

Summer Reading Assignment for Rising 10th Graders (not Honors)



Summer reading for rising 10th graders corresponds with the first unit of study in 10th grade, Inside the Nightmare. In this unit, students will explore fiction and non-fiction texts in order to answer the unit essential question: What is the allure of fear?

Over the summer, students will read three text selections from below. Completion of the Comprehension Checks is not required, but may be helpful in preparing students for the assessment of the texts. Students will be given a quiz on the material when they return to school; the reading is due by Friday, August 7, 2020. The texts are included in this document.

Directions: All students will read "Why Do Some Brains Enjoy Fear" and "Feather Pillow"
Choose One: "Fall of the House of Usher" or "House Taken Over"

Summer Reading Assignment for Rising 10th Grade Honors Students

Over the summer, honors English 10 students will read the novel Frankenstein and the interview "Why Do Some Brains Enjoy Fear?" These texts will be the basis of the first unit of study for Honors English 10, so students are expected to have a deep understanding of the novel; annotating the text is encouraged. Annotating is any action that "deliberately interacts with a text to enhance the reader's understanding of, recall of, and reaction to the text." Students should ask questions, make comments, mark powerful words and phrases, and generally read actively. Students will also be assessed on the material with a quiz when they return to school; the reading is due by Friday, August 7, 2020. Students may want to purchase their own copy of the novel so they can annotate in the book however, students may also borrow a copy of the novel by stopping by Tennessee High School's front office. Students will need their lunch number to check out a copy. The interview is included in this document.

Why Do Some Brains Enjoy Fear?

Allegra Ringo

BACKGROUND

As human beings, we are equipped with a variety of different survival mechanisms. One system detects danger. If we could not recognize dangerous situations, we would not be able to avoid them. For that reason, our brains are hard-wired to feel fear when we encounter a threat. Our fear response releases “fight or flight” chemicals into our bloodstreams, and these help make us stronger, quicker, and more alert. In other words, fear makes us ready to fight or flee.

- 1 This time of year, thrillseekers can enjoy horror movies, haunted houses, and prices so low it’s scary. But if fear is a natural survival response to a threat, or danger, why would we seek out that feeling?
- 2 Dr. Margee Kerr is the staff sociologist at ScareHouse, a haunted house in Pittsburgh that takes all year to plan. She also teaches at Robert Morris University and Chatham University, and is the only person I’ve ever heard referred to as a “scare specialist.” Dr. Kerr is an expert in the field of fear. I spoke with her about what fear is, and why some of us enjoy it so much.

Why do some people like the feeling of being scared, while others don’t?

- 3 Not everyone enjoys being afraid, and I don’t think it’s a stretch to say that no one wants to experience a truly life-threatening situation. But there are those of us (well, a lot of us) who really enjoy the experience. First, the natural high from the fight-or-flight response can feel great. There is strong evidence that this isn’t just about personal choice, but our brain chemistry. New research from David Zald shows that people differ in their chemical response to thrilling situations. One of the main hormones released during scary and thrilling activities is dopamine, and it turns out some individuals may get more of a kick from this dopamine response than others do.

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Basically, some people's brains lack what Zald describes as "brakes" on the dopamine release and re-uptake¹ in the brain. This means some people are going to really enjoy thrilling, scary, and risky situations while others, not so much.

- 4 Lots of people also enjoy scary situations because it leaves them with a sense of confidence after it's over. Think about the last time you made it through a scary movie, or through a haunted house. You might have thought, "Yes! I did it! I made it all the way through!"

To really enjoy a scary situation, we have to know we're in a safe environment.

So it can be a real self-esteem boost. But again, self-scaring isn't for everyone, and there are lots of psychological and personal reasons someone may not enjoy scary situations. I've talked to more than a handful of people who will never set foot in a haunted house because they went to a haunt

at a young age and were traumatized. I always recommend parents thoroughly check out the content and rating of a haunted attraction before bringing a child. The chemicals that are released during fight-or-flight can work like glue to build strong memories ("flashbulb memories") of scary experiences, and if you're too young to know the monsters are fake, it can be quite traumatic and something you'll never forget, in a bad way.

What happens in our brains when we're scared? Is it different when we're scared "in a fun way" versus being actually afraid?

- 5 To really enjoy a scary situation, we have to know we're in a safe environment. It's all about triggering the amazing fight-or-flight response to experience the flood of adrenaline, endorphins, and dopamine, but in a completely safe space. Haunted houses are great at this—they deliver a startle scare by triggering one of our senses with different sounds, air blasts, and even smells. These senses are directly tied to our fear response and activate the physical reaction, but our brain has time to process the fact that these are not "real" threats. Our brain is lightning-fast at processing threat. I've seen the process thousands of times from behind the walls in ScareHouse—someone screams and jumps and then immediately starts laughing and smiling. It's amazing to observe. I'm really interested to see where our boundaries are in terms of when and how we really know or feel we're safe.

What qualities do "scary things" share across cultures, or does it vary widely?

- 6 One of the most interesting things about studying fear is looking at the social constructions of fear, and learned fears versus those fears

1. **re-uptake** *n.* reabsorption of a neurotransmitter. This process regulates the levels of a neurotransmitter in the body.

that appear to be more innate, or even genetic. When we look across time and across the world, we find that people truly can become afraid of anything. Through fear conditioning (connecting a neutral **stimulus** with a negative consequence), we can link pretty much anything to a fear response. Baby Albert, of course, is the exemplar case of this. The poor child was made deathly afraid of white rabbits in the 1920's, before researchers were required to be ethical. So we know that we can learn to fear, and this means our socialization and the society in which we are raised is going to have a lot to do with what we find scary.

- 7 Each culture has its own superhero monsters—the Chupacabra (South America), the Loch Ness Monster, the Yōkai (supernatural monsters from Japanese folklore), Alps (German nightmare creatures)—but they all have a number of characteristics in common. Monsters are defying the general laws of nature in some way. They have either returned from the afterlife (ghosts, demons, spirits) or they are some kind of nonhuman or semihuman creature. This speaks to the fact that things that violate the laws of nature are terrifying. And really anything that doesn't make sense or causes us some sort of **dissonance**, whether it is **cognitive** or aesthetic,² is going to be scary (axe-wielding animals, masked faces, contorted bodies).
- 8 Another shared characteristic of monsters across the globe is their blurred relationship with death and the body. Humans are obsessed with death; we simply have a hard time wrapping our mind around what happens when we die. This contemplation has led to some of the most famous monsters, with each culture creating their own version of the living dead, whether it's zombies, vampires, reanimated and reconstructed corpses, or ghosts. We want to imagine a life that goes on after we die. Or better yet, figure out a way to live forever. Again, though, that would violate the laws of nature and is therefore terrifying. So while the compositions and names of the monsters are different, the motivations and inspirations behind their constructions appear across the globe.

What are some early examples of people scaring themselves on purpose?

- 9 Humans have been scaring themselves and each other since the birth of the species, through all kinds of methods like storytelling, jumping off cliffs, and popping out to startle each other from the recesses of some dark cave. And we've done this for lots of different reasons—to build group unity, to prepare kids for life in the scary world, and, of course, to control behavior. But it's only really in the last few centuries that scaring ourselves for fun (and profit) has become a highly sought-after experience.

2. **aesthetic** (ehs THEHT ihk) *adj.* of or relating to art or beauty.

NOTES

Mark familiar word parts or indicate another strategy you used that helped you determine meaning.

stimulus (STIHM yuh luhs) *n.*

MEANING:

Things that violate the laws of nature are terrifying.

dissonance (DIHS uh nuhns) *n.*

MEANING:

cognitive (KOG nuh tihv) *adj.*

MEANING:

- 10 My favorite example of one of the early discoveries of the joys of self-scaring is actually found in the history of roller coasters. The Russian Ice Slides began, not surprisingly given the name, as extended sleigh rides down a snowy mountain in the mid-17th century. Much like they do today, riders would sit in sleds and speed down the mountain, which sometimes included additional man-made bumps to make it a little more exciting. The Russian Ice Slides became more sophisticated throughout the 18th century, with wooden beams and artificial mountains of ice. Eventually, instead of ice and sleds, tracks and carriages were constructed to carry screaming riders across the “Russian Mountains.” Even more exhilarating terror came when innovative creators decided to paint scary scenes on the walls that shocked and thrilled riders as they passed by. These came to be known as “Dark Rides.” People were terrified, but they loved it.
- 11 We haven’t just enjoyed physical thrills—ghost stories were told around the campfire long before we had summer camps. The Graveyard Poets of the 18th century, who wrote of spiders, bats, and skulls, paved the road for the Gothic novelists of the 19th century, like Poe and Shelley. These scary stories provided, and continue to deliver, intrigue, exhilaration, and a jolt of excitement to our lives.
- 12 The 19th century also brought the precursors to the haunted attraction industry. Sideshows or “freak shows,” and the museums and houses of “oddities” have existed since the mid-1800s. Perhaps the most notable is Barnum’s American Museum, operated by P. T. Barnum, best known for being half of the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus. His museum contained things like monkey torsos with fish tails attached, and other characters meant to frighten and startle. Much like modern haunts, customers would line up to challenge themselves and their resilience and dare each other to enter the freak shows and face the scary scenes and abnormalities. The haunted attraction industry has come a long way from fish tails and plastic bats—modern haunts incorporate Hollywood-quality sets, and a crazy amount of modern technology all designed to scare us silly.
- There’s a common belief that if you meet somebody for the first time in a fearful situation, you’ll feel more attached or more attracted to that person than you would if you’d met them in a low-stress situation. Is there any truth to that?
- 13 One of the reasons people love Halloween is because it produces strong emotional responses, and those responses work to build stronger relationships and memories. When we’re happy, or afraid, we’re releasing powerful hormones, like oxytocin, that are working to make these moments stick in our brain. So we’re going to remember the people we’re with. If it was a good experience, then we’ll remember them fondly and feel close to them, more so than if we


were to meet them during some neutral unexciting event. Shelley Taylor discussed this in her article “Tend and Befriend: Biobehavioral Bases of Affiliation Under Stress.” She shows that we do build a special closeness with those we are with when we’re in an excited state, and more importantly, that it can be a really good thing. We’re social and emotional beings. We need each other in times of stress, so the fact that our bodies have evolved to make sure we feel close to those we are with when afraid makes sense. So yes, take your date to a haunted house or for a ride on a roller coaster; it’ll be a night you’ll never forget. 🦇

NOTES

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Comprehension Check

Complete the following items after you finish your first read. Review and clarify details with your group.

1. According to Dr. Kerr, how are our bodies affected by things that scare us?
2. According to Dr. Kerr, what critical information do we need to have in order to enjoy a scary situation?
3. What happened to Baby Albert?
4.  **Notebook** Confirm your understanding of the text by writing a summary.

RESEARCH

Research to Clarify Choose at least one unfamiliar detail from the text. Briefly research that detail. In what way does the information you learned shed light on an aspect of the interview?

Research to Explore This interview may spark your curiosity to learn more. Briefly research a topic from the text that interests you. Share what you discover with your group.

The Feather Pillow

Horacio Quiroga



About the Author



Horacio Quiroga (1878–1937) was born in Uruguay but spent much of his life in Argentina. A journalist and justice of the peace, he turned to fiction writing after becoming inspired by nineteenth-century writers such as Rudyard Kipling. Quiroga was a prolific writer who published about 200 short stories and is considered a master of the genre.

BACKGROUND

Heavily influenced by Gothic horror writer Edgar Allan Poe, Horacio Quiroga wrote many stories that explored themes of madness, the writing process, and survival. His tales often contain an element of horror. “The Feather Pillow,” published in 1907 and originally written in Spanish, is one of Quiroga’s most widely read stories.

- 1 **H**er entire honeymoon gave her hot and cold shivers. A blond, angelic, and timid young girl, the childish fancies she had dreamed about being a bride had been chilled by her husband’s rough character. She loved him very much, nonetheless, although sometimes she gave a light shudder when, as they returned home through the streets together at night, she cast a furtive¹ glance at the impressive stature² of her Jordan, who had been silent for an hour. He, for his part, loved her profoundly but never let it be seen.
- 2 For three months—they had been married in April—they lived in a special kind of bliss. Doubtless she would have wished less severity in the rigorous sky of love, more expansive and less

1. **furtive** *adj.* secret.

2. **stature** *n.* height.

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cautious tenderness, but her husband's impassive manner always restrained her.

3 The house in which they lived influenced her chills and shuddering to no small degree. The whiteness of the silent patio—friezes, columns, and marble statues—produced the wintry impression of an enchanted palace. Inside the glacial brilliance of stucco, the completely bare walls, affirmed the sensation of unpleasant coldness. As one crossed from one room to another, the echo of his steps reverberated throughout the house, as if long abandonment had sensitized its resonance.

4 Alicia passed the autumn in this strange love nest. She had determined, however, to cast a veil over her former dreams and live like a sleeping beauty in the hostile house, trying not to think about anything until her husband arrived each evening.

5 It is not strange that she grew thin. She had a light attack of influenza that dragged on insidiously for days and days: after that Alicia's health never returned. Finally one afternoon she was able to go into the garden, supported on her husband's arm. She looked around listlessly. Suddenly Jordan, with deep tenderness, ran his hand very slowly over her head, and Alicia instantly burst into sobs, throwing her arms around his neck. For a long time she cried out all the fears she had kept silent, redoubling her weeping at Jordan's slightest caress. Then her sobs subsided, and she stood a long while, her face hidden in the hollow of his neck, not moving or speaking a word.

6 This was the last day Alicia was well enough to be up. On the following day she awakened feeling faint. Jordan's doctor examined her with minute³ attention, prescribing calm and absolute rest.

7 "I don't know," he said to Jordan at the street door. "She has a great weakness that I am unable to explain. And with no vomiting, nothing . . . if she wakes tomorrow as she did today, call me at once."

8 When she awakened the following day, Alicia was worse. There was a consultation.⁴ It was agreed there was an anemia⁵ of incredible progression, completely inexplicable.⁶ Alicia had no more fainting spells, but she was visibly moving toward death. The lights were lighted all day long in her bedroom, and there was complete silence. Hours went by without the slightest sound. Alicia dozed. Jordan virtually lived in the drawing room, which was also always lighted. With tireless persistence he paced ceaselessly from one end of the room to the other. The carpet swallowed his steps. At times he entered the bedroom and

3. **minute** (my NOOT) *adj.* precise and detailed.

4. **consultation** *n.* meeting with a doctor.

5. **anemia** (uh NEE mee uh) *n.* weak condition.

6. **inexplicable** *adj.* unable to be explained.

continued his silent pacing back and forth alongside the bed, stopping for an instant at each end to regard his wife.

9 Suddenly Alicia began to have hallucinations, vague images, at first seeming to float in the air, then descending to floor level. Her eyes excessively wide, she stared continuously at the carpet on either side of the head of her bed. One night she suddenly focused on one spot. Then she opened her mouth to scream, and pearls of sweat suddenly beaded her nose and lips.

10 “Jordan! Jordan!” she clamored, rigid with fright, still staring at the carpet.

11 Jordan ran to the bedroom, and, when she saw him appear, Alicia screamed with terror.

12 “It’s I, Alicia, it’s I!”

13 Alicia looked at him confusedly; she looked at the carpet; she looked at him once again; and after a long moment of stupefied confrontation, she regained her senses. She smiled and took her husband’s hand in hers, caressing it, trembling, for half an hour.

14 Among her most persistent hallucinations was that of an anthropoid⁷ poised on his fingertips on the carpet, staring at her.

15 The doctors returned, but to no avail. They saw before them a diminishing life, a life bleeding away day by day, hour by hour, absolutely without their knowing why. During their last consultation Alicia lay in a stupor while they took her pulse, passing her inert wrist from one to another. They observed her a long time in silence and then moved into the dining room.

16 “Phew . . .” The discouraged chief physician shrugged his shoulders. “It is an inexplicable case. There is little we can do . . .”

17 “That’s my last hope!” Jordan groaned. And he staggered blindly against the table.

18 Alicia’s life was fading away in the subdelirium⁸ of anemia, a delirium which grew worse through the evening hours but which let up somewhat after dawn. The illness never worsened during the daytime, but each morning she awakened pale as death, almost in a swoon. It seemed only at night that her life drained out of her in new waves of blood. Always when she awakened she had the sensation of lying collapsed in the bed with a million-pound weight on top of her. Following the third day of this relapse she never left her bed again. She could scarcely move her head. She did not want her bed to be touched, not even to have her bedcovers arranged. Her crepuscular⁹ terrors advanced now in the form of monsters that dragged themselves toward the bed and laboriously climbed upon the bedspread.

7. **anthropoid** (AN thruh poyd) *n.* being with a human-like form.

8. **subdelirium** *n.* disturbed state of mind.

9. **crepuscular** (krih PUHS kyuh luhr) *adj.* occurring at twilight.

- 19 Then she lost consciousness. The final two days she raved ceaselessly in a weak voice. The lights funereally illuminated the bedroom and drawing room. In the deathly silence of the house the only sound was the monotonous delirium from the bedroom and the dull echoes of Jordan's eternal pacing.
- 20 Finally, Alicia died. The servant, when she came in afterward to strip the now empty bed, stared wonderingly for a moment at the pillow.
- 21 "Sir!" she called Jordan in a low voice. "There are stains on the pillow that look like blood."
- 22 Jordan approached rapidly and bent over the pillow. Truly, on the case, on both sides of the hollow left by Alicia's head, were two small dark spots.
- 23 "They look like punctures," the servant murmured after a moment of motionless observation.
- 24 "Hold it up to the light," Jordan told her.
- 25 The servant raised the pillow but immediately dropped it and stood staring at it, livid and trembling. Without knowing why, Jordan felt the hair rise on the back of his neck.
- 26 "What is it?" he murmured in a hoarse voice.
- 27 "It's very heavy," the servant whispered, still trembling.
- 28 Jordan picked it up; it was extraordinarily heavy. He carried it out of the room, and on the dining room table he ripped open the case and the ticking with a slash. The top feathers floated away, and the servant, her mouth opened wide, gave a scream of horror and covered her face with her clenched fists: in the bottom of the pillowcase, among the feathers, slowly moving its hairy legs, was a monstrous animal, a living, viscous ball. It was so swollen one could scarcely make out its mouth.
- 29 Night after night, since Alicia had taken to her bed, this abomination had stealthily applied its mouth—its proboscis¹⁰ one might better say—to the girl's temples, sucking her blood. The puncture was scarcely perceptible. The daily plumping of the pillow had doubtlessly at first impeded its progress, but as soon as the girl could no longer move, the suction became vertiginous.¹¹ In five days, in five nights, the monster had drained Alicia's life away.
- 30 These parasites of feathered creatures, diminutive¹² in their habitual environment, reach enormous proportions under certain conditions. Human blood seems particularly favorable to them, and it is not rare to encounter them in feather pillows. 🦋

10. **proboscis** (proh BOS kihs) *n.* insect mouthparts shaped like a long, thin tube.

11. **vertiginous** (vur TIHJ uh nuhs) *adj.* causing dizziness.

12. **diminutive** *adj.* extremely or unusually small.

The Fall of the House of Usher

Edgar Allan Poe

BACKGROUND

In this story, Edgar Allan Poe shows his sympathy for the Romantic movement, which was at its height in Europe when he was writing, in the early nineteenth century. The Romantics explored themes of love and death, often with an intense interest in human psychology. For Poe, the darkest aspects of the mind and heart were most revealing of what it means to be human.

- 1 **D**uring the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was—but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate

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CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: Mark words and phrases in paragraph 1 that refer to the imagination or altered reality, and others that refer to falling or sinking.

QUESTION: What is happening to the narrator as he looks at the house?

CONCLUDE: What is the effect of these strong descriptive details?

annihilate (uh NY uh layt) *v.*
destroy completely

or terrible. I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eyelike windows—upon a few rank sedges¹—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul, which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveler upon opium—the bitter lapse into everyday life—the hideous dropping off of the veil. There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart—an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught² of the sublime. What was it—I paused to think—what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered. 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. It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of the picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression; and, acting upon this idea, I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn³ that lay in unruffled luster by the dwelling, and gazed down—but with a shudder even more thrilling than before—upon the remodeled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eyelike windows.

2 Nevertheless, in this mansion of gloom I now proposed to myself a sojourn of some weeks. Its proprietor, Roderick Usher, had been one of my boon companions in boyhood; but many years had elapsed since our last meeting. A letter, however, had lately reached me in a distant part of the country—a letter from him—which, in its wildly importunate nature, had admitted of no other than a personal reply. The MS⁴ gave evidence of nervous agitation. The writer spoke of acute bodily illness—of a mental disorder which oppressed him—and of an earnest desire to see me, as his best and indeed his only personal friend, with a view of attempting, by the cheerfulness of my society, some alleviation of his malady. It was the manner in which all this, and much more, was said—it was the apparent *heart* that went with his request—which allowed me no room for hesitation; and I accordingly obeyed forthwith what I still considered a very singular summons.

3 Although, as boys, we had been even intimate associates, yet I really knew little of my friend. His reserve had been always excessive and habitual. I was aware, however, that his very ancient family had been noted, time out of mind, for a peculiar sensibility

1. **sedges** *n.* grasslike plants.

2. **aught** (awt) *n.* anything.

3. **tarn** *n.* small lake.

4. **MS** *abbr.* manuscript; document written by hand.

of temperament, displaying itself, through long ages, in many works of exalted art, and manifested, of late, in repeated deeds of munificent yet unobtrusive charity, as well as in a passionate devotion to the intricacies, perhaps even more than to the orthodox and easily recognizable beauties, of musical science. I had learned, too, the very remarkable fact, that the stem of the Usher race, all time-honored as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch: in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain. It was this deficiency, I considered, while running over in thought the perfect keeping of the character of the premises with the accredited character of the people, and while speculating upon the possible influence which the one, in the long lapse of centuries, might have exercised upon the other—it was this deficiency, perhaps of collateral issue,⁵ and the consequent undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony⁶ with the name, which had, at length, so identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the “House of Usher”—an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion.

- 4 I have said that the sole effect of my somewhat childish experiment—that of looking down within the tarn—had been to deepen the first singular impression. There can be no doubt that the consciousness of the rapid increase of my superstition—for why should I not so term it?—served mainly to accelerate the increase itself. Such, I have long known, is the paradoxical law of all sentiments having terror as a basis. And it might have been for this reason only, that, when I again uplifted my eyes to the house itself, from its image in the pool, there grew in my mind a strange fancy—a fancy so ridiculous, indeed, that I but mention it to show the vivid force of the sensations which oppressed me. I had so worked upon my imagination as really to believe that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity—an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but 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.

- 5 Shaking off from my spirit what *must* have been a dream, I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building. Its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive **antiquity**. The discoloration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be

antiquity (an TĪHK wuh tee) *n.*
very great age

5. **of collateral issue** descended from the same ancestors but in a different line.

6. **patrimony** (PA truh moh nee) *n.* property inherited from one's father.

fissure (FIHSH uhr) *n.* long, narrow crack or opening

a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones. In this there was much that reminded me of the specious totality of old woodwork which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of the external air. Beyond this indication of extensive decay, however, the fabric gave little token of instability. Perhaps the eye of a scrutinizing observer might have discovered a barely perceptible **fissure**, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn.

6 Noticing these things, I rode over a short causeway to the house. A servant in waiting took my horse, and I entered the Gothic⁷ archway of the hall. A valet, of stealthy step, thence conducted me, in silence, through many dark and intricate passages in my progress to the studio of his master. Much that I encountered on the way contributed, I know not how, to heighten the vague sentiments of which I have already spoken. While the objects around me—while the carvings of the ceilings, the somber tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric⁸ armorial trophies which rattled as I strode, were but matters to which, or to such as which, I had been accustomed from my infancy—while I hesitated not to acknowledge how familiar was all this—I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up. On one of the staircases, I met the physician of the family. His countenance, I thought, wore a mingled expression of low cunning and perplexity. He accosted me with trepidation and passed on. The valet now threw open a door and ushered me into the presence of his master.

7 The room in which I found myself was very large and lofty. The windows were long, narrow, and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within. Feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way through the trellised panes, and served to render sufficiently distinct the more prominent objects around; the eye, however, struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber, or the recesses of the vaulted and fretted⁹ ceiling. Dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene. I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all.

8 Upon my entrance, Usher arose from a sofa on which he had been lying at full length, and greeted me with a vivacious warmth which had much in it, I at first thought, of an overdone

7. **Gothic** *adj.* high and ornate.

8. **phantasmagoric** (fan taz muh GAWR ihk) *adj.* fantastic or dreamlike.

9. **fretted** *adj.* ornamented with a pattern of small, straight, intersecting bars.

cordiality—of the constrained effort of the *ennuyé*¹⁰ man of the world. A glance, however, at his countenance convinced me of his perfect sincerity. We sat down; and for some moments, while he spoke not, I gazed upon him with a feeling half of pity, half of awe. Surely, man had never before so terribly altered, in so brief a period, as had Roderick Usher! It was with difficulty that I could bring myself to admit the identity of the wan being before me with the companion of my early boyhood. Yet the character of his face had been at all times remarkable. A cadaverousness¹¹ of complexion; an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve; a nose of a delicate Hebrew model, but with a breadth of nostril unusual in similar formations; a finely molded chin, speaking, in its want of prominence, of a want of moral energy; hair of a more than weblike softness and tenuity—these features, with an inordinate expansion above the regions of the temple, made up altogether a countenance not easily to be forgotten. And now in the mere exaggeration of the prevailing character of these features, and of the expression they were wont to convey, lay so much of change that I doubted to whom I spoke. The now ghastly pallor of the skin, and the now miraculous luster of the eye, above all things startled and even awed me. The silken hair, too, had been suffered to grow all unheeded, and as, in its wild gossamer¹² texture, it floated rather than fell about the face, I could not, even with effort, connect its Arabesque¹³ expression with any idea of simple humanity.

9 In the manner of my friend I was at once struck with an incoherence—an inconsistency; and I soon found this to arise from a series of feeble and futile struggles to overcome an habitual trepidancy—an excessive nervous agitation. For something of this nature I had indeed been prepared, no less by his letter, than by reminiscences of certain boyish traits, and by conclusions deduced from his peculiar physical conformation and temperament. His action was alternately vivacious and sullen. His voice varied rapidly from a tremulous indecision (when the animal spirits seemed utterly in abeyance) to that species of energetic concision—that abrupt, weighty, unhurried, and hollow-sounding enunciation—that leaden, self-balanced, and perfectly modulated guttural utterance, which may be observed in the lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium, during the periods of his most intense excitement.

10 It was thus that he spoke of the object of my visit, of his earnest desire to see me, and of the solace he expected me to afford him. He entered, at some length, into what he conceived to be the nature of his malady. It was, he said, a constitutional and a family evil, and one

NOTES

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: Mark details in paragraph 8 that relate to the absence of color and force.

QUESTION: What portrait of Usher do these details create?

CONCLUDE: What does this portrayal of Usher help the reader understand?

10. **ennuyé** (on wee AY) *adj.* French for “bored.”

11. **cadaverousness** (kuh DAV uhr uhs nihs) *n.* quality of being like a dead body.

12. **gossamer** (GOS uh muhr) *adj.* very delicate and light, like a cobweb.

13. **Arabesque** (ar uh BEHSK) *adj.* of complex and elaborate design.

for which he despaired to find a remedy—a mere nervous affection,¹⁴ he immediately added, which would undoubtedly soon pass off. It displayed itself in a host of unnatural sensations. Some of these, as he detailed them, interested and bewildered me; although, perhaps, the terms and the general manner of the narration had their weight. He suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; the most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odors of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds, and these from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror.

- 11 To an anomalous species of terror I found him a bounden slave. “I shall perish:” said he, “I *must* perish in this deplorable folly. Thus, thus, and not otherwise, shall I be lost. I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results. I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial, incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation of soul. I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect—in terror. In this unnerved, in this pitiable, condition I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR.”

14. **affection** *n.* affliction; illness.



12 I learned, moreover, at intervals, and through broken and equivocal hints, another singular feature of his mental condition. He was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and whence, for many years, he had never ventured forth—in regard to an influence whose supposititious¹⁵ force was conveyed in terms too shadowy here to be restated—an influence which some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of his family mansion, had, by dint of long sufferance, he said, obtained over his spirit—an effect which the physique of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had at length, brought about upon the morale of his existence.

13 He admitted, however, although with hesitation, that much of the peculiar gloom which thus afflicted him could be traced to a more natural and far more palpable origin—to the severe and long-continued illness—indeed to the evidently approaching **dissolution**—of a tenderly beloved sister—his sole companion for long years, his last and only relative on earth. “Her decease,” he said, with a bitterness which I can never forget, “would leave him (him, the hopeless and the frail) the last of the ancient race of the Ushers.” While he spoke, the lady Madeline (for so was she called) passed slowly through a remote portion of the apartment, and, without having noticed my presence, disappeared. I regarded her with an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread; and yet I found it impossible to account for such feelings. A sensation of stupor oppressed me, as my eyes followed her retreating steps. When a door, at length, closed upon her, my glance sought instinctively and eagerly the countenance of the brother; but he had buried his face in his hands, and I could only perceive that a far more than ordinary wanness had overspread the emaciated fingers through which trickled many passionate tears.

14 The disease of the lady Madeline had long baffled the skill of her physicians. A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical¹⁶ character were the unusual diagnosis. Hitherto she had steadily borne up against the pressure of her malady, and had not betaken herself finally to bed; but on the closing in of the evening of my arrival at the house, she succumbed (as her brother told me at night with inexpressible agitation) to the prostrating power of the destroyer; and I learned that the glimpse I had obtained of her person would thus probably be the last I should obtain—that the lady, at least while living, would be seen by me no more.

15 For several days ensuing, her name was unmentioned by either Usher or myself; and during this period I was busied in earnest endeavors to alleviate the melancholy of my friend. We painted

NOTES

dissolution (dihs uh LOO shuhn) *n.* ending or downfall

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: In the first two sentences of paragraph 13, mark the sections that are set off by dashes or parentheses.

QUESTION: Why does the author structure these sentences in this way?

CONCLUDE: What do these fragmented sentences suggest about the way Usher speaks and behaves?

15. **supposititious** (suh poz uh TIHSH uhs) *adj.* supposed.

16. **cataleptical** (kat uh LEHP tihk uhl) *adj.* in a state in which consciousness and feeling are suddenly and temporarily lost and the muscles become rigid.

and read together, or I listened, as if in a dream, to the wild improvisations of his speaking guitar. And thus, as a closer and still closer intimacy admitted me more unreservedly into the recesses of his spirit, the more bitterly did I perceive the futility of all attempt at cheering a mind from which darkness, as if an inherent positive quality, poured forth upon all objects of the moral and physical universe, in one unceasing radiation of gloom.

16 I shall ever bear about me a memory of the many solemn hours I thus spent alone with the master of the House of Usher. Yet I should fail in any attempt to convey an idea of the exact character of the studies, or of the occupations, in which he involved me, or led me the way. An excited and highly distempered ideality¹⁷ threw a sulfurous luster over all. His long improvised dirges will ring forever in my ears. Among other things, I hold painfully in mind a certain singular perversion and amplification of the wild air of the last waltz of von Weber.¹⁸ From the paintings over which his elaborate fancy brooded, and which grew, touch by touch, into vaguenesses at which I shuddered the more thrillingly, because I shuddered knowing not why—from these paintings (vivid as their images now are before me) I would in vain endeavor to educe more than a small portion which should lie within the compass of merely written words. By the utter simplicity, by the nakedness of his designs, he arrested and overawed attention. If ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher. For me at least, in the circumstances then surrounding me, there arose out of the pure abstractions which the hypochondriac contrived to throw upon his canvas, an intensity of intolerable awe, no shadow of which felt I ever yet in the contemplation of the certainly glowing yet too concrete reveries of Fuseli.¹⁹

17 One of the phantasmagoric conceptions of my friend, partaking not so rigidly of the spirit of abstraction, may be shadowed forth, although feebly, in words. A small picture presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel, with low walls, smooth, white and without interruption or device. Certain accessory points of the design served well to convey the idea that this excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth. No outlet was observed in any portion of its vast extent, and no torch, or other artificial source of light was discernible; yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendor.

18 I have just spoken of that morbid condition of the auditory nerve which rendered all music intolerable to the sufferer, with the exception of certain effects of stringed instruments. It was, perhaps,

17. **ideality** (y dee AL uh tee) *n.* something that is ideal or has no reality.

18. **von Weber** (fon VAY buhr) Carl Maria von Weber (1786–1826), German Romantic composer whose music was highly emotional and dramatic.

19. **Fuseli** (FYOO zuh lee) Johann Heinrich Füssli (1741–1825), also known as Henry Fuseli, Swiss-born painter who lived in England and was noted for his depictions of dreamlike and sometimes nightmarish images.

the narrow limits to which he thus confined himself upon the guitar, which gave birth, in great measure, to the fantastic character of his performances. But the fervid facility of his impromptus could not be so accounted for. They must have been, and were, in the notes, as well as in the words of his wild fantasias (for he not unfrequently accompanied himself with rhymed verbal improvisations), the result of that intense mental collectedness and concentration to which I have previously alluded as observable only in particular moments of the highest artificial excitement. The words of one of these rhapsodies I have easily remembered. I was, perhaps, the more forcibly impressed with it, as he gave it because, in the under or mystic current of its meaning, I fancied that I perceived, and for the first time, a full consciousness on the part of Usher of the tottering of his lofty reason upon her throne. The verses, which were entitled “The Haunted Palace,” ran very nearly, if not accurately, thus:

I

- 19 *In the greenest of our valleys,
 By good angels tenanted,
 Once a fair and stately palace—
 Radiant palace—reared its head.
 In the monarch Thought’s dominion—
 It stood there!
 Never seraph²⁰ spread a pinion²¹
 Over fabric half so fair.*

II

- 20 *Banners yellow, glorious, golden,
 On its roof did float and flow
 (This—all this—was in the olden
 Time long ago)
 And every gentle air that dallied,
 In that sweet day,
 Along the ramparts plumed and pallid,
 A winged odor went away.*

III

- 21 *Wanderers in that happy valley
 Through two luminous windows saw
 Spirits moving musically
 To a lute’s well-tuned law;
 Round about a throne, where sitting
 (Porphyrogene!)²²
 In state his glory well befitting,
 The ruler of the realm was seen.*

20. **seraph** (SEHR uhf) *n.* angel.

21. **pinion** (PIHN yuhn) *n.* wing.

22. **Porphyrogene** (pawr fehr oh JEEN) *adj.* born to royalty or “the purple.”

IV

- 22 *And all with pearl and ruby glowing
Was the fair palace door,
Through which came flowing, flowing, flowing
And sparkling evermore.
A troop of Echoes whose sweet duty
Was but to sing,
In voices of surpassing beauty,
The wit and wisdom of their king.*

V

- 23 *But evil things, in robes of sorrow,
Assailed the monarch's high estate;
(Ah, let us mourn, for never morrow
Shall dawn upon him, desolate!)
And, round about his home, the glory
That blushed and bloomed
Is but a dim-remembered story
Of the old time entombed.*

VI

- 24 *And travelers now within that valley,
Through the red-litten²³ windows, see
Vast forms that move fantastically
To a discordant melody;
While, like a rapid ghastly river,
Through the pale door,
A hideous throng rush out forever,
And laugh—but smile no more.*

- 25 I well remember that suggestions arising from this ballad led us into a train of thought wherein there became manifest an opinion of Usher's which I mention not so much on account of its novelty (for other men have thought thus), as on account of the pertinacity²⁴ with which he maintained it. This opinion, in its general form, was that of the sentience of all vegetable things. But, in his disordered fancy the idea had assumed a more daring character, and trespassed, under certain conditions, upon the kingdom of inorganization.²⁵ I lack words to express the full extent, or the earnest abandon of his persuasion. The belief, however, was connected (as I have previously hinted) with the gray stones of the home of his forefathers. The conditions of the sentience had been here, he imagined, 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

23. *litten* *adj.* lighted.

24. **pertinacity** (*purt uhn AS uh tee*) *n.* determined stubbornness.

25. **inorganization** *n.* inanimate objects.

this arrangement, and in its reduplication in the still waters of the tarn. Its evidence—the evidence of the sentence—was to be seen, he said (and I here started as he spoke), in the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and the walls. The result was discoverable, he added, in that silent, yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had molded the destinies of his family, and which made him what I now saw him—what he was. Such opinions need no comment, and I will make none.

26 Our books—the books which, for years, had formed no small portion of the mental existence of the invalid—were, as might be supposed, in strict keeping with this character of phantasm. We pored together over such works as the *Ververt et Chartreuse* of Gresset; the *Belphegor* of Machiavelli; the *Heaven and Hell* of Swedenborg; the *Subterranean Voyage of Nicholas Klimm* by Holberg; the *Chiromancy* of Robert Flud, of Jean D'Indaginé, and of De la Chambre; the *Journey into the Blue Distance* of Tieck; and the *City of the Sun* of Campanella.²⁶ One favorite volume was a small octavo edition of the *Directorium Inquisitorium*, by the Dominican Eymeric de Gironne; and there were passages in Pomponius Mela, about the old African Satyrs and Ægipans, over which Usher would sit dreaming for hours. His chief delight, however, was found in the perusal of an exceedingly rare and curious book in quarto Gothic—the manual of a forgotten church—the *Vigiliae Mortuorum secundum Chorum Ecclesiae Maguntinae*.

27 I could not help thinking of the wild ritual of this work, and of its probable influence upon the hypochondriac, when, one evening, having informed me abruptly that the lady Madeline was no more, he stated his intention of preserving her corpse for a fortnight (previously to its final interment), in one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building. The worldly reason, however, assigned for this singular proceeding, was one which I did not feel at liberty to dispute. The brother had been led to his resolution (so he told me) by consideration of the unusual character of the malady of the deceased, of certain obtrusive and eager inquiries on the part of her medical men, and of the remote and exposed situation of the burial ground of the family. I will not deny that when I called to mind the sinister countenance of the person whom I met upon the staircase, on the day of my arrival at the house, I had no desire to oppose what I regarded as at best but a harmless, and by no means an unnatural precaution.

28 At the request of Usher, I personally aided him in the arrangements for the temporary entombment. The body having been encoffined, we two alone bore it to its rest. The vault in which we placed it (and which had been so long unopened that our torches, half smothered in its oppressive atmosphere, gave us little

26. *Ververt et Chartreuse* of Gresset . . . *City of the Sun* of Campanella All the books listed deal with magic or mysticism.

opportunity for investigation) was small, damp, and entirely without means of admission for light; lying, at great depth, immediately beneath that portion of the building in which was my own sleeping apartment. It had been used, apparently, in remote feudal times, for the worst purposes of a donjon-keep,²⁷ and, in later days, as a place of deposit for powder, or some other highly combustible substance, as a portion of its floor, and the whole interior of a long archway through which we reached it, were carefully sheathed with copper. The door, of massive iron, had been, also, similarly protected. Its immense weight caused an unusually sharp, grating sound, as it moved upon its hinges.

29 Having deposited our mournful burden upon trestles within this region of horror, we partially turned aside the yet unscrewed lid of the coffin, and looked upon the face of the tenant. A striking similitude between the brother and sister now first arrested my attention; and Usher, divining, perhaps, my thoughts, murmured out some few words from which I learned that the deceased and himself had been twins, and that sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them. Our glances, however, rested not long upon the dead—for we could not regard her unawed. The disease which had thus entombed the lady in the maturity of youth, had left, as usual in all maladies of a strictly cataleptical character, the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death. We replaced and screwed down the lid, and, having secured the door of iron, made our way, with toil, into the scarcely less gloomy apartments of the upper portion of the house.

30 And now, some days of bitter grief having elapsed, an observable change came over the features of the mental disorder of my friend. His ordinary manner had vanished. His ordinary occupations were neglected or forgotten. He roamed from chamber to chamber with hurried, unequal, and object-less step. The pallor of his countenance had assumed, if possible, a more ghastly hue—but the luminousness of his eye had utterly gone out. The once occasional huskiness of his tone was heard no more; and a tremulous quaver, as if of extreme terror, habitually characterized his utterance. There were times, indeed, when I thought his unceasingly agitated mind was laboring with some oppressive secret, to divulge which he struggled for the necessary courage. At times, again, I was obliged to resolve all into the mere inexplicable vagaries²⁸ of madness, for I beheld him gazing upon vacancy for long hours, in an attitude of the profoundest attention, as if listening to some imaginary sound. It was no wonder that his condition terrified—that it infected me. I felt creeping upon me, by

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: In paragraph 30, mark words that relate to physical actions and behavior.

QUESTION: What do these physical details show about Usher's mental state and emotions?

CONCLUDE: What is the effect of these descriptive details?

27. **donjon-keep** (DUHN juhn keep) *n.* inner storage room of a castle; dungeon.

28. **vagaries** (VAY guhr eez) *n.* odd, unexpected actions or notions.

slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions.

31 It was, especially, upon retiring to bed late in the night of the seventh or eighth day after the placing of the lady Madeline within the donjon, that I experienced the full power of such feelings. Sleep came not near my couch—while the hours waned and waned away. I struggled to reason off the nervousness which had dominion over me. I endeavored to believe that much, if not all of what I felt, was due to the bewildering influence of the gloomy furniture of the room—of the dark and tattered draperies, which, tortured into motion by the breath of a rising tempest, swayed fitfully to and fro upon the walls, and rustled uneasily about the decorations of the bed. But my efforts were fruitless. An irrepressible tremor gradually pervaded my frame; and, at length, there sat upon my very heart an incubus²⁹ of utterly causeless alarm. Shaking this off with a gasp and a struggle, I uplifted myself upon the pillows, and, peering earnestly

29. **incubus** (IHN kyuh buhs) *n.* something nightmarishly burdensome.



within the intense darkness of the chamber, hearkened—I know not why, except that an instinctive spirit prompted me—to certain low and indefinite sounds which came, through the pauses of the storm, at long intervals, I knew not whence. Overpowered by an intense sentiment of horror, unaccountable yet unendurable, I threw on my clothes with haste (for I felt that I should sleep no more during the night), and endeavored to arouse myself from the pitiable condition into which I had fallen, by pacing rapidly to and fro through the apartment.

- 32 I had taken but few turns in this manner, when a light step on an adjoining staircase arrested my attention. I presently recognized it as that of Usher. In an instant afterward he rapped, with a gentle touch, at my door, and entered, bearing a lamp. His countenance was, as usual, cadaverously wan—but, moreover, there was a species of mad hilarity in his eyes—an evidently restrained hysteria in his whole demeanor. His air appalled me—but anything was preferable to



the solitude which I had so long endured, and I even welcomed his presence as a relief.

33 “And you have not seen it?” he said abruptly, after having stared about him for some moments in silence—“you have not then seen it?—but, stay! you shall.” Thus speaking, and having carefully shaded his lamp, he hurried to one of the casements, and threw it freely open to the storm.

34 The impetuous fury of the entering gust nearly lifted us from our feet. It was, indeed, a tempestuous yet sternly beautiful night, and one wildly singular in its terror and its beauty. A whirlwind had apparently collected its force in our vicinity; for there were frequent and violent alterations in the direction of the wind; and the exceeding density of the clouds (which hung so low as to press upon the turrets of the house) did not prevent our perceiving the lifelike velocity with which they flew careering from all points against each other, without passing away into the distance. I say that even their exceeding density did not prevent our perceiving this—yet we had no glimpse of the moon or stars, nor was there any flashing forth of the lightning. But the 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.

35 “You must not—you shall not behold this!” said I, shudderingly, to Usher, as I led him, with a gentle violence, from the window to a seat. “These appearances, which bewilder you, are merely electrical phenomena not uncommon—or it may be that they have their ghastly origin in the rank miasma³⁰ of the tarn. Let us close this casement:—the air is chilling and dangerous to your frame. Here is one of your favorite romances. I will read, and you shall listen:—and so we will pass away this terrible night together.”

36 The antique volume which I had taken up was the *Mad Trist* of Sir Launcelot Canning;³¹ but I had called it a favorite of Usher’s more in sad jest than in earnest; for, in truth, there is little in its uncouth and unimaginative prolixity which could have had interest for the lofty and spiritual ideality of my friend. It was, however, the only book immediately at hand; and I indulged a vague hope that the excitement which now agitated the hypochondriac, might find relief (for the history of mental disorder is full of similar anomalies) even in the extremeness of the folly which I should read. Could I have judged, indeed, by the wild overstrained air of vivacity with which he harkened, or apparently harkened, to the words of the tale, I might well have congratulated myself upon the success of my design.

37 I had arrived at that well-known portion of the story where Ethelred, the hero of the *Trist*, having sought in vain for peaceable admission into the dwelling of the hermit, proceeds to make good

NOTES

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: In paragraph 34, mark words and phrases that suggest extremes, whether of emotion, action, or size.

QUESTION: What is noteworthy about this storm?

CONCLUDE: What greater meaning do these details give to the storm?

30. **miasma** (my AZ muh) *n.* unwholesome atmosphere.

31. ***Mad Trist of Sir Launcelot Canning*** fictional book and author.

an entrance by force. Here, it will be remembered, the words of the narrative run thus:

38 “And Ethelred, who was by nature of a doughty³² heart, and who was now mighty withal, on account of the powerfulness of the wine which he had drunken, waited no longer to hold parley³³ with the hermit, who, in sooth, was of an obstinate and malicious turn, but, feeling the rain upon his shoulders, and fearing the rising of the tempest, uplifted his mace outright, and, with blows, made quickly room in the plankings of the door for his gauntleted hand; and now pulling therewith sturdily, he so cracked, and ripped, and tore all asunder, that the noise of the dry and hollow-sounding wood alarumed and reverberated throughout the forest.”

39 At the termination of this sentence I started and, for a moment, paused; for it appeared to me (although I at once concluded that my excited fancy had deceived me)—it appeared to me that, from some very remote portion of the mansion, there came, indistinctly, to my ears, what might have been, in its exact similarity of character, the echo (but a stifled and dull one certainly) of the very cracking and ripping sound which Sir Launcelot had so particularly described. It was, beyond doubt, the coincidence alone which had arrested my attention; for, amid the rattling of the sashes of the casements, and the ordinary commingled noises of the still increasing storm, the sound, itself, had nothing, surely, which should have interested or disturbed me. I continued the story:

40 “But the good champion Ethelred, now entering within the door, was sore enraged and amazed to perceive no signal of the malicious hermit; but, in the stead thereof, a dragon of a scaly and prodigious demeanor, and of a fiery tongue, which sate in guard before a palace of gold, with a floor of silver; and upon the wall there hung a shield of shining brass with this legend enwritten—

Who entereth herein, a conqueror hath bin;

Who slayeth the dragon, the shield he shall win.

41 And Ethelred uplifted his mace, and struck upon the head of the dragon, which fell before him, and gave up his pesty breath, with a shriek so horrid and harsh, and withal so piercing, that Ethelred had fain to close his ears with his hands against the dreadful noise of it, the like whereof was never before heard.”

42 Here again I paused abruptly, and now with a feeling of wild amazement—for there could be no doubt whatever that, in this instance, I did actually hear (although from what direction it proceeded I found it impossible to say) a low and apparently distant, but harsh, protracted, and most unusual screaming or grating sound—the exact counterpart of what my fancy had already conjured up for the dragon’s unnatural shriek as described by the romancer.

43 Oppressed, as I certainly was, upon the occurrence of this second and most extraordinary coincidence, by a thousand conflicting

32. **doughty** (DOWT ee) *adj.* brave.

33. **parley** (pahR LEE) *n.* conference; discussion.

sensations, in which wonder and extreme terror were predominant, I still retained sufficient presence of mind to avoid exciting, by any observation, the sensitive nervousness of my companion. I was by no means certain that he had noticed the sounds in question; although, assuredly, a strange alteration had, during the last few minutes, taken place in his demeanor. From a position fronting my own, he had gradually brought round his chair, so as to sit with his face to the door of the chamber; and thus I could but partially perceive his features, although I saw that his lips trembled as if he were murmuring inaudibly. His head had dropped upon his breast—yet I knew that he was not asleep, from the wide and rigid opening of the eye as I caught a glance of it in profile. The motion of his body, too, was at variance with this idea—for he rocked from side to side with a gentle yet constant and uniform sway. Having rapidly taken notice of all this, I resumed the narrative of Sir Launcelot, which thus proceeded:

44 “And now, the champion, having escaped from the terrible fury of the dragon, bethinking himself of the brazen shield, and of the breaking up of the enchantment which was upon it, removed the carcass from out of the way before him, and approached valorously over the silver pavement of the castle to where the shield was upon the wall; which in sooth tarried not for his full coming, but fell down at his feet upon the silver floor, with a mighty great and terrible ringing sound.”

45 No sooner had these syllables passed my lips, than—as if a shield of brass had indeed, at the moment, fallen heavily upon a floor of silver—I became aware of a distinct, hollow, metallic, and clangorous, yet apparently muffled, reverberation. Completely unnerved, I leaped to my feet; but the measured rocking movement of Usher was undisturbed. I rushed to the chair in which he sat. His eyes were bent fixedly before him, and throughout his whole countenance there reigned a stony rigidity. But, as I placed my hand upon his shoulder, there came a strong shudder over his whole person; a sickly smile quivered about his lips; and I saw that he spoke in a low, hurried, and gibbering murmur, as if unconscious of my presence. Bending closely over him I at length drank in the hideous import of his words.

46 “Not hear it?—yes, I hear it, and have heard it. Long—long—long—many minutes, many hours, many days, have I heard it—yet I dared not—oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am!—I *dared* not—I dared not speak! *We have put her living in the tomb!* Said I not that my senses were acute? I *now* tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I heard them—many, many days ago—yet I dared not—I *dared not speak!* and now—tonight—Ethelred—ha! ha!—the breaking of the hermit’s door, and the death cry of the dragon, and the clangor of the shield—say, rather, the **rending** of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault! Oh! wither shall I fly? Will she not be here anon? Is she not hurrying to

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: Mark examples of repeated words in paragraph 46.

QUESTION: Why do these words merit being repeated?

CONCLUDE: What is the effect of these repeated words?

rending (REHN dihng) *n.*
violent or forceful pulling apart of something

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? Madman!"—here he sprang furiously to his feet, and shrieked out his syllables, as if in the effort he were giving up his soul—"Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door!"

47 As if in the superhuman energy of his utterance there had been found the potency of a spell, the huge antique panels to which the speaker pointed, threw slowly back, upon the instant, their ponderous and ebony jaws. It was the work of the rushing gust—but then without those doors there *did* stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame. For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold—then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated.

48 From that chamber, and from that mansion, I fled aghast. The storm was still abroad in all its wrath as I found myself crossing the old causeway. Suddenly there shot along the path a wild light, and I turned to see whence a gleam so unusual could have issued; for the vast house and its shadows were alone behind me. The radiance was that of the full, setting, and bloodred moon, which now shone vividly through that once barely discernible fissure, of which I have before spoken as extending from the roof of the building, in a zigzag direction, to the base. While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened—there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind—the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight—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—and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the "*House of Usher*." ❧

tumultuous (too MUHL choo uhs) *adj.* loud, excited, and emotional

House Taken Over

Julio Cortázar

BACKGROUND

In 1946, when this story was written, Julio Cortázar lived in Buenos Aires, Argentina. World War II had only recently ended, and Argentina was in a state of political turmoil. Young people, including Cortázar, were critical of a conservative element in the government that had refused to join the Allied cause against Adolf Hitler until late in the war, by which time communication with Europe had all but stopped. The young author left Buenos Aires five years after writing this story, in protest against the policies of Juan Peron, who was increasingly dominating Argentinian politics.

- ¹ **W**e liked the house because, apart from its being old and **spacious** (in a day when old houses go down for a profitable auction of their construction materials), it kept the memories of great-grandparents, our paternal grandfather, our parents and the whole of childhood.

NOTES

spacious (SPAY shuhs) *adj.*
large; roomy

unvoiced (uhn VOYST) *adj.*
not spoken out loud or
expressed

obscure (uhb SKYAWR) *adj.*
not well-known

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: Mark details in paragraphs 3 and 4 that relate to the idea of being necessary or unnecessary, useful or useless.

QUESTION: Why might concepts of necessity and uselessness be important?

CONCLUDE: What do these details show about the characters and their lives?

- 2 Irene and I got used to staying in the house by ourselves, which was crazy, eight people could have lived in that place and not have gotten in each other's way. We rose at seven in the morning and got the cleaning done, and about eleven I left Irene to finish off whatever rooms and went to the kitchen. We lunched at noon precisely; then there was nothing left to do but a few dirty plates. It was pleasant to take lunch and commune with the great hollow, silent house, and it was enough for us just to keep it clean. We ended up thinking, at times, that that was what had kept us from marrying. Irene turned down two suitors for no particular reason, and María Esther went and died on me before we could manage to get engaged. We were easing into our forties with the **unvoiced** concept that the quiet, simple marriage of sister and brother was the indispensable end to a line established in this house by our grandparents. We would die here someday, **obscure** and distant cousins would inherit the place, have it torn down, sell the bricks and get rich on the building plot; or more justly and better yet, we would topple it ourselves before it was too late.
- 3 Irene never bothered anyone. Once the morning housework was finished, she spent the rest of the day on the sofa in her bedroom, knitting. I couldn't tell you why she knitted so much; I think women knit when they discover that it's a fat excuse to do nothing at all. But Irene was not like that, she always knitted necessities, sweaters for winter, socks for me, handy morning robes and bedjackets for herself. Sometimes she would do a jacket, then unravel it the next moment because there was something that didn't please her; it was pleasant to see a pile of tangled wool in her knitting basket fighting a losing battle for a few hours to retain its shape. Saturdays I went downtown to buy wool; Irene had faith in my good taste, was pleased with the colors and never a skein¹ had to be returned. I took advantage of these trips to make the rounds of the bookstores, uselessly asking if they had anything new in French literature. Nothing worthwhile had arrived in Argentina since 1939.
- 4 But it's the house I want to talk about, the house and Irene, I'm not very important. I wonder what Irene would have done without her knitting. One can reread a book, but once a pullover is finished you can't do it over again, it's some kind of disgrace. One day I found that the drawer at the bottom of the chiffonier, replete with mothballs, was filled with shawls, white, green, lilac. Stacked amid a great smell of camphor—it was like a shop; I didn't have the nerve to ask her what she planned to do with them. We didn't have to earn our living, there was plenty coming in from the farms each month, even piling up. But

1. **skein** (skayn) *n.* quantity of thread or yarn wound in a coil.

Irene was only interested in the knitting and showed a wonderful dexterity, and for me the hours slipped away watching her, her hands like silver sea urchins, needles flashing, and one or two knitting baskets on the floor, the balls of yarn jumping about. It was lovely.

5 How not to remember the layout of that house. The dining room, a living room with tapestries, the library and three large bedrooms in the section most **recessed**, the one that faced toward Rodríguez Peña.² Only a corridor with its massive oak door separated that part from the front wing, where there was a bath, the kitchen, our bedrooms and the hall. One entered the house through a **vestibule** with enameled tiles, and a wrought-iron grated door opened onto the living room. You had to come in through the vestibule and open the gate to go into the living room; the doors to our bedrooms were on either side of this, and opposite it was the corridor leading to the back section; going down the passage, one swung open the oak door beyond which was the other part of the house; or just before the door, one could turn to the left and go down a narrower passageway which led to the kitchen and the bath. When the door was open, you became aware of the size of the house; when it was closed, you had the impression of an apartment, like the ones they build today, with barely enough room to move around in. Irene and I always lived in this part of the house and hardly ever went beyond the oak door except to do the cleaning. Incredible how much dust collected on the furniture. It may be Buenos Aires³ is a clean city, but she owes it to her population and nothing else. There's too much dust in the air, the slightest breeze and it's back on the marble console tops and in the diamond patterns of the tooled-leather desk set. It's a lot of work to get it off with a feather duster; the motes⁴ rise and hang in the air, and settle again a minute later on the pianos and the furniture.

6 I'll always have a clear memory of it because it happened so simply and without fuss. Irene was knitting in her bedroom, it was eight at night, and I suddenly decided to put the water up for *mate*.⁵ I went down the corridor as far as the oak door, which was ajar, then turned into the hall toward the kitchen, when I heard something in the library or the dining room. The sound came through muted and indistinct, a chair being knocked over onto the carpet or the **muffled** buzzing of a conversation. At the same time or a second later, I heard it at the end of the passage which led from those two rooms toward the door. I hurled myself against the door before it was too late and

2. **Rodríguez Peña** fashionable street in Buenos Aires.

3. **Buenos Aires** capital of Argentina.

4. **motes** *n.* specks of dust or other tiny particles.

5. **mate** (MAH tay) *n.* beverage made from the dried leaves of a South American evergreen tree.

NOTES

recessed (rih SEHST) *adj.*
remote; set back

vestibule (VEHS tuh byool) *n.*
entrance room

muffled (MUH fuhld) *adj.*
difficult to hear because something is covering and softening the sound

CLOSE READ

ANNOTATE: In paragraphs 8–13, mark the short sentences.

QUESTION: Why does the author use so many shorter sentences?

CONCLUDE: How do these short sentences add to the portrayal of the characters' reactions?

shut it, leaned on it with the weight of my body; luckily, the key was on our side; moreover, I ran the great bolt into place, just to be safe.

7 I went down to the kitchen, heated the kettle, and when I got back with the tray of *mate*, I told Irene:

8 "I had to shut the door to the passage. They've taken over the back part."

9 She let her knitting fall and looked at me with her tired, serious eyes.

10 "You're sure?"

11 I nodded.

12 "In that case," she said, picking up her needles again, "we'll have to live on this side."

13 I sipped at the *mate* very carefully, but she took her time starting her work again. I remember it was a gray vest she was knitting. I liked that vest.

14 The first few days were painful, since we'd both left so many things in the part that had been taken over. My collection of French literature, for example, was still in the library. Irene had left several folios of stationery and a pair of slippers that she used a lot in the winter. I missed my briar pipe, and Irene, I think, regretted the loss of an ancient bottle of Hesperidin.⁶ It happened repeatedly (but only in the first few days) that we would close some drawer or cabinet and look at one another sadly.

15 "It's not here."

16 One thing more among the many lost on the other side of the house.

17 But there were advantages, too. The cleaning was so much simplified that, even when we got up late, nine thirty for instance, by eleven we were sitting around with our arms folded. Irene got into the habit of coming to the kitchen with me to help get lunch. We thought about it and decided on this: while I prepared the lunch, Irene would cook up dishes that could be eaten cold in the evening. We were happy with the arrangement because it was always such a bother to have to leave our bedrooms in the evening and start to cook. Now we made do with the table in Irene's room and platters of cold supper.

18 Since it left her more time for knitting, Irene was content. I was a little lost without my books, but so as not to inflict myself on my sister, I set about reordering papa's stamp collection; that killed some time. We amused ourselves sufficiently, each with his own thing, almost always getting together in Irene's bedroom, which was the more comfortable. Every once in a while, Irene might say:

19 "Look at this pattern I just figured out, doesn't it look like clover?"

6. **Hesperidin** substance that comes from the rind of certain citrus fruits and is used for various medicinal purposes.

- 20 After a bit it was I, pushing a small square of paper in front of her so that she could see the excellence of some stamp or another from Eupen-et-Malmédy.⁷ We were fine, and little by little we stopped thinking. You can live without thinking.
- 21 (Whenever Irene talked in her sleep, I woke up immediately and stayed awake. I never could get used to this voice from a statue or a parrot, a voice that came out of the dreams, not from a throat. Irene said that in my sleep I flailed about enormously and shook the blankets off. We had the living room between us, but at night you could hear everything in the house. We heard each other breathing, coughing, could even feel each other reaching for the light switch when, as happened frequently, neither of us could fall asleep.
- 22 Aside from our nocturnal rumblings, everything was quiet in the house. During the day there were the household sounds, the metallic click of knitting needles, the rustle of stamp-album pages turning. The oak door was massive, I think I said that. In the kitchen or the bath, which adjoined the part that was taken over, we managed to talk loudly, or Irene sang lullabies. In a kitchen there's always too much noise, the plates and glasses, for there to be interruptions from other sounds. We seldom allowed ourselves silence there, but when we went back to our rooms or to the living room, then the house grew quiet, half-lit, we ended by stepping around more slowly so as not to disturb one another. I think it was because of this that I woke up irremediably⁸ and at once when Irene began to talk in her sleep.)
- 23 Except for the consequences, it's nearly a matter of repeating the same scene over again. I was thirsty that night, and before we went to sleep, I told Irene that I was going to the kitchen for a glass of water. From the door of the bedroom (she was knitting) I heard the noise in the kitchen; if not the kitchen, then the bath, the passage off at that angle dulled the sound. Irene noticed how brusquely I had paused, and came up beside me without a word. We stood listening to the noises, growing more and more sure that they were on our side of the oak door, if not the kitchen then the bath, or in the hall itself at the turn, almost next to us.
- 24 We didn't wait to look at one another. I took Irene's arm and forced her to run with me to the wrought-iron door, not waiting to look back. You could hear the noises, still muffled but louder, just behind us. I slammed the grating and we stopped in the vestibule. Now there was nothing to be heard.
- 25 "They've taken over our section," Irene said. The knitting had reeled off from her hands and the yarn ran back toward the door and

7. **Eupen-et-Malmédy** (yoo PEHN ay mahl may DEE) districts in eastern Belgium.

8. **irremediably** (ihrr ih MEE dee uh blee) *adv.* in a way that cannot be helped or corrected.

disappeared under it. When she saw that the balls of yarn were on the other side, she dropped the knitting without looking at it.

26 “Did you have time to bring anything?” I asked hopelessly.

27 “No, nothing.”


28 We had what we had on. I remembered fifteen thousand pesos⁹ in the wardrobe in my bedroom. Too late now.

29 I still had my wrist watch on and saw that it was 11 p.m. I took Irene around the waist (I think she was crying) and that was how we went into the street. Before we left, I felt terrible; I locked the front door up tight and tossed the key down the sewer. It wouldn’t do to have some poor devil decide to go in and rob the house, at that hour and with the house taken over. 🐭

9. **fifteen thousand pesos** large sum of money at the time of the story.

Comprehension Check

Complete the following items after you finish your first read.

1. Briefly describe the house in which the narrator and his sister live.
2. What is the source of the siblings' income?
3. How do Irene and the narrator occupy their time?
4. What decision do Irene and the narrator make when they realize the back part of the house has been taken over?
5. What happens to the brother and sister at the end of the story?
6.  **Notebook** Write a **critical summary** of "House Taken Over" to confirm your understanding of the story.

RESEARCH

Research to Clarify Choose at least one unfamiliar detail from the text. Briefly research that detail. In what way does the information you learned shed light on an aspect of the story.

Research to Explore Research the origin of the story. Discover information about the home in Buenos Aires Province that inspired it.