**Plot Summary**

By Michael J. Cummings

.......When the narrator arrives by horseback one autumn evening at the House of Usher, the sight of its bleak walls and desolate grounds fills him with gloom. He draws up his horse at the edge of a tarn, a small lake encircling the mansion and reflecting its forbidding image.
.......In a letter, the owner of the property, Roderick Usher, had begged the narrator to visit him for several weeks. Such a visit, he wrote, would be a form of therapy for Usher against a mental disorder afflicting him..Usher and the narrator had been close friends since childhood, although Usher was never one to confide his inmost thoughts to anyone. The narrator, therefore, does not know Usher as well as their close friendship would suggest. The Usher family has long been distinguished for its devotion to the arts and its dedication to charitable causes.
.......Looking up from the lake, the narrator–upon beholding the mansion and the grounds once again–perceives that an eerie atmosphere–“a pestilent, mystic vapor”–overhangs the scene. The ancient building is discolored. A tangled fungus covers the walls. The structure appears stable, however, even though individual stones of the masonry are crumbling.
.......After riding across a bridge to the front of the house, the narrator hands the reins of his horse to a waiting servant, enters the mansion, and walks through a Gothic archway. A valet conducts him through a labyrinth of hallways with tapestries and coats of arms, then up staircases. On one staircase, he meets the family physician. Finally, he enters the chamber of Roderick Usher. It is a large room with a vaulted ceiling and dark draperies, as well as various books and musical instruments scattered about. Usher, lying on a sofa, rises and greets the narrator warmly. Then they sit down.
.......Usher, a delicately handsome man, is much altered in appearance since the last time the narrator saw him–so much so that the narrator hardly recognizes him. He is sickly pale; his silken hair has grown wildly about his face. He is nervous, agitated one moment and sullen the next, speaking rapidly, then slowly like a drunkard or opium user. His illness, he tells the narrator, runs in the family.
.......“He suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses,” the narrator says. “The most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odors of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds, and these from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror.”
.......Usher says, “I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial, incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation of soul. I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect — in terror. In this unnerved — in this pitiable condition — I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR."
.......The gloomy mansion is in part responsible for his depressed state of mind. But what deeply disturbs him is the condition of his beloved sister, Madeline: Long in declining health, she now appears to be dying. She is his only relative and, for many years, has been his only companion. Her death would leave him as the only survivor of the ancient Usher family. While Usher and the narrator converse, Madeline passes quickly through the distant end of the room and disappears. The sight of her fills the narrator with a sense of dread that he cannot explain. Physicians have been unable to identify the exact cause of her illness, but its symptoms were as follows: “A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character.” Although she had long managed to remain on her feet, that very evening–not long after the narrator arrives–she is confined to bed.
.......Over the next few days, the narrator does his best to cheer up his friend. They paint and read books. The narrator listens to Usher play his guitar. It becomes clear, however, that Usher remains locked in his prison of gloom. One of Usher’s paintings depicts a long subterranean tunnel with a low ceiling and white walls. Although no torches line the walls, a ghastly light radiates from the scene.
.......While playing the guitar, he sometimes vocalizes improvised verses remarkable for their organization and clarity. One of them, “The Haunted Palace,” is a ballad that tells of a stately, radiant palace through whose windows passersby could see spirits moving to the rhythms of a lute around a throne upon which a monarch sat. Echoes of the sweet music passed through the pearl- and ruby-studded door of the palace, singing of the “wit and wisdom” of the king. But evil invaded the palace, attacking the monarch and desolating the palace. Never again would morning dawn for him. Only discordant melodies would henceforth emanate from the door.
.......When the narrator discusses the meaning of the ballad with him, Usher speaks of the ability of the trees on the grounds and the fungus on the stones of the house to create, over time, a sinister atmosphere that shaped the destinies of the long line of Ushers.
.......The books he read focus on fanciful, mystical, or religious subjects–a subterranean voyage, palmistry, satyrs, a Dominican directory on the Inquisition, and “the manual of a forgotten church.”
.......One evening, after Usher informs the narrator that Madeline has died, he announces that he will preserve her corpse for two weeks in a vault in one of the walls of the building before its final burial. This unusual step will keep the corpse out of reach of her attending physicians, who are curious about the malady that killed her. It will also provide a temporary resting place for the body while burial plans are decided.
.......The narrator assists Usher in lifting the body into the coffin and placing the coffin in the vault, situated beneath the part of the house containing the narrator’s bedroom. In feudal days, the vault served as the keep of a dungeon and in later years as a storage place for gunpowder. The archway in front of the vault was covered with copper, as was the huge iron door opening into the vault. After setting the coffin in place, they moved aside the lid to look one more time upon Madeline Usher. Noticing the very strong resemblance between her and Roderick Usher, the narrator wonders whether Madeline and her brother were twins; Roderick confirms that they were and says that they shared certain feelings that others would find hard to comprehend. Before screwing down the lid of the coffin, the narrator notices that her illness left a “faint blush” on her breast and her face. Her lips were locked in lingering smile."
.......In the following days, Roderick Usher paces aimlessly and his complexion takes on an even paler hue. He speaks in a tremulous voice, as if he were experiencing terror. The narrator observes:
.......“There were times, indeed, when I thought his unceasingly agitated mind was laboring with some oppressive secret, to divulge which he struggled for the necessary courage . . . [and] I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions.”
.......About a week after Madeline was laid in the vault, the narrator is unable to sleep because of a nervousness that overcomes him–perhaps resulting from the gloomy surroundings. His body begins to shake. He hears “indefinite sounds,” perhaps from a storm raging at that moment, and puts on his clothes and begins to walk around his chamber. After a few moments, he answers a knock at his door. It is Usher carrying a lamp. He has the same cadaverous look except that “there was a species of mad hilarity in his eyes.”
Usher looks about for a moment and says, “And you have not seen it?” Then he throws open a window to the storm. A blast of wind rushes in, nearly knocking the men down. Outside, the narrator sees low clouds gusting into one another in the glow of an unearthly light from “faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion.”
.......The narrator, protective of Usher, pulls him away from the window, telling him that the strange sights result from ordinary “electrical phenomena” or arise from the small lake on the property. To calm Usher, he seats him in a chair and reads from a romance: "The Mad Trist," by Sir Launcelot Canning. As the tale progresses, Usher listens carefully to every word of the story as the narrator comes to the part when Ethelred, the hero, breaks into the dwelling of a hermit by driving his spiked war club through the door. The sound of the cracking, splintering wood reverberates through the forest. At that moment, the narrator hears a similar sound that appears to be coming from some distant corner of the mansion. Perhaps the storm rattled windows.
.......The narrator reads on.
.......Upon entering the hermit’s dwelling, Ethelred encounters a dragon keeping guard over what turns out to be a palace of gold. On a wall is a shield inscribed with these words:

.......Who entereth herein, a conqueror hath bin ;
.......Who slayeth the dragon, the shield he shall win.

.......Ethelred slays the dragon.
.......The narrator hears a wild scream in the mansion, not unlike that which he imagines the dragon gave out in his dying moment. But the narrator maintains calm so as not to excite Usher. However, Usher turns his chair to the door. His lips tremble as if he is trying to say something. His head hangs on his chest. His body begins rocking.
.......The narrator reads on.
.......After slaying the dragon, Ethelred walks up to the shield. But before he can reach for it, it falls crashing to his feet. At that moment, the narrator hears a similar sound in the mansion. The narrator jumps up and goes over to Usher out of concern for his reaction to the sound. But Usher continues to rock, his eyes fixed in an empty gaze. When he begins murmuring, the narrator places an ear in close to hear what he is saying. Usher speaks of hearing something for many minutes, hours, days. Then he says:
“I now tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I heard them — many, many days ago — yet I dared not — I dared not speak !”
.......Usher jumps to his feet and says, “"Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door!"
.......The wind throws open the door and there stands Madeline Usher with blood on her burial garments. Then, giving out a low cry, she enters the room and, in the throes of her final death spasms, falls upon Roderick Usher. During the fall, he dies. The narrator flees the mansion. During his escape, he sees a blood red moon shining over the building. The mansion then collapses, and the dark waters of the tarn swallow every last fragment of the House of Usher