

# Research paper on the fall of the house of usher

[Life](#), [Death](#)



The name Edgar Allan Poe is synonymous with literary horror: his works such as “ The Pit and The Pendulum” and his “ Murders in the Rue Morgue” short-stories collection have managed to intrigue, woo and horrify readers for decades. His dark, suspenseful imagery has a distinctive style with its focus on the macabre and the slightly twisted. Poe is a master at creating horror without the need for graphic violence and gore, a talent which has long since been lost on today’ s modern horror writers. “ The Pit and the Pendulum”, for example, demonstrates a build-up of horror through an air of potential misery for its protagonist: a ‘ will it or won’t it’ book that scares and thrills by playing upon basic human fears with a wink to its knowledge of how the human imagination works. It doesn’t require graphic scenes to depict its internalized horror. “ The Fall of the House of Usher” is one such horror story and leans on the gothic style to lend to its overall effect. Within the course of this essay, we will discuss the traditional aspects of the gothic genre and assess how Poe has used this to build upon the horror in his novel, whilst discussing how archetypal “ The Fall of the House of Usher” is to its gothic traditions, or whether it is simply a parody of such traditions.

Before continuing on, it is first vital to examine the gothic genre and identify its key traditions and attributes. It is widely seen as a sub-strand of horror with a large focus on setting and character: traditional gothic novels are usually set in old abbeys, castles, ruinous buildings or manor houses. Their characters are often dark, mysterious creatures that prefer the shadows and a dark alleyway to the shopping malls and schools of the 1990s ‘ slasher’ horror movie teenagers. Andrew Smith, a literary critic, states that one important consideration when critically analysing a gothic novel, is its

representation of 'evil': "The demonization of particular types of behaviour makes visible the covert political views of a text." (Smith 3) This assessment is largely accurate: the gothic novel has long since been associated with politics and religion from the bastardization of the re-birth of Christ in Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein", to the allegorically, chastity-laden, subliminal message of Bram Stoker's "Dracula": political commentary is a significant factor in the gothic tradition. The gothic is a genre which tends to be manipulated within various larger genres: its features chopped and used through literature, meaning that its clear definition is quite hazy in practice.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" reflects gothic traditions in a number of ways. Its overall feel is one which is sombre, overbearing and verging on claustrophobic: "Animated by a looming death madness experienced [with Usher's wife]... the story offers a classic example of claustrophobic atmosphere... and a mounting fear of premature burial" (Snodgrass 112). A large gothic characteristic is the over-arching atmosphere to a story: imagine, if you will, walking into an old, large manor house which hasn't been lived in for decades and has a succession of spider webs, creaking doors and dusty surfaces: the creeping, chilling feeling that comes over you is the atmosphere of a gothic novel. It doesn't require anything particularly scary to develop your belief that something spooky is/could be happening. The atmosphere of this book is immediately set on the first page: "During the whole of a dull, dark and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country." (Poe 1) Poe repeatedly uses negative language to create a sense of its whole, miserable

nature. The choice of season (autumn) reflects the nature of the book's build up to an inevitable conclusion of death; autumn being as the leaves start to die and fall off the tree before the cold, final, annual conclusion of the year in winter. Poe has deliberately chosen words such as 'dark' and 'dull' to set the scene of a miserable day, whilst using 'oppressively' and 'soundless' to influence the atmosphere of the scene: again, it's the silence and feeling of something spooky weighing down on the reader to induce a feeling of fear. Automatically, the reader is expecting something horrid to happen.

The title character of Roderick Usher is a morose character whose focus is firmly on the negative. His preoccupation with his symptoms borders on manic hypochondria and his mood greatly influences that of the book. Upon arriving at the house, the narrator is quick to draw attention to his host's health: "It was with difficulty that I could bring myself to admit the identity of the wan being before me with the companion of my early boyhood." (Poe 3) Immediately we are met with a mental image of a man who has significantly changed since childhood and there is an underlying suggestion that something terrible has caused this change. Our mental image is sharpened when the narrator adds a description of Usher, saying: "A cadaverousness of complexion..." and this allusion to death creates an image of a man who pale, weak and weary is already half in his grave. This again, furthers the 'inevitable' feeling of the book's conclusion as lying in a morbid setting. The character of Usher is increasingly strange through the novel and as events build, so does his paranoia and the intensity of the writing increases in time with his frenetic behaviour.

Usher's twin sister, Madeline, is also an extremely strange character. She and Usher "appear to share an incestuous relationship" and this increases his obsession with the impending "terminus of his family's lineage."

(Snodgrass 113) Her presence in the book is metaphorical of her fate: she wafts through the house, like a ghost which adds an air of irony to her character as she is eventually killed by her brother, returning as a ghost to wreak her revenge. The narrator states: "the lady Madeline (for so was she called) passed slowly through a remote portion of the apartment, and without having noticed my presence, disappeared." (Poe 13) This apparition-like appearance adds to the already creepy scenario of the house, the eccentric Usher and the narrators repeated references to his discomfort whilst being in the house: "[I believed] that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity – an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven." (Poe 2) Madeline suffers from a strange illness which puzzles her physicians but seems confined to a destiny where her fate is sealed. This in itself is a gothic tradition: the miserable woman with a, seemingly, incurable illness; it also adds to the growing tension of 'inevitability' in the book.

The narrator plays a significant role in proceedings. His voice is the rational in an increasingly surreal setting – the reader's link to the macabre. Whilst the narrator seems keen to remain detached from his surroundings, he is often quickly influenced by Usher and he "embodies the helplessness" of the book's underlying message of its inevitable ending. His inability to overcome the supernatural powers of the house emphasises the strength of these powers and demonstrates the juxtaposition of the house and its family

with the actuality of the real world. The narrators narrow escape back into his world before the house and its entire contents vanish, demonstrates the thin divide between the real and the supernatural. (Müller 7) Poe's message seems to be that it is often a fine line between 'normal' and 'abnormal' in life.

Poe inserts a 48-line poem entitled 'The Haunted Palace.' According to one source, this poem serves as an allegory for its father story by presenting a "royal dwelling threatened by an undesignated evil." The poem "echoes" Usher's ever-increasingly weak grip on reality by presenting the King as being under siege by this evil. (Snodgrass 113) This idea further invokes the inevitable decline of Usher, his sister and indeed, their family. This allegory almost seems like a step too far by Poe; it is almost parodying the gothic genre by going over the top with its use of gothic traditions. The constant 'hammering home' of gothic ideas runs throughout every sentence and paragraph and it begins to border on being slightly ridiculous.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is widely considered to be Poe's greatest work and as such, it is widely respected as a member of the gothic genre. The haunting is a metaphor for Usher's own personal haunting in his mind: he is a man plagued by demons in both the form of his own dementia and by the reality of the house, his sister and their complicated relationship. When he convinces the narrator to help him carry his 'dead' sister to the family crypt, the narrator comments that her cheeks still seemed rosy. As the story develops, it is clear that Usher is haunted by his sister and she eventually 'returns' from the dead to claim his life. The story is so dramatic that actually,

it begs the question of whether its melodrama serves as a parody of gothic horror, rather than in homage. Poe appears to have packed in so many gothic traditions that it seems slightly excessive: the feeling of an inevitably morbid conclusion that is infused throughout the story almost seems like it is deliberately stereotypical; it is as if Poe has taken the reader aside and whispered ‘ of course that’s the ending – they all end like this’ in their ear. The story works well as both parody and traditional gothic tale; whichever interpretation that reader opts for, it is dependent on their reading of the text as either being a masterpiece of the macabre, or a ridiculing take on the world of gothic horror.

## References

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