

# The relation between roderick usher and the family mansion



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Edgar Allan Poe, who was born in the early nineteenth century, had an undeniable impact on American literature. Influenced by the era's trend, the Romanticism, he had written plenty of short stories, tales and poems spiced with gothic features and grotesque humour. His widely known works are *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *The Black Cat*, *The Raven* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*. In this essay I will discuss the lattermost, exploring the strange connections between the protagonist and his house and the supernatural events that had befallen them.

Poe uses personification to describe the Usher mansion, we could say, it is considered the fourth character. Entering the scene, the narrator found himself in a gloomy, dreadful condition, which he failed to explain rationally. The house with its „ vacant eye-like windows” (Works, III. 273), the atmosphere „ which had reeked up from the decayed trees” (Works, III. 276) all had their terrible influence on both Usher and the narrator. The friend from boyhood, Roderick Usher summons the narrator to his mansion, claiming he is suffering from a mysterious mental illness; therefore he has not much time left and asking the narrator to spend few days with him. His sickness, a „ constitutional and a family evil” (Works, III. 280), the curse and the fate of the Usher race, „ an effect, which the physique of the gray walls and turrets ... brought about upon the morale of his existence” (Works, III. 280-281) had poisoned him. It is Usher who suggests that „ the house is alive and has a malignant influence on his mind” (Thompson, p. 18).

According to Barton Levi (quoted in Jonas 55), “ the idea of 'dwelling' has two aspects: a temporary state ... it can be abandoned and even allowed to go to ruin; on the other hand, it implies the dependence of life on its surrounding

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... a decisive difference to the dweller and determines his whole condition”

(3). In our case, it is the second alternative; everything surrounding the house and inside as well are contaminated and contagious. The books, the arts and its people are infectious; hence even the narrator wonders if he has lost his sanity as reading their books, and acts as a listening audience to Roderick’s music and art.

The personification of the family mansion reaches its peak when the narrator notices that Usher’s face resembles the house. It is not just the mansion that had decayed, but Roderick also had its destructive impact on him; „ his large and luminous eyes ... the ‘web-like, silken hair’ ... merges the face-like structure of the house with Usher’s face” (Thompson, p. 20). This indicates that the mansion is more than mere personification.

The cursed house of the Usher race is not only a personification, but also represents Roderick’s sickened mind. The entering scene implies that the house is in fact Roderick’s brain condition; “ there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts and the crumbling condition of individual stones” (Works, III. 276), which indicates that Usher’s mind is still one, working engine, but many areas are damaged and demoralized. The “ barely perceptible fissure, which extending from the roof ... made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction” (Works, III. 276) also shows the broken, ill mind of his. When the narrator is ushered by the valet to the “ master”, at that point he realizes how many “ dark and intricate passages” (Works, III. 276) he has to go through to find Roderick in the studio. This scene implies that in our mind, we have hidden rooms full of

thoughts and dark passages with secrets too, those we may have never showed to anyone else, and therefore it is the brain of Usher.

Rashkin argues that “ The Haunted Palace” poem is “ an allegorical description of the head of Roderick Usher, whose eyes, blonde hair, teeth and lips are deemed to correspond to the palace’s windows, yellow banners, and pearl and ruby door” (124), which, again tells us the face-like appearance of the house that also resembles Roderick. She also notes that the Usher house is “ a reflective of the Usher race” (131). It is not only the mysterious illness or curse that is inherited by all the members from their family, but the house too.

Moreover, we can assert that the house and Usher’s mind are one. The work of Butler indicates that just as the house has a ruined physique, Roderick has a “ deteriorating physiognomy” as well, and the discussion “ of the dwelling’s oppressive affords parallels to the melancholic qualities of his own mind” (192-193). In fact, the Usher’s doomed fate is twisted with the house. Indeed, “ the house, the atmosphere, its inhabitants and the art they produce or consume” (Roche, p. 28) are tied together. These ties are so inseparable from each other, that “ Roderick, his house, his twin have become virtually the same organism, a single diseased consciousness and constitution”, as Butler points out (193). They are all related to each other, could be seen as one.

Furthermore, in the end of the novel, when Madeline shows her unbelievable, supernatural strength and returns from her tomb back bloodstained to take revenge on her brother for burying her alive, all, including the house with the

exception of the narrator, who manages to flee, meet their demise. The mansion collapses into the dim tarn, starting from the earlier mentioned zigzag fissure. Having met their gloomy fate, the Ushers leave no relatives alive.

In brief, the house is in fact alive, a character with its own atmosphere and face-like features, and in the same time, a reflection of the diseased mind and thoughts of Roderick. The vivified, living, embodied house from Gothic tales, the artistic, but mad soul Usher from the era of Romanticism, all the same contaminated organism and mind. As they had been living together for years, thus they had to perish together also.

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