

# The fall of the house of usher

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Madeline of the House of Usher Role-playing games are a great past time for literature enthusiasts. A player sits down, creates a character with quirks and a personality, usually special abilities, and meets with other people who have done the same. They sit at tables, in couches, on porches all around the world. They sit down to hear and participate in a story, a story told by the storyteller. The storyteller creates a scenario, a background, extra characters (NPCs), and certain rules. Once the story begins, control is a relative term.

The storyteller knows the story, but the characters are free to move about and unknowingly change the story as they go. In Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Fall of the House of Usher," the storyteller and characters interact in a very strange way. The storyteller tries to maintain control and the characters try to free themselves. It is a struggle against two aspects, the oppressor and the oppressed, masculine and feminine. Madeline Usher, the sole female character in the story, is kept in the background, but holds her own by being the main drive for much of the plot.

Roderick Usher, the male descendant of the Usher household, has qualities of the feminine, but introduces a powerfully masculine identity into the house. The line of triumph of the oppressed feminine over the oppressive masculine is blurry and leaves much to be desired. The first key to the house as a story and backdrop is the connection often attributed to Roderick and the house. The idea that the house deteriorates with the last wielder of the Usher name has been argued before. Roderick's slow descent into madness is marked by cracks in the foundation of the house.

This theory holds good merit from textual evidence. The story itself follows that line; Roderick describes the house as having “ an effect which the physique of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought about upon the morale of his existence” (119). But this is just one influence the characters have over the plot and vice versa. This view of the house and the connection to the family is shaded by a masculine identity. Surely the last male heir of the Usher house must be the cause for the decay, regardless of the feminine Usher remaining.

It is easy to label Madeline Usher as a weak character. Not only is her lack of presence in the story noted, but her physical descriptions are that of a weak girl. Roderick explains to the narrator that she suffers from an unknown disease, “[a] settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character...”(119). Madeline suffers from an unknown illness and is kept indoors in case she becomes the victim of her own frailty.

The narrator sees her only briefly before her burial later in the story, and soon after her appearance, she is confined to her bed. The character of Madeline Usher is subjugated. She is kept in the background. Her family line is given to Roderick, her twin brother, as was the custom at the time. Within the story, she could be representative of other women in the nineteenth century: left in the home with no rights. Madeline can also represent one of the more important aspects of the feminine as a whole, the idea of death and rebirth in her premature burial and subsequent escape from her tomb.

Beverly Voloshin makes note of another point of Madeline's femininity through color association. " Madeline matches her brother's pallor, but her special mark is red...blood red being the token of both life and death" (14). Not only is she often introduced with the color red, a generally accepted color for the feminine, but her actions in the story speak directly to the idea brought about by that color. Madeline is, essentially, the feminine half of the Usher family. Roderick Usher, Madeline's twin and the masculine half of the Usher family, is the initial, obvious oppressor.

As Leila May explains as historical background in her essay, "'Sympathies of a Scarcely Intelligible Nature': The Brother-Sister Bond in Poe's 'Fall of the House of Usher'," the social and political authority over the household was given to the men (389). As far as the outside world is concerned, Roderick is the head of the household, putting him in a legal and social position over his sister. Diane Hovler makes some very sound arguments for the idea of Roderick as an oppressor in her essay " The Hidden God and the Abjected Woman in ' The Fall of the House of Usher'. She points out Poe's own frustration with women and the idea that Roderick strives for a world, a " purely masculine universe, a fortress where males engage in discourse without the intrusion of the female in any form -living or dead: ' Us' versus ' her': ' Us/her'" (388). Legally, Roderick is the superior half of the last vestiges of the Usher family. It was Roderick, after all, who invited the male narrator to the house. The narrator explains that the two had been friends before and Roderick had recently sent a letter insisting that he come to the house (Poe 114).

It is Roderick's decision in the story to entomb his deceased sister in the vaults underneath the house before her burial. This burial can be viewed as an attempt by the masculine identity to rid itself of the female identity, Roderick making a final struggle against his sister. However, as Cynthia Jordan argues, " he is but a character in the story himself, and his actions are at least in part the product of his narrator's construction" (6). The idea of plot control being in the narrator's hands puts the narrator in the sole position of masculine oppressor and not just over Madeline Usher.

The narrator in " The Fall of the House of Usher" views, or at least tries to explain, everything from a distanced point-of-view. His logical take on what happens at the house paints a picture with traditionally masculine tones. He also is focused on the masculine half of the Usher twins. His focus is so centered on Roderick that he would as soon dismiss Madeline from his story entirely. Jordan notes this striving towards sole masculinity influence in her essay " Poe's Re-Vision...": " The narrator's first encounter with Madeline confirms the conflict between the male storyteller and the lady of the house" (7).

His first encounter with Madeline is almost half way through the story. He describes her briefly, almost as a wraith, when Roderick mentions her. " I regarded her with an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread; and yet I found it impossible to account for such feelings" (Poe 119). His reaction to the feminine aspect of the Usher household is obviously negative, describing his emotions of shock and fear in the face of Roderick's sister. After this brief mention, he leaves her out of the story once again, citing that she

succumbed to her bed after his almost encounter and that he would not see her again alive (120).

Jordan notes that this absence of Madeline is an attempt on the narrator's part to keep Madeline out of the story: "the narrator uses language covertly to relegate Madeline to a passive position in relation to himself" (7). Roderick, in this case is not the masculine oppressor; the narrator is. The irony of the situation, though, is that in trying to suppress Madeline, the female twin and the object that the narrator prescribes to femininity, he lets that feminine essence flourish. By the end of the story, the narrator is forced to face that he cannot create a solely masculine story.

As Raymond Benoit, a voice in Explicator's long series of essays on "Usher," points out, the narrator is forced to face the feminine through the reading of "Mad Trist" at the end of the story: "a mad story that parallels what is occurring in the house and reflects and even enables the awakening of the feminine side thought to have been laid to rest in the philosophy and literature of the Enlightenment and by Roderick/narrator" (80). The narrator cannot ignore the strong feminine influence in the house, much as he tries.

Perhaps this is because the source of the feminine influence is sitting beside him. Throughout the story, Roderick appears as a romantic and an artist. He reads romance and gothic novels and is emotional to the point of hysteria at times. Beverly Voloshin enters her theory in the series shared with Benoit and others on "The Fall of the House of Usher" in Explicator. Her theory follows the lines of Roderick being the feminine half of the Usher twins. "

Roderick is associated with the abstract, atemporal, and ideal” (14). These attributes are generally feminine in nature, gentle and imaginative.

In a usually feminine role, Roderick’s actions are often reactions to other characters, showing subordination. His madness is spurred by the supposed death of Madeline, an irrational and emotional reaction to an action of another character. Roderick’s death, often attributed with the ultimate fall of the house itself, is a reaction to the return and death of Madeline. His death is a reaction to the death of a feminine character, which gives power to the feminine over the masculine. Poe is known to have sickly seraph types in his stories, but these seemingly weak female characters speak to his fondness for women.

Poe’s life was filled with women who were taken away by illness, making them physically weak: his mother, his cousin and wife. But the women in Poe’s life were often the source of his strength, making them spiritually and often mentally strong. The experience of physically weak, spiritually strong women in his life greatly influenced his portrayal of women in his stories and poetry; Anabelle Lee comes to mind. Similarly, Madeline follows the guidelines for Poe’s memory of women. In a strange way, Poe often put these women on pedestals.

Madeline’s presence is very rarely in the foreground of Poe’s short story, but the times when she does appear, it is her appearance that changes the mood of the scene. Madeline owns every scene in which she appears. Her actions are catalysts. The character is weak, but Poe puts her in a position of power beyond character; Poe gives Madeline a position of power over the

plot. While the ultimate portrayal of Madeline might be a slap in the face against feminists, her role in the story is large enough to create a strong female influence.

Poe follows his own guidelines in the character of Madeline Usher. She fits his ideal for true beauty. John H. Timmerman helps lead the way towards viewing Madeline in this light by explaining Poe's reasoning. He explains Poe's drive towards creating beauty in his writing, a beauty that he believed could only be achieved through sadness (232). Because of this connection and his past with women, Poe comes to the conclusion that "the most sad thing, and therefore the most beautiful, is the death of a beautiful woman" (232).

Madeline, though pale and sickly, is one of these beautiful women. Her death, then, is a thing of beauty in Poe's eyes. The concept is not a very enthusiastic one, nor is it useful in citing Poe as an advocate for women, but that he put emphasis on women is a step in the right direction. From his idea that a beautiful woman's death is indeed the most beautiful occurrence in nature, he spurned the male characters in his stories to help reclaim the feminine within his stories. The male counterparts to these tragic women are the main argument for Cythia Jordan.

In her essay "Poe's Re-Vision: The Recovery of the Second Story," Jordan argues that Roderick Usher and C. Auguste Dupin are male characters who attempt to bring to light the feminine or "second" story. While the narrator has ultimate control over the plot of "The Fall of the House of Usher," Jordan points out times when Roderick tries to wrestle that control from him and



reassert Madeline as a prominent figure in the story. The final scene of “Usher” is where Roderick gets that victory, “ Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door! ” (130).

Jordan explains that this marks a moment in which Roderick takes control of the narrative long enough to call the narrator out on his oppression and to bring Madeline out into the spotlight (11). Roderick proves again that he is not the male oppressor but is instead a supporter if not aspect of the feminine. The question becomes, then, why would Roderick want to bring Madeline to the forefront? The sole reason being that she is his twin is likely not enough. The idea of them being two aspects of the same being, or two sides of the same face is more concrete.

But consider that Roderick is an artist, not only placing him in a feminine role, which would be cause enough to help the feminine thrive, but as an artist he must meet that ultimate goal that Poe put forth for himself: to create beauty. If Poe’s characters follow his own guidelines, then, Roderick’s only way to express that which is most beautiful in the world is to bring his beautiful sister’s death to the forefront of the story. Thus, in Roderick’s moment of control over the plot, in revealing the “ second story” of Madeline, he follows those rules of an artist so avidly produced by his own author.

The end result is not just Poe’s ideal of beauty, it also gives voice to the silenced feminine within the story –both Madeline’s and possibly Roderick’s own. The connection between Madeline and Roderick as twins is an interesting part of their mixed and almost non-existent gender roles. It has

been suggested that their relationship is an incestuous affair, bringing together that mixed-gendered ambiguity into an even more scrambled position. Voloshin and others regard the twin connection, Voloshin looking specifically at the dichotomies apparent within that connection. ...[T]he Usher twins also represent the duality of culture and nature, or more precisely, that they correspond to many cultural constructions of masculine and feminine, which divide the genders along the axis of culture and nature” (14). The fact that Poe decided to use twins pushes the idea that such dichotomies exist. Roderick, similar to Madeline, is afflicted with an ailment, one that is “ a constitutional and a family evil, and one for which he despaired to find a remedy –a mere nervous affection” (118). This nervous condition is displayed throughout the story in his outbursts and personality shifts.

It is suggested that the ailment, being a family curse, is close to if not the same as Madeline’s. Madeline, however, shows strength in that she did not succumb to the illness before the narrator arrives. Madeline is given credit for being the stronger of the two, a masculine trait. The dichotomy does not fit what society would expect from gender roles. The male is the feminine and the female is the masculine. It has been suggested that Roderick and Madeline are the same person, or aspects of the same person. Hoeveler plays with this idea in her essay on the “ Abjected Woman. She discusses the idea that Madeline is in fact the feminine half of Roderick that has escaped to become an alter-ego (391). Not only would physical evidence within the text dispute that idea –the fact that the narrator sees Madeline during a conversation with Roderick –but why, then, would Roderick assume so many

feminine traits of his own? And why would Madeline seem to uphold those traits generally accepted as masculine? The rest of the essay is another key: the idea of dualities in religion, the goddess and the god. The duality returns to the twin idea, and the twin concept requires a semblance of balance.

If Roderick is the feminine role, Madeline must step in to play the role of the masculine. Traditionally, in feminist readings, the masculine identity can be discovered by its subjugation and subordination of the feminine identity. Madeline is buried in the vault, making her symbolically subordinated, but in the end, it is she who buries Roderick: "...with a low moaning cry, fell heavily upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated" (Poe 131).

The first item of note is the fact that Roderick's name is not mentioned once in his death scene. Roderick is placed in the passive part of the sentence, "upon the person of her brother," rather than given an active death. His name is not mentioned, instead he is listed as the brother of Madeline. He is also noted as being a victim, a position often associated with the feminine. Here, Roderick is not only stripped of identity of his own, but is made the passive victim of a violent force against him. The idea of Madeline as a violent or at least controlling force over Roderick is used in the somewhat popular vampire theory.

Lyle Kendall discusses this theory and cites examples from the text to help prove it. He suggests that Roderick asks the narrator to come to the house to aid him in the destruction of his oppressor, the vampire, Madeline (451). J. O.

Bailey goes into more depth, citing the history and mythology behind the vampire theory. He, however, notes that both of the twins seem to exhibit traits of one who has been attacked by a vampire, but that Madeline was the one whose body is inhabited by a vampiric entity (Bailey 458).

Vampires in stories have been male and female –there is no prescription for the sex of these mythological creatures. The idea of the vampire, though, of one who comes and sucks the life out of others fits the mold for a control aspect. The masculine identity is the controlling identity, and if Madeline is indeed a vampire, then she becomes that controlling identity; Madeline becomes the oppressor and Roderick the oppressed. Another supposedly masculine trait is the sense of structure and order.

Robinson brings the dichotomy of order/disorder into play in his formalist reading of the short story in his essay “ Order and Sentience in ‘ The Fall of the House of Usher’ . ” Robinson writes, “[t]he progress of the story sees Usher, his house, and his sister Madeline changing from an organized to a disorganized state, until finally all sink together” (69). Robinson also brings to light the notion that Madeline’s physical senses dim through the story while Usher’s heighten (75). Roderick becomes more sensitive where his sister becomes less so.

Their traits become intermingled, masculine and feminine twisting their positions to the opposite sex until finally it all comes back together into a union. The final union between the masculine and the feminine is the destruction of the house, according to Robinson, when the house and the story fall into a state of disorganization. The final scene in “ The Fall of the

House of Usher” seems to be a culmination of all that is feminine within the work. Roderick sits and listens to his favorite romantic story, “ Mad Trist,” which brings the feminine back into the plot.

During this reading, Roderick comes into a position to speak against the narrator, for the narrator, when he calls him a “ madman,” and reveals Madeline standing outside the door. When Madeline appears for her final scene, her coup de grace, she is in her burial shroud with blood on her, a symbol of rebirth. The walking symbol of the feminine falls upon Usher, who without a fight, falls to the ground, and the two die. The narrator flees the fall of the house of Usher, and watches as the house behind him is mysteriously destroyed.

The story comes together, finally, with a seeming grand finale of femininity. Symbols, romanticism, disorganization, all of those ideals that have been attributed to feminism culminate. But looking back once again on Roderick’s death, there is the passivity. Madeline, in the midst of this fantastic moment of feminine symbolism, takes on the role of a masculine identity, pressing Roderick beneath her and putting him into a passive state. Are the symbols enough for this story to triumph over masculine influence?

Or has the narrator put his foot down on the final scene to ensure that some semblance of masculine oppressiveness remained in the story? Regardless of masculine or feminine traits, at the end of the story, as the world of the narrator collapses into romantic idealism, it is the woman, the female half of the Usher family, that finally oppresses the man. Madeline triumphs, but only when put into a masculine gender role. Leo Spitzer, author of “ A

Reinterpretation of ‘ The Fall of the House of Usher’,” also notes the near necessity for the two to die as one.

He first shines light on the importance of Madeline, citing her as a deuteragonist and pointing out the eerie timing of her appearances, and he goes on to say that “ Roderick and Madeline, twins chained to each other by incestuous love, suffering separately but dying together, represent the male and the female principle in that decaying family whose members, by the law of sterility and destruction which rules them, must exterminate each other” (352). They do destroy one another at the end, leaving the narrator to escape.

And, as Jordan points out, the narrator gets the last word, “ for his final act of ‘ sentencing’ is to dispatch Madeline and her too-familiar twin into the ‘ silent tarn,’ out of mind and out of language one last time” (12). Despite this triumphant climax for Madeline and Roderick, the narrator clings tightly to his story. The narrator, or storyteller, in “ The Fall of the House of Usher” fights for control over the characters within the story, both female and feminine. He takes on, ultimately, the role of masculinity.

Whether, within the house, Madeline was oppressed or Roderick was matters very little –their aspects were in sync with on another and bound to come together eventually. But their ultimate victory and freedom from the masculine narrator is achieved only in their deaths, and the storyteller condemns the last vestiges of the feminine. In this story at least, the victory of femininity is short-lived and ultimately futile. Works Cited Bailey, J. O. " What Happens in 'the Fall of the House of Usher'? " American Literature: A

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