

# Paweł Pyrka

---

## The House of Usher Never Fell : Impossible Escapes and the Dark (K)night of the Soul

---

Kultura Popularna nr 4 (54), 86-93

---

2017

Artykuł został zdigitalizowany i opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej [bazhum.muzhp.pl](http://bazhum.muzhp.pl), gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Paweł Pyrka

**The House  
of Usher Never Fell:  
*Impossible Escapes  
and the Dark  
(K)night of the Soul***

# I. The Unseen Comedown

In a sense, the narrator of “The Fall of the House of Usher” has always been the most unreliable of Edgar Allan Poe’s voices, more suspect than the wife-killer of “The Black Cat”, the obsessed murderer in “The Tell-Tale Heart”, or even Ligeia’s apparently addle-brained husband. Perhaps the reason for this impression of enhanced artifice and deeper, more elaborate trickery is the very fact that the narrator character makes it out of the House alive, and relatively unscathed in a psychological sense. Having witnessed the complete disintegration of the Usher family, Roderick’s psyche, and the physical structure that has been the House of Usher, he manages to “flee aghast” and live to tell the tale (Poe, 108).

It is not unusual to read Poe’s story as a metaphor for the degenerating mind (Roderick’s, most frequently), an enclosed mental space collapsing upon itself from the burden of personal history of transgression and guilt (Wilbur, 264). It is equally common to see the twin characters of Roderick and Madeline as incomplete fragments of a familial soul, made whole (and ultimately undone) by their connection to the ancestral mansion. Such interpretations are invited by Poe’s narrator: the structure’s “eye-like windows” watching their own twisted reflection in the waters of the tarn in a grotesque version of the Lacanian mirror stage the “sentience of all vegetable things” which, Roderick believes, move and direct the House of Usher, and finally the hasty, almost forced and yet unconscious burial and re-emergence of Madeline, her climb from the depths of repression back into her twin brother’s awareness – all these point to the image of the house as a mental space with its occupants in the roles of psychological forces and thought-content, all bound by the mechanics of the psyche. And thus, in this sense Roderick must always attempt to contain and repress, effectively bury, his sister, who is a sign and sin of incest, while Madeline must always try to break out and return from the prison of the unconscious. Poe’s use of twins to evoke the uncanny in the narrator in a pre-Freudian context is even more telling of the symbolic dimension of this narrative process.

But if the house is but a mind, and its occupants merely thoughts, then who does it belong to? Throughout the story, the narrator serves as an observer and a listener. His role is mostly to describe and discourse with Roderick, occasionally to provide an extra level of narration as with the heroic tale of Ethelred. He is in fact at his most active when called upon, supposedly by Usher, to assist with the entombment of Madeline, the moment in which he seems to be inclined to literally get his hands “dirty”. In addition, it is the narrator who cannot, or perhaps pretends he cannot, hear the sounds accompanying Madeline’s return (unlike Roderick with his illness-augmented senses). His denial of the truth about his involvement is therefore apparently complete and absolute, and so when faced with its re-emergence, all he can do (if indeed he can, assuming he does not lie to both himself and the reader) is „flee aghast”, followed by the radiance of the blood-red moon and the tumultuous collapse of the House. The act of flight, the impossible escape from the burdens of sin and madness, is shown to be successful, with no unnecessary words of explanation as the narrative voice ceases. Like the Ethelred of the story within the story, he conquers the dragon of his conscience and emerges victorious.

This almost too perfect closure of the story, along with the unsatisfying resolution of the psychological situation and its consequences, is why I propose to read Poe’s tale as an escape fantasy, a narrative constructed by

**Paweł Pyrka** is a lecturer at the SWPS University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw, teaching courses in American literature, cultural theory, and English. He holds a Master’s Degree in English and a PhD in cultural studies. His interests include American fiction, popular culture and media studies.

the narrator-character, utilizing externalization, dream logic and open denial, in order to speculate and fantasize about escaping the constraints of one's identity, history and psychology. The story of "Mad Trist" (itself an invention) is included to enhance the credibility of the narrative, posing as a fictional counterpart to "real" events. Like a "reveller upon opium" invoked in the opening lines of the story, trying to flee the harsh burdens of reality, Poe's narrator destroys his house of sin and guilt, buries it in the dark waters of the tarn, and ends his tale in the comforting, if illusive, peace of mind.

However, isn't all that we see or seem but a dream within a dream, to use Poe's own poetic discourse? As readers, we are not allowed to glimpse the comedown from the revelry provided by the narrative fantasy, but we are given a powerful description of what it feels like to the narrator, curiously, though in a sense appropriately, at the beginning of the story: "with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium -- the bitter lapse into everyday life -- the hideous dropping off of the veil" (Poe, 90). This powerful passage is how the narrator describes his first impression of the House of Usher, indicating a much more personal attitude than his (apparently) casual relationship with Roderick would suggest. But this is also how I believe the text hints at the possibility that the fantasy was never real, the narrative exorcism never complete – that the House of Usher never fell.

## II. The Dark Knight of the Soul

As a companion text to Poe's tale I've chosen a Batman graphic novel *Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth* (1989) written by Grant Morrison and illustrated by Dave McKean. It is a story of Batman's visit to the infamous asylum for the criminally insane, which houses many of his enemies, among them his arch-nemesis – the Joker.

As befits a postmodern work, the graphic novel, as befits a postmodern work, is marvelously rich in symbols and references and, similarly to Poe's text, contains a story within a story, in this case a diary of Amadeus Arkham, the historical founder of the asylum. From the pages of the diary, Arkham emerges as a Norman Bates-like character who decides to devote his life to helping the insane, following his mother's mental dissolution and death, but who also begins his own descent into madness after his wife and daughter are murdered by a patient. Arkham's obsessive need to understand the causes and nature of madness and to conquer (or transform) it becomes the driving force behind the asylum's operation. Arkham's narrative alternates with and parallels Batman's intervention in the asylum, following a riot led by Joker. For the Caped Crusader, the visit to Arkham becomes a journey into the depths of his own fear and the heart of his own darkness.

As if echoing Poe's thematic pattern, Arkham Asylum emerges from the visual narrative as both a physical location and a mental space, its foundations anchored within both Batman and Bruce Wayne's identity and psyche. Shortly before entering the Asylum, Batman articulates his position:

Afraid? Batman's not afraid of anything. It's ME. I'M afraid. I'm afraid that Joker may be RIGHT about me. Sometimes I... QUESTION the rationality of my actions. And I'm afraid that when I walk through those asylum

gates... When I walk into ARKHAM and the doors close behind me... It'll be just like coming home (Morrison and McKean, 10, original emphasis).

The fear is that of “coming home”, of allowing for the possibility that someone who spends their nights dressed in a bat costume, hunting psychopaths and madmen, belongs in the Asylum. It is the terror of uncertainty about the categories of sanity and lunacy and the way they are applied and understood both within and outside Arkham.

For Batman, the night in the asylum is the act of gazing into the abyss and holding a twisted mirror to the actions that define and have defined him. It is as much a trial, as an act of becoming, of attempted reconciliation with one's insecurities and weaknesses. Joker, in a typical Trickster-like manner, stands ready to test the Dark Knight, trying at the same time to tear down any illusions he might have about the reality outside the madhouse. As a result, while inside the asylum Batman goes through a series of encounters resembling a journey into the underworld of one's own unconscious with a homicidal clown for a guide.

Early on, Batman speaks to a pair of “civilians”: Arkham's administrator, Cavendish, and a doctor responsible for treating Joker, Two-Face and the rest of the patients. Among other things he learns that the psychotherapist, Ruth Adams, has “weaned” Two-Face off his coin fetish and moved him first to a six-sided die and later on to a deck of Tarot cards, with a plan to introduce him to I-Ching as the final “cure” for his obsession with duality.

Batman is at a loss trying to see the therapeutic value of stripping the criminal of delusions of “black and white absolutes” – he is in fact uncomfortable with the confusion it must cause: “But right now, he can't make a simple decision, like going to the bathroom, without consulting the cards? Seem to me you've effectively DESTROYED the man's personality, Doctor” (25–26, original emphasis). To which Adams responds in the following manner: “Sometimes we have to pull down in order to REBUILD, Batman. Psychiatry's like that” (26).

The comment resonates with Batman, as it expresses his own concerns, both of ethical and psychological nature. Instead of clear-cut identity he is presented with a chaotic labyrinth of complexity and relativity. The psychotherapist's professional assessment of Joker is even more disconcerting:

It's quite possible we may actually be looking at some kind of super-sanity here. A brilliant new modification of human perception. More suited to urban life at the end of the twentieth century. Unlike you and I, the Joker seems to have no control over the sensory information he's receiving from the outside world. He can only cope with the chaotic barrage of input by going with the flow. THAT'S why some days he's a mischievous clown, others a psychopathic killer. He HAS no real personality. He creates himself each day (27–28, original emphasis).

While to Adams, Joker is a post-modern mind, to Batman he remains a madman. But Joker himself offers insight into the significance, and perhaps the real causes for Batman's presence in Arkham, when he refuses the inmates' call to take off his enemy's mask and discover the hero's “real” face. “That is his real face” (32, original emphasis), he says and instead uses doctor Adams to engage Batman in a word association exercise, the result of which clearly

points to the character's origin story involving murdered parents, but at the same time through the very same process of association connects the reader to the narrative structure of Amadeus Arkham's diary.

When Batman enters the depths of the asylum, a series of powerful flashbacks, one of seeing "Bambi" at the cinema and one of the fateful night after seeing "Zorro", the very night he witnessed the murder of his mother and father, puts him into a sort of trance from which he emerges only through an almost shamanistic ritual of blood sacrifice, pushing a shard of glass through his palm to recover his connection to the physical reality. The flashbacks echo Arkham's own relationship with his mother, while the bloody act brings the Dark Knight closer to "Mad Dog" Hawkins, the man responsible for murdering Arkham's family and one who had claimed he must cut himself in order to feel.

As he walks around Arkham, Batman encounters Clayface, portrayed as an embodiment of filth and pestilence and evoking the fear of AIDS, as well as unresolved sexual issues, to which Joker had alluded before, he hides from the wheelchair-bound Doctor Destiny, whose power is to turn dreams and nightmares into tangible reality, avoids the pitchfork-wielding Scarecrow and ultimately comes to face the twisted version of the Mad Hatter. The latter, apart from spewing pedophilic allusions, explains to Batman his situation in the clearest possible way, at the same time echoing the memory of the House of Usher: "Sometimes... Sometimes I think the asylum is a HEAD. We're inside a huge head that dreams us all into being. Perhaps it's YOUR head, Batman. Arkham is a LOOKING GLASS. And WE are YOU" (62, original emphasis).

From that encounter Batman proceeds to the room reserved for Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT), where Maxie Zeus, haunted and tormented by messianic delusions, offers him the gift of "true power". Maxie's cell bears a scratched inscription: ["KNOW THYSELF"]. Batman runs off. The final encounter is with the bestial Killer Croc and is far more violent and visceral. In the twisted version of the mythical hero's journey, this is the low point, the ordeal, the abyss. Batman must face the Dragon and defeat him. Incidentally, for this purpose he uses the spear taken off of Archangel Michael's statue. Wounded but alive, he finally reaches the "secret room" where Amadeus Arkham kept his journal. Here, administrator Cavendish, haunted by Arkham's memories, is revealed to have instigated the riot in order to lure Batman into the asylum. Cavendish has turned into a reflection of Amadeus Arkham, to the point of donning his Mother's wedding dress, all to take vengeance upon the Bat, which had tormented her.

As in Poe's text, this is where the surface and underlying story come together, but in *Arkham Asylum* the connection is more psychological, since it does not respect chronology or causality. It seems as if, at least in Cavendish's mind, it is Batman's visit to the hospital that becomes the very terror which had haunted Arkham's mother in distant past. The two struggle, but it is doctor Adams who saves Batman by slashing her boss's throat. Cavendish thus dies the same way Arkham's mother did, with the word "Mommy" on his lips (94). Serving as a surrogate Amadeus Arkham, Cavendish is the reflection of Batman, as much as he is the architect and creator of Arkham Asylum. And should we believe the Mad Hatter, he too is all contained in Batman's head. This is the point of transformation, of rebirth, the moment when the Bat, which had symbolized madness and torment is absorbed by and reconciled with the Man.

Just before this final struggle, the reader is also allowed a glimpse of the asylum's structural plans pinned on the walls of the secret room, erected according to sacred geometry and mystical principles, to allow Arkham to transcend

the limits of sanity. The man himself can be seen scribbling on the room's floor, singing "The Star-Spangled Banner". In his journal, he writes: "I see now the virtue in madness, for this country knows no law nor any boundary. I pity the poor shades confined to the Euclidean prison that is sanity" (90).

Whether they apply to the House of Arkham, to Batman's Gotham City, or to America as asylum, the words must be comforting to Batman, as he tells Joker that he's free, along with the other inmates. "Oh, we know that already", Joker answers. "But what about you?" (99). Batman puts the decision regarding his final fate in the hands of Two-Face, to whom he has returned his coin, symbolically reinstating the black-and-white duality of his imagined world, but at the same time surrendering to the mad logic of Arkham. As he is let go (Two-Face lies about the face of the coin) Joker says: "Enjoy yourself out there. In the asylum. Just don't forget – if it ever gets too tough... There's ALWAYS a place for you here" (102).

No discussion of Morrison and McKean's work would be complete without a closer look at the visual layer of the novel. After all, comic books and graphic novels rely as much on the writing as on the graphic representations of their narrative's building blocks. In this respect Arkham Asylum once again stands out as tour de force of imaginative pursuit. McKean's signature style of mixed media, combining ink, paint, typography, photography and photomanipulation techniques, give the novel its distinctive and unforgettable look. If *Arkham Asylum* (as well as Poe's tale) is a story of crossing thresholds, traversing mental spaces, of raising and bringing down textual edifices, then the visual aspects of the book do a perfect job in reinforcing its themes and structures. The colors are dark, with dominant shades of grey, brown, blue and dirty green, but interspersed with vibrant crimsons of blood and fiery oranges when appropriate. The characters' silhouettes seem to emerge from the panels in a fluid fashion, without clear points of origin or delineations, sometimes almost dissolving into darker backgrounds. The style enhances the oneiric, unrealistic atmosphere of the narrative. The panels are frequently placed on visually astonishing, full-textured and at times photorealistic backgrounds, which seem to form the mosaic of thoughts, impressions, glimpsed situations and half-recollected memories. The interplay of foreground and background content creates a unique tension between the novel's composite narratives. The presentation and layout of the panels themselves is especially striking in the light of the novel's main theme: the extensive use of long, vertical panels, resembling tall windows or mirrors, invites the reader's eye to travel up and down *Arkham Asylum*, at the same time exploring the underlying background imagery. The panels' borders are straight and clear, (albeit thin), except for specific, emotionally charged scenes in which they become blurred, bent and even broken, as in the dramatic final encounter with Killer Croc.

McKean's art serves as a perfect vehicle for Morrison's writing, carrying the reader through the powerfully visualized corridors of the mental/psychological institution/space complex. The images are composed and laid out in a conscious effort to correspond to the architecture of text:

I like it when you got a defined place even though it was a labyrinthine kind of woolly space. I like it when you got something that sort of hangs around and then it becomes more of a psychological space. So, to make it different you have to not just draw what it looks like but what the feelings in the room are. (McKean, par. 20)

The artist's approach is expressionist, as it "builds" an additional layer of symbolic meaning over the structured and rich legacy of Batman comics. It is at once an homage and an escape from this tradition, a visual interrogation of the icon, accompanying and blending with Morrison's textual one.

### III. The Flights of Fancy

Joker's final words express the sentiment which remains unspoken both by Poe's narrator and by character of Batman. Their infinite capacity for fantasy, or perhaps rather self-delusion, allows the former to externalize and bury his fears and guilt beneath the ruins of the House of Usher, and the latter to contain and seemingly "cure" his insecurities and doubts within the walls of Arkham Asylum. Both enter and explore the mental structures that they have erected for themselves, to escape the reality, the "unredeemed dreariness of thought" (Poe,90) in the place which "knows no law nor any boundary." Both appear to emerge victorious and refuse or fail to see through their own illusion. But perhaps to them it is fortunate after all, since to pierce it, as we have attempted to do, would be to acknowledge and embrace the existence of some kind of super-sanity, which at once questions and reasserts an individual's (in)ability to comprehend and express the roots and consequences of their thoughts, feelings, and actions. In the introduction to their book on Poe and the American Gothic, Perry and Sederholm write:

Finding a stable meaning within "Usher" will always be futile. After all, some of the more recent sophisticated critiques of the story, including deconstructive approaches, rely on the idea that the story not only refuses to be read but also helps us see language in terms of what it can't do (3).

What Wilbur described as the effort of "poetic soul to escape all consciousness of the world in dream" (260) becomes, in a sense, an exercise in futility in Poe's tale. However, the erection of the imaginary gothic edifice that is the House of Usher and the theatrical display of traumatic, yet in its purpose therapeutic role-playing contained within it, is a fascinating example of a literary attempt to reach the non-linguistic dimension of experience.

In *Arkham Asylum* Batman enters the madhouse which in a sense is of his own making, with colorful, bizarre inmates representing different facets of his own psychological crisis. Animalistic violence, the need for power and control, both personal and social, along with the sexual ambiguity of the character's relationships (including allusions to the accusations presented in Fredric Wertham's infamous *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), of Batman and Robin's "inappropriate" liaison) form a landscape not unlike that of the House of Usher. Thus, for the Dark Knight, crossing Arkham's threshold can be read as "coming home" and an attempt to "pull down in order to rebuild" the fantastical psychological safe space of superhero identity. In this regard, Batman fulfills the definition of "super-sanity" given by doctor Adams, (re-) creating himself each day under the mask in order to deal with the experience of Gotham City (and, in a larger sense, of America) as a place that "knows no law nor any boundary."

In *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human*, Grant Morrison describes

*Arkham Asylum* as a story of “un-American exploration of an American icon. A story of the mad and excluded. A story not of the real world but the inside of a head—Batman’s head, our collective head” (Morrison, 225). The poignancy of this description inevitably brings the reader back to the House of Usher, identifying both narratives as tales of the limits of individual and collective psyche.

As Poe’s narrator “flees aghast” the horror of madness and transgression which the structure embodies, and as Batman leaves the confines of the Asylum, re-establishing the status quo of stable categories of sanity/lunacy, the reader follows, finding comfort in the belief that one’s demons can forever be exorcised completely. The alternative, after all, would be to accept the fluidity of the self, inherent in what the graphic novel terms “super-sanity”. And that way Joker lies.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- McKean, Dave. “Dave McKean interview from Łódź Comics Festival, Poland 2012.” Interview by Milán Kovács. Comic Conventions 27 Oct 2012, [www.comicconventions.co.uk/dave-mckean-interview-from-international-festival-of-comics-and-games-in-lodz-2012](http://www.comicconventions.co.uk/dave-mckean-interview-from-international-festival-of-comics-and-games-in-lodz-2012). Accessed 2 Dec 2017.
- Morrison, Grant. *Supergods: What Masked Vigilantes, Miraculous Mutants, and a Sun God from Smallville Can Teach Us About Being Human*. New York, Spiegel & Grau, 2012.
- Morrison, Grant, and Dave McKean. *Batman Arkham Asylum: A Serious House on Serious Earth. 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Deluxe Edition*. New York, DC Comics, 2014.
- Perry, Dennis R., and Carl H. Sederholm. *Poe, „The House of Usher,” and the American Gothic*. New York, NY, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings: Poems, Tales, Essays and Reviews*. Ed. David D. Galloway. London, Penguin Books, 2006.
- Wilbur, Richard. “The House of Poe.” *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe*. Ed. Eric W. Carlson. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970.