

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 6 : 6 June 2006

Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Associate Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

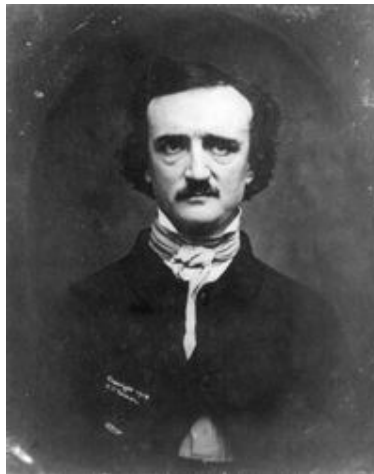
THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

Arezou Pashapour

THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

Arezou Pashapour

ABOUT THE AUTHOR – Edgar Allan Poe



Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on January 19, 1809, the second son of David Poe, an actor, and his actress wife, Elizabeth Arnold Hopkins. Shortly after his birth, the family moved to New York City, where both parents pursued sporadic acting jobs. Eventually David Poe abandoned his wife, Edgar, and a daughter Rosalie, born in 1810. Edgar's older brother, William Henry, was living with the Poe grandparents in Baltimore. To support her children, Elizabeth accepted acting parts in Norfolk, Charleston, and eventually in Richmond, where her health rapidly declined. She died of tuberculosis in December 1811. Edgar and Rosalie were taken in by separate affluent Richmond families, Rosalie by the William McKenzies, and Edgar by the John Allans. Poe was never officially adopted into the family but took Allan as his middle name. Critics and biographers generally agree that the traumatic events of Poe's early life influenced his personality and his writing.

In 1815 John Allan moved his family to England where Poe attended Stoke Newington, a prestigious preparatory school, later used as a setting for his short story, "William Wilson." In 1820 the Allans returned to Richmond and in 1825 Poe enrolled at the University of Virginia, where he excelled in literature and languages. He also, however, accrued large gambling debts and was soon forced to withdraw from the school.

Poe moved to Boston in 1827, where he published *Tamerlane and Other Poems* and then enlisted in the army under an assumed name, Edgar A. Perry. Surprisingly, he was such a good soldier that he was promoted to sergeant-major within eight months. After his foster mother, Frances Allan, died in 1829, Poe bought his way out of the

ranks and, with the help and encouragement of John Allan, entered West Point, hoping to make a career as an army officer. Within a year, however, he tired of military life and, after a bitter quarrel with Allan, Poe deliberately had himself expelled.

Poe moved in with his Baltimore relations, Mrs. Maria Poe Clemm and her daughter Virginia. In 1832 he published five stories in Philadelphia's *Saturday Courier*, and in 1833 he won a cash award from the *Baltimore Saturday Visiter* for his "MS Found in a Bottle." This story earned him critical acclaim, and, with the aid of John Pendleton Kennedy, he became assistant editor and then editor of Richmond's *Southern Literary Messenger*. Under Poe's direction, this journal increased its circulation from 500 to 3,500 subscribers. On May 16, 1836, he married his thirteen-year-old cousin, Virginia Clemm.

Poe quarreled repeatedly with the owner of the *Southern Literary Messenger*, for personal as well as professional reasons, and he was ultimately dismissed from the magazine. He then moved to New York, where he published *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* in 1838. In the summer of that year, Poe moved his family—Mrs. Maria Clemm lived with them—to Philadelphia, where he became the assistant editor of *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*; from 1841 to 1842, he edited *Graham's Magazine* and increased its circulation from 5,000 to 50,000 subscribers; in 1843 he published "Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Gold Bug." Other successful publications included "Ligeia" in 1838, and "The Fall of the House of Usher" and "William Wilson," both in 1839.

In April 1844, the Poes moved back to New York where he became the owner and editor of the financially-strapped *Broadway Journal* in 1845, the same year he published *The Raven and Other Poems*. Tragically, after bursting a blood vessel in her throat while singing, Virginia's health declined, her condition aggravated by Poe's poverty. She died of malnutrition and tuberculosis on January 30, 1847, and some sources say there was not enough money to provide a fire for warmth as she was dying. Not long after this tragedy, Poe attempted suicide with an overdose of laudanum.

In 1849 Poe returned to Richmond to court his childhood sweetheart, Sarah Elmira Royster, now a wealthy widow. On September 27, 1849, he left Richmond for what was to be a short trip to Baltimore. Mysteriously, he was found unconscious on a Baltimore street six days later. He never recovered enough to say where he had been or what he had been doing, and he died in delirium on October 7, 1849.

Poe exerted a major influence on American literature with his own works but also with his literary criticism, which included such essays as "Hawthorne's Twice Told Tales," "The Poetic Principle," and the "Philosophy of Composition." In this last essay he details how he wrote "The Raven," his most famous poem.

In addition, Poe originated the detective story formula in his tales of ratiocination about Monsieur C. Auguste Dupin, the scientifically and rationally superior detective who appears in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and "The Purloined Letter" and who was a precursor of Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. Poe's other ratiocination tale is "The Gold Bug" in which William Legrand, a Dupin-type character, deciphers a cryptogram and finds Captain Kidd's buried treasure on Sullivan's Island in Charleston Harbor.

Like his Romantic contemporaries Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne, Poe was interested in the dark side of man's soul and psyche. He crafted gothic tales of horror on subjects that ranged from revenge, reincarnation, and doppelgänger tales to insanity, murder, and premature burial. Although he wrote in the gothic tradition established by Horace Walpole, Charles Brockden Brown, Ludwig Tieck, and E. T. A. Hoffman, Poe's innovations and contributions raised gothic fiction to a new height.

OVERVIEW

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is one of Poe's most popular short stories. Moreover, analyzing this story provides a basis for understanding Poe's gothicism and his literary theories. As in all of Poe's short stories, "The Fall of the House of Usher" concentrates on a "single effect"—in this case, the degeneration and decay of the Usher house and family. In the story's opening, for example, the narrator comments upon the "insufferable gloom" that pervades his being as he notices the "few rank sedges," the "white trunks of decayed trees," the unruffled luster of the "black and lurid tarn," and the house's vacant "eye-like windows." Once inside, the details increase: the "antique and tattered" furniture and the other furnishings that "failed to give any vitality to the scene."

In addition, the narrator emphasizes Roderick Usher's wildly fluctuating physical and mental states and Madeline Usher's "settled apathy" and gradual wasting away. Not only do these details highlight the mystery on which the tale develops, but they also foreshadow the story's denouement when Roderick, Madeline, and the dark house itself all crash into the dark waters of the tarn. Indeed, with its unity of character, setting, tone, and action, "The Fall of the House of Usher" epitomizes Poe's literary skills and techniques.

SETTING

With the exception of "The Gold Bug" and "Murders in the Rue Morgue," Poe's settings are usually remote in time and space, enhancing the story's mystery and other-worldliness. "The Fall of the House of Usher" has no definite setting except for the "singularly dreary tract of country" through which the narrator must travel to reach the House of Usher. Suits of armor and subterranean dungeons tend to suggest a European rather than an American locale, but these details were established trappings of the gothic genre. Typical gothic elements in the story include the Usher house, described as "this mansion of gloom" with its dark hallways and draperies, ebony black floors, "feeble gleams of encrimsoned light," and its eerie burial vault.

Complementing these elements are Madeline Usher's mysterious malady, death, and burial, and her return from the grave, the latter heightened by the thunder and lightning of a violent storm, a gothic technique often adopted by modern films and stories dealing with the supernatural.

THEMES AND CHARACTERS

Except for a servant, a valet, and a family physician, who appear in the opening scenes and are never mentioned again, the characters of the tale are the unnamed narrator, Roderick Usher, and his twin-sister Madeline, who are the last surviving descendants of the Usher line. Roderick suffers from an oppressive mental disorder and has summoned the narrator to his side in the hope of alleviating his sickness. The narrator arrives at Usher's house but immediately finds himself overcome by an "insufferable gloom." Unable to explain away this feeling, the narrator concludes that while "there *are* combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth." These observations and conclusions establish the story's tone and the mystery that will unfold. At the same time, the narrator's description of the house and its grounds, Roderick's vastly altered state, and Madeline's disease not only relate to the story's themes of decay and death, but also constitute the major elements of the plot. As a survivor of the terrifying fall of the Usher house, the unnamed narrator, somewhat like Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, lives to relate the strange and terrifying events he has witnessed.

Although Madeline Usher appears only three times—once as a phantomlike presence while the narrator and Roderick converse, later in her coffin, and lastly when she returns from the grave—she is a brooding presence throughout the story. Poe describes Madeline as Roderick's identical twin (an oversight since identical twins cannot be different sexes). She is young, beautiful, but slowly dying from a mysterious malady that even baffles the family doctor: "a settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affectations of a partially cataleptical character." Moreover, Madeline's wasting away becomes a symptom of Roderick's general malaise. Besides being an effective gothic device, Madeline's return from the tomb relates to a recurring theme in Poe's short stories—the fear of being buried alive.

The narrative events swirl phantasmagorically around the central character, Roderick Usher. A typical Poe character, Usher borders on melancholy and madness. He suffers from a "morbid acuteness of the senses" so that "the most insipid food was alone endurable"; he can wear only certain types of clothes; all flower fragrances are oppressive; and his eyes are tortured by "even a faint light." Roderick's altered state coincides with the plot's details in that his voice ranges from "tremulous indecision" to "energetic concision" as his actions are alternately vivacious or sullen.

In addition, Roderick's characterization reinforces the story's major symbol, the Usher house. The house's vacant, eye-like windows, the minute fungi hanging in "fine tangled web-work," and its old woodwork "rotting for long years in some neglected

vault, with no disturbance from the breath of external air" have their counterparts in Roderick's eyes, his silken hair with its "wild gossamer texture," and his being shut up in the recesses of the house. Roderick, the house, and the Usher "race" become inextricably bound together, an idea developed in "The Haunted Palace," one of Roderick's favorite poems. The story's conclusion simultaneously marks the fall of Roderick, Madeline, the Usher house and family.

LITERARY QUALITIES

Poe's literary skill is readily apparent in "The Fall of the House of Usher," and one of his most vivid techniques is the story's tone. Poe chooses details that highlight the terror of near madness, premature burial, and death and destruction. Foremost is his description of the gloomy Usher house, and the fissure that seems to extend from the house's roof to the "sullen waters of the tarn." Equally important in setting the tone is the violent storm on a night that is "singular in its terror and beauty." The thunder crashes, the lightning bolts flash, and the wind howls as Madeline makes her way from the tomb to the door of Roderick's study. Roderick's and Madeline's deaths are further heightened as the narrator notes that the "blood-red moon...now shone vividly through the once barely discernible fissure."

Another literary device used masterfully by Poe is foreshadowing. Roderick's terrible fate is foretold in the description of the house that totters on the brink of collapse. The details of the bleak exterior prepare the reader for the description of the house's interior and of Roderick and Madeline Usher. Two other foreshadowing devices are Roderick's painting of a vault which eventually becomes Madeline's tomb and the narrator's reading of Sir Lancelot Canning's "Mad Twist," the plot of which coincides with Madeline's return from the tomb.

Poe also reinforces the story's plot and theme with symbolism. The most obvious symbol is the Usher house, which stands now in stark contrast to its once vibrant history, a history alluded to in "The Haunted Palace." The house's windows, fungi, and fissure suggest Roderick's rapidly decaying physical and mental states. By extension, Madeline's barren womb also symbolizes the Usher lineage, house, and Roderick. When she dies, he is the last of the Ushers; when he dies, it will indeed be the fall of the House of Usher.

SOCIAL SENSITIVITY

Poe's literary theory repeatedly stressed art for art's sake, an idea somewhat removed from the era's general literary belief that literature should teach or preach a moral lesson. Furthermore, Poe advocated the "single effect" theory in his literary criticism and practiced it within his own poems and stories. It would be difficult to deduce any messages on Poe's part in his tales of horror and terror. He sought to frighten his readers or to intellectually entertain them, and thus introduces a full range of elements that straddled the line between science and the supernatural.

Arezou Pashapour

Islamic Azad University

Bushehr

IRAN

Arezou_pashapour@yahoo.com