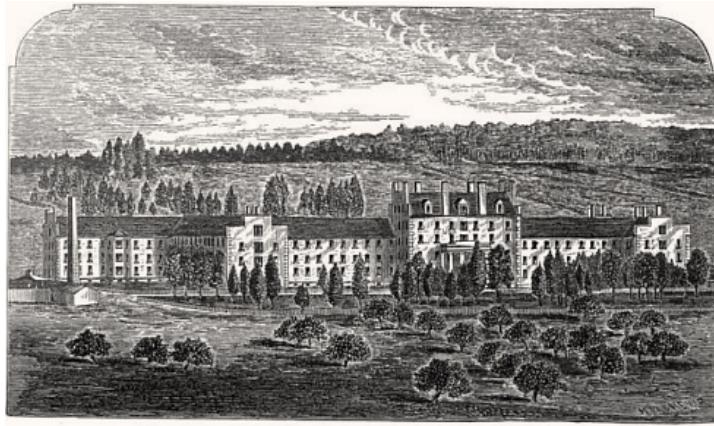


**Creative Interpretation of an Archival Object (Prompt written by Kesi Augustine)**

- Choose an archival object (a document, monument, or artwork within a National Park, gallery, or museum; an original document located in an archive – a photograph, a letter, a title page, etc.) Your object must directly relate to a theme and/or to an author that we have discussed in American Literature I. You may choose to revise and to expand your work for exercise #2.
- Describe and interpret this object. By means of informed close reading, you also must actively relate the sources of your annotated bibliography to your interpretation of your object. How do your sources help us to understand your object? And, how does your object help us to understand (or to complicate) your theme or your understanding of an American author?
- Your interpretation must result in an original, stand-alone product: a mini-documentary, a podcast, an article or an interactive blog for a specific venue of vigorous quality (*The Nation*, *The New York Times*, etc.), a work of fiction, or a film/play script. You must include at least **X** number of sources. Your interpretation should represent your perspective.

# Non Compos Mentis<sup>1</sup>



MAINE INSANE HOSPITAL, 1869.

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<sup>1</sup> Non compos mentis: not of sound mind (Merriam-Webster)

<sup>2</sup> Maine Insane Hospital in 1869.

American Literature I  
Spring 2015  
Section 002  
Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Fall of the House of Usher" paints a disturbing picture of the mentally-ill Roderick Usher. Roderick has acute anxiety, hypochondria, and a handful of other symptoms that indicate mental instability. However, the story is not about Roderick's struggle to overcome his disorders: it is a horror story. Depictions of mental illness continue to be associated with a ~~horror aesthetic in today's popular culture. In my final project, I~~ Deleted: n

examine society's treatment of and attitude towards mental illness through the medium of a historical fiction short story. I attempt to answer questions about the origin of stigmas by examining nineteenth-century documents from the Augusta Mental Health Institute, otherwise known as the Maine Insane Hospital. My primary document is an 1840 guide book for the hospital employees entitled "System of Regulations for the Maine Insane Hospital." This source helped me understand employees' duties and potential perspectives on mental illness at the time, as well as what kind of roles they played in the emergence of mental health into the twentieth century. Comparing modern depictions of asylums and mental health, such as FX's miniseries "American Horror Story: Asylum" with older works of fiction, like Poe's "Usher," helped to gauge my understanding of how prominent Poe's approach to this subject matter has remained over time, despite America's changed attitude toward psychiatry. The detailed first-hand account of one nineteenth-century patient, Isaac H. Hunt, of his time at the Maine Insane Hospital informed many of my decisions while writing the actual story. In his first chapter, Hunt writes, "Start not! think not that a mad man raves. I shall utter nought but truth" (1). I hope that my

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Image source: <<http://historyofmentalhealth.com/2014/10/14/maine-insane-hospital/>>

project uncovers some reasons why patients like Hunt had to beg to be heard, as well as whether or not their words made an [impact](#).

**Comment [GD1]:** Excellent!

## Author's Note

My inspiration for this project originally came from Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Fall of the House of Usher." But this story led me to a huge variety of sources that included information, images, and firsthand accounts that I could barely believe existed when I first discovered them. The first source that I came across was a primary document, written in 1840, entitled "System of Regulations for the Maine Insane Hospital." This brief, twelve-page booklet listed in some detail the hospital's staff and their duties at an insane asylum that opened in 1840 in Augusta, Maine. The hospital closed just over a decade ago. During its 165 years in operation, approximately 11,647 people died at the hospital (Bouchard 1). Of course, a certain number of these deaths must have been from natural causes, given that the patients were mentally ill and unstable during their time at the hospital. But to me, this statistic indicates a disproportionately high number of deaths in a relatively short history. What was more, I learned that many of the bodies were unaccounted for or buried in unmarked graves, a fact that former patient Karen Evans is currently trying to remedy with the Maine Cemetery Project (Evans [1](#)). The Maine Cemetery Project is attempting to create a memorial for all of the lost patients who disappeared into an unmarked grave or just somewhere underground after their time at the hospital.

Because these statistics were so shocking to me, I decided to do some research and try to find any other information about the hospital. Reading about Karen Evans and her gruesome memories from her time there was helpful, though she resided at the hospital relatively recently (early 1960s). To my amazement, I was able to find a 50-page booklet written by Isaac Hunt, a

**Comment [GD2]:** Very interesting.

nineteenth-century patient of the hospital. The booklet, entitled “Astounding Disclosures! Three Years in a Madhouse,” is a first-hand account of Hunt’s experiences in the hospital, with a particular emphasis on the brutality that he observed and was subjected to by the hospital’s staff.

What immediately caught my attention was how contradictory Hunt’s portrayal of the hospital’s staff was to how the “System of Regulations” booklet described how the staff should be. All told, Hunt’s testimony probably contained at least one example of every behavior that the staff was not allowed to do according to the booklet. Given what I have learned this semester about the history of mental illness in another course I am taking (Child and Adolescent Psychopathology), it did not surprise me that the staff would abuse patients in the horrific ways that Hunt described in his booklet. Mental illness was not widely recognized at the time, and mental illness in children was particularly overlooked (Shatkin 2). I decided to examine Benjamin Rush’s text, *Medical Inquiries and Observations*, which is widely recognized as the first American textbook on psychiatry. While parts of the text were difficult to decipher, it gave me a good impression of how mental illness was approached in the nineteenth century. Even Rush, who was passionate in the field and wanted to learn more about the mind and how it worked, did not think of mental illness on a scientific level. Reading a few chapters of the textbook made it clear how much room for error, oversight, and misdiagnosis there was at the time. Furthermore, we learned in my class that even today, in a world where psychiatry is much more commonly practiced and studied, there is still a great need for psychiatrists in the United States. According to my professor, most of his patients wait over three months before they are finally able to have an appointment that will enable them to be diagnosed and treated.

With all of this in mind, I began to think about my project in creative terms. Originally, I wanted to narrate the story from a patient’s point of view, similar to Hunt’s account. However, I

soon decided against this because I didn't feel knowledgeable enough to narrate with a first-person voice as a mentally-ill character. My narrator then became Margaret, a young woman who works at the Maine Insane Hospital for several months as a female attendant. Margaret's father is one of the hospital's three directors, and he contributes to the "System of Regulations" (this aspect of the story is fictionalized; I couldn't find a record of who actually wrote the booklet). As I wrote on, I noticed Margaret becoming a more complex character, as the lines between good and bad were blurred. I made her an unreliable narrator by having her narration take place retrospectively, about a decade after she has finished her work at the Maine Insane Hospital. She chronicles her time there in terms of three patients, and she describes the regrets and painful memories she still has every day from her time working there. Margaret also examines her role as one of the hospital's attendants and implicitly asks herself whether or not she did any good there, despite the good intentions she had.

I drew a good amount of examples and anecdotes about the patients from Hunt's account because of how vividly he wrote and how detailed his descriptions of certain staff members were. I wanted to draw on his examples without copying them exactly, which was another reason why having Margaret as a narrator was useful for the story. Most of the characters' names, except for Margaret's, were taken from a nineteenth-century registry of patient names. I chose to do this so that the names would be authentic for the time period and so that the piece would feel more connected to the actual history of the hospital.

Additionally, while I did not research many modern sources for this project, I kept horror movies (for example, "The Sixth Sense") and TV shows (FX's "American Horror Story: Asylum") in the back of my mind while writing. I feel that these modern interpretations of people living with mental illness are extensions of works like Poe's "Usher." A story like Poe's

**Comment [GD3]:** Yes, I think this was a good move.

**Deleted:** like

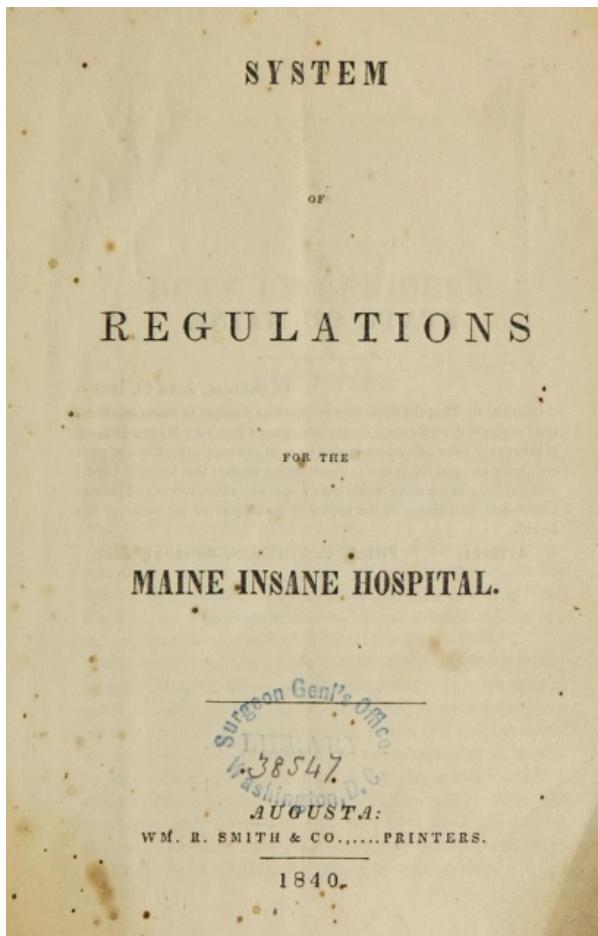
may have been very influential on how people of his time thought of mental illness. Poe's story makes an appearance in my story and has a profound effect on one of my characters. However, modern interpretations of people living with mental illness have the potential to isolate such patients even more than a story such as Poe's. Movies and television shows are broadcast to much larger audiences and are equipped with special effects and soundtracks that increase the drama in the subject matter and allow these people to be portrayed as mere elements of the horror genre and not as real people.

After writing the story, I realized that any dramatization of this subject matter is connected, whether it is Poe's story, the newest horror movie to come out with a protagonist who hears voices in his head, or my story. I hope that my story effectively speaks to several themes that are important in this field, such as the danger in preventing a person from being heard, the desire to be heard, and the consequences of allowing something immoral to take place. One unnamed worker on the Maine Cemetery Project said on the thousands of the hospital's patients who were buried without ceremony, "They are absolutely lost souls. It boggles my mind that we just threw people away. Having a permanent memorial will help put to rest the shame and stigma associated with mental illness" (van Setten 1). I hope that my story will give these lost patients a legacy, however fictionalized it may be.

**Comment [GD4]:** And we could argue that these are also concerns of the Gothic! Might be interesting to provoke further if and why horror is the go to genre for representations of how we treat the mentally-ill.

**Comment [GD5]:** Absolutely beautiful author's note.

Louisa Brady  
May 6, 2015



“Start not! think not that a mad man raves. I shall utter nought but truth.”

-Isaac Hunt

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<sup>3</sup> Image source: <<https://archive.org/details/101560081.nlm.nih.gov>>

## Non Compos Mentis

*Father, I'm concerned.*

Those words haunt me to this day. They rattle around in my head, smacking the sides with the force of wrecking balls aiming to knock down the world.

*Margaret...*

*Father, I've read the book. I know—*

My head interrupts the memory of my words with the vision of my hand. Mother used to say that when she met someone, she looked not at their eyes but at their hands. If eyes are the windows to the soul, she would say, hands are the canvases to one's personal history.

[Comment \[GD6\]:](#) 

I had noticed my own hands that day as I accused my father of failing in his role as one of the three directors of the Maine Insane Hospital, where I once served as an attendant. I accused him by handing him a booklet...not one that was filled with my words, but one that was filled with his.

My hand had looked milky white, illuminated in a ghastly way by the dim lights of the hospital's library. Veins trickled down from my knuckles to halfway up my forearm like silent tears that fall out of your eyes and evaporate before anyone else can see them. What is it that they say...? "If a tree falls in a forest and no one is around to hear it, does it make a sound?"

Maybe the difference is that the salt residue of the tears stays. It ensures that you don't forget that they fell.

My hand shook. The little hairs on my arm—not as blonde as they once were—stood on edge.

The title dominates the cover of the booklet with a bleak use of the English language.

*System of Regulations for the Maine Insane Hospital.*

My father's voice, which I haven't heard in over a decade now, comes back into my head. He says my name several more times, and tells me I don't know what I'm saying. I don't know what I've seen.

I remember realizing that he was speaking to me in the way that he and the other employees speak to the patients. I remember feeling angry and storming out of the library in a fit of frustration, face fiery hot and the rejected booklet bent in the unrelenting grip of my fingers.

Comment [GD7]: Good.

During my two months at the Maine Insane Hospital, I met dozens—maybe hundreds—of patients.

I remember my time there in terms of three.

Three patients, two books, and one villain.

And many mistakes.

I made my worst mistake in June of 1850, about one month prior to handing my father that booklet. It was a careless, preventable one, which, as we all know, are the worst breed of mistakes.

I left Oliver Ray's copy of Poe's *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, dog-eared to "The Fall of the House of Usher," in the hospital's library.

\* \* \*

Oliver Ray was the first male attendant that spoke to me when I began at the hospital.

"Dr. Ray," he'd said, presenting me with a large, hairy hand.

"Doctor?" I had asked, trying to sound both polite and skeptical.

Oliver Ray laughed and squeezed my hand at the same time. He went on to explain that no, he wasn't a doctor. He asked me how I had known he'd been lying. I gave him an aloof and cold answer because I didn't like him. And I didn't like how he carelessly was thumbing through

my copy of the “System of Regulations.” My father had helped write those words, and they were important. They ensured the hospital ran in a good and honest way. My father was a good and honest man. I didn’t like to see his words crinkled in this liar’s hands.

My father was a good man for getting me the job. He hadn’t insisted that I get married.

A book had been poking out of Oliver Ray’s satchel the first time we spoke. I could only make out one word on the cover.

“Poe?” I asked, gesturing towards his bag.

He pulled out the book and displayed it to me. *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*. Edgar Allan Poe.

“Good companion reading for this job.” His beady eyes glinted in the shadows created by his caterpillars of eyebrows.

Against my better judgment, I asked, “Why is that?”

“Lots of loonies in both.”

We stared at each other for several slow moments. I half-expected a smile to emerge on Oliver Ray’s face from beneath his beard, but the wiser part of me knew that he wasn’t making a joke.

I ended our first interaction. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Ray.”

And I walked away. Yes, I had ended our first interaction. But Oliver Ray would end our last one...and not with words.

\* \* \*

Respect. Attention. Kindness. These were the words I forced to the forefront of my mind on my first day with the hospital’s patients. *Should the attendants be provoked by insults and abusive language, they must keep cool...* I repeated this phrase especially over and over again.

Mentally, I was prepared for the worst in my patients. Besides, my father's quiet and vague stance on his position as director of the hospital had led me to believe in the patients' inevitable difficulty and obstinacy. I assumed they were too difficult a people to discuss over the dinner table with Mother and me.

Perhaps it was because the first patient whom I attended to was Eda that I almost immediately began to question my premature impression of the place.

Eda was an Irish orphan, fourteen years of age. She had a sweet, circular face that was scarred with premature lines of sadness in her forehead and under her eyes. Her eyes were a doleful blue, and it is difficult to say much more about them because Eda didn't often look anyone in the eye, even me.

Her hands were soft and fleshier than the rest of her sticklike body. There were traces of scars on the backs of her palms. She would try to cover up the scars, sometimes, with the opposite hand. But then she would remember that the scars embraced both hands, and neither could hide the other without exposing itself.

**Comment [GD8]:** Good.

*On rising in the morning, attendants must see that the patients are properly washed, their hair combed...*

**Comment [GD9]:** I love the interlacing of language from the manual with the narrative of your story.

Eda's hair was chopped off unevenly. Chestnut frizzles stuck out every which way, ignoring gravity. I assumed her hair must be naturally impossible to manage, as taming of the hair was listed in the booklet as one of our daily duties. So I was surprised when I sat down to comb Eda's hair on that first morning. After putting up a brief struggle, the hair swallowed its pride and began to back down.

"Hasn't your hair been combed before?"

Though they were looking downwards, I could see Eda's eyes darting all over the floor as though they were chasing the trail of a loose mouse. "Yes" was the first word she said to me. Her voice was hoarse and low, and I wondered when was the last time she had spoken aloud.

"Which of the attendants normally combs your hair?" I asked her, trying to keep my tone light. I had to forgive myself for feeling nervous. "She hasn't been doing a very good job."

It took Eda several moments to spit out the words: "No...my mother—she..."

Somehow I understood. "Where is she today?" I asked.

Eda jerked her head up. The comb caught in a snarl of her hair. Eda shook her head at me, then went back to looking downwards.

Her mother wasn't there, I realized. But she had been.

Later that day, I learned more about Eda from the other female attendants. Eda and her mother had entered the hospital together a year ago. Together, perhaps, is the wrong word. They were kept in separate wards, Eda in the children's ward and her mother in a specialized, high-security ward. The female attendants always speculated whether or not anything at all was wrong with Eda. Other than being quiet, she seemed like a normal, sweet girl. And a good daughter, they told me. She had made a point to visit her mother twice a day. Never allowed to stay for long, their visits would consist of Eda sitting silent at her mother's side, stroking her wispy, grey hair. Eda's mother wouldn't—couldn't?—say anything either. But, said many of the attendants I spoke with, there was a tenderness in her mother's eyes when she was accompanied by her daughter that didn't exist any other time of the day.

Then, one morning, Eda's mother was found with her head smashed between two bars of her window.

I still remember my heart dropping when I learned this part of the story.

*How did the staff let that happen? Why did she do it? What about Eda?*

These were among the questions I asked. None of the female attendants had the answers, even to the first one. They had all said something like, “I don’t know how anyone could be so careless to let that happen right under their nose. *I* was working in the children’s ward that night so I can’t be held responsible—” Their defensive words trail off in my mind as I hear them years later.

The words they said almost didn’t matter. Their clenching hands gave it all away to me.

**Comment [GD10]:** Good.

Eda wasn’t the same after her mother was gone. She stopped speaking after she had made her pleas about burying her mother properly. She had wanted her to be buried on the hospital’s grounds, so that she could visit her. It would be attended to, the matron and the superintendent both told her.

I didn’t need to be told the end of the story. I knew that Eda was still waiting, maybe hopelessly, for her mother’s grave to appear. And I knew that it wouldn’t appear, for I had learned that despite the disproportionate amount of deaths in the hospital, there were no marked graves on the grounds. There was no place to mourn the ones who had been lost. There was nothing.

And Eda had withered away to almost nothing in the months since her mother had gone.

Every time I laid eyes on the girl after hearing her story, I couldn’t help but wonder whether or not there was anything at all that could be done or that could be given to her to persuade her to lift her eyes...to coax her into human interaction...to allow her to demonstrate that she didn’t belong in this hospital as a patient any more than I did.

In the insane world of the Insane Hospital, that was one thing I knew to be true. Eda—without anyone in the world besides her neurotic and incapable mother—would be less of a burden on society if she were just whisked away with her mother to the hospital, labeled as just

another patient. And how perfect, I realized, that she herself is nervous, quiet, small. She would—and did—blend in.

I remember a conversation I had with Oliver Ray on the matter. He caught me staring at Eda during breakfast one Wednesday morning.

“You’ve taken a liking to her.”

At first I didn’t respond. My dislike of Oliver Ray had persisted throughout the first month I had been at the hospital. But finally, I said, “She shouldn’t be here. She should be in an orphanage.”

Oliver Ray laughed. I despised it when he laughed. It made me want to remind him that he wasn’t any more all-knowing than I was, though the tone of his laugh suggested that he believed otherwise. His eyes twinkled, but even you must know by now that twinkled is the wrong word. His eyes were cold, and yet there was a glisten...a glimmer of something.

“It’s true.” I had defended myself. “Our staff is small, and there are already too many patients that need to be given care and attention. We shouldn’t be trapping young girls here just because they haven’t got anywhere else to—”

“These people don’t need *care* and *attention*.” There was disgust in Oliver Ray’s voice. “They need to be shaken out of it.”

“They’re ill.”

“They believe they’re ill,” Oliver Ray said. “What it really means to be in this hospital is that you’re not strong enough to live in the outside world.”

I bit my lip, fuming. I imagined myself growing six inches and gaining forty pounds in muscle weight and knocking Oliver Ray to the ground. For a split second, I imagined his head

cracking when he hit the ground on the stone cold floor of the hospital's dining room. But that made me think of Eda's mother, and my vision ended.

"It's a shame," Oliver Ray went on. "About the girl." He pointed at Eda. *It's rude to point*, I wanted to say, *echoing something my mother had always told me as a child. But the same rules didn't apply in this world.* *The world here was backwards and upside down.*

"What's a shame?" I asked, angry with myself for indulging him.

"She could have been a real beauty." The twinkle had returned to Oliver Ray's eyes as he, too, fixated on Eda.

My heart began throbbing against my chest as I stole a glance in his direction. I felt a rush of gratefulness towards the booklet that I still carried around in my pocket for designating that the male attendants focus their efforts on the male patients.

\* \* \*

"Help me! Help me! No—no—NO!"

Oliver Lander was the second of the three patients that define my time at the hospital. And he gave me the greatest scare of the three. He came running at me one morning while the other female attendants and I were ensuring that all of our patients were properly dressed. He was screaming and it looked like he was being chased by a small mob of men. I soon realized that Oliver Ray was leading the pack, holding a straightjacket in one hand and a razor in the other.

The man, whose name I soon afterwards learned was Oliver Lander, ran up to me and fell on his knees at my feet. "I don't want to be shaved," he had whimpered over and over again, clutching at my skirts with dirty fingers that reminded me of my father's fingers in shape and strength. "Please," he begged. "Don't let them...don't let them..."

**Comment [GD11]:** Good continuing juxtaposition between the "rules" the mother tells the narrator and the rules she must follow in the hospital.

I didn't want to touch him, really. Oliver Lander was filthy and his clothes were soiled in grime and I didn't know what else. But I laid my hand on his surprisingly muscular shoulder. He looked up at me, tears in his eyes. Strange, I thought, to see a fifty-year-old man cry. His head was practically bald but for a few tufts of hair. He had a large nose and a long neck with skin that looked like it would snap if it was stretched any farther.

"Stand up, Mr. Lander," snapped Oliver Ray's voice. Two other male attendants stood behind him as reinforcement, though the expressions on their faces suggested that even they knew they wouldn't be needed for this endeavor. Mr. Lander didn't stand up. "Oliver!" Oliver Ray commanded. It is always strange to hear someone speak their own name out loud, especially Comment [GD12]: ☺

when they are addressing someone else. Oliver Ray looked at me and smirked. "We have the same name," he remarked, gesturing toward the patient.

"I gathered as much."

"I think it helps me control him," Oliver Ray said. As if he was giving himself a cue, he kicked the patient, who was still crouching on the ground. "Up!"

Oliver Lander stood up. He looked me in the eye as his head rose to match my head's level. "I don't want him to shave me."

As his eyes bored into mine, imploring me to make good on this simple request, I found myself looking away and instead finding Oliver Ray's eyes. "What does he mean?" I had asked, unsure what else to say. It was plain what this patient had meant: he didn't want Oliver Ray to shave him, which was one of the duties of the male attendants according to the booklet. *Why* was the question I should have asked. But I didn't. Another mistake.

Deleted: ed

"I'll take care of him." Oliver Ray left with Oliver Lander following closely but slowly behind him. The straightjacket was still in Oliver Ray's hand, and the two other male attendants had still done nothing. They followed behind Oliver Ray in a manner similar to Oliver Lander's.

I didn't see Oliver Lander for several more weeks. One day, I saw him sitting on a bench with Eda in the courtyard one sunny winter afternoon.

Sunny winter afternoon. That isn't exactly accurate. It was early April, after all, not quite winter any longer. But in Maine, April can feel like winter. Sometimes May, too. And that makes a sunny winter (spring) afternoon that much worse. You rise at the crack of dawn, mentally preparing yourself for the day ahead of you. Something blinds you temporarily as you emerge from beneath your covers, and it is with utter joy that you realize it is the sun shining through your window. It is blinding, but it is wonderful. You bound to your wardrobe and dress quickly, forgetting to realize that the air inside your bedroom is still chilly. You imagine how the sun will feel on the back of your neck, on your hands, on your face...anywhere. And you pray that from this point on, the rest of the days will be sunny until winter returns in full.

But then you step outside and take a breath. Fog appears in the air in front of your mouth, and that is the first sign. Feeling the cold air around you comes second, because you've expected warmth. But seeing your foggy breath, teasing you...wagging its finger in front of your face just out of reach...that is when you know it is a sunny winter day. And it is nothing to smile about.

Eda and Oliver Lander were not smiling, though I would wager that they had many other reasons besides the weather that caused them not to smile. For many of the other patients, the weather determined their demeanor for the entire day. But neither Eda nor Oliver Lander were these kinds of patients.

An odd pair, I couldn't help but observe. Eda wasn't saying anything, as far as I could tell. She was listening without looking. Her eyes were cast down at her feet, which were dangling back and forth, unable to touch the ground. At first, I didn't see Oliver Lander speaking either. But after several minutes of furtive glances, I began to see his mouth moving, as though he were speaking in quick sentences that he didn't want anyone else to notice.

That evening, I did something unprofessional.

"Eda, who was the patient you were speaking with this afternoon in the courtyard?"

Eda waited and debated for the duration of three of my brushstrokes before answering, "Mr. Lander." Her voice was still scratchy and low. But it sounded more used now than it had when she had first spoken to me over a month before. Maybe that had just been in my optimistic imagination.

"What were you speaking about?" I remember lowering my voice, so that Eda wouldn't worry that the other patients might overhear us. Maybe, thinking back, that wasn't why I had lowered my voice.

Five brushstrokes. Six brushstrokes. Seven...and then...

"Mr. Lander doesn't like to be shaved."

"Why not?"

(Why was I interrogating this girl? I shouldn't have been, that much I know now. And I knew it then, too. But I needed to know...I needed to understand. Something was amiss and it was impossible to see what. I needed to get inside of Eda's mind to understand this place.)

Many brushstrokes went by. I lost count. Eda had begun to clamp her hands together. A spot of red caught my eye and I realized that her long fingernails were digging into her palm.

"Eda, stop that—"

“The man with the beard touches Mr. Lander in the shaving room.”

Eda’s own words and not mine made her release her flesh from her grip.

“The man with the beard? Oliver Ray?”

“Mr. Lander doesn’t like it. He’s scared.”

“But...isn’t there anyone else? Any other male attendants who can—”

Eda interrupted me then. “He’s scared,” she repeated, making eye contact with me for a long moment, then looking back down at the floor.

I don’t believe we ever made eye contact again.

\* \* \*

I try to forget what happened next, but the memory doesn’t go away. It stays like a stain on a carpet that has grown dimmer over the years but has never fully disappeared, and somehow you know it never will be fully gone.

What happened next?

Nothing. I didn’t do anything about what Eda told me about Oliver Lander and Oliver Ray. I don’t know why. Maybe I was scared. Maybe I didn’t believe her. She *was* in the loony bin, after all—

I have to stop myself.

The third patient who frames my time at the hospital doesn’t have a name. Well, I suppose she does, or did once. But I never learned her name. She reminded me of a bird. Not a songbird, but a bird who squawks. I suppose this is a strange observation to make, for this woman never said a word out loud in my presence. Still, I think of her as the birdlike woman...whose fingernails were long and curved up and around the tips of her fingers like claws. Her hair was thinning. In fact, it was just sprouting up in a seldom few places atop her

head in patches. Her nose was hooked and her eyes were small. They scarcely opened, and when she did open them, they twitched as though the eyelids were about to crack under pressure. She was an old woman. Perhaps she wasn't so old, now thinking back. Age worked differently in the Insane Hospital. Time went faster, and patients looked years beyond what they should have looked like.

Her skin, though, was what frightened me the most. Her skin was coarse, like the hide of a rhinoceros. It even had a greyish tint to it. Whenever I touched her hand or held her arm to guide her across the dining room or the courtyard, I felt as though I was holding onto sandpaper. Hairs didn't grow on her arms anymore. According to the rumors, she had plucked them all out so many times that they had given up trying to grow back.

The birdlike woman spent hours upon hours in her cell carving the word *Remember* into the wall with her fingernails. Her nails were thick and tough, having grown used to this form of abuse over the years that she had spent there. Whenever I watched her carving, she did it as though the most important thing in the world was finishing the next letter...completing the word...repeating it three more times...

But it never stopped. There was no goal, no end to the birdlike woman's endeavors. She carved and carved. And sometimes, she visited the library.

When she visited the library, she didn't pick up any books or attempt to read anything. No, she just walked slowly, limping along, with her hand raised to her side. She let it hover about six inches away from the spines of the books. Sometimes, she would stop at certain books and run her fingers over their titles as though she were blind and couldn't read them with her eyes.

I never saw this woman pick up a book. But I know that she picked up at least one. And it was a book that wasn't supposed to have been there.

The books in the hospital's library were mild. Historical, some of them. Controversial, none of them. They were meant to increase the patients' literacy abilities, not to amuse them nor to put any ideas into their heads. That's what I was told. I don't know if I've ever read a book where my head has emerged completely unscathed from any ideas at all. But I suppose these books may exist.

**Deleted:** Can't you guess what it was? ..

Poe's *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* was not supposed to have been in the library. One evening, I had seen it lying in the staff common room on the coffee table. I recognized it as Oliver Ray's book at once, and I wondered why he had left it there. I can't say that I wasn't intrigued by the book, particularly because of his remarks on it. And so I stole away with it. I made off to the library. It was after hours, and I knew that no patients would be roaming through the corridors at this time of night. I found a comfortable and clean-looking corner that was equipped with a nearby lamp, and I began to read.

I didn't mean to leave the book there. I woke up in the middle of the night, and there was a storm outside, roaring in my ear. I jolted to awareness and glanced at the book, which was lying, cover up, on the floor. Quickly, I picked it up and examined where I had left off reading, for I couldn't quite remember falling asleep.

"The Fall of the House of Usher." I didn't think I had fallen asleep reading that...I thought I had finished that story. But I could have been wrong. As always, I could have been wrong.

As I looked at the words on the page, my eyes blurred. The words melted together and looked as though they were running down the page like raindrops on a windowsill. The details of the story came back to me... *The silken hair, too, had been suffered to grow all unheeded, and as, in its wild gossamer texture, it floated rather than fell about the face, I could not, even with*

*effort, connect its arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity*<sup>4</sup>. A shudder ran down my spine as I wondered why Poe had had to disassociate Roderick Usher from humanity...from normalcy. I slammed the book shut and, suddenly very paranoid, got up from my cushy armchair and ran out of the library, leaving the book tucked in between the cushion and side of the chair. I'd like to say that it was hidden, shoved into the depths of the chair or even folded beneath the cushion entirely. But it wasn't hidden. I left it carelessly protruding, half-hidden. And oftentimes, in a library, a book that is half-hidden is more conspicuous than any book that has been displayed dutifully on the shelf.

I won't beat around the bush, as they say. I left the book there, and one of the patients picked it up. And opened it to the dog-eared page. "The Fall of the House of Usher." And read it.

I didn't even remember that I had left it there until Oliver Ray asked all of the attendants whether or not they'd seen his book. Immediately, I had leapt up out of my seat, nearly spilling my morning coffee on the way. I ran to the library. Oliver Ray was following closely behind me. I could hear his clunky, heavy footsteps. I think he was calling my name, too, but I don't remember. I don't even remember whether or not he ever learned my name.

When I reached the library and the armchair, I knew immediately that I was too late. The book was gone. I didn't even bother checking the other armchairs for the book. I knew what I had done, and I knew that no amount of frantic searching was going to change that.

"You know where the book is?" Oliver Ray had asked me when he had caught up.

"One of the patients has it."

"What?"

"One of the patients—"

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<sup>4</sup> From "The Fall of the House of Usher," p. 657.

"Shut it—I heard you, but how could one of the patients have it? They shouldn't be reading anything like—"

"I left it here. I borrowed it. Last weekend."

"You..."

I was determined to find the book. Oliver Ray was determined as well; I could tell from his behavior. At the time, I had told myself that we wanted to find the book for different reasons. My reason was so that I could prevent patients from reading a story like "The Fall of the House of Usher" that might upset them and cause them to believe that they would always be perceived by the outside world in the same way that Roderick Usher was perceived: horrific characters of the overactive imagination. Oliver Ray's reason, I guessed, was so that he could get his book back. Materialistic, simplistic. But now I'm not so sure.

Our search for the book led us to the birdlike woman's room. When we got there, her room was empty, but there were traces of blood trickling down the wall. She had added an inordinate amount of words to her collection of carvings. The variety of words was so wide that I could not possibly have read all of them in the few moments Oliver Ray and I stood there. But I remember some of the words...home...help...Roderick...please.

"Legacy" was the word that my eyes lingered on.

After a few moments of surveying the room, Oliver Ray spotted the missing book underneath her cot and snatched it up. He tucked it away in his coat pocket and led me out of the room to find the birdlike woman.

When we finally found her, she was where we had begun: in the library, tucked away in a corner. Her eyes were wild and darting all over the place as though there were faces floating above her and observing her from every angle. And she was still carving. She

Deleted:

had made excellent progress on the decaying walls of the library. Words already littered the lower half of the walls in that corner of the room, and the birdlike woman didn't look as though she was about to stop anytime soon. A few other patients in the room were watching the birdlike woman silently from the shadows, fascinated by her concentration and determination. I couldn't help but join them as she continued, unaffected at first by our presence, to carve...carve...carve...

Oliver Ray was not so intrigued.

He kicked her in the ribcage so that she landed flat on her stomach with a moan of anguish.

Oliver Ray kicked her again...and again...and...

*“Stop!”*

When he finally relented, the birdlike woman was a bloody, bruised mess. Her arms were shaking, and she couldn't prop herself up. I practically carried her to the infirmary, Oliver Ray following behind us. Once we arrived, he said to the nurse, “First of all, you've got to clip off those fingernails of hers. She's bringing the entire place down with those.” And the nurse complied.

The very next day marked my father's directorial visit to the hospital. That was when I cornered him in the library.

“Father, I'm concerned.”

“Margaret...”

“Father, I've read the book. I know—”

“You're talking about things you don't understand, Margaret.”

“Father, you don’t understand. You’re acting as though there isn’t any mistreatment or abuse here, but...but you’re wrong. Yesterday, one of the female patients was beaten by a male attendant, Mr. Ray. And that’s not all he’s done...one of the other patients, Eda, told me—”

I was raving. I remember wishing I had written it all down in order, exactly how I had seen it happen. Maybe I sounded mad. My father certainly had looked at me as though I was.

When I stormed out of the library, crushed booklet in my hand and tears of frustration in my eyes, my father had stopped me with a large hand on my shoulder. He had told me he would speak with the patients I had mentioned the next day. He said he would ask them what they had been through and whether or not they had suffered. That satisfied me, for the moment.

As I went one way down the corridor and my father went the other, I saw Oliver Ray emerge from a shadowy corner of the library.

A final mistake: I didn’t think anything of this. I didn’t assume that he had heard anything I’d said about him to my father. I simply lowered my head, avoiding eye contact, and went back to resume my duties.

I don’t know whether or not my father had actually intended on speaking with either the birdlike woman or Oliver Lander, and I never will know. The next morning, both of the patients were found dead.

Suicide, they said, for both of them. The birdlike woman had even clawed the word *goodbye* into the wall.

“But she had no fingernails,” I protested weakly. “They cut them off...how could she...”

I resigned from my post the same day. It had been less than two months since I began.

I didn’t trust my father anymore. The relief in his eyes when he learned the fate of the patients he had promised to speak with was undeniable.

I knew Oliver Ray was behind it. I saw the look in his eyes as he watched me pack my things. It was a look of dim, disguised satisfaction.

I saw Eda staring at me from the courtyard as I left. For a moment, I fantasized that she looked sad to see me go. But she didn't. I couldn't detect any emotion in her face. Her hands hung limply at her sides.

Comment [GD13]: Good.

I haven't seen my father since that day in the hospital.

*Father, I'm concerned.*

It's not the fact that I said these words. That's not what haunts me. My words, well-intentioned as they may have been, didn't solve anything. If anything, my words made the Maine Insane Hospital a worse place. A place with more corruption. That's why the words tug at my heart and pull it down below the surface of the earth and even below the patients' corpses that inhabit some space—possibly that will never be located—down there. Oliver Lander. Eda's mother. The birdlike woman. Dozens, probably, who I had never and would never meet.

And what was their legacy?

My thoughts always turn back to Roderick Usher as I toss and turn in my bed, trying to sleep and toss these impossible questions out of my mind.

If I was lucky, I would fall asleep with a blank mind full of sheep waiting to be counted and sweet lullabies that would play in my head.

*The moon will be bright, while you slumber through the night.*

It was during the empty, safe nights that I counted myself lucky and felt happy that I'd escaped the hospital and my father's book of lies disguised as regulations.

And that was frightening.

More frightening than any birdlike woman, Oliver Lander, or Usher ever could be.

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### Final Comment:

Just, wow. Excellent work here. Your author's note, in which you lay out not only the extensive research you undertook in this creative project but also your personal investments in the topic, is every bit as beautifully written as your story, which successfully treats the ethics of representations of the mentally-ill. I was particularly impressed with your incorporation of and attention to the physical attributes of your characters. This attention to body, on several levels, contributed to your ethical and evocative character development. These people weren't scary in your story. They were real and sympathetic. I absolutely LOVED your use of hands and the

multiple ways you incorporated them into the narrative, from Oliver Ray's hairy ones, to the narrator's white and ghostlike ones, to Eda's scars, and the bird lady's nails. Beautifully crafted. I think this motif also came together around your interlacing of Margaret's mother's "rules" and the rules presented in the guidebook. I thought this was an especially nice touch. Also, I loved that you incorporated a bit of literary criticism into your story with the inclusion of "Usher." Ahh! I could say so much more. It was great have you in recitation this semester. You are clearly a talented English student and creative writer. Keep up the good work, and have a wonderful summer!

Grade: A

Best,  
Gina