

INTERVIEW

Poe: The Angry Psycho

BY SEAN KELLY

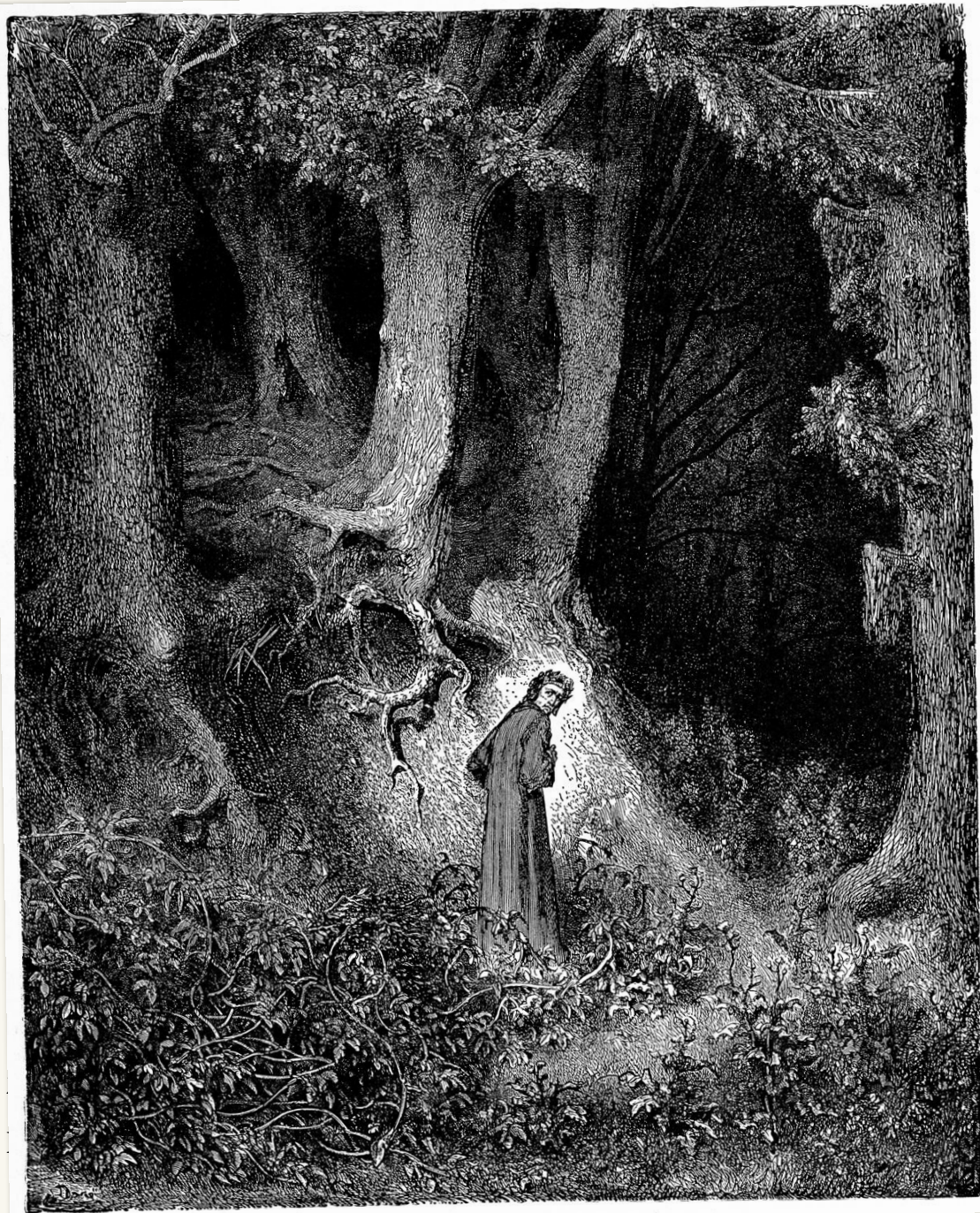
Say Hello to a singer who pals around with fans online.

She's smart. She's attractive. She's talented. And she has the touch of gold. Having released only one music CD, the officially certified gold disc *Hello* from Modern/Atlantic Records (www.atlantic-records.com), rock

performer Poe is batting a thousand, with a decisive home run.

But while *Hello* impressed us with its raw emotional electricity, it's the electricity she sends through our modems and our game consoles that attracted *ComputerLife* to her even more. In other words, the 28-year-old Annie Danielewski — who nicknamed herself Poe at age 10 after attending a Halloween party dressed as the plague (as told by Edgar Allan Poe in "The Masque of the Red Death") — is thoroughly wired: onstage, online, and on disc.

Her lyrics reference the Net. Her online site at www.poe.org (managed primarily by a fan from



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This novel is a work of fiction. Any references to real people, events, establishments, organizations or locales are intended only to give the fiction a sense of reality and authenticity. Other names, characters and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and did not occur or are set in the future. — Ed.

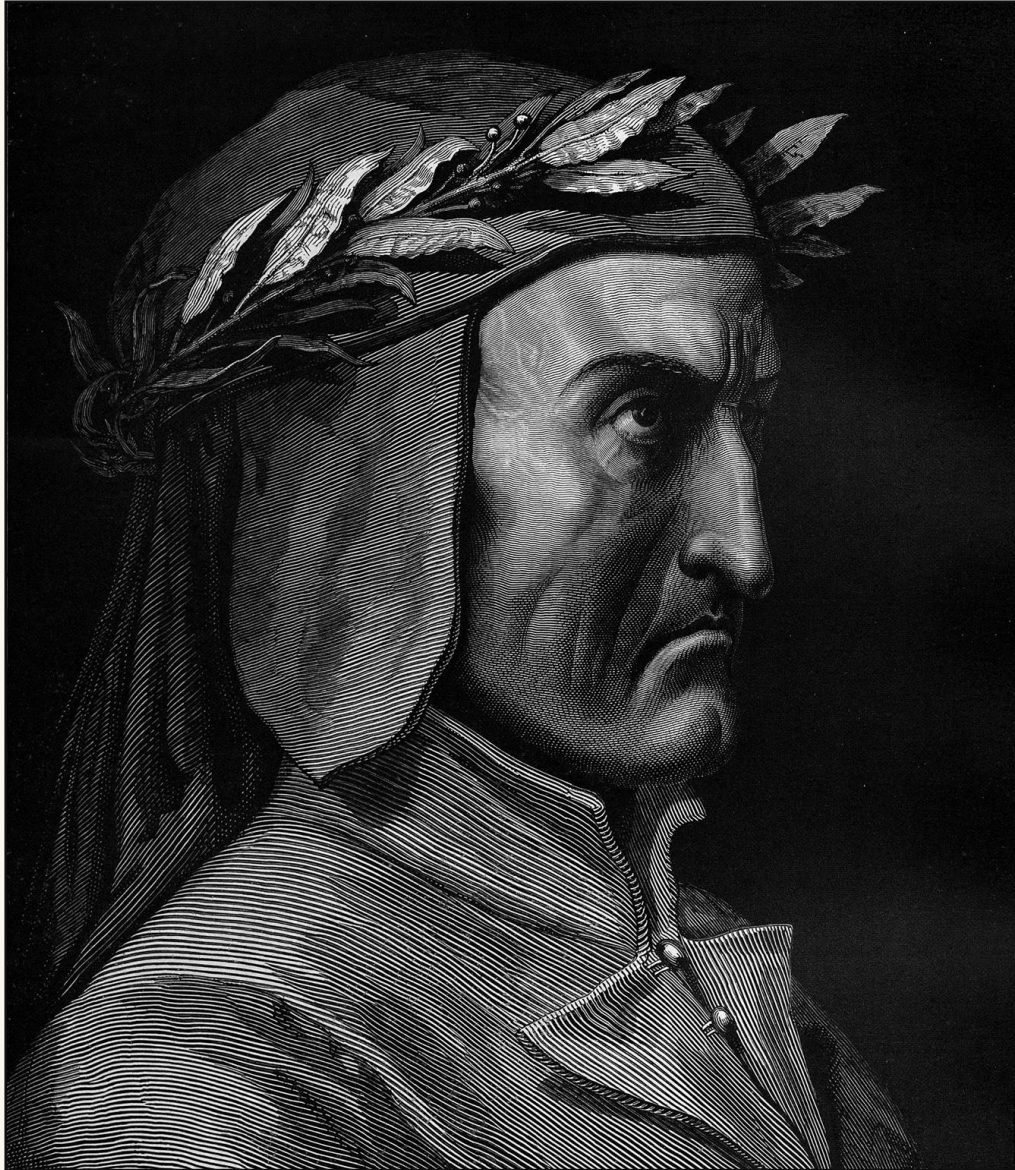
Contents

Foreword.....	vii
Introduction.....	xi
<i>The Navidson Record</i>	1
Exhibits One - Six.....	529
Appendix: Zampanò.....	537
A – Outlines & Chapter Titles.....	538
B – Bits.....	541
C – ... and Pieces.....	548
D – Letter to the Editor.....	553
E – The Song of Quesada and Molino.....	555
F – Poems.....	557
Appendix II: Johnny Truant.....	567
A – Sketches & Polaroids.....	568
B – The Pelican Poems.....	573
C – Collages.....	581
D – Obituary.....	584
E – The Three Attic Whalestoe Institute Letters.....	586
F – Various Quotes.....	645
Appendix III: Contrary Evidence.....	657
Index.....	663
Credits.....	707
Yggdrasil.....	709

FOREWARD

The first edition of [House of Leaves](#) was privately distributed and did not contain Chapter 21, Appendix II, Appendix III, or the index. Every effort has been made to provide appropriate translations and accurately credit all sources. If we have failed in this endeavor, we apologize in advance and will gladly correct in subsequent printings all errors or omissions brought to our attention.

— The Editors



(Dante Alighieri by Gustave Doré, 1860. — Ed.)



This is not for you.



Introduction

I still get nightmares. In fact I get them so often I should be used to them by now. I'm not. No one ever really gets used to nightmares.

For a while there I tried every pill imaginable. Anything to curb the fear. Excedrin PMS, Melatonin, L-tryptophan, Valium, Vicodin, quite a few members of the barbital family. A pretty extensive list, frequently mixed, often matched, with shots of bourbon, a few lung rasping bong hits, sometimes even the vaporous confidence-trip of cocaine. None of it helped. I think it's pretty safe to assume there's no lab sophisticated enough yet to synthesize the kind of chemicals I need. A Nobel Prize to the one who invents that puppy.

I'm so tired. Sleep's been stalking me for too long to remember. Inevitable I suppose. Sadly though, I'm not looking forward to the prospect. I say "sadly" because there was a time when I actually enjoyed sleeping. In fact I slept all the time. That was before my friend Lude woke me up at three in the morning and asked me to come over to his place. Who knows, if I hadn't heard the phone, would everything be different now? I think about that alot.

During the following weeks, while I was couching it from Santa Monica to Silverlake looking for an apartment, Lude told me about this old guy who lived in his building. He had a first floor apartment peering out over a wide, overgrown courtyard.

Supposedly, the old man had told Lude he would be dying soon. I didn't think much of it, though it wasn't exactly the kind of thing you forget either. At the time, I just figured Lude had been putting me on. He likes to exaggerate. I eventually found a studio in Hollywood and settled back into my mind numbing routine as an apprentice at a tattoo shop.

It was the end of '96. Nights were cold. I was getting over this woman named Clara English who had told me she wanted to date someone at the top of the food chain. So I demonstrated my unflagging devotion to her memory by immediately developing a heavy crush on this stripper who had Thumper tattooed right beneath her G-string, barely an inch from her shaved pussy or as she liked to call it—"The Happiest Place On Earth." Suffice it say, Lude & I spent the last hours of the year, scouting for new bars, new faces, driving recklessly through the canyons, doing our best to talk the high midnight heavens down with a whole lot of bullshit. We never did. Talk them down, I mean.

Then the old man died.

From what I can gather now, he was an American. Though as I would later find out, those who worked with him detected an accent even if they could never say for certain where it came from.

Anyway, Lude had been out very late with some woman he'd met at his salon. It was just after seven when he finally stumbled back into the courtyard and despite a severe hangover immediately saw what was missing. Lude frequently came home early and always found the old guy working his way around the perimeter of all those weeds, occasionally resting on a sun

beaten bench before taking another round. A single mother who got up every morning at six also noted Zampanò's absence. She went off to work, Lude went off to bed, but when dusk came and their old neighbor had still not appeared, both Lude and the single mother went to alert Flaze, the resident building manager.

Flaze is part Hispanic, part Samoan. A bit of a giant, you might say. 6'4", 245 lbs, virtually no body fat. Vandals, junkies, you name it, they get near the building and Flaze will lunge at them like a pitbull raised in a crackhouse. And don't think he believes size and strength are invincible. If the interlopers are carrying, he'll show them his own gun collection and he'll draw on them too, faster than Billy The Kidd. But as soon as Lude voiced his suspicions about the old man, pitbull and Billy The Kid went straight out the window. Flaze suddenly couldn't find the keys. He started muttering about calling the owner of the building. After twenty minutes, Lude was so fed up with this hemming and hawing he offered to handle the whole thing himself. Flaze immediately found the keys and with a big grin plopped them into Lude's outstretched hand.

Flaze told me later he'd never seen a dead body before and there was no question there would be a body and that just didn't sit well with Flaze. "We knew what we'd find," he said. "We knew that guy was dead."

The police found Zampanò just like Lude found him, lying face down on the floor. The paramedics said there was nothing unusual, just the way it goes, eighty some years and the inevitable kerplunk, the system goes down, lights blink out and there you have

Old shelters—television, magazines, movies—won't protect you anymore. You might try scribbling in a journal, on a napkin, maybe even in the margins of this book. That's when you'll discover you no longer trust the very walls you always took for granted. Even the hallways you've walked a hundred times will feel longer, much longer, and the shadows, any shadow at all, will suddenly seem deeper, much, much, deeper.

You might try then, as I did, to find a sky so full of stars it will blind you again. Only no sky can blind you now. Even with all that iridescent magic up there, your eye will no longer linger on the light, it will no longer trace constellations. You'll care only about the darkness and you'll watch it for hours, for days, maybe even for years, trying in vain to believe you're some kind of indispensable, universe-appointed sentinel, as if just by looking you could actually keep it all at bay. It will get so bad you'll be afraid to look away, you'll be afraid to sleep.

Then no matter where you are, in a crowded restaurant or on some desolate street or even in the comforts of your own home, you'll watch yourself dismantle every assurance you ever lived by. You'll stand aside as a great complexity intrudes,

tearing apart, piece by piece, all of your carefully conceived denials, whether deliberate or unconscious. And then for better or worse you'll turn, unable to resist, though try to resist you still will, fighting with everything you've got not to face the thing you most dread, what is now, what will be, what has always come before, the creature you truly are, the creature we all are, buried in the nameless black of a name.

And then the nightmares will begin.

— Johnny Truant
October 31, 1998
Hollywood, CA

Old shelters—television, magazines, movies—won't protect you anymore. You might try scribbling in a journal, on a napkin, maybe even in the margins of this book. That's when you'll discover you no longer trust the very walls you always took for granted. Even the hallways you've walked a hundred times will feel longer, much longer, and the shadows, any shadow at all, will suddenly seem deeper, much, much, deeper.

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Then no matter where you are, in a crowded restaurant or on some desolate street or even in the comforts of your own home, you'll watch yourself dismantle every assurance you ever lived by. You'll stand aside as a great complexity intrudes,



²Asked to briefly describe *House of Leaves*, Danielewski has said in an interview that he “likes to look at *House of Leaves* as a three-character play: a blind old man, a young man, and a very special, extraordinarily gifted woman.”

³Anthony Quinn plays the traveling strongman Zampanò, Richard Basehart plays the Fool, and Giulietta Masina plays the clown Gelsomina in Federico Fellini’s *La Strada* (1954). 2003 digital transfer, with restored image and sound, by The Criterion Collection.



Federico Fellini directs Giulietta Masina as Gelsomina in *La Strada* (1954), the film that launched their careers.

2003 digital transfer, with restored image and sound, by The Criterion Collection.

July 28, 1982

My dear child,

Your mother is here, not altogether here, but here nonetheless. It has been a tough year for her but no doubt a tougher one for you.

The Director tells me you have a foster family now. Open your heart to them. They are there for you. They will help you recover from your father's untimely death. They will also help you comprehend the reasons for my stay here.

Remember your mother loves you, despite her crumbling biology. Also remember, love inhabits more than just the heart and mind. If need be it can take shelter in a big toe.

A big toe for you then.
I love you.

Mommy

August 30, 1982

My dear child,

Another family already? That's fine. I'm told you worked yourself up into quite a fit, throwing things and making a

a general mess of your room. That's fine too. It pays in this world to play out your passions.

If I were with you now, I'd hug you and tender you and shape you with sloppy wet kisses the way mother cats shape their cubs in the wild.

Unfortunately since such excursions are strictly prohibited from The Whalestoe, this tongue of ink will have to do.

Felicities my felix feline boy,

Love,

Mommy

November 7, 1982

My sweet baby,

I knew you'd find a home. Are you happy now? Do they serve you hot chocolate and large slices of lemon meringue pie? Does your new mother tuck you in at night and read you stories full of opal and jade?

The Director, who does his best to keep me au courant on your travails, said you're handling your father's tragedy very matter a factly. I'm so impressed by your maturity. Apparently

your new family thinks of you as "clear eyed" "exceedingly bright" and "a very strong reader." Imagine that! Daddy would have been blistered with pride.

You have so much inside you that you have yet to discover. As long as you keep striving, inspecting and exploring, you will come into possession of untold glory. I promise you.

Love,

Mommy

January 20, 1983

Dearest Johnny,

You would have received a hundred more letters before now if the Director had not "strongly recommended" I curtail my epistolary efforts. Apparently your nouvelle mère objected to the intrusive and divisive nature of my communiqués. Well, hard as this is for me to say, she's probably right. So is the Director (he is a good man). You don't need to be troubled by your mad mother. You need to build a new life, a solid life.

As old Goethe wrote, "Wouldst shape a noble life? Then cast no backward glances toward the past, and though somewhat be lost and gone, yet do thou act as one new born."

Open your heart to the kindness and stability you new

May 8, 1987

Dearest Johnny,

They have found a way to break me. Rape a fifty-six year old bag of bones. There is no worse and don't believe otherwise.

The attendants do it. Others do it. Not every day, not every week, maybe not even every month. But they do it. Someone I don't know always comes. When it's dark. Late. I've learned not to scream, screaming gave me hope and unanswered hope is shattered hope. Think of your Haitian. It is far saner to choose rape than shattered hope. So I submit and I drift.

I let caprice and a certain degree of free-association take me away. Some times I'm still away long after it's done, after he's gone—the stranger's gone—the stranger, the attendant, the custodian, the janitor, cleaning man, waiting man, dirty man—the night tidying up after him.

I'm in hell giving in to heaven where I sometimes think of your beautiful father with his dreamy wings and only then do I allow myself to cry. Not because your mother was raped (again) but because she loves so much what she could never have been allowed to keep. Such a silly girl.

You must save me Johnny. In the name of your father. I must escape this place or I will die.

Edith Skourja has written an impressive forty page essay entitled *Riddles Without* on this one episode. While most of it focuses on what Skourja refers to as “the political posture” of both women—Karen as ex-model; Audrie as travel agent—one particular passage yields an elegant perspective into the whys and ways people confront unanswered questions:

Riddles: they either delight or torment. Their delight lies in solutions. Answers provide bright moments of comprehension perfectly suited for children who still inhabit a world where solutions are readily available. Implicit in the riddle’s form is a promise that the rest of the world resolves just as easily. And so riddles comfort the child’s mind which spins wildly before the onslaught of so much information and so many subsequent questions.

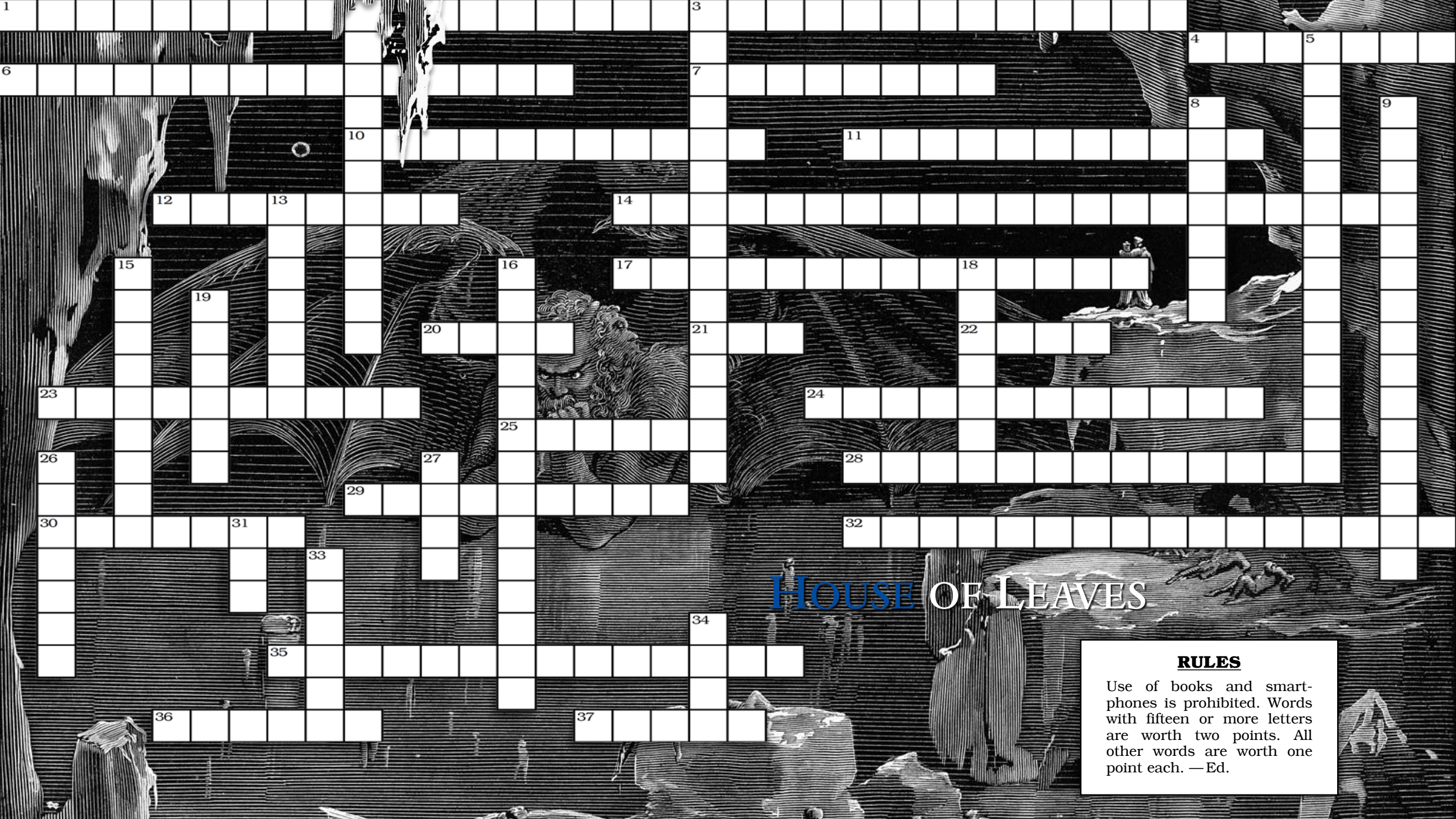
The adult world, however, produces riddles of a different variety. They do not have answers and are often called enigmas or paradoxes. Still the old hint of the riddle’s form corrupts these questions by re-echoing the most fundamental lesson: there must be an answer. From there comes torment.

It is not uncharacteristic to encounter adults who detest riddles.

House of Leaves Crossword Puzzle Game



(Dante’s *Inferno*, Canto 34 : Lucifer, The King of Hell. Illustration from *The Divine Comedy* by Gustave Doré, 1882. — Ed.)



1 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37

HOUSE OF LEAVES

RULES

Use of books and smart-phones is prohibited. Words with fifteen or more letters are worth two points. All other words are worth one point each. —Ed.



Gelsomina (Giulietta Masina) is sold by her mother into the employment of Zampanò (Anthony Quinn), a brutal traveling strongman in Federico Fellini's La Strada (1954). 2003 digital transfer, with restored image and sound, by The Criterion Collection.

From what I can gather now, he was an American. Though as I would later find out, those who worked with him detected an accent even if they could never say for certain where it came from.

He called himself Zampanò. It was the name he put down on his apartment lease and on several other fragments I found. I never came across any sort of ID, whether a passport, license or other official document insinuating that yes, he indeed was An-Actual-&-Accounted-For person.

Who knows where his name really came from. Maybe it's authentic, maybe made up, maybe borrowed, a nom de plume or—my personal favorite—a nom de guerre.

As Lude told it, Zampanò had lived in the building for many years, and though he mostly kept to himself, he never failed to appear every morning and evening to walk around the courtyard, a wild place with knee high weeds and back then populated with over eighty stray cats. Apparently the cats liked the old man a lot and though he offered no enticements, they would constantly rub up against his legs before darting back into the center of that dusty place.

Anyway, Lude had been out very late with some woman he'd met at his salon. It was just after seven when he finally stumbled back into the courtyard and despite a severe hangover immediately saw what was missing. Lude frequently came home early and always found the old guy working his way around the perimeter of all those weeds, occasionally resting on a sun beaten bench before taking another round. A single mother who got up at six also noted Zampanò's absence. She went off to work, Lude went off to bed, but when dusk came and their old neighbor had still not appeared, both Lude and the single mother went to

Existentialism

After the 1940s, there was a widespread tendency in new writers to view a human being as an isolated existent who is cast into an alien universe, to conceive the universe as possessing no inherent truth, value, or meaning, and to represent human life—in its fruitless search for purpose and meaning, as it moves from the nothingness whence it came toward the nothingness where it must end—as an existence which is both anguished and absurd. The philosophical premise of existentialism is that temporality and historicity—a situation in one's present that looks back to the past and anticipates the future—is inseparably a part of each individual's being; that the process of understanding something, involving an act of interpretation, goes on not only in reading verbal texts but in all aspects of human experience; and that language like temporality, pervades all aspects of that experience. The understood meaning of the text is an event which is always the product of a "fusion of the horizons" that a reader brings to the text and that the text brings to the reader.

— The Editors





- Despite being exceptionally gifted, a true genius in every sense of the word, Stephen Hawking lacked motivation early in life. Teachers and family members spoke of him as brilliant but lazy, and, as we'll see in the documentary, he frequently skipped classes to drink with friends. What events changed Hawking's work ethic? Have you had any similar life-changing experiences?

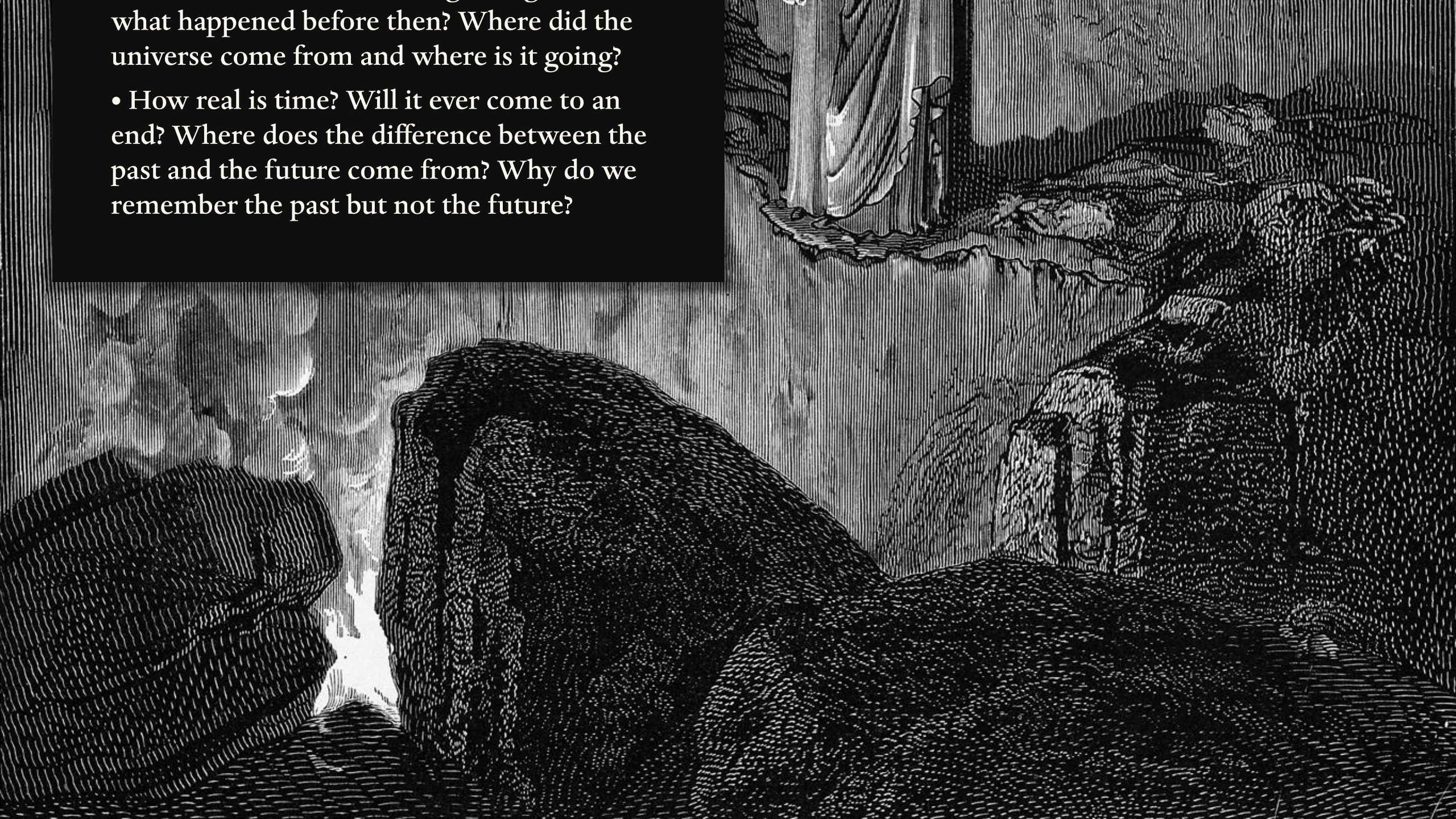
- In describing the area of an event horizon, Hawking says, "One might say of the event horizon what Dante said of the entrance to Hell, 'Abandon all hope ye who enter here.'" Danielewski also quotes Dante to foreshadow what awaits readers in the Navidsons' mysterious house on Ash Tree Lane. Can any of Hawking's research into black holes be used to help us understand what the Navidsons discover in **HOUSE OF LEAVES**?

- Did the universe have a beginning, and if so



what happened before then? Where did the universe come from and where is it going?

- How real is time? Will it ever come to an end? Where does the difference between the past and the future come from? Why do we remember the past but not the future?

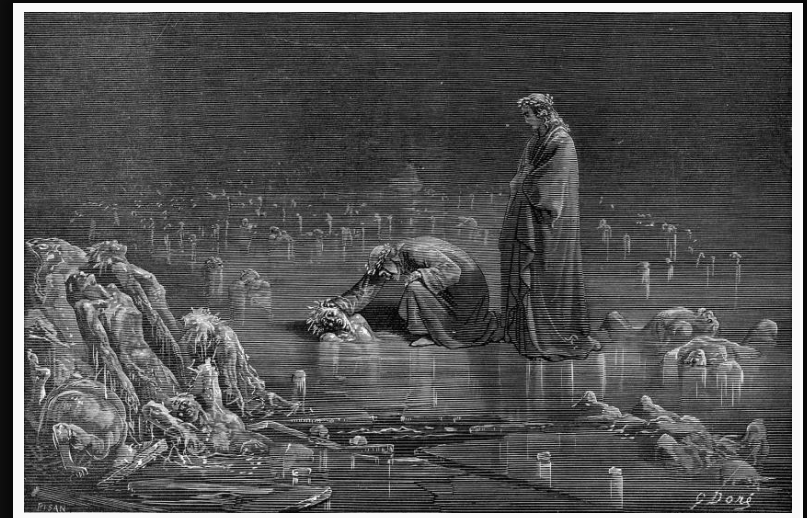
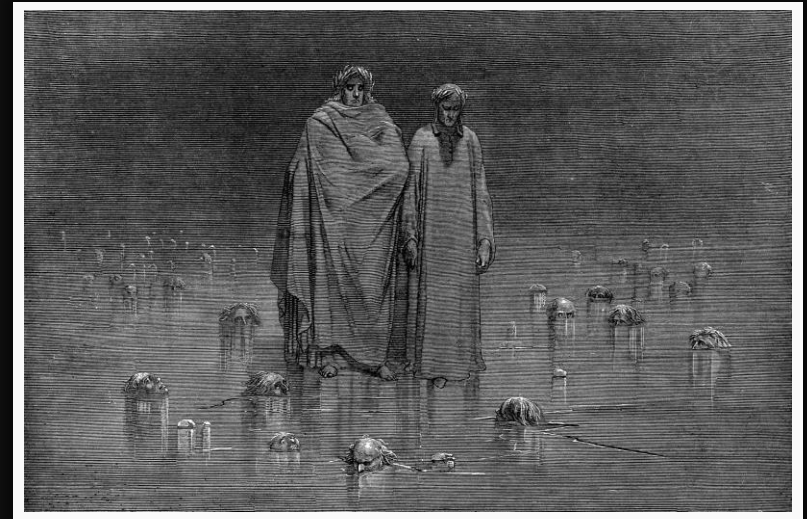


Appendix II

Due to the unexpected number of inquiries regarding the first edition, Mr. Truant agreed for this edition to provide the following additional material.

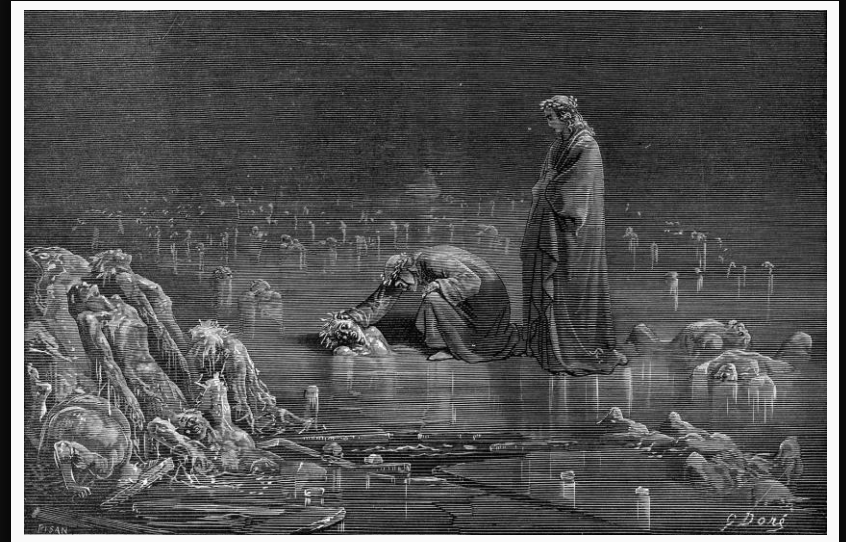
— The Editors

A.
Sketches & Polaroids

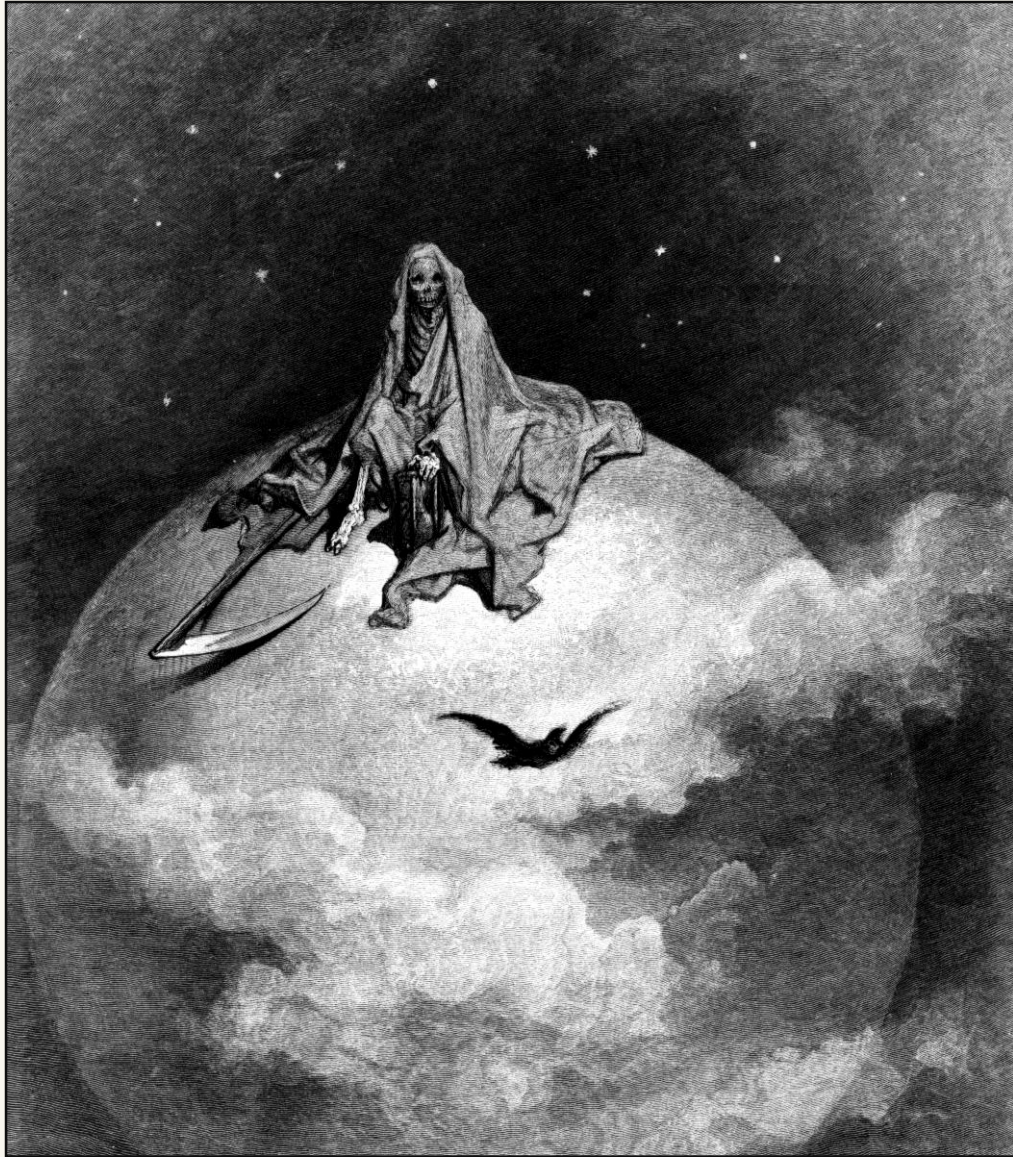


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A.
Sketches & Polaroids



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(Illustration from "The Raven" by Gustave Doré, 1882. — Ed.)

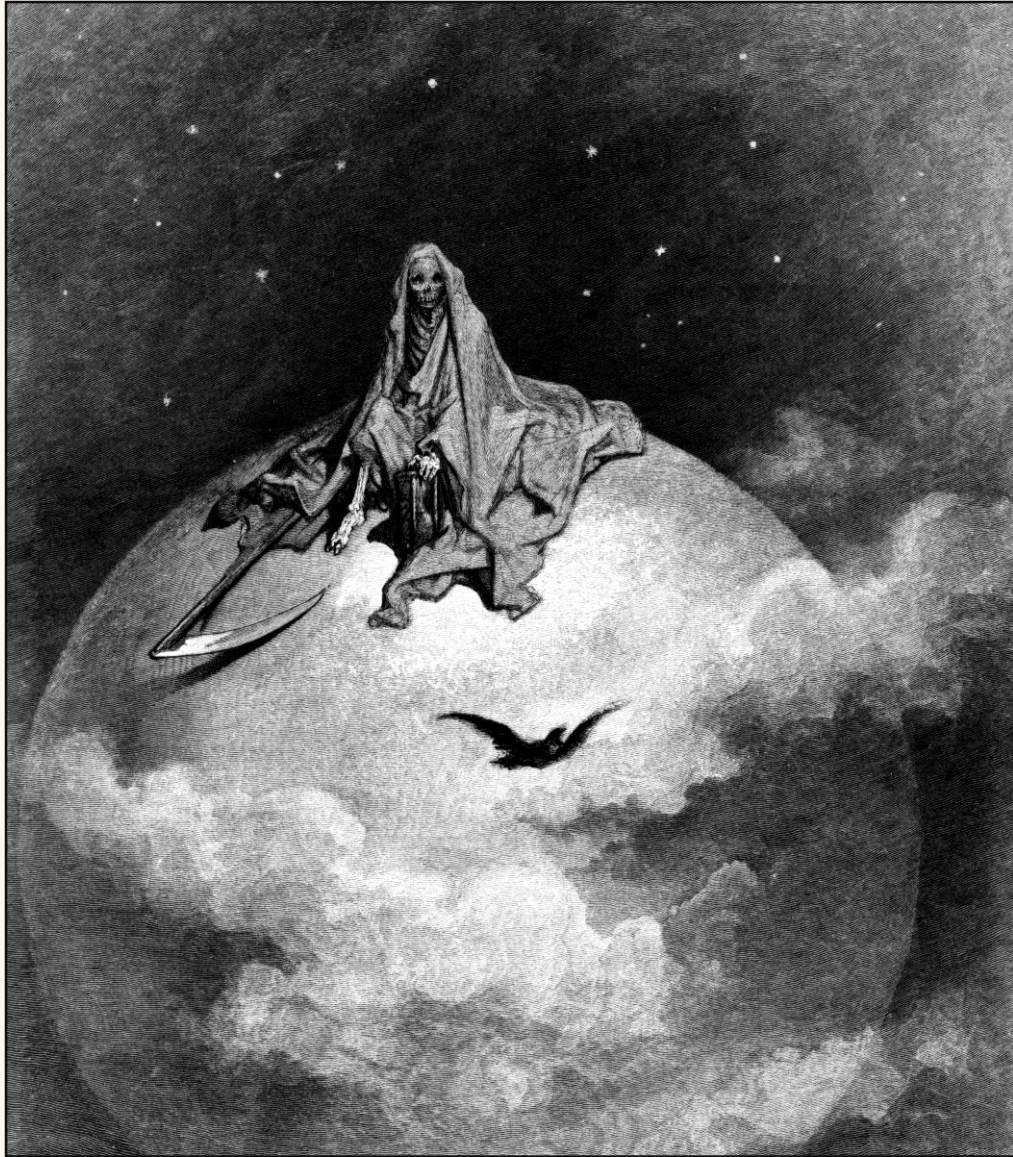
POE AND THE SURREALISTS

Soon after Edgar Allan Poe's brief and unceremonious funeral, Poe's many enemies worked tirelessly to discredit his work by defaming his reputation. He was portrayed as a minor writer whose debauched character had ruined his talent. As this view became generally accepted, no one could have predicted that Poe would become the most influential American writer of his time, perhaps of any time.

That influence was first felt abroad, especially in France. When the foremost French poet of the age, Charles Baudelaire, first read Poe's work, he had the eerie sensation that not just his ideas and feelings but actual sentences formulated in his own thoughts had been written down twenty years earlier by this unknown author in faraway America.

Baudelaire respected the logical part of Poe's mind seen in his so-called "tales of ratiocination." But what truly interested him was Poe's imaginative penetration of the mind's psychological states, especially the abnormal ones. Poe, Baudelaire believed, had "plunged into the least explored abyss of the human intellect" to describe nervousness, physical and mental disease, the extremities of terror and horror, and dreams. Through Baudelaire, Poe's writings became a part of the modernist concern with the nature of human consciousness.

One result of this interest in abnormal psychological states was Surrealism, a revolutionary movement in the arts. Surrealism first appeared in French literature around the time of the First World War. Soon it had spread to other countries and to



(Illustration from “The Raven” by Gustave Doré, 1882. — Ed.)

POE AND THE SURREALISTS

painting, sculpture, photography, and movies. The Surrealist definition of reality included—in fact, celebrated—the irrational and the fantastic. The irrational as we see it in random mental associations, in dreams, even in madness, is always evidence of the “deep mind” that underlies the conscious mind. To Surrealists these “abysses of the intellect” are the only valid source of art. Poe’s stories of dreams, opium trances, hallucinations, extreme terror, and suspended animation were all explorations of this deep mind.

Just as Poe’s stories were highly visual, so Surrealism flourished best in the visual arts. Surrealistic movies abandoned accurate depiction of the world for sequences of unrelated images. As viewers saw relationships and made connections between disparate images, meanings would “rise subterraneously.” Sculpture distorted all forms (including the human form) to make new arrangements of life. Painters, especially, took up this new language of the deep mind of the unconscious—with results that were sometimes silly, occasionally profound, and often stimulating.

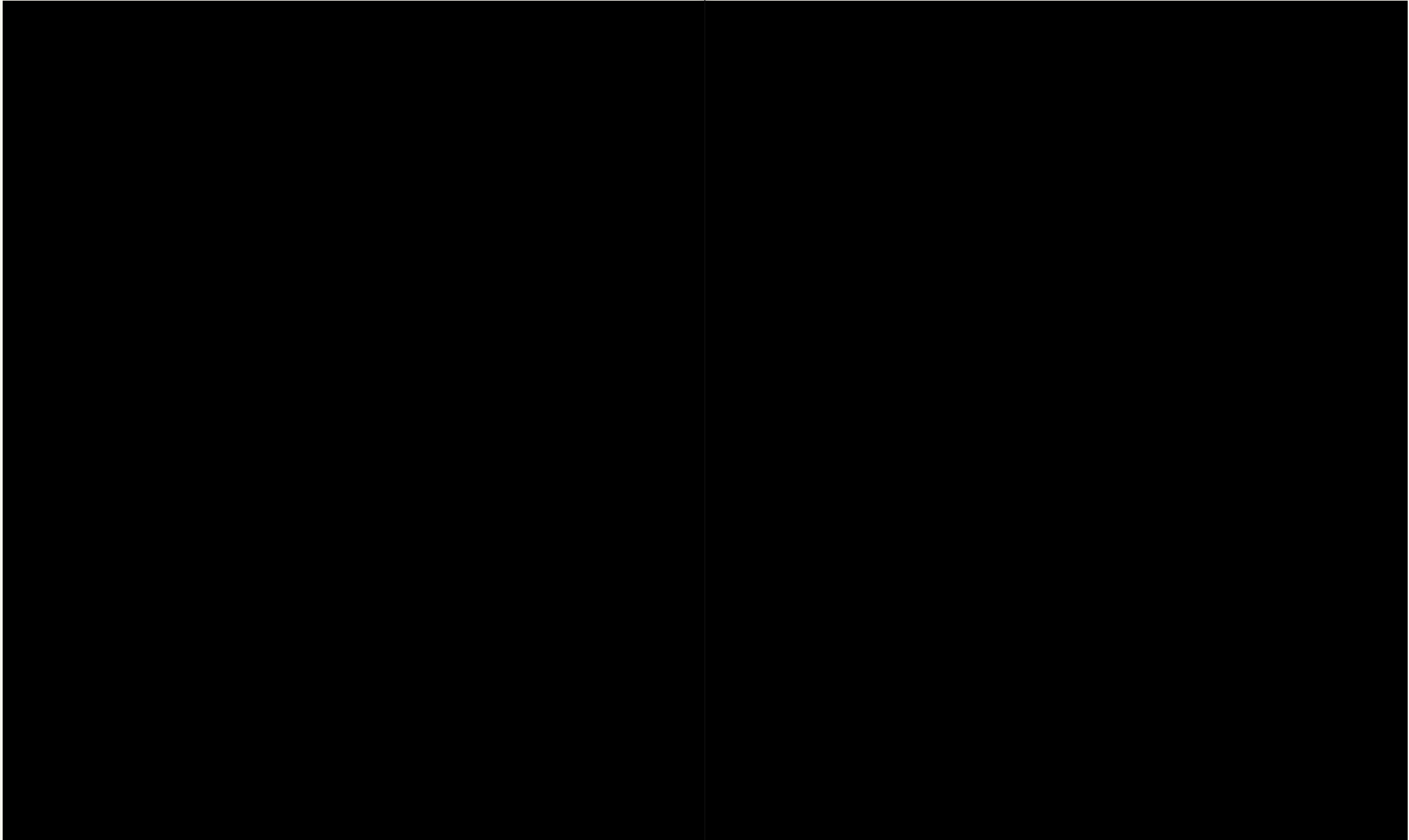
As we can see in the illustration to the left, the renowned nineteenth-century artist Gustave Doré fashions a world which ultimately evokes rather than describes the text. Often we’re reminded that the “reality” we see is governed by our own subjectivity.

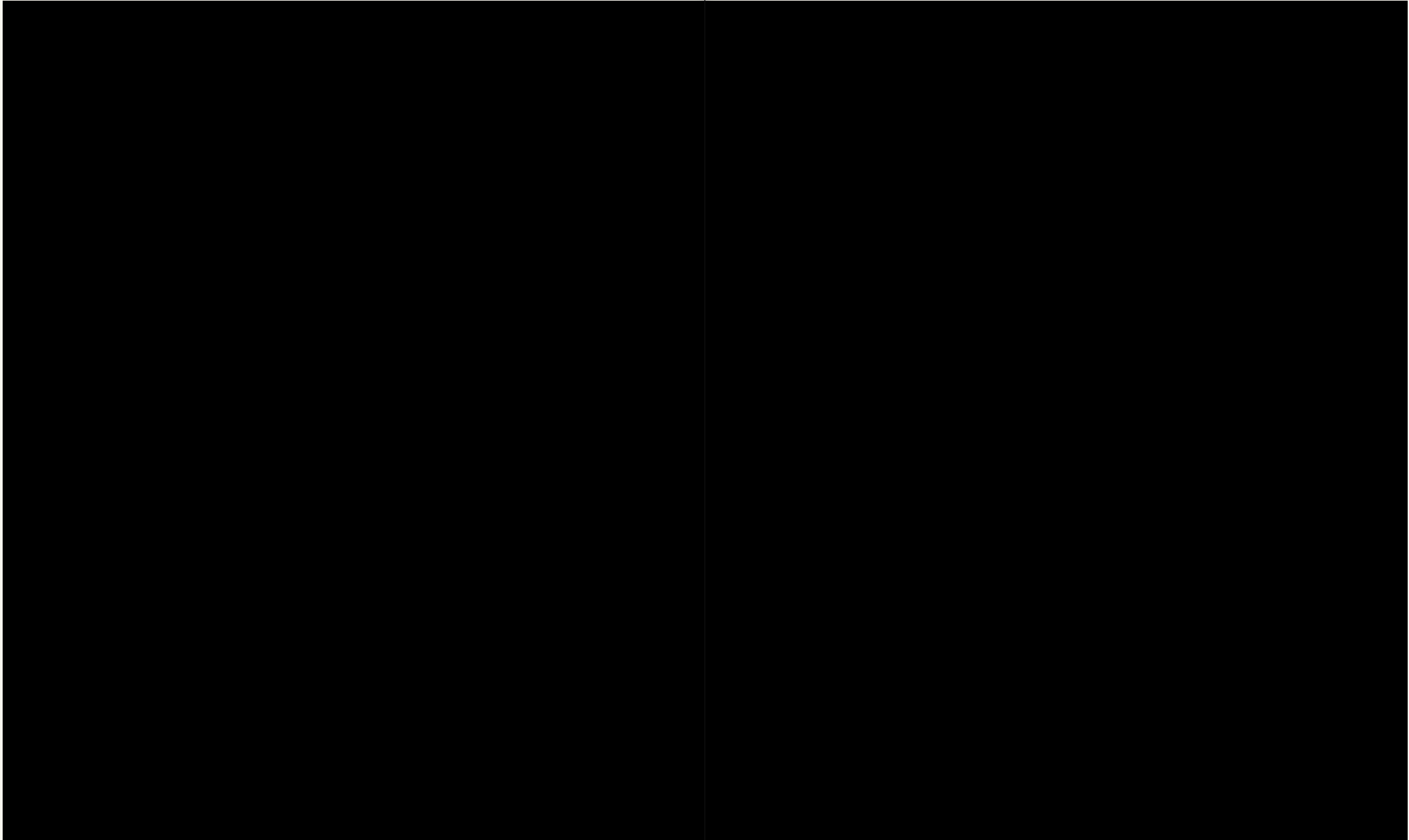
Most of all, Surrealists insisted, as Poe had long before, that there is no clear line between subject and object, or between the night life of dreams and the waking reality of daylight life.

The remarkable impact of Dante on the human conscience has revealed itself in the way generation after generation has found its world view congruent with many aspects of *The Divine Comedy*. In interpreting that world view, the artist transposed the Dantean vision through his own aesthetic idiom or conceptual mode. When rained upon with a number of exacting questions—unlike Gustave Doré’s classic woodblock engravings—Salvador Dalí’s color woodblock prints of *The Divine Comedy* open up like an umbrella and gather under its dome all kinds of aesthetic, indeed also philosophical, attitudes, including pragmatism and existentialism, the rigors of reality and the fantasy of dream, expressionism and surrealism, the ways of the conscious, and the subterfuges of the subconscious.

Not so much in the *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* but in the *Inferno* do we detect a turbulent procession of images that denote a psychic disturbance. The images align with what Dalí described as a “paranoiac” process of thought: appearances and counter-appearances which call attention more to themselves and how they relate to each other through quick and systematic associations, rather than to how they relate to the Dantean text. The “paranoiac-critical method,” according to him, represents a “spontaneous method of irrational knowledge based upon the interpretive-critical association of delirious phenomena.” For this reason, the subject of Dante’s canto may not be recognized at first sight, but it remains subtly pervasive, suggesting that in his dream world Dalí feels more liberated from the Dantean text than does Doré in his more realistic world.



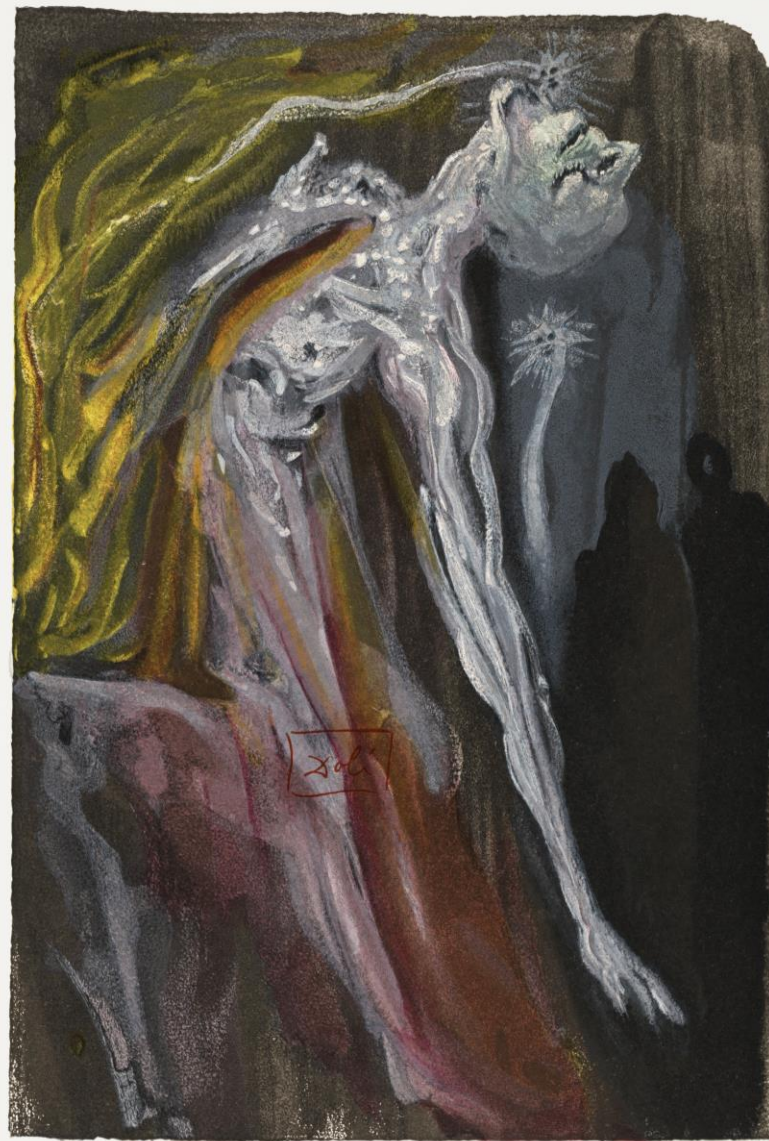




SKETCHES OF HELL

What does the titular [House](#) of Leaves look like? Despite Zampanò's 500-plus page opus and a reported documentary film on the exploration of its hallways, readers and viewers still lack closure on the specifics of the Navidsons' house. "Is it possible to think of that place as 'unshaped' by human perceptions? Especially since everyone entering there finds a vision almost completely—though pointedly not completely—different from anyone else's?," asks Zampanò in Part X of *The Navidson Record* (172-174). Later in the novel, a teacher at Chad and Daisy's new school is alarmed by the drawings of their house; as Zampanò recounts, "In some respects, the distillate of crayon and colour traced out by the hands of two children captures the awfulness at the heart of that [house](#) better than anything caught on film or tape, those shallow lines and imperfect shapes narrating the light seeping away from their lives" (315). Similar to Chad and Daisy's creative process, use paper, colored pencils, and your imagination to construct the infamous [house](#) on the corner of Succoth and Ash Tree Lane.

Explore the limits of virtual space and the recesses of your subconscious to design a fantastic and surreal 'dream [home](#)': do not feel limited by everyday notions of physics, time, place or any other definitions of 'reality.' Try to incorporate specific imagery from Danielewski's novel as well as haunting visions from your own dreams. Feel free to also design outdoor areas, or play with the notions of 'inside' and 'outside' perspectives. Examine Gustave Doré and Salvador Dalí's illustrations from *The Divine Comedy* for ideas. A direct quotation from [House of Leaves](#) which helped inspire your design is also required somewhere on your paper. Your completed drawing of the Navidsons' house will count as a class participation grade.



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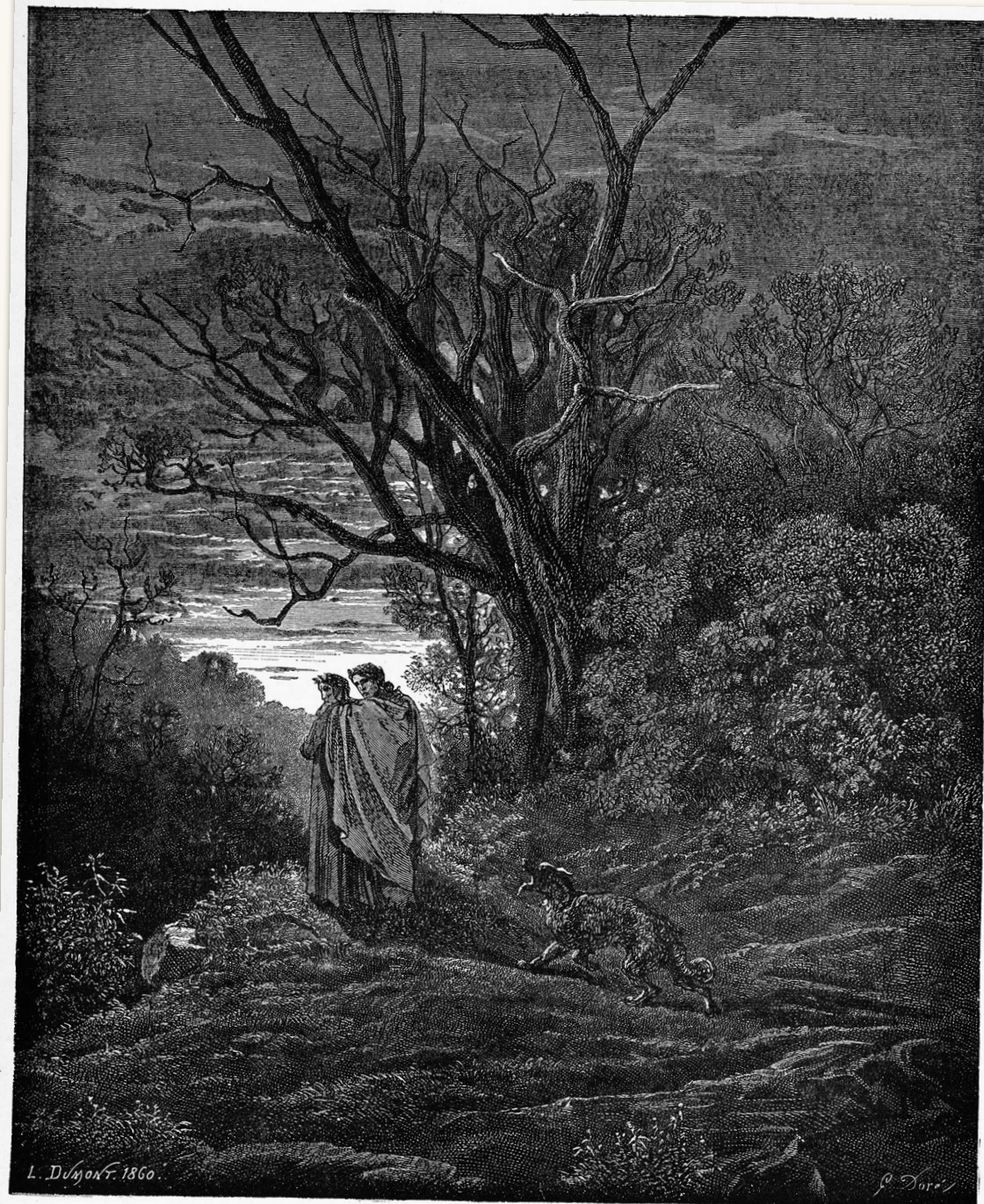
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⁴Yggdrasil in Norse mythology is an ash tree that supports the universe. In *Mythology* (19-42), Edith Hamilton records, “A wondrous ash-tree, Yggdrasil, supported the universe. It struck its roots through the worlds. The roots were Urda (the Past), Verdandi (the Present), and Skuld (the Future). Here each day the gods came, passing over the quivering rainbow bridge to sit beside the well and pass judgment on the deeds of men. Over Yggdrasil hung the threat of destruction. A serpent and his brood gnawed continually at the root beside Niflheim, Hel’s home. Some day they would succeed in killing the tree, and the universe would come crashing down” (461).