

ANALYSIS

“The Fall of the House of Usher” (1840)



Edgar Allan Poe

(1809-1849)

Edgar Allan Poe was the most extreme of the American Romantics, as is clearly displayed in “The Fall of the House of Usher.” Lowell said that Poe “had written some things quite the best of their kind, / But the heart somehow seems all squeezed out by the mind.” Whereas the other Romantics affirmed garden settings, there are no gardens in Poe. No love stories, no pastoral “good place.” Poe is polarized in a vertical mode. He was a Romantic in his view that the rational mind is too limited to attain metaphysical knowledge. He was Gothic in believing that to see the Truth--the terror and beauty of ultimate reality--reason must be overthrown or transcended by intuitive imagination, leading to a fall into madness, decay and death. The dedication of the seeker, especially the poet, is tragic in a Gothic universe.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” is Poe’s most complex story and the one that most comprehensively expresses his vision. In his time, an usher was a school teacher. Ishmael is a school teacher in *Moby-Dick*, with very different lessons to convey. Poe’s usher is an aristocrat, Melville’s a common man. Poe’s usher stays at home, Melville’s goes to sea to see. Poe’s vision is Gothic with a tragic hero in Usher, Melville’s is transcendental with a Modernist hero in Ishmael.

Poe saw himself as belonging to an aristocracy of merit, a visionary poet deprived of a corresponding status in society when disinherited by his adoptive father. His artist hero Roderick Usher is the last survivor in his aristocratic family line. As democracy increased in the United States, Poe lamented the decline of the old order in the South that eventually would lead to the Civil War. He associated artistic achievement with the traditional aristocratic patronage system, which in the form of his stepfather had betrayed him. The story is set in the Fall and the fall of the house represents the collapse of high culture with the aristocracy.

The house has a “web-work” of fungi and Roderick has “web-like” hair. Like a head or psyche with “eye-like” windows, the house of Usher is comparable to Hawthorne’s house of the seven gables explicitly representing the collective psyche of the Pyncheon family. Houses are recurrent symbols of the mind or the psyche in literature and people often dream of themselves as houses. The narrator is conducted “through many dark and intricate passages,” then “ushered” into the “lofty” presence of Usher. The house has a “wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones.” Roderick likewise has an “incoherence--an inconsistency.” There is even a fissure

extending down from the roof into its moat, or tarn. The house is cracked, like Roderick. The quotation beginning the story refers to his extreme sensitivity: “His *heart* is a suspended lute which resounds as soon as it is touched.” As an artist seeker, he has lived so exclusively within his sensibility, he has neglected the physical and lost touch with reason. Now he has a “mental disorder.”

The emphatic symbolism of the house initiates a psychological allegory. The narrator is the voice of reason: “I struggled to reason off the nervousness which had dominion over me.” He is the artist’s “best and indeed his only personal friend.” They used to be “intimate associates, yet I really knew little of my friend.” This is a pathological example of what T. S. Eliot later called “dissociation of sensibility.” The artistic *sensibility* has lost touch with *reason* and calls upon his rational friend for help. The line, “It was the apparent *heart* that went with his request” casts the narrator as the *head*. Roderick and his sister Madeline are twins with a “striking similitude.” She represents the body, his “sole” companion, who had a family disease that caused her to become apathetic and waste away to such an extent Roderick buries her. Poe’s iconoclasm is exemplified here, as he reverses Victorian gender roles that identified women with the heart/soul and men with the head and the body, which was considered gross. His ideal woman is “Ligeia,” a Romantic dark lady and voluptuous intellectual.

Roderick as artistic sensibility is so dominant by now that instead of helping him recover his sanity, the narrator helps him bury Madeline. Roderick is a poet, musician, painter and mystic. “If ever mortal painted an ideal, that mortal was Roderick Usher.” One of his paintings is a vision of ultimate Truth very like that of Pym at the end of his narrative, a white tunnel into the earth: “No torch or other artificial source of light was discernible; yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendor.” The storm near the climax is unusual in “its terror and its beauty”—Poe’s vision in a phrase. The house and everything glow in the “unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation.” People who have had near-death experiences often report being drawn toward an intense white light such as Poe imagines here.

Roderick is a 19th-century Romantic in his view of Nature, seeing “the sentience of all vegetable things,” in contrast to the mechanistic view of Nature that prevailed in the 18th century during the Age of Reason, deriving from physicist Isaac Newton. The word *wild* is a motif in the story emphasizing the archetypal Wilderness in the individuation process. Poe does not believe in the possibility of wholeness or salvation, hence the white light and the archetypal Sky in his story do not represent transcendence. His sky is dark with storm and lit by “electrical phenomena” that fill the narrator with terror and awe. He tries to pacify Roderick by reading him an old tale aloud, a story within the story that includes parallels to Roderick, a hermit knight in quest of the ideal.

The artist seeker Roderick proves his access to the Truth by intuiting that his sister is outside the door. Contrary to Christianity, in Poe’s materialist view the psyche cannot be separated from the body in the end, hence Roderick and Madeline must die together, embracing. Poe’s hysterical style may convey his own fear of death. By the end, ironically, Roderick sees his friend, reason, as mad for lacking intuition of the Truth. *Mad*-eline is dressed in white, evoking the white light of his vision, but she is a bloody white, representing not transcendence but annihilation.

Michael Hollister (2014)

“‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ is a journey into the depths of the self.... All journeys in Poe are allegories of the process of dreaming, and we must understand ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ as a dream of the narrator’s, in which he leaves behind him the waking, physical world and journeys inward toward his...inner and spiritual self. That inner and spiritual self is Roderick Usher...a part of the narrator’s self, which the narrator reaches by way of reverie. We may think of Usher...as the narrator’s imagination, or as his visionary soul. Or we may think of him as a state of mind which the narrator enters at a certain state of his progress into dreams.

Considered as a state of mind, Roderick Usher is an allegorical figure representing the hypnagogic state...a condition of semi-consciousness in which the closed eye beholds a continuous procession of vivid and constantly changing forms.... Poe regarded the hypnagogic state as the visionary condition *par excellence*, and he considered its rapidly shifting abstract images to be—as he put it—‘glimpses of the

spirit's outer world.' These visionary glimpses, Poe says in one of his *Marginalia*, 'arise in the soul... only...at those mere points of time where the confines of the waking world blend with those of the world of dreams.' And Poe goes on to say: 'I am aware of these "fancies" only when I am upon the very brink of sleep, with the consciousness that I am so.'

Roderick Usher enacts the hypnagogic state in a number of ways.... His conduct resembles...that wavering between consciousness and subconsciousness which characterizes the hypnagogic state... Since Roderick is the embodiment of a state of mind in which *falling*—falling asleep—is imminent, it is appropriate that the building which symbolizes his mind should promise at every moment to fall. The House of Usher stares down broodingly at its reflection in the tarn below, as in the hypnagogic state the conscious mind may stare into the subconscious; the house threatens continually to collapse because it is extremely easy for the mind to slip from the hypnagogic state into the depths of sleep; and when the House of Usher *does* fall, the story ends, as it must, because the mind, at the end of its inward journey, has plunged into the darkness of sleep....

Poe saw the poet as at war with the material world, and with the material or physical aspects of himself... Poe identified poetic imagination with the power to escape from the material and the materialistic, to exclude them from consciousness and so subjectively destroy them.... Poe's houses or palaces, with their eye-like windows and mouth-like doors, represent the physical features of Poe's dreaming heroes... The extreme decay of the House of Usher...is quite simply a sign that the narrator, in reaching that state of mind which he calls Roderick Usher, has very nearly dreamt himself free of his physical body, and of the material world with which that body connects him." [But then what is meant by his sister embracing him to death?]

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