

The house of usher: a window to the soul



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In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the phantasmagoric setting Poe creates not only serves as an exquisite background for the story, but also gives the reader insight into the mystery of the characters. Through Poe’s descriptive personification, the physical state of the mansion becomes representative of the mental state of the family of Usher and its individual members, granting the reader a glimpse into their enigmatic characterization. Throughout the story, the author gives many clues as to the meaning behind the elaborate, despondent setting, but the reader is assured of its connection with the characters by Roderick himself. The narrator tells us that Roderick felt, “an influence which some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of his family mansion, has, by dint of long sufferance, he said, obtained over his spirit,” (Poe 73). The words form and substance are used, implying that the mansion’s physicality is not the only aspect which affects Roderick. On a superficial level, the general decrepit nature of the grounds causes a despondency to come over Roderick, as it similarly does, to a lesser degree, over the narrator himself. However, there is a deeper connection here between the house and Roderick that the narrator does not, and cannot share in. The reader sees that the narrator’s description of the house and his description of the man share great similarities. The mansion has “bleak walls” and “vacant eyelike windows” which directly mirror the deathly countenance of Roderick (Poe 70). This personification of the mansion serves to make the connection between the house and the character abundantly clear. Initially, Roderick may have adopted those attributes of the mansion in which he lived, yet as the metaphysical link between the two forms grew in strength, the house in turn began to adopt attributes which became manifest in Roderick’s mind. With this connection thus established, the author goes on

to give clues as to the mental state of the family members and, from that, foreshadows the end of the narrative. The narrator remarks that, “ there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between [the mansion’s] still perfect adaptation of parts and the crumbling condition of the individual stones,” (Poe 71). Here, the individual parts are representative of the members of the family of Usher insofar as they still make up a House of nobility, but their personal stability is unreliable. Thus foreshadowing is employed when the question is raised: how long can a building stand if each of its stones is weak? How long will it take for the insanity of the individual members to bring down the entire family? Similarly, as the house is representative of Roderick himself, the parts of his mind are crumbling and will not be able to support him much longer. The large crack in the house further points to the eventual downfall of the family, a “ barely perceptible fissure,” which runs the length of the house, (Poe 71). This further points to the mental state of the inhabitants of the house; one may even recall the term ‘ cracked’ used to describe the clinically insane. Although at the beginning of the story, Roderick appears to be still whole in some aspects, participating in regular activities and ordering the affairs of his household, the manner in which he does them truly frightens the narrator. This strange effect is manifested in the mansion, as the narrator says, “ I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up,” (Poe 72). The narrator has seen grand houses and curiously adorned rooms before, but the particular combination of these attributes is what strikes fear in his heart. The reader can also see that the combination of the ordinary actions of Roderick hint to his fearfully unstable state of mind. In the very room where Roderick waits upon his guest, the same parallel exists. There “ many books

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and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene” (Poe 72). Although Roderick paints and reads, these activities do not inspire life within him. His mind remains in the clutches of death and chaos despite the stimulation of the arts. These faculties, while made useful in a physical sense by Roderick, are not utilized fully to incite his passions just as the books and instruments do not keep the somber pall from encompassing the room. His mind has sunk to a level of such peril that no dosage of art can repair it. At the conclusion of the story, weather further solidifies the notion of mental instability, while the collapse of the house at the conclusion fulfills the foreshadowed fall of the family. As the deranged Roderick appears in the narrator’s bedchamber, he throws open the window to the raging tempest without. The narrator remarks in terror that, “ a whirlwind had apparently collected its force in our vicinity; for there were frequent and violent alterations in the direction of the wind,” (Poe 79). As Roderick throws open the casement, he symbolically embraces his own insanity. The violent storm that threatens the very foundations of the house parallels the chaos and madness that has been haunting Roderick throughout the tale, the same madness which threatens to destroy him. As the Usher twins fall to the ground in death’s embrace, both the victims of passionate fear, the mansion crumbles around them. The narrator, fleeing, says, “ my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder,” (Poe 82). The fissure and the individual crumbling stones coupled with the raging storm become too much for the structure to bear, and it collapses into the tarn. With both Ushers lying dead, the family is no more, and the connection between them and their House becomes explicit as it too falls into oblivion. Without looking to the setting, the characterization of the Ushers is

mysterious at best. Poe gives the reader a parallel that is crucial to understanding the motivations and mental state of his characters. The formal element of setting in this story serves much more than as a background or context for the plot. In many ways, the setting and the characterization aid each other, each making the other richer and more complex.