

The Fall of the House of Usher

by

Evan Quinlan

Based on the short story by Edgar Allan Poe

This work is licensed under Evan Quinlan
the Creative Commons evan.quinlan@gmail.com
Attribution-NoDerivs 3.0 603-305-9009
Unported License. To view a
copy of this license, visit
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/3.0/>
or send a letter to Creative
Commons, 171 Second Street,
Suite 300, San Francisco,
California, 94105, USA.

Cast of Characters

<u>Roderick Usher</u> :	The last in a long line of aristocrats, living in a dilapidated mansion.
<u>Rose Smith</u> :	Head house maid and nurse to Roderick Usher.
<u>Vincent Young</u> :	Childhood friend of Roderick Usher.
<u>Madeline Usher</u> :	Roderick's afflicted sister.
<u>Eliza</u> :	A maid in Roderick's employ.
<u>Storybook Characters</u> :	Characters in "The Mad Trist of Sir Launcelot Canning", including Ethelred the Champion, the Hermit, the Dragon, and the Acolytes.

Scene 1

RODERICK USHER lies prostrate upon the couch. Suddenly he sits partially upright. His hair is unkempt; his eyes are dark; he seems on edge and not at all well-rested. Roderick cocks his head to one side and listens. Though no sound is perceptible, he smiles and his demeanor seems to relax.

RODERICK

Rose! Rose!
(Pause.)
Rose!

ROSE SMITH enters carrying a tray, on top of which sits a jar of rubbing alcohol, a cloth, a syringe, and a vial.

ROSE

Yes, Roderick?

RODERICK

(Seeing the vial.)
Oh no, put those horrid things away. Where's my sister?

ROSE

I've not seen her.

RODERICK

Take back the medicine; my guest has arrived.

ROSE

Not yet, he hasn't. Sleeve up, please. Thirty seconds and you'll be in a proper state to receive visitors.

RODERICK

A proper state! I sometimes wonder if you understand the nature of a proper state. Now listen, woman! Put that away! Can't you hear him coming?

Rose sets the tray on the nightstand by the sofa. She tips the rubbing alcohol onto the cloth.

ROSE

Sit up properly so I can help you.

RODERICK

Help me. If you truly wish to help me, stay away! He is coming and I will not have his first impression of me in twelve years--

(CONTINUED)

The young ELIZA enters and stops by the door, assuming a posture of practiced humility.

ROSE

Yes, Eliza, what is it?

ELIZA

I am sorry for the interruption. Vincent Young has arrived from Oxford shire and wishes to call upon the master.

Roderick stands eagerly, straightening his jacket and rather clumsily running his hand through his hair in an effort to quell it.

RODERICK

Yes, of course! Let him enter!

VINCENT YOUNG steps into the room, holding his hat and cloak in his arms. Upon seeing Roderick, he hands his hat and cloak to Eliza and spreads his arms in a welcoming gesture.

RODERICK

Vincent!

VINCENT

Roderick, my old friend! It's been far too long!

RODERICK

(With uncommon enthusiasm.)

You look wonderful, my boy! Truly, truly wonderful! And just as I remembered you! Not a day older, it would seem. Not a day!

The two friends approach and hug warmly. Once apart, Vincent takes in the countenance of his friend, noticing for the first time the worn and disheveled nature of Roderick's appearance.

RODERICK

I can see my letters couldn't prepare you for the extremity of my decline. You can see I've changed for the worse.

VINCENT

No, no! You look good, Roderick. Like a man who's lived well. Dignified in your years.

RODERICK

How kind of you. I can tell already that your stay here will do me much good.

(Leaning forward somewhat conspiratorially.)

I am glad you came.

ROSE

Eliza will see to it that your things are moved to the study.

Eliza bows her head and exits. As she does so, Rose moves back over to the tray on the nightstand and proceeds once again to wet the cloth with rubbing alcohol. Roderick's posture slumps in frustration and he throws a despairing look at Vincent.

ROSE

Now sit down.

RODERICK

Might I please retain even a shred of dignity? Perhaps this can wait, Rose.

ROSE

Health does not wait. I'm sure Master Young wouldn't want you to bring harm to yourself on his account.

VINCENT

Of course not. Nothing to be ashamed of, Roderick, it's just a dose of medicine.

RODERICK

(Suddenly angry.)

Like hell it is!

ROSE

You're getting irritable. Have your shot.

VINCENT

(To Rose.)

Perhaps it can wait.

ROSE

Pardon me, sir: no, it cannot.

Victor raises his eyebrows. Roderick marches melodramatically to the couch and sits. Rose rubs his arm with the cloth. Roderick looks away from her and begins nervously and uncomfortably rearranging objects, including a book, on the nightstand at his side of the sofa, into some new configuration. Vincent, a bit indignant, walks over to the bookshelf and busies himself inspecting Roderick's many other volumes. Rose fills the syringe with medicine from the vial.

VINCENT

Still an avid collector of books, I see.

RODERICK

Yes.

ROSE

Now hold still.

Rose injects the medicine into Roderick's arm. Roderick's eyes squeeze shut and he holds his breath. After a couple of seconds he pounds the nightstand with his free arm and knocks the book onto the floor.

ROSE

Oh, stop it.

VINCENT

"Ververt et Chartreuse", "Heaven and Hell", "The Subterranean Voyage of Nicholas Klimm"...

At last, Rose removes the syringe from Roderick's arm. Roderick begins to breathe again, panting. Rose immediately begins gathering the medical supplies back onto the tray.

ROSE

All done.

Rose picks up the tray, spends a moment observing Roderick, who carefully does not make eye-contact with her, then faces Vincent.

ROSE

(To Vincent.)

If you need anything, sir, Eliza will be by again in a few minutes. Feel free to make yourself a drink; the bar is fully stocked. I'll make up your bed.

VINCENT

I'd prefer the couch, please.

ROSE

A bed would do better for you, sir.

VINCENT

Pardon me, Miss: no, it would not.

Rose acknowledges the heavy irony then exits, leaving Vincent and Roderick alone. After an uncomfortable silence, Roderick speaks.

RODERICK

I feel everything too much.

VINCENT

So you mentioned. In your letter. A "morbid acuteness of the senses," you wrote. An "agitation of the soul." It worried me to read. Are you well?

RODERICK

No. And this damned medicine--pardon my language--these vile rituals practiced by the nurses and witch doctors of today... they do no good.

VINCENT

What can help you?

RODERICK

Very little, I fear. I shall perish--I must perish--in this... deplorable folly. We were once so proud, we Ushers.

Roderick stands. He is unstable at first but as he walks to the window he regains a semblance of his earlier, feeble but dignified posture.

RODERICK

Did you notice the grounds as you passed through?

VINCENT

Yes, of course. It was growing dark but I saw them.

RODERICK

And what was your impression? Did you notice anything... strange?

VINCENT

(Unsure.)

No, nothing out of place.

RODERICK

Not out of place. Extraordinary, perhaps? Even... disturbing? To the mind. Or soul.

VINCENT

No. Well... yes. I mean, it is a dull and dreary day. And I was alone. I will admit I felt some trepidation as I approached.

RODERICK

Why?

VINCENT

A silly reason.

RODERICK

Was it the lake?

VINCENT

Why, yes. I perceived I saw--though it must have been a dream--a strange... vapor... rising up from it, or from the decaying trees around it. I admit it frightened me, but I'm sure it was my imagination.

RODERICK

It was not your imagination. It is this place. The water. The trees.

Roderick moves away from the window to the table upon which sits, among other things, the violin.

VINCENT

Surely this property has done you well. It's served your family for centuries.

RODERICK

Certainly it has served my family. But it has done more--much more--to slowly annihilate it.

Roderick picks up the violin.

VINCENT

What a singular notion, Roderick.

RODERICK

I'll show you.

Roderick begins to play the violin. The melody is slow and sad, yet somewhat harsh in its tonality.

RODERICK

(Still playing.)

Go to the window.

Vincent hesitates for a moment, then does as he is told.

RODERICK

Don't look back. Tell me what you see.

VINCENT

It's dark; I see only the recess of the window and your reflection in it. And the vines that grip the trellis. And beyond that, the lake.

RODERICK

Describe it.

VINCENT

Describe it, in a literary sense? ...Ghastly. Dreamlike? Sullen. Insidious. Ah, I'm no poet. I'm sorry, Roderick, I don't see where this is--

RODERICK

(In a loud whisper.)

Don't turn around.

MADELINE USHER steps softly and quietly, like a ghost, into the room. Roderick locks eyes with her, never ceasing to play the violin. Seeing Madeline in the window's reflection, Vincent inhales sharply and stiffens. Madeline is pale and emaciated. She walks stiffly; though it is evident she once possessed a youthful grace, her gait, now, is halting, as if her joints refuse to move properly. She stumbles toward Roderick and begins to make soft noises like singing but that have a haunting and moan-like quality. Eventually she gets to Roderick and her arms reach out to grip his shoulder. She leans her head against his stiffer arm, which holds the violin, and seems to lose herself in the music. Finally, Vincent turns around.

VINCENT

Good god; Madeline?

Madeline gives a cry of shock and embarrassment, realizing for the first time that someone else besides herself and Roderick is in the room. Roderick ceases his playing immediately and guides Madeline, stumbling, to the door.

VINCENT

I'm sorry, I-- I--

At last Roderick delivers Madeline safely out of the room. Breathing heavily--perhaps with a hint of indignation--he strides to the table and replaces the violin.

VINCENT

I didn't mean--

RODERICK

It's alright. I should have better informed you. I shouldn't have expected you to understand simply from reading my letters.

VINCENT

No, of course not. It's too horrible for words. Is she--can she cope well enough?

RODERICK

Her doctors are perplexed. After weeks of invasive scrutiny they cannot offer any helpful reason or explanation of her condition. They profess only hollow diagnoses and comfortless rhetoric. Damn them!

Uncontrollable sorrow seems to take hold of Roderick. His voice cracks as he speaks and he seems to descend suddenly into a wild state of emotion.

RODERICK

I tell you, Vincent, she does not deserve this! To decay--to rot slowly to nothing--in this sinking, crumbling house! And what's more... I am condemned to suffer every agony she suffers--subject to every sensation of her intolerable state! Every sound, every smell, every taste of her broken breath--I am haunted by it day and night! And 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... It is the absolute and unrelenting effect of slow and unnatural terror; it is Fear itself!

Vincent listens, transfixed and aghast at the words of his boyhood friend. Roderick observes Vincent's fright and quickly calms himself. After a moment he even forces a smile.

RODERICK

But I am sorry to frighten you. Where are my manners? I'm sorry to force these unhappy matters upon you thus.

VINCENT

But that's why I'm here, old friend. That is precisely why I came all this way. Together we will drive these sorrows away. You'll see.

RODERICK

Yes. I hope you're right. I really do. And now I must retire to bed. You'll be wanting Eliza to fix up the couch for you?

VINCENT

Yes. I'll sleep here, if that's alright. I never can rest very soundly in a strange bed.

RODERICK

And what could be stranger than a bed in the House of Usher?

(He chuckles.)

I'll see that some bedding is brought for you. Goodnight, old friend.

VINCENT

Goodnight, Roderick.

Roderick exits. Vincent sits on the sofa. He leans down, picks up the book from the floor and replaces it on the nightstand.

Scene 2

Vincent is slumped over the table, his sleeping face pressed against the pages of an open book. A half-empty glass sits near his hand. Rose enters and sees the unconscious Vincent. She quietly approaches him and lifts the glass away from his hand.

ROSE

Master Young.

Vincent awakes with a sudden jerk. His hand passes through the exact spot where the glass stood a moment ago. Rose smiles disingenuously and replaces the glass with care.

ROSE

Sleeping so will ruin your back, Master Young.

VINCENT

I couldn't sleep. I cannot sleep, of late, since Madeline fell ill. She, bed-ridden and me, bed-less. Pray tell: how is she?

ROSE

(Pause.)

She is dead. Sir.

VINCENT

No. Oh, no, no, no, no. Usher... Where is Roderick?

ROSE

He's with the body, sir. I would not disturb him.

Vincent stands.

VINCENT

I must see him. He needs me.

ROSE

Please sit, Master Young. Are you a man of medicine?

VINCENT

No, of course not.

ROSE

Then there is nothing to be done.

VINCENT

There is nothing to be done for the Lady Madeline, but there is a bewildered and sorrowful man whose soul has been rent by insoluble grief and I would see it tended!

ROSE

Sir, I urge you remain calm.

VINCENT

Why are you so cold?

ROSE

I am no stranger to grief, Master Young. You think perhaps I am immune to the suffering of your friend? Quite the opposite.

VINCENT

Then why leave him alone in his time of need?

ROSE

It's not that he must be left alone, but rather that you must not speak to him until you have heard what I have to say.

(Pause.)

If it be your will.

VINCENT

Speak, then. Ere I go to him.

ROSE

The master Usher, though rattled by grief, has in another sense already overcome that effect and begun to make plans not for the earthly burial of the Lady Madeline but rather the placing of her corpse for a full fortnight in a locked vault within the house.

VINCENT

What? Why?

ROSE

Those same deplorable aberrations of mind that lead him to believe in evil vapors and the sentience of green matter, those which twist his perception of the world into an insoluble paradox of comfortless enmity, have now led him to believe at the same time that his sister is both dead and not dead.

VINCENT

I don't understand. Is she dead or isn't she?

ROSE

Of course she is dead, Master Young. To a sane man, she is dead.

VINCENT

Roderick Usher is as sane as you or I.

ROSE

Is that your professional opinion?

VINCENT

That is my human opinion.

ROSE

Very well. Then I implore you to appeal to the sanity of Roderick Usher and stop him from undertaking this hollow and ill-fated task.

VINCENT

Why should I? What if she lives? Should we bury the poor girl alive? And what if she's dead? Will it do any harm to keep her in the vault?

ROSE

It will indeed! Roderick Usher tears down the remnants of his diminishing life by sustaining his indulgence of lurid and frivolous obsessions. This home needs a master free of superstition! Madeline Usher must die tonight and remain dead!

VINCENT

I know not why or how but it seems clear to me that where your enduring heart should beat there is a stone. Miss Smith, the Lady Madeline shall be placed in the vault, exactly as her brother wishes, yet she will still be dead and gone, I assure you. Her coffin shall be nailed shut, the vault locked, and the hall without darkened and then my friend--your master--Roderick Usher, shall begin to heal. And in good time he shall prevail over this monstrous blemish on his long and full life. Now if you'll excuse me.

Vincent goes to leave.

ROSE

Roderick Usher knows not what he desires, coffins and chains or no. He knows not whether his sister should be dead or alive, nor which truth will yield him the least pain.

VINCENT

If there's pain, let him feel it. For God's sake, Rose. Let the man feel.

Vincent exits.

Scene 3

The sound of howling wind. Vincent paces back and forth in the dark sitting room. His clothes are in a state of dishevelment, having been worn for far too long. He looks tired. Vincent stops and looks at the covered easel in the corner. Walking to it, he removes the draped cloth and inspects the painting underneath eagerly, as if humoring some vain hope that the study of the work might somehow ease his anxiety. The sound of wood creaking violently. Vincent looks up at the ceiling then down at the floor with trepidation on his face. The sound of wood creaking, much quieter and gentler this time. Vincent turns to see Roderick usher enter carrying a lamp. He has a wild look in his eyes and an air of excitement half-way between childlessness and madness.

RODERICK

Have you not seen it?

VINCENT

Eh? Your painting of the buried crypt? Quite haunting, Roderick. What inspired it?

RODERICK

No! You have not seen it, then? But stay; you shall!

Roderick places his lamp on one of the nightstands and goes to the window.

VINCENT

Don't let the storm in!

Roderick opens the window; an impetuously furious gust of wind tears through the room, bringing with it a luminous and distinctly visible gas that bathes the room in an unnatural light. Roderick

raises his arms in a kind of reverence, overwhelmed by both beauty and terror. Vincent rushes to the window.

RODERICK

Can you smell it? The smell of fear, of decay!

VINCENT

Roderick!

Vincent shuts the window. Silence.

RODERICK

Tonight they shall all achieve their purpose.

VINCENT

Who shall? Roderick, you're speaking nonsense.

RODERICK

The weeds drink of the lake... the weeds decay... the poison becomes vapor...

Vincent takes Roderick's arm and gently guides him to a comfortable chair. Roderick sits, still in a daze.

VINCENT

The miasma you behold, which came in through the window, is merely a natural, electrical phenomenon.

Roderick suddenly cocks his head.

VINCENT

What?

The sound of wood bending and creaking under the strain of the gale.

RODERICK

(Suddenly terrified.)

Do you... hear it?

VINCENT

Yes, I do, old friend. This is a cracked and ancient house; you must see it renovated soon or I fear the worst.

RODERICK

You fear it, do you?

Roderick, to Vincent's puzzlement, breaks into laughter. He stands and, still laughing oddly--as if at some private joke--walks to the bar and pours himself a drink, mixing in approximately three-fourths water.

RODERICK

(Recovering from laughter.)

I have to dilute everything nowadays. Nothing but the most insipid foods for the last son of Usher.

Roderick suddenly goes rigid again, as if listening for some imagined sound. His eyes are filled with dread and his lip quivers tremulously for a moment. After a moment he remembers Vincent and looks at the young man. Vincent is visibly moved by Roderick's odd behavior and studies him uncertainly. Roderick chuckles guiltily.

RODERICK

Phantoms of thought, my boy.

Vincent glances around for something with which to tie the conversation back to sanity. He spots the book on the nightstand that Usher had knocked to the floor over a week ago.

VINCENT

Shall I read to you? Might that calm you on this sleepless night?

RODERICK

Yes... yes.

Vincent hastens to the nightstand, seizes the book, and returns to his seat.

VINCENT

I have here your favorite... uh... "The Mad Trist of Sir Launcelot Canning"!

RODERICK

Splendid. Splendid.

At Vincent's beckoning, Roderick shuffles back to the armchair and sits, though he is still visibly shaken. Vincent flips through the volume, looking for a passage that might keep Roderick's attention.

VINCENT

Ah, here we are.

(Reading aloud.)

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

VINCENT (cont'd)

"And Ethelred, who was by nature of a doughty heart, and who was now mighty withal, on account of the powerfulness of the wine which he had drunken, waited no longer to hold parley with the hermit, who, in sooth, was of an obstinate and maliceful turn..."

Across the room, the characters of the story, ETHELRED THE CHAMPION and the HERMIT, enter and begin to act out the story in time to Vincent's words. Roderick stares intently but vacantly at Vincent as he reads.

VINCENT

"...but, feeling the rain upon his shoulders, and fearing the rising of the tempest, uplifted his mace outright, and, with blows, made quickly room in the plankings of the door for his gauntleted hand; and now pulling therewith sturdily, he so cracked, and ripped, and tore all asunder, that the noise of the dry and hollow-sounding wood alarumed and reverberated throughout the forest."

The enactment of the story abruptly falls dark and grows still. The distant sound of wood cracking and splintering. The reverberation from the sound lingers for a moment. Roderick's demeanor remains unchanged from one of distracted hearkening. Vincent pauses for a moment, then shakes off his mingled wonder and continues to read. The actors of the story are lit once again. Enter the DRAGON character into the scene.

VINCENT

"But the good champion Ethelred, now entering within the door, was sore enraged and amazed to perceive no signal of the maliceful hermit; but, in the stead thereof, a dragon of a scaly and prodigious demeanor; And Ethelred uplifted his mace, and struck upon the head of the dragon, which fell before him, and gave up his pesty breath, with a shriek so horrid and harsh that Ethelred had fain to close his ears with his hands against the dreadful noise of it."

The imagined scene goes dark. The protracted sound of distant, grating metal is heard, mixed with what sounds like a hideous scream. The noise dies slowly, leaving Vincent with an expression of wild amazement and Roderick with the beginnings of a frail and bitter chuckle. Vincent continues to read the narrative, but this time with a hint of desperate resolve. He stands, as the players are lit once again, moving toward the corner of the

(CONTINUED)

room. The players shift position to the raised upstage platform. Two ACOLYTES hold the shining brass shield, others kneel around it in reverence. Ethelred approaches them.

VINCENT

"And now, the champion, having escaped from the terrible fury of the dragon, approached valorously over the silver pavement of the castle to where there hung upon the wall a shield of shining brass; which in sooth tarried not for his full coming, but fell down at his feet upon the silver floor, with a mighty great and terrible ringing sound."

The story darkens once again, but this time remains bathed in the same eerie glow of the lake-vapors as the rest of the sitting room. The sound of a distant, hollow, metallic, and clangorous, yet apparently muffled, reverberation, as if the crashing of some metal object to a stone floor, is heard.

VINCENT

(Astonished and terrified.)

Roderick. What are those sounds?

RODERICK

Now you hear it? Yes, I hear it, and have heard it. Long--long--long--many minutes, many hours, many days, have I heard it--yet I dared not--oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am! I dared not--I dared not speak! We have put her living in the tomb!

Vincent stands paralyzed with fear.

RODERICK

Said I not that my senses were acute? 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! And now--tonight--Ethelred!

(A ghastly, halting laugh escapes him.)

The breaking of the hermit's door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangor of the shield--

VINCENT

No.

Vincent lets the book slip through his hands and drop to the floor. The sound of the storm picks up again, crescendoing as Roderick's revelation sinks in.

RODERICK

Say, rather, the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault! Oh, whither shall I fly? Will she not be here anon? Is she not hurrying to upbraid me for my haste? Have I not heard her footstep on the stair? Do I not distinguish that heavy and horrible beating of her heart? Madman!

Roderick springs to his feet. Madeline Usher enters and creeps into the middle of the platform amid the players of the epic, who remain deathly still. Her appearance is cadaverous; her hair is tossed into furious tangles; her black eyes shine ferally; her white robes are stained with blood and grime; her fingers bleed; her skin is pallid; her posture is rigid and conveys a raging yet silent, icy hatred.

RODERICK

Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door!

Vincent at last beholds Madeline and shrieks with fright, stumbling backward against whatever furniture of the room is behind him. Madeline, with raw and vicious anger, lunges at Roderick, who raises his arms partly in fear and partly in a gesture of forgiveness. Ethelred and the acolytes take hold of the end of a large, black cloth and trail behind Madeline as she lurches toward her brother. Just as she pulls him to the floor, shrieking, she, Roderick, Ethelred, and the acolytes become shrouded in the dark material. Vincent watches in horror for only a moment, lacking the wits to do anything else, then races for the door through which Madeline had come. At once, all lights, even the glow of the miasma, flicker out, except a single light on Vincent. Silence. He turns and speaks as if recounting the event to a listener, weeks after the fact.

VINCENT

From that chamber, and from that mansion, I fled aghast. The storm was still abroad in all its wrath as I found myself riding back the way I had come. Suddenly there shot along the path a wild light, and I turned to see whence a gleam so unusual could have issued. The radiance was that of the full, setting, and blood-red moon, which now shone vividly through a once barely discernible fissure in the wall of that vast house, extending from the roof, in a

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

VINCENT (cont'd)

zigzag direction, to the base. While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened. My brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls come rushing asunder--there was a long, tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters--and the deep and dank lake at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the House of Usher.

THE END