

A providing theme in the fall of the house of usher

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Prosecution of Roderick Usher

In “ The Fall of the House of Usher,” Roderick Usher is guilty of the premeditated murder of his sister, Madeline. While some readers might reach different conclusions, the most strict interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe’s work reveals clear evidence of Roderick’s culpability; by the end of the story, it is apparent that not only did Roderick bury Madeline alive, but he did so intentionally. Several elements of the short story verify this accusation: first, Roderick chooses to keep his sister’s body for a fortnight after she has been buried (presumably so that no one can save her); second, Roderick’s actions as well as the settings of the narrative expose his guilt; third, Roderick confesses that he knew Madeline was still breathing during her burial; and finally, Roderick’s hypochondria provides him with a motive to kill Madeline.

The evidence of Roderick’s guilt begins to emerge midway through “ The Fall of the House of Usher,” when Roderick leads the narrator to believe that Madeline has died and that the narrator should aid him in burying his sister. In fact, it is likely that Madeline is alive and merely suffering from a cataleptical attack. When the narrator first arrived at the House of Usher, Roderick told him that Madeline’s catalepsy causes her to temporarily lose the ability to move parts or all of her body. This would explain Madeline’s “ faint blush” and “ suspiciously lingering smile” during her burial (323). While Roderick and the narrator are burying Madeline, Roderick informs the narrator that he intends to keep the coffin in his mansion for a fortnight after Madeline’s internment. Roderick claims that this temporary entombment is a

defense against the “obtrusive and eager inquiries on the part of [Madeline’s] medical men,” which might culminate in the dissection of his sister’s body by doctors (321). When scrutinized, however, Roderick’s assertions seem highly suspect. Although it is true that doctors might be interested in Madeline’s body in light of her peculiar symptoms, a simple request that Madeline’s body be left in peace would likely quell the doctors’ inquiries. Additionally, Roderick only desires to retain his sister’s body for a fortnight; he seems to have no qualms relinquishing her corpse after two weeks have passed – at which point the doctors will have free reign over Madeline’s body anyway. The only plausible explanation, then, for Roderick’s refusal to release Madeline’s body for a fortnight is that he knows his sister will die after being kept in a grave for two weeks with no food or water. Moreover, if a doctor were to open Madeline’s grave prior to her death, she would be able to escape, and Roderick’s crime would be unveiled. Thus, Roderick Usher not only buried Madeline alive, but he did so deliberately, as made clear by his refusal to allow her body to be released for two weeks.

Poe continues to provide proof that Roderick Usher murdered his sister in multiple layers of “The Fall of the House of Usher.” After “some days of bitter grief,” the narrator perceives “an observable change” in Roderick (323). He says, “there were times, indeed, when I thought his unceasingly agitated mind was laboring with some oppressive secret” (323). While the nature of this secret is not explicitly revealed at this time, the positioning of this statement directly after the burial of Madeline and the declaration of Roderick’s grief strongly implies that the “oppressive secret” is Roderick’s knowledge that he killed his sister. In addition, the settings of the short story

can be read as a metaphor for Roderick's guilt. "You have not then seen it?--but stay! You shall," he tells the narrator before throwing open the doors of his mansion and witnessing a "whirlwind [that] had apparently collected its force in our vicinity" (323-324). The narrator goes on to describe the storm as containing "frequent and violent alterations" and culminating in "a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion" (324). The whirlwind represents the storm of guilt that is gathering inside Roderick and hanging over the House of Usher in the wake of Madeline's death at Roderick's hands (hence the narrator's recollection that the storm took "its force in our vicinity"). Eventually, the narrator will learn of the homicide, just as the narrator sees the storm once Roderick throws the doors open (hence "you shall [see it]"). Roderick's guilt further substantiates the charge of premeditated murder, as his killing must have been intentional given that he clearly knows he murdered Madeline after the fact.

Finally, Roderick admits to killing Madeline in the concluding paragraphs of the short story, thereby dispelling any pleas for innocence. After he hears what he believes to be his sister rising from the grave and coming toward him, he says, "We have put her living in the tomb ... I now tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I heard them ... yet I dared not - I dared not speak!" (326) This confession confirms beyond reasonable doubt that Madeline's death had in fact been the object of both Roderick's guilt and his "secret" earlier. The suspect has now confessed to the crime.

Skeptics might ask why Roderick Usher would kill his own sister. However, Poe deliberately mentions that Roderick is a hypochondriac at two very important places in the story, and he hints that this hypochondria might have lead Roderick to kill Madeline out of the fear that he could contract her disease. Poe first mentions Roderick's excessive paranoia of diseases when describing a painting of Roderick's. He begins, " if ever mortal painted an idea, that mortal was Roderick Usher," and although he never specifies what idea Roderick painted, he says that " there arose out of the pure abstractions which the hypochondriac contrived to throw upon his canvas, an intensity of intolerable awe, no shadow of which I felt ever yet in the contemplation of the certainly glowing yet too concrete reveries of Fuseli" (319). The ideas that Roderick is painting, then, have to do with Johann Heinrich Fuseli, a Swiss painter who dedicated his career in art to scenes of horror. The identification of Roderick as a " hypochondriac" in the same sentence as Poe's allusion to Fuseli is not coincidental; rather, it can be interpreted as Poe's method of foreshadowing the horrifying acts that Roderick will commit due to his fear of disease - such as killing his sister. The second instance where Poe alludes to Roderick's hypochondria makes this connection even more explicit. After the narrator finishes conversing with Roderick about his favorite books - which include such works as " The New Tortures of the Inquisition" and the " Vigils for the Dead" - the narrator notes that " I [can] not help thinking of the wild ritual of this work, and of its probable influence upon the hypochondriac, when ... he stated his intention of preserving her corpse for a fortnight" (321). It has already been demonstrated that Roderick's decision to hide away Madeline's body followed his burial of her

while she was still alive. Here, Poe clarifies that not only was this decision influenced by books about torture, but also that it was motivated by Roderick's hypochondria. Roderick, therefore, buried his sister alive because his hypochondria caused him to fear that her disease might spread to him. This is his motive for the murder.

Some might argue for a charge of premeditated attempted murder given that the narrator reports seeing Madeline alive at the end of the story, which could be interpreted as an indication that the murder was unsuccessful. However, as any careful literary critic will note, Madeline's appearance may have been intended figuratively rather than literally. After all, Poe writes one paragraph that the House of Usher suddenly split in half and collapsed into the water - clearly, then, not everything at this point in the short story is to be taken at its face value. Rather, Poe likely wrote of Madeline's return as a metaphor for the intensification of Roderick's guilt as the story nears its conclusion. This explanation seems more plausible than a physical appearance since Madeline has by this juncture been buried for over seven days, making it improbable that she is still alive. Still, even if Madeline's return is interpreted as an event that literally takes place, the narrator reports that Madeline is covered in her own blood and too weak to stand; consequently, even if she managed to rise from her grave, the experience of being buried alive weakened her to the extent that she will in all likelihood die soon. Therefore, whether one reads Madeline's appearance literally or metaphorically, Roderick Usher still committed a premeditated murder. Others might argue that Roderick was only guilty of involuntary manslaughter. However, had the killing of his sister been accidental,

Roderick would have had no reason to hide Madeline's body for a fortnight. Furthermore, if Roderick had committed the murder fortuitously, then he would not have known that his sister had still been alive during her burial. Following this scenario, he would neither have realized that he had killed her nor been guilt-ridden about the murder; however, Poe makes it clear that Roderick did, in fact, know what he had done. Finally, still others might plea for insanity. Putting aside, for a moment, the typical inefficacy of such pleas, the evidence for Roderick's insanity prior to the murder is simply inadequate. In fact, Roderick only seems to become insane after he kills his sister (hence the "observable change" in Roderick following the burial); therefore, if it is true that Roderick is insane at any point in the short story, this insanity is an outcome of his guilt, not some actual mental illness. In addition, the plot to hide his sister's body from any doctors is clearly the plot of a calculating murderer rather than the invention of a lunatic.

Roderick Usher's murder of Madeline was cold and premeditated. Because he feared that his sick sister's catalepsy might be contagious, he conceived of a plan to bury her alive. Following the burial of his still-living sister, Roderick made certain that her body would not be discovered; naturally, he felt guilty, but he suppressed the pangs of his conscience rather than saving his sister while he still could; and finally, when the guilt was too much to contain, he confessed to the murder. Thus, the final two Ushers destroyed themselves, and with them fell the metaphorical House of Usher.