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### Gothic Determinism: The Interplay of Atavism and Hope in "The Old Nurse's Story" and "The Fall of the House of Usher"

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25 January 2022

Gothic Determinism: The Interplay of Atavism and Hope in “The Old Nurse’s Story” and “The Fall of the House of Usher”

For time out of mind, people have been terrified of death and of things associated with death. The Gothic genre in particular has an affinity for thrilling and terrifying its readers with ghosts, demons, undead beings, haunting death-bed secrets, and disturbances from beyond the grave. Determinism, the belief that the past unavoidably prescribes the future, is a common trope in the Gothic (Hoefler). It plays on fears of powerlessness by giving the dead past unprecedented power over the living present: “the Gothic.... preyed upon readers’ anxieties about the past” (Beckwith 361). This belief coupled itself with the biological concept of Atavism, the reoccurrence of certain traits through genetic inheritance (Bergman, 31-32). Together, the concepts of Determinism and Atavism form Gothic Determinism, an almost fatalistic mindset which is obsessed over the role that family heritage plays in the outcome of a person’s life (*Glossary*). Gothic Determinism terrifies and thrills its readers by pointing back to the sins and virtues of their forefathers and tying them to the future (Beckwith 364). It states that a person’s future is largely predetermined by the prior actions and decisions of their relatives. In this world of generational sin where your father’s sins are your own, your path has already been paved either towards destruction or glory.

On the surface, two works of Elizabeth Gaskell and Edgar Allan Poe fit neatly into the views of Gothic Determinism. Both “The Old Nurse’s Story” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” appear to be stories warning of the inevitable evils of generational sin, with little room

for hope of redemptive change. However, even within these works, we can find “cracks in the concept of Determinism” beginning to form (Hacking 455). If we look beyond the surface, we find there is more intricate, latent meaning being communicated. Though both stories acknowledge the influence and even danger the past can inflict on the present, Gaskell and Poe also permit more hopeful perspectives to Determinism to infiltrate their works.

### **Gaskell’s Ghosts as Representations of Reality**

An educated woman living in the industrial and troubled city of Manchester, Elizabeth Gaskell developed a compassion for the impoverished which lasted her whole life. Being the wife of a Unitarian pastor, Gaskell spent a large portion of her life devoted to assisting the poor and expressing their plight (Martin 27). In his *Letters from England*, Robert Southey describes the working-class conditions in Manchester as nothing short of abysmal: “Deprived in childhood of all enjoyment...Their health physical and moral alike destroyed; they die of diseases induced by unremitting task work...they live to grow up without decency, without comfort, without hope, without morals, without religion, and without shame” (88). Gaskell saw first-hand the conditions of the factory workers and how they lived in daily depression and squalor, only to die of malnourishment and poor living conditions, leaving behind their children to continue the legacy. Determined to bring their plight to the public eye, Gaskell devotes much space to detailing the lives of society’s forgotten individuals trapped in poverty and their generational struggles in many of her works (Martin 28). According to Alan Shelston, Gaskell’s explicit purpose in *Mary Barton* was “expository: to lay before those citizens...the realities of that hidden Manchester whose ‘woes,’ as she says, ‘pass unregarded by all but the sufferers’” (48). Yet, despite her many social ministries, Gaskell could not alter the fabric of society and the relentless rhythm of cyclical poverty.

This vicious cycle deeply offended Gaskell's sense of justice and played on her fears of the supernatural. Her ghost stories are a fascinating "mixture of the supernatural and the realistic" (Martin 28). This combination of realism and supernatural mirrors Gaskell's own disposition. Though a practical and religious woman, Gaskell was "admittedly superstitious and yet a woman of great common sense and considerable knowledge" (Martin 27). She held several superstitions close to heart and enjoyed collecting and sharing tales of dead people who still "walked" among the living. Likely, a combination of her compassionate and superstitious nature led her to fear this cycle as an inescapable reality—as a real-life depiction of Gothic Determinism.

In order to process these fears, Gaskell incorporated them into her writing. Jack Sullivan asserts that "ghost stories are deftly in touch with our most exaggerated feelings of powerlessness in a chaotic world" (5). Barbara Weiss laments how Gaskell's ghost stories have been written off in the past as containing little literary substance, arguing they contain a deeper purpose than mere entertainment (274). Weiss states that these stories act as a front for Gaskell to express her fears about life (286). It is under the Gothic threshold of a ghost story that Gaskell can let loose her wildest superstitions and fears and allow them to run their full course. In "The Old Nurse's Story," Gaskell's characters must hazard unavoidable curses and unforgiven sins, both from unknown sources. Innocent children are endangered by their relatives' past mistakes—and the price of such mistakes is immediate death. These characteristics demonstrate Gaskell's anxieties about the atavistic danger of the unresolved past. By expressing her fears in written form, Gaskell subconsciously searches for a solution to the problem of Gothic Determinism which she observed in the sorrow-ridden existence of the poor.

In “The Old Nurse’s Story” the majority of the plot revolves around the orphaned and vulnerable Rosamond. Too young to care for herself, Rosamond is largely left to the protection of her hired nurse Hester. The story begins with Hester, now an old nurse, recounting to Rosamond’s children a story about their mother in her younger years. Following the death of her parents, five-year-old Rosamond is handed over to her elderly great-aunt, Ms. Grace, who lives in the isolated Furnivall Manor in the Cumberland Fells. Hired as a nurse prior to the death of Rosamond’s parents, the immensely loyal Hester resolves to stay with Rosamond and take care of her, in accordance with the parents’ deathbed wish. She admits, however, that she would have done it without even being asked, so great was her motherly affection for the child (Gaskell 1).

Hester rapidly becomes aware that all is not right in the Furnivall mansion; a great and sorrowful secret hangs over the house. Ms. Grace and her servant Ms. Stark sit brooding by the fire day by day. The east wing is locked and no one, not even the eldest servants, is permitted to enter. At nights, a cracked and broken organ can be heard furiously playing, with no one to be seen touching the keys or pedals. More alarming than this, Rosamond begins seeing the ghost of a small child at windows, luring her to come play outside on the freezing winter Fells. Rosamond seems incapable of resisting this “Phantom Child,” who continually tries to draw Rosamond away from safety, culminating in an episode where Rosamond nearly freezes to death (Gaskell 1-5).

The source of these hauntings is a terrible event that occurred nearly 50 years prior, due to a spiteful relationship between Ms. Grace and her sister Ms. Maude. Ms. Grace reveals to their father that Ms. Maude has an apparently illegitimate child from a secret marriage. Lord Furnivall beats the child with his cane and casts his daughter and granddaughter out into the freezing winter cold, while Ms. Grace looks on it all without pity. The next day, Ms. Maude is found

“sitting, all crazy and smiling, under the holly-trees, nursing a dead child” (Gaskell 9). Maude follows her child shortly after, and their ghosts have haunted the manor each winter since. Their appearances to Rosamond become increasingly dangerous and frequent as the winter progresses. One night in a climactic burst of action, the hideous scene is replayed in its entirety in full view of the present day Furnivalls and servants. The elderly Ms. Grace attempts to intervene and undo her past gruesome deed, but in that moment, the ghosts disappear and she drops to the floor, dying shortly after.

This tale is particularly chilling because there is no explanation offered as to why it occurs. Gaskell presents patterns that offend a sense of justice and play on the fears of powerlessness in an inconsistent world. She cannot explain why the innocent are punished, the penitent die in their sins, and old grudges continuing without reconciliation, thus she works it into a ghost story. Following Weiss’s argument, it stands to reason that Gaskell intentionally leaves her story largely unexplained because it is inexplicable to her— she does not have the answers she longs for (274). Does a person’s personal merit outweigh atavistically-inherited evil, or is Gothic Determinism unavoidable? To what degree does the past impact the present? As Gaskell’s characters grapple with these issues, so does she vicariously.

### **Gothic Determinism in “The Old Nurse’s Story”**

Rampant among Gaskell’s characters, Gothic Determinism is a mindset both comforting and frightening to the characters in “The Old Nurse’s Story,” who conceptualize it to make sense of their world. Although it attributes a frightening power to heredity, which contributes feelings of powerlessness and lack of control, it also ironically provides a sense of security. By assuming that a person dispositionally mirrors their relatives, Gothic Determinism asserts that one can logically make assumptions about an unknown person with consistent accuracy. Gaskell’s

characters, who mirror the Manchester poor which she interacted with, bring this pattern to life through their interactions with each other.

According to a study conducted by Bettina Nyeste, individuals who experience higher cognitive load tend to stereotype more than people under less mental strain (33). This is unconsciously done, presumably in an effort to reduce the amount of mental strain. For example, Gaskell's peripheral characters widely acknowledge the Furnivall family's generational tendency toward pride. According to the long-employed, faithful servant Dorothy, Old Lord Furnivall was "eaten up" with pride and arrogance: "Such a proud man was never seen or heard of; and his daughters were like him" (Gaskell 8). The country folk residing near the Furnivall manor observe a long-standing trend in the Furnivall men and infer that all Furnivall Lords are similar in disposition: "[Young Lord Furnivall] was a stern proud man, as they say all the Lords Furnivall were; and he never spoke a word more than was necessary" (2). Although the younger Lord Furnivall no longer lives on the old estate and therefore has extremely limited interaction with residents there, the country folk seem to know implicitly the personality of the young Lord Furnivall. In their world of uncertainty, the country folk sought to fit people into easily defined categories in order to gain some semblance of security, and thus they mentally merge individuals with their family characteristics as frequently as possible.

With shifting political systems, societal norms, and economic developments, early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Britain was a new and confusing time for those living in it. Any source of stability was something to be grasped at. David Eastwood calls it "the Age of Uncertainty," arguing that the new technologic and moral changes occurring in society caused a great deal of uncertainty into the average person's life (61-69). People from varying social classes and generations contextualize others based on their familial roots. They observe, categorize, and systematically

make judgments on the character of one another and themselves based on prior knowledge. By building upon pre-existing knowledge, they strive to overcome the cognitive dissonance caused by receiving new information. Therefore, in the eyes of the country folk, the Furnivall pride was a reliable truism in an unreliable existence.

Though the Furnivall's pride is an undesirable attribute, it's consistent presence in the family acts as a constant in an ever-shifting world. To outsiders such as Dorothy and the townsfolk, the origin of this family trait is not particularly relevant. Whether they are self-propagating, learned, or genetic does not interest the public. The importance is that expectations are met, which gives a sense of security. When these expectations are disrupted, characters experience cognitive dissonance as a result. Upon Rosamond's arrival at the mansion, Ms. Grace at first assumes that the child will prefer her company to those of servants because of the noble blood of Rosamond's mother. When Rosamond "flit[s] away into the kitchen" to spend time with the serving staff, Ms. Grace is surprised and perhaps a little offended. Rosamond's actions seem to break from the comfortable, atavistic pattern. Mrs. Stark soon rectifies this conundrum by noting "what stock her father had come of," for he was only a poor clergyman, and thus her actions can be accounted for (Gaskell 3). Even the protective and loyal Hester believes that Rosamond's sweet qualities are largely due to the nobility of her mother: "[F]or sweet, winning ways, you've none of you come up to [Rosamond]. She took after her mother, who was a real lady born; a Miss Furnivall, a granddaughter of Lord Furnivall's" (1). Rosamond was four years old when her mother died and Hester became her primary caretaker and moral educator. Nevertheless, even Hester attributes Rosamond's good qualities to atavism (namely, her mother's noble birth), rather than environment or upbringing.

In a similar way, the loyal Furnivall servants tend to remain on the premises even after the current Lord passes away, as in the case of James and Dorothy (Gaskell 3-4). To reduce the cognitive load of creating a new mental picture of their home, they must assimilate their previous employer's attributes with the new one. Thus, they grow to expect each Lord Furnivall to be proud, and through a combination of heritage and environment, he meets their expectations in a self-fulfilling prophecy. One Lord soon replaces another, and with each replacement the servants and surrounding countryfolk grow more confident in their assessment of the family character. Though a new person is set against its backdrop, they occupy the same land, same home, same name: Furnivall. These familial similarities combine to make an amalgam of all the family members across generations.

Although the idea of an amalgamated family identity helps reduce cognitive load for the countryfolk, it has negative implications for the Furnivalls. In her youth, Ms. Grace is a perfect example of Gothic Determinism. As the daughter of the proud and cruel Lord Furnivall, Ms. Grace was expected to display the common characteristics of her family: pride, cruelty, and scorn. As all observers expected, Ms. Grace mirrored the expected characteristics and became also proud and cruel. On looking at a portrait of Ms. Grace in her youth, Hester describes her as an "out-and-out beauty," yet with a "lip curled" in scorn and "such a set, proud look....as if she wondered how anyone could have the impertinence to look at her" (Gaskell 3-4). Without the influence of an outside intercessor, Ms. Grace could not help but model her behavior after her scornful sister Ms. Maude and her cruel father (4, 8). Her mother died after Lord Furnivall had "broken [her poor] heart with his cruelty" and thus Ms. Grace was left without anyone to counteract the negative influence of her father (8). Just as Lord Furnivall destroyed his closest familial relationship, that of his wife, Ms. Grace dismantles her relationship with her sister. Out

of jealousy, Ms. Grace sabotages her sister's plan to keep her child safe and exposes them to their merciless father (8-9). Both Ms. Maude and Lady Furnivall die of broken hearts, though Ms. Maude's heartache is due to the death of her child. Lord Furnivall dies lonely and infirm, just as Ms. Grace does decades later. All these similarities appear to be a strong case for atavism and the effects which Gothic Determinism can have on an individual. Elizabeth Gaskell writes her deepest fears into the character of Ms. Grace. To all initial appearances, Ms. Grace acted exactly as her father did, and her fate was the same.

### **Deterministic Significance in Furnivall Mansion**

The function of the Furnivall mansion within the story reflects Gaskell's own Deterministic superstitions surrounding a particular location. In her own life, Gaskell attributed some troubles during her retirement to the nature of the "unlucky" house which she and her husband had purchased. It was this house that "absorbed much of her writing time and it was there she suffered her fatal seizure" (Martin 28). Gaskell's ghost story seems to connect heredity characteristics to the Furnivall family's ancestral home.

As the Furnivalls inhabited their mansion, they molded it to fit their needs and unwittingly imposed upon it their characteristics. Old Lord Furnivall, due to his all-consuming love of music, had his great, black organ built directly into the walls of the house (Gaskell 2). Music was a part of him, thus he made it a part of his home. Ms. Maude and Ms. Grace continually fought with one another, thus they occupied the East and West wings respectively. Unknowingly, the Furnivalls were translating their personalities and interpersonal dynamics into physical form in the house. By impressing their personalities upon the residence, the mansion becomes a physical representation of those who lived there. Long after Lord Furnivall's death, his broken organ still echoed through the halls on stormy, wintery nights. After Ms. Maude's death and her daughter's

murder, the east wing is closed off for good, the doors continually locked, and all passages forbidden (Gaskell 5). The division of east and west signifies an important mindset found in the last remaining Furnivalls: they are simultaneously terrified by and preoccupied with the past. In this massive attempt to shun the past, they become imprisoned by it. The occurrence is part of Furnivall Manor now: as long as they remain in the house, the east wing and its ghostly inhabitants will both remind and confront them with the bleak history. The very conflict they deny is ensconced in the house itself. By remaining in the house, yet acting as if the foul murder never occurred, the Furnivalls become trapped by living in a constant state of denial. Even as they attempt to block it from their minds, they reveal their preoccupation with the history.

The mansion itself is a representation of the people who have lived there, which is partially why the Furnivall home developed “such a bad name on the countryside” (8). The manor’s reputation becomes symbolically corrupted after the horrific murder of Ms. Maude and her daughter by Lord Furnivall. Although the family continues to propagate, the once-splendid ancestral manor becomes shrouded in infamy. Though the younger generations of Furnivalls eventually desert the house, Ms. Grace spends her days staring hopelessly into the fireplace, absorbed by her past sins. As she does so, her obsession with the family’s dark past fuels and feeds the house. In part, Ms. Grace’s inability to move on powers the ghosts which her “unlucky” manor now shelters.

Drawing on the imagination of the old woman, the house acts as a backdrop for a dramatic reenactment of the past. The house becomes a stage for the ghosts of the past to act out their hateful history. The Old Lord Furnivall plays his “cracked and broken” organ, the Fells become harsh and hostile, and the Phantom Child’s crying face appears in the windows.

These hauntings are described in violent, urgent language. The “locked-up” doors to the east wing are flung wide with “a thundering crash, as if torn open in a violent passion” and the hallways are filled with a “mysterious light.” The tall, imposing Lord Furnivall strides in reminiscent of a Greek god, with streaming grey hair, “gleaming eyes,” and an attitude of “relentless...abhorrence” (10). Even from beyond the grave, Lord Furnivall possesses the tyrannical ability to overpower his offspring and descendants. Portrayed as pitiless and callous, Lord Furnivall drives his daughter and granddaughter to freeze to death, despite their “screams” and pleadings, completely lacking the natural empathy for Ms. Maude and “the little child clinging to her dress” (10). Lord Furnivall is here a representation of the terrifying, all-powerful nature of Determinism. Inescapable, cruel, pitiless, it drives the innocent into destruction solely because of the parents’ error.

The sinister repercussions of the Furnivall sins affect the innocent as well as the guilty. The most potent example of this takes shape in the Phantom Child and her irresistible influence over Rosamond. Similar to Lord Furnivall, the Phantom Child acts also as a physical representation of Gothic Determinism and its obliviousness to justice. It inexplicably punishes the innocent for the errors of past relatives, while the innocent have no apparent capability of resisting. Gaskell takes pains to demonstrate that Rosamond has no control over herself when called by the Phantom Child: “‘Oh Hester! Hester!’ cried Miss Rosamond...‘[L]et me go to her; they are drawing me to them. I feel them—I feel them. I must go!’” Rosamond is “convulsed” and “torn” by her efforts to reach the Phantom Child and her demise (10).

Rosamond’s personal innocence has apparently no effect on the judgment enacted by the Phantom Child. Gaskell selects words to demonstrate Rosamond’s utter lack of control over her behavior. A naturally sweet and kind child, Rosamond’s only crime is being born a Furnivall.

Even though she has escaped the Furnivall pattern of cruelty and pride by nature of her humble parents and Hester's influence, she is punished for the cruelty of her aunt and grandfather. Hester's account of Rosamond while under the influence of the Phantom demonstrates her inability to control her own fate: "But my little lady still heard the weird child crying and mourning; and not all we could do or say, could keep her from wanting to go to her..." (10).

To Gaskell, the truly frightening aspect of the story is how the curse brought about by one family member may be borne by another, regardless of the individual's innocence. Gaskell is slipping into the appropriate mode for this ghost story. She is exploring a narrative that is mostly frightening due to its potential to become a reality. Gaskell's characters seem to understand the danger implicitly, though their responses to it vary. Hester acknowledges without questioning the tangible danger that Rosamond is in, and immediately makes plans to protect Rosamond. Dorothy pleads with Hester to stay employed at Furnivall mansion despite the malicious ghosts, and Ms. Grace begs "Hester! keep her from that child! It will lure her to her death!" (6).

Though Ms. Grace hopes for Rosamond's protection, she does not seem to expect that positive change can occur. Rather than trying to deal with or resolve the past, she instead accepts the ghosts as indications of her dark future with a fatalistic hopelessness. Though Ms. Grace wants to be free of the dreadful history—"Oh! have mercy! Wilt Thou never forgive! It is many a long year ago"—(Gaskell 7), she instead tortures herself, year after year, by remaining in the house and watching her past crimes replay. Only is this cycle broken when Ms. Grace, in a massive development of character, finally tries to interfere with the horrific display to save Rosamond and the little child.

Up until this point, Ms. Grace has accepted her role by viewing the future as inescapable and the past unforgiveable. Yet when Ms. Grace confronts her past self, she symbolically rejects her

past actions. This confrontation cannot save the already-deceased child—the spirits continue on with the dreadful enactment. However, upon Ms. Grace's words, the ghosts disappear and no longer torment Rosamond. It is this action which purges the house of the Deterministic ghosts. Gaskell is presenting an idea counter to the tenets of Gothic Determinism. By confronting the past and striving with the future, individuals have the ability to victoriously overcome the Determinism with otherwise holds them.

Though Ms. Grace dies with the fatalistic proclamation "Deeds done in youth can never be undone in age" (Gaskell 11), her ability to feel empathy suggests the opposite. Over time, she has gained the ability to care for others, namely Rosamond, and to feel empathy at least for the innocent child, her niece. This suggests that Ms. Grace is not as chained by Determinism as she herself believed, for she was able to overcome her father's cruelty and pride. According to the tenants of Atavism, Ms. Grace should have remained "dead in her sins." She demonstrates humility and reflection by becoming conscious of her own faults. Ms. Grace is not only aware of her wrong deed, but she even tries make it right when finally confronted with the old scene again. As the ghost of Lord Furnivall raises his cane to strike her niece, Ms. Grace cries out, "Oh father! father! spare the little, innocent child!" (10). Although Ms. Grace cannot undo her actions, she frees Rosamond from the destructive influence of the ghosts by seeking to reconcile the past. At the moment of her entreaty, the ghosts finish their display, move on, and never appear again. Ms. Grace falls to the floor and is "carried to her bed that night never to rise again" (11). Ms. Grace dies in despair, muttering about her inability to overcome her Deterministic fate. Yet even as she does so, she exists as an uncursed woman. Through a sincere desire to make the past right, Ms. Grace demonstrates all the humility and morality that her younger self lacked. This self-metamorphosis has broken the Furnivall curse over Ms. Grace and Rosamond. Ms.

Grace fails to see her own ability to benefit her family positively, yet her transformation permits Rosamond to survive and live a happy life. The tragedy of Ms. Grace occurs because she doesn't realize her own victory. She has risen to the occasion too late in her years and dies without recognizing the relative liberty which she has just achieved.

### **Determinism in The House of Usher**

In "The Fall of the House of Usher," Roderick Usher lives with his twin sister Madeline, in a decrepit House which like the Furnivall mansion, has become bound up in their collective identity. The Ushers are an ancient family, yet the only remaining heirs, Roderick and Madeline, are rapidly declining in health. Roderick lives in a state of constant terror which he attributes to his ambiguously described "familial illness," and enlists his boyhood friend, the 'Narrator,' to help him overcome it. Ultimately, these efforts prove unsuccessful, and with Madeline and Roderick's death, the entire House falls and is swallowed by the black lake next to it (Poe 1-3).

At first glance, "The Fall" is an exclusively Deterministic piece. Even the Narrator, who claims to avoid superstition, emphasizes his sense of foreboding at the first sight of the House of Usher, a sensation which he believes to communicate death and coming doom. As he first approaches, he describes the tarn as "decayed," "silent," "pestilent," "dull, grey, leaden-hued" (Poe 1-2). This language is specially chosen to create an atmosphere which reflects the decay of the House and the family inside. When the Narrator first enters the House, he notices 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). This crack represents the instability of the House and its crumbling foundation. As the remaining inhabitants grow weaker, the House increasingly deteriorates, indicating a physical connection between the mansion and the health of the Ushers. The cleft in the House signifies that the twins are soon to

be dissevered in death. Initially, the Narrator attempts to dispel his predilections of doom, but the more time he spends with Roderick, the more his own perspectives begin to shift. By the end, both the Narrator and Roderick seem to expect the oncoming destruction.

Though most critical readings of “The Fall of the House of Usher” tend to emphasize the deadly fate and characters’ inability to avoid it, Poe’s characters are not as helpless as they first appear. Although Roderick does not seem to be capable of overcoming his “constitutional family illness” on his own, he takes a step atypical of the Usher family: he asks for assistance from an outside source (Poe 1-2). The Ushers are known for their “excessive and habitual” social reservation—evidenced by the fact that Roderick considers the Narrator to be his closest and only friend, while the Narrator states that he “really knew little of [his] friend” (4). Given the familial tendency towards isolation, Roderick’s behavior demonstrates not only initiative and autonomy of action, but also an autonomy of thought. Recognizing the relative liberty which the Narrator would have within the confines of the Usher House, Roderick attempts the “alleviation of his malady” by mere association of the Narrator’s company (4). When faced with a problem, Roderick is able to assess his situation, recognize a need for change, and search for a solution.

The Narrator is immediately struck with Roderick’s apparent “inconsistency” of manner (Poe 8). At every moment Roderick’s personality and behavior appears to contradict itself. Upon their first meeting, Roderick greets the Narrator with such “vivacious warmth...and constrained effort” that he appears inauthentic. However, after searching Roderick’s face, the Narrator is surprised to find a “perfect sincerity” in Roderick’s excited greeting (8). Even Roderick’s physical attributes are contradictory. He is described as pale and ghostly in complexion, even as displaying a “cadaverousness,” yet his eye is “luminous beyond compare” and holds a “miraculous luster.” His lips are pallid, yet pleasantly shaped, and his nose and chin are well

molded if somewhat disproportionate (8). Roderick's physical body appears to be corpse-like, yet his eyes, which are often associated with the mind and soul, are bright and even vivacious. It's as if Roderick's body is decaying but his mind strives for life. His mannerisms and habits appear inconsistent as well: "His action was alternately vivacious and sullen. His voice varied rapidly from a tremulous indecision....to that species of energetic concision" (9). During their long hours pursuing entertainment and alleviation from illness, Roderick exhibits a distinct change in temperament. The hypochondriac is at times characteristically lackadaisical, indecisive, and timid, then overcome by a sudden vivacity, confidence, and energy, especially during his pursuits of music and visual art (11). It's as if he casts off his illness for a brief time when engaging his mind with the arts.

Likewise, Roderick's mental patterns and perceptions of his illness appear inconsistent. Initially, when describing the nature of his illness, he calls it "a constitutional and a family evil, and one for which he despaired to find a remedy," only to backtrack in the same breath: "—a mere nervous affection, he immediately added, which would undoubtedly soon pass off" (Poe 9). He at first despairs of his ability to overcome this generational family illness, then immediately declares that it will soon disappear. The illness is an "acuteness of the senses" which confines Roderick to living a grey version of life in which he must consume only bland food, avoid bright lights and sharp sounds (9). The Narrator describes him as a "bounden slave" to terror, yet the source of Roderick's fear is unclear. He states, "I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results...I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect—in terror" (10). Roderick fears the future, but only in the fear it might produce in him at that point in time. His vortex of anxieties are confused and nearly incompatible, a quality which is puzzling to the Narrator (5-12).

These inconsistencies in Roderick can be linked to the idea of his two selves. One self is his independent mind, which is connected to his identity as an individual. This self is the one which is associated with the bright luminosity of his eye, the vivacity and passion in art, and the sincerity and confidence in his speech. According to Lawrence Stahlberg, Roderick possesses a “heightened consciousness” which gives him the ability to “perceive aspects of existence above and beyond the range of experiences open to the average man...” (11). This portion of Roderick desires autonomy and separation from the House of Usher, and the ability to pursue his own life uninhibited and undetermined by the restraints of his ancestry. His ability to comprehend an existence divorced from his family enables him to struggle against the Gothic Deterministic mold. It is this increased sense of awareness that gives Roderick the opportunity to develop his sense of self, even in the oppressive atmosphere of the House of Usher. All of these attributes are consistent with a person possessing positive self-concept. Roderick’s ‘true’ self is the individual of the mind—his other fearful, sickly self is the result of the House.

Roderick’s second self is one whose identity is completely bound up in both the House and the family of Usher. Roderick has long been steeped in the idea that his sustenance comes from the House and his family. His mental pathways seem to be exclusively centered around the House of Usher. He ponders obsessively the ancient “home of his forefathers” and the impacts it has had on him and his family line (17). He discusses the long-standing family illness and wonders at its cause (15-16). The only dialogue that comes from Roderick that is not explicitly about the House of Usher or the illness is always about his twin sister, who is yet another extension of the Usher family. In fact, Roderick obsesses over the continuation of the House, and is deeply troubled by his inability to produce an heir to continue the family line. The Narrator relates how the constant lack of an heir over the centuries prior has merged the Usher House and

family into one synonymous unit: “the ‘House of Usher’ seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion” (Poe 5). Roderick laments that Madeline’s death would leave him (“the hopeless and the frail”) the last living Usher (10). In his mind, Roderick’s family has ceased to be comprised of individuals; instead, it has become a single entity whose embodiment takes the shape of a House. Reminiscent of how the Furnivalls were robbed of their individuality and condensed from family members into a simplified, amalgamated individual, Roderick’s autonomous self has been molded to conformity.

This second, embodied self cannot leave the House because, subconsciously, he feels he *is* the House. To be separated from the House would mean to be separated from his family line, his source of life. Like a branch on a tree, he fears he will wither and die when severed from his familial roots. Similarly, Roderick believes that the death of his twin sister would result in his own demise, due to the negative impacts it would have on his illness (10-11). This constantly ill, apathetic and lackadaisical second self—the one with a corpse-like complexion and “tremulous indecision”—is wholly dependent on the House for survival. Since the House is decaying, so is the man.

This mindset effectively links Roderick’s character to the House—and Poe uses each to inform the other. The soul of the Usher House is clearly visible to the observing eye, for the House becomes a physical manifestation of the Usher family’s internal state. The House and grounds give off a tangible sensation of “pervasive gloom” which mirrors the sickly depression of the soul that weighs upon Roderick’s mind. In addition, the Narrator describes a “wild inconsistency” between the intact stonework and the “extraordinary dilapidation” of the House (6), which mirrors the inconsistency in Roderick’s character. Though the House is in a “crumbling condition” and marked by “extensive decay,” it is held together by a system of “fine

tangled web-work” from the vines and fungi of the grounds. In other words, the House of Usher is sustained by its grounds.

As these plants hold together the very foundation of the House, they also sustain Roderick’s Deterministic, bodily self. However, despite his perceived dependence on the House, Roderick also believes that the plants create a stifling atmosphere, or miasmata, which compounds his illness and has affected entire family through the generations. Roderick confides to the Narrator that the plants in conjunction with the walls and tarn create a “silent yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family...,[making] him what I now saw” (16). This reveals that Roderick also holds a belief about the insidious nature of the House. The very life form that holds the House together also negatively influences the family inside. In a paradoxical cycle, the atmosphere which it creates stifles Roderick which increases his fear, which in turn makes his illness worse (Stahlberg 1). In Roderick’s mind, he is trapped in the most unsolvable predicament: his existence and demise are both bound up irreversibly in the same entity, the House. The House that sustains his very existence also confirms his demise. Their two fates—Roderick’s and the House of Usher—are intertwined: as one dies, so does the other.

Roderick’s autonomous self, however, does not appear to fear death—as he admits: “I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results...I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect—in terror” (Poe 10). Rather, Roderick fears the results of actions, deeds, stimuli, fear itself. He states that he fears the day when he must abandon “life and reason together,” indicating that he is afraid of losing his ability to control his mind and sense of self. Roderick’s greatest fear is losing autonomy, the ability to control how he think and acts (Stahlberg 3). For Roderick’s true self, mental death (rather than physical) is the greatest thing to

fear.

In some unnatural way, Roderick's autonomous self views death as a release from the burdens of his House. Death is merely another step along his journey towards self-actualization (Stahlberg 11-15). When Roderick paints the crypt where Madeline is buried shortly after, it bears little resemblance to the actual crypt as described by the Narrator. The real crypt is "small, damp, and entirely without admission for light" (Poe 17). The crypt that Roderick paints is very different. Roderick paints his as a tunnel extending on and on forever into blackness, yet he incorporates light into his piece: "a flood of intense rays rolled throughout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendor" (12). The Narrator sees this light as inaccurate and inappropriate, but Roderick is obsessed with image and its representation. The Narrator acknowledges: "If ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher" (12). Although the crypt, which typically represents death and sorrow, ought to be a source of fear for Roderick, his painted tomb is an eternal tunnel with a great light sprung from an unknown source (12). His incorporation of this light from beyond gives a distinctly hopeful and positive outlook to an otherwise sorrowful image. This communicates Roderick's feelings towards his own inevitable death; eagerness for liberty from the oppressive House and its noxious influence.

Thus, Roderick's selves are afraid of two opposing outcomes. His Deterministic self is fearful of the end of the House, and his autonomous self longs for it. This places him in the middle of a grim, oxymoronic mental trap, in which he is constantly terrified of the end of his House yet cannot obtain true autonomy without its demise. Tang Weisheng states that Roderick's "the lofty reason" in conjunction with his inability to actualize it by chasing his own pursuits, "...causes the erosion of his rational thoughts or ideas and the ensuing nervous agitation" (287). This leads Roderick to a sort of mental war in which he obsesses over the two selves and their

incompatible desires. From this internal battle proceeds the so-called “wild inconsistency” of self that is present in Roderick. According to the Narrator, this inconsistency arises from “a series of feeble and futile struggles to overcome a habitual trepidancy—an excessive nervous agitation” (Poe 9). The Narrator declares that Usher’s contradictory behavior arises from an attempt to overcome a *habitual* inclination towards fear. Roderick is aware that the end is rapidly coming for one of these selves—or perhaps both—and each is vying for the ability to survive. Furthermore, the moments when Usher is most alive and most excitable are the times in which he finds the will to fight against the Deterministic self which otherwise rules his mind. These contradictory selves act as a representation for a man grappling with the realities and falsehoods of Determinism.

### **Madeline**

Though Madeline only appears twice in the entire piece, Poe makes it apparent that Madeline and Roderick share a synergetic connection. The Narrator learns that “sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them” (Poe 18). Some critics have even suggested that Madeline and Roderick are two parts of the same being, since Roderick has often been associated with the mind and intellect, whereas Madeline occupies strength of body (Weisheng 287). The exact nature of their relationship is unclear—though it appears their mutual wellness and ailment is connected. As Madeline’s sickness grows increasingly worse, Roderick’s agitation grows more prominent. While Roderick’s illness is of the mind, Madeline’s illness is strictly of the person; Roderick describes it as a “cataleptic” illness, “a settled apathy” and “a gradual wasting away of the person” (Poe 11). Though she had previously “steadily borne up” against the sickness, the night of the Narrator’s arrival, Madeline finally “succumbed...to the prostrating power of the destroyer” (11). On seeing his sister’s illness reach the point of no return, Roderick

displays “inexpressible agitation” and “[buries] his face in his hands,” giving way to “passionate tears” (11). In the following days however, Roderick spends increasing amounts of time playing “wild fantasias,” reading, and painting images with “vivid” and light-filled pieces (11-13). At this point, the Narrator notices and is perturbed by Roderick’s confusing range of emotions, which grows more apparent each day. One moment full of apathetic gloom, the next displaying “intense mental collectedness and concentration” during his lively improvisations (13). These mannerisms are indicative of his bisected personality. Madeline is intimately connected both to Roderick’s Deterministic self and the House. Like this self, Madeline is afflicted with an illness which detracts from her autonomy. The “cataleptic nature” of her illness forces her to hold rigid and unnatural poses, remaining perfectly still on the bed, incapable of controlling her own movements. When she finally gives in and lets the sickness take her, Roderick’s Deterministic self sees oncoming doom and is terrified, while Roderick’s autonomous self sees a potential end to the House and thus his imprisonment.

When Madeline dies, Roderick is faced with a need to make peace between his warring selves and their respective realities. Prior to her demise, the two selves could remain in limbo, neither holding the upper hand. Yet without another Usher to preserve the family, the only obstacle in Roderick’s journey to autonomy is his other self. The two selves of Roderick Usher can no longer simultaneously exist. When faced with this choice, Roderick makes the decision that the Narrator predicts—he makes the decision prescribed by Gothic Determinism.

Upon his twin sister’s death, Roderick’s autonomous self gives way to his Deterministic self. His voice changes tone and becomes now a “tremulous quaver, as if of extreme terror,” and his mind is “unceasingly agitated” (Poe 18). The Narrator often finds him “gazing upon vacancy for long hours” (18). It’s as if Roderick’s mental abilities have been decreased—he no

longer engages in his favored activities, and instead stares at nothing for hours on end. Roderick grows paler and more sickly looking, and worse of all: “the luminousness of his eye had utterly gone out” (Poe 18). The light in his eyes (associated with his true self) has disappeared entirely, and with it his very soul. Claudine Hermann notes that it is after Madeline’s death that the light leaves Roderick’s eyes, and he begins wandering from room to room, opening windows which will let in the deathly vapor he has since kept out (39). This suggests that Roderick gives up his will to continue fighting for survival at this point, puts to rest his duplicitous, warring nature, and succumbs to resignation. It is his resignation, not the death of Madeline, which ultimately ends his life. When finally faced with the crucial decision, Roderick’s struggle with Determinism ends in defeat, not because of his *inability* to avoid it, but because he chooses to stop trying. After three days of perpetual terror and empty wandering through empty rooms, Roderick notices a deadly-looking vapor coming upon the House. Outside, a swirling vortex of a storm beats against the windows, and Roderick begins raving about the sounds he has been hearing, which he attributes to his twin sister. As the storm reaches its climax, Madeline’s living body flings open the door and falls dying upon her brother, who instantly perishes of extreme terror (Poe 24-26).

Roderick’s death at the hands of his sister is representative of a Deterministic death. He perishes out of fear brought on by his deceased relative—his sister—who will not go to the grave without him. Roderick’s Deterministic self perishes with a painful lack of control. Madeline, the embodiment of physical power in the House of Usher, brings death to the mind-self of Roderick Usher, exerting her power from beyond the grave itself. Roderick’s final words are uttered in an utterly terrified frenzy of hysteria and insanity:

“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!...* Oh! whither shall I fly? 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?... *Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door!*" (Poe 24).

Upon shrieking these words, Roderick springs "furiously to his feet" and begins screaming unintelligibly, "as if in the effort he were giving up his soul—" (24). Indeed, Roderick *is* giving up his very soul. This final scene is the terminating blow against Roderick's true self and his grapple for his independent personhood. Not only is Roderick killed by an agent of the House, he also completely loses mental control in the process. His final words are "*Madman!*" which degenerate into inarticulate screaming—the final sign of his completed divorce from his mind. The Narrator flees the scene and turns just in time to watch the House of Usher split in two against a blood-red moon, falling into the lake and swallowed forever (25).

### **Intercessors in Poe and Gaskell**

Rosamond and Roderick have drastically different results in their stories. The Nurse's dialogue at the opening of Gaskell's story indicates that Rosamond grew up to have a happy, contented life, continuing the Furnivall name free of its curse with healthy children of her own (Gaskell 1). Roderick, on the other hand, is consumed by his hereditary illness and dies in sorrow and fear, the House of Usher perishing with him. The difference between the contrasting outcomes is rooted in two main points. First, it is due in part to the diligence of the intercessor to protect their wards. Although both Rosamond and Roderick possess personal merit, either of character or intellect, they both have a lack of experience which leaves them vulnerable to malevolent forces. Roderick has never lived outside of the House; Rosamond is too young to

understand how to avoid danger. Personal merit alone is not enough; both require an outside intercessor to provide guidance, protection, and care. Both Hester and the Narrator act as outside observers who can move freely about the family and interact safely with the respective Houses, without fearing for their safety. Neither is bound by blood to the House, so both can be passive observers of the family history, yet active engagers in the lives of the current residents. Despite the Narrator and Hester's similarities in position, their wards meet opposite ends: death, and life. The key distinction between them is the conviction of the intercessor that a better future *can* be possible for their ward, and that it is worthwhile to strive for redemption.

As an intercessor, the Narrator provides only a flimsy opportunity for hope in Roderick's life. Although dedicated to his friend, the Narrator almost immediately concludes that the House of Usher is rapidly coming to an end. This predilection increased as the Narrator comes to know Roderick more deeply. He states: "I [did] perceive the futility of all attempt at cheering a mind from which darkness...poured forth upon all objects...one unceasing radiation of gloom" (Poe 11). The Narrator perceives the intense depression of the mind which weighs on Roderick, yet he does not believe a solution possible, and subconsciously deems it futile to save Roderick. Both the Narrator and Roderick are predisposed to expect failure—and thus, failure is what they obtain.

To contrast, Hester in "The Old Nurse's Story" recognizes the danger in Furnivall family history and uses it as an impetus to become more vigilant. Constantly "watching," "guarding," bolting doors and shutting windows, Hester uses her own autonomy and knowledge to keep Rosamond from a fate that she cannot seem to escape herself (7): "I held her tight with all my strength; with a set will, I held her. If I had died, my hands would have grasped her still, I was so resolved in my mind" (10). Hester is a surrogate mother for Rosamond, providing for her

physical needs such as hunger, warmth, protection, as well as her emotional needs by playing with her, moral education, and companionship (Gaskell 2-11). Unlike the Narrator (who rather than providing an escape from the oppression of the House, merely joins Roderick in his “mansion of gloom”), Hester throws herself into the fray and grapples against forces spiritual and physical for the life of Rosamond. Hester successfully acts as the intercessor for Rosamond by standing, often literally, in the way of her ward and the destruction that lies in wait due to the Furnivall’s past evils.

The second factor in Rosamond’s ability to escape Determinism is in her resilience and ability to break free of the generational tendencies and mental entrapments. Although Rosamond is too young to protect herself, she is also too young to be negatively influenced by an over-emphasis on Determinism. She has not grown up believing herself to be doomed—in fact, Hester indicates that she is the most vibrant soul in Furnivall mansion (Gaskell 3). Rosamond is incapable of resisting the calls of the Phantom Child, but she also does not live in a foggy stupor or a stormy indecision as Roderick does. Rosamond is young, which makes her vulnerable, but also gives her a greater potential for resilience. Gaskell may be implying that a way out of the deathly trap of Determinism exists—though through an outside intercessor.

Roderick’s destruction, on the other hand, may be due in part to his lack of experience and protection in the world and the Narrator’s inability to provide it. Furthermore, Roderick’s two selves robbed him of the ability to strive absolutely towards redemption. Only his autonomous self worked toward evading his Deterministic fate. His Deterministic self sought and fervently fretted over the continuation of the House. Roderick’s inconclusive battle with his two selves rendered him incapable of committing to one victory. He created a mental prison for himself, from which he could fathom no escape.

Similarly, Ms. Grace Furnivall locks herself in a mental penitentiary. Over her life-span, Ms. Grace finds herself guilty of a crime, one spurred on by the generational sin of pride that had long eaten her family alive. She regrets the assisted murder of her sister and niece, and subsequently condemns herself to death of spirit and mind by reliving the past over and over again in her decaying mansion. Never forgetting or being forgiven, she anticipates her death decades before it occurs and lives in a sort of waking-slumber, waiting for her the judgment she perceives as inevitable.

Yet, Ms. Grace does not perceive the redemption which lies in her repentance. Though her nephew and immediate descendants leave behind Furnivall mansion and prosper elsewhere Ms. Grace chooses to remain frozen in time. Rather than separating herself from her past existence in the Furnivall Manor, Ms. Grace does not sever herself from her past mistakes or from the associated mansion. Instead, she opts to remain isolated in the east wing with her complacent companion, Mrs. Stark. This is indicative of a mental block born of an inability to let go of the past, and it is ultimately her undoing. What appears to be a damning sentence at the end of “The Old Nurse’s Story— (“What is done in youth can never be undone in age!— (12)) is actually a tribute to the cyclical ruinous nature of a Deterministic mindset on individuals.

Both characters imprison themselves in mental chains from which they fail to break free. Roderick’s Deterministic self binds up his entire identity in the continuation of his family line, thereby sapping himself of vivacity and autonomy. He traps himself in an inescapable conundrum by which he is both killed by his House and dies without it—yet he does not fully commit to autonomous action. Rather than wallowing in despair, Roderick ought to have taken steps to dis sever his mind from his self which was dependent on the House of Usher. Ms. Grace ought to have allowed herself a future apart from the insidious family past, yet she did not

believe it possible. The flaw in characters such as Ms. Grace or Roderick is not their family history; it's their crippling obsession with atavism and heredity. The error in Roderick and Ms. Grace's reasoning is that they view their family past or heredity as an irreparable flaw, rather than an obstacle to overcome. Both lack autonomy and proper intercessors to give them the ability to overcome their fate and familial past—therefore, they perish.

There are atavistic elements and tendencies in Poe and Gaskell's works which make it apparent that family history does affect its descendants. However, on close inspection, these authors allude to potential for a more hopeful future. Though their characters are still impacted by Gothic Determinism in mind and body, they demonstrate an important quality that should not be overlooked. Each of these characters has the capability of changing their situations for the better. They can improve their own character and surroundings. They can identify problems and search for solutions. These individuals possess autonomy, and can reach out to others for assistance and intervention. They can reason, think, empathize, and change for the better. Even characters under the influence of familial Determinism have the potential for vindication. The past may look bleak, and it may influence the present, but it does not annul the future possibility for redemption. While not every character in these stories was able to escape the clutches of Gothic Determinism, Poe and Gaskell communicate that a better life was possible. Roderick and Ms. Grace had the capability to free themselves but failed due to their own presuppositions about their fate. Where Roderick only sees light in the realm beyond death, Rosamond, with the help of Hester, shows us that there is the possibility of light in life as well. The looming shadow of Determinism does not extend forever—there is a great light at the end of the Roderick's tunnel, if only we open our eyes to see it.

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