Descartes' Fallacy: How linking mental and physical diagnosis can illuminate Southern Gothic themes

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The Cartesian mind-body duality is one of modern medicine's greatest fallacies. The mind-body duality asserts that the nature of the mind is completely separate from the nature of the body (Skirry). The separation of mind and body is not only a false but a dangerous assertion. Dissociating ourselves from the overlap between cognitive and corporeal capacities limits our ability to treat either illness and of course, mental and physical illness tend to cross over in unexpected ways. For instance, anxiety can present itself through trouble breathing, chest pains, chills, or overheating (Raypole, 2021). Depression can manifest through decreased pain tolerance, muscle aches, eye problems, or digestive issues (Fraga, 2019). Our body has a wonderful way of bringing these altered mental states to our attention before we might realize something is wrong, just as our subconscious is aware of physical issues before they manifest fully. Mental illness is incredibly complex and dynamic in this way.

This phenomenon of the overlap of physical and mental states is prominent in "The Fall of the House of Usher" by Edgar Allan Poe (1839) and "Everything That Rises Must Converge" by Flannery O'Connor (1965). Both short stories blend physical and mental overlap with inherently Southern Gothic themes such as the fixation on a false golden age and the stagnation of family lines. Each follows the same exact formula: first, a character is experiencing a sort of physical deterioration; second, their lack of touch with reality reveals the origin of their disposition; next, their physical state deteriorates to an extreme; and finally, the character experiences a climactic, gruesome death due to their separation from reality. In a comparison of "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Everything that Rises Must Converge," Julian's mother and Usher follow this exact formula. Both of these stories together reveal the absurdity of the Cartesian mind-body duality. The intersection between the mental and physical dispositions of Usher and Julian's mother, resulting in their overly dramatic deaths, manifest in the way neither character is willing to accept the loss of former stability and comfort, ultimately revealing the inherent danger in the Southern tendency to resist the progression of time.

Though Edgar Allan Poe died before the Civil War, which is arguably the origin of Southern Gothic literature, his stories, as well as his life, mirror Southern Gothic themes beautifully. His abandonment by his parents, his struggles with addiction, and his mysterious death all lend themselves to the darker Gothic motifs. "The Fall of the House of Usher," for example, is set in the landscape of Europe rather than in the American South; however, the story itself is incredibly revealing when analyzed through a Southern Gothic lens. For instance, if the European castle were a Southern mansion on a family plantation, the hierarchical structure of the family, as well as the generational decay, would be considered in a new light, revealing deeper connections between "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Everything that Rises Must Converge."

The story itself revolves around the narrator's attempts to protect his friend Usher from falling into madness. Usher is living in his family house alone with his sister. He invites his childhood friend to come stay with him for a while while he recovers from a mysterious mental fugue. The

overlap between Usher's mental and physical symptoms eventually manifests in the climactic moment of the story, and the Southern Gothic repercussions of his stagnation in the family home.

Through the observations made by Usher's childhood friend, the narrator, a lot is revealed about Usher's cerebral-corporeal battle. Some of these observations include the ways in which Usher is experiencing "a morbid acuteness of the senses" (5). He can experience only "the most insipid food," "garments of certain texture," and "peculiar sounds from stringed instruments" (5). His sensitivity is borderline toddler-like in the way he is horrified by anything that is not gentle, soothing, or calm. He desires to return to a former stage of his life, just as a baby can only eat bland foods, listen to soft sounds, and wear gentle clothing. These physical symptoms are manifestations of his desire to revert back to a younger form of himself. His age-related regression is only the top layer of Usher's unconscious desire to assume a version of a past state.

It is only later revealed that the origin of his mental despair is due to the impending death of his sister. This much "more natural and far more palpable origin" is "admitted, however, [...] with hesitation" (5). Even Usher's hesitation to reveal the true affliction of his mental disposition demonstrates his hesitancy to come to terms with his stark reality: the dissolution of the family line. If his sister dies, he will become "the last of the ancient race of the Ushers" (6). Her decay highlights how his family home and familial way of life are crumbling before his eyes, and he is overly sensitive to the dissolution; however, he refuses to come to terms with that reality. Once his sister does die, he refuses to give her a proper burial, "preserving her corpse for a fortnight" instead (9). Usher is so far removed from his reality that he is unable to part with the corpse of his sister: the last beacon of hope for the family. The South relies heavily on the daughters of prominent families to continue the family line. His sister was the only one left who could produce a new generation of Ushers. Without her, all the responsibility lies on him. Even if Usher does have children, the line would be corrupted by outside blood, so that his heir would not be a "pure Usher." His out-of-touch mental state makes him vulnerable to being consumed by his fantasy: to rejoin the Usher family line. Unfortunately, the only way he can reunite with them is through death.

Due to Usher's mental disconnect, his physical condition rapidly deteriorates. He turns from overly sensitive to abjectly aimless: "His ordinary occupations [are] neglected or forgotten. He roam[s] [...] with hurried, unequal, and objectless step [...] The luminousness of his eye [has] utterly gone out" (10). Usher becomes a shell of his former self. In his final moments, he awaits his death with open arms, jumping up, "as if he [is] giving up his soul" as the corpse of his sister breaks down his bedroom door. In his final climactic moment, the remaining two Ushers rejoin their departed family as "[Lady Madeline] [falls] heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, [bears] him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he [has] anticipated" (15). The House of Usher capitulates as the familial structure caves in on itself. Usher remains the victim of his inability to leave the former status of his family behind and come to terms with the reality that he must move forward. Without being able to face the dissolution of the Usher familial line, Usher perishes with the family home and the name.

Just as Usher falls victim to the blurred boundaries between physical illness and mental dysfunction, Julian's mother in "Everything that Rises Must Converge" by Flannery O'Connor follows the same formula to her equally climactic death. In line with traditional Southern Gothic themes, "Everything that Rises Must Converge" puts the disposition of the individual in conversation with the dissolution of the past, revealing the way in which losing touch with progressive reality can leave someone vulnerable to self-inflicted injury. Julian's mother is an overweight, racist woman who, we learn on the first page, has been instructed by her doctor to lose twenty pounds due to a serious risk of stroke. Her physical dysfunction is a product of her own making, and it is easy to see how her racism and blood pressure are symbolic of her stagnation and decay.

Though her vulnerability to stroke has an entirely physical explanation, there are external, non-physical factors that amplify her condition. One of these factors is her pride in her family name despite its problematic history. They say, "The greater the elevation, the greater the fall," and Julian's mother elevates herself and her family name constantly: "Your great-grandfather was a former governor of this state [...] Your grandfather was a prosperous landowner. Your grandmother was a Godhigh" (2). Her superiority complex only adds fuel to the fire when it comes to her delusions. Political figures, landowners, religious people garnered higher levels of respect in the South; however, what Julian's mother does not overtly state is that all of these positions were intrinsically connected to the instituion of chattel slavery. Julian's mother talks about these family members with pride, rejecting their sinister connotations, demonstrating the way she cherrypicks her memories. The more she clings to her twisted memories, the more her delusions interfere with her ability to process her current reality. In addition, her obsession with her family name is rooted deeply in her family's past of slavery as her grandfather "had a plantation and two hundred slaves" (2). In many ways, she still lives in a past of slavery, segregation, and blatant discrimination. Even though the story takes place after the end of Jim Crow laws, she is unable to remove herself from that past. She says, "They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence" (2). Her racism, coupled with the obsession with her past familial affluence, contributes to her loss of reality. Though Julian's mother does not demonstrate depressive or anxious mental symptoms as Usher does, her racism is itself pathological. In many ways, "strong racist feelings, [...] tied to fixed belief systems impervious to reality checks, [are] symptoms of serious mental dysfunction" (Poussaint, 2002). Her racist ideology is fixed, and as such, like Usher, she is stuck in the past. This unwillingness to move forward is what causes the amplification of her stroke symptoms, contributing to her self-inflicted demise.

To a first-time reader of "Everything that Rises Must Converge," the onset of Julian's mother's stroke is subtle until it is almost too late. It is not until these progressive symptoms are stitched together that we start to realize how fine the line is between her racism and her oncoming stroke. The first of these many racism-driven stroke symptoms occurs when a Black man sits down next to Julian: "Her face [has] turned an angry red" (5). Though this first offense is much more mental than physical, the origin of her blood pressure rising stems from her bigoted behavior. As her blood pressure continues to rise due to her racist rage, she is subjecting herself to a self-inflicted demise. Next, Julian asks the Black man for a match, and her resulting reaction includes "her eyes [retaining] their battered look. Her face [seeming] unnaturally red, as if her blood pressure [has] risen" (6). At this point, her hatred is manifesting clearly in her physical body. The barrier between mental and physical has been breached, and the elevation of her blood pressure becomes

just the beginning of the end. Her subsequent symptoms include “the blue in her eyes turning a bruised purple” as she realizes she is wearing the same hat as the Black woman (8). Though the reader has been primed to perceive these physical reactions as an indication of her racism, these symptoms are again a subtle nod to what is about to happen, which makes the climax all the more inevitable. In her final climactic moment, she has just been slapped by the Black woman. She stands in shock, her face “expressionless,” “immobile” (9). “She [takes] [Julian’s] hand and, breathing hard, [pulls] heavily up on it and then [stands] for a moment, swaying slightly as if the spots of light in the darkness [are] circling around her” (9). At this point, Julian’s mother has been quite literally slapped in the face with integrated reality. At this moment, she is in complete shock as she finally realizes that life is not as she perceives it to be, and the reality of desegregation and equality “circles” around her. It is difficult to differentiate to what degree her dizziness and lack of breath are due to this realization, or the breakdown of her body, but at this moment, mental and physical realities fuse as she discovers that her perception fails to align with reality. She cannot ignore the progression of time, and this realization, combined with her baked-in bigotry, becomes the end of her: “She [is] breathing fast [...] A tide of darkness [seems] to be sweeping her from him. [...] crumpling, she [falls] to the pavement. [...] [Her eyes remain] fixed on him, raking his face again, [find] nothing and [close]” (10). Her racism is what causes her blood pressure to rise, inflicting her death.

Just like Usher in his final moments, she accepts her fate and finds solace in returning to the long-forgotten remains of her once-glorious family: “Tell Grandpa to come get me, [...] Tell Caroline [her Black former caretaker] to come get me” (10). As she is unable to move forward with the integrated, progressive nature of her present, she forces herself to rejoin the dead past. Her unwillingness to proceed is the root of her racism, which causes her death, allowing her to rejoin the rest of the stunted family tree.

Usher and Julian’s mother are perfect examples of the way Southern ideology is cemented in the inability to accept change. Their stagnation is completely self-inflicted. If they were able to accept their present and let go of their past, it is easy to see how their overly dramatic deaths would be completely avoidable. Instead, they allow for their mental conditions to overtake them, inducing their physical demise. It is impossible to assert the separation of the mind and body when characters such as Usher and Julian’s mother demonstrate the crossover so blatantly. This crossover is even apparent in psychiatric medicine. Precision Psychiatry is one of the newest fields of medicine, having its earliest roots in 2015, and at its basis, it both addresses the cognitive and physical roots of mental illness. In instances such as depression and anxiety, the condition must be treated with both medicine for the body and cognitive behavioral therapy for the mind. As a result, researchers have found that remission rates for patients with major depressive disorder were much higher for those who underwent both cognitive behavioral therapy as well as antidepressant medication (Dunlop, 2019). The two cannot be separated, and the condition could not be alleviated without both. Just as Usher and Julian’s mother suffered deadly consequences of believing in the mind-body duality, so do patients with serious mental conditions. If the condition is not properly alleviated, the risk of suicide and self-harm still persists. It is crucial to dissolve the Cartesian mind-body duality, as evidenced by “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “Everything that Rises Must Converge,” and modern medicine. The mind and body work in a powerful combination, and if the two are separated, the consequences will be deadly.

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