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GOTHIC TROPES IN POE'S "THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER"

INTRODUCTION

While it is impossible to define the Gothic concretely and holistically across all its mediums and iterations, there are many tropes that run through its most prominent works. To start, the Gothic bases itself in aesthetics first and foremost, but this fact does not make the Gothic shallow by any means. The Gothic uses setting to emphasize how the world around the subject influences them and vice versa. Along with this foundational element, much of the power in Gothic media comes from the introspection exhibited by a character projecting their cognitive dissonance. In many classic Gothic works, the dramatization and extremes of emotions exhibited by characters evokes insecurity and paranoia in the reader. The outside conflict in the story reflects a character's internal struggles, flaws, and neuroses, and that by tackling this external conflict, the subject comes experience internal changes. Lastly, the Gothic cannot exist without the uncanny, where a subject exists in two simultaneous and contrasting states. This is where many prominent Gothic works create tension and establish the essential conflict of the story with the reconciliation of the two states or one eventually overtaking the other.

In "The Fall of the House of Usher," Poe employs several Gothic tropes, notably the use of robust setting description, relegated and extreme emotional states, and the uncanny to more effectively communicate how the tradition of maintaining family legacy is ultimately pointless and will lead to its downfall.

WORLD BUILDING

Robust setting description emphasizes the importance of how characters and their environment affect each other. Originating from an architectural style, setting is an essential aspect of any Gothic work. While "The Fall of the House of Usher" is chalked full of rich setting description, the narrator's relationship with the space is in direct contrast with Roderick's relationship and adds depth to the power dynamic between the two of master versus guest. Upon entering the Usher Estate, the narrator notes the hostility of the Roderick's quarters. Despite the narrator's limited knowledge of Roderick and his family, and the space is considerably lived in, the narrator notes that space is unusually hostile. The narrator observes,

The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay scattered about, but failed to give any vitality to the scene. I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all (Poe 94).

The narrator notes the "atmosphere of sorrow" and the gloom of Roderick's room; *why* the room evokes these feelings comes directly from Roderick. There is nothing inherently wrong with Roderick's room, but the evidence of somebody *living* in the space, being the music and books and tattered furniture. Despite the narrator's observations, Roderick's room feels infinite and empty, now reduced to only a few notable objects: objects that identify Roderick to the

narrator. Through the description of the space, the reader has already been introduced to Roderick, preparing them for his physical introduction into the story. Roderick is a shell of himself, and his quarters reflect this. Even before learning a single thing about Roderick as he exists actively in the story the narrator has already entered Roderick's psyche through the acknowledgement of the space in which he occupies, as if entering his head. Roderick feels the consequences of his ancestor's attempts to keep wealth and purity in their bloodline through his mental decline, and the Usher Estate reflects this. The relationship between character and environment powerfully communicates how the former prominence of the family is now on the verge of complete destruction.

EMOTIONAL STATES

The taboo of relegated and extreme emotional states, often exacerbated by madness, show the progression of the greater conflict within the story. Open talks about mental health in the 19th century were unheard of and the consequences were severe if the wrong person were to find out and lead to mistreatment or even death. In the late stages of the family's incestuous lineage, Roderick is entirely incapable and unwilling to continue the bloodline. The Usher Estate has fallen into severe disrepair, Roderick is plagued with the musical gift that made the Ushers rise to prominence, now a curse.

While the mental decline of the elderly is normal and well-known, to hear of a middle-aged man lose his grasp on reality would be a terrifying thought. This terror extends to the narrator as he feels his own sanity slipping. After the entombment of Lady Madeline, the narrator becomes restless and paranoid, pacing around his room. Upon exiting his room, the narrator runs into Roderick noting a "restrained *hysteria*" in his demeanor. Roderick enthusiastically opens the window, exposing the pair to a violent storm. The narrator notes, "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” (104).

The narrator pulls the two out of their haze. Until this point there has been a heavy separation between Roderick and the narrator by comparison of perceived “sanity.” The narrator talks with an air of objectivity and superiority to Roderick because, while the two are friends, the narrator is ultimately Roderick’s caretaker in this story. The notion of this line being blurred would be preposterous, but ultimately terrifying. While the Gothic often does not directly critique society’s views of perceived “insanity” or “madness,” it reminds the reader that it is the great equalizer and that one day, their sanity might be called into question. In a society that so heavily stigmatizes emotional distress, this could be considered a death sentence. Ironically enough for the Usher family, in the name of preserving wealth in the family, they would accidentally destroy it.

THE UNCANNY

The uncanny is a powerful force in any great Gothic work. To put it simply, the uncanny, as I will define it, is a subject— whether it be a person, object, place, emotion etc. — existing into two directly opposing states. Common conflicts that invoke the uncanny may include the familiar and unfamiliar or the natural and supernatural. Though the uncanny is not unique to the Gothic, there is no other genre that makes it so prominent. In the Gothic, the uncanny does not just add tension to a subject, but it creates and projects the conflict of the story altogether, the story ultimately centering around the reconciliation of the uncanny or one of the subject states prevailing over the other. In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” one of the largest examples of the uncanny is the transformation of the house, which directly coincides with the Roderick’s mental deterioration, and the destruction of the two in the climax of the book with Lady Madeline’s resurrection. The narrator reports,

The radiance was that of the full, setting, and blood-red moon... 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 — and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the “House of Usher” (109)

In the beginning, the narrator expresses that, “Beyond this indication of extensive decay, however, the fabric gave little token of instability” (93). This sentiment is just as applicable to Roderick, in which the narrator notes his “cadaverousness of complexion” (94), but that Roderick is ultimately in good spirits about his arrival. In this story, the uncanny is perceived through the lens of the narrator, and so the reader must take on their perspective. Conflict in “The Fall of the House of Usher” comes from the subject, whether it be Roderick or the Usher

Estate, trying to exist in two opposing states; however, one of these states triumphs over the other, such as in the death of Roderick at the sight of Lady Madeline, or the complete destruction of the Usher Estate. The madness instilled in Roderick overtakes him, and him along with his family's legacy die.

CONCLUSION

The Gothic is extremely broad and many of its tropes are individually non-specific to the genre; however, it is through specific combinations that the Gothic is conjured. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," it can be seen the synergistic incorporation of Poe's extensive world-building, dramatic characters, and the use of the uncanny create a Gothic classic. The feelings of desperation, loneliness, and madness of the Ushers is felt viscerally in the reader through Poe's ability to mix these tropes effectively. Though the Gothic is reminiscent of many other literary and artistic movements, its influence is vast. Many Gothic tropes can be seen in the works of surrealism, horror, science fiction, and speak to the power of the Gothic. It is evident why the Gothic is still a prevalent and enduring artistic tradition.