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How Poe Reforms Horror, Calling our Wealth and Racial Purity in

“The Fall of the House of Usher”

Edgar Allan Poe is commonly known for his iconic gothic literature. There are certain modern conceptions revolving around Poe and his work, along with different interpretations of him as a person and an author. Regardless of how he was perceived, Poe was, and has remained, a critical figure in not just gothic literature, but the Romantic movement in America as well. In the mid-1800s, American Romanticists were determined to reform certain styles and topics of writing that would reflect American ideals. They did this “while also combining reason, imagination, and intuition, a combination of faculties that, they believed, was necessary for arriving at truth” (The "Romantic" Movement in American Literature). Looking closer at Poe’s short story “The Fall of the House of Usher”, we see Poe experiment with Romantic ideals in his writing to reform the classic horror story. Published in 1839, “The Fall of the House of Usher” revolves around an unnamed narrator and his relationship with Rodrick Usher, the Usher Clan, and the house they have lived in for generations. From the beginning the narrator feels eerie when laying his eyes on the house and as the story progresses, we see him lose his logic and reason, descending into the madness that has cursed his friends and the generations of family before him. At first glance, this story seems to reflect on the classic ideals of horror. A haunted house, disturbing imagery, and a ghost-like woman. However, upon further examination, we see Poe do more with his short story. Within “The Fall of the House of Usher”, he reforms the idea of a classic horror story, targeting one’s reason and intuition, rewriting horror in an American Romantic mindset. He then uses this reform to further call out and try to reform societal ideals surrounding the need to maintain one’s wealth and racial purity. By experimenting with details in his writing, and describing the burden placed upon the characters in the story, we see Poe attempting to call out societal beliefs and demonstrate true horror with the depth behind the characters, not just a creepy atmosphere.

To start off, Poe begins by reforming classic aspects of the horror genre. Instead of focusing merely on the overall aesthetic of the story and scaring readers that way, we see him writing with special attention to certain details, and having the narrator explain what he's seeing and rationalizing his fear. We see this many times throughout the story, beginning right when the narrator first describes laying his eyes on the house. Despite the horrible sight, the narrator describes, "It was possible, I reflected, that a mere different arrangement of the particulars of the scene, of the details of this picture, would be sufficient to modify, or perhaps to annihilate its capacity for sorrowful impression" (NAAL B 579). Here we see the narrator rationalize his fear and change the picture by imaging the house in a different light. In the beginning of the story, there is a constant analysis of the aesthetics of the house and the people within by the narrator. However, towards the end, we see the narrator slowly lose his ability to explain things to himself. As he continues to stay in the house with Usher he says, "At times, again, I was obliged to resolve all into the mere inexplicable vagaries of madness... It was no wonder that his condition terrified—that it infected me. I felt creeping upon me, by slow yet certain degrees, the wild influences of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions" (NAAL B 588). With the progression of the story, the narrator slowly descends into a sort of madness himself, finding it harder to explain and analyze what is going on. With this descent into madness, we see Poe reform aspects of the horror genre. He plays with fears of the mind, targeting the fear of losing yourself and what you believe in. Horror is not just a scary ghost story, instead Poe makes it an interactive experience, violating the separation of art and its audience. This style of writing relates to aspects of American Romanticism, with Poe playing with the concept of reason and intuition. His writing sparks your imagination, triggering the fear of losing your mind and the turning point where you are no longer able to explain what is happening to you.

Poe uses this ability to connect his work to his audience to do more than just reform classic horror ideals in literature. He also uses this connection to trigger and reform fears surrounding societal beliefs of the time. The Usher Clan within “The Fall of the House of Usher” plays an important role in the horrible things that fall upon the characters. In Poe’s time, there was a key belief in sustaining your wealth and protecting it at all costs. We see this with the Usher clan, their house and its wealth being passed down for generations. However, Poe attempts to reform this idea that wealth is important and the only thing we need to survive. Much like Henry David Thoreau, Poe attempts to call out the idea of wealth being important as ridiculous. In *Walden*, Thoreau writes, “But men labor under a mistake...By a seeming fate, commonly called necessity, they are employed...laying up treasures which moth and rust will corrupt and thieves break through and steal. It is a fool's life, as they will find when they get to the end of it” (NAAL B 949). Poe reflects on similar ideas of this laborious life working for wealth with his portrayal of Rodrick Usher and his family line. The narrator describes the relation between the Usher Clan and their house by saying, “the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and the walls. The result was discoverable, he added, in that silent, yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which made him what I now saw him—what he was” (NAAL B 586). For generations, the Usher family has been burdened by their house, taking it on and maintaining it all for the sake of wealth and status. And yet all this effort has only hindered them. They have not prospered in their house, they have only withered away, living “foolish” lives, as Thoreau would say. The Usher’s worked so hard to maintain societal purity, a status above all those around them, and it only led to pain. With “The Fall of the House of Usher” Poe calls out this idea of wealth being the only thing that matter, using his horror reform and theatrics to create a

direct connection to his audience. With this connection, he scares them and demonstrates their future of self-destruction should they continue to follow these ideals.

Furthermore, Poe does not only reflect on the consequences of societal purity, but racial purity as well. Within the House of Usher, one sees an obsession with the family line, and a caution to let outsiders in. We see this when Rodrick Usher tells the narrator, ““I dread the events of future, not in themselves, but in their results. I shudder at the thought of any, even the most trivial, incident, which may operate upon this intolerable agitation of the soul”” (NAAL B 587). Quickly after he says this, we learn that his sister is dying, which will make him ““the last of the ancient race of the Ushers”” and upon further examination, there may be a disturbing incestuous suggestion surrounding the Ushers (NAAL B 588).. They feared “contamination” and losing their purity so much they perhaps didn’t let anyone else in to further the family line, only each other. This concept of a contaminated race is not new. We saw it in writer Mary Rowlandson’s time with the concept of Creolization and the thought that spending too much time with another race would make you become that race (“Creolization” PowerPoint Presentation, Slide 2). Before meeting with Rodrick the narrator notes that the Ushers “had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain” (NAAL B 580). With this, we see that the Usher’s very rarely let anyone outside their clan, all of them descending directly from each other. This knowledge leads one to conclude that the Ushers strictly believed in the concept of racial purity. Poe uses the disturbing idea of the Ushers relations to perhaps reform the idea of racial purity during his time. With the Ushers, racial purity only lead to their own self-destruction. The deterioration of the Ushers, the cursed sickness they feel, like with societal reform, is an example of how this concept of racial purity only destroys people. Poe’s horror

once again directly targets the audience, showing them the fear and consequences if we do not reform these beliefs. The downfall of the Ushers demonstrates the fear of destroying yourself because of these negative ideals.

But Poe does not leave a reader filled with complete fear because despite the story's horrifying ending, we see the narrator's ability to escape. As he flees the house he describes, "Suddenly there shot along the path a wild light, and I turned to see whence a gleam so unusual could have issued" and as he flees the light strikes the Usher house, destroying it (NAAL B 591). Of course, this light is a figure used to emphasize the destruction of the Usher, however, it is also a beacon of hope. It is the light at the end of the tunnel for the narrator. He has finally escaped the horrifying house and its plague that infected his mind. The story ends somewhat happy because the narrator was able to escape, leaving behind the destructive cycle of the Usher family. With his escape, Poe also allows the reader to escape. He shows them the horror that comes with societal beliefs about wealth and race, but with reform, there is a chance of escape. The narrator has a chance to take what he witnessed from the Ushers and go on to live a better life that is nothing like theirs. Poe demonstrates to a reader their potential to destroy themselves, and then tells them that it doesn't have to be that way if one gives themselves a chance to reform.

Within Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Fall of the House of Usher", we see Poe participate in the American Romanticism movement, targeting one's reason and intuition, calling for reform. With this horror reform, Poe calls out other areas of concern that need reform, particularly the Usher's concern with their death and racial purity. Overall there is a great irony because all the work the Usher's have done to protect themselves, all these fears they have festered, it only leads to their downfall in the end. Poe connects his audience to the story and plays with horror concepts to show why these fears are meaningless, and only lead to horrifying

consequences. All they will do is lead one to suffer the same fate as the Ushers, destroying themselves. Poe allows a reader to see this horror and know that they do not have to fester in this fear, that a path to escape is possible. This path to escape is also an appeal to American Romanticism. By allowing the narrator to escape, Poe gives the story a slightly happier ending, in contrast to old horror with bad endings. With this horror reform, "The Fall of the House of Usher" is not a scary story simply because of a haunted house. What is scary is the fear of losing ourselves and ruining ourselves in the end, however, even as we get sucked into the horror there is hope for pulling ourselves out of it and creating a better future.

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