

The fall of southern  
aristocracy, and the  
fall of the south: an  
examination of po...



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Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Fall of the House of Usher" details the end of a southern aristocratic family line in a gothic manner which is to be expected of Poe. While Poe's writing most prominently focuses on gothic quality, it is important to note the southern nature of his writing as well. Poe may have been born in Boston, but he was raised in the South. Although a sense of southern quality is not at the forefront of his works, there is a southern influence to Poe's gothic writing style which deserves examination for its depiction of the antebellum South. Ellen Glasgow, a postbellum southern author that demonstrates the birth of the critical spirit in Southern Literature, uses the same underlying gothic principles and themes that are established by Poe in "The Fall of the House of Usher" in her short story "Jordan's End" in order to parallel the end of a southern family line with the end of the old southern way of life.

On the surface, "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "Jordan's End" both appear to be near-identical in style and story. Both stories center on the mental decline of the last of a family line, develop a gothic atmosphere, and explore the theme of isolation. However, when comparing the two stories, it becomes apparent that Poe and Glasgow have different authorial intentions in their writings. Poe's writing demonstrates cohesion among the gothic elements of the story which suggests his sole intentions were to create a standalone work of horror, and it is mere coincidence that the setting of "The Fall of the House of Usher" is in Virginia. Authors of *The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs* state that "Poe records little that is obviously Virginian. Emphasis falls on a sublime gothic beauty/terror" (Flora, MacKethan, and Todd 942).

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Nonetheless, there is a sense of eloquence in Poe's writing that can only be attained by a southern gentleman. In opposition to this, Glasgow uses the elements of gothic literature to criticize the Old Southern way of life instead of fixating only on the beauty and terror of gothic stylization. Poe writes gothic works for the sake of creating something eloquent and otherworldly; Glasgow uses gothic style to support a critical examination of the fall of the Old South and the people of that time period. Glasgow establishes a very southern quality in her work through the use of local color, mentioning of the Civil War, and the character Father Peterkin. Father Peterkin allows Glasgow to more freely include aspects of southern literature without disturbing the unity of the story, and his dialect reveals a very southern quality. The narrator of "Jordan's End" reflects on Father Peterkin's dialect after learning the correct Virginian pronunciation of the family name "Jordan": "The name was invariably called Jurdin by all classes; but I had already discovered that names are rarely pronounced as they are spelled in Virginia" (359). Glasgow helps to establish the southern element of the story in the distinction of Father Peterkin's dialect.

Poe establishes a theme of isolation in "The Fall of the House of Usher" which is retained in Glasgow's "Jordan's End." Geographical isolation is an important factor to consider in southern literature because living in the rural Old South means being isolated from the rest of the nation and other local people. The isolation affected the way in which southern people lived their lives in the Old South. People that lived in the rural Old South like Roderick Usher and Alan Jordan were confined by geographical boundaries such as mountains and rivers. Neighbors and cities were great distances away which

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made socialization outside of the family hard to attain. Poe describes the isolation of Roderick Usher: I had learned, too, the very remarkable fact, that the stem of the Usher race, all time-honored as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain. (104) Poe means to say that the Usher family has always been small. There has never been deviation from a direct line of descent among the Ushers, and this essentially means that the Usher gene pool is slim-pickings. Very similarly, Glasgow describes the Jordan family as being so entirely isolated that they have practiced intermarriage and inbreeding. The inbreeding in the Jordan family leads to the development of mental disease in the men of the Jordan family, and, like the Ushers, they have never expanded their family beyond an immediate line of descent which is ultimately the cause of the end of their family lines. As described by Father Peterkin, a character in "Jordan's End," the Jordan family "jest run to seed" (Glasgow 359). Glasgow suggests that the grotesqueness of inbreeding is a product of both isolation and ways of thinking in the Old South. A literary critic delineates on the subject: It was narrow-mindedness born of pride, ethnocentrism born of ignorance, that led families such as the Jordans to the kind of inbreeding that produced insanity in generation after generation. The way of life, the way of thinking, and the refusal to admit that things had changed — all were causes for the decline of southern aristocracy. (Ross) Glasgow follows Poe in the use of southern aristocratic characters, but she does so in order to discuss the decline of those types of people in the Old South. Glasgow wishes to offers reader an understanding of the decay of an

old way of life, and she does so through using the Jordan family as a symbol for the end of an era in the South.

Both Poe and Glasgow use symbolism in their short stories to aid in their desired effects. Poe uses symbolism in “ The Fall of the House of Usher” in his description of the house of the Usher family. Poe writes about the house in a manner that is conducive to his careful gothic structure: The discoloration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones.

(105) Poe writes about the inconsistency of how the Usher’s house seems to be falling apart and defying time at the simultaneously because the same inconsistency exists in his character Roderick Usher. Poe uses the house as a symbol for Roderick Usher’s character. Poe describes Roderick Usher: “ I gazed upon him with a feeling half of pity, half of awe” (106). Poe uses this symbolization as a way to create a more cohesive short story in which all parts are interwoven. The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe states that “ critics have long noted, “ The Fall of the House of Usher” is carefully structured” (Hayes 179). The main goal of Poe’s writing is to create a unified piece of literature. Both stories use symbolism in their names. “ The Fall of the House of Usher” has a double meaning because it tells the story of the fall of Usher family line, and the house mimics the Usher family and declines throughout the expanse of the short story until it ultimately falls as well. Poe

creates a connection between the actual house of the Usher family and the <https://assignbuster.com/the-fall-of-southern-aristocracy-and-the-fall-of-the-south-an-examination-of-poes-the-fall-of-the-house-of-usher-and-glasgows-jordans-end/>

Ushers themselves, and he does so very literally. It is as though the house and the Usher family are one of the same. Poe writes that Roderick Usher fell to the floor dead, and he also writes that the walls of the house “came rushing asunder” (116). Again, the symbolization Poe uses in this work is done so in a manner that unifies each individual aspect of his writing. “Jordan’s End” also offers a double meaning in its name symbolism: “It is the name of the crumbling southern mansion which is the main setting of the story, and it is also a reference to the decaying state of the Jordan family” (DeFattore and Cassidy). The connection that Poe establishes between the Usher family and the Usher house is retained in “Jordan’s End,” and the connection can be seen through the similar depictions of the appearance of Alan Jordan and the Jordan House. Glasgow describes the Jordan family home: Forlorn as it appeared at this first approach, I surmised that Jordan’s End must have possessed once a charm as well as distinction. The proportions of the Georgian front were impressive, and there was a beauty of design in the quaint doorway, and in the steps of rounded stone which were brocaded now with a pattern of emerald moss. But the whole place was badly in need of repair. (360) Alan Jordan is described in a similar manner: “His head was sunk forward his eyes were staring fixedly at some image we could not see; his fingers moving restlessly were plaiting and unplaiting the fringe of a plaid shawl. Distraught as he was, he still possessed the dignity of mere physical perfection” (364).

The similarities between the way in which Poe and Glasgow connected the family and the family home demonstrates a clear coherence to both texts.

Glasgow, however, uses symbolism a bit more abstractly in her story than <https://assignbuster.com/the-fall-of-southern-aristocracy-and-the-fall-of-the-south-an-examination-of-poes-the-fall-of-the-house-of-usher-and-glasgows-jordans-end/>

Poe. The decline of the Jordan family is symbolic of the decline of the old southern way of life after the civil war. Some critics concur with the assertion that Glasgow is discussing the fall of the old southern way of life in her work: "the condition of the physical place wherein resides the latest in the line of Jordans mirrors the condition of that line, and by extension, the decline of a way of life" (Ross). There are many parallels that can be seen in the end of the Jordan family line and the end of the Old Southern way of life. Glasgow speaks directly to the parallel between the Jordan Family and the South pre and post-Civil War through Father Peterkin. Father Peterkin says, "I kin recollect away back yonder when old Mr. Timothy Jur'dn was the proudest man any whar aroun' in these parts; but arter the War things sorter begun to go down hill with him" (359). Glasgow uses Father Peterkin as a means to create a direct connection between the Jordan family and the southern way of life for in her writing. She creates this direct connection so that readers may more easily see the parallel between the fall of the old south and the fall of the Usher family. Glasgow suggests that the Jordans and the Old South seemed to be functioning properly before the war. After the war, however, there is a collapse of a way of life. What once had been prosperous has met its downfall, and the turning point was the Civil War. More abstractly, the end of Glasgow's short story is left ambiguous, and it can be examined as another parallel between the Jordan family line and the Old South. The doctor left Alan Jordan a bottle of full bottle of pain medication, but, when he returned to see Jordan the next day, the bottle was empty and Jordan was dead. The ambiguousness of his death is in the idea that someone may have killed him with the pain medication left by the doctor, but Glasgow does not

explicitly state the manner in which Jordan died. A parallel can be made between Jordan's ambiguous death and the fall of the South through viewing the doctor as an external force in the lives of the Jordan family such as the North was an external force in the Old South. This implication can suggest that the doctor killed Jordan, and it was an external force that brought on the fall of the South. Alternatively, it can be argued that someone in the Jordan household used the pain medication to kill Alan Jordan, and this explanation would imply that the Old South fell apart because of internal forces such as inbreeding and isolation.

Glasgow uses the same stylistic prowess that Poe establishes in "The Fall of the House of Usher," but she does so in order to create a parallel between the end of a southern aristocratic family and the end of the antebellum era in the America South. "Jordan's End" contains many elements that make it more southern in nature than "The Fall of the House of Usher," and Glasgow includes the overt southern essence so that her audience may more easily see the connections she wishes to make between the Jordan family and the Old South. Glasgow demonstrates the birth of a critical spirit in her short story through the parallels she creates between the Jordan family and the fall of the South in comparison to Poe's work. "The Fall of the House of Usher" does not seem to reflect very much of a southern quality, but it does display a sense of unity in its gothic style which is to be expected of Poe. Perhaps the southern quality is not at the forefront of Poe's works because his writings are from the time before the birth of the critical spirit in the South. Glasgow uses Poe's style as a means to convey her depiction of the fall of the south as exemplified by one aristocratic family.

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