

American Literature Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher"

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is a journey into the depths of the self, being a kind of allegories of the process of dreaming, and we must understand "The Fall of the dream of the narrator's, in which he leaves behind him the waking, physical world and journey toward his inner and spiritual self. That inner and spiritual self is Roderick Usher.

The Usher mansion has "vacant eye-like windows," and there are mysterious physical sympathies between Roderick Usher and the house in which he dwells. The House of Usher is, in allegorical fact, the physical body of Roderick Usher, and its dim interior is, in fact, Roderick Usher's visionary mind.

The House of Usher is in a state of extreme decay. The stonework of its façade has so crumbled and decomposed that it remind the narrator, so he puts it, "of the specious totality of old woodwork which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault." The Usher mansion is so eaten away, so fragile, that it seems a breeze would push it over; it remains standing only because the atmosphere of Usher's domain is perfectly motionless and dead.

Within the unity of the house of Usher are many diffusions in the form of mirrored or echo-like correspondences. The house is reflected in the tarn. Roderick and Madeline are twins between whom "sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature" had always existed. Roderick's painting suggests Madeline's vault. The sounds described in "Mad Trist" are echoed by the noises which accompany Madeline as she seeks her revenge. The storm outside the window reflects the storm within Roderick's mind. His song, "The Haunted Palace," relates symbolically the union between the "radiant palace" and the mind of the tenant, and—a key element in the structural unity—it is Poe's story in capsule form.

The main line of diffusion runs chainlike from the tarn to the house of Roderick to Madeline. The narrator, arriving before the "mansion of gloom," is immediately conscious of the isolated and self-contained atmosphere of the place. One feature of the house is the "barely perceptible fissure, which extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn." The "unruffled" tarn may be interpreted as the oneness or nothing from which all has emerged and to which all must return, or as a symbol of "disorder" which affects the house's decay physically and the family of Usher mentally.

The next link of diffusion is the correspondence between the house of Usher and Roderick. In addition to several analogies described in "The Haunted Palace," many details in the story express the relationship. The "eye-like windows" and doors like

“ponderous and ebony jaws” are the most obvious. The “minute fungi...hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves” is equivalent to Roderick Usher’s hair of a more than web-like softness and tenuity.” The “wild inconsistency” between the house’s “perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones” is the “inconsistency which arises from Roderick’s feeble and future struggle to overcome and habitual trepidancy.” The crack in the building corresponds to Roderick’s struggle against insanity, his effort to maintain his composure against what may be called the “kingdom of in-organization.”

The fissure in the building also corresponds to the diffusion split between Roderick and Madeline. Just as the house and Roderick are included within the range and influence of the tarn, the house is equal to both the Ushers. In a sense, Madeline is subordinate to her brother. Poe tells us that there had always been an “undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony with the name.” This would imply that there has been but one surviving male Usher in each generation and that the daughters, who need not have appeared every generation, have either failed to marry or to survive. The “sympathies of scarcely intelligible nature” between the twins would suggest that, the one always suffer with the other. But, as far as most of Poe’s narrative is concerned, it is Roderick who affects, Madeline who is affected. Her mysterious illness appears to be the reflection of his mental affliction. The relation between brother and sister is like one responds to the other’s actions and emotions.

The power of the mansion and the tarn to influence the mind of Roderick is, in part, explained by his belief in the sentience of things. Evidence of this sentience Roderick finds in “the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and walls.” The narrator has noticed the “pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued” which apparently “had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the grey wall, and the silent tarn.”