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

Literature / Second Year

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I. Introduction:

"The Fall of The House of Usher" is a short gothic story written by Edgar Allan Poe in 1839. Poe was born in 1809 in Boston, and died in 1849. He is considered the father of modern detective stories. In this short story, Poe recounts the story of Roderick Usher, one of the last descendants of the Usher family, together with his sister, Madeline. Usher suffers from physical and emotional illness, which urges him to call his childhood friend to accompany him and ease his distress and fear. His boyhood friend, the narrator, welcomes his friend's invitation and accepts it at once, only to find the Usher house in a state of decay and disrepair. Unsurprisingly, like the house, Roderick Usher appears debilitated and diseased. Once inside the house, the narrator notices the dim rooms and long, dark passages and gathers that Usher is nervous and frightened of his own house. In an endeavour to lift his spirits, the narrator tries to reassure his friend by listening to him play his guitar or helping him write lyrics for his songs. However, all his attempts were in vain. Roderick's twin, Madeline, has a grave disease that will soon end her life. Roderick is determined to bury his sister in the house, which makes the narrator sceptical of the personal motives of Roderick. After entombing Madeline, Roderick grows more uncomfortable and uneasy. One night, Roderick and the narrator notice a bright gas moving, which the narrator deems completely natural. As a strategy to ease Roderick's uneasiness, the narrator reads to him the story of "Mad Trist" by Sir Launcelot Canning, and while he is reading, he hears noises that match the pictures in the story. He convinces himself that these noises are simply the creation of his imagination, but he soon learns that Roderick has been hearing them for days. Roderick assumes that he might have buried his sister alive, and she is trying to escape from her coffin. In a blood-stained white robe, Madeline appears and attacks Roderick, who immediately dies of fear. As the narrator escapes from the house, the ushers' house falls behind him.

In his fiction, Poe showed a mastery of gothic conventions of mystery, hypersensitivity, madness, "freakish aspirations," premature burial, and death obsession.

Edgar Allan Poe investigated human responses to horror, ranging from curiosity to insanity. He accentuated the tragic consequences of romanticism in which human beings are uncontrolled by rules and laws.

II. Analysis of the Atmosphere of Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher”:

In fiction, the atmosphere is the mood, feeling, or atmosphere created in the reader’s mind. It also enables the reader to foreshadow events and the characters’ destiny. Poe chooses selected words that help him shape the atmosphere in his stories.

► An example from the “Fall of the House of Usher”:

I had so worked upon my imagination as really to believe that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity—an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the **decayed trees**, and the **gray wall**, and the **silent tarn**—a **pestilent** and **mystic vapor**, **dull**, **sluggish**, **faintly discernible**, and **leaden-hued**. (Poe’s FHU 6)

We may choose the adjectives “gloomy, dark, frightening, etc.” to describe the atmosphere of this passage or the whole story.

III. Analysis of Characters:

We selected four elements: Roderick’s fear of death; the burial of Madeline alive; Madeline’s coming back from the grave; and victimised characters and inner horror.

A. Roderick’s fear of death and ghosts:

Roderick is distressed and paralysed by the ambiguous concept of death. This obsession with death heightens his fears of the grave, diseases, and the sight of blood. The reappearance of his sister from the grave scares him to death. This could be a reflection of the author's psyche in his fiction, which confirms his deepest fears and scepticism about metaphysical dimensions when death is the end of life, not the beginning. The return of

Madeline from the grave conveys the impression that souls have no other place to go, save their return to take revenge on their killers or roam about aimlessly.

The disease which had thus entombed the lady in the maturity of youth, had left, as usual in all maladies of a strictly cataleptical character, the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death [...] but then without those doors there did stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame. From upon the threshold—then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated. (Poe's FHU 18-25)

B. characters who are buried alive:

The other interesting aspect of gothic fiction is its psychological experiments carried out on the reader to evaluate the magnitude of shock that comes from reading books about people buried alive and trying to escape. In "The Fall of the House of Usher", the narrator is presented as a realistic example of the traumatic effects when people's imaginations and minds are haunted by ghosts:

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!—I dared not—I dared not speak! We have put her living in the tomb! Said I not that my senses were acute? I now tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I heard them—many, many days ago—yet I dared not—I dared not speak! (Poe's FHU 24).

C. Victimised Characters, Inner Horror, and Secret Sin:

Poe's characters are usually represented as having inner turmoil or conflict, which is the product of a hidden sin. They tend to be portrayed with pale faces and emaciated bodies that betray their inner struggles.

A cadaverousness of complexion; an eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid but of a surpassingly beautiful curve; a nose of a delicate Hebrew model, but with a breadth of nostril unusual in similar formations; a finely moulded chin, speaking, in its want of prominence, of a want of moral energy. (Poe's FHU 8)

IV. Sublime and Aesthetic pleasure:

Sublime is the pleasure gained from the combination of two conflicting elements: beauty and fear, as described in the previous lessons. In Poe's works of fiction, "horror is turned into beauty after the terrible experience, and pain is turned into peaceful delight after aesthetics" (W. F. Pang et al. 19). In other words, Poe turns horrifying or shocking stories into beautiful pieces of art. With regards to turning pain into peaceful delight, his readers experience a traumatic experience or imagined reality in fiction, but feel and are safe and unhurt in reality.

An example of the sublime from "The Fall of the House of Usher":

"The impetuous fury of the entering gust nearly lifted us from our feet. It was, indeed, a tempestuous yet sternly beautiful night, and one wildly singular in its terror and its beauty" (Poe's FHU 20)

It may occur to us that such a night filled with gusts of strong wind cannot possibly be a beautiful scene to enjoy. Aesthetically speaking, however, Poe's mastery of rendering such an awful night beautiful is what makes his frightening stories arresting and aesthetic.

V. Poe's Stylistic features:

Poe uses some stylistic traits that truly reveal that he is the father of detective fiction. Among these stylistic features is the use of parataxis and hypotaxis, which he frequently employs in an attempt to attract his readers.

a. Parataxis:

The term "parataxis" refers to the process of arranging phrases or independent clauses one after the other without any subordinating or coordinating conjunctions (but, and, after, where, etc.). Paratactic sentences are linearly set up in the form of subject-verb-object. The target effect of the use of parataxis is to produce a hurried rhythm that fit the speed of events.

An Example of parataxis from "The Fall of the House of Usher":

there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind—the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight—my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder—there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters (Poe's FHU 25).

b. Hypotaxis:

It is the inclusion of multiple subordinate or relative clauses in the main clause or other subordinate or relative clauses. The intended effect is to slow down the pace of the progress of events in the story.

► An example hypotaxis in "The Fall of the House of Usher" :

“I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon

opium—the bitter lapse into every-day life—the hideous dropping off of the veil”. (Poe’s FHU 3)

VI. Interpretations of Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher”:

- The external appearance of the usher’s house, surrounded and coated with decayed trees and fungi, reflects the inner and psychological state of the ushers’ minds and psyche. The fall of the house of the Usher family symbolises the fall and collapse of the family into insanity and hysteria.
- Other interpretations support the view that "The Fall of the House of Usher" represents the fall of the mind into the darkness of sleep or hypnagogia, that is, the beginning of sleep or a state between wakefulness and sleep.
- "The Fall of the House of Usher" is a great example of the use of the "Gothic double", which refers to the duality of character or personality. In gothic fiction, it means that protagonists often have their doubles, namely their fears and obsessions, reflected on other characters. For instance, Roderick, has his sister, Madeline, as his gothic double; or his inner reality or world externalised in the outside appearance of the house:
 - Madeline represents the sanity of her brother, Roderick.
 - Madeline’s ghost is an undying reminder that Roderick cannot bury his past.
 - The house’s exterior represents Roderick’s body.
 - The house’s troubled interior represents Roderick's mind.

Conclusion:

We can conclude that Gothic fiction stresses the importance of psychological development and complexity of characters’ identity and life. It digs deeper into what disturbs their

calmness and privacy. It is a projection of the reader's fears and anxiety on written characters to show how human beings behave in severe circumstances.

- **References**

Pang, Wenfang, Diqiu Wang, and Shanshan Hu. "Gothicism in The Fall of the House of Usher." *Advances in Literary Study* 3.01 (2015): 15.