

# Gothic influences of the monk on "the fall of the house of usher"



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Matthew Lewis' *The Monk*, published in 1796, built on the Gothic tradition established by the earliest authors in the genre, including Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe. Although it was not the first Gothic novel, it was one of the earliest and certainly the most scandalous of its period, and had lasting effects on the genre, from soon after it was published through the present. *The Monk's* influences on the Gothic genre are evident in Edgar Allen Poe's 1839 short story, "The Fall of the House of Usher." This novel and story share themes of dark and eerie settings, the supernatural, and familial relationships. Lewis' *The Monk* takes place in its contemporary setting of late eighteenth century Madrid (which the author provides thinly veiled political commentary about, particularly regarding the Spanish Inquisition) and intertwines multiple narratives. These include the love story of Antonia and Don Lorenzo, his nun sister's pregnancy and her punishment, her lover's adventures and quest to reunite with her, the pious monk Ambrosio's discovery that his most trusted mentee is a woman, who seduces him, and Ambrosio's violation of Antonia and literal fall from grace. The multitude of storylines culminates at the conclusion, when Matilda, the false monk, promises Ambrosio that he can escape execution by Inquisition officials if he agrees to sell his soul to the devil. The devil rescues the monk, but he reveals that Matilda was a demon sent to torture him and that Elvira was his mother, making Antonia his sister. He finally feeds the monk to eagles, which tear his body apart and drop him to his death on sharp rocks.

Lewis' approach to setting is particularly interesting because there are many settings throughout the novel that defy traditional Gothic stereotypes.

Several of the side plots, including those detailing Antonia's family or Don

Raymond, take place in typical houses or outdoors in temperate weather. However, Lewis writes *Ambrosio* almost exclusively in typical Gothic settings, including his small monastery chambers outdoors at night. As the plot lines converge, these settings become more dominant in the narrative, culminating in the cavern beneath the convent. The reader is made to feel wary as soon as Lorenzo enters from the line, " They at length were bewildered by the labyrinth of passages" (Lewis 309). In this scene, Agnes is found trapped in a hidden tomb in the sepulchre by Lorenzo and his companions, clutching her infant's corpse and barely clinging to life, while *Ambrosio* rapes Antonia nearby and stabs her in the chest just before he is found by the Inquisitors. One of the best examples of setting comes from Lewis' use of light and darkness to describe the terrifying atmosphere of the tomb in which Agnes is concealed. Lewis writes, " The horrors of a narrow gloomy dungeon formed in one side of the cavern...Coldly played the light upon the damp walls, whose dew-stained surface gave back a feeble reflection. A thick and pestilential fog clouded the height of the vaulted dungeon" (316). This use of a creepy, religious setting is extremely important to consider when discussing Lewis' use of the supernatural.

The *Monk* is rife with supernatural elements throughout, and each one has a religious aspect to it, which contributes to the book being largely about religion itself. The first instance of the supernatural is manifested in Lorenzo's dream, which perhaps stemmed from his guilt about his impure thoughts regarding Antonia. This theme of guilt and the religious supernatural is carried through the novel, which is most evident when Elvira appears as a ghost to *Ambrosio* and at the end when he sells his soul to the

devil. As Peter Brooks argues in his article, "The Monk: Virtue and Terror," "The problem of the Sacred in *The Monk* comes to crisis in its ethical relation, in the problem of guilt and its definition" (251). The initial skepticism of some of the characters toward these forces supposed to be beyond their control leads to their pain and punishment. Brooks uses the example of Raymond and Agnes' decision to imitate the Bleeding Nun to facilitate Agnes' escape from her convent to show how mocking the spirit world can have dire consequences. He posits that "the forces which we deny, mock, put down, are precisely those that assert their reality and smite us...It is in fact possible to specify within this episode the point of intersection of the natural world and the supernatural, the moment at which the natural yields, cedes, gives way to the imperative solicitations of the supernatural" (254-255). Some of the most powerful examples of supernatural elements in this novel are told through the lens of family.

The initial scene in *The Monk* sets a precedent for the rest of the novel, as it is centered around the young Antonia and her aunt, Leonella, who go to the church to hear Ambrosio preach. The Gothic theme of familial relationships is present in some form in nearly every occurrence in the novel, from Elvira's protectiveness over Antonia to Lorenzo's reunion with his sister and her deceased child. The most notable and disturbing relationship in *The Monk* is, of course, that between Ambrosio and Antonia. Elvira's supernatural premonition that "Antonia [was] on the verge of a precipice...[shrieking] 'Save me, mother! Save me!'" saved her daughter from Ambrosio's first attempt at sexual assault (Lewis 261). When he is caught by Elvira, who threatens to expose his sins to the entire town, he strangles her to death.

Brooks explains why this is a turning point of the novel when he writes that, " A notable moment is the murder of Elvira...a moment of frenetic passion which culminates: ' Ambrosio beheld before him that once noble and majestic form, now become a corpse, cold, senseless, and disgusting'...and the object which he sought to gain by the murder, Antonia's possession, now equally appears to him an object of disgust" (259). Another reason for this disgust could be Ambrosio's supernatural sense that Antonia was connected to him, as it is later revealed that he was the young son who Elvira believed had died in Cuba. These themes are also prevalent in the later Gothic publication, Poe's " The Fall of the House of Usher."

" The Fall of the House of Usher" follows an unnamed narrator's visit to his physically and mentally ailing friend, Roderick Usher, at his dilapidating family mansion. The narrator soon learns that Usher is suffering from a sensory overload and a sense of impending doom as he fears that his sister, Madeline, will soon die, leaving him alone to face the end of the Usher family line. When Madeline dies, Roderick elects to keep her in a vault in the house for two weeks before she is buried. On a stormy night, Madeline, who is revealed to be Roderick's twin, appears at the door, emaciated from escaping her tomb. She falls onto her brother, and as they both meet their ends, the house cleaves along a fissure which divides it into halves and falls as the narrator barely escapes.

One of the most common and easily notable aspects that weaves its way through Gothic literature is a dark and gloomy setting. Although this idea does not appear to require as much examination, these settings often come alive (sometimes literally) and contribute substantially to deeper themes in <https://assignbuster.com/gothic-influences-of-the-monk-on-the-fall-of-the-house-of-usher/>

the story, and the titular House of Usher is no exception. According to the article “ Elements of the Early Gothic in E. A. Poe’s ‘ The Fall of the House of Usher’” by Stefan P. Pajovic, “ the unnamed author rides on “ a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year” (Poe 1961: 83). It is the very first sentence that introduces the atmosphere of a horror story” (188). Unlike many of its predecessors, this story’s home is not a castle, rather the narrator describes looking upon “ a mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain— upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows— upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees” (3). However, this lack of grandeur contributes to the haunting effect and the narrator’s feelings of foreboding. The brief mention of “ a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction” sounds as if it may be merely another undesirable detail of the dingy residence until the final paragraph of the story reveals a frightening twist of events and the entire house divides at this crack and falls (6, 25). Here the importance of the setting becomes overwhelmingly clear, as the fissure is a physical manifestation of the Usher siblings’ relationship. This scene is not only important when discussing the setting of the story, but the fissure is also one of its most important supernatural elements.

Although they are not as numerous, nor as explicitly stated as in *The Monk*, there are many supernatural themes throughout “ *The Fall of the House of Usher.*” As the narrator reads Sir Launcelot Canning’s “ *Mad Trist*” to Roderick, he begins to hear strange noises, but assumes that he is paranoid and imagining things, influenced by his companion. However, his suspicions

are concerned when Poe writes, "...there could be no doubt whatever that, in this instance, I did actually hear...a low and apparently distant, but harsh, protracted, and most unusual screaming or grating sound—the exact counterpart of what my fancy had already conjured up for the dragon’s unnatural shriek as described by the romancer” (23). Pajovic discusses Poe’s use of the supernatural in this manner. He writes, “ in Gothic literature, the function of the supernatural is mainly to turn the reader’s attention to the fact that something is not quite right with the world they live in and that the subsequent gruesome outcome is the direct result of the ill-doings that had taken place. Poe’s supernatural in the story in question is as outright as in any other work of the Gothic, as he is being mysterious about the mysterious” (Pajovic 197). Poe also subtly suggests to the reader that Lady Madeline is not fully human, as it would be natural to assume given that she had been ill. However, when “ the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady” appears like a specter in the doorway, it becomes clear that she possesses supernatural abilities, even though Poe never writes this directly (25). Pajovic explains how the author accomplishes this with a set of minute grammatical cues, writing, “ Every single adjective that the writer uses to explain how Roderick’s sister was secured in her final resting place brings the audience one step closer to the realization that no mortal entity could free itself from such bondage” (197). The presence of the supernatural in this short story is also closely intertwined with its sibling relationship.

Like *The Monk*, “ *The Fall of the House of Usher*” also discusses family and contains an unhealthy and dangerous sibling relationship, although it is only implied that this may have been an incestuous one like Ambrosio’s and

Antonia's. The narrator is aware that "The entire [Usher] family lay in the direct line of descent," which is peculiar on its own, especially given the time period. Roderick and Matilda's coexisting illnesses and their status as twins, which is not revealed until late in the plot when the latter dies, establishes them as a strongly emotionally connected pair, a concept that can seem supernatural in its own right. Pajovic addresses this concept as well, writing, "A strong bond, sometimes referred to as "the sixth sense", between siblings gets amplified as Poe's characters share such similar features, both physical and mental, that the reader gets the impression that they are one entity" (190). This oneness becomes even more literal when Madeline throws herself onto her brother and they collapse together, conjoined in a mutual death. As mentioned in the discussion of the setting, their relationship is symbolized by the home, which began to crack as they became unstable and fell immediately upon their demise.

Since the inception of the genre, Gothic literature has tended toward the dramatic in ways that has kept readers intrigued for centuries. These works have historically shared certain elements, including those mentioned: creepy and often miserable settings, the supernatural (and often its relation to religion), and twisted familial relationships, among others. The significant impact of the genre's early works, particularly *The Monk*, on the literature of the next several hundred years is clear.