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The Real Horror was Society All Along!:

Societal Degradation in "The Fall of the House of Usher"

Often grotesque and macabre, Edgar Allen Poe's works grip readers with suspense and fear, making him renowned among American writers. One of these stories, "The Fall of the House of Usher", published in 1839, follows a nameless narrator as he visits the titular Usher house and bears witness to its haunting destruction. The narration of "The Fall of the House of Usher" is occupied by recurring themes of terror, decay, and general disconnect from the natural world. These motifs all fall under the purview of the Gothic genre, which emphasizes strong emotions such as passionate fear. In turn, the Gothic was a school of thought in the Romantic tradition. The Romantic movement was a reaction to the Age of Enlightenment. It rejected order, reason, and scientific rationalization in favor of emotional experience and connection to Nature. The Romantics also lamented the rise of civilization with its cities and social convention, which they viewed as dividing humanity and Nature. Poe bears distinction as one of America's greatest Romantic authors and in the Gothic motifs of his works, one recognizes this characteristic condemnation of society.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" criticizes American proclivities by associating them with dark, oppressive themes. The text comments on apathy, stagnation, the spread of Enlightenment precepts, and the spiritual disconnect from Nature that pervades American

culture. It also underscores terror as a means of experiencing Nature's transcendency. By reading "The Fall of the House of Usher" as an observation of social habits, Poe's usage of Gothic elements serves to highlight humanity's worst tendencies as they appear in American society. Furthermore, it asserts that society is the root of these predilections and shackles humanity to them.

The first self-destructive tendency that Poe observes in "The Fall of the House of Usher" is apathy. The text presents apathy as a miasma that consumes the characters' emotions, cutting them off from Nature and the inner self. The story opens on this miasma as the narrator observes a "sense of insufferable gloom… an utter depression of soul" (1) surrounding the Usher house. Beginning the story with this observation assigns prominence to this oppressively lugubrious aura, which in turn characterizes the very setting as injurious to the human soul. The fall of the Ushers is characterized by a great many causes for fear, but none of them are so insidious and damning as apathy. Tang Weisheng remarks on how the human beings in the story "suffer from melancholy, despair, and mental breakdown and show little, if any, sign of agency" (14). This melancholy prevents both the Ushers and the nameless narrator from recognizing or reacting to the dangers present and ultimately dooms the once-great family. The emphasis placed on the danger of lassitude reflects Poe's Romantic background; The Romantics believed that emotions, even those such as terror, were pathways to connection. Apathy is the tool used to rob the people of their ability to enjoy a connection with Nature.

When the narrator meets Roderick Usher he is horrified by the changes that have come over his childhood friend. Roderick relates to the narrator that he is suffering from a "constitutional and family evil" (5) that manifests in a torturous sensitivity to all sensory joys: he

can only tolerate the blandest food, the textures of most clothes torment him, “the odors of all flowers were oppressive” (5), light of any degree hurts his eyes, and there are only “peculiar sounds… which did not inspire him with horror” (5). The narrator notes how bound up in dread Roderick is and how it results in a fear of the future. Because the illness’s physical symptoms manifest in heightened sensitivity in the five senses, Poe ties the idea of this sickness to an inability to appreciate the simple pleasures of life – a characteristic symptom of depression. The choice to assign a sense of dread stemming from the future also aligns with a torpid diagnosis, as sufferers of chronic depression often despair of the future. Roderick’s bald horror of being in this state, let alone dying in it, suggests to the reader that being robbed of one’s senses in this manner is a fate worse than death. Thus, the manner in which his illness is introduced conveys Poe’s revulsion for apathy. Under the rule of civilization, it colors the human condition in shades of depression and gloom.

At the end of “The Fall of the House of Usher”, the reader bears witness to the ultimate folly of apathy. At the apex of the unnatural storm, at the conclusion of the fairy tale he reads Roderick, the narrator notices that Roderick is in a state of gibbering utterances. He admits “‘[they] have put her living in the tomb!” (Poe 14) moments before the undead form of Madeline Usher erupts through the floor and frightens her twin brother to death. The paranoia that he displays in the days leading up to this climax proves that he knew, or at least suspected, that Madeline would not be contained by her entombment. “Usher is guilty of, knowingly, committing Madeline to a living death. He becomes increasingly hysterical for he senses the imminence of his punishment and end.” (Alwan 10). But despite his terror and hysteria, Roderick makes no effort to escape his fate. He does not suggest leaving the estate or properly interring his

sister's corpse, nor does he even entertain the idea of letting scientists or doctors take her body; in fact, his excuse to the narrator for entombing her is out of fear that these "medical men" would want to examine her corpse. And yet he is terrified of the end Madeline will inevitably inflict on him. Roderick's inability or refusal to intercede on his own behalf is another, more fatal manifestation of the apathy plaguing the Usher mansion. Even the powerful fear he experiences is not enough to drive him to escape the cycle of resignation. This parallels a ubiquitous experience for any group of people under civilization: despite knowing how it systematically subdues the better side of human nature, people continue to suffer it. This is the underhanded effect of societal acedia.

As apathy is the tool that allows society to profligate, stagnation is the effect it wishes to inflict on humanity. "The Fall of the House of Usher" warns the reader about the dangers of languishing in a perilous environment. While contemplating potential causes for the hereditary disease now plaguing Roderick and Madeline Usher, the two remaining scions of the house, the narrator considers the family mansion and the family itself. He muses on "the possible influence which the one .. might have exercised upon the other--it was this deficiency, perhaps, of collateral damage [which caused] the consequent undeviating transmission, from sire to son" (2). The suggestion that the mansion is exerting a malevolent force on the lineage of its inhabitants is a composite of Gothic elements. Gothic literature habitually summons the motif of blood and gloomy, undefined evils. Tang Weisheng also suggests that "things around and in the House of Usher all seem mysterious and inscrutable, and infiltrated with a kind of evil power destructive to human beings" (4). By using these elements, Poe creates the image of a house that continuously infects its inhabitants and their descendants, and the narrator informs the reader that

the two have become so intertwined that “The House of Usher” is used interchangeably to refer to both. This notion, that the environment synonymous with the Ushers themselves is poisonous, evokes the idea of a hereditary evil that surrounds its inhabitants. As Weisheng proposes, “it is the ‘terrible influence’ of the things around him that have caused Roderick’s nervous breakdown” (10). Interpreted through a lens that views society as something passed down from citizen to child, the image of the Usher house aligns with the Romantic loathing for the society which stifles the people within it. By remaining in their family home, the Ushers are unable to escape its malignant influence. In continuing to live under the constraints of society, humanity stagnates and cannot embrace the benefits of Nature.

Poe continues to develop the self-destructive tendency of stagnation by using the physical state of the Usher house as a representation of American society. He describes how the house is crumbling around the family and has become overgrown with nature’s reclamation: the “excessive antiquity” and “[great] discoloration of ages” (Poe 3), the deteriorating foundation, the “Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior” (3). These manifestations of decay in the mansion reflect the social decline of the family. As Huda Alwan puts it, “there is a symbolic relation between the state of the house and its inhabitants” (Alwan 7). The condition of the house and family reflects the effects of stagnation. Refusal to change ultimately results in decay and destruction. As a mirror for American proneness, the putrification of the Usher house spells a die warning. Gavin Jones explains that “gothic tropes [of structural fault] are intimately connected to the horror of social breakdown” (5). In other words, the disintegration of the house reflects the fear that society might also collapse. As the cause of this collapse owes to the lack of maintenance or repair, it serves as a warning against inertia and complacency. The narrator points

out how the individual stones of the foundation are crumbling but the masonry still presents an undamaged exterior. What the reader takes from this is that as long as the Ushers are still able to present a pristine facade, there will be no investigation into the infrastructure's weaknesses. The "tangled web-work" (Poe 3) suggests the image of a thing that has not moved in a very long time. The discoloration and antiquity illustrate how the Ushers have not sought new greatness and instead languish with their past accolades. This reflects a grim picture of humans in society. It criticizes the overzealous commitment that often characterizes society's attachment to the past. Willingness to embrace the new and creative with open arms goes against the 'civilized' person's predisposition to the old and proven. Americans and American society are no exception to this. Staying in the past without embracing fresh experiences is oppositional to human nature, which is to adapt and imagine. However, under society, people are driven to maintain the status quo and reject opportunities to explore new paths.

It is not only the exterior of the house that functions as a critique of American tendencies. The interior appearance also critically observes the state of its society. When the narrator first enters the House of Usher, he remarks on the "many dark and intricate passages" (3) which lead to a room with "Dark draperies hung upon the walls. The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered" (4). It is certainly no surprise that the interior of a house with such an obviously rotten exterior is so dreary and stark. But the mansion's decor reflects more than just the Ushers' poor taste in interior design. The impression of an old, dark house with old, dark furniture reflects the Gothic themes of decay and an atmosphere of fear. These descriptions use the moldering description to create a sense of tension and suspense. There is also a repeated motif of age featured in these descriptions. Like the house, the furniture is "antique" and

"tattered". This suggests that the depressing state of the decor comes from more than just intentional austerity. It results from time wearing away at what once might have been beautiful and majestic if not for its neglect by its inhabitants. Yet again, the effects of being stagnant and unchanging afflict the ancestral home with a malaise that undoubtedly spreads to those who dwell within.

The habitual rejection of tendencies intended to ameliorate in favor of those that harm is symptomatic of the spread of Enlightenment ideals. The Romantics, as a reactionary movement to the Age of Enlightenment and Industrialism, loathed the proliferation of reason and rationality. In many ways, they considered it a perversion of how humanity ought to live. In "The Fall of the House of Usher", Poe depicts this perspective with Madeline Usher's unnatural disease and corpse. After she dies, Roderick entreats the narrator to help him inter her for two weeks in a vault. He cites the "unusual character of the malady of the deceased" (9) as the reason why he wishes to entomb her temporarily. The vault, the reader learns, is devoid of light, explosion-poofed, and sealed with a weighty iron door. The narrator agrees and they bring her coffin to "this region of horror"(10) before looking on her, faintly blushing and smiling in death, and locking her in. The trope of a thing that cannot be rendered harmless even in death is not unique to this story alone. However, the idea of a *person* who still threatens even in death is a profoundly supernatural – and Gothic – concept. The fear of Madleine's corpse is well founded, as, despite "the conventional wisdom that a dead body is lifeless or powerless, the corpse of Lady Madeline in Poe's story breaks loose out of her coffin and scares to death her brother Roderick" (Weisheng 6). Notably, the circumstances of Madeline's death and her post-mortem hazardousness bring to mind diseases that remain virulent even after the infected has died. By

escaping her coffin, Madeline perverts the natural order in a manner that is strikingly and primally terrifying to human instincts. However, isn't it also true that by entombing her alive, Roderick disrupted the natural order first? These multiplying transgressions against the sacredness of death reflect the Romantic sentiment that the Enlightenment trespassed against the natural state of humanity.

Poe details the spread of Enlightenment views as an infection or advancement by connecting it to Roderick's theory of vegetal sentience. He explains that he believes that the family gravestones, "the many fungi which overspread them, and the decayed trees which stool around" all form the conditions of this proposed sentience. He also cites "its reduplication in the still waters" as part of the consciousness. This theory ties closely to the ideas of spreading mushrooms, mold, and bacteria, all things that one associates with infestations or outbreaks. By relating this to the Enlightenment, Poe essentially situates its ideas as a growing blight on the surface of humanity. Weisheng describes Roderick's descent into paranoia as caused by "his belief in the sentience of things and his fear of things invading his thought" (11). The spread of stifling logic and rationalization is no superficial blight, either, but it is a dangerous and compounding spread that is detrimental to humanity. Roderick's capitulation in the form of his disordered certainty in his theory represents the threat present in each moment where a person contributed to the proliferation of reason and the strangulation of their relationship to Nature.

Poe also highlights the damaging effects of Enlightenment by underscoring how it cuts humanity off from connecting to Nature. When expositing on the Ushers' history, the narrator informs that they were historically noted "for a peculiar sensibility of temperament, displaying itself … in many works of exalted art, and manifested .. in repeated deeds of munificent yet

unobtrusive charity, as well as in a passionate devotion to the intricacies … of musical science" (Poe 2). Despite this lauded past in art, charity, and music, the Ushers are now reduced to a single pair of sickly twins in a dilapidated manor. Roderick and the narrator both imply that they trace the source of this decline to the malevolent nature of the house itself. As previously established, the house's spoiling radiation is symbolic of society's malignant effects on humanity. From this, it becomes clear that the fall from grace, especially in an artistic and creative sense, stems from the influence of civilization, social conventions, and the Enlightenment ideals that they arise from. The Ushers' fall from passionate creation strikes a particularly mournful chord with the Romantics; the loss of an artistic lineage such as theirs would surely have been a tragedy. However, the idea of losing one's ability to create is painful for any random individual. Jone diagnoses this as stemming from "social insecurity in which the failure to mean becomes the meaning of failure" (7). In other words, making art and enjoying beauty is a defining human experience, and being robbed of it is horrific.

To further drive home the point that division from Nature can only bring grief, Poe creates the image of an impossible storm and chronicles the futility of attempts at explaining it. He describes this storm, which instills the nearby objects to glow unnaturally, commenting on the"impetuous fury of the entering gust… a tempestuous yet sternly beautiful night, and one wildly singular in its terror and its beauty" (11). This storm creates such dense and violent clouds as to block out the stars, but inexplicably returns that light in glowing auras around the house and objects. Despite these supernatural occurrences, the narrator attempts to explain it away as a mere electrical storm, unremarkable. But he fails to actually divest the storm of its meaning and danger. It is a manifestation of the emotion and fear that has built throughout the story and finally

climaxes on this final night. It foreshadows the dead Madeline's return and the final, catastrophic destruction of the House of Usher. Alwan summarizes this hubris by writing" Being unable to subdue it to scientific observation and examination does not eliminate it" (12). The narrator tries to retreat to the comfort of ignorance, as he has done all along by rebuffing and ignoring Roderick's supernatural explanations for the strange things haunting them. But it does not save him from the trauma of the destruction or save Roderick and the house from falling. Poe shows the perils of becoming so cut off from Nature and its insights, and even more so the danger of trying to maintain that disconnect.

Being cut off from Nature and the interiority of humanity is a threat that the Romantics feared like death. But the ideology spread from the Age of Enlightenment and the advent of Industrialism left little room for the individual to contemplate the connections between them, the sublime, the artistic, and the imaginative. The rise of rationalization and scientific reasoning invading every part of life threatened to cleave that life from Nature's benefits. "The Fall of the House of Usher" serves as an allegory for this conflict. The narrator comes to investigate and bears witness to the crashing degeneration looming over the ailing twin scions. The encroaching fungus, the dying trees, the house's deterioration and miasma, and even the illnesses plaguing the family all originate from the disconnect between the Ushers and Nature. Because "things in and outside the House of Usher are not open to the world but remain withdrawn to their own mystery" (Weisheng 4-5), there is no intercession of freedom or wonder to relieve them.

Poe paints this portrait of disconnection with strokes of oppressive gloom only interrupted by sporadic fear. And somehow, this fear becomes the only beacon of escape within the narrative. One should recall the atmosphere of apathy that haunts the Usher estate and its

connection to the Romantics. The stifling of emotion is antithetical to that movement and they believed electrifying emotions of any kind could invigorate the connection to Nature. The sublime, one of Romanticism's core tenets, inspired not just awe and wonder but overwhelming terror as well. Fear is a rousing emotion and stirs in service of self-preservation. Arguably, the entire course of "The Fall of the House of Usher" is infused with fear in every drop of ink. The word "wild" appears ten times throughout the text and "terror" is mentioned seven times. "Thrill" and "ghastly" both feature five occurrences. According to Alwan, the reason for this comes from "Poe's aim to agitate the reader into a wakefulness of the spirituality within, because he believes that all people are part and element of the divine" (12) In reading "The Fall of the House of Usher" as a condemnation of society's attempts to smother emotion and humanity's innate goodness, then it only makes sense that the spiraling core of terror springs to intercept it. Only that powerful feeling is enough to overcome the fugue inflicted by society and experience the transcend connection a person is meant to have with the greater world.

Just as on these pages, Poe makes an impassioned argument in "The Fall of the House of Usher" against conceding to the influences of society. The Romantic movement in America was much less theoretical than its European counterparts. While this story does not reflect much of the social context of the time it was written, American Romanticism was occupied by issues of slavery, industrialism, and expansion, to name a few. These issues had and continue to have far-reaching influences on both the future and the rest of the world. The story of the Ushers is not a reassuring one by any means, but it is not intended to be. It is not a guidebook on how to resist influences that do not prioritize benefiting the people. Poe highlights more general human weaknesses that modern civilization inflames just as surely as any specific political or social

issue. While the Age of Enlightenment is no longer rapidly on the rise, its tenets of reason, rationality, and empiricism still work in our society today. Although many crucial developments that bettered civilization arose from it, the damage it did to the idea of naturalism and connecting with a spiritual power remains. Becoming too removed from emotion and Nature is harmful to the human spirit. The ideas of the Enlightenment were austere and emphasized function at the cost of experience. It neglected the joy and wonder and yes, a sense of being overwhelmed not unlike fear, that should be intrinsic to the way we experience the world.

Humanity does not need to return to living a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, alone and isolated. But modern civilization promotes a moral decay deleterious to the emotion and fascination that was unavoidable in that period. It bears repeating that modern society, especially alongside American culture, hyperfocuses on the notion of efficiency and maximization. The story of the Ushers is a fantastical version of what happens to a person and their spirit under this form of society. They fall from the heights of creativity and become embedded in the apathy and spiritual isolation that society so prizes. Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" is a grim painting of the condition of American civilization and culture, both in his time and today. It is, after all, a Gothic story obsessed with the rotting past and the invasion of something putrefying, otherworldly, and resoundingly malevolent. But as previously mentioned, it is not a guidebook and it is not a prophecy. Regardless of whether the Romantics were right to pine so fervently for Nature or if the Enlightenment movement doomed humanity, we are still here today and we have the lives we have today. Delving into the past's illustrations and interpretations of its fears is the best we can do to learn from them.

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