

The House as Mirrors in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher"

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Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher"¹ is a story about an anonymous narrator who is invited to a childhood friend's ancient house where there are his friend and his sister, suffering from both physical and mental illness, devoured by a doomed implosion of the sullen tarn. Poe draws on the emerging Gothic novel preoccupation and reveals his own investment about the forceful environment in "Usher." However, the deterioration of the house mirrors another interpretation of the tragedy of the Ushers. By linking the decay and corruption of the Usher mansion to the Ushers' tragedy, I confirm that Poe imaginatively explores the function of the environment surrounding the Usher mansion and, moreover, expresses the ecological influence on his writing. In order to demonstrate Poe's knowledge and interest in the omniscient uncontrollable power in the surrounding of the house, I will briefly examine Martin Heidegger's dwelling ecological theories. The symbolic natural surrounding is responsible the family for the final ends in three gradual corruptions, the corruption of the house, of Madeline's sudden death and of Roderick Usher's mental problem. Within this context, I will trace the environmental theme in "Usher," showing how the story illustrates Poe's recognition of the influential ecological power.

Starting to read the story, the stifling depressed and frightened atmosphere pervades when the narrator sets out on his ride to the house of Usher. The gloomy and morose tarn remains readers one of Poe's most widely-read tales and a touchstone for investigating Poe's preoccupation with elements of Gothic novel or Gothic romance.² M. H. Abrams further explains that Gothic novel or Gothic romance has been extended to a type of fiction which "develops a *brooding atmosphere of gloom and terror*, represents events which are uncanny, macabre or melodramatically violent, and often deals with aberrant psychological states" (78, my emphasis). Moreover, in accordance to Walpole's theory of the Gothic romance, Gary E. Tombleson concludes that the surrounding of the story has the factor of traditional Gothic romance and meanwhile combines with its innovative element (90). Mark Kinkead-Weekes argues that the story is a Gothick "which at every turn signals a consciousness of its own operation" (17). Especially, as Kinkead-Weekes suggests, the author's depiction of disintegration and dissolution based on elements of the Gothic novel, emphasizing on the surrounding in the story, such as the uncanny atmosphere, the overwhelming supernatural weather, and the terror during the corruption.

¹ "The Fall of the House of Usher" will be abbreviated as "Usher" thereafter.

² The Gothic novel was invented almost by Horace Walpole, whose *The Castle of Otranto*, written in the eighteenth century, contains essentially all the elements that constitute the genres, such as an atmosphere of mystery and suspense, supernatural or otherwise inexplicable events, the metonymy of gloom and horror, and etc.

From the explanation of Gothic novels, there is an obvious point on which should pay more attention, the influence of the environment. No matter what Gothic novel suggests a glooming atmosphere is, it establishes the sense of environment having some kinds of power to determine the development of “Usher”. Especially, the anonymous narrator depicts the trail to the house:

During the whole of *a dull, dark, and soundless day* in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heaven, I [the narrator] had been passing alone, on horseback. . . with the first glimpse of the building, *a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit*” (“Usher” 14, my emphasis).

The description which the narrator reports allows readers to grasp the idea of insufferable gloom. The subtle and mysterious surroundings give a fulfillment of the definition Gothic novel—gloom and terror. In the first paragraph, the sentences in very long and heavy structure enhance the gloomy effect. On the other hand, the narrator wanders a strange landscape, a mirror to his inner torment. Natural landscape conducts the strangeness in the narrator’s mind. Here, Poe makes a parallel between the narrator’s imaginative description and his uneasy consciousness.

Furthermore, the narrator observes that the atmosphere which he calls also surrounds the Usher mansion and the tarn.

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 grey wall and the silent tarn—a pestilent and mystic vapour, and leaden-hued. (“Usher” 16)

The pervading gloomy atmosphere appears not only in the narrator’s mind but also in the misty qualities of the Usher domain. The tarn seems to be occupied by certain peculiar vapor with a dismal leaden-hued color. More importantly, the atmosphere enveloping the whole surroundings is without any affinity of heaven; that is, the atmosphere is not friendly in the beginning. In other words, the nature of the mansion is believed to have noxious effect.

In addition, while entering the main building, the narrator finds an odder and shadier natural thing which connects the mansion and the tarn. “A barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn” (16). The zigzag direction seems to be the connection between the domain and the sullen tarn. Now that the family was described as the pronoun of the house:

This deficiency [without any branch of offspring] . . . from sire to son, of the patrimony with the name, which had, at length, so identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the “House of Usher”—an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of . . . both the family and the family mansion.” (15-16)

And the appearance of the house, from the portrait of the narrator, is human-like, such as “a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre,” “ghastly tree-stems,” and “the vacant and eye-like windows” (“Usher” 14, 15). With such a link, the z-shaped crack reminds the similarity among these two objects with the same name; meanwhile, for the deep connection of the house and the family, it is obvious that since there is a crack on the house, it must have some fissures in the Ushers.

Although the description of both the gloomy Usher domain and solitary history prepares undoubtedly the tragedy of the Ushers for readers, the black sullen tarn and the ancient mansion are not simply elaborate Gothic decorations. In *Green Writing*, James McKusick deploys an idea that the root of ecology is from a Greek word *oikos*, home and dwelling place (29, original emphasis).³ Adopted Heidegger’s thinking, the theory of dwelling means the “irreducible to any notion of building, construction or activities producing material habitats” and an essence of men (24). The sense of belonging constructs in the sense between one’s identity and the material place, subsequently creating a sense of home. Furthermore, Heidegger felt that “building and dwelling were always involved with attempts to *make sense of existence*, and were thus poetic” (qtd. in Shart 76, my emphasis).⁴ In this concept, dwelling does not simply define one’s existence in a given place but also the sense of settled-down because of the influence of dwelling with rootedness.

However, though there are great deal of connections between the house and one’s life, especially Roderick Usher’s in this story, the zigzag direction indicates that the house has been ignored for a long time and decayed without the care of the house owner, Roderick. In the cracks, there are lots of fungi overspreading from the appearance to the inner of the mansion. The neglected vault represents a kind of rotted atmosphere

³ Due to the original explanation of *oikos*, the dwelling place is the basis deriving from ecological determination to the influential environment.

⁴ Therefore, poetry, literary works, and dwelling remain intense measures of one another, helping individuals make sense of their circumstances. And the sense of the circumstance is the essence of a person’s existence. What Heidegger emphasizes is to embed a person in a particular place, his home, and then expose himself to an entanglement with the environment as a united system. For this reason, dwelling is a practice, which consists of a way of human beings and a way of knowing the surrounding. A person’s identification toward a certain place is mixed to the empirical observation and deep essence of the attained knowledge.

in the long-time unbalanced overwhelming power. According to Wendell Berry's assertion, "without a complex knowledge of one's place, and the faithfulness . . . is inevitable that the place will be used carelessly, and eventually destroyed" (67). Although the Ushers has been *lived* in the dwelling place for centuries, the family doesn't have cherish with the house, nor can it be called *rooted* because of not taking care of the house. The rotted mansion, in accordance to Bate, is "a lack of rootedness . . . associated with . . . corruption" (2). In the ecological rationale, a sense of home and an ethics of care for one's environment are basic acquirements of a certain place. In other words, if a person is "lack of rootedness", the person's life is destroyed (2). Moreover, the declined Usher family can be a parallel comparing with the structural collapse of the house, solitary in some distant tract of country and its long-timed waste. The pair between the mansion and the Ushers is concluded as the narrator describes the first one and then the later, and recognizes unnerving similarities. Hence, the small cracks on the mansion become the first corruption when the house launches the finale. Even though the family members ignore gradual changes of the destruction house, the original bounding, from the house to the sullen tarn, brings end of the physical structure.

Furthermore, the second corruption shows in the stirring mind of the mansion owner Roderick. "He was enchained by certain superstitious impression in regard to the dwelling" (18). Moreover, the narrator also mentions "to an anomalous species of terror I found him a bounden slave" (18). It is not only the narrator but also Roderick who is in the agony position to witness the disintegration of the house. He has already bounded and influenced by the strange power with notice and been the slave of the gradual withered ancient house. Being the only heritage of the Usher, Roderick has already known his doom with the combination of the house. He declares "I must perish in this deplorable folly. Thus, thus, and not otherwise, shall I be lost. I dread the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results" (18). He has a firm belief in the atmosphere arising from the decayed mansion and the dormant tarn.

Moreover, he states obviously that the inescapable atmosphere has been responsible not only for the solitude of his family but also for his pitiful condition. The most obvious evidence of Roderick's visionary prophecy is the invitational letter written to the narrator. "The MS. gave evidence of nervous agitation. The writer spoke of acute bodily illness—of a mental disorder which oppressed him . . . with a view of attempting, by the cheerfulness of my society, some alleviation of his malady" (15). From the invitational letter, the main reason Roderick wants to invite the narrator is to release his anxiety of the worry of his sister's disease. The narrator, summoned by

Roderick's prophecy to support his friend during his mental disorder, becomes a witness that Roderick's visionary prophecy is the result of his collapse.

Though the letter that the narrator receives calling him to the Usher domain betrays Roderick's derangement, throughout the tale, Roderick is in an acute state of terror arising not only from his sister's physical disease but also from "the pitiable condition—I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR" (18). The terror can be traced back to the inactive tarn and its atmosphere surrounding the mansion. Besides, these words derive from the totally hopeless view of life and Roderick's struggle in the withered house. He has already known the inseparable connection between the house and his family and his inescapable destiny.

As Freud concludes, conflicts between the demands of the masked ego and the demands of the environment tend to produce anxiety (qtd. in Ainsworth 69).⁵ Therefore, what Roderick suffers is conflicts between him and the environment.

The result of such perfect adjustment is shown in any animal species, and to a less degree in human beings of certain classes living under fixed conditions for many generations, such as an agricultural peasantry or any long-descended hereditary aristocracy. (Gilman 69)

What Gilman explains is the perfect adjustment shows in the long-living family; however, if the perfect adjustment has been turned out to an artificial stage, such peaceful scene "though quite at peace within himself, if transferred to a new environment, however healthy, would he nerve strain in the effort at adjustment" (69). That is, be there a peaceful environment, it would be even healthy to the person; but if he cannot accept, the healthy environment will suddenly become a frustrated scene in his mind. Roderick describes the environmental effect that "the physique of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought upon the morale of his existence" ("Usher" 19). His agony position is in the process of the disintegration of the house but powerless to prevent it. Although he recognizes clearly that he is in the pitiful condition, he has no method to change it.

⁵ Roderick's madness means his ego, consciousness, is not under the control of the superego, the social rule. According to Freud's theory about melancholy depression,

Freud . . . noted that ongoing attempt to balance *the demands of the masked sexual drives and the demands of environment are associated with unrecognized or unconscious conflicts*, which themselves tend to produce anxiety. Freud believed that *depression* results from failure of characteristic defense mechanisms to effectively deal with unconsciously generated anxieties. (qtd. in Ainsworth 69, my emphasis)

Since a person's life is always bound into the struggle between these two influences, these two causes can be concerned with the background of one's life, regarded as an environmental effect. Hence, unconscious conflicts make indirect evidence that Roderick's aberrant psychological states are from the anxieties in the conflicts between ego and the demands of environment.

The mansion has already become oppression toward Roderick. For example, the most natural and beautiful things to Roderick are the most horrible and intolerable weapons against his uneasy and sensitive nerves:

He suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; the most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odours of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light. . . . (“Usher” 20)

When the natural landscape is under destruction, the substitutive material is from the man-made fake, mimicry of the natural ones. Roderick undergoes a disease that could not accept nearly everything natural. No matter is flower, delicious food, sun light or sounds, all he can endure is the never-changed artificial materials. As all natural things will be withered and scattered someday, what Roderick endured is the unchanged produces which will remain in a long period. However, similar to the once delicate Usher house, even though artificial things can be preserved for temporary long time, they can't exist forever like natural things. All the artificial materials would be destructed little by little resembling the decayed mansion. Hence, in those affected by conflicts in “the demand of environment,” the creation of natural beauty would be unhealthy; that is, natural things would be terrifying, strange, and unbearable to them (Gilman 69).

The same adjectives can be used exactly in Roderick Usher's artistic compositions. The most obvious instance to show the extreme pervasive artifact is the way that Roderick performs his impromptu poem “The Haunted Palace.” His music is though with “fantastic character” but distorted in a “morbid condition of the auditory nerve” (“Usher” 20). Though performed with the extremely musical skill, the music is the highest representative of artificial excitement. The unhealthy atmosphere has already perverted Roderick's sensation to the state that can only perceive highly non-natural things. Significantly, the content provides another mirror image parallel to the fate of the mansion. The work precisely traced and prophesies the degeneration of the Usher house from a palace by “Thought's dominion” to a disorder where demons haunt (21). The harmful demon is nothing else but the gloomy atmosphere, having permeated the Usher residence for a long time. Following the movement “to a Lute's well-tuned law”, the poem changes its spiritual thoughts to a “discordant melody” (21, 22). The disordered melody is the chaotic status in Roderick's mind. The poem and the music are all forcible revelation of Usher's emotional and intellectual derangement. Though the artificial things are the long-lived materials and seem to exist for a long time, however with the disordered structure, it is inevitable that he cannot escape from the

destruction easily because of the long-period fetter with the decayed house.

Owing to the parallel with the tottering house structure, the health condition of Roderick's sister falls with the house as her brother's mental balance. When the narrator first sees her in the distance, he is full of unreason dread in her appearance.

The disease of the lady Madeline had long baffled the skill of her physicians. A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptically character, were the unusual. ("Usher" 19)

Madeline's ghost-like image, so flimsy and frail, seems to fade out the story like vapor into the air. She is in the consumption of illness and is waiting for her death. But her reason is the control of her behavior. Although she tries herself hard to not be taken to bed, as the combination of the name of the house, the parallel influence is doomed to Madeline's finale.

The physical similarity is the inescapable fate in Madeline and the structure of the house. Similar to the connection between the mansion and Madeline, there is also a bound between Roderick and her. This brother and sister is a pair of fraternal twins. Her existence is the only remedy of Roderick's mental chaos. That is, the similar appearance and quality they share is just like looking reflection in a mirror. They seem like spitted images, not a whole being. Accompanying the decayed house, the brother suffers mental unbalanced condition, the sister physical illness. The inescapable fate has already bounded them from their birth. It is impossible for each to exist solitarily. The only way to make them become a whole is to combine them together again. Therefore, despite awaking from the long sleep of being buried alive, Madeline's last effort in life is merely to struggle out from the tomb and take her brother away as what the sullen tarn swallowed the large building to make the final end of the family. Since the family has been bound with the doomed atmosphere so such, the doom day is settled down previously. Even though Roderick tries hard to find some external power to help him, facing the omniscient sullen atmosphere, all the things are unchangeable. The deep attachment among him, the mansion and his sister brings the entire Ushers to their finale.

But what is more surprising is what happens to the narrator after Madeline's entombment. Following the entombment of Madeline, Roderick's derangement accelerates. His physical appearance is stranger and startling than ever: The pallor of his countenance had assumed, if possible, a more ghastly hue" ("Usher" 24). Roderick's strange behavior makes the narrator feel absurd. Especially on the night of

the catastrophe, the narrator experiences the same terror which had oppressed Roderick throughout the story. The narrator tries his best in reading to ease Roderick's tensional nerve but in vain. As the narrator reads, the content described in the story is combined with the outside weather. As the content goes, a door slashing, a dragon slaying, and a shield dropping produce the "cracking and ripping, shrieking and clanging noises" (27). The outside weather seems to have the same influence and starts to vary: "The clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens" (14). And "the exceeding density of the clouds (which hung so low as to press upon the turrets of the house)" represents the permanent omniscient control of nature surrounding the mansion and the family (25). The low, condensed and thick clouds make stresses of the natural destiny for no one can flee from such control. The storm from outside descends upon and envelops the mansion mirrors Roderick's inner storm swirls the collapse of his rationality and sense. And it becomes obvious that Roderick's mental balance is disturbed by the surrounding environment. He mentions his "efforts were fruitless," because the depressed atmosphere has been penetrated into the deep of not only the mansion but also the fate of Usher family (24).

Madeline's escape from the dungeon seems to be impossible at first. However, following the narrator's story-telling skill with compelling and dramatic manner, on the close observation, readers can find that the reality of the whole story. Roderick's stirring mind haunts him with plucking himself to the doom in force. In order to create something with mental threat, Poe produces a mixture of such images in the end. The most immediate way for Roderick is to leave his sickened sister by burying her without the coming of the death. After burying his sister, Roderick appears weirder and stranger behavior in his life. To ease Roderick's mind, the narrator recites to him from Sir Launcelot Canning's "Mad Trist." Every step with Etherlred to force the entrance to the hermit's dwelling has its mirror in Madeline's struggling escape by her claws out of her coffin and mansion cellar to confront her brother. One of Roderick's paintings prophesies this scene, "this excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth" (20). However, after eight day in the deep dungeon, even if Madeline does really revive, it is hard to believe that she could survival. The reading of "The Mad Tryst" which foreshadows Madeline's surprising reappearance is necessary for both story lines to obtain the tension of the story and to prefigure the final catastrophe. To the disintegrated Usher's mind, the supernatural sequence of "The Mad Tryst," and the sounds of the storm outside the Usher building and Madeline's survival suggest one meaning; that is, the three struggles are about to destroy Roderick Usher. In this imagination, the overwhelmed terror in Roderick's mind is accompanied with the grotesque surrounding and the terrible sounds of the

unearthly storm.

If natural atmosphere teaches us about the power of environment and the sense of dwelling theory, it is fair to say that “Usher” is a cautionary tale, warning the unhealthy combination between human and the environment. The strong influential atmosphere is the controller of the fate of the Ushers. The pair contrast enhances the ecological understanding which Poe makes many molding parallels between the environment and human beings in physical bounding and psychological connection. The decayed house mirrors the physical destruction of Madeline and the mental chaos of Roderick. While the house owner Roderick does abandon himself in finding the way to escape, he and his sister are miserable because of the long-time bounding in the house. The house is like the mirror reflecting the finale of the family. The sense of rootedness and settle-down foreshadow the end of this family. Tiny breaks are the trigger element of the end. The atmosphere of the decayed house of Usher has demonstrated all the doomed things already.

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