A Taste of Your Own Medicine:

The Portrayal of Revenge in *The Fall of the House of Usher* (2023)

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Introduction

In the English language, the word "drug" can refer to either medicinal drugs, illegal hard drugs, or even (legal) recreational drugs. In 1996 Purdue Pharma introduced a pain-killer called OxyContin, the line between the two meanings of the words became more muddled than ever before. OxyContin was pushed as a non-addictive painkiller that could be prescribed for anything. Soon, OxyContin proved itself to be a gateway drug for harder substances, like heroin. Purdue Pharma was never held legally responsible for its role in instigating the opioid crisis in the United States of America (Frakt).

The injustice of this situation inspired several movies and TV series such as *Painkiller* (2023) directed by Peter Berg, and *Dopesick* (2021) based on Beth Macy's book *Dopesick: Dealers, Doctors, and the Drug Company that Addicted America* (2018). In October of 2023, Mike Flanagan released his latest Gothic creation[1] on Netflix, *The Fall of the House of Usher*, which was also inspired by the impact of Purdue Pharma on the people of America. While Purdue Pharma and OxyContin are never mentioned in the TV series, the Usher family mirrors the Sackler family. In *The Fall of the House of Usher* Flanagan uses several of Edgar Allan Poe's works to tell the story of Roderick and Madeline Usher as directors of a fictional pharmaceutical company responsible for the opioid epidemic in the United States. Every episode follows a member of the Usher family who dies gruesomely as the result of their own choices. This thesis analyses Edgar Allan Poe's oeuvre, focusing on those narratives that fall under the category of revenge tales. Through a detailed analysis of Poe's works, this study aims to demonstrate how Mike Flanagan incorporates and reinterprets the theme of revenge within his adaptation of "The Fall of the House of Usher".

Flanagan translates Poe's short stories and poems to the contemporary television series

[1] Flanagan's *House of Usher* was the final installment of a series of TV adaptations of classic Gothic novels, which also included *The Haunting of Hill House* (2018) and *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020)

with a contemporary audience. In *A Theory of Adaptation* (2012), Linda Hutcheon categorizes adaptation as follows.

> In short, adaptation can be described as the following:
>
> • An acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works
>
> • A creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging
>
> • An extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work

Flanagan's *The Fall of the House of Usher* belongs to the first category, as he amalgamates multiple works of Poe.

In chapter one, "Cask of Amontillado" and "Hop Frog" are analysed to uncover what themes these revenge tales have in common, in order to establish how Poe shapes revenge narratives. In chapter two, the themes of Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" are dissected as to denote what elements of the story Flanagan portrays in his adaptation. In the third chapter, the first episode of *The Fall of the House of Usher* analysed to establish what themes from chapter one and two are portrayed in the TV series. The fourth chapter's subject is the second episode of the series. Here, the formula of the series is brought in to focus. The fifth chapter regards the seventh episode of the series, and it focuses on the theme of imminent death. The last chapter regards the last episode. In this chapter, the confrontation with Nemesis is centralized. Analysing these tales and episodes reveals how Flanagan reinterprets these themes to critique and mirror Purdue Pharma's role in the opioid crisis through the fictional Usher family.

Chapter One: Best your Jester: How Edgar Allan Poe Portrays Revenge

While Edgar Allan Poe has written stories in many genres, Gothic horror, political satire, romantic idealism, many of his most influential short stories are revenge tales. To better understand Flanagan's adaptation of this central theme in Poe's work, this chapter analyses how revenge is portrayed in two of his seminal Gothic short stories. In "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846) and "Hop-Frog" (1849), the protagonists take revenge on what they considered to be a grave wrong committed against them by figures in positions of power . In these two stories, revenge is closely related to the themes of social and political hierarchy, manipulative one-on-one relationships, but also abuse of alcohol and notably, the manifestations of guilt.

In "Amontillado," Montresor takes revenge on Fortunato, apparently after having suffered an insult. Both characters are upper-class individuals who navigate the same social circle. Reading the text plainly, it is not clear why Montresor is seeking revenge, only that Montresor deems it necessary to take it. The reader is introduced to Fortunato and Montresor's resentment for him in the first sentence. The narrative begins with: "The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as best I could; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge" (Poe 274). The injuries, or final insult in question are not explained further. It feels as though the story has started *in medias res*, or even at the beginning of the final act. The reader cannot know whether Montresor's need for revenge is justified. The reader only knows that Montresor is wounded, whether physically or mentally, and that he thinks he deserves to take revenge. In the next sentence, the reader is addressed directly: "You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however that I gave utterance to a threat" (274). This sentence could mean that this story is a deathbed confession, or maybe a religious

confession.[2] It would be fitting if Montresor would say: "You, who so well know the nature of my soul" to a priest. The confession could also be given to a close relative or friend. The reader assumes a role in which Montresor can confide. Raymond DiSanza argues, in his essay "On Memory, Forgetting and Complicity," that the reader becomes complicit when they are directly addressed in this intimate manner:

> We "so well know the nature of his soul" that we believe on some fundamental level it is utterly impossible he could have committed such a horrifyingly malicious atrocity without some perfectly justifiable cause. By taking us into his confidence, by invoking or evoking some kindred spirit between us, Montresor relieves himself of the need for a motive by sending us to search for one. And the insult that we ascribe to Fortunato is the insult that would drive us to murder, in the same way Oscar Wilde contended that the sins readers assign to Dorian Gray belong to the readers themselves. (DiSanza 202).

As DiSanza explains, the "injuries" or the "insult" that Fortunato has inflicted on Montresor are never expanded upon by him. The severity of Fortunato's crimes are not revealed to the reader. Which leaves the reader to imagine the worst thing possible. The complicity of the reader is used to immerse them and enhance the effect of Montresor's guilt. The lack of information makes it difficult to decide how heavy Fortunato's punishment should be, or if he should be punished at all.

A clue to Montresor's motive that can be explored further is the social dynamic between Fortunato and Montresor. Fortunato converses with Montresor as if they are friends on good terms, which Montresor expects. Montresor comments on how he plans to approach Fortunato: "It must be understood, that neither by word nor deed had I given Fortunato cause

[2] In many of his revenge tales, Poe follows William Barrett Browning's conception of the dramatic monology as embodied in the poem "Porphyria's Lover," in which a disturbed, if not insane, speaker attempts to justify a murder through a confession that includes a form of justification for the heinous act, as Max Keith Hutton explains: "in [the speakers'] mind, destruction means salvation" (286).

to doubt my good-will. I continued, as was my wont, to smile in his face, and he did not perceive my smile *now* was at the thought of his immolation" (274). Montresor wants Fortunato to think that they are on good terms. This implies that Fortunato did not believe that he had done something to Montresor that would be a clear cause to sever ties. If Fortunato had openly expressed disdain or aggression towards Montresor, they would likely not be able to converse in an amicable manner. Fortunato's behaviour towards Montresor implies that Fortunato does not think he has severely offended or injured Montresor. Montresor does not evoke any suspicion when he asks for Fortunato's expertise regarding the Amontillado, and Fortunato seems to think of Montresor as a friend: "He accosted me with excessive warmth, for he had been drinking much" (274). Fortunato had been drinking, which explains the "excessive warmth." Yet, it is safe to assume that Fortunato does not openly express ill-will towards Montresor, nor any aggression. This assumption does not mean that Fortunato has not insulted Montresor on some level. However, it does mean that he has not attempted to murder Montresor and is unaware of any insult given. If revenge goes by the biblical maxim "an eye for an eye", then the Fortunato's murder could only be warranted if he had attempted to murder Montresor or something equal to it. If Fortunato had attempted such a thing, it is likely that he would not have greeted Montresor as a friend afterwards.

The narrative revolves solely around the act of revenge, which means that the dynamic between the two involved is central. Furthermore, in this short story, they are the only characters the reader meets. The opportunity for revenge is possible because of the knowledge that Montresor has of Fortunato. Montresor knows that Fortunato is a prideful person. Additionally, Montresor knows that Fortunato is proud of his knowledge about wine: "He prided himself on his connoisseurship in wine" (274). That is why Montresor is able to lure Fortunato with the promise of Amontillado. He is able to manipulate Fortunato be using his prideful personality. Even though Montresor and Fortunato are the only two characters the

reader meets, there are references to their social circle. Montresor mentions Luchesi a few times to taunt Fortunato, as Fortunato seems to dislike Luchesi:

> "Amontillado!"
>
> "As you are engaged, I am on my way to Luchesi. If any one has a critical turn, it is he, He will tell me –"
>
> "Luchesi cannot tell Amontillado from Sherry."
>
> "And yet some fools will have it that his taste is a match for your own."
>
> "Come, let us go." (Poe 275).

It is his hurt pride and need to prove himself that makes Fortunato vulnerable for Montresor. This method brings an awareness to the reader about the social network in which these two move about. Both Montresor and Fortunato are concerned with where they stand on the social hierarchy. Fortunato demonstrates that if you want to move up on the hierarchical ladder you can do so by putting others down. Fortunato talks poorly about Luchesi's knowledge about wine and sherry. By doing so he places himself above Luchesi in the social hierarchy. He believes his knowledge in wine is superior and it is important for Montresor to know it.

This push and pull for status could be the reason for Montresor's desire for revenge on Fortunato, according to Elena Baraban. She argues that Fortunato was of a higher social status than Montresor: "Since a rich and powerful man such as Fortunato cannot remember the Montresors' insignia, it is logical to assume that Montresor was not an active participant in the life of local aristocracy" (51). While I do believe that Montresor navigated the same social circle as Fortunato, as they both know each other and Luchesi, Baraban makes a compelling point. Montresor currently has a lower social status. Yet, according to Baraban, this might not have always been the case. Baraban argues that Montresor's family has a history in aristocracy: "The catacombs of the Montresors are extensive and their vastness genuinely impresses Fortunato. In the catacombs, surrounded by the remains of Montresor's ancestors,

Fortunato realizes how powerful this family used to be" (51). It is clear that both Montresor and Fortunato care about the perceived status of the other. By using Fortunato's pride and Montresor's understanding of the social hierarchy they both navigate, Montresor is able to give Fortunato a custom-fit punishment.

Montresor's family is a silent presence throughout the story. The deeper Fortunato and Montresor venture into the catacombs, and the closer they come to the bodies of Montresor's ancestors, the more is revealed about the Montresors. There is a piece of dialogue in which Montresor give two important signifiers:

> "The Montresors," I replied, "were a great and numerous family."
>
> "I forget your arms."
>
> "A huge foot d'or, in a field azure; the foot crushes a serpent rampant whose fangs are imbedded in the heel."
>
> "And the motto?"
>
> "*Nemo me impune lacessit.*"
>
> "Good!" he said (276).

The arms of the Montresors is an interesting depiction of two beings suffering. This image is a reference to the painting by Guido Reni of archangel Michael killing Satan. Baraban notes that it Montresor is the foot in this image: "Fortunato may use his power to 'injure' Montresor, but since he comes from a less prominent family, he has no right to insult Montresor" (Baraban 52). Taking a closer look at the wording, this answer resonates with Montresor's understanding of himself and Fortunato. The heel that crushes the snake represents Montresor and the serpent represents Fortunato. While the heel might have crushed the snake, the snake poisons the heel. The poison represents the manifestation of guilt that

"Michael and Satan" by Guido Reni

Montresor experiences at the end of the story. The word "imbedded" is especially important, as Fortunato gets physically imbedded in the house of the Montresors. He has infiltrated the catacombs of the Montresors, just as the tooth has infiltrated the heel.

The imbedding of Fortunato can also be interpreted as the manifestation of Fortunato's murder in the mind of Montresor. The distress that Montresor experiences at the end of the story is a sickness. A sickness that is caused by poison, namely Fortunato's murder: "There came forth only a jingling of the bells. My heart grew sick – on account of the dampness of the catacombs" (279). The en-dash between "sick" and "on" is there to make the reader briefly think that Montresor acknowledges that he feels guilty. Yet, this is immediately disproven by the deflection of his guilt. When he says his heart grew sick, he ascribes it to the catacombs. The catacombs are ancient and riddled with nitre, which is a fungus. It grows in damp dark places. Throughout the narrative, Montresor mentions the nitre a few times. When Montresor comments on his illness at the end of the story, he places blame on the catacombs themselves. This is a deflection of guilt, as well as a deflection of consequences for his actions. But the sickness of the heart is more suitably ascribed to the embedding of Fortunato.

The coat of arms and the motto of the Montresors give insight as to why Montresor believes what he is doing is justified. His family motto is "Nemo me impune lacessit" (276), which translates to "No one insults me with impunity." This motto signifies the privilege that Montresor feels as the result of his ancestral nobility. As this motto is something that he has probably heard since childhood, it is logical to assume that this has become part of his morals. He believes that he is free to punish those who insult him. He believes that what he is doing is justified. The importance of impunity is mentioned early on in the story. At the beginning of his confession Montresor first mentions impunity: "I must not only punish, but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser" (274). When his family motto is revealed, it becomes clear how important impunity is to Montresor.

Furthermore, Montresor explicitly mentioned the term “redress.” The term “redress” implies that Fortunato’s murder is an act that corrects a mistake. Montresor seeks to balance something out. Yet, if what Fortunato has done is not equivalent to murder, then that must mean that the balance is not restored. Rather, the balance is still off, but simply in a different direction.

The setting of the story enhances the silent presence of Montresor’s family. When Montresor and Fortunato venture into the wine cellar, they are removed further and further away from society. At the beginning of the tale, they are presumably surrounded by many people: “It was dusk, one evening during the supreme madness of the carnival season, that I encountered my friend” (Poe 274). Montresor leads him to a place where it is just the two of them, the catacombs. Montresor takes care to note that there are not even any people at work. “I had told them that I should not return until the morning, and had given them explicit orders not to stir from the house. These orders were sufficient, I well knew, to ensure their immediate disappearance, one and all, as soon as my back was turned” (275). The further they travel, the lonelier they get. Montresor essentially removes them from society. The removal from society renders the push and pull of the social hierarchy irrelevant. Just as the catacombs render Fortunato’s status irrelevant. When Montresor entombs Fortunato, Montresor creates a space that only Fortunato occupies. This removes him from society with finality.

Analysing the themes of revenge tales like “Amontillado” helps to bring the portrayal of revenge in *The Fall of the House of Usher* into focus, as these key features are also present in the TV series.

In Poe’s “Hop Frog,” the characters and events of this story were not adapted directly into Mike Flanagan’s TV series. Yet, analysing this story’s representation of the revenge motif brings Poe’s revenge strategies clearer into focus. There are several important similarities

between the way in which revenge is portrayed in “Hop Frog” and “Amontillado” that do find their way into Flanagan’s plot.

The first similarity is the presence and significance of the jester. Both “Amontillado” and “Hop Frog” have characters that are or are dressed as jesters. In “Hop Frog” the protagonist wears the jester outfit because he is an actual jester employed by a monarch. In “Amontillado,” the victim of revenge is dressed as a jester during carnival, a setting that temporarily renders roles in society irrelevant. In both storylines the role of a jester is important for the theme of revenge. In “Amontillado,” Fortunato’s costume has an ironic touch. It signifies to the reader that he is a fool, which contrasts with his place in the social hierarchy. Fortunato is a man of status and a jester is not. This contrast is a signifier as to how much social status plays a role in the portrayal of revenge in “Amontillado.” The distinct difference in “Hop Frog” is that the protagonist is an actual jester. He is a man of a lower social standing who is ridiculed for the entertainment of the king:

> At the date of my narrative, professing jesters had not altogether gone out of fashion at court. Several of the great continental “powers” still retained their “fools,” who wore motley, with cap and bells, and who were expected to be always ready with sharp witticisms, at a moment’s notice, in consideration of the crumbs that fell from the royal table. (Poe 502)

In this passage, Poe highlights the contrast between Hop Frog and the king. While the story concerns a specific jester, namely Hop Frog, Poe takes the time to note that at court there are two groups of people at the royal table. In his words, there are “powers” and “fools.” By placing these words between quotation marks, Poe signifies that these words should not be taken as fact. Hop Frog now assumes the role as fool, as it is ascribed to him by the king: “His fool, or professional jester, was not a *only* fool, however. His value was trebled in the eyes of the king, by the fact of his being also a dwarf and a cripple” (502). Hop Frog is not only

viewed as socially inferior, but is presented as physically inferior to the king. His profession as jester places as much distance as possible between the king and him. This distance between them is what emboldens the king to treat Hop Frog with disrespect. In the eyes of the king, Hop Frog is not even a person, he is a thing, or rather a pet.

The second similarity between "Hop Frog" and "Amontillado" is the significance of alcohol. In "Cask of Amontillado," alcohol is important, as indicated by the title. It is due to Fortunato's pride in his knowledge of wine that he is vulnerable to Montresor's murder plan. Furthermore, the jester is heavily intoxicated all throughout the story. An intoxicated jester is also present in "Hop Frog." In "Hop Frog," alcohol is once again an important story element. The king knows that Hop Frog does not handle alcohol well, but forces him to drink anyway. Just as in "Cask of Amontillado," alcohol is used to the disadvantage of the jester: "He knew that Hop Frog was not fond of wine; for it excited the poor cripple almost to madness; and madness is no comfortable feeling. But the king loved his practical jokes, and took pleasure in forcing Hop-Frog to drink and (as the king called it) "to be merry" (504). Yet, in his wish to "prank" Hop-Frog, the king fuels Hop-Frog's thirst for revenge.

Drinking and alcohol are not the sole instigators of revenge in either tales. Yet, as pointed out by Robert Shulman, in his essay "Poe and Powers of the Mind," drinking is a useful device in Poe's revenge tales: "More profound and fully dramatized is Poe's insight into the dynamics of destructive hostility and thwarted creativity, into the impulses the wine releases and allows Hop-Frog to express" (Shulman 252). One can be metaphorically drunk in many ways. Becoming less in control of oneself due to an emotion is referred to as "being drunk." For example: being drunk on hate, drunk on love and drunk on revenge. The presence of alcohol is further highlighted by the king's punishment for Trippetta. When Trippetta begs for the king to stop forcing Hop-Frog to drink, the king throws his wine at her: "At last, without uttering a syllable, he pushed her violently from him, and threw the contents of the brimming

goblet in her face" (Poe 505). Alcohol is used by the king to control and punish his subjects. Just as Montresor uses it to control Fortunato. The importance of alcohol in both of these revenge tales is directly tied to the theme of social status and relations. Yet, emboldened by the wine that the king used to punish Hop-Frog, he is mad enough to start planning his revenge. When the king throws wine in Trippetta's face, it is the straw that breaks the camel's back. Hop-Frog starts grating his jaw when he plans his revenge.

Both of these tales give a picture on how Poe portrays revenge. Both tales feature the use of alcohol as a gateway to madness. In a "Amontillado" Montresor uses the promise of alcohol and the intoxication of Fortunato to lure Fortunato to his death. In "Hop Frog" alcohol is portrayed as a tool for the king to wield over the heads of his fools. Furthermore, both narratives feature a jester. In "Amontillado" the jester costume is used to present Fortunato as a fool to the reader. His costume is in contrast with his actual social standing. In "Hop Frog" the protagonist is a jester. Here, Hop-Frog's social standing is accurately portrayed by his costume. His social standing is contrasted by that of the king. The theme that Poe uses in these revenge tales most is the theme of status differences. This theme is used to give justification for revenge.

In this chapter, the common themes portrayed in Poe's revenge tales are brought into focus. The analysis of these themes helps to understand how revenge is portrayed in Flanagan's *The Fall of the House of Usher.*

Chapter Two: What makes "The Fall of the House of Usher"?

Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) functions as the frame of Mike Flanagan's adaptation. The narrative is expanded over the length of eight episodes and many characters and subplots have been added by including by adapting material from other works of Poe. The theme of revenge in Poe's "House of Usher" has seen comparatively little attention in scholarship. It is important, therefore, to understand how Poe included revenge into his Gothic masterpiece before analysing the theme of revenge in the TV series adapted from the original.

While " House of Usher" contains some of the same themes as "Amontillado" and "Hop Frog," like guilt and familial ties, it contains the additional theme of the interconnectedness between the mental and the physical world. As such it is not a revenge tale like "Amontillado" and "Hop Frog," because worldly revenge against obnoxious authorities is the central theme of the latter two stories. In " House of Usher" the act of revenge that takes place is a more symbolic form of revenge. Madeline represents Nemesis: "a personal chastiser, meant just for us, a personification that still reminds us of our mortality or human limitation, even in the absence of a religious belief; it is a messenger of Justice, if not Justice herself" (Stimilli 99). She embodies the indomitable rival of the Usher family who Roderick tries to suppress. Madeline Usher "kills" Roderick Usher after he has buried her alive. The narrator never fully acknowledges that Roderick had murdered Madeline, yet it is heavily implied that Roderick knew that Madeline had not yet died but was in a catatonic state. The narrator sees her alive once before Roderick says she died. When Roderick announces that Madeline has died, the narrator notes Roderick's curt tone:

> 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. (Poe 240)

The narrator does not question Madeline's death any further. He assumes that Madeline's death is due to her illness. Roderick is quick to suggest that Madeline should be buried in one their vaults. The narrator helps with Madeline's entombment. When he sees her presumed dead body, he notes some significant features: "The disease which had entombed the lady in the maturity of youth, had left, as usual in all maladies of a strict cataleptic 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" (240). In hindsight, the colour in her face and the smile on her lips are clear indicators that Madeline is alive. The combination of Madeline's physical appearance and Roderick's abruptness when announcing her death implies that Roderick has unsuccessfully attempted to murder Madeline. Roderick represents Hubris as he thinks he is able to suppress Nemesis. Madeline's murder starts to eat away at Roderick. The manifestation of Roderick's guilt is part of the inevitable retribution delivered by Nemesis. The narrator describes Roderick's demeaner as out of the ordinary, though he ascribes it to the grief Roderick must be feeling. His erratic behaviour reaches a climax in the final scenes of the story. Madeline murders Roderick. Madeline's final act serves as confirmation of Roderick's crime. In a sense, the tale does revolve around revenge. The gruesome entombment of Madeline is avenged by the murder of Roderick.

The House in the story embodies some traditional Gothic elements. In "Amontillado" the setting of the story plays a significant part of translating the theme of social hierarchy into a physical space. The catacombs of Montresor are comparable to the vaults of the Ushers. Here, the vaults do not represent social hierarchy, but represent the layers of consciousness. The Usher mansion is almost its own character in the narrative. In Richard Wilbur's article

"The House of Poe," he writes that "the House of Usher *is,* in allegorical fact, Roderick Usher's visionary mind." (242). The house is personified by the narrator.

> When Roderick's friend first arrives at the mansion, he describes it as a face.
>
> I looked upon the scene before me – upon the mere house, and simple landscape features of the domain – upon the bleak walls – upon the vacant eye-like windows – upon the few rank sedges – and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees – with utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium – the bitter lapse into every-day life – the hideous dropping of the veil. (Poe 231).

The impression of the physical house of Usher is bleak and cadaverous. Everything around the house is dead. The white trunks of dead trees stand like bones, and the windows are "eye-like." The house personified by describing its attributes like human ones. The personification highlights how the state of the house reflects the current state of the Usher family. When the narrator first arrives, both of the twins are the only Ushers left, and are both nearing death. Therefore, the house embodies a state of near death. The narrator continues to describe the feeling that the house evokes at his first glance: "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 aught of the sublime" (231). The house exudes an aura of illness and death that is so horrifying that the feeling of sublime is evoked. Traditionally, when the sublime is evoked in Romantic literature, it is usually the case that the protagonist is met with a view so vast, that it makes the protagonist feel small in comparison (see Milbank). The evocation of the sublime usually occurs when the protagonist is met with a view that is filled with life and realizes their small place inside the complex system of the world. Here, the sublime is evoked by the image of death.

That the house functions as a representation of the state of the family is further confirmed by what happens to it at the end. After Madeline kills Roderick, the house is destroyed, both in the figurative sense and the literal sense of the word house:

> 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 dark tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the "*House of Usher.*" (245)

The title of the story essentially foreshadows two things. The physical house will be destroyed and the family will be destroyed. The introduction of the house establishes it as an important and significant character in this narrative. The audience finds that fragile state of the house is quickly matched with the state of Roderick Usher himself. The two characters are synced together. Claudine Herrmann and Nicholas Kostis argue that there is a motif of duplication in "House of Usher." They propose that every component, from the title to the ending has a double in the story:

> Thus, all the components of "The Fall of the House of Usher" – including the storm which is echoed by the tempest in "Mad Trist" – possesses a double with one exception: "the full, setting, and blood-red moon" at the moment of the fall of the House, a feminine symbol if there ever was one, a metaphor of the crime and madness ("lunatic"), but a metaphor which allows the tale to end with an extraordinary metonymy. For the moonlight, which has replaced the House of Usher, forcing the narrator to turn around and watch the House double itself before sinking into the tarn (its double), brings about the triumph of reason and destroys forever duplication – the image of disorder and essence of the fantastic tale. (42)

As Herrmann and Kostis point out, even the natural elements in this story contribute to the unfolding of the plot. The night that Madeline rises from her tomb an intense storm is raging outside. The storm masks the sounds of Madeline's escape, therefore it accommodates the murder of Roderick. In the two short stories of the last chapter the revenge in question is performed by a character. While Madeline does kill Roderick, Roderick feels as though the whole family was cursed long before that. The force that wants to eradicate the Ushers is present in the natural setting.

It seems as though the Ushers used to be a big and influential family. The Usher mansion is large and has the capacity to house a lot more Ushers. Yet, assumingly due to their sickness, not many Ushers are left. Madeline and Roderick are the only Ushers left. The added detail that they are twins nearly gives the idea that there is only one Usher left. In "The Twin Motif in 'The Fall of the House of Usher'," William Bysshe Stein argues that Madeline is meant to represent Roderick's alter ego: "As Madeline escapes her death-in-life confinement on the literal level of action, on the psychological level the instincts (or alter ego) attain their release. Thus the two levels of reality in the tale are brought into perfect conjunction" (111). Stein highlights the importance of the familial ties between the Madeline and Roderick to the plot, as the twin motif is used as a literary device to marry the subconscious to the physical. The theme of family and family pride that is portrayed in "Amontillado" is also present in "House of Usher." The double meaning of the word "house" indicates signifies the importance and eventual demise of family relations in this sort story. The ailment of Madeline and Roderick is a hereditary sickness:

> 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 for which he despaired to find a remedy – a mere nervous affection, he immediately added, which would undoubtedly soon pass off. (235).

The sickness is described as “a constitutional and a family evil,” implying that multiple people in the Usher family have suffered from this disease. When the narrator arrives, Madeline’s illness has already progressed further than that of Roderick. The narrator remarks that the nature of the disease could not be uncovered by doctors. “The disease of lady Madeline had long baffled the skill of her physicians” (236). The illness is not curable and seems to target every Usher. This inexplainable hereditary disease that the Ushers have underlines that there is a force at work that wants to put an end to the Usher bloodline. As in “Amontillado,” the reason and origin for this curse remains a mystery the entire narrative. In “The ‘Unhealthy’ in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’: Poe’s Aesthetics of Contamination,” David Roche analyses the contagion that occurs in the story. Roche writes that the mental and the physical are linked in story: “The tale’s representation of the disease depicts a clear link between the physical and the mental which David W. Butler convincingly links to ‘the romantic and transcendental belief in the interrelationship of mind and matter’” (23). According to Stein and Roche, the combination of the familial ties and the sickness that Madeline and Roderick share marry the mental and the physical in “House of Usher.”

This combination of familial ties and sickness is represented (or as Herrmann and Kostis would say: doubled) by the fungus that covers the house. The narrator remarks on the fungus when he enters the house: “Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves” (Poe 233). The fungus that spreads over the Usher house is a metaphor for the sickness that plagues both Madeline and Roderick. The “web-work” portrays contagion and connection, as the Ushers are made ill by the connection they share. This fungus is comparable to that in “Amontillado.” In both cases the fungus is remarked upon several times. In “House of Usher” the fungus grows in the form of thin strands that cover the house in an almost weblike texture. This is of note as nitre does this too, only on stone. Fungus represents death, as it helps decomposition. Fungus is a living

organism that is sustained by death. The fungus in "Amontillado" grows in the catacombs. These catacombs serve as the final resting place of the Montresor family. Just as the fungus in "House of Usher" cavers the final resting place of the Usher family.

There is a difference between the revenge tales "Amontillado" and "Hop Frog" and "House of Usher." The natural elements and the setting of the plot are tied together just as the mental and physical are tied together. Whereas the theme of revenge is personal in "Cask of Amontillado" and "Hop Frog," Roderick's and Madeline's deaths in "House of Usher" are portrayed as the final acts of a curse that has rested on the Ushers for a long time. Madeline is Nemesis and Roderick Hubris. Roderick's death represents the inevitable punishment of crime by Nemesis. To the reader, the death of Roderick is expected, as the house would truly fall when the last Usher has died. This tale is ultimately less of a revenge tale and more so the tale of the fulfilment of a prophecy. The setting, natural elements, double effect and familial ties combine to portray this fulfilment.

To fully understand the revenge motif in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, it is important to first understand how Poe portrayed revenge in the pretext.

Chapter Three: Poe's Voice Presented to a Contemporary Audience

On 12 October 2023, Netflix released Mike Flanagan's adaptation of Poe's "House of Usher." The TV series is comprised of eight episodes, each about an hour long. This release is one of the several Gothic literary adaptations that Flanagan has written and produced for Netflix. While his previous TV series, like *Haunting of Hill House* (2018) and *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020), were adaptations of short novels, *The Fall of the House of Usher* combines a variety of themes, motifs and characters from a selection of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories and poems into a Gothic narrative that addresses on of the darkest of contemporary socioeconomic problems: the American opioid epidemic. Flanagan aligns different plots from, amongst others, Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death," "The Black Cat," and "The Raven," and combines the themes, characters and motifs, making sure that the combination of different works play in harmony so they can fit into the framework neatly. This form of adaptation allows the common themes of Poe's works to create the overtone of the piece: a macabre representation of the human spirit. Flanagan fitted these themes to speak to a contemporary audience, using a nineteenth-century voice:

> In her article "Poe and Gothic Creativity," Maria Antónia Lima wrote that
>
> Poe's literary creations have undoubtedly enabled us to perceive the mystery and terror of our restless souls, showing that the manifestation of horror in creativity should be understood as a response to a world desensitized to violence and human perversity, and art is not immune to such destructive effects. (22)

The presence of self-destruction in Netflix's *The Fall of the House of Usher* is undeniable. In both the short story and the TV series, the destruction of the Usher family is inevitable, as both narratives feature a representation of Nemesis that punishes the Usher family for their crimes.

The show intersperses unchanged pieces of the works of Poe in between contemporary dialogue. Additionally, the title of every episode is the title of one of Poe's stories or poems, or a key phrase from a Poe text. The pilot episode is called "A Midnight Dreary," which is a quotation from the opening line of "The Raven." In this episode, Flanagan introduces the audience to the main characters and establishes the different time- and plotlines of the series. The establishment of these timelines must be viewed in the context of Poe's works. Flanagan uses a variety of ways to integrate Poe's tendency to start a story, not at the beginning of a plotline, but in the middle. The episode starts with a black screen and the Pink Floyd song "Another Brick in the Wall" (1980) playing while people count down. Flanagan makes use of the "J-cut," which is a form of editing where the audio of a scene precedes the visual of the scene. Flanagan also makes use of the "L-cut," where the opposite happens. The visual is shown while the audio from the previous scene still plays. This form of editing is a small, yet significant part of the framing of time. The time at which Poe starts his short stories plays a role in the plot development. In "The Cask of Amontillado," the reader enters the narrative at a point where Montresor swears revenge, yet the story does not start early enough for the reader to see what action warrants the revenge.

In this first episode , the audience enters the narrative at a few different points in time. The first visuals of the TV series are shots of a New Year Eve party, a brick wall, a raven, and Verna. All of these shots are part of the timelines that will be explored in the series. The New Year's Eve party is the place where the Usher twins meet Verna for the first time, the brick wall is the place where Griswold is murdered, Roderick meets the raven after all of his children and grandchildren have died, and Verna is the character that assumes the role of Nemesis in the series. The rapid-fire visuals provide the audience with a form of foreshadowing. Just as Poe revealed the ending of "House of Usher" in its title. After these shots, the camera focusses on a stained glass image of Jesus. The audience is met with a

nearly empty church where the funeral for three people is being held. The priest is delivering a eulogy for the deceased. While Flanagan uses short snapshots to foreshadow the key moments in the series, the first words that are spoken in the series are used to establish the main theme of the overall narrative. This eulogy is in actuality Poe's poem "For Annie." The audience enters at the point of "And the lingering illness, is over at last—and the fever called 'Living' is conquered at last" (E1 00:00:44). The poem addresses the theme of illness. The poem centres on the relief that is felt after death takes away the suffering of illness. The theme of illness is accompanied by the theme of guilt, as the audience sees how Roderick Usher is haunted by the deaths of his children. At 00:00:58, Roderick sees the deaths of his children flash before his eyes. This portrayal of the deaths of his children highlights how the beginning of this TV series in fact starts with the end.

After the funeral scene, the first episode of the TV series proper begins. Roderick calls inspector Dupin (a character borrowed from Poe's detective stories, but reimagined as an African American urban detective) over to the original Usher house. As Dupin is part of the legal team that is prosecuting the Usher family for crimes against American citizens, he is the perfect candidate to hear Roderick Usher's confession. As in "Amontillado" and stories such as "Berenice," the TV series is a confession narrative at heart. Roderick Usher underlines this himself when he says: "I called you tonight to give you the only thing you ever wanted: my confession." (E1 00:06:48). The confession narrative gives way to the framework form that shapes the series. Most narrators in Poe's stories either commit a crime or are witnesses. In "Amontillado" the reader becomes the witness of Montresor's detailed confession of his crime against Fortunato. The same is true for the audience of the series. Together with Dupin, the audience becomes the witness of the crimes of the Ushers against the American people .

Poe's "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845), provides an insight into the workings of Poe's stance on confession. The "Imp" as the narrator calls it, creates a self-destructive

behaviour that pushes a person to do what they know is wrong: to do the thing that you are not supposed to do. The imp first pushes the protagonist of the tale to commit murder, as this would allow him to inherit a great estate. The same imp pushes the protagonist to confess to the murder, as this is something a murderer is not supposed to do. The confession to murder is a plotline that is explored by Poe in many of his tales. As discussed in chapter one, "Amontillado" is a confession tale. In "House of Usher," Roderick eventually confesses to the narrator that he had buried Madeline alive, just before he is murdered by her in what seems like an act of vengeful rage. In both cases, the confession to the crime happens after the protagonist has suffered bouts of guilt. Much like "Hop Frog," the actual narrative of "Imp " is not adapted by Flanagan for the TV series. Yet, the sentiment of the tale and of the essay that heralds it is very much present in Flanagan's iteration of Poe's "House of Usher."

The third theme that establishes its presence in the TV series is substance abuse. Following various Poe stories, from "Ligeia" to "House of Usher" itself, the abuse of alcohol and other intoxicating substances is a significant motif in the first episode, and throughout the series. When Dupin enters the Usher house, Roderick offers him an expensive cognac. Like Amontillado, cognac is a form of fortifies wine. The use of alcohol is not a sign of hospitality in this situation. According to Roderick, the bottle had cost him four million euros at an auction, additionally, the liquor bottle is ostentatiously decorated with yellow gold and diamonds. The decadence of the liquor bottle is contrasted by the dismal setting. In "Amontillado" and "Hop Frog," alcohol is used to control people. After Dupin has refused the cognac, Roderick ignores him and pours two glasses anyway. He adds that a single pour would "probably cost twice your annual salary" (E1 00:05:20). Roderick tries to patronize Dupin even more when he adds "Have a glass. See what a few years of your worth tastes like" (E1 00:05:33). In "Amontillado," the rare bottle of fortified wine is also a status indicator. Additionally, Montresor takes advantage of an intoxicated Fortunato and lures him with the

promise of alcohol. Fortunato is prideful about his knowledge of wine and uses it to establish himself as a cultured and rich man. Roderick tries to do a similar thing here. He tries to assert dominance over Dupin with his niche and expensive cognac. When Dupin starts recording Roderick's confession, he says that Roderick has waived the right to an attorney. Roderick responds with: "And Mr. Dupin has waived a glass of Henri IV, so which of us is crazier?" (E1 00:07:12). Roderick knows at this point that his death is inevitable. He also knows that, after tonight, his crimes will be made public. Yet, he still tries to assert his dominance over Dupin on the record. He tries to place himself higher on the social ladder, using expensive alcohol to do so.

The use of whiskey and cognac as tools for navigating difficult conversations is present in the rest of this episode. When Perry pitches his club idea to Roderick, they sit down at a whiskey bar that is built inside Roderick's house. Perry uses a specific whiskey from the year he was born. "This is a Glenfiddich '96." (E1 00:36:26). He tries to persuade Roderick and Madeline to let him open a club. Perry uses the whiskey from 1996 to represent himself. Both he and the whiskey have matured from 1996 onwards. If Roderick approves of the whiskey he will approve of Perry. Here, Perry tries to control the outcome of this conversation using alcohol. The whiskey is a bargaining chip for Roderick to approve of his business venture. This situation parallels the deal that Roderick and Madeline made with Verna. The setting of a bar and getting whiskey served is overlaid with a flashback. When Roderick is alone and closes his eyes, another glass is set down by Verna. Here, the alcohol is not used to control or manipulate a person, but to remind Roderick of his deal with Verna. As soon as Roderick sees Verna, she disappears. The scene that follows it is at a bar on New Year Eve. Verna serves whiskey in the same glass that Perry poured it in. Madeline insists that Roderick drinks. Here, she uses alcohol to create the illusion of nonchalance. "Drink, but don't get drunk. Talk, but don't talk" (E1 00:47:38). In all of these instances, alcohol is used to convey

something unspoken. Roderick uses alcohol to place himself above Dupin. He uses expensive cognac to signal that he is richer than Dupin and thus has the rich to dominate over him. In Perry's case, the whiskey is used to win his father's approval. Madeline uses alcohol to create an air of nonchalance. She tries to convey to the outside world that Roderick and she are normal people. Alcohol is important to " Netflix's *House of Usher*, not just because these themes are also present in the pretexts by Poe, but also because of the importance of substance abuse. The Ushers try to control the people around them using alcohol, this coincides with the trial that is held against them on the basis of pharmaceutical malpractice, where Fortunato Pharma's is accused of contributing to the opioid epidemic as they distribute Ligodone. The use of alcohol among the Ushers is significant, as the theme of drug use is significant.

The ostentatious cognac that Roderick tries to serve Dupin stands in stark contrast with the setting. What becomes clear is the difference in class that the Usher twins go through in the first episode highlights how far they have come financially. The childhood house of the twins is small and, at the time of Dupin's visit, nearly in ruins. Comparing this to the house that is shown during the dinner scene, or the houses of the children, the jump in ostentatious wealth is significant. The house that Roderick calls Dupin to at the beginning of the story, is nearly in ruins. Roderick announces where he and Dupin are for the record: "We're in my childhood home. Yeah, this is where I grew up. Kept it all these years. The whole neighbourhood, actually. So I can watch the paint peel. The weeds grow. And smell the rot if I need a pick me up" (E1 00:07:33). The setting functions much like the house in Poe's story. In Poe's story, the house parallels the state of the Usher family. Time stood still from the time that Roderick was rich enough to buy this neighbourhood. From that moment forward the house and neighbourhood have started to rot away, as he said. The rotting of the house parallels the rotting of Roderick's soul, just like it did in the pretext. The house directly connects the corruption of money with the corruption of the soul. As addressed in the

previous chapter, the house in Poe's short story parallels Roderick's health, as well as the state of the Usher family. In "Order and Sentience in 'The Fall of the House of Usher'," E. Arthur Robinson provides an analysis of consciousness that the house seems to possess:

> Various individuals, declares the narrator, have believed in 'the sentience of all vegetable things,' but Usher's peculiarity lies in his extending this view to include the inorganic world. Now 'sentience' may refer either to a state of consciousness or to mere sensation as stimulation to the senses, such as sight or hearing. In this instance both meanings seem to be implied. (70)

A family name is traditionally passed on by the male family members. As Roderick's father is named "Longfellow," it is clear that this is not the case for the Usher family. Roderick and Madeline have both carried on their mother's maiden name. The fact that they are "Usher" and not "Longfellow," highlights the importance that this house holds for Roderick. Like Robinson said, the house in Poe's short story has become sentience. Applying Robinson's analysis to the house in the TV series, a different form of consciousness is present. Roderick and Madeline were able to choose their own path after their mother and father died. They both chose to follow in their father's footsteps. Their old house is a physical representation of the path not chosen.

The path that the Ushers have not chosen is expanded on in the first flashback. In a snapshot of his youth, Roderick highlights his absent and rich father, who is the CEO of Fortunato. His mother is portrayed as a passive and deeply religious woman who looks up to and fears Longfellow. When Eliza remarks that Longfellow is "complicated, like God" (E1 00:10:33). His mother and father are the opposites of each other in a few regards. While Roderick and Madeline's father is a man in a position of power, their mother possesses no power. Much like the protagonist in "Hop Frog," Eliza is allowed to stay in the vicinity of the higher powers at their whim. Yet, like Hop-Frog, Eliza is in a weaker position and completely

at the mercy of the people in higher positions. The contrast between Eliza and Longfellow is also shown in their usage of substances. Roderick and Madeline's mother refuses to take medicine when she is ill, and Longfellow is the CEO of a pharmaceutical company and is paid to push medicine. Eliza's refusal to take medicine stems from her Christian beliefs: "Jesus showed us how to heal the sick, and it wasn't through medicine" (E1 00:11:35). Eliza's and Longfellow's perspective on medicine are two ends of a spectrum.

The contrast between Eliza and Longfellow marks two different paths that the Usher twins could have followed. They could have followed in the footsteps of either parent. Choosing their father's path would mean that they would mean that they would become cruel, yet successful. Choosing their mother's path would mean adopting her extreme religious beliefs and submitting to powerful people like Longfellow. They chose to follow in the footsteps of Longfellow. As the twins see it, their mother had lived her life under the thumb of a cruel man and died suffering. Their father was that cruel man. They chose the more powerful position. How this choice unfolds is foreshadowed at the end of this timeline narrative. The resurrection of his mother and the subsequent murder of his father is the first instance of revenge in this narrative. Longfellow's murder is mirrored by that of Roderick in the final episode, which is discussed in chapter seven. Just like Hop-Frog took revenge on the king, Eliza took revenge on Longfellow. In "Super Evil and Poe's Revenge Tales," Magdalen Wing-Chi Ki writes about Hop-Frog's revenge:

> Chance eventually allows Hop-Frog to heal the 'enlightened' gap between his private use of autonomous reason and his public duty to the king, as well as to reconcile the gap between the lawless body and duty-bound mind. As the king asks for a new costume, Hop-Frog cunningly obeys the Other's order to do things his own way, serving his duty to cancel his duty. (68-69)

In death, Eliza is able to heal her "enlightened gap" between her autonomous reason and her religious duty. As said before, Eliza equated Longfellow with God, which equates her duty to Longfellow to her duty to God. After she dies, Eliza is able to enact revenge. This murder is used to foreshadow Roderick's own eventual demise. Eliza seems to possess a supernatural strength after rising from the grave. She uses this strength to strangle Longfellow. Through the supernatural force, she is able to equate herself with Longfellow. She is no longer constrained by the power dynamics are their difference in financial status to enact revenge. Before her entombment, Eliza was submissive to Longfellow's will, as he was stronger in every regard. Her rebirth from the earth has given her the strength that she had not had before. The concept of a supernatural strength that enables revenge is present throughout the whole narrative. This instance of this concept is a small, but significant example of it. Roderick and Madeline's mother has enacted her own revenge on Longfellow. She assumed the role of Nemesis, just like Madeline did in the pretext.

Roderick and Madeline feel like they are owed revenge on their upbringing. They are never acknowledged as his children by Longfellow. Therefore, they will not inherit Fortunato Pharma. While they do despise Longfellow, they have also inherited some of the reverence that their mother displayed towards Longfellow. Roderick's current self describes his mother's act of revenge: "The last thing my mother did in this life was kill a powerful man. And we carried that secret, and loved her all the more. She was – remarkable." (E1 00:19:19). This line reveals how the current Roderick views the legacy of his mother and father. Eliza is loved for killing a "powerful man." Her final act of violence was something that the twins looked up to. At that moment, the mother's revenge is justified by the behaviour that is

displayed by Longfellow. Yet, Roderick also thinks of his father as powerful. While Roderick has embodied his father in his adult life, his mother is haunting him. Through the hereditary disease, she haunts both Roderick and Madeline. Additionally, she literally haunts Roderick in the first episode. The dark colour pallet of the scenes inside the Usher house hides Eliza's figure from 00:20: 32 until she moves at 00:20:54.

Her ragged appearance blends into the equally ragged wall. Here, she demonstrates how the house and herself are both neglected and damaged reflections of the Usher twins' souls. After Eliza dies, the current voice of Roderick narrates "Thank heaven the crisis has passed, and the lingering illness is over at last. And the fever called 'Living' was conquered at last" (E1 00:14:20). This line becomes ironic as the story progresses, as Eliza continues to haunt Roderick after rising from the grave.

Episode 1 "The Fall of the House of Usher" (00:20:32)


Episode 1 "The Fall of the House of Usher" 00:20:54

The second plot point that is introduced is between the date of the courtroom and Roderick's and Dupin's meeting at the Usher house. This timeline provides exposition for the Usher children. The children each get an episode dedicated to the time leading up to their

deaths. From 00:23:00 the J-cut is used. The audience hears Dupin's voice address the court while seeing his face reacting to Roderick who revealed that this was the last day that the whole Usher family was together. Dupin's shocked face foreshadows the guilt that he feels over the lie that he told. The informant that Dupin talked about in his opening statement is the hour that strikes close to midnight for Roderick and Madeline. The deal that they made with Verna has protected them from any judicial consequences for their actions. The mention of an informant catches them off-guard and increases the hostility among the siblings. This moment in the court scene is the beginning of the end for the Usher family. The setting of this scene is important. The courthouse is where people are deemed guilty or not guilty. In both Poe's "Amontillado" and "House of Usher" guilt plays a part in the downfall of Montresor and Roderick respectively. It is signified early on that the Usher twins are guilty of various crimes. The motif of legal consequences is highlighted further by the cake that Morrie makes for the Usher family dinner. She makes a cake that is shaped like a pharmaceutical law book. The cake is shown at 00:27:21. Morrie serves this cake at the dinner so Roderick and the rest can literally "eat the law," as Madeline puts it (E1. 00:40:10).

The guilt established in the courtroom scene is not the only theme that is present in this scene. The courtroom combines the theme of illness and the presence of family. Illness and family are also combined at the family dinner at Roderick's home. Before Roderick's children arrive, his doctor comes to bring him the news that he has the same illness as his mother. At 00:35:45, Roderick's doctor stands over the empty dinner table. This scene represents how the ordinary family's dynamic is interrupted by the hereditary disease that looms over them.

The first episode features the same themes of Nemesis, family pride, illness, alcohol, guilt, and revenge, as the works of Poe that were discussed in the previous chapters. The first episode sets up the confession narrative. Nearly the whole series is told from Roderick's

perspective who retells the deaths of his children. In this episode, he claims that he is responsible for all of these deaths. The audience is not yet aware at this point how Roderick is responsible. Confession is a proclamation of guilt. In “Amontillado,” Montresor confesses to the murder of Fortunato. The guilt that Montresor feels is embedded in his soul from the moment that he entombs Fortunato. The same is true for Roderick. He is proclaiming his guilt and explains the events that led up to and followed the murder of Griswold. The guilt that is portrayed in the first episode is not the only theme that parallels the revenge tales of the previous chapters. Just as in “Amontillado” and “Hop Frog,” alcohol is used to control people. Additionally, alcohol is a point of pride and status for the protagonists of the story. The introduction of alcohol in the TV series is contrasted by the dilapidated setting. The return to the childhood home of the Ushers reveals how, even though they have acquired financial wealth, their childhood home is the place where the Usher twins end. Their wealth is insignificant in death. The Usher twins end where they began, alone in their mother’s house. The empire that they built is irrelevant in the final moments of their lives. By starting multiple plotlines in the same episode, the audience gathers parts of the narrative piece by piece, which adds suspense and is in line with the way that Poe reveals or omits information. By starting these different time- and plotlines in the first episode Flanagan establishes the key themes that are also present in Edgar Allan Poe’s revenge tales. Using Poe’s nineteenth century voice, Flanagan presents these themes to a contemporary audience.

Chapter Four: Lethal Consequences: Flanagan's Revenge Formula in *The Fall of the House of Usher*

The first episode of Flanagan's *House of Usher* established the similar themes present in the works of Poe discussed in the first two chapters of this thesis. While the first episode is the start of the TV series, the second episode, "The Masque of the Red Death," marks the beginning of the revenge formula that repeats itself in the next five episodes. The episode closely follows one of the Usher children who makes an immoral choice and dies as the consequence of that choice, all while Verna accommodates the choice. This formula is used on all of the Usher children. Perry is the first child of Roderick to die at the hands of Verna. The second episode of the TV series establishes how revenge propels the plot forward. The episode covers both personal revenge and systematic revenge. In doing so, the second episode emphasizes the importance of consequence and the possibility of choice.

In the first scene of the second episode, the audience is introduced to a young Dupin who is investigating Fortunato Pharma for graverobbing. This snippet of Dupin's backstory reveals why he is so determined to indict Fortunato Pharma. He expresses his frustration with the systems in place: "Respect? Come on, nobody holds anybody to account. You know that. The people in charge of making us healthy, make us sick. We cheat the dying. We fleece the poor. Promote the racist. Let the demons run amok. This world needs changing" (E2 00:02: 41). This quote is significant for a few reasons. It highlights that Dupin sees Fortunato Pharma is an example of a more widely morally corrupt industry, and it emphasizes that law enforcement, embodied by Dupin, is aware of how little they can to do solve such systemic injustice. This frustration is important to establish early, as it sets the tone for the rest of the episode. Dupin is frustrated by the capital gains that can be made by disadvantaging and exploiting the poor, but he also mentions that "demons run amok." The "demons" that Dupin

mentions can refer to both Verna, who is a metaphysical realization of death and Nemesis, or it could refer to the Ushers. His boss responds with: “Say you win. If you could catch them all, take all of it, all the greed, the foulness, the rot in the world and sit across from it. What would you say?” (E2 00:02:51). At this moment a J-cut is made whilst the audience can see the younger version of Dupin ponder on the question, the current Dupin says: “Was it ever going to be enough?” (E2 00:03:00). The camera cuts to the current Roderick Usher. Roderick is implied to be “all the greed, the foulness, the rot in the world.” The “demons” that Dupin mentioned are thus further implied to be the Ushers and the system they represent. Dupin’s frustrations with systematic injustice are expressed to Roderick Usher, as, at this moment, Roderick represents and is the embodiment of systematic injustice.

In Poe’s “Red Death,” the plot centres around King Prospero whose kingdom has nearly entirely succumbed to the Red Death. Neglecting his duties as king, Prospero throws a masquerade party for all the nobility and locks out all of his civilians. This action is punished by the Red Death itself. The Red Death takes on a physical body and walks into the ball to kill everyone. This tale is not a revenge tale like “Hop Frog” or “Amontillado.” While those tales feature allusions to a wider society, the revenge taken is personal. In “Red Death,” the revenge is not taken by a real person, but by a supernatural agent that confronts the nobility with the consequences of their selfish actions. The physical embodiment of this metaphysical form of revenge is of importance in this episode. The revenge owed to the citizens is acted out by a personification of the “Red Death.” The Red Death and Verna are comparable in this way. The embodiment of the Red Death is a form of poetic justice. In “Entropic Imagination on Poe’s ‘The Masque of the Red Death’,” Hubert Zapf refers to the personification of the disease:.

> the plague, which Poe uses as a metaphor in the story for the destruction of human hopes and illusions by the agency of a superhuman fate, and which is personified and

> becomes the 'spectral image' for the final emptiness and futility of earthly life, was similarly seen as a scourge of God in the historical times of the plague. (211)

The hopes and illusions that Zapf mentions can be applied to the naïveté that Perry and his guests have toward the consequences of their actions. Zapf goes on to write:

> The 'Red Death' as the determining agent of the text is not really an outside force but is inherent in the ways in which, by means of political power-structures and the structures of artistic imagination, human life tries to become independent from the forces of chaos and annihilation surrounding it. (213)

Zapf's analysis of the metaphysical existence of the "Red Death" is applicable to the character of Verna. Flanagan uses Verna to be the metaphysical agent of Nemesis. She is a force that presents people with choices and consequences. She is the answer to Dupin's frustration. She does this disregarding their social status or any other form of cultural, social or financial capital.

Perry wants to take revenge on Roderick for refusing to fund his business venture. Perry wants to take personal revenge. In the first episode, the audience is made aware of Roderick's tradition of offering a "nest egg" to each of his children. He does this because he was never acknowledged as Longfellow's son and therefore did not inherit a portion of Longfellow's money. Yet, the result of this tradition is that all of the Usher children must come up with a business, and then they have to actually ask Roderick to approve of them. A rejection of their idea is a rejection of themselves. Perry's business proposal is to open a nightclub that accommodates "debauchery," and this is quickly rejected and ridiculed by both Roderick and Madeline. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Perry presents Roderick with a bottle of whiskey from the year he was born to convince Roderick and Madeline of his club idea. By rejecting Perry's nightclub idea Roderick and Madeline reject Perry from their family business and as such disinherit him from the family fortune, as family and business

have become one in their eyes. Perry vents to his friends about his father's nest-egg tradition: "He makes it sound like a gift, but it's not. It's a fucking trick. He puts you under his ugly ass fucking thumb, and you might never get out. So fuck him. Doesn't like my idea? Maybe we dodged a bullet" (E2 00:07:15). This quote is comparable to the first line of "Amontillado," where Montresor announces his justified disdain towards Fortunato. In both cases, the lines highlight the need for vengeance against the subject. Perry will continue his idea without the approval of his father, in the hope that he will see that the idea could be successful. By going even further than the idea that he presented to Roderick in their meeting, and by succeeding, he will prove to his father that he is worthy of approval.

Roderick's dismissive attitude towards Perry's idea is not the only thing that makes Perry want to take revenge in this episode. He and Frederick are both present at a meeting with a group of attorneys who want to sue Fortunato Pharma for their dangerous abandoned properties. Frederick and Perry are the antithesis of each other. Perry tries to defy his father in an effort to win his approval, and Frederick tries to appease his father to win his approval. At the meeting, Frederick lashes out at Perry for talking during the meeting: "The last thing he [Pym] needs is Gucci Caligula handing over the keys to the store" (E2 00:09:44). Frederick tells Perry that he is ruining their meeting with the attorneys by giving them too much information. This hostile encounter with Frederick is the second reason that makes Perry want to take revenge on his family. When Frederick leaves another J-cut is made and the audience hears Perry's voice say "We're throwing a party" (E2 00:10:43). The use of the J-cut implies that Frederick's outburst and the idea of a party are related. In contrast to Prospero's masked ball in "Red Death," which is organised to shield the rich and powerful from the plague, Perry's party is organised and held out of a desire to avenge a wrong, to satisfy a personal grievance. Additionally, Perry takes revenge on Frederick by inviting Morrie, Frederick's wife, to the party, knowing that she is unhappy in her marriage and cajoling her to act on her

inner-most desires. Here, the way that revenge begets itself is establishes as a central motif in the TV series, as Frederick will eventually seek vengeance against Morrie for defying his authority.

The Usher children interact with each other as if they are competitors for promotion at a large firm, which Roderick's and Madeline's manipulations reveal they are in fact. Some of them are tolerant towards others, but most of them act with hostility towards each other, out of suspicion that they are seeking an unfair advantage within the company's power structure. While they cannot get fired from their family, they can get written out of the will, which in the context of the series amounts to the same thing. If one Usher is written out of the will, the others will obtain a larger portion of the inheritance, so they all have vested interests in seeing each other ostracized from the family. They are thus encouraged to plot each other's financial downfall to ensure their own financial success. There is no room to treat each other like siblings.

The closest thing to familial acceptance that Perry experiences is obtaining drugs from Leo. The use of drugs is a prominent theme throughout the whole narrative. While all of the Usher children come in contact with drugs at some point, Perry and Leo are the most open about it. Illegal drug use is important to the narrative as it represents the infiltration of harm that Fortunato Pharma inflicts on its consumers. Perry asks Leo to supply him with drugs for the party:

> Look man, I just want this thing to be epic. Dad doesn't believe in me and the rest just make fun of me, but I blow the roof of this thing and I print seven figures out of thin air, maybe I get a fraction of the respect that is supposed to come with this name? It's harder for me and you know that. You know that. But the rest don't. It's hard enough for the bastards, but it's harder for me for some reason. Like I'm extra bastard. Like I'm the fucking bastard's bastard. (E2 00:14:30).

Perry opens up to Leo about not winning his father's or other sibling's approval. He says that he feels like the "bastard's bastard." This line is ironic, as Perry actually is a bastard's bastard. He is a bastard, just like his father is a bastard. While Leo first refuses to provide drugs for Perry's party, he sympathizes with Perry in the end. Perry's appeal to Leo's goodwill is done via the mutual understanding of and wish for approval. Of all the Ushers Leo is the only one who lends Perry a bit of approval:

> You've got this. Half your guests will be holding, half are going to be rolling before they even get there. I'm going to give you two dealers to invite. And they'll jump on it, just for the sales opportunity. But whatever the fuck goes down after that is on them, not you. Oi! Look at me. This shouldn't be on you. You're better than a dealer. You're smarter than a DJ. This is beneath you. And you're going to kill it. But you're better than all of this. (E2 00:15:02).

While Leo does say that this party is beneath Perry, these are by far the most encouraging words spoken to Perry by an Usher. This is an ill-fated attempt at support. Most Ushers consume drugs or have their minds altered in some way before they die. Perry supplies all of his guests with drugs, just like his father provides his consumers with drugs. This party is a small-scale model of what Fortunato Pharma does to its consumers. The curse that rests on the Usher family is extended to the people who come in their vicinity. They are contagious like a disease. Leo tries to show sympathy and approval by giving him drugs. While his intention is good-natured, he is acting like a reflection of his father. The fact that gifting illegal and harmful drugs is seen as a generous act in the context of the series, highlights the opioid problem of the United States.

Perry holds the party at a building owned by his family and only invites a carefully selected group of people. Additionally, he does not allow phones or cameras inside, and he asks all of his guests to put on a mask before they come in. All of these measures are taken to

ensure a private space that shuts out the outside world and provides a space that will conceal any secrets. In " Red Death," Prospero invites the nobility to his ball and then shuts the gates to keep out the plague, as the peasants die all around the castle walls. At Perry's party, the exclusivity of the event accommodates lavish drug use and sexual licentiousness without anyone running the risk of ruining their reputation in the public eye. In both cases, the organizer of the party assumes that high-class social status is enough to ensure their immunity from any negative consequences of their actions. In his article "Inside 'The Masque of the Red Death'," Martin Roth writes: "The tale narrates the penetration of an inside space by an outside agent or force, yet, in its personification, this agent represents the deepest inside of that space" (50). The idea of a cocoon, or closed-off space is what gives the rich and powerful the idea that what they do has no consequences for them. This idea is debunked by the "outside agent or force" that infiltrates the cocoon. In this case that is Verna.

The TV series depicts this nobility in the form of celebrities and politicians. As Flanagan set the story in 2023, the concept of the traditional feudal hierarchy is projected onto the upper echelons of today's society. This projection further highlights the theme of systematic revenge. When the attorney at the beginning of the episode explains why the buildings are dangerous, Perry does not listen. Therefore, he does not know what will happen if the buildings are not destroyed. He invites 2023's corporate nobility and assumes they have the same intrinsic immunity to disaster as Prospero's guests in Poe's tale. When he announces where the party will be held, he says: "No holds barred. Fuck the permits" (E2 00:10:55). To use a building like this, requires permits. Permits like this are in place to protect people from physical danger. Perry continues, "This building belongs to my family's company. These old labs have their own power, closed water supply. Keeps of the city's radar" (E2 00:11:25). Perry says that the building essentially is not part of the city in the same way that other buildings are. The building belongs to his family and is thus exempt from normal city code.

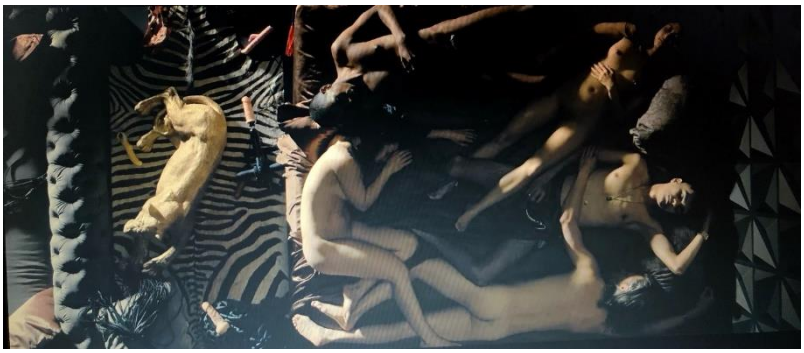
Additionally, the masks that the guests wear, shield them from the rest of the world. The masks highlight how these people live in a bubble where there are no consequences for their actions. They can act however they want, as they are anonymous. Verna remarks on the importance and presence of consequences. She tells Perry that, despite his illusion of not having to face any consequences, life is made up of chains of consequences:

> There are always consequences. Take you, for instance. Someone, a long time ago, made a little decision, then another, then a big one, then one of absolutely no importance. And then by and by, you were born. On that day, you were the consequence of a harmless choice made by someone in a moment where you didn't even exist. And that choice defined your whole life. You are consequence, Perry. And tonight, you are consequential. (E2 00:51:01)

From decision, consequence is born each time. In this monologue, Verna remarks on the power of choice. Verna tells this to Perry to make him aware of the choice to stop and think about the decisions he has made and the consequences that they could have. The motif of choice is brought up again when Verna whispers for Morrie to go. Here, the audience can see up close how Morrie's decision leads to consequence. She decides to stay at the party after receiving a warning from Verna. The presence of Verna at the party is immediately notable, as Perry has emphasized many times that this party is an exclusive event. Like the Red Death at Prospero's ball, Verna catches the attention of Perry right away. This is the first episode in which the audience sees how Verna operates. Whenever an Usher child is on the brink of a fundamentally bad decision that will lead to their own and often others' destruction, she appears to give them the chance to make a different choice, to avert the catastrophe about to happen. In every case, the Usher in question holds onto their first, selfish choice, and Verna allows for the lethal consequences of that choice to occur. In Perry's case, she presents him with the opportunity to stop being reckless and end the party before turning on the sprinklers.

At 00:55:10, the rain is released from the sprinklers, and the water that has turned acidic kills almost everyone in the room.

The Usher children's sexual lives are often highlighted in their respective episodes. This episode highlights it more overtly than others. Perry's character is defined by his radical hedonism. Almost all of the Usher children use sex as a form of currency, whether to buy or sell something with. Perry uses his financial and social status as a way to accommodate his sexual escapades. His obsessive relationship with sex as a means to power eventually leads him to his death. The first shot of Perry in the second episode of the series foreshadows Perry's death scene. At 00:05:17 an aerial shot of Perry and a group of naked people is shown.



Episode 2 "The Fall of the House of Usher" 00:05:17

In this shot, the naked people are asleep. His body is interwoven with that of his companions. This is the first time the audience gets to see Perry in the second episode. Compare this to the shot at 00:57:01, this is another aerial shot where Perry lies among a group of naked people, only this time, everyone is dead and not asleep. Perry ends the episode where he starts.

Episode 2 "The Fall of the House of Usher" 00:57:01

At Perry's party, the colour red is used to evoke a feeling of sensuality. Red lights are infamous for being used in so-called "Red Light Districts" across the world. The red lights used in these districts follow the tradition of nineteenth century brothels that had gas lamps from which came only red light. (Crabtree). But more than sex, the red tones of this shot serve as a continuance of the allusion to Poe's "Red Death."

In Poe's short story, colours are a significant yet mysterious theme. King Prospero has several rooms in which the guest could reside, and each of these rooms is decorated with one colour. There is not enough information in the story itself to say what each colour's symbolic meaning is. Joseph Roppolo argues that the colours are "reminiscent of a life cycle: blue in the first chamber indicating birth and life, and black and red in the last apartment signifying death" (Du Plessis 40). While there are several rooms available at Perry's party, the colours of these rooms are not all specified. Yet, as seen in the shot above, red is a prominent colour in the main area of the party. When viewing the colours with Roppolo's interpretation in mind, Perry's party is marked as the final stage of life by the colour red. The colour red stands for how the nobility and Prospero bled. The original story highlights the presence of the colour red in the first few lines: "Blood was its Avatar and its seal – the redness and the horror of blood." (Poe 269). The disease that infests every human body present makes blood pour from every pore. At Perry's party, the acid rain that pours from the sprinklers produces a similar effect, but also ensures that the individual human bodies begin to fuse with each other into a grotesque mass of flesh. In this most graphically horrifying scene of the series, the colour red represents both sex and death, as well as the danger of a radically hedonistic lifestyle constructed on total irresponsibility for the welfare of others.

The Ushers have not had to face any consequences for their actions in years. At the outset of the episode, Perry is an example of how someone who has not had to face consequences for their actions moves through the world. The Ushers consider themselves

exempt from the systems that are in place to regulate people's behaviour in society. In Perry's case, he considers himself above the law, above his family, and above trivial things like permits. Just as the nobility at Prospero's party in "Red Death" considered themselves above the disease that plagued the civilians. The emphasis on consequences in this episode highlights the cycle of revenge that propels this plot forward. One revenge begets another. Perry takes revenge on Roderick for not approving of him. Frederick lashes out at Perry for not being quiet at their meeting, which makes Perry want to take revenge on Frederick as well. Morrie goes to the party, which makes Frederick want to take revenge on Morrie. This instance of revenge will be further discussed in the next chapter. With Perry's death, his need for revenge ends. Every episode after, Verna stops another revenge cycle by killing one of the Usher children until there are no Ushers left.

In this episode, the audience sees for the first time who Verna is and how she operates. Adapting a short story like "Red Death" is a suitable choice for introducing a supernatural depiction of revenge taking on the shape of a guest. Verna continues to play this role for the rest of the series. Additionally, this episode highlights the importance of choice and how any choice has impact. Perry made a choice not to obtain permits from the city. Morrie made a choice to come to Perry's party. Both of these choices had disastrous consequences for each of them. Perry assumes that he is above the law and above the system. He feels as if he and his guests have a sort of immunity. They are rich enough to skirt the consequences of their actions. The masks at the party highlight and embolden a feeling of anonymous privilege to do whatever they want.

Chapter Five: The Final Heir in "The Fall of the House of Usher"

In the previous chapter, the revenge formula for the series was established. Only the first and last episodes divert from this formula. The seventh episode is the second to last episode of the TV series. For Roderick and Madeline, this episode is the eleventh hour. The seventh episode of Flanagan's *House of Usher* revolves around Frederick Usher. Frederick is the oldest Usher child and has witnessed all of his siblings die. Being the only heir left, he has gained more power than ever before. The episode highlights what happens when the time for choosing different paths is over, and consequences of ones actions are imminent. After this episode, the only Ushers that remain alive are Roderick and Madeline.

The episode starts with a cat clock that swings its tail. In the first scene, the audience first sees Frederick as a little boy. The swing of the cat clock's tail is used to foreshadow the pendulum that kills Frederick. The Frederick that the audience sees here, is not the same man that Frederick is currently. Frederick's parents still live together in a small flat. Fredrick still has many years ahead of him in at the time of the scene. Meaning, that he has not yet made any of the decisions that lead him to his gruesome death. Here, he is still innocent. Over the course of the first five episodes, Frederick established himself as a person who is full of jealousy and rage. He has gone from cowardly trying to appease his father by everything he does, to an abusive spouse who tortures his hospitalized wife. Introducing Frederick in this episode as a little boy is a way to evoke sympathy from the audience. Roderick is also met with a younger hallucination of Frederick, subverting his own expectations. When Dupin is just about to leave the Usher house, a grandfather clock chimes, startling Dupin. Roderick explains:

> That's Freddie, I expect. They've been at me all night. Making sure I get their stories right. Which is – its fantastic. My personal hell is being micro-managed. No, what

> happens now, see, is you start talking. And then all of the sudden I spot a little hint of Freddie, but I try to ignore it because you can't see him, and then he manages to get a good jolt in there for my benefit while you look at me like I'm insane. I'm not insane. And while CADASIL is no picnic, it certainly isn't this. I'm afraid you're ringside for my reckoning, old friend. And any second, Freddie is going to peek up from behind the chair and show off his C-section scar. (E7 00:22:14).

Frederick is presented as his younger self to Roderick when he hallucinates him. A hallucination of Annabel Lee and a young Frederick come to see Roderick. Every episode Roderick hallucinates his deceased children, who tell the story of their deaths to Roderick. Roderick has become aware of the way in which his children present themselves. Every Usher child came to Roderick looking like their post-mortem selves, except for Frederick. In the quote above, Roderick expresses his anger with these apparitions. After seeing five of his children, he has become cynical. Seeing a young version of Frederick catches Roderick off guard. The final apparition subverts Roderick's expectations. The apparition of both Annabel Lee and Frederick show Roderick what he has lost. They show what Roderick's life looked like before he ran Fortunato Pharma. Frederick's younger self is a representation of what an Usher child looks like before the Ushers were the owners of Fortunato Pharma.

Frederick is the oldest Usher child, and thus the heir of Fortunato Pharma. All of his siblings set up their own businesses, but Frederick is expected to follow in Roderick's footsteps by Roderick. Throughout the TV series, Frederick has been driven by his need to win his father's approval. As said in the previous chapter, he is the antithesis of Perry in this regard. Frederick tries everything to make his father proud of him. Frederick is tasked with tearing down the building that had become the crime scene of Perry's death. Frederick tries to demolish this building the legal way and wants to obtain permits. According Roderick, this takes too long:

> It matters because I have to count on you. It's a fucking crime scene with our family's name all over it. Your brother's blood all over it. It matters because if I can't count on you to do the building, then I can't count on you for the little things, which means I can't count on you for the big things, and I have to count on you, Freddie. I have to. You're it, you see? You're the fucking swing vote. (E7 00:12:28).

Roderick begrudgingly has to admit that he is dependent on Frederick. To Frederick, this is an affirmation of his importance. After this Frederick feels more powerful. He decides to forgo any permits and forces his contractor's hand. The importance that he feels after speaking with his father combined with his cocaine use cause a power trip. As he stands over his wife, whom he has held hostage, he calls the contractor: "I don't care about the fucking blasting permit. Give me a ball and a crane. Because I fucking asked you to. Because I'm the Usher ascendant. The Jersey boys listen to Roderick, and the Jersey boys listen to me" (E7 00:15:58). Frederick calls himself "the Usher ascendant," because he is the only heir left. He uses his status as leverage. Here, Frederick falls into the same pattern as Perry. He is convinced that rules do not apply to him. After this phone call, Frederick seems to become aware of the power that he has now that all his siblings have died: "Did you hear how fast he changed his tune? It's amazing. My whole life, you know, they won't take me seriously, and then suddenly, you're the new CEO and everybody is fucking so accommodating" (E7 00:16:10). Frederick is already calling himself "the new CEO," implying that he wishes Roderick to step down. Frederick's has the idea he has power over everyone, excluding his wife. Because Morrie was at Perry's party, Frederick assumes that Morrie cheated on him. He takes revenge on Morrie by holding her hostage and not providing her with any medical care. Instead, he paralyzes her by using a paralytic that was derived from Ligodone.

In "Berenice," the narrator, Egæus, obsesses over his cousin's teeth. This obsession leads him to robbing Berenice's grave to obtain her teeth. This short story is not a revenge

tale. Its plot revolved around the protagonist's slow decent into madness because of his obsession to possess his cousin body and soul. In this episode, Frederick has become obsessed with the idea that Morrie has cheated in him, as he believes he own her body and soul. At 00:08:52, the audience sees that Frederick has pasted pictures of him and Morrie at their wedding day.

Episode 7 "The Fall of the House of Usher" 00:08:52

The extent of Frederick's obsession is shown in this shot of him. Frederick's control of Morrie serves a metaphor of what Fortunato Pharma is doing to its consumers. Even when Morrie is unable to defend herself against Frederick, he still obsesses over controlling her:

> You, Morrie, you know one thing Dad was really big about? It was a lesson that he taught us all. One of the first things he taught us. If you want to test a bond, you don't really need to break it. You just crack it a little. He put me one rung higher on the ladder than Tammy and he sat back and watched. Cracked, but it didn't break. It did make it stronger. Second lesson Dad was big on was getting your house in order. You don't have to be a tyrant, but if you don't want to be consistently cruel, then you have to sufficiently brutal at least once to establish authority. (E7 00:16:13).

After Frederick says this, he pulls out Morrie's teeth with pliers, exercising his power over her. He does so to get his "house in order." In his monologue, Frederick highlights how he and his siblings have grown up without a conventional family dynamic. The first lesson that Roderick taught Tamerlane and Frederick was to damage relationships in order to strengthen them. Roderick pitted Tamerlane and Frederick against each other the moment he gained

power at Fortunato Pharma. From then on, any chance of a normal sibling dynamic was lost. Frederick's inability to navigate any familial relationships is portrayed in this scene. The second rule reveals how Roderick took charge of Fortunato Pharma. He gained power by being "sufficiently brutal." Frederick phrases this rule in a peculiar way. To "get your house in order" was not Roderick's job when he was still living with Annabel Lee as she stayed at home with the children. Instead of his house, Roderick refers to Fortunato Pharma itself. The rules that Roderick establishes for his children, are rules for running a large corporation , not a family. While the audience never sees how Roderick deals with co-parenting his children after the divorce, these pieces of information given by Frederick imply that he started treating them like he started treating the company. After gaining all his money, Roderick traded his home for the company. Frederick tries to apply these techniques on his own family after finding himself in a position of power comparable to that of Roderick.

The theme of choice and consequence is foregrounded in Frederick's death scene. Frederick feels like his choices have no bad consequences Additionally, he bars Morrie from making any choices by paralyzing her. In contrast to the other siblings, Verna never tries to stop Frederick from his decisions. Instead, she caused him to collapse in the abandoned building while it was getting demolished using the same drugs he paralyzes Morrie with. "That's the nightshade paralytic. You got a little carries away back there. And strictly speaking, I try to never intervene this directly, but the pliers got me thinking. Fuck it" (E7 00:46:58). Verna handles Frederick's death in the same way that Frederick handles the demolition of the building. She does not wait for permission, and she does not give Frederick a choice. She remarks on this too. "I don't normally like to get my hands this dirty, but honey, you earned it." (E7 00:48:08). Verna highlights how Frederick's actions were beyond redemption. She also remarks on what Frederick could have been if he had lead a different life. "A dentist. That's the funniest part. That's what you were going to be in the other life.

You would have been a dentist. And a pretty good one. And I don't know, I guess that made what you did feel worse somehow." (E7 00:48:26). She calls this alternative outcome "the other life," this would be the life is Frederick had not chosen Roderick's footsteps to follow. Verna acknowledges both Roderick's impact on Frederick's life, and Frederick's choice to live differently: "He did you wrong, Freddie. You only ever wanted to be loved by him. You only ever wanted his approval. And it's still no fucking excuse" (E7 00:50:23). Verna says that she, too, had a choice. "You know, I could have done this just about any way I wanted to. You could have had a heart attack in your car. The coke would have teed that up nicely. You could have been hit by a bus. But then you had to bring her home, and you had to grab the pliers." (E7 00:49:40). This quote highlights how the deaths of the Usher children are as brutal as their own actions. Frederick, like Perry, becomes a victim of his own hubris. If he had not gone inside to pee on the crime scene of his brother's death and if he had not drugged his wife, then he would not have died this way.

In "Poe's Phantasmagoreality," Fred Botting describes the how Poe uses multiple Gothic effects at the same time:

> Poe's tales tend to redouble rather than resolve Gothic effects, a twist which initiates their dark modernity and aims at extending psychological disturbance, replaying the usual diseased, drug-fuelled, or feverish imaginings of the protagonists at the level of narration and reading. (9).

Flanagan uses the combination of two of Poe's short stories to tell Frederick's story. He combines "The Pit and the Pendulum" and "Berenice." The way in which "Berenice" is adapted in this episode highlights the theme of obsession. "The Pit and the Pendulum" highlights the importance of time. Frederick obsesses over Morrie in the same way that Egæus did over Berenice. After that Fredrick dies in the pendulum trap. In "Pendulum," the protagonist is trapped while a sharp pendulum swings back and forth. The pendulum is a

significant object in the second-to-last episode, as pendulums are most commonly found in clocks. As mentioned above, two clocks with pendulums are used in this episode to foreshadow Frederick's death. Additionally, Madeline and Roderick know that they are Verna's next target. Just like the narrator of "Pendulum" knew that death was imminent. They experience the fear of imminent death that the narrator does in "Pendulum." Jennifer Ballengee focuses on the mental torment that the protagonist of "Pendulum" endures, in "Torture, Modern Experience, and Beauty in Poe's 'The Pit and the Pendulum'." She argues that "At this point, full awareness of his danger having dawned on him, the narrator thinks back to his initial escape of the pit and realizes that actually his "failure to fall" has led directly to the horrifying torment that now awaits him" (33). Aside from Frederick's death, the use of pendulums and clocks are further used as a warning that time is running out. A pendulum swings back and forth. Each swing travels the same distance. If the pendulum swings one way, it will come back the other. The pendulum is also a metaphor for revenge. An Usher pushes the metaphoric pendulum one way, and Verna, who assumes the role of Nemesis, swings it back the other.

The seventh episode shows how choices that are made cannot be unmade. Frederick made the choice to come to hold his wife hostage, he made his choice to go on drugs, he made the choice to pull out Morrie's teeth and he made the choice to enter the building condemned for demolition. He has chosen to walk down a certain path. Most of the bad decisions that he made stem from the power that he feels, now that he is the last Usher child. Or as he calls it "the Usher ascendent." With this newfound power, he also bars people from making choices. By drugging Morrie, he takes away any choice for her to make. Furthermore, he forces the contractor to demolish the building. The power that he has over others, is mirrored in the power that Verna has over him. He is paralyzed with the same drug that he used to paralyze his wife. Furthermore, he is demolished at the same time the building is demolished. The

seventh episode gives the audience more insight to the minds of the Ushers. With Frederick left as the only Usher child, Madeline and Roderick know that time is running out. Verna has cornered them and now they are trying to escape. They cling to the idea that they do not need to face any of the consequences of their actions.

Chapter Six: Meeting Nemesis in the Final Episode, "The Raven"

The first episode of Flanagan's *House of Usher* is called "Midnight Dreary," after the first line of Poe's "The Raven." The last episode of the TV series is simply called "The Raven." The first and last episode are tied together this way. This episode shows why Roderick ended up in his childhood home (at the outset of the show), and why he confesses to having murdered his children. Furthermore, the deal Roderick and Madeline struck with Verna is revealed, informing the audience of the terms with which Roderick and Madeline agreed. Finally, the last act of revenge, Roderick's murder by Madeline, ends the Usher family.

The episode starts with Roderick waking up from his Ligodone-induced coma. At the end of the previous episode, Madeline had convinced him to commit suicide in an attempt to escape Verna. This episode forces Roderick to confront all of the immoral choices he has made. In this scene the manifestation of Roderick's guilt over the deaths he is responsible for. Verna stands over Roderick and reminds him of all the people that died as a result of their opioid addiction.

> 84000 people just last year. Just in the U.S. And that's just a guess. It's impossible to know the real numbers. 941,878 since 1985. Again, just the U.S. Again, just a guess. But we know better, don't we? Millions, Roderick. Millions. And that's just the deaths. Who knows how many more are addicted. Ruined. Your tally is – fucking impressive, Roderick Usher. (E8 00:00:21).

Granted, Roderick has only just awoken from his coma when Verna tells him this, but his reaction seems dismissive. In this episode, the audience is presented with Verna in her true state. When she appears to the Usher children, she wears different uniforms and outfits to

make her blend in with the public. In this scene, Verna is dressed in an all-black gown with bell sleeves, mimicking wings.

Episode 8 "The Fall of the House of Usher" 00:02:10

"Verna" is an anagram for "raven." In this scene, she fully cements herself in her role as the raven and Nemesis. Nemesis herself is also depicted as having wings. She stands over Roderick with her arms out stretched like wings. The wall behind her is the place where the twins have entombed Griswold. A pulsing sound comes from behind the wall, and just when it seems to give, Verna disappears. Roderick is crouched on the ground bracing himself for Griswold to come out of the wall. When Verna first says how many people died of opioid addition at the hands of Fortunato Pharma, Roderick seems not to react immediately. But when he thinks Griswold is about to emerge from the wall, he is frightened. The guilt that has manifested is manifested out of fear of revenge.

Roderick and Madeline cursed their bloodline. Lenore Usher is part of the Usher bloodline, and therefore has to die. Lenore's death is not gruesome like that of the other Ushers. Lenore does not get a dedicated episode, but she does meet Verna right before she dies. Verna explains to Lenore, that the choice she made to save her mother, causes Morrie to save the lives of others:

> She inherits a sizable fortune when Fortunato collapses. She puts it to work immediately. She gives most of it away. Domestic violence and abuse charities. But keeps enough to start a non-profit. She sets up chapters all over the world. She calls it the Lenore Foundation. After her daughter. And she saves a lot of lives. Would you

like to know how many? Dozens in the first year. Then hundreds. Thousands soon after. And then a major burst of growth. 600,000 five years in. And in a decade, it's millions. More than 3,000,000, in fact. And then it gets hard to count. Because the people she helps help others, who help others and others. And so on and – this is the part I really want you to hear. You did that. When you got her out of the house, when you defied your father, you did that. You saved those people. That choice you made echoes through millions of lives. I thought you should know that. (E8 00:48:33)

After Verna tells Lenore this, she touches Lenore's forehead, which kills her instantly. Verna has told the Usher children that she has a choice in their deaths. This scene exemplifies this choice. This monologue also confirms that the Ushers are not born to be bad. Each member of the family had a choice. While most of them chose to fall into the Fortunato Pharma regime, Lenore exercised her ability to choose for the good. This monologue is the opposite of the monologue that Roderick receives from Verna in the first scene of the episode. Lenore's choices have saved lives, not taken them. Verna highlights how every choice has consequences and Lenore is the first Usher that yields good consequences.

When Roderick discovers that Lenore has died, he goes to Fortunato Pharma for the last time. There he speaks to the hallucination of his deceased children. Roderick blamed the consumers for consuming drugs: "It hurts. It hurts and they cry and cry, and I took it away! I reached in and snuffed out those flames in their backs, in their joints, their heads and their hands" (E8 00:55:01). The hallucinations do not talk. Roderick tells this to himself. This quote expresses Roderick's continued denial. Even though he has been confronted with the dangers of addiction many times. This was done in the beginning, when Verna stood over him and told him how many people died in the United States from opioid additions. Still, throughout the TV series, Roderick does not seem to want to exit his state of denial. In this

scene, Verna visually confronts Roderick with the people who died from opioid addiction. As Roderick looks down onto the city from his office, it starts raining dead bodies.

Episode 8 "The Fall of the House of Usher" 00:56:04

The setting of this scene is significant. The Fortunato Pharma building is a representation of the hierarchical structure that Roderick and Madeline managed to climb. At the top of the building are the offices of the most important people, and at the bottom, the offices of the least important people. Roderick has started at the postal room of the office and has risen all the way to the top. Verna describes the building. "One last look at your great tower. Your pyramid." (E8 00:56:46). Verna highlights how this office building is used as way to signal importance. The amount of power that Roderick has over the world is comparable to that of a king or a pharaoh.

Furthermore, the hierarchical structure of the building, is an important factor for Griswold's murder. Roderick and Madeline murder Griswold, they do so in the unfinished basement of the building. Griswold's murder was foreshadowed in the first episode, where "Another Brick in the Wall" plays, and a visual of the basement wall is shown. At that time, Griswold is the CEO, which means that he had the office on the top floor. The Roderick works on a lower level of the building before he becomes CEO. Because of the hierarchical structure of the building and the company, Griswold felt like he had the right to look down on Roderick. From the CEO's office, one could look down on everyone. Yet, when Griswold is entombed in the basement, he is on the very lowest level of the building and thus, the

company. From his point of view, he cannot look down on anyone. The setting of his murder symbolizes revenge. As discussed in chapter one, in "Amontillado" the setting is significant as it represents Montresor's lineage. This is also true for Griswold's murder. As both Longfellow and Eliza used to work at Fortunato Pharma, the Usher twins see the company as place that represents their lineage.

Griswold's murder also highlights the theme of alcohol in the TV series. Madeline and Roderick serve Griswold a cyanide laced glass of Amontillado. Just like Fortunato in Poe's short story, Griswold is eager to show off his knowledge about the Amontillado in question: "This bottle right here, this probably costs more than a year of your s—Well, your former salary" (E8 00:15:58). This is the same boast that Roderick uses in the first episode to belittle Dupin. This quote shows the audience how much the current Roderick behaves like Griswold. The parallel of Roderick and Griswold accentuates the circularity of revenge. Roderick and Madeline take revenge on Griswold because of how Griswold treated them, and they believed that they had the right to the CEO position at Fortunato Pharma. Now, after they treat the people around them the same way. This parallels Magdalens Wing-Chi Ki's analysis of the ending of "Amontillado":

> However, the story fails to end on a triumphant note because, through the act of entombment, Fortunato has become a member of the family. Revenge is no longer sweet because, according to the Montresors' Law, all wrongs in the family must be dealt with. Montresor's joy suddenly gives way to a "sick" heart. He has twice done wrong, and the Law must judge and condemn him. (66)

In this episode, Roderick is forced to fully realize that he has out-grown the corporate evils of his predecessors Griswold and Longfellow and has become the destroyer of his own family. He has to realize his own hubris, and now has to await Nemesis coming for him.

At the funeral of his last children, Roderick hallucinates Annabel Lee. Here, she has shorter hair than in the flashbacks. When she walks past Roderick, the audience sees the open wound at the back of her head, revealing that she killed herself. The change in appearance implies that this hallucination takes on the form of Annabel post-divorce and it reveals that she killed herself after her children left her. She emphasizes how Roderick damaged Tamerlane and Frederick with his money:

> They were young. They only knew appetite, and 'Here,' you said, 'come with me. Gorge yourselves.' How could I compete with that? You didn't feed them though, did you? You starved them. Less and less of them came back each time until one day they were empty. They were syphoned. You started filling them up with – What did you fill them up with, Roderick? What did you have to fill them with? Because you weren't rich, were you? I thought you were a rich man all this time, but I see you now. I look at you and I see you. The poverty of you. Maybe this is a kindness in disguise. Maybe they died in their childhoods. (E8 00:09:45)

Roderick corrupted Tamerlane and Frederick with money. Using money and status, Roderick had more power than Annabel Lee. According to Annabel Lee, he lured the two children to him instead of her. Just like Roderick and Madeline chose to follow in Longfellow's footsteps and not Eliza's. In this scene, Annabel Lee also serves as a manifestation of the guilt that Roderick feels for taking Tamerlane and Frederick away from Annabel Lee.

Roderick and Madeline's deal with Verna has been alluded to throughout the whole narrative, but the specific details are revealed to the audience in the last episode. Verna, Roderick and Madeline are the only guests that are left after the party, and they are drinking whiskey. Verna asks what Roderick and Madeline are willing to do to achieve their dreams:

> So, what would you do to make your dreams come true? People talk a good game, but money where your mouth is. What would you be willing to do? For example, what if I

> told you right now that you could achieve all the success you ever imagined? All the money. All the power. A lifetime of luxury. Comfort. What would you do? What would you give? (E8 00:26:01)

Verna tries to get a read on the Usher twins. She already knows that Roderick and Madeline have committed murder that evening, and builds up to revealing this information. She lays out two paths in front of the Usher twins. Madeline's answer to Verna's questions gives an insight to the way the twins viewed the choices made by their mother: "Our mother used to tell us Bible stories. She talked about how the meek would inherit the Earth. Well, she didn't inherit shit" (E8 00:26:44). To say "she didn't inherit shit" alludes to the fact that she did not get any money or help from Longfellow when she was dying. In this quote, Madeline equates Longfellow with God. As the meek inherit the Earth from God. The twins see their mother as the evidence that being a "meek" person does not mean that life will be good to you. They saw their mother suffer in her deathbed and decided to not go down that road. In doing so, they automatically assumed their father's footsteps would be more suitable for them, failing to see that Longfellow died just as brutally as their mother. Madeline continues: "The real world is Darwinian. Survival, chaos, power, leverage" (E8 00:27:02). This world view is more in line with their father's. After killing Griswold to gain out of revenge and to gain power at Fortunato, the Usher twins have clearly chosen their father's footsteps. Verna takes this moment to propose a deal to the Ushers. At this moment it is confirmed that Roderick agreed to the deaths of all his children and grandchildren in return for money and power. Instead of a contract, they drink: "In the ancient world we'd seal this with blood, or spit. And then later, papyrus. But, a deal's a deal all over the world. Tonight we'll just drink. But not just any drink" (E8 00:32:54). She serves them the expensive cognac that Roderick offered Dupin at the beginning of the first episode. Verna reveals why Roderick has brought out this cognac when Dupin came to visit him: "You drink this on the best day of your life, or your last night

on Earth" (E8 00:33:43). They all drink, and Roderick and Madeline leave the bar. When they look back, they see that there is no bar. This causes them to doubt if the interaction even happened at all.

At the end of the episode, it is revealed that Madeline has been mutilated by Roderick. Roderick knows that he is about to die. The denial that he has expressed this episode has come to an end. He confesses to Dupin:

> I promised my confession. And here it is. I knew. Deep down. In the witching hour. I knew. I knew that I would climb to the top of the tower on a pile of corpses. And we told them – it was about soothing the world's pain. That's the biggest lie we told. You can't eliminate pain. There is no such thing as a painkiller. And imagine if we'd put that on the bottle. I bet I still could have sold it. (E8 01:05:36)

In his last moment, Roderick confesses that he has known how Ligodone would affect its consumers. This confession is an allusion to the eleventh hour confession made by Roderick in Poe's story. Instead of the pre-mortem burial of his sister, this Roderick reveals to Dupin that, beneath all of the denial, he knew what his choices would amount to.

The last episode revolves around Roderick's choices and its consequences. The episode presents the contrast of Roderick and Lenore. In doing so, the possibility to choose is highlighted. Roderick's choices had exponentially negative consequences, while Lenore's choices have exponentially positive consequences. The state of denial that Roderick is in contributes to his hubris. Hubris is punished by Nemesis, who is represented in Verna. The episode heavily features alcohol, just as the first episode did. The use of alcohol alludes to revenge tales "Amontillado" and "Hop Frog."

Conclusion

The themes present in the revenge narratives of Poe are also present in Mike Falanagan's *The Fall of the House of Usher.* This thesis set out to show how Flanagan used Poe's nineteenth-century voice to portray revenge to a contemporary audience. Flanagan's adaptation of Poe's work took the themes present in Poe's work such as alcohol use, guilt, social hierarchies, familial ties, hubris, and Nemesis, and set them in 2023.

In the first chapter, the revenge narratives "Cask of Amontillado" and "Hop Frog" are analysed to uncover what themes they have in common. Both of these tales portrayed the themes of alcohol use, social hierarchy, illness, and guilt. These themes are all present in *The Fall of the House of Usher*. In the second chapter, the motif of revenge is continued in "The Fall of the House of Usher," where Madeline assumes the role of Nemesis. In this chapter, the relationship between the physical and the mental is brought into focus, and the concept of "family evil" is introduced. In chapter three, the first episode of *The Fall of the House of Usher* is analysed, and the themes that were established in the previous two chapters are further established in this episode. The first episode sets up the confession narrative that around which the series is framed. In chapter four, the second episode is discussed. In this episode, the formula of the series is introduced to the audience. The character of Verna, who is the embodiment of Nemesis in the series, follows each of the Usher children to their deaths. In this chapter, the hubris of the Usher family is analysed. Chapter five regards the second to last episode. This episode portrays the theme of the inevitability of consequences. Chapter six analyses the last episode of the series. In this episode, Roderick is confronted with the choices that he has made. Verna assumes the role of Raven and Nemesis.

Analysing Poe's revenge tales and episodes reveals how Flanagan reinterprets these themes to critique and mirror Purdue Pharma's role in the opioid crisis through the fictional Usher

family. Edgar Allan Poe's portrayal of revenge is translated by Mike Flanagan to the contemporary medium of television.

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