

The Fall of the House of Usher | Context

Gothic Literature

While many of Poe's works fall into other genres, such as science fiction or detective fiction, "The Fall of the House of Usher" is situated firmly in the Gothic genre, which features mystery, dread, death, romance, and elements of the supernatural. This is indicated through the narrator's enumeration of the details of the house's architecture and setting. Many crumbling family castles fill Gothic literature; this story is no exception. The setting is a family manor far from daily life and civilization. The narrator even explicitly points to the Gothic, as he enters the house through a "Gothic archway."

Like Harold Walpole's 1764 novel *The Castle of Otranto*, generally seen as the first work of Gothic literature, this story is full of family secrets, mysterious noises, lingering illnesses, odd sounds, irrational events, doors opening of their own accord, hidden compartments, intimate and disturbing family relationships, and, of course, an emphasis on the medieval past. Finally, Gothic literature is known for its celebration of intense passions, madness, and desire. "The Fall of the House of Usher" is rich with such dark passions, which can be seen in Roderick's moods, the unnatural weather, and the narrator's inability to understand what he sees.

The Sublime

In the opening paragraphs of this story, the narrator consciously grapples with his impression of the countryside through which he's riding. He tries to make sense of the oppressive, gloomy mood the setting evokes in him, and to instead focus on the sublime or the elevated or extraordinary quality of the experience. He fails at both. This failure says a great deal about the power of the locale in the story.

Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) defines the sublime in several overlapping ways. The sublime evokes thoughts of danger and pain. It can be found in art or experience. It generates the most intense emotions a mind can experience. These emotions transcend the rational. It is associated with astonishment, and with a sense of infinity or grand dimensions. Beautiful objects are beautiful in part because they are regular, but sublime experiences are uneven and overwhelming. Much of Poe's fiction strives for a moment of the sublime, when intense emotions overwhelm readers. In this story, the narrator's attempt to try to conceive of the landscape in terms of the sublime tells readers a lot about him. He is an intellectual, familiar with 17th- and 18th-century philosophy. Thinking so consciously about what he's experiencing, how it fits together, and how it affects him also shows him to be exceptionally reflective.

Period Fears

The fear of being buried alive started to become common in the 18th century and became even more widespread in the 19th century. This fear became so widespread that an organization was founded to address it: The Society for the Prevention of People Being Buried Alive. An Italian thinker, Enrico Morselli, gave this anxiety a formal name: *taphophobia*. It isn't exactly clear why people became more concerned about being buried alive during this time. It appears to be a mix of genuine events (a few people were buried alive), which spread as news via the emerging mass media and took on the qualities of urban legends, combined with a more general emphasis on death and the afterlife during the period. While no one wants to be buried alive, this fear would perhaps make Madeline's fate seem more horrific to readers in Poe's time than today.

A second, lesser 19th-century fear was a concern over "febrile miasma," the medical concept that as living material decayed in a swamp, it tainted the air. This would have contributed to the ill health of the Usher twins and might explain Madeline's return from the grave as a hallucination. The narrator suggests something along these lines when Roderick wakes him and reveals the storm, saying the "rank miasma of the tarn" might be responsible for people seeing strange things.