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**PREGNANT THOUGHTS ON "THE FALL OF THE
HOUSE OF USHER"**

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Although many previous critics have darkly hinted at an incestuous relationship between Roderick and Madeline Usher, none has intimated that such a union might have resulted in Madeline's becoming pregnant. Therefore, let us squarely confront the viable, interesting possibility that Madeline was pregnant with Roderick Usher's child.

Obviously, in this regard, the opinion of the physician closest to the case must be given serious consideration. On the occasion of their first meeting, the narrator thought that the Usher family doctor "wore a mingled expression of low cunning and perplexity," a countenance that would be highly out of keeping with a death-bed situation, but that would be appropriate (albeit in poor taste) if the physician suspected pregnancy but was puzzled as to the identity of the father, the most obvious candidate being the valet, an unthinkable social circumstance. Of course, critics who place little or no store in the narrator's reliability will not be slow to insist that his description of the physician's countenance is highly subjective and, therefore, suspect.¹

As I am loath to belabor the point, let us consider the physician's "unusual diagnosis," which, because it is not a diagnosis at all, but rather an enumeration of symptoms pointing to a cause left politely unstated, is very unusual indeed. The symptoms of Madeline's so-called malady are "a settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character." Sol De Lee, M.D., lists depression, physical and mental indifference, and weight loss as common disorders of early pregnancy (35, 44).² "In pregnancy," he adds, "many women faint or lose consciousness for a moment. They may become pale, but not necessarily so, and the pulse may or may not be affected" (65). Although frequency of urination, resulting from the enlarged womb pressing upon the bladder, is another early symptom of pregnancy, Madeline (we are told) had "steadily borne up against the pressure of her malady." Equally curious is Roderick's manifestation of an aversion to certain sounds and textures, the odors of flowers, and all but "the most insipid foods"—symptoms which, considering how he and Madeline were twins between whom existed "sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature," encourage our suspicion that the hapless father, having

succumbed to his own pregnant thought, is experiencing the physiological and psychological disorders of pregnancy in his own body.

In view of these observations, dare we suspect that, while Roderick's "unceasingly agitated mind was laboring with some oppressive secret," Madeline was laboring with something of a more tangible and immediately disconcerting nature in the vault below?

Dare we infer from Roderick's reluctance to inter Madeline in the "remote and exposed" family plot a well-grounded fear that the local physicians, having made "certain obtrusive and eager inquiries," might rob the grave and perform an autopsy, thereby exposing the obtrusive pregnancy that Roderick had gone to such pains to put out of sight and mind? Dare we associate Roderick's "hollow-sounding enunciation" with a drum and all that a drum implies in this increasingly maternal context? Dare we read a not-so-hidden meaning in certain "prominent" objects in Roderick's studio, or in the narrator's curious reference to the "physique" of the walls and turrets?

Dare we induce from Roderick's failure to fly to the aid of his imprisoned sister, when he first heard "it" stirring in the vault, an unwillingness to pry the lid off a coffin from which, horror of horrors, Madeline might spring up with a miscarried fetus—with *it*—clutched by one leg in her bruised and quaking fist?

Dare we gaze transfixed upon the blood on Madeline's white robes and ask ourselves two unpleasant but painfully obvious questions: did the lady break out of the coffin and vault with her obtruding stomach, or is the blood evidence of "some bitter struggle" other than her exertions to free herself, a struggle which can not be voiced openly in polite nineteenth-century society, which can only be alluded to by puns and innuendo carefully implanted in the text?

Finally, what are we to make of that wholly unambiguous image of a blood-red moon pushing its head through a widening vaginal crack as the House of Usher, shuddering with the contractions of childbirth, breaks water in a tooth-grinding catharsis? Think it if you dare: the House of Usher is not a head with eyes, but a womb with a view.

NOTES

¹Ready reference to much criticism of "Usher" may be located in Craig Howes, "Burke, Poe and 'Usher': The Sublime and Rising Woman," *ESQ*, 31 (1985), 186-189; "'The Fall of the House of Usher' and Elegiac Romance," *SLJ*, 19 (1986), 68-69. Benjamin Franklin Fisher IV, "Playful 'Germanism' in 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" *Ruined Eden of the Present—Hawthorne, Melville and*

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Poe: Critical Essays in Honor of Darrel Abel, ed. G. R. Thompson and Virgil L. Lokke (West Lafayette, Ind., 1981), pp. 354-374, points out many reasons to consider the narrator unreliable and the tale overall rife with hoax elements. See also James W. Gargano, "'The Fall of the House of Usher': An Apocalyptic Vision," *UMSE*, n.s. 3 (1982), 53-63.

²De Lee, Sol T. *Safeguarding Motherhood* (Philadelphia & Toronto, 1969).