

Course: English Literature
Level: Second Year
Lesson Three: “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839)
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The Fall of the House of Usher Summary:

This story is about a man called Roderick Usher who suffers from mental illness that leads him to seek some comfort in his childhood friend who is the narrator. The story begins with the narrator’s first impressions of the House and its foreboding surrounding as he comes near the house of Usher. Upon his arrival, the narrator begins to notice some unusual things about the house and its residents. As he meets Roderick for the first time after many years, the narrator is surprised by how changed his friend has become both physically and psychologically. Roderick explains in a vague manner that his mental illness originates from his family tradition adding that even his sister is not healthy (she suffers from cataleptic disease that limits her mobility) and that she is dying. Several days after the narrator’s arrival, Roderick announces that his sister is dead and asks the narrator to help him bury her in a tomb beneath the house. As they are burying her, the narrator remarks that she is smiling and her cheeks are rosy which indicates that she is still alive. After few days, Roderick’s mental state begins to escalate as the narrator notices him staring aimlessly at a distance. On a stormy night, Roderick comes to the narrator’s room startled by a glowing gas that covers the house. In attempt to soothe his friend, the narrator explains that the gas is a result of the storm and he begins to read for him in order to put him at ease. The narrator picks a medieval romance called “Mad Trist” to read for Roderick. To his surprise, the narrator notices that the sounds that he reads out from this book are echoed in the house. Roderick explains that he has been hearing these sounds for days that he believes are coming from Madeline’s tomb. The door then is opened, revealing Madeline who is all in white and covered in blood. She falls on her brother and they both die. Filled with horror, the narrator escapes from the house and as he is on his horse he looks back at the house and he sees it falling down.

The fall of the House of Usher as a Gothic story:

There are many Gothic elements in this short story that have specific associations with the psychology of the characters as well as family histories. The Gothic style is apparent from the beginning of this tale, the weather and atmosphere mirror the narrator’s dismal mood as if the physical world is connected to him. This is typical of Gothic literature. The bleak horror that surrounds the house corresponds to the greater horrors within.

1)The house of Usher as a Gothic element:

- The Gothic house is a popular device of the Gothic that writers often use to articulate some specific events that cannot be addressed openly. For example, the sight of the house fills the narrator with dread for some reason. He calls this feeling “unsufferable” (Poe 1). This foreshadows the mysterious events about to take place in this house.

- The narrator describes the Usher's house as "the melancholy house of Usher" with its "bleak walls" and "vacant eye-like windows". In Gothic literature, the physicality of the Gothic castle or mansion often mirrors the dark psychology of the characters. Hence, these impressions that the narrator makes can be said to refer to the melancholy of Roderick Usher himself. Specifically, the image of the "bleak walls" can refer to the bleak state of mind of Roderick Usher who apparently suffers from a nervous illness.
- The narrator describes the windows of the house like "Vacant eye-like windows" (Poe 1). This can refer to the vacant eyes of Roderick Usher that are devoid of hope and also refer to desolation. In addition, the house of Usher with its windows acting like eyes can be metaphorical of the panopticon which means being observed and watched by a larger entity such as God, the government, something supernatural etc. In the case of the house of Usher, the "vacant eye-like windows" can symbolise the idea that Roderick is being watched, hence, haunted by his family's secret of the incest. This is why Roderick, according to the narrator, seems possessed by terror; he says "To an anomalous species of terror I found him a bounden slave" (Poe
- Another significant element of the Gothic house is its mysterious passages or dark corridors that the character traverses. The narrator in this story walks through "the many dark and intricate passages" (Poe 3) of the house. Since the house is used as a metaphor in Gothic fiction, the secret and dark passages can refer to the mysterious state of mind of Roderick and the hidden secret of his family. The more the narrator walks in those corridors the deeper he delves into Roderick's mind.
- "the sombre tapestries of the walls" and "the blackness of the floor" capture the foreboding and eerie atmosphere of the house. The dark physicality of the house seems to leave a strong effect on the narrator who feels uncomfortable as he says that "strange ideas grew in my mind from these simple things".
- The instability of the interior of the house reflects the instability of Usher's mental state and the decay of the house mirrors the decay of the Usher's Family line. Indeed, the House of Usher and the Usher family are attached by name. The concept of the family lineage and the building is one and the same.

2) Terror:

- Terror is another significant Gothic element that is strongly present in the story. We get instances of terror early in the story when the narrator approaches Usher's house.
- Upon his arrival, the narrator reflects that there is something that "unnerved" him as he has seen the house with its dark atmosphere.

- The sudden appearance of Madeline passing by as the narrator speaks to Roderick has terrified the narrator. He says “the lady Madeline ...passed slowly through a remote portion of the apartment, and, without having noticed my presence, disappeared. I regarded her with an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread—and yet I found it impossible to account for such feelings.” (Poe 6)
- Roderick is terrified of the future. He says “ I dread the events of the future” (Poe 5).
- Roderick and the narrator sometimes hear some strange sounds that tend to evoke feeling of terror within them such as the sounds that come from the vault where Madeline has been buried. ““Not hear it?—yes, I hear it, and have heard it. Long—long—long—many minutes, many hours, many days, have I heard it—yet I dared not—oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am” (Poe 14)
- Madeline’s escape from the tomb is another scene that evokes terror and led the narrator to flee the house. The narrator says “From that chamber, and from that mansion, I fled aghast” (Poe 15)

3) Mental Illness and Madness:

The themes of madness and mental illness are central in Gothic literature. Madness is a trope that writers use to describe the instability of the mind and the fear associated with it

- Madness is a central theme in *The Fall of the House of Usher* as both characters Roderick and his sister Madeline suffer from mysterious mental conditions. Symptoms of depression and anxiety are strongly remarkable in the character of Roderick.
- Roderick explains that his mental condition stems from a family evil. The narrator explains “He entered, at some length, into what he conceived to be the nature of his malady. It was, he said, a constitutional and a family evil, and one for which he despaired to find a remedy” (Poe 5).
- Madeline suffers from symptoms of an unknown illness that physicians failed to find a cure for. Her illness is called catalepsy. This is a medical condition that is characterised by rigidity of the body and unconsciousness.
- Roderick and the narrator place Madeline in the tomb thinking that she is dead, only to discover several days later that she is alive. Since Madeline suffers from catalepsy, she has been temporary immobile and unconscious. This has led Roderick to think that she has died.
- Several days after her death, the narrator has started to hear some strange sounds coming from the bottom of the house and this terrified both narrator and Roderick. It is at this point that Roderick’s mental condition worsens.

4) Family secrets:

This element of family secrets is also a repeated element in Gothic stories.

- There is a mystery about the Usher's family. This is evidently apparent in the strange relationship between Roderick and his sister.
- The mystery of the family can also be seen in the isolation of Roderick and his sister. Roderick has only one childhood friend who is the narrator and Madeline seems to have no one apart from her brother.
- Roderick and Madeline are the last line of their family and this seems to sadden Roderick.
- The two siblings have been living together for many years and both do not have any spouses which is also indicative of their isolation from the outside world.
- One interpretation of the source of the siblings' madness is that they are a product of inbreeding/incestuous marriage.
- Roderick considers that Madeline is his last link to life and that her death would leave him "the last of the ancient race of the Ushers". This is indicative of incest because if Madeline dies Roderick will not be able to carry on with his family's tradition of incest and this is, perhaps, why he buried her alive. In other words, his act of burying her while she is still alive can be deliberate from his part because he wants to put an end to his family's tradition of the incest and eventually free himself from this burden.