

# Exploration of Gothic Elements in Allen Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*

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## ABSTRACT

As representative Gothic work of Allan Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher* inherited Gothic tradition in western literature, and was added modernist elements of psychological analysis due to the innovation and development of Poe. By means of literature research, this article analyzes Gothic elements in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, subsequently, summarizes the function of Gothic characteristics in novel plotting, character shaping and spiritual struggle, so as to provide a further understanding of the literary view of Allan Poe and a deep insight into people's psychological problems in modern society.

**Keywords:** Gloomy environment, Weird character, Abnormal psychology.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*The Fall of the House of Usher* is one of the masterpieces of Edgar Allan Poe, a famous American poet, short story writer and literary critic. From the first person perspective, the author told readers a series of unimaginable, horrified strange things that he saw with his own eyes before the collapse of the house. The elder brother, and the host of the house and his sister, Miss Madeleine, lived in a solitary castle — the house of Usher. Afraid that his ill sister was about to die and leave himself alone, the mentally ill brother nailed his sister in the coffin. On a stormy night, his sister burst out of the coffin, rushed out of the morgue, and died in her brother's arms, followed by her brother's death because of mental disorder and extreme fear. Subsequently, their house fell down. [6]

As the representative work of Allan Poe's Gothic novels, *The Collapse of The House of Usher* inherits the Gothic tradition of western literature. Because of the innovation and development of Poe, modernist elements such as psychological analysis and symbolic techniques were presented, reflecting Poe's theory of Unified Effect, thus winning its author the status as a master of grotesque novels. This paper analyzes Gothic factors in *The Collapse of The House of Usher* in order to summarize the

function of traditional and modern Gothic factors in novel plotting, characters shaping and psychoanalysis, furthermore, unveils the modern significance and unique advanced consciousness of the work [1]. It also aroused people's reflection in modern society, in which with the popularization of social software and industrial civilization, human communication is being carried out more in virtual environment, making people more independent, self-centered and interior, therefore, resulting in a series of psychological problems such as loneliness, alienation and personality division.

## 2. GLOOMY ENVIRONMENT

In traditional Gothic novels, the story is usually set in gloomy environment, such as dilapidated castles and churches, dark, curved corridors and stairs, and secret basements and maze-like rooms, to achieve frightening effects. The environmental context of *The Fall of the House of Usher* belongs to this type. The opening periodic sentence of the novel sets the "gloomy" tone for the article. The dilapidated Usher House was located alone in the wilderness. A glance of its appearance made people sad. A zigzag fissure running from the base to the roof stung the author's eyes like a scar. Somber autumn, low dark clouds, desolate walls, withered branches, and empty and hollowed windows, all suggested depression and gloom. Passing through

the dark corridor and into an empty room of the mansion, the author saw narrow pointed windows with dark curtains high above the ground, dilapidated furniture in dim light, books scattered, with gloomy atmosphere filling the room. In Poe's view, isolated buildings symbolize retreat from the real world into human's spiritual world and dreams, and the crumbling mansion is also a sign of the imminent spiritual collapse of the characters. His view was confirmed by Mr. Usher's words, who believed that everything in the environment in which he lived was spiritual, the dark brick walls and dark waters of the lake suggesting his mental state, and he could not get rid of the superstitious idea of not being able to leave the mansion without permission. In addition, with regard to the time of the story, Poe chose midnight commonly used in traditional Gothic novels because it is a symbol of the nightmare in which people escape from the real world into the dream at midnight, and reason gives way to imagination. It is in this unconscious state that human pain and struggle can be fully manifested [2]. The heroine of the novel, the younger sister, broke out at midnight when the brother was in a mental breakdown, with extreme remorse for burying his sister alive and in great trouble of family illness. When the door was blown away by the storm, his sister stood all in blood in her shroud, staggering toward him, and eventually died in his arms. Mr. Usher's spirit and body were completely crushed. The author ran out of the house desperately. The zigzag fissure from the base to the roof which he saw when he came here first broke out completely. With the huge roar, the house collapsed like a huge monster, burying the family full of mystery and terror. The description of the gloomy environment went through the full text of the novel because the author was always trying to create a desolate, terrible, disastrous atmosphere, in this way reflecting his aesthetic creation concept, that is, the work is not to tell people the truth, but to give people the enjoyment of beauty, making feelings and soul excited.

### **3. WEIRD CHARACTER IMAGES**

Typical characters of Gothic novels are stubborn conservatists with strange words and deeds, which can be seen from Poe's portrayal of the hero's image. Mr. Usher's face was pale, but his eyes were surprisingly bright even frightening. His hair was long and soft, as if floating on the face. Though eager to overcome uncoordinated body movements as a result of habitual spasm, he failed at last. His spirit alternated between excitement and

depression swiftly. His voice was agitated and trembling. His inherited disease made him neurotic, while the mansion and his sister's illness frightened him. Obsessed with rhapsody and phantom paintings, Mr. Usher gradually lost his mind. Especially after they put his sister's coffin in the cellar, Mr. Usher's nerve disorder became more serious; he was immersed in his own hallucinations like a zombie. On the other hand, the description of his sister, the heroine of the mansion, is not specific, but more mysterious. On the first day when the author arrived at the house, he caught a glimpse of a woman walking far through the room slowly, without notice of the author, soon disappearing behind the door. The second time I saw her was after her death, when the author helped the brother send her body to the cellar, only to find that the two looked surprisingly alike, and the deceased still seemed to blush on her face and chest, with a mysterious smile on lips. It seemed like she was sending a certain message to the author, but also like her teasing his ignorance, as a warning of the occurrence of something. In combination with the resurrection of the sister in the following text, this is where the author implied. The author dared not to see or to think in the face of such an environment, he was deeply wrapped in fear, powerless and helpless. All this portrayal of images reveals the atmosphere of horror, while changes in their appearance indicate their ultimate destiny [3]. The author's description of the other two mysterious characters in the novel is much less. One was the servant who led the author through the dark corridor when he first arrived at the mansion. His silence and stealthy manners lowered the author's poor mood on account of the gloomy surroundings of the mansion. Suspense continued. Another mysterious figure immediately came on stage, that is, the mansion's family doctor, who looked unruly but terrified, greeting the author in panic and never appearing again. He went suddenly as well as came suddenly. So far, the author's description of the two characters came to an abrupt end, with no more description. The coming and going of the two mysterious characters adds mystery, horror and suspense to the novel, paving the way for the development of subsequent events. This description also reflects Allan Poe's creating principle, that is, the sole pursuit of the unity of effect and atmosphere. In order to pursue the horror effect, the author has every word, every image and everything written on the paper to serve the horror effect.

#### 4. ABNORMAL PSYCHOLOGY

Unlike traditional Gothic novels, Poe's Gothic novels excel at the unconscious, subconscious and abnormal psychology, and the imagination and intuition in his work reflect the pressure and spiritual split in the world dominated by reason and science. For the first time in the literary history, Poe introduced psychological analysis into literary creation and focused on psychological problems of helplessness, despair and doubt which people face in the modern society, especially in the industrial society where machines replace people and the relationship between people is more complex and alienated. Poe was also the first American writer to feature neurologist as the protagonist of the novel [4]. The hero of the *Fall of Usher House* is a character troubled by mental illness. Fully aware of the family illness and the end of the family fate, Mr. Usher was worried but helpless. As a bystander, the author "I" had witnessed Mr. Usher's spiritual collapse. At first sight, Mr. Usher, with abnormally bright eyes and frightening pale face, suffered from unstable mental illness which he tried to overcome. At the beginning he could rationally analyze his mental state — he was not afraid of death, but the idea of what may happen kept him in fear, so he actively sought the help of "I". However, after the younger sister fell ill to bed, the brother abnormally did not mention it at all in spite of deep feelings for his sister, instead, he developed closer relationship with the author. "I" witnessed the elder brother drawing paintings full of dark cellars and terrible light; playing grotesque rhapsody and reading melancholic and crazy books. Only at that time did "I" realize that his poor reason had been lost gradually. After the two transported the younger sister's body to the cellar, the elder brother suffered a complete nervous breakdown, eyes hollowed and face colorless, like a dead person immersed in the illusion of wild thoughts and voice. The author describes the protagonist's psychological process from reason to complete disorder, deeply exploring the state of consciousness and subconsciousness. Mr. Usher was lonely, isolated, off the people, and suffering from family illness and personal sin. Not only did he himself suffer from fear, but his mental state also created fear for others. His schizophrenia not only affected himself, but also brought disaster to all the people and things around him. The author skillfully combines the external world with the inner world of the male hero in the story, unifying the appearance and interior layout of the mansion with Mr. Usher's nervous system and emotional

situation, so as to achieve its preset suspense and horror effect.

This novel studied the subconscious mind of people hidden under a normal appearance. Poe likes to explore the unconscious and subconscious mind, and the working state deep in brain. He can accurately show this mental activity. He thinks everyone is half mad, or is able to fall into insanity. Thus, the protagonists of the Poe article are usually mentally ill persons. These people are isolated, without identity, names, residence, incompatible with society, wondering from place to place, or just follow others because they have no place to go; or they try to establish their identity through committing crimes; or they lost their loved ones just like the hero in *The Collapse of House of Usher*. The highlight of Poe's work is its horror atmosphere, or the coming horror. Poe tries to tell people that the irrationality of human primitive impulses can drive people crazy or to commit crimes. Poe's figures, despite losing their minds, are always aware of their state and therefore, able to exhibit the stages of mental disintegration. Allen Poe is an author full of imagination, proficient in induction and reasoning. He is good at imagination and fancy, but also has human rational way of thinking, logical and intuitive, with sixth sense that is hard to explain. He anticipated the twentieth century writer for his analysis of the disintegration of self in the world of nothingness. Poe is sensitive enough to feel the pressure of people in the world dominated by science and reason, where there is no joy, no love, no light, no peace, and no one helps you relieve your pain. Allan Poe's work on disintegrating process of the soul, mental and moral disorders has opened a new path for literary creation

#### 5. CONCLUSION

On one hand, Poe described eccentric characters by means of traditional Gothic elements such as lonely and desolate environments and strange characters, thus symbolizing the fate of people. On the other hand, unlike traditional Gothic novels in which protagonists are villains, the protagonist in *The Fall of the House of Usher* is the victim of psychological problems. In his psychological description, Poe skillfully combined the external world with the inner world of characters, making the plot and background into one. He introduced psychological analysis in literary history for the first time, setting suspense from the first person perspective, creating the atmosphere, and exploring human consciousness, subconsciousness and

abnormal psychology, triumphing over traditional Gothic novels in that it created horror in people's psychology. In terms of the aesthetic principles, Allan Poe put forward the theory of "unity of effect", in which the setting of characters, shaping of the environment and development of events all serve to achieve the final effect [5]. In *The Collapse of the House of Usher*, the author fully demonstrates the writing principles of "overall impression" and "short and fine", and the construction process of the plot is the collapse process of the House of Usher. These creative theories and writing styles have established his position as a master of short stories in the literary world, especially as a master of grotesque horror fiction. As a "Modernist of the Romantic Period", Poe reflected modernist issues such as loneliness and alienation to transcend his time, thus providing important inspiration for modernism and impressionism [6].

## **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

This paper is independently completed by Xiaoli Zhang.

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