The Fall of the House of Usher
By Edgar Allen Poe

Was it the man or the house that was evil?

Characters:
Narrator 1
Narrator 2
Narrator 3
Jonathan Beringer
Roderick Usher
Groom
Mrs. Finley, housekeeper
Dr. Cordwell, a physician
Madeline Usher

Setting: the early 1800s, rural Massachusetts

Scene 1:

Narrator 1: During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless
day in the autumn of the year…
Narrator 2: when the clouds hang oppressively low in the
heavens…
Narrator 3: Jonathan Beringer is passing alone, on horseback,
through a dreary tract of country.
Narr 1: As the shades of evening draw on, he finds himself
within view of the melancholy House of Usher. The building
fills him with a sense of insufferable gloom.
Narr 2: The bleak walls and vacant, eyelike windows, the
white trunks of decayed trees turn his heart to ice.
Jonathan Beringer: (to himself) Can this be the place? It is
so…sad, so depressing.
Narr 3: He guides his horse to the brink of a black and murky
pond and gazes down at the inverted image of the mansion
reflected on the water.
Narr 1: He pulls a letter from his coat and reads again the cry
for help that has brought him here.
Roderick’s voice: Jonathan—it pains me to write after so
many years. But I have no one else to turn to. I feel as if I am a
prisoner in my own home…
Narr 2: A mist rises from the water and with it, a sour odor of
decay. Jonathan continues reading.
**Roderick’s voice:** I have been confined to the house by an unknown illness that leaves me nervous and, I admit, moody. You are my only friend. Come quickly, if you can. I would not ask it of you unless it was urgent. Roderick.

**Narr 3:** Roderick folds the letter and puts in his pocket. The horse stamps, uneasy. Jonathan runs his hand along the animal’s sweating neck.

Jonathan: *(to horse)* Easy. I, too, would like to turn around and leave this place. But a friend needs my help.

**Narr 1:** Jonathan nudges his horse forward onto a wooden bridge that is itself rotting. **Reluctantly**, horse and rider pass through the iron gate and enter the House of Usher.

**Scene 2**

**Narr 2:** Up close, Jonathan sees that the exterior of the old mansion is covered with a peculiar growth—a fungus. It hangs in tangled webs from the roof.

**Narr 3:** Underneath the growth, a crack in the stones zigzags down the wall to the foundation of the house.

**Groom:** Welcome to the House of Usher, sir.

**Narr 1:** a groom steps forward from the shadows. Jonathan whirls around to face the old man.

Jonathan: I did not see you.

Groom: No, sir. But I saw you across the pond.

**Narr 2:** He points to the road Jonathan has just traveled. A gas—**Sluggish** and glowing—rises from the water, sealing the House of Usher behind its lead-colored curtain.

**Groom:** Have you come up from Boston, then?

Jonathan: Why, yes. But how did you know? I did not write that I was coming.

Groom: Master has been expecting you. Not many people pass this way.

Jonathan: I don’t wonder. It is so isolated. Tell me, are these waters...healthy?

Groom: It is a dying lake, sir. Everything, even water, dies with time.

**Narr 3:** His words chill Jonathan. As the groom leads the horse away, Jonathan worries that perhaps his decision to come might have been made too hastily.

Jonathan: *(to himself)* One evening. That’s all I need to stay. Perhaps tomorrow in the daylight this place will seem less—
Narr 1: The front door opens. A thin, pale old woman eyes Jonathan curiously.

Mrs. Finley: You’re the gentleman from Boston. Come in, come in. Master Usher is waiting.

Jonathan: But how did he know I had arrived?

Mrs. Finley: He has his ways.

Narr 2: She takes Jonathan’s cloak. Quickly, he glances into a parlor. Heavy tapestries, dusty and faded with age, cover the walls.

Finley: Follow me, sir. Master has asked for you every day for the past week.

Jonathan: Is he very ill? His letter said it was urgent that I—

Finley: Oh, I wouldn’t know now what he wrote to you, sir.

Narr 3: She leads him up a staircase to the second floor. The flaming candles in sconces on the wall cast his shadow on the steps behind him, as if he were being followed.

Narr 1: Upstairs in the hall, a door closes softly. A scowling, middle-aged man mutters to himself. Then he sees Jonathan.

Doctor Cordwell: Who are you? What are you doing here?

Jonathan: If you must know, I am a friend of the family.

Cordwell: A friend?

Jonathan: You seem surprised.

Cordwell: You are here for just a visit then? A short visit, I hope.

Jonathan: Who, may I ask, are you?

Cordwell: Lady Madeline’s physician.

Jonathan: I thought Roderick, not his sister, was ill.

Narr 2: The doctor grunts and descends the stairs, his shadow fleeing before him. The old woman waits at the end of the hall. She whispers.

Mrs. Finley: Be careful not to make any loud noises. That would only make things worse, you understand?

Jonathan: No, I do not understand. What is going on in this ghastly place?

Narr 3: She moves away without answering. The hem of her skirt drags along the floor. Jonathan takes a deep breath, then knocks—softly.

Roderick: Come in, Jonathan.

Jonathan: Roderick?

Narr 1: For a moment, he sees nothing but shadows in the dark room.

Roderick: I knew you would come!
Narr 2: Jonathan turns to where the sound of the voice floats from a dark corner. In the faint light from the embers of a dying fire in the grate, Jonathan sees the form of his friend lying on a sofa.

Narr 3: Heavy draperies cover the windows. Shelves of books line the walls. The air inside the room smells sour, not unlike the rotting swamp outside.

Roderick: I cannot tell you how relieved I am that you have come. I heard your horse in the woods.

Jonathan: Across the lake in the woods? How could you possibly hear anything that far away through these thick stone walls?

Roderick: If you only knew what I can hear. The sounds torment me!

Narr 1: Jonathan stares at him, stunned. Roderick’s silken black hair is long and uncut and hangs about his face. A pallor has bleached his skin white, like the tree stems outside.

Roderick: You look at me with eyes of pity. I have changed, have I not?

Jonathan: What has happened to you? Your letter said you were ill with some unknown disease.

Roderick: Sit down and I shall tell you what I can.

Jonathan: Perhaps I should light a lamp first.

Narr 2: Jonathan leans towards the embers in the fireplace.

Roderick: (shouting) No! No light! Please! I cannot bear it!

Jonathan: All right, Roderick. Whatever you say. (He sits.)

Roderick: I know not what the illness is, only that it has affected my nervous system. The faintest light tortures my eyes. The odors of flowers make my stomach churn. I can wear only soft-textured, loose-fitting clothing. Otherwise my skin prickles as if stuck with a thousand pins. And food? I can swallow only the most tasteless gruels.

Jonathan: Surely, the doctor must—

Roderick: (interrupting) Doctors know nothing of what ails me!

Narr 3: Roderick stands and paces nervously.

Roderick: They do not hear what I hear. The slightest movements—the rustle of Mrs. Finley’s skirt on the floorboards, the ripples across the pond when the wind blows, the scratching of rats inside these stone walls…

Jonathan: Roderick, how can I help you? What can I do?

Narr 1: He collapses on the sofa once more. For a long time, he does not speak. Then he turns to Jonathan.
Roderick: Do you know what I fear most? This house. I am its prisoner.
Jonathan: That’s nonsense!
Roderick: I shall perish inside this house, as did my father and grandmother before me. Look at me, Jonathan. The noises, the odors, the lights have reduced me to a pitiful state.
Jonathan: Return with me to Boston. Surely, there are doctors at the university who—
Narr 2: Roderick raises his hand, silencing him.
Roderick: Listen. Do you hear it?
Jonathan: I don’t hear anything.
Roderick: Shhh! It is Madeline.
Narr 3: The door opens. A young woman steps inside.
Jonathan rises. He has heard Roderick speak of his sister, but he has never seen her until now.
Narr 1: Her silken black hair, white skin, and dark eyes are identical to Roderick’s.
Jonathan: I’d no idea you were twins!
Roderick: (rising) Sister?
Narr 2: She walks across the room, as if not seeing Jonathan or Roderick. She goes to a desk covered with books and papers. Roderick puts his arm around her.
Roderick: (kindly) You must return to your room. Come, I will take you.
Narr 3: Here eyes stare vacantly past Jonathan. With a shock, he realizes she is asleep. At the door, Roderick looks over his shoulder.
Roderick: (to Jonathan) Mrs. Finley will show you to your room. We will talk again in the morning.
Jonathan: Is there anything I can do?
Roderick: You have come. For now, that is enough. (He leaves.)

Scene 3

Narr 1: Jonathan steps from the house and breathes deeply the damp night air. He looks again at the wide crack in the foundation. When he touches the mortar between the stones, it crumbles like salt on his fingers.
Narr 2: Out from the shadows, where he has been waiting for his carriage, steps Dr. Cordwell.
Cordwell: If you have any sense, you will leave this place at once.
Jonathan: I’ve only just arrived!
Cordwell: Just the same, you can do nothing here. Leave this evil house while you’re able.
Jonathan: (laughing) Doctor, I am not frightened of a house. People are evil—not mortar and stone.
Cordwell: How well do you know the House of Usher?
Jonathan: As I told you earlier, Roderick and I are friends. We met at the university five years ago.
Cordwell: Yes, yes. But do you know him, really?
Jonathan: He was quiet, kept to himself. I know the men in his family were famous artists. When his mother died, Roderick left school and returned here to care for his sister.
Cordwell: They are the sole heirs. There are no other surviving Ushers.
Jonathan: What is wrong with Lady Madeline?
Cordwell: She suffers from catalepsy. It’s a rare disease.
Jonathan: I’ve heard of it. The body becomes completely paralyzed.
Cordwell: Not quite. The body loses its will to move. The trance may last a minute, an hour, a day.
Jonathan: What causes it?
Cordwell: Agitation. Nervousness. Some in my profession believe the disease is a form of…well, I shall say it plainly……mental illness.
Jonathan: Is there no hope for her?
Cordwell: Her disease is baffling but not fatal.
Jonathan: And Roderick?
Cordwell: Him? (scowls) He’s a hypochondriac whose imagination wraps him in illness.
Jonathan: You mean, nothing is—
Cordwell: Nothing is wrong with him physically, no. But—(tapping the side of his head)—up here, it’s a different story.
Narr. 3: The groom drives the horse and carriage to the front of the house. Before leaving, the doctor warns Jonathan.
Cordwell: I don’t doubt you mean well by coming here. But you can do no good. Leave in the morning if you know what is good for you.

Scene 4

Jonathan: Will Mr. Roderick be coming downstairs to breakfast this morning?
**Mrs. Finley**: Oh, no, sir. He always dines alone, what little he eats.

**Jonathan**: And Lady Madeline?

**Mrs. Finley**: She is not well either, poor thing.

**Narr 1**: Jonathan helps himself to sausage and a biscuit.

**Jonathan**: How long has Lady Madeline been walking in her sleep?

**Mrs. Finley**: Since she was a child.

**Jonathan**: And her catalepsy—has she suffered from that since childhood?

**Mrs. Finley**: I dare not speak of it, sir. I cook the day’s meals and mind my own business. At night, I go home to my cottage in the village.

**Jonathan**: I did not mean to pry. It’s just that I intend to take Roderick and his sister from this house. In Boston, university doctors will examine them.

**Mrs. Finley**: *(shocked)* Leave here? The lady is dying. She cannot travel.

**Jonathan**: That is not what her physician says.

**Mrs. Finley**: It is what Master Usher believes. *(glancing about to be certain no one is listening)* Mark my words. When she dies, it will surely kill him!

**Scene 5**

**Narr 2**: Later that morning, Jonathan persuades Roderick to walk outside. The sunshine is weak and watery, but Jonathan insists fresh air will be beneficial to Roderick. The friends walk and talk about the family illness.

**Roderick**: It runs in my family.

**Jonathan**: What is that?

**Roderick**: This melancholy. Sometimes I fear losing my mind.

**Narr 3**: They stand on the bridge, looking down at the rippled reflection of the house on the pond’s black face.

**Jonathan**: You spend too much time in this mansion of gloom. *(Quickly apologizes)* Forgive me, I didn’t mean to be rude.

**Roderick**: No, you are right. In fact, I have a theory about my illness and Madeline’s and the illnesses of my ancestors. Of course, the doctors laugh.

**Jonathan**: Tell me.

**Roderick**: It is the house—the fungus that clings to the stones, the mold in the air. It infects us. It is the source of our madness.

**Jonathan**: You and Madeline must return with me to Boston. At once!
Roderick: If only we could…
Jonathan: Tomorrow, I promise you. We shall leave here tomorrow.
Narr 1: The next morning, Jonathan dresses in his traveling clothes, anxious to be gone. When he opens the door, he finds Roderick trembling in the hall. His face is white with shock.
Jonathan: (alarmed) What is it? What has happened?
Roderick: She’s dead. My sister died in her sleep during the night.

Scene 6

Narr 2: Roderick languishes in grief on the worn sofa in his room.
Jonathan: I don’t understand why you cannot wait one day. The doctor should examine the body before burial.
Roderick: What good did he do her in life? None. He will not touch her now. I forbid it.
Jonathan: But perhaps an autopsy would reveal—
Roderick: No! We shall bury her ourselves in the family crypt. Tonight.
Narr 3: That evening, Jonathan helps Roderick carry the wooden coffin down the narrow steps to the cellar of the mansion. The dampness from the lake outside has caused mold to grow thickly over the crypt’s stone shelves.
Narr 1: The burial done, Jonathan returns to his room. Unable to sleep, he picks up a pen and writes in a notebook he brought with him.
Jonathan: (reading as he writes) How well I remember Mrs. Finley’s words—that Madeline’s death would kill Roderick. I cannot leave him now in this grief-stricken state. Perhaps in a few days more I can persuade him to leave with me.
Narr 2: For several days, Jonathan tries desperately to cheer his friend. But Roderick refuses even to step outside. The only activity that soothes him is literature. For hours at a time, Jonathan reads aloud from the many books upon the shelves.
Narr 3: At night, alone in his own room, Jonathan feels a growing helplessness. He writes:
Jonathan: I can see now that I was wrong to think I could cheer his dark mind. Worse, I feel creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of Roderick’s fantastic superstitions about this house.
Narr 1: He sets down his pen. He stands, paces, then returns again to the desk.
Jonathan: (writing) If I do not leave soon, I am afraid I too will become a prisoner of the House of Usher.

Scene 7

Narr 2: On the eighth day after the burial of Lady Madeline, Jonathan wakes suddenly during the night. He sits up, gasping.
Narr 3: Outside, a storm is approaching. He hears the tortured breath of the wind rising across the lake. The tattered draperies rustle uneasily. The moaning, creaking sounds within the house fill him with alarm.
Narr 1: He throws on his clothes and starts for the door. Just as he is about to undo the latch, a knock sounds.
Roderick: Jonathan, I must speak with you!
Narr 2: Jonathan opens the door. A mad hilarity is in Roderick’s eyes.
Roderick: Have you not seen it?
Narr 3: He hurries past Jonathan and throws open a window. The fury of the entering gust nearly lifts him off his feet.
Narr 1: The wild wind and racing clouds give the night a terrible beauty. A blood-red moon hangs low in the sky—now visible, now blotted by the knotted clouds.
Roderick: You must see it. Look!
Narr 2: Vapors rising from the dying lake glow in an unnatural light.
Roderick: Evil spirits enshroud the house! We are their prisoners.
Jonathan: It is only the gases rising from the lake!
Narr 3: Jonathan stares at Roderick. Grief for his dead twin has turned Roderick’s skin to wax. He looks near death himself.
Roderick: Something terrible has happened. Can you not feel it? Can you not hear it?
Jonathan: Let me close the window. The air is chilling and dangerous to you.
Narr 1: Jonathan struggles to close the window against the wind. Then he leads Roderick to the chair near the door.
Roderick: Do not leave me alone in this house!
Narr 2: Jonathan eyes the closed door. He could escape. He should. “Leave while you are able,” the doctor had warned him.
Narr 3: Roderick is rocking in the chair, as if in a trance. Jonathan squeezes his eyes closed. Then he turns to the table and an open book lying there.
Jonathan: I’ll read to you. Together, we’ll get through this terrible night.
Narr 1: His hands tremble as he turns the pages. The book’s title is Mad Trist, a story of a knight named Ethelred who forces his way into the home of a hermit during—coincidentally—a terrible storm.
Jonathan: (reading) Feeling the rain upon his shoulder and fearing the rising of the tempest, Ethelred uplifted his battle-ax and—
Narr 2: Outside, a crash of thunder shakes the very foundation of the House of Usher.
Jonathan: (reading)—smashed the wooden plankings of the door. Then with his gauntleted hand, he cracked and ripped away the wood. The noise of the dry and hollow splintering echoed throughout the forest.
Narr 3: Jonathan stops reading. From a distant part of the mansion, he thinks he hears the very same sounds as described in the book—wood ripping, splitting.
Roderick: Do you not hear it?
Jonathan: I heard…..something.
Roderick: (sobbing) Oh, pity me!
Jonathan: It is only the wind. (reading again) The good Ethelred, now entering within the door, was amazed to discover a dragon with its fiery tongue standing guard before a treasure of gold and silver.
Narr 1: A muffled scream seems to echo somewhere in the dark House of Usher.
Roderick: (mumbling) Not hear it? Yes, I hear it! I have heard it.
Narr 2: Jonathan too has heard the scream. But that is impossible. The servants have all left for the night. No one is in the house but he and Roderick.
Jonathan: (reading more quickly) On the wall there hung a shield of shining brass engraved with this motto—Who entereth herein, a conquerer hath bin; Who slayeth the dragon, the shield he shall win.
Roderick: (babbling) I hear it and have heard it, many minutes, many hours, many days.
Jonathan: (reading) And Ethelred struck the head of the dragon, which fell before him, and gave up his pesty breath with a shriek so horrid and harsh and piercing—

Narr 3: Jonathan lowers the book. The sound is unmistakable now—a distant but harsh screaming coming from the chambers below, a woman’s voice!

Narr 1: Roderick rocks, his eyes fixed on the door. A sickly smile quivers about his lips. When Jonathan puts his hand upon his shoulder, Roderick shudders violently.

Roderick: Said I not that my senses were acute? I tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin.

Jonathan: What?!

Roderick: I heard them days ago, but I dared not speak! I dared not!

Jonathan: Roderick, what are you saying?

Roderick: (crying) We have put her living into the tomb?

Jonathan: Lady Madeline? But I saw her myself. She was dead!

Roderick: (babbling) And now—tonight—Ethelred—ha! ha!—the breaking of the door and the deathcry of the dragon. No, it was her struggles to escape her tomb, her coffin lid, not the hermit’s door, breaking open.

Narr 2: Suddenly, a violent gust slams open the window again.

Roderick: Oh, where shall I fly? Will she not be here soon? Is she not hurrying to punish me for my haste?

Jonathan: Stop this insane talk! Madeline is dead!

Roderick: Madman! You think I am a madman, but I can hear the heavy and horrible beating of her heart!

Narr 3: He springs to his feet.

Roderick: I tell you that she now stands outside that door!

Narr 1: As if moved by the frantic energy of Roderick’s voice, the heavy oak door swings slowly open.

Roderick: See! She comes for me!

Jonathan: It is the wind. The storm.

Narr 2: Roderick’s eyes are wide and terrified. He points.

Narr 3: Lady Madeline stands in the doorway. Blood stains her white robes, the evidence of her bitter struggle to claw her way out of her tomb.

Madeline: (moaning) Ahhhhh!

Narr 1: As she reels upon the threshold, Roderick clutches his chest.

Roderick: Madeline! Sister! Forgive me!
Narr 2: With a low, moaning cry, Madeline falls heavily inward upon her brother.

Roderick: *(screaming in terror)* “Ahhhhhh!”

Narr 3: As they both fall to the floor, silent….

Narr 1: Jonathan stares, aghast.

Narr 2: Neither Lady Madeline nor Roderick moves. A violent bolt of lightening pierces the sky like a crooked finger.

Narr 3: Jonathan flees—down the dark hall and the shadowy stairs, out of the house and into the night.

Narr 2: On the bridge, he stops, panting. The house and its shadows are behind him. Suddenly, a wild light shoots from the sky and strikes the roof. The lightning zigzags down along the crack in the stones.

Narr 3: Jonathan hears a long, frenzied shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters. It is the fierce breath of a whirlwind bursting from the clouds.

Narr 1: As Jonathan watches in terror, the mansion walls explode, crashing down upon themselves.

Narr 2: And then all is silent again. The deep and dank lake closes sullenly and silently over the fragments of the House of Usher.