

“The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839)

Summary

An unnamed narrator approaches the house of Usher on a “dull, dark, and soundless day.” This house—the estate of his boyhood friend, Roderick Usher—is gloomy and mysterious. The narrator observes that the house seems to have absorbed an evil and diseased atmosphere from the decaying trees and murky ponds around it. He notes that although the house is decaying in places—individual stones are disintegrating, for example—the structure itself is fairly solid. There is only a small crack from the roof to the ground in the front of the building. He has come to the house because his friend Roderick sent him a letter earnestly requesting his company. Roderick wrote that he was feeling physically and emotionally ill, so the narrator is rushing to his assistance. The narrator mentions that the Usher family, though an ancient clan, has never flourished. Only one member of the Usher family has survived from generation to generation, thereby forming a direct line of descent without any outside branches. The Usher family has become so identified with its estate that the peasantry confuses the inhabitants with their home.

The narrator finds the inside of the house just as spooky as the outside. He makes his way through the long passages to the room where Roderick is waiting. He notes that Roderick is paler and less energetic than he once was. Roderick tells the narrator that he suffers from nerves and fear and that his senses are heightened. The narrator also notes that Roderick seems afraid of his own house. Roderick’s sister, Madeline, has taken ill with a mysterious sickness—perhaps catalepsy, the loss of control of one’s limbs—that the doctors cannot reverse. The narrator spends several days trying to cheer up Roderick. He listens to Roderick play the guitar and make up words for his songs, and he reads him stories, but he cannot lift Roderick’s spirit. Soon, Roderick posits his theory that the house itself is unhealthy, just as the narrator supposes at the beginning of the story.

Madeline soon dies, and Roderick decides to bury her temporarily in the tombs below the house. He wants to keep her in the house because he fears that the doctors might dig up her body for scientific examination, since her disease was so strange to them. The narrator helps Roderick put the body in the tomb, and he notes that Madeline has rosy cheeks, as some do after death. The narrator also realizes suddenly that Roderick and Madeline were twins. Over the next few days, Roderick becomes even more uneasy. One night, the narrator cannot sleep either. Roderick knocks on his door, apparently hysterical. He leads the narrator to the window, from which they see a bright-looking gas surrounding the house. The narrator tells Roderick that the gas is a natural phenomenon, not altogether uncommon.

The narrator decides to read to Roderick in order to pass the night away. He reads “Mad Trist” by Sir Launcelot Canning, a medieval romance. As he reads, he hears noises that correspond to the descriptions in the story. At first, he ignores these sounds as the vagaries of his imagination. Soon, however, they become more

distinct and he can no longer ignore them. He also notices that Roderick has slumped over in his chair and is muttering to himself. The narrator approaches Roderick and listens to what he is saying. Roderick reveals that he has been hearing these sounds for days, and believes that they have buried Madeline alive and that she is trying to escape. He yells that she is standing behind the door. The wind blows open the door and confirms Roderick's fears: Madeline stands in white robes bloodied from her struggle. She attacks Roderick as the life drains from her, and he dies of fear. The narrator flees the house. As he escapes, the entire house cracks along the break in the frame and crumbles to the ground.

Analysis

"The Fall of the House of Usher" possesses the quintessential -features of the Gothic tale: a haunted house, dreary landscape, mysterious sickness, and doubled personality. For all its easily identifiable Gothic elements, however, part of the terror of this story is its vagueness. We cannot say for sure where in the world or exactly when the story takes place. Instead of standard narrative markers of place and time, Poe uses traditional Gothic elements such as inclement weather and a barren landscape. We are alone with the narrator in this haunted space, and neither we nor the -narrator know why. Although he is Roderick's most intimate boyhood friend, the narrator apparently does not know much about him—like the basic fact that Roderick has a twin sister. Poe asks us to question the reasons both for Roderick's decision to contact the narrator in this time of need and the bizarre tenacity of narrator's response. While Poe provides the recognizable building blocks of the Gothic tale, he contrasts this standard form with a plot that is inexplicable, sudden, and full of unexpected disruptions. The story begins without complete explanation of the narrator's motives for arriving at the house of Usher, and this ambiguity sets the tone for a plot that continually blurs the real and the fantastic.

Poe creates a sensation of claustrophobia in this story. The narrator is mysteriously trapped by the lure of Roderick's attraction, and he cannot escape until the house of Usher collapses completely. Characters cannot move and act freely in the house because of its structure, so it assumes a monstrous character of its own—the Gothic mastermind that controls the fate of its inhabitants. Poe, creates confusion between the living things and inanimate objects by doubling the physical house of Usher with the genetic family line of the Usher family, which he refers to as the house of Usher. Poe employs the word "house" metaphorically, but he also describes a real house. Not only does the narrator get trapped inside the mansion, but we learn also that this confinement describes the biological fate of the Usher family. The family has no enduring branches, so all genetic transmission has occurred incestuously within the domain of the house. The peasantry confuses the mansion with the family because the physical structure has effectively dictated the genetic patterns of the family.

The claustrophobia of the mansion affects the relations among characters. For example, the narrator realizes late in the game that Roderick and Madeline are twins, and this realization occurs as the two men prepare to entomb Madeline. The

cramped and confined setting of the burial tomb metaphorically spreads to the features of the characters. Because the twins are so similar, they cannot develop as free individuals. Madeline is buried before she has actually died because her similarity to Roderick is like a coffin that holds her identity. Madeline also suffers from problems typical for women in nineteenth-century literature. She invests all of her identity in her body, whereas Roderick possesses the powers of intellect. In spite of this disadvantage, Madeline possesses the power in the story, almost superhuman at times, as when she breaks out of her tomb. She thus counteracts Roderick's weak, nervous, and immobile disposition. Some scholars have argued that Madeline does not even exist, reducing her to a shared figment Roderick's and the narrator's imaginations. But Madeline proves central to the symmetrical and claustrophobic logic of the tale. Madeline stifles Roderick by preventing him from seeing himself as essentially different from her. She completes this attack when she kills him at the end of the story.

Doubling spreads throughout the story. The tale highlights the Gothic feature of the doppelgänger, or character double, and portrays doubling in inanimate structures and literary forms. The narrator, for example, first witnesses the mansion as a reflection in the tarn, or shallow pool, that abuts the front of the house. The mirror image in the tarn doubles the house, but upside down—an inversely symmetrical relationship that also characterizes the relationship between Roderick and Madeline.

The story features numerous allusions to other works of literature, including the poems "The Haunted Palace" and "Mad Trist" by Sir Launcelot Canning. Poe composed them himself and then fictitiously attributed them to other sources. Both poems parallel and thus predict the plot line of "The Fall of the House of Usher." "Mad Trist," which is about the forceful entrance of Ethelred into the dwelling of a hermit, mirrors the simultaneous escape of Madeline from her tomb. "Mad Trist" spookily crosses literary borders, as though Roderick's obsession with these poems ushers their narratives into his own domain and brings them to life.

The crossing of borders pertains vitally to the Gothic horror of the tale. We know from Poe's experience in the magazine industry that he was obsessed with codes and word games, and this story amplifies his obsessive interest in naming. "Usher" refers not only to the mansion and the family, but also to the act of crossing a threshold that brings the narrator into the perverse world of Roderick and Madeline. Roderick's letter ushers the narrator into a world he does not know, and the presence of this outsider might be the factor that destroys the house. The narrator is the lone exception to the Ushers' fear of outsiders, a fear that accentuates the claustrophobic nature of the tale. By undermining this fear of the outside, the narrator unwittingly brings down the whole structure. A similar, though strangely playful crossing of a boundary transpires both in "Mad Trist" and during the climactic burial escape, when Madeline breaks out from death to meet her mad brother in a "tryst," or meeting, of death. Poe thus buries, in the fictitious gravity of a medieval romance, the puns that garnered him popularity in America's magazines.