

# Edgar Allan Poe's, "The Fall of the House of Usher": A Symbol of the Crumbling Borders of American and Psychic Consciousness and the Birth of Gothic Transcendence

Gloria Roxanne Buckley  
Mercy College, Dobbs Ferry, NY

**Abstract-** Beginning right from the title, "The Fall of the House of Usher", containing the word house which has been metaphorically used to depict the crumbling down of the house due to incestuous genetic patterns, the whole story is interwoven into the theme of transcendence. Again the word fall itself signifies rebirth. The paper attempts to delve into the concept of gothic transcendence as explored in the story by Poe.

**Keyword-** Poe; Psychic Consciousness; Transcendence; House of Usher; Gothic;

D.H. Lawrence once stated about Edgar Allan Poe's ("Poe") writing the following:

*Moralists have always wondered helplessly why Poe's "morbid" tales need have been written. They need to be written because old things need to die and disintegrate, because the old white psyche has to gradually be broken down before anything else can come to pass* (35).

In Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" ("Usher"), the mansion "of gloom" (Poe 702) with "vacant and eye-like windows" (702) that seem to peer out as if a "sentient" (709) soul in utter torment has gasped its last horrid, rancid, breath of "southern slavocracy" dies (Dougherty 15). It is Poe's tale, according to Stephen Dougherty that: "failed reproduction of the superior race-the extinction of a white family, the collapse of a white nation" (17) forms the underlying basis for the crumbling borders of American and psychic consciousness once known in antebellum America. Yet in the demolition of archaic anarchy lies Poe's creation of Gothic transcendence. Nature, people and objects may take on a ghastly, horrific, dark hue unlike Emerson or Whitman's joyous rays, but, the soul transcends nonetheless. The cosmic unity occurs in a very arabesque, morbid sense. With the collapse of what once was an eerily hopeful transcendence prevails in Poe's articulation of his very Gnostic theories of the universe. Duality in horror and hope reign supreme over the sentient hauntings of the Usher souls!

In that carnage, within the narrator's dream-like journey into the abysmal tomb of the "ancient" (Poe 703) Usher family; desperate attempts at preservation of the blue vein lineage dominance permeates the atmosphere of the Usher mansion. Roderick Usher ("Roderick") and his twin sister Madeline as well as their mansion are the

symbols of the crumbling borders of the American and psychic consciousness of southern aristocracy. Even in their odd, perhaps, incestuous relationship (Spitzer 352), the Usher twins fail to regenerate.

In Poe's translation of the disintegrative process of the psyche as well as racial and class distinctions; a new consciousness of Gothic transcendence reveals itself in the demise of the Usher lineage. E. Miller Budick believes that "within the world of the narrator's mind signals the rebirth of mental harmony" (48). It's our narrator's transcendence from the Usher house of horrors that promises rebirth. His will to live as the mansion is suffocated within the black tarn is as Beverly Voloshin believes an escape that represents: "that part of the romantic artist who can survive and recreate the imagined world" (Voloshin 423). This imagined world is the apocalypse and transformation simultaneously imprinted in the narrator's mind. His emotional tattoo is the observations and experience of his boyhood friend Roderick's decline into a state of "phantasmagoric" (Poe 704) hysteria with "mad hilarity in his eyes" (Poe 711). The eyes symbolize the mad self, the true self and the soulful self. They also represent sight, the windows of the mansion, clarity and a means of escape.

The journey into the Usher mansion through the eyes of the narrator proves to be an inverted mirror image of our very own souls. Numerous images are provided as premonitions of death circulate in the tale. For example, the blackness of the tarn with the mirroring of the house and fissure, the air of gloom and decay, Roderick's hysteria and obsession with off-kilter art and music, artwork that symbolizes a long hall where Madeline is ultimately entombed alive and resurrects to return and scare her brother to death. Poe leads us through the psychic forest of doom, like the witch in *Hansel and*

*Gretel* with crumbs along the path leading us to destruction.

We stand beside the narrator teetering on the edge of “that precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn” (Poe 702). Poe presses the reader to see in a slight, “barely perceptible fissure (that) zigzags” (703) like an inverted acrobat flowing down the house exterior; pieces of our own American shadow. In that reflection lives a history of servitude, emancipation, wealth and decline; for if you are American or you live in America, you have seen even in this lifetime those images.

We have all observed borders crumbling and rising in unison through racial tensions, poverty, loss and then hope. Joan Dayan believes: “Poe’s Gothic is crucial to our understanding of the entangled metaphysical of romance and servitude” (242). In Poe’s creation of Madeline, ailing from an unknown disease, Poe develops the idea of duality in life and death. Madeline’s incurable illness as well as Usher’s nervous mania are symptoms of our American unrest and white guilt for the oppression caused for our very own brothers. Roderick even obsesses over tales of African goat-men and the torture of heretics in the church (Poe 709). Poe joins both themes together in Roderick’s day dreaming and discussion of his library. Duality in Roderick’s dream-like hauntings.

This dualistic transformation of destruction and Madeline’s death symbolize the dissolution of servitude for a white aristocratic lineage. Madeline is buried by Roderick and the narrator within the tomb hidden under that long dark corridor beneath the house as depicted in Roderick’s painting. She rises ethereal, a symbol of death and the undead, a “phantom terrorizing the self” (Girgus 307). Sam Girgus also writes in “Poe and the Transcendent Self” that “many critics have discussed Poe in this way as an individual consciousness in rebellion against the dominant culture of his time. They see his tales as stories of a single mind or personality in conflict with itself and with its external environment” (25). This conflict rises in and outside of the Usher mansion.

Thus, the sentence of the house haunted by its inhabitants reflects the chilling madness of Roderick Usher as well as its imprint upon the narrator’s psyche. This sentence haunts and takes hold of each character: Madeline in being buried alive; Roderick’s mania and madness knowing his sister is “living in the tomb” as she bangs the “rending of the coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault” (Poe 714). The narrator is a witness to “the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher” (714); the ghost of Usher. The house breathes the ultimate demise of Roderick as he predicts the imminent collapse of his family and life.

Gillian Brown opines that “humanity remains at the center of the cosmos (along with God as Poe reveals in his work, *Eureka*). Poe’s cosmology presents a cosmos that mirrors humanity: an unlimited human legality” (Brown 333). This tale of Usher extinction therefor as Gillian Brown asserts: “composes a monument to

consciousness, a legacy of impressions. “The Fall of the House of Usher,” this terminus in all its multiple forms, is thus the extension and indeed the perpetuity of mental states. Poe finds in the terror of demise the perpetuation of consciousness. There is no ultimate extinction in Poe’s tale, for the aesthetics of terror preserve and transmit signs of intelligence” (Brown 332). The intelligence is both a primordial consciousness left in the cosmos by the Ushers and as an imprint in the narrator’s psyche.

It is this mirror camouflaged in Poe’s dream journey of the narrator where transcendence and decay occur simultaneously; that simple state between sleep and awakening where reality and a dream fuse (Carlson 10). This according to Poe is his place for transcendentalism and unity in the universe (Carlson 10). As Eric Carlson believes that “Poe was deep into his own “transcendentalism” and ready to claim it as the only authentic form” (Carlson 10). As Gary Tomblinson writes, “Poe’s notion of necessary cosmic annihilation or apocalyptic destruction is a prelude to regeneration” (84). Poe’s form of transcendentalism required destruction then renewal.

In the sleep walk state of living and dying, as Poe states that “an air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all” (704). This utter doom, blackness, is the place where Poe begins his tale where he finds “an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray walls, and the silent tarn, in the form of an inelastic vapor or gas-dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued. Shaking off from my spirit what *must* have been a dream” (703). Yet, the mirrored circulation of the fissure disappearing into the murky waters of the tarn along with the narrator standing on the edge before being “ushered” (704) into the house are all foreshadows of the apocalypse. Gillian Brown asserts that what is left after the house and the Ushers collapse into the tarn is the following:

*What survives is evidence of Roderick’s consciousness, imprinted on his friend the narrator, who has shared his presentiments and aided Roderick in entombing Madeline. Poe’s history adheres to a single individual. The ultimate terror of Poe’s tale may be the policy of elimination implemented to guarantee the vitality of such a single consciousness (342).*

In the death of the Ushers, the “House of Usher is giving up its soul” according to Leo Spitzer (356). The sentient, cracked, house as it is swallowed into the black abyss of the tarn symbolizes the decay, destruction and loss of power in the southern aristocracy.

Our narrator and as Jonathan Cook writes that “the reader is the beneficiary of the vicarious “delight” arising from the narrator’s intermediary position as participant-observer and survivor of the house’s collapse” (8). Once the old aristocracy has been abandoned and the

Ushers have transcended into the cosmos, our narrator stands as a psychically fit hero. He survived the crazy house. As E. Miller Budick agrees, our narrator is symbolic of life and art in moderation (40):

*"The Fall of the House of Usher," is the tale of one man's journey toward meaningful artistic consciousness. The narrator does not have to murder anyone to acquire a sense of needful boundaries of art and of the quest toward the Ideal. He can escape the awful "going down" of self-destruction. To understand the tale as a lesson in the moderation of imagination and artistic sensibility, it is necessary first to see that the narrator and not (as some critics have suggested) Usher is its hero)".*

The narrator's escape from the house is critical to Poe's ideas of dark transcendence. For the narrator, despite the hauntings of the house, the hauntings of Roderick's mind, transcends as Burdick believes that "from his own internal capacity to reassert his role as human "champion" (49). His own internal servitude to the ghastly images of the house, just as Madeline's clawing out of the crypt bloody and vengeful to scare her brother to death are all acts of strength, servile uprisings.

The very thing that perhaps Poe and his contemporaries were afraid of was slaves whether psychic or actually becoming free and in rebellion flee the borders of the prison. In fact, they destroy the prison with their psychic strength. As Joan Dayan writes:

*In seeking out an idiom of servitude, Poe understood, as did Herman Melville, how the raw material of legal authority could become the stuff of literary fiction. Poe moves us back to a time when a myth of blood conferred an unpolluted, legitimate pedigree ("The Fall of the House of Usher") (417).*

This preservation of pure pedigree is the very metaphor for the sentence of the house where it's inhabitants are incarcerated by the very laws of oppression they seek to enforce. In that effort to "hold on" the terror of the apocalyptic outcome occurs: extinction.

The hope for the destruction of servitude reigns supreme because the narrator lives. He runs "aghast" (Poe 714) from the horror of the house and he creates a message of strength and shock at what Roderick had done; the burial of his sister alive (this symbolizes the nonexistence of Negroes and even women in the eyes of the law). The non-being treatment of human beings in terms of civil rights. The narrator while temporarily afflicted as he states that "an irrepressible tremor gradually pervaded my frame; and at length, there sat upon my very heart an incubus of utterly causeless alarm" (Poe 711). The incubus is Roderick's madness and his knowledge that he knew his sister was entombed alive. The incubus is the tale of extinction within ultimate extinction. Madeline heaves

one last attack upon Roderick for what appears as a lover's embrace as the house drowns them into the tarn. This resurrection for one last act of truth by Madeline is a metaphor for literally and figuratively: uprising. The fissure that becomes a crack is the figurative breaking free even if such freedom is death.

Extinction of the myth of the pure pedigree. Extinction of the psychic madness. No longer a "species of terror" (Poe 705), afraid of becoming what Roderick really was; "a bouden slave" (705). As Poe puts it Roderick was "enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling he tenanted" (705). The irony is that Roderick was a slave imprisoned in his own house. The very world he sought to preserve became the borders he simply could never transcend.

Monika Elbert believes that:

*Poe's stories show that he is aware of the limitations of having a good family name in the new democracy of America. Having the name of Usher could not ward off loneliness. Just as the narrator in "Usher" wants to go back fervently to his childhood, to his past with Roderick Usher, a past, he suggests, in which he is implicated intimately, to a sense of ancestral greatness, so too does Poe want to believe in an ancestry that never was, which leaves him in the end with the belief in nothing. The narrator in "Usher" ends up looking despondently in the tarn with its ruined image of the House of Usher and is actually observing his own feeling of displacement-of not belonging to history. Poe, too, at times clings to a vestige of aristocratic England in his mythologized version of a Southern past (a crumbling past, a past that never was present: hence the feeling of decay and decomposition in "Usher") (19-22).*

If the narrator succumbs to the "nothingness" of his life as Elbert suggests then he too would have died. Elbert further indicates that: "The Fall of the House of Usher" illustrates a national phenomenon as well. This was a time when patriarchal authority in America was beginning to diminish" (22). It is no wonder the empathy of fatherlessness so strong in Poe would rise in Roderick as well as the narrator. This search for identity from the fathers of our country with the simultaneous rise of emancipation whispering in the ears of Americans white and black forced man to literally see himself in the reflection of hypocrisy. The mirrored moment existed in the hypocrisy of slave-owners praying while enslaving the very souls that needed protection. Antebellum America was in a state of flux and "Usher" teaches us where that white pedigree preservation landed; flushed into the tarn.

Our narrator flees from the Usher house and narrowly escapes being swallowed by the tarn as he



watches in horror as the house sinks into the ground. No remnants of the Usher twins remain. Richard Wilbur stated in an interview that every word of Poe's has meaning (Wilbur 72). Many abandon the search for further meaning of Poe's apocalypse. However, according to Molly Robey, "prophecy, degeneration, and apocalypse-themes overtly identified in Poe's review of Stephen's *Incidents of Travel*-surface in "Usher", a tale written during a period of burgeoning Holy Land fascination and millennial fervor" (64). Roderick foresees his demise along with his sister and confides in the narrator that he has a sense of doom. This is where Poe creates his Gothic transcendence as never before written. Unlike the light and love of the cosmos in such writers as Emerson or Whitman, Poe takes us to enlightenment down a dark deserted alley of our own psyche. Yet he doesn't leave the reader there to die. He leads us to inward contemplation. Molly Robey asserts that Poe was steeped in travel logs to the Holy Land and in his fascination, Robey believes:

*The very words Poe uses to describe the final destruction of the House of Usher connect the Usher's story to the tradition of Biblical prophecy. The narrator hears a 'sound like the voice of a thousand waters' as the tarn closes 'sullenly and silently over the fragments of the 'House of Usher', an image that as William Mentzel Forrest has pointed out, strongly resembles the words of Revelations 1:15. In this final Biblical book that foretells the return of the messiah and the world's end, God's 'voice is described 'as the sound of many waters'. With the fall of the Usher house, the final prophecy is accomplished (65).*

What Poe has done is a magnificent journey beginning with the observation of the "slight fissure" (Poe 703) that expands into a house blown apart within its own mirrored image in the tarn. Our narrator is a Gothic prophet fleeing to the Holy Land of revelations. In his nothingness is a very existential hope of everything.

Taking Poe's birth of Gothic transcendence one final step further is Barton Levi St Armand's analysis of Usher and Poe as a master in the metaphysics of Gnosticism. As St. Armand asserts, "*The Gnostic Religion*, forcibly suggests, to the Poe scholar, the general outlines of Poe's metaphysic. This metaphysic, like that of the Gnostics, with whom he certainly was familiar, is basically one of a radical dualism that sees the soul trapped in the materiality of a prison-house world, with escape possible only through a supreme act of knowing, or gnosis" (2).

St. Armand indicates that: "the act of *gnosis* was thus both Genesis and Apocalypse rolled into one" (3). Following Richard Wilbur's dream journey St. Armand sees the demolition of Roderick, his sister and the house as a necessary transmutation in alchemic Jungian terms. St Armand opines:

*The situation is now gradually illuminated as is a dark night by the rising moon. The illumination comes to a certain extent from the unconscious since it is mainly dreams that put us on the track of Enlightenment (13).*

The unconscious is splattered as an infinite imprint upon our narrator who now must go on with the knowledge as St. Armand writes:

*What we notice is the presence of the four elements-the dark and earthly "tenement" of the house, the "fierce breath of the whirlwind," the fiery radiance of the "wild light," and "unusual gleam" of the "blood-red" moon, and the "long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters"-all described in terms of an apocalypse. Yet these elements (earth, air, fire, and water) are now in conjunction (12).*

As Robey attributed the "thousand cries" to the Holy Land and the Bible, St Armand attributes them to a dualistic consciousness. In either school a spiritual shift occurs.

Kao Shu-Ting takes the Gnostic transcendence a bit further and believes that "Roderick's yielding himself up to Death in terms of Gnostic transmutation from base metals to gold contains elements of the afterlife's bliss" (14). This interpretation brings a spiritual transcendence to Poe's dark demise of the Ushers. The collapse of aristocratic reign takes on an illumination out of a black abyss. Shu-Ting sheds further light and indicates that "if something can be inferred from the survival of the narrator, then it should be that a dream, a hallucination, or a supernatural force can explain his escape. In the real, natural world, Roderick has completed the Gnostic initiation ritual and submitted to the will of God" (16).

In the Jungian shadow of our souls lies a little bit of Roderick, Madeline and Poe. We live with the imprint of oppression in our primordial consciousness. In contemplation, our hearts should soar and smile in knowing such destruction of old beliefs is possible. Should they resurrect themselves again in our thoughts and hearts as a racial incubus will, then our hope is that social inequities are dissolved into the far corners of that dark alley of our souls. Tossed ever so violently away from us and dismantled into the abyss!

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## Author's Biography



Gloria Roxanne is a practicing attorney for 30 years. She holds a B.A., M.A. in English Literature, Juris Doctorate and is now a PhD candidate at Faulkner University in the Great Books Honors program with an emphasis in literature. Her poetry has been published in several literary magazines. Her prose in national magazines. She is now focusing her attention in literary criticism and analysis. Her goal is to continue to write and publish her analysis of many great literary works. Her love is literature.