

"The Fall of the House of Usher"

The first five paragraphs of the story are devoted to creating a gothic mood--that is, the ancient decaying castle is eerie and moldy and the surrounding moat seems stagnant. Immediately Poe entraps us; we have a sense of being confined within the boundaries of the House of Usher. Outside the castle, a storm is raging and inside the castle, there are mysterious rooms where windows suddenly whisk open, blowing out candles; one hears creaking and moaning sounds and sees the living corpse of the Lady Madeline.

This, then, is the gothic and these are its trappings; one should realize by now that these are all basic effects that can be found in any modern Alfred Hitchcock-type of horror film, any ghost movie, or in any of the many movies about Count Dracula. Here is the genesis of this type of story, created almost one hundred and fifty years ago in plain, no-nonsense America, a new nation not even sixty years old.

Besides having a fascination for the weird and the spectral, Poe was also interested in the concept of the double, the schizophrenic, the ironic, and the reverse. He investigated this phenomenon in several stories, including "William Wilson" (a story which is analyzed in this volume), and so it is important to note that there is a special importance attached to the fact that Roderick Usher and the Lady Madeline are *twins*. Poe is creating in this story his conception of a special affinity between a brother and his twin sister; it is almost as if Poe were "inventing" ESP, for this accounts for the fact that Roderick Usher has heard the buried Lady Madeline struggling with her coffin and her chains for over three days before the narrator hears her. Unfortunately, modern readers tend to be a little jaded by the many gothic effects. ESP, for example, is rather old hat today as a gothic device, but in Poe's time, it was as frightening and mysterious as UFOs are today.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" exemplifies perfectly Poe's principle of composition that states that everything in the story must contribute to a single unified effect. Late in the story, Roderick Usher says: "I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR." Clearly, Poe has chosen the "grim phantasm, FEAR" for his prime effect to be achieved in this story. As a result, every word, every image, and every description in the story is chosen with the central idea in mind of creating a sense of abject terror and fear within both the narrator and the reader. From the opening paragraphs, ominous and foreboding as they are, to the presentation of the over-sensitive, hopelessly frail and

delicate Roderick Usher, to the terrible conclusion with the appearance of the living corpse, all of Poe's details combine to create the anxiety accompanying that "grim phantasm, FEAR."

Like so many of Poe's stories, the setting here is inside a closed environment. From the time the unnamed narrator enters the House of Usher until the end of the story when he flees in terror, the entire story is boxed within the confines of the gloomy rooms on an oppressive autumn day where every object and sound is attenuated to the over-refined and over-developed sensitivities of Roderick Usher.

In fact, the greatness of this story lies more in the unity of design and the unity of atmosphere than it does in the plot itself. In terms of what plot there is, it is set somewhere in the past, and we find out that the narrator and Roderick Usher have been friends and schoolmates previous to the story's beginning. At least Usher considers the narrator to be his friend--in fact, his only friend--and he has written an urgent letter to him, imploring him to come to the Usher manor "post-haste."

As the narrator approaches the melancholy House of Usher, it is evening time and a "sense of insufferable gloom pervades" his spirit. This is the first effect Poe creates, this "sense of insufferable gloom." There are no gothic stories or ghost stories which take place in daylight or at high noon; these types of stories *must* occur in either darkness or in semi-darkness, and thus the narrator arrives at this dark and cryptic manor just as darkness is about to enshroud it. The house, the barren landscape, the bleak walls, the rank sedges in the moat--all these create a "sickening of the heart--an unredeemed dreariness." This is a tone which will become the mood throughout the entire story.

Poe next sets up a sense of the "double" or the ironic reversal when he has the narrator first see the House of Usher as it is reflected in the "black and lurid tarn" (a dark and gruesome, revolting mountain lake) which surrounds it. The image of the house, you should note, is upside down. At the end of the story, the House of Usher will literally fall into this tarn and be swallowed up by it. And even though Poe said in his critical theories that he shunned symbolism, he was not above using it if such symbolism contributed to his effect. Here, the effect is electric with mystery; he says twice that the windows of the house are "eyelike" and that the inside of the house has become a living "body" while the outside has become covered with moss and is decaying rapidly. Furthermore, the ultimate Fall of the House is caused by an almost invisible crack in the structure, but a crack which the narrator notices; symbolically, this is a key image.

Also central to this story is that fact that Roderick and the Lady Madeline are twins. This suggests that when he buries her, he will widen the crack, or fissure, between them. This crack, or division, between the living and the dead will be so critical that it will culminate ultimately in the Fall of the House of Usher. It is possible that Poe wanted us to imagine that when Usher tries to get rid of that other part of himself, the twin half, he is, in effect, signing his own death warrant. Certainly at the end of the story, Lady Madeline falls upon him in an almost vampire-like sucking position and the two of them are climactically, totally one, finally united in the light of the full moon, by which the narrator is able to see the tumultuous Fall of the House of Usher. (The full moon, of course, is a traditional prop for stories of this sort; that is, one finds it in all gothic, ghostly, and vampire-type stories.) Upon entering the gothic archway of the deteriorating mansion, the narrator is led "through many dark and intricate passages" filled with "sombre tapestries," "ebon blackness," and "armorial trophies." As noted earlier, these details of old armor standing in the shadows and the intricate passageways leading mysteriously away are all traditional elements in all gothic horror stories. Over everything, Poe drapes his "atmosphere of sorrow . . . and irredeemable gloom." He evokes here his primary effect: We sense that some fearful event will soon transpire. When the narrator sees Roderick Usher, he is shocked at the change in his old friend. Never before has he seen a person who looks so much like a corpse with a "cadaverousness of complexion." Death is in the air; the first meeting prepares us for the untimely and ghastly death of Roderick Usher later in the story.

Usher tries to explain the nature of his illness; he suffers from a "morbid acuteness of the senses." He can eat "only the most insipid food, wear only delicate garments," and he must avoid the odors of all flowers. His eyes, he says, are "tortured by even a faint light," and only a few sounds from certain stringed instruments are endurable. As Roderick Usher explains that he has not left the house in many years and that his only companion has been his beloved sister, the Lady Madeline, we are startled by Poe's unexpectedly introducing her ghostly form far in the distance. Suddenly, while Roderick is speaking, Madeline passes "slowly through a remote portion of the apartment" and disappears without ever having noticed the narrator's presence. No doctor has been able to discover the nature of her illness--it is "a settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person" in a "cataleptical" state; that is, Lady Madeline cannot respond to any outside stimuli. The narrator then tells us that nevermore will he see her alive. Of course, then, the question at the end of the

story is: Was the Lady Madeline ever alive? Or is the narrator deceiving the reader by this statement?

Roderick Usher and the narrator speak no more of the Lady Madeline; they pass the days reading together or painting, and yet Usher continues to be in a gloomy state of mind. We also learn that one of Usher's paintings impresses the narrator immensely with its originality and its bizarre depiction: It is a picture of a luminous tunnel or vault with no visible outlet. This visual image is symbolic of what will happen later; it suggests both the vault that Usher will put his sister into and also the maelstrom that will finally destroy the House of Usher.

Likewise, the poem "The Haunted Palace," which Poe places almost exactly in the center of the story, is similar to the House of Usher in that some "evil things" are there influencing its occupants in the same way that Roderick Usher, the author of the poem seems to be haunted by some unnamed "evil things."

After he has finished reading the poem, Usher offers another of his bizarre views; this time, he muses on the possibility that vegetables and fungi are sentient beings--that is, that they are conscious and capable of having feelings of their own. He feels that the growth around the House of Usher has this peculiar ability to feel and sense matters within the house itself. This otherworldly atmosphere enhances Poe's already grimly threatening atmosphere.

One day, Roderick Usher announces that the Lady Madeline is "no more"; he says further that he is going to preserve her corpse for two weeks because of the inaccessibility of the family burial ground and also because of the "unusual character of the malady of the deceased." These enigmatic statements are foreboding; they prepare the reader for the re-emergence of the Lady Madeline as a living corpse.

At the request of Usher, the narrator helps carry the "encoffined" body to an underground vault where the atmosphere is so oppressive that their torches almost go out. Again Poe is using a highly effective gothic technique by using these deep, dark underground vaults, lighted only by torches, and by having a dead body carried downward to a great depth where everything is dank, dark, and damp. After some days of bitter grief, Usher changes appreciably; now he wanders feverishly and hurries from one chamber to another. Often he stops and stares vacantly into space as though he is listening to some faint sound; his terrified condition brings terror to the narrator. Then we read that

on the night of the "seventh or eighth day" after the death of the Lady Madeline, the narrator begins to hear "certain low and indefinite sounds" which come from an undetermined source. As we will learn later, these sounds are coming from the buried Lady Madeline, and these are the sounds that Roderick Usher has been hearing for days. Because of his over-sensitiveness and because of the extra-sensory relationship between him and his twin sister, Roderick has been able to hear sounds long before the narrator is able to hear them.

When Usher appears at the narrator's door looking "cadaverously wan" and asking, "Have you not seen it?," the narrator is so ill at ease that he welcomes even the ghostly presence of his friend. Usher does not identify the "it" he speaks of, but he throws open the casement window and reveals a raging storm outside--"a tempestuous . . . night . . . singular in its terror and its beauty." Again, these details are the true and authentic trappings of the gothic tale. Night, a storm raging outside while another storm is raging in Usher's heart, and a decaying mansion in which "visible gaseous exhalations . . . enshrouded the mansion"--all these elements contribute to the eerie gothic effect Poe aimed for. The narrator refuses, however, to allow Usher to gaze out into the storm with its weird electrical phenomena, exaggerated by their reflection in the "rank miasma of the tarn." Protectively, he shuts the window and takes down an antique volume entitled *Mad Trist* by Sir Launcelot Canning and begins reading aloud. When he comes to the section where the hero *forces* his way into the entrance of the hermit's dwelling, the narrator says that it "appeared to me that, from some very remote portion of the mansion, there came, indistinctly, to my ears, what might have been, in its exact similarity of character . . . the very cracking and ripping sound" which was described in the antique volume which he is reading to Usher.

The narrator continues reading, and when he comes to the description of a dragon being killed and dying with "a shriek so horrid and harsh, and withal so piercing," he pauses because at the exact moment, he hears a "low and apparently distant, but harsh, protracted and most unusual screaming or grating sound" which seems to be the exact counterpart of the scream in the antique volume. He observes Usher, who seems to be rocking from side to side, filled with some unknown terror. Very soon the narrator becomes aware of a distinct sound, "hollow, metallic and clangorous, yet apparently muffled." When he approaches Usher, his friend responds that he has been hearing noises for many days, and yet he has not dared to speak about them. The noises, he believes, come from Lady Madeline: "We have put her living in the tomb!" He heard the first feeble movements

a few days ago while she was in the coffin, then he heard the rending of the coffin and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison and then her struggling with the vault and, finally, she is now on the stairs and so close that Usher can hear "the heavy and horrible beating of her heart." With a leap upwards, he shrieks: "Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door!" At this moment, with superhuman strength, the antique doors are thrown open and in the half darkness there is revealed "the lofty and enshrouded figure of the Lady Madeline of Usher." There is blood upon her white robes and the evidence of a bitter struggle on every portion of her emaciated frame. With the last of her energy, while she is trembling and reeling, she falls heavily upon her brother, and "in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated."

The narrator tells us that he fled from the chamber and from the entire mansion and, at some distance, he turned to look back in the light of the "full, setting and *blood-red* moon" (emphasis mine) and saw the entire House of Usher split at the point where there was a zigzag fissure and watched as the entire house sank into the "deep and dank tarn" which covered, finally, the "fragments of the 'House of Usher.'"

There are more varying interpretations of this story than there are of almost any of Poe's other works. For some of the widely differing interpretations, the reader should consult the volume *Twentieth-Century Interpretations of Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher."* One key to the story is, of course, the name of the main character. An *usher* is someone who lets one in or leads one in. Thus, the narrator is *ushered* into the house by a bizarre-looking servant, and he is then *ushered* into Roderick Usher's private apartment and into his private thoughts. Finally, *usher* also means doorkeeper, and as they had previously *ushered* Lady Madeline prematurely into her tomb, at the end of the story Lady Madeline stands outside the door waiting to be *ushered* in; failing that, she *ushers* herself in and falls upon her brother.

In the concept of twins, there is also a reversal of roles. It is Usher himself who seems to represent the weak, the over-sensitive, the over-delicate, and the feminine. In contrast, Lady Madeline, as many critics have pointed out, possesses a superhuman will to live. She is the masculine force which survives being buried alive and is able, by using almost supernatural strength, to force her way out and escape from her entombment in the vaults, and then despite being drained of strength, as evidenced by the blood on her shroud, she is able to find her brother and fall upon him.

Another reading of the story involves the possibility that Roderick Usher's weakness, his inability to function in light, and his necessity to live constantly in the world of semi-darkness and muted sounds and colors is that the Lady Madeline is a vampire who has been sucking blood from him for years. This would account for his paleness and would fit this story in a category with the stories of Count Dracula that were so popular in Europe at the time. In this interpretation, Roderick Usher buries his sister so as to protect himself. Vampires had to be dealt with harshly; thus, this accounts for the difficulty Lady Madeline encounters in escaping from her entombment. In this view, the final embrace must be seen in terms of the Lady Madeline, a vampire, falling upon her brother's throat and sucking the last drop of blood from him.

The final paragraph supports this view in that the actions occur during the "full blood-red moon," a time during which vampires are able to prey upon fresh victims. At the opposite end of this phantasmal interpretation is the modern-day psychological view that the twins represent two aspects of one personality. The final embrace, in this case, becomes the unifying of two divergent aspects into one whole being at birth. Certainly many Romantics considered birth itself to be a breaking away from supernatural beauty, and they believed that death was a reuniting of oneself with that original spirituality. Lady Madeline can then be seen as the incarnation of "otherworldliness," the pure spirit purged of all earthly cares. She is, one might note, presented in this very image; at one point in the story, she seems to float through the apartment in a cataleptic state. If Usher embodies the incertitude of life--a condition somewhere between waking and sleeping--when Lady Madeline embraces him, this embrace would symbolize the union of a divided soul, indicating a final restoration and purification of that soul in a life to come. They will now live in pure spirituality and everything that is material in the world is symbolized by the collapse of the House of Usher--the dematerialization of all that was earthly in exchange for the pure spirituality of Roderick Usher and the Lady Madeline.

Even though Poe maintains that he did not approve of symbols or allegory, this particular story has been, as suggested above, subjected to many and varied types of allegorical or symbolic interpretations. Basically, however, the story still functions as a great story on the very basic level of the gothic horror story, in which the element of fear is evoked in its highest form.

Reference: *Cliffnotes on Poe's Short Stories (1980)*