nevertheless, another implication of an inevitable climax of the almost ridiculously terrifying occurrences is yet

to appear. Usher seems to be extremely hysterical and upset by the storm outside and when the two characters open the window and look outside a disturbing view extends in front of them. “[T]he under surfaces of the huge masses of agitated vapor, as well as all terrestrial objects immediately around us, were glowing in the unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion” (Poe 213). The surroundings of the mansion in this scene seem to be actually fulfilling a role of a living organism which is somehow speaking to the two souls who are desperately trying to escape the frightening control that it has over them.

In effort to calm themselves, Roderick and the narrator proceed to read a romance which belongs among Usher’s favorites. Nevertheless, this whole event makes the situation worse as while the narrator reads the story, he hears sounds which correspond to the events occurring in the romance. After the last sound he is completely “unnerved” (215) and rushes to Usher who seems to have reached the utter stage of his madness when he starts speaking hysterically about his conviction of his sister having been buried alive, and the narrator thus finds out he was not the only one who heard the strange sounds. Usher is persuaded that all of the previously heard noises were connected to his sister’s struggle to escape her tomb: “We have put her living in the tomb! . . . I now tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin” (24). The narrator seems to be very doubtful about these claims that Roderick’s mad mind produces, even more when he adds: “Will she not be here anon? Is she not hurrying to upbraid me for my haste? Have I not heard her footstep on the stair? Do I not distinguish that heavy and horrible beating of her heart?” (215). However, as soon as Roderick finishes his utterance, lady Madeline actually appears in the room and attacks her brother resulting in his immediate death caused by “the terrors he had anticipated” (216).

The finale of the story leaves the narrator extremely upset which he confirms in one of his final sentences when he remarks: “From that chamber, and from that mansion, I fled aghast” (216). After the mansion starts falling apart, the previously mentioned theory of it being one complex organism of the building, its surroundings and the Usher family seems to confirm itself as the single elements of this structure cannot exist separately, even though in this case the very existence is extremely corrupted from the very beginning. After the personalities of the inhabitants of the House of Usher finally break down completely, the house follows them. As the narrator moves away from the building, he once again implies with his utterance: “my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder—there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a

thousand waters” (Poe 216) that this mysterious mansion has shown strange signs of being more of a living entity than a simple gloomy house in the woods and even while breaking down, it was still capable of influencing his spirit in a terrifying way which he was unable to explain. As Bruce Olson implies in his essay “Poe’s Strategy in the ‘Fall of the House of Usher’”, in the end “[a]s the mansion splits asunder and tumbles down on Usher and the lady Madeline locked in an embrace of death, the superiority of the world of feeling is ‘proved’ to the reader” (559). This statement can be explained throughout the words of the narrator of the story, who at the very beginning of the story asserts that there exist certain natural phenomena in the world that cannot be reasonably explained, only perceived. “I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion, that while, beyond doubt, there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth” (Poe 200).

In connection with this story, it is interesting to mention the term “pathetic fallacy”, which was introduced by one of the most famous Victorian art critics, John Ruskin. When Ruskin published his theory, Poe’s stories had been already written, which means that Poe did not work with the term pathetic fallacy in mind. However, he uses a device of a very similar character in his stories. According to Ruskin, the pathetic fallacy represents a particular state of mind in which a character encounters themselves and it is a state so strong, that it changes their perception of the world around them:

All violent feelings have the same effect. They produce in us a falseness in all our impressions of external things, which I would generally characterize as the “pathetic fallacy”. (Ruskin 205).

Ruskin’s theory speaks mainly about nature in connection to this theory, however, it is possible to consider also other settings. In Poe’s stories the reader sees that the settings of them affect their characters – in the case of the House of Usher, this connection is obviously very strong. Roderick Usher is a man of a very ill mind and he is convinced that his mental illness is in close relationship with his family mansion. He, thus, attributes unreal qualities to the house and sees the reality in a much distorted way. Ruskin also mentions that the fact a mind is under the influence of a “pathetic fallacy” is always connected to the weakness of such mind: “The temperament which admits the pathetic fallacy is . . . that of a mind and body in some sort too weak to deal fully with what is before them or upon them” (Ruskin 208). In the case of Roderick Usher, it is definitely a true statement, as his mind is very disturbed and he had not been able to explain his illness

rationally. The fact Poe uses this kind of device in the story strengthens the impression of chaos and madness and provides an even stronger overall impact which is left on the reader.

2.2 The Pit and the Pendulum

“The Pit and the Pendulum” represents another example of a story which illustrates a close connection of the settings to a chaotic state of mind, and also potential madness. The narrator of the story finds himself in a dark and unknown place and from the very beginning, his mind is already in a very fragile state as he has been sentenced to death by the inquisitors. He has been tortured by the sole thought of upcoming death and the feeling of despair and hopelessness develops throughout the whole story. The following analysis provides a more precise image of the concrete means of provoking such feelings in one’s mind.

From the very first passages of the story the reader learns that the narrator’s mind has been tortured by terrifying thoughts and images in regards to a previously uttered death sentence: “I felt that my senses were leaving me. The sentence – the dread sentence of death – was the last distinct accentuation which reached my ears” (Poe 305). The feeling of terror and despair is actually strengthened by the fact that the narrator is able to create very specific and vivacious images of the previous events, and probably also due to the fact that he finds himself in an absolutely unknown and silent place, and therefore his mind *speaks* very loudly. From the beginning it is implied that the narrator’s mental stability has been already tested and an only question remains. For how long is he going to be able to keep his rationality?

According to Jeanne M. Malloy “Poe was [certainly] interested in the psychology and, consequently, the language of despair” (84) which can be seen in the following passages of the story. The narrator describes every detail of the feelings he is going through very precisely, almost as if he himself played a role of his own psychologist. Also, even in his desperate condition, he opens a certain kind of philosophical debate in his own mind:

I had swooned; but still will not say that all of consciousness was lost. What of it there remained I will not attempt to define or even describe; yet all was not lost. In the deepest slumber – no! In delirium – no! In a swoon – no! In death – no! even in the grave all is not lost. Else there is no immortality for man. (Poe 306)

The narrator, then, seems to be a person of great mental capacity and a very rational man. Despite the fact his fate is probably sealed and he has no idea about the length of time for which he will be forced to suffer before his execution, he is still able to keep his wits.

Nevertheless, it is necessary to mention that he, until a particular moment, does not see anything of his surroundings: “So far, I had not opened my eyes” (Poe 307). This fact causes that everything he is able to perceive, is done so through all senses except for sight. This makes him feel the potentially unpleasant aspects of the space very strongly as the physical perception usually intensifies when the sight is not implemented. While trying to examine the space around him with his hands at least, he realizes that the thing he fears the most is the possible nothingness around him: “I dreaded the first glance at objects around me. It was not that I feared to look upon things horrible, but that I grew aghast lest there should be nothing to see” (Poe 307). After he opens his eyes, he finds out that his “worst thoughts . . . were confirmed” (307) and this triggers a chain of new emotions connected to the darkness around him. As darkness represents a space of unknown and uncertain, it usually evokes an extreme sense of anxiety and panic. That is also the case in “The Pit and the Pendulum” as the narrator seems unable to handle the newly discovered environment surrounding him: “The intensity of the darkness seemed to oppress and stifle me. The atmosphere was intolerably close” (Poe 307).

In this moment it might appear to the reader that the moment of losing his sanity is very near, nevertheless, the narrator is still capable of thinking rationally, at least to some extent. Although he has no exact idea about the place he finds himself in as it is absolutely dark, he is still able to perceive reality. He tries to make his mind function and deduce his future moments:

[N]ot for a moment did I suppose myself actually dead . . . Had I been remanded to my dungeon, to wait the next sacrifice, which would not take place for many months? This I at once saw could not be. Victims had been in immediate demand. (Poe 307)

When he comes to a realization that he is probably not going to spend an extensive period of time in the cell, a sudden feeling of extreme anxiety takes over his body once again. Consequently, his mind and body together produce a chaotic mixture of thoughts and movements. This chaos traps him in a painful agony for the next few moments – it is not clear whether the time was passing in minutes, hours or just mere seconds – and he is now desperate to find “some faint ray of light” (Poe 308) to confirm his thoughts. The reason for this sudden wave of panic lies in the narrator’s realization that his “dungeon, as well

as all the condemned cells in Toledo, had stone floors, and light was not altogether excluded” (Poe 308). The actual failure of his efforts to find light brings a brief sense of relief for his mind as he realizes that death might not be as close to him as he feared. Nevertheless, he is absolutely unable to stop thinking and even though it evokes incredible terror inside of him, he strives to find out about his faith – or more precisely about the exact method and time of his death: “The mode and the hour were all that occupied or distracted me” (Poe 308).

In the effort to discover about the method the judges chose to kill him, the narrator starts examining his cell carefully. During this examination, “he encounters a number of increasingly dire torments, each of which involves him in a narrow escape from death” (Ballengee 30). These torments include the giant pit, the swinging pendulum, and later also the heated walls that later start shrinking.

The pit represents the first of his discoveries. It creates an enormous amount of disgust in him as it produces a “peculiar smell of decayed fungus” (Poe 309) and also incredible fear since he remembers that he has already heard about such pits in the past: “Neither could I forget what I had read of these pits – that the sudden extinction of life formed no part of their most horrible plan” (310). In this moment the narrator finds himself extremely upset as his mind has already experienced a series of the most terrifying views that a man can imagine, all together during just few moments. As he earlier remarks:

By long suffering my nerves had been unstrung, until I trembled at the sound of my own voice, and had become in every respect a fitting subject for the species of torture which awaited me. (Poe 309)

It is now more than obvious that all of the experience that happens to the narrator is a part of a perfect plan to deprive him of his reason and, in this stage of the story, this plan seems to be slowly fulfilling itself. All of the devices present in the story have their particular function: “The pendulum as an instrument of torture, the application of heat to the dungeon walls to produce terror in the victim, and the pit with its attendant horrors” (Clark 349) create a complex mechanism which serves to drive the narrator gradually and completely insane.

Returning to the narrator’s examination of his dungeon, it is quite evident that the process itself also forms a part of the death plan since it seems to be deepening his mental instability. When the moment where he is finally able to see “the extent and aspect of the prison” comes, he realizes that “[i]n its size [he] had been greatly mistaken” (Poe 310)

which implies that his senses were previously deceiving him. Therefore, he might be feeling as though he is on the way to lose his mind already. Consequently, he starts a rational investigation of his mistake: “My soul took a wild interest in trifles, and I busied myself in endeavors to account for the error I had committed in my measurement” and engages in the process so obsessively that it actually seems that his thinking is not rational anymore. As Jeanne M. Malloy mentions in her article “Apocalyptic Imagery and the Fragmentation of the Psyche: ‘The Pit and the Pendulum’”, the narrator’s efforts to gain control over the situation and to keep the rational attitude are fruitless as they produce more of the opposite effect: “Ironically, his attempt rationally to understand and control his destiny brings him to the very edge of sanity” (92). Here it would be quite easy to assume that the other discoveries that the narrator is about to make are going to represent the last part of destroying the remaining pieces of his sanity. As he is such a thoroughly thinking person, he will definitely not leave the pendulum, and also the newly discovered properties of the cell, unattended.

He thus continues his exploration of the cell and, as it has been implied, it is of no good use for him. When he realizes his mistakes in size and shape of the dungeon, he also notices that the wall he had previously thought made of stone, are made of metal. Unfortunately, also their appearance creates another strengthening link for the chain of depression and fear:

What I had taken for masonry seemed now to be iron or some other metal, in huge plates, whose sutures or joints occasioned the depression . . . The figures of fiends in aspects of menace, with skeleton forms, and other more really fearful images, overspread and disfigured the walls. (Poe 310)

Exhausted by the new amount of torture his mind has gone through, the narrator falls asleep to awake in a whole new position. This fact creates a new aspect in the setting of the story and also in the narrator’s mental perception:

I now lay upon my back, and at full length, on a species of low framework of wood. To this I was securely bound by a long strap resembling surcingle. It passed in many convolutions about my limbs and body, leaving at liberty only my head and my left arm . . . (Poe 311)

In this moment, the torture is intensified by the fact that now the narrator is trapped and unable to move. Obviously, he thus cannot continue to further examine the dungeon. As Jennifer R. Ballengee remarks in her article “Torture, Modern Experience, and Beauty in Poe’s ‘The Pit and the Pendulum’”, he “undergoes horrifying bodily discomfort and pain

that simultaneously suggest and provoke an experience that eludes rational knowledge and communicability” (30). The condition he now finds himself in is thus one that contributes to an even more desolated state of his own mind. As he is now unable to produce any physical activity, it seems that the insanity is now simply inevitable.

The only thing he was able to examine in such moment was, then, the ceiling of his cell. He recognizes a “painted figure of Time” which seems to be holding “a huge pendulum such as we see on antique clocks” (Poe 311). To his misfortune, he later finds out that the pendulum is not only a painting, but that it is real and hanging in the air just above his head. His feelings are at first very confused:

While I gazed directly upward at it . . . I fancied that I saw it in motion. Its sweep was brief, and of course slow. I watched it for some minutes, somewhat in fear, but more in wonder. (Poe 311)

The fact that the narrator needs a while to realize what exactly the pendulum means in connection to his faith might serve as an indication that his mind is already exhausted and his rationality experiences damage. Nevertheless, he dedicates to further examination of the pendulum and after a certain period of time he notices that the “sweep of the pendulum had increased in extent by nearly a yard” and that “it had had perceptibly descended” (Poe 311). This certainly disturbs him, and at the moment when his sight catches the “edge evidently as keen as that of a razor” (Poe 311), his disturbance reaches an ultimate point. At the very moment he comes to a realization that this pendulum is now supposed to be the means of his death and that it is not a much less terrifying method of torture than the pit which he had previously thought to be his doom. Unfortunately, the fact that he accidentally escaped the pit, “typical of hell” (Poe 312), was well known to the inquisitorial judges so his wearied mind shall suffer even more with the following events:

I could no longer doubt the doom prepared for me by monkish ingenuity in torture. My cognizance of the pit had become known to the inquisitorial agents . . . The plunge into this pit I had avoided by the merest of accidents, I knew that surprise, or entrapment into torment, formed an important portion of all the grotesquerie of these dungeon deaths. (Poe 312)

The sole fact that the pendulum is a terrifying tool of death makes his mind go through an unbearable and seemingly the last phase of suffering before the sanity completely disappears. Furthermore, the sudden possibility to perceive time, thanks to the swinging of the pendulum, is the thing which initiates the utmost test of his mental stability, as mentioned in Jennifer R. Ballengee’s article:

Suddenly, the narrator, who previously manifested an inability to measure time becomes excruciatingly aware of the passing of each moment: the pendulum reminds him as it hisses past, each swing a shock that brings his physical torture closer to bear . . . Poe's narrator is forced to meet each successive feint of the pendulum, feeling literally the passage of time as a series of horrifying shocks, a repeated and persistent moment in which he encounters his own impending death. (34-35)

In this connection, the narrator starts noticing changes in his state of mind as he later realizes that his mental processes have developed into a confused conflict between reason and insanity.

I grew frantically mad, and struggled to force myself upward against the weep of the fearful scimitar. And then I fell suddenly calm, and lay smiling at the glittering death, as a child at some rare bauble. (Poe 312)

These torturing moments of madness, however, create a particular critical point where the narrator is balancing on the very edge of sanity, and it is only a matter of time when he either falls from this edge or manages to save himself. Consequently, the overall situation creates an opportunity for a newly evoked feeling in his mind, and that is, very surprisingly, a sudden feeling of hope. It appears after he eats the last bit of meat that has been lying next to him for an uncertainly long period of time: “As I put a portion of it within my lip, there rushed to my mind a half formed thought of joy – of hope” (Poe 312). This seems to be the very point where it is to be decided whether he is about to be saved or completely doomed in the deadly embrace of his madness and the upcoming event of dying.

The story then supports the other option, as “[c]onfused by what seems like such a futile emotion, he turns his attention back to the sharp blade, which descends relentlessly toward him with each passing moment” (Ballengee 35). Now there is an indication of the forthcoming events to be changed as his attention turned back to the pendulum evokes an idea of possible salvation in his mind. Although he already considers himself half insane and also his idea seems “feeble, scarcely sane, scarcely definite”, it is “still entire” (Poe 314) and he decides to realize it. It seems as if his brain woke up from a slumber of numb insanity and the narrator is again able to think straight. He decides to take advantage of the fact that “[f]or many hours the immediate vicinity of the low framework upon which [he] lay, had been literally swarming with rats” (Poe 314) and uses the last bits of meat to smear the rope around his body with grease to make the rats help him destroy his

binding. When the rats start swarming around him, the narrator feels both full of hope and absolute disgust:

I was half stifled by their thronging pressure; disgust, for which the world has no name, swelled my bosom, and chilled, with a heavy clamminess, my heart. Yet one minute, and I felt that the struggle would be over. (Poe 314)

Although his feeling of disgust is obviously very strong, it does not seem to be bothering his mind anymore, due to the fact that he senses salvation being just within arm's reach. When the rats finally manage to break the rope, the actual feeling of freedom comes to the narrator like an avalanche just to be dissolved right away: "I at length felt that I was free. The surcingle hung in ribands from my body . . . For the moment, at least, I was free" (Poe 314-315).

This moment seems to be the end of his unbearable torture and therefore also a moment where his mind could have escaped the complete and absolute insanity. However, the narrator "immediately upon throwing himself free of the pendulum's path. . . realizes the falsity of his feeling of liberation and the inevitability of his continued entrapment" (Ballengee 35). Still remaining in a phase where his exhausted mind exhibits last bits of rational thinking, he realizes that the judges will not let him simply escape his death sentence, and he starts falling into another loop of despair and hopelessness.

This was a lesson which I took desperately to heart. My every motion was undoubtedly watched. Free! – I had but escaped death in one form of agony, to be delivered unto worse than death in some other. (Poe 315)

The reacquired feeling of chaos and despair is later proved as justified when the next part of the death plan comes to realization. After gaining awareness of the cruel reality, the narrator notices a significant change in the environment of the cell and this implies that a new kind of torture is ahead of him:

I rolled my eyes nervously around on the barriers of iron that hemmed me in. Something unusual – some change which, at first, I could not appreciate distinctly – it was obvious, had taken place in the apartment. For many minutes of a dreamy and trembling abstraction, I busied myself in vain, unconnected conjecture. During this period I became aware, for the first time, of the origin of the sulphurous light which illumined the cell. (Poe 315)

While observing the strange light, the narrator also notices that he is now able to recognize more precisely the figures painted on the walls. As he sees the "Demon eyes,

of a wild and ghastly vivacity” (315), he realizes that their glow seems too strong to not have a connection to something terrifying. His conjecture proves to be true as he becomes aware of the fact that the “fire” in those “Demon eyes” “could not force [his] imagination to regard as unreal” (Poe 315). He comes to a realization that it is the heat coming from the iron walls which makes the paintings on the walls glow so incredibly. Immediately after this observation, the narrator becomes hysterical and his mind starts rushing chaotically in effort to exert a movement of possible escape from such terror. This results in an ironical deed of trying to find salvation near to the cold and dark pit which had previously been one of the principal causes of all terrors created in his mind:

I panted! I gasped for breath! There could be no doubt of the design of my tormentors-oh! Most unrelenting! Oh! Most demoniac of men! I shrank from the glowing metal to the centre of the cell. Amid the thought of the fiery destruction that impended, the idea of the coolness of the well came over my soul like balm. (Poe 315)

Due to the feeling of utter despair he experiences, it seems that the narrator is going to decide to surrender himself to the depths of the pit. However, the thought of falling into it seems so terrifying, that he hurriedly rushes away from the pit and starts crying desperately: “Any horror but this! With a shriek, I rushed from the margin, and buried my face in my hands – weeping bitterly” (Poe 315). Although in this moment the narrator seems to have reached the utmost peak of hopelessness and it would seem logical to finally end his torture, he decides to continue his desperate struggle. According to Jennifer R. Ballengee, he “remains uncomfortably alive in order to pass on his story, choosing - for the moment - the continuation of his torment over a fall toward oblivion” (37). Obviously, the pit represents an object of absolute damnation and, thus, the narrator exerts all possible movements to avoid it. He seems to have lost hope for an escape from the cell, he is fully aware of the fact that death has now become straightly inevitable, however, his mind remains obsessed with the previously mentioned “mode” (Poe 308) of it: “‘Death’, I said, ‘any death but that of the pit’” (Poe 316).

The expected moment of the mental chaos reaching its peak comes with the narrator’s finding that the walls of the cell started shrinking. He realizes that he is no more able to avoid falling into the pit and in the very moment, he resigns and his rationality is completely destroyed, together with his sanity. He has become an exhausted entity with a mind tortured to such extent that he is not capable of anything else than a last hopeless cry. He surrenders and enables the pit to seal his doom.

I struggled no more, but the agony of my soul vent in one, loud, long, and final scream of despair. I felt that I tottered upon the brink – I averted my eyes . . . (Poe 316)

Unexpectedly for Poe's stories, the salvation comes in the end with the arrival of the French army, however, the story still remains a representation of despair as the life of the narrator is saved, however, he has escaped from the cell with a completely destroyed mind and therefore a great amount of suffering is probably still ahead of him. Poe used different aspects of the setting and connected their effects to the processes of the narrator's mind to create an atmosphere of incredible despair and hopelessness which together lead to complete loss of sanity. These aspects definitely also create an influence on the mind of the reader – the story creates an impression of severe anxiety as its settings are very dark, depressing and also claustrophobic.

2.3 The Masque of the Red Death

The next story I am going to analyze is "The Masque of the Red Death". Even though at first it might seem that the connection between the settings of the story and a particular state of mind is quite loose, after closer examination it is possible to find a relationship between these two aspects.

First of all, it is important to mention that in the story, there are present two different kinds of setting, both of which represent a particular kind of chaos – although they create a contrast to each other. The first one is the outside world which is afflicted by the plague, or "The Red Death". The disease has affected the life in the country enormously, in fact "no pestilence had even been so fatal, or so hideous" (Poe 299). Obviously, when a disease of such character appears and starts destroying the population, it creates incredible chaos and panic. It might be also said that it generally drives people insane – on one hand due to the fact that its symptoms often "shut [a man] out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men" (299), and on the other, because the population fears death and at the same time realizes that it is omnipotent and impossible to escape from.

The second and notably more prominent setting is the castellated abbey where the carnival takes place. On one hand, it seems to be representing an organized environment of order which contrasts to the chaos outside the castle – this point is to be discussed later. On the other hand, a particular kind of chaos is developed there, too, as the carnival organized by Prospero creates a wild scenery full of dancing, joyful music, and various

costumes and masks which together create a very bizarre masquerade: “There were buffoons, there were improvisatori, there were ballet-dancers, there was Beauty, there was wine” (Poe 300). Of course, there is no doubt that all of the joy and seeming happiness is a product of great fear and concern about the future. As Gerald E. Gerber remarks in his article “Additional Source for ‘The Masque of the Red Death’”, these two contrastive aspects are usually connected as “[e]ither a careless pleasure is the parent of a serious woe, or . . . such pleasures are often motivated by great distress” (52). Their minds are therefore undoubtedly disturbed by the chaos that is being produced outside, so they create efforts to make themselves forget since “[t]he external world could take care of itself. In the meantime it was folly to grieve, or to think” (Poe 300).

The fact that Prince Prospero organizes a wild masquerade at times when “the pestilence raged most furiously abroad” (300) implies that his mind differs from a mind of an ordinary and, primarily, an empathetic person greatly. According to H. H. Bell, “[t]o the discerning reader there is . . . implicit within the text a strong suspicion that this man is probably insane” (101). In fact, it is quite easy to consider him a madman after the reader discovers about Prospero’s careless nature and the ruthlessly selfish act of denying the fact that the plague is killing thousands of people. In fact, he completely distances himself from the reality which do not seem to be the qualities of a rationally thinking person.

A supporting point for this claim of Prospero being insane might be found in the architecture and decorations present in the mysterious seven rooms. From the beginning the reader already knows that the prince had his “own eccentric yet august taste” (Poe 300) which implies that his taste was quite different from the usual and that he reveled in the extraordinary or even extravagant. H. H. Bell actually suggests that “it may be gathered that [Poe] views [the rooms] as the allegorical representation of Prince Prospero's life span” (101) which leads to an interesting observation in connection to Prospero’s mental state. When describing the rooms, the narrator of the story states that there was something unusual about the way the rooms were built and distributed: “The apartments were so irregularly disposed that the vision embraced but little more than one at a time” (Poe 300). He consequently compares this fact to other rooms which can be seen in palaces elsewhere: “In many places . . . such suites form a long and straight vista . . . so that the view of the whole extent is scarcely impeded” (300). H. H. Bell suggests that this might be an indication that “Prospero's life differed from that of most people –

that it is more crooked and winding, more tortured and stress ridden than the lives of others which are straighter and perhaps calmer” (102).

The fact that the rooms have an important function for the whole story is almost undoubtable, and the same applies to the colors that appear in these rooms, as “Poe has so much to say about the colors found in the seven rooms that it is difficult, if indeed not impossible, to think that he meant nothing by them” (Bell 103). Concerning the colors of the rooms, Bell further extends his theory of them illustrating Prospero’s life-span by examining each of the color’s meaning. It is possible to consider the possibility of every color in each room being “related to Prospero's physical and mental condition in that decade of his life” (Bell 103) and therefore showing the reader the actual process of becoming the personality he was in the story.

The first room is colored in blue which Bell specifies as a symbol for “the unknown, by extension of meaning it may reasonably be associated in this instance with the beginning of life, which is unknown also” (103). Following this theory, we might, therefore imagine the blue room as the earliest stage of Prospero’s life, a phase when he was young, innocent and his mind was still a blank space and thus could not be corrupted or damaged in any sense. As Prospero grew older, he must have obtained knowledge and probably achieved certain goals, which would correspond with the color of the second room – purple – as it is a “color worn by those who have achieved something in the world or in society . . . perhaps moving into maturity” (Bell 103). Later on, there comes a phase in life when a man grows up and encounters himself in a place where he feels “full of life and vigor” (103). This stage of Prospero’s life is illustrated through the green room as green is usually seen as a color of blossoming, in this case blossoming of life – perhaps an enjoyment of being young and healthy. The next stage of Prospero’s life is symbolized by the orange room, which, according to Bell, corresponds to the “autumn of life” (103). This indicates that in this moment Prospero has already moved from youth to a later phase of life where he is not particularly old, however, he is slowly approaching the older age. The fifth room is covered in white color which might be suggesting old age, as Bell compares it to “silver or hoary haired period of old age” (104). Even though it is not clearly mentioned in the story whether Prospero is still a young man or not, at the end of the story the reader learns that Prospero goes through all phases of his life, if the theory about the rooms is still followed. The penultimate room is violet, which indicates “the gravity and the soberness of extreme old age as well as the more or less enforced chastity

that goes along with it” as the color violet serves as an emblem “of gravity and chastity” (Bell 104).

Considering Bell’s theory about the colors being symbols of each stage of Prospero’s life, it is then quite natural to assume the last room serves as the symbol of death. It is completely black, except for the windows: “The panes here were scarlet – a deep blood color” (Poe 300-301). Obviously, the red color symbolizes blood, and also in this case it might be related to the Red Death itself – as if it was indicating that it is a place where the Red Death is supposed to strike. In connection to the last room, Bell also mentions that “this room is the most westerly of all, and the association of conclusions, ends, and death itself with ‘West’ are too numerous to mention” (104). As it has been already mentioned above, this arrangement of the rooms and their colors differed greatly from what, according to Poe, we could usually see in other palaces of such character. Prospero’s taste and life is, therefore, very different from those of other people which might serve as a proof that Prospero was at least a very bizarre persona, if not directly insane.

Staying on the topic of Prospero’s bizarre mind, it is interesting to observe the message found in the organization of the masquerade as such. Prospero has chosen all of the decorations and the masks that were supposed to appear during the carnival and it was definitely not an ordinary spectrum of ideas. It seems as if the whole carnival was based on imaginary and dream-like images. In fact, Poe himself describes the masquerade as “a multitude of dreams” (302) in connection to the previous description of it: “There were much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the bizarre, something of the terrible, and not a little of which might have excited disgust” (302). The fact that the spectrum of the masks was so wide and unusual, and that it was not only of a pleasing sort, might be, similarly to the design of the rooms, implying a connection to Prospero’s mind. H. H. Bell comments on this theory with the following notion: “Enhancing the possibility of considering Prospero insane, Poe indicates that the rooms were filled with dreams such as those a man with a tortured mind might have” (104), which indicates that the dreams his guests imaginarily turned into create images of Prospero’s ill mind. That is also why the whole scenery of the masquerade seems so bizarre.

It is also probable that Prospero created this strange environment of bizarre creatures, wild atmosphere and dancing in effort to strengthen the feeling of being isolated from the outside world, of being safe. According to Kermit Vanderbilt, “Prospero has combined light and color, arabesque sculpture, wild music, and the rhythms of the dance

to create his dreamland, out of space, out of time” (384), so to feel as if the reality that was happening outside the castle was not his – or his guests’ – business.

An interesting paradox actually arises here. The castle was built to make the guests and Prospero feel safe, it was secured to the last nail, and the most joyful atmosphere was created inside. Nevertheless, in effort to escape the plague, the guests of the masquerade actually threw themselves into a death trap from which they were not able to escape. Since “[t]his wall had gates of iron. The courtiers, having entered, brought furnaces and massy hammers and welded the bolts”, so, “[t]he abbey was amply provisioned” (Poe 300), and they had no clue about what awaited them. Prospero created his own chaos inside an ordered structure of the palace to make his guests and himself feel better but his damaged mind actually created an atmosphere of weirdness and possibly also disgust and horror which even intensified with the coming of the Red Death.

It is actually possible to assume that even the minds of Prospero’s guests were influenced by the strange atmosphere. From the beginning of the story the reader is able to feel that there is something happening, something more than a mere carnival to forget the evils that destroy the lives outside. The most prominent aspect of the story which creates this feeling of uncertainty about the forthcoming events is the “gigantic clock of ebony” (Poe 301) placed in the black room. The masquerade seems to be full of joy and merry dancing the whole time, only during the moments when the clock strikes, “the dreams are stiff-frozen as they stand” (302). Even though these moments last only a very small period of time and, they mean a lot. When “the echoes of the chime die away . . . a light, half-subdued laughter floats after them as they depart”, the festivities fluently continue. However, the fact that the dancers stop their activities at the sound of the clock implies that they feel that this clock is designed to “do more than a clock does” (Bell 104). With each new stroke of the clock, the feeling of nervousness and confusion intensifies. The fact that the sound of the clock is heard most prominently from the black room which – if we follow the previous theory of color symbolism – illustrates the final stage of life, implies that death is probably creeping into the palace.

To him whose foot falls upon the sable carpet, there comes from the near clock of ebony a muffled peal more solemnly emphatic than any which reaches their ears who indulge in the more remote gaieties of the other apartments. (Poe 302)

H. H. Bell supports this idea with his remark that “it would appear from the way he writes that Poe meant for the clock to count off periods of life-not mere hours” (104). This

indicates a moment in the story where an upcoming breakdown of events is about to appear. It is obvious that the guests of the masquerade feel “that more of thought crept, with more of time, into the meditations of the thoughtful among those who revelled” (Poe 302). As Bell also further mentions, the characters of the story started to realize their time is being counted, “[t]hey think not in terms of an hour having passed but rather in terms of just so much of their lives as having passed” (104). The pressure the clock puts the guests under is stronger with every minute and the chaos gradually intensifies. Prospero’s principal idea of creating a place completely outside of reality therefore slowly disintegrates: “[T]he measured, hourly chiming of the ebony clock threatens to dissipate the fantasy” (Vanderbilt 384). The ebony clock thus serves as an intensifier of an already present chaos. Until a particular moment, this chaos was not to be perceived as a negative element, only after the company gained awareness of their forthcoming damnation, the positive chaos changed into a scary threat.

When the mask of the Red Death appears on the scene, the chaos reaches its peak. In this moment also Prince Prospero realizes that there is probably no escape from neither the castle, nor the faith that awaits the whole company. Although he is probably aware of this fact at the very moment he sees “the figure in question” (Poe 303.), he manifests effort to fight his destiny. While uttering his words “[W]ho dares insult us with this blasphemous mockery? Seize him and unmask him”, he stands in the blue room. This fact might be an indication that Prospero, for a bright moment, felt full of strange feelings about the unknown as if he was at the beginning of his life once again. Nevertheless, while trying to make his way to get to know the unknown and to fight it, he actually destroyed himself. To specify my previous statement, I will use H. H. Bell’s comment: “In his anger Prospero rushes toward the figure of death with the intention of stabbing him to death-irony of ironies!” (105) by which Bell suggests that Prospero unknowingly throws himself into a death trap. He has, thus, probably lost his mind completely. During this act of effort to save himself from this scary figure, Prospero gradually runs through all of the seven rooms which “represent the seven decades of Prospero's life” (Bell 103) just as though he actually ran through his whole life only to finish his journey in the embrace of the worst kind of death possible.

When this mysterious – perhaps not for the reader but for the guests – figure finally kills Prospero in the last room, everything seems to fall into place. The enormous chaos that has been created by the arrival of the “mummer” into the palace is gone, everything stays silent and the guests of the masquerade “acknowledged the presence of the Red

Death” (Poe 304). In the seventh room, which has already been recognized as the room of death, the Red Death finishes its deadly mission by gradually killing each one of the guests. Now it is clear that from the very beginning of the story, death was supposed to win over the selfish and careless natures of the people present in the abbey. Mainly and primarily over Prospero who thought, as we know, that “the outside world could take of itself” (Poe 300). He naively thought that he could escape the terrible pestilence by creating his own order in contrast to the chaos that the plague created. Instead, a different kind of chaos was created in Prospero’s mind and palace. The unrestrained wilderness of the masquerade blinded its members to the point where they did not see the Red Death actually coming for them right into their shelter which they supposed the abbey to be.

After the death of every character, the order seems to be somehow restored as each of the characters meets their fate. Even though the pestilence itself represents chaos and disorder, the fact that the characters did not escape their punishment for being selfish and ignorant implies that the things that were supposed to happen from the beginning, came true. Therefore, a certain kind of order was created, no inappropriate joy or gaiety was happening anymore. Also the clock which was counting the times of each of the character stops ticking and all the lights that created magical lights in the windows of each room die out. This symbolizes death to all, including the chaos and madness produced previously.

And the life of the ebony clock went out with that of the last of the gay.
And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the
Red Death held illimitable dominion over all. (Poe 304)

The actual ending of the story corresponds to the previously mentioned theories that the seven rooms represented stages of Prospero’s wild and strange life and perhaps also way of thinking. It is not certain whether Prospero was actually a madman, nevertheless it is quite safe to assume that his mind was not one that is usually seen. His bizarre tastes and sense for organization and peculiarity support this idea as well. The overall setting of the palace also played a significant role for the whole story. It was supposed to be a shelter, a place of safety but later it showed itself as a prison, a death trap from which the masqueraders could not escape from. Even though in the first moments of the story it was not seen by the characters, the environment of the castle, particularly the seven rooms and the ebony “clock of death” (Bell 104) affected their minds and calmness greatly. It left them waiting for their own damnation ending in the arms of the Red Death about which they had thought they did not need to care.

2.4 The Cask of Amontillado

The last story to be analyzed in this thesis is “The Cask of Amontillado”. Similarly to the previous case, this story deals with a setting of a carnival, however, here the carnival plays a slightly different role in connection to the characters that appear in the story. “The Cask of Amontillado” offers two different settings for an examination, the first one is the already mentioned carnival and the second one are the dark catacombs of the Montresor family.

Since the very beginning of the story the reader is acquainted with the fact that Montresor is planning to avenge “the thousand injuries” (Poe 415) that have been done to him by Fortunato. The exact character of the planned revenge is not given, however, it is quite obvious that it is not going to be a friendly rebuke and that Montresor has planned his revenge well ahead:

You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose . . . that I gave utterance to a threat . . . I must not only punish but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed when the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done he wrong.

It must be understood that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause to doubt my good will. (Poe 415)

Considering the fact that later in the story the reader is given the opportunity to create a more concrete idea about Montresor’s plan, it is quite important to examine the setting of the carnival in connection to this plan which is – of course – to kill Fortunato. The carnival actually creates one of the ironic aspects of the story as it is, according to Charles N. Nevi, “place for gaiety, happiness, and fun and games, not for cruel, cold-blooded murder” (462). Similarly as in the case of “The Masque of the Red Death”, the carnival represents a certain kind of chaos, however, this time it is happening outside and therefore it might be seen as an even more chaotic and disordered environment than the masquerade in “The Masque of the Red Death”. Of course, it is also meant to create an atmosphere of joy and gaiety and this time it is not an effort to hide from the cruel reality, but of an *ordinary* celebration which does not seem to be any different from other festivities of such character.

Nevertheless, the above mentioned notion is the exact attribute of a carnival that Montresor is able to take advantage of. As there are no rules and the society is having a

good time while indulging in a lot of drinking, Montresor encounters Fortunato in a state which enables him to make use not only of the fact that Fortunato “had been drinking much” (Poe 416), but also of the way he was dressed. As Charles N. Nevi remarks in his article “Irony and ‘The Cask of Amontillado’”, Fortunato’s jester costume is actually his weakness since “a jester is not just a man to be laughed at; he is a man who makes others laugh by being aware of the frailties of mankind and then ridiculing them”, nevertheless, he “is the one who is aware of very little and who ridicules nothing” (462). This indicates that Montresor is the one who plays games here and he plays them very well as Fortunato is unable to recognize any suspicious behavior in his so called friend’s utterances.

The fact that Montresor also makes use of Fortunato’s dress is once again connected to the setting of the carnival. Usually, or under normal circumstances, Fortunato is, according to Montresor’s principal words, a man of a quite high social status. However, according to Elena V. Baraban, during the carnival “identities are destabilized and traditional social hierarchy and etiquette collapse” (54) which provides an opportunity for the usual roles of people in society to be distorted or changed for that certain period of time which definitely fits into Montresor’s plan. Baraban further remarks that “[h]aving chosen the role of a fool, Fortunato becomes socially inferior to Montresor who is wearing . . . a costume that makes him resemble an executioner” (54).

This claim might be later supported by taking the setting of Montresor’s palazzo into account. When he persuades Fortunato, without any extensive effort, to go with him into the vaults of his palazzo, he actually implements another part of his plan into the story. He puts himself into a position, where he operates in a place which he knows and which is his own – we might call it his comfortable zone – while Fortunato finds himself in a completely new environment. This “space symbolism” then again “serves the purpose of undermining Fortunato’s social role” (Baraban 54). Thanks to this fact, Montresor has the opportunity to feel even more confident with his plan and he probably supposes that Fortunato is going to fall into his trap more easily. In fact, in this moment, “it is Montresor who comes to the role of jester” (Nevi 462). During their passage through the catacombs, Montresor is making ironic remarks which indicate his cold-blooded nature and actually an incredible cruelty of his mind: “Come....we will go back; your health is precious. You are rich, respected, admired, beloved; you are happy, as once I was. You are a man to be missed” (Poe 417) and Fortunato is absolutely unable to recognize the irony in his words. From this remark it is also quite obvious that Montresor is very angry about the fact that Fortunato is a happy and rich man while his life is not what he wants it to be anymore.

From various similar utterances expressed by Montresor and also from the fact that he is very calm even though he is about to kill a man in just a few minutes there arises a question whether Montresor could be considered a madman. As Elena V. Baraban mentions in her article “The Motive for Murder in ‘The Cask of Amontillado’”, “such interpretation . . . seems to make certain details in the elaborate structure of the story unnecessary and this, in turn, goes against Poe’s approach to composition” as in his “The Philosophy of Composition” “Poe demonstrates that there are no details in his works that appear due to accident or intuition” (47). Nevertheless, it is quite absurd to simply deny this possibility as Montresor definitely demonstrates a kind of behavior which does not seem to be corresponding with a sane mind. As the story proceeds and it is slowly coming to the very act of murder, the reader sees that Montresor shows absolute calmness in connection to his forthcoming actions. He is actually even able to make ironic jokes as in the passage when Fortunato performs the masonic gesture and thus reveals one of Montresor’s lies:

“You are not of the masons.”

“Yes, yes,” I said; “yes, yes.”

“You? Impossible! A mason?”

“A mason,” I replied.

“A sign,” he said, “a sign.”

“It is this,” I answered, producing from beneath the folds of my *roquelaire* a trowel. (Poe 419)

It is therefore quite evident that Montresor indeed enjoys the process and he seems to be looking forward to the act of murder itself – almost as if it signified an utmost satisfaction of mind to him.

With regards to Montresor’s possibly damaged mind, it is possible to examine the environment of his catacombs as such. Concerning the fact that they are hidden under the surface, they might be seen as a contrast to the chaos produced by the carnival which is happening outside on the streets. They are dark, quiet, and represent a certain kind of order inside the chaos, although they seem to be rather mysterious. Considering the fact that Montresor has been acting very mysteriously and also calmly in connection to the ongoing events, his catacombs might be seen as a parallel to his own mind. Joseph J. Moldenhauer mentions an interesting idea in his article “Murder as Fine Art: Basic Connections between Poe’s Aesthetics, Psychology, and Moral Vision”. He claims that by completing his evil plan, which translates to both killing Fortunato “with impunity”

(Poe 415) and avenging his “family honor”, and also by having in possession the precious wines including Amontillado, he gains a “treasure” which consists of the three previously mentioned elements:

The wine cellar and the family tomb are one and the same; the ‘treasure’ which Montresor’s name implies is at once the honor of those revered dead, the rare wines in the catacombs and especially the prized Amontillado which Fortunato expects to find, and, finally, the dead Fortunato himself. On all three the satisfied Montresor reposes; all three are his ‘possessions’, his secrets, his mementos, functions of his mind. The identity of Fortunato has become internalized in Montresor, forming no small part of his ‘buried’ store of values. (293)

According to this idea, the state of Montresor’s mind is connected to the catacombs of his palazzo. The catacombs are dark, vast and calm and so is the psyche of the main protagonist. Creating an abstract point of view, the catacombs might be seen not only as the above mentioned “store of [his] values”, but also as a store of his own madness as they keep all of the Montresor family history and his terrible deed buried inside of them.

As the catacombs are connected to Montresor in this kind of psychic way, it is also interesting to examine the state of his mind in the end of the story. By the time he proceeds to walling Fortunato up in the niche, it becomes obvious that he really enjoys the act of killing him and that he feels absolutely no remorse:

I busied myself among the pile of bones of which I have before spoken. Throwing them aside, I soon uncovered a quantity of building stone and mortar. With these materials and with the aid of my trowel, I began vigorously to wall up the entrance of the niche. (Poe 420)

This suggests Montresor is excited about his deed as everything is going according to his principal plan so far. However, in this moment Fortunato slowly starts to wake up from his drunken state: “I had scarcely laid the first tier of the masonry when I discovered that the intoxication of Fortunato had in a great measure worn off. The earliest indication I had of this was a low moaning cry from the depth of the recess” (Poe 420.). The fact that Fortunato reacts to the situation in a way that indicates suffering, seems to make Montresor even more content with his actions. As he slowly finishes the remaining layers of the wall, the fact that he thoroughly enjoys the process is undoubtable: “Montresor has been enjoying the last scene in his playlet immensely. Twice he has put aside the trowel to savor and increase the sufferings of his victim” (Henninger 38). In this moment the

reader might perceive Montresor as completely insane since this cruel act of murder connected to such feeling of satisfaction could probably not represent a mind of a sane person.

Nevertheless, when Montresor almost finishes his horrible plan, there appears a brief indication that he might actually feel regret in regards to what he has done. When Fortunato stops answering to Montresor's utterances and the place becomes silent, Montresor remarks: "My heart grew sick" (Poe 421) which might be a signal of a moment of realization – a moment when Montresor experiences a sense of sickness over his terrible deed. However, as the sentence continues, an assurance of his heart being absolutely cold and emotionless comes: "it was the dampness of the catacombs that made it so" (Poe 421). The fact that the catacombs made Montresor feel by some means wrong might be perceived, if we follow the previous mentioned idea of the vaults being connected to his mind, as a parallel to his discussed mental state. Even though the catacombs represent a well-known environment for Montresor, they were capable of making him feel uncomfortable which might be compared to his own mind as it is also supposed to be an *environment*, where he feels comfortable. Nevertheless, it is so ill that it surprises even its proprietor.

In spite of that, another possible explanation for Montresor's heart growing suddenly sick might be proposed. Even though it is very probable that Montresor is really the mad one in the story and that Fortunato was simply a victim of the surrounding chaos as he was very drunk and thus unable to see through Montresor's cruel intentions, Francis J. Henninger offers an interesting idea in his article "The Bouquet of Poe's 'Amontillado'". According to him, Montresor might be representing an embodiment of insanity, but in the end of the story, the situation might be also explained through an idea of Fortunato having lost his mind, too, and therefore recreating the point of view on Montresor's feeling. Concretely, Henninger claims that the possibility of the catacombs being the cause of Montresor's sudden sickness is highly improbable and suggests another possible motivation for such feeling:

This excuse from the heretofore proud and self-congratulating Montresor is so obviously lame that we must accept Poe's challenge to discover the true case of this unexpected sickness. Only one thing could make Montresor sick, the spoiling of his revenge. (39)

The explanation for what is meant by "spoiling of his revenge" is given precisely in the idea of Fortunato being a madman in the end of the story.

First of all, it is important to examine the behavior Fortunato exhibits. For the most part of the story, Fortunato seems to be rather joyful – given mainly to the fact that he is very drunk – and carefree, and is obviously absolutely clueless. Although Montresor acts at least strange during the whole time, Fortunato gains no suspicion. The only moment which might be perceived as an indication of Fortunato feeling uncomfortable or insecure in a way occurs, when the two characters enter the catacombs and Fortunato notices their vastness which he was previously unaware of: “‘These vaults,’ he said, ‘are extensive’” (Poe 418). The reason why I suggest that this moment might represent a sense of insecurity or discomfort for Fortunato is the fact that he “realizes how powerful this family used to be” (Baraban 51). Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, this is the only possible indication of Fortunato’s disconcertion, because in the following passages he remains completely happy in his drunken bliss.

Only as the story grows closer to its end – when the act of his own murder is being executed, Fortunato changes his attitude and actions, and he “sounds somewhat hysterical” (Henninger 37). Fortunato’s drunkenness, which is an element of mental chaos itself, and the enormous shock he experiences at the finding that his supposed friend is about to kill him connect into an unchained mixture of feelings and thoughts that might very easily turn even a healthy mind into a much damaged entity. The last dialogue between Montresor and Fortunato might well serve as an indication of the newly developed insanity within Fortunato’s drunken mind.

“Ha! ha! ha! – He! he! he! – a very good joke, indeed – an excellent jest. We will have many a rich laugh about it into the palazzo – he! he! he! – over our wine – he! He! He!”

“The Amontillado!” I said.

“He! He! He! – he! He! He! – yes, the Amontillado. But is it not getting late? Will not they be awaiting us at the palazzo, the Lady Fortunato and the rest? Let us be gone.” (Poe 420-421)

Although it might seem that Fortunato is trying to escape the forthcoming death in these last utterances, it is quite improbable as he must have been fully aware in that particular moment that he was doomed. However, he tries to turn the situation into a joke which implies the previously suggested damage of his mind. Now we return to the above mentioned explanation of Montresor’s heart growing sick from a different reason than “the dampness of the catacombs” (Poe 421). Francis J. Henninger’s suggestion is that Fortunato has really gone insane and thus Montresor’s revenge has been spoilt because

in such a situation Fortunato would turn into a man who has no longer a real image about what is going on around him and therefore the principal plan fails:

Fortunato has gone completely mad. He is a madman; a man without his rationality. And Montresor? He is a man killing a rational animal who has lost his reason; his vendetta is being worked out upon an animal. Not only is his wrong 'unredressed' because the avenger has failed 'to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong,' but he has the satisfaction one would receive from avenging his family's honor upon an offending dog. (39)

This idea explains the possible reason for Montresor's heart growing sick which is different from the one presented by Montresor himself – the atmosphere of the catacombs. So two possible reasons for his sickness exist: either it is the environment of the catacombs, or the fact that his plan has not been accomplished in a satisfactory manner as Fortunato has gone mad. In my opinion, neither of these options exclude each other since the cause of Fortunato's madness might partially lay in the claustrophobic framework of the catacombs. This might have spoiled Montresor's pure satisfaction and thus the catacombs still remain connected to his unpleasant feelings.

The carnival and the catacombs are two different settings which contribute to the completion of the atmosphere of the whole story. The carnival represents an element of pure chaos which is used as a set-up for Montresor's cruel intention. During such festivity it is very easy to get confused and therefore caught in a trap – in this case a deadly one. In contrast to this chaos, there is the environment of Montresor's catacombs which are vast, quiet and dark. In a way, it is possible to connect the setting of these catacombs to the mental state of Montresor himself as his actions are similarly very *quiet* and calm. Everything he does is very well planned and it exhibits no signs of chaos. On the other side of the scene there stands Fortunato who is greatly indulged in the chaos, primarily by being drunk which later contributes to his apparent loss of senses. Concerning Montresor's insanity, it is not completely clear whether he is a madman or not, but he certainly performs acts and expresses thoughts that could hardly correspond to behavior of a sane person. Montresor could be seen as a psychopathic element but in spite of that, he is able to act very composedly while Fortunato seems to be a very eccentric persona. In the end he is already unable to control his senses and surrenders to hysteria, or chaos, which is developed by his drunken mind, fear of death and also the unpleasant atmosphere

created by the catacombs, and lastly by the fact that he is about to die by being walled up in a niche.

Conclusion

Chaos and madness are the examples of the most prominent themes in Edgar Allan Poe's texts. These aspects create a certain impression which is left on the reader and their presence in Poe's work is by no chance accidental. Edgar Allan Poe used specific and exactly planned methods while writing his texts and it is, therefore, undoubtable that the creation of the most horrifying effects of the stories was his main aim. The settings of his stories are also a key element in the creation of such impressions as they are usually no less disturbing than the above mentioned features.

In this thesis I have examined the connection between the peculiar psychological states – the chaos and madness – and the strange settings of Poe's stories. In the first section I introduced Poe's techniques which he used to evoke certain feelings in the reader and I clarified that none of his work was created in a fit of spontaneous creation. Poe had his work exactly planned and everything in his stories, including the settings, the psyches of the characters, and the atmosphere which they together create, has its function and reason.

In the next part of the thesis, I have analyzed the relationship between the settings and the chaos/madness. For my analyses I have chosen four of Poe's stories – “The Fall of the House of Usher”, “The Pit and the Pendulum”, “The Masque of the Red Death” and “The Cask of Amontillado”.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” is the first analyzed story since it illustrates the relationship between the two aspects most prominently. This story is a representation of a seriously ill mind of the protagonist who is no longer able to think rationally about things that surround him. He thus he perceives his own family mansion as a source for his insanity, he attributes unreal qualities to the house and lets it destroy his psyche completely.

The second story, “The Pit and the Pendulum” is, similarly to the “Fall of the House of Usher” set in an interior environment and it is also one which affects the protagonist incredibly. However, in this case, the narrator is not insane from the beginning of the story. In this text Poe has shown different methods of torture which can lead even a very rational mind to complete insanity. The settings of the story are also tools of death and madness and gradually their purpose is fulfilled as in the end the narrator remains completely destroyed both physically and mentally.

The third and fourth story – “The Masque of the Red Death” and “The Cask of Amontillado” represent different kind of settings and also different influence on the mind

of both the reader and the characters. In both of these stories we are presented to a protagonist whose mental state is somehow damaged, and the settings of these stories somehow correspond to this condition. In the case of “The Masque of the Red Death” Prince Prospero’s life and psyche is connected to the arrangement of the rooms in his palace and also the organization and the visual aspect of his masquerade. These settings represent the peculiarities of his mind and thus provide an interesting outlook on his personality. In “The Cask of Amontillado”, the settings also correspond to the protagonist’s mental state in a way, as Montresor’s catacombs illustrate the same calmness, mysteriousness, but also dreadfulness of his probably insane mind.

As I have argued before, the settings are a key feature in Edgar Allan Poe’s stories and similarly important are the themes of chaos, madness, and in some cases also despair and hopelessness. This thesis investigated the relationships between the aspects of chaos/madness and the settings in Poe’s four selected stories and thus provided different points of view on these texts and possibly also new perspectives on the overall reading of Edgar Allan Poe’s prose.

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