

The fall of the house of usher by edgar allen poe



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Number Your 13 October 2006 The Inevitability of " The Fall of the House of Usher" In a foreboding old mansion set into a blasted landscape, a terrifying scenario unfurls. Edgar Allen Poe needs no ghosts or vampires to pull this off; there are no supernatural elements to " The Fall of the House of Usher."

Instead, he employs an old literary tradition, using the landscape to reflect the psychological state of the landowner. Given Roderick Usher's moribund mind, the grounds and the house can only be expected to produce a disconcerting effect on the viewer. The house is haunted, not by the dead, but by the barely-living. Poe's depiction of a crumbling world introduces the fragile remnants of the Usher family and foreshadows their inescapable demise.

Poe draws this classical connection between the family and the land early on, saying bluntly that the House of Usher is " an appellation which seemed to include, in the mind of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion" (Poe 45). The future of the House is revealed in the observation that the family " had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch" (Poe 45). It is not a prolific family tree, and neither Roderick nor the Lady Madeleine exhibit the sanguinity to make them fit stewards of the property or likely to bear any descendents. The House of Usher, we are to understand, is dying. Their lands exhibit an atmosphere of death, the family is vulnerable to illness, both physical and mental, and they just don't seem like the kind of people with the inclination to procreate. The very idea of children feels sacrilegious in this somber atmosphere.

The bleak surroundings are apparent before any observations are made on the family. The story opens with a long paragraph describing precisely how desolate and disconcerting the landscape is. The house is located in " a

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singularly dreary tract of country" (Poe 43), the first adjective used to describe it is "melancholy" (Poe 43), and the narrator's first emotional response to its sight is, "a sense of insufferable doom" (Poe 43). Every aspect of the description is intended to highlight impending doom: the sedge is "rank" (Poe 43), the trees "decayed" (Poe 43), and the effect of looking upon them comparable to drug withdrawal. Even when he rides his horse up the tarn, the narrator cannot shake the impression. Poe's intent is to demonstrate that, no matter how you look at the situation, Usher is on the brink of doom.

There is a miasma of bad fortune surrounding the whole place, "a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued" (Poe 46), which the narrator can almost see, despite his understanding that it must be an illusion. The sickness in the land and the family is actually palpable. There are other overt signs of decay: "Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior" (Poe 46) and certain stones seem to be crumbling, but on the whole, the house is standing and "the fabric gave little token of instability" (Poe 46). But there is one final element that foreshadows the eventual fall, a thing so small that it is the last thing the narrator mentions in his description. Further, he mentions it almost as an afterthought, saying, "Perhaps the eye of a scrutinizing observer might have discerned a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn" (Poe 46). This is the most important clue.

The tale that unfolds within the House of Usher is enough, finally, to send the narrator fleeing into the stormy night, where the weather obliges the author by matching the tempestuousness of Roderick's final emotions. With the lord

and lady either dead or dying, the line of Usher has come to an end, and Poe can employ the small device he embedded early on in the story. As the live burial finally destroys the siblings who lived so long so close to death, lightning strikes the crack that has been allowed to grow in the house and "this fissure rapidly widened I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder" (Poe 64). Then, just as the crack itself had disappeared into the tarn, the entire house follows suit. It's a case of all the pins having been set up early on, and now the author need only watch them fall in order: first the twins, then the crack, and finally, the entire house swallowed by the water.

Poe, Edgar Allen. "The Fall of the House of Usher." *Tales of Mystery*. New York: Award Books. 43-64.

Poe, Edgar Allen. "The Fall of the House of Usher." *Literature, An introduction to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama* 9th ed. Eds. Joe Kennedy & Dana Gioia. New York: Pearson, 2005.

Outline

I. Introduction

Thesis: Poe's depiction of a crumbling world introduces the fragile remnants of the Usher family and foreshadows their inescapable demise.

II. The family is inextricably connected to the land

A. Both are known as The House of Usher

B. The family tree is barren, like the land.

C. The family is sick, like the land

III. The land projects a feeling of doom

A. Description of land

B. Descriptions of plants

C. Every view is disconcerting

IV. The house projects a feeling of death and decay

A. Air feels pestilent

B. Fungus grows on the house

C. A minute crack runs the length of the house

V. Conclusion

Poe has set up a world that symbolizes imminent destruction, then destroys it.