

The Fall of the House of Usher*Edgar Allan Poe*

I rode on a horse one dull, dark and soundless day in autumn until I came to the melancholy House of Usher. I do not know why but I felt an intolerable gloom. I say intolerable because there was nothing poetic or beautiful about this scene, only the dreary house
5 on the edge of a cliff over a black lake surrounded by dead and rotting trees.

Still, I was planning to spend some weeks here. Its owner, Roderick Usher, had been one of my closest childhood friends even though I had not seen him for many years. However, he had sent me
10 a letter. He wrote me of a mental disease that oppressed him and a great desire to see me, his only personal friend. He hoped that my company would make him feel better. So, I had to come.

Although, we had been very close as boys, I knew very little about my friend because he was so reserved. I knew, however, that
15 he came from a very ancient family famous for both its wonderful works of art and its great acts of charity.

I had also learned too, a very remarkable fact, that the entire Usher family lay in the direct line of descent. So it was that for centuries the patrimony of the family had been handed down from
20 father to son, and that the peasants of that region called both the family itself and the family mansion the 'House of Usher'.

The house itself was incredibly old and it was greatly discoloured by time. Strangely, even though individual stones were ruined and crumbling, no portion of the house had fallen. In fact, the building
25 did not look unstable. However, if you looked very carefully you could see a very thin crack; it ran from the roof of the building in front and made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction until it became lost in the dark waters of the lake.

After observing these things, I rode over a short causeway to the
30 house. A servant took my horse, and a valet led me to the studio of his master through many dark and intricate passages. I felt an

increasing gloom as we walked. On one of the staircases, I met the doctor of the family. I thought he looked both cunning and perplexed. He stopped to speak with me a moment and then went
35 on.

Finally the valet opened the door of the studio. It was very large and high. There were many pieces of furniture, but they were all comfortless, antique and tattered. Many books and musical instruments lay about the room too. An air of deep and hopeless
40 gloom hung over and pervaded all.

When I came in, Roderick Usher got up from a sofa, and greeted me warmly. We then sat down, and for some moments, while he did not speak, I looked at him with pity and fear. Surely, no man had ever changed in so short a period as had Roderick Usher! I could
45 hardly believe that he was the same person who had been my boyhood friend. The ghastly pallor of his skin and the miraculous shine of his eyes shocked me and even frightened me. His hair, which he had allowed to grow, floated rather than fell about his face.

My friend's actions were incoherent and inconsistent: at times he was full of great energy and at times he was sullen. In this way he spoke about his great desire to see me and his disease. He said that it was a constitutional and family evil, and that he did not think he would find a cure. He suffered from an extreme acuteness of the
50 senses. He could only endure the most insipid food; he could wear only clothing of a certain texture; the odours of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were only a few special sounds (and these from stringed instruments) which did not inspire him with horror.
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He was also completely dependent on an unusual kind of terror. 'I will perish and die,' he said, 'I must perish in this horrible madness. I am not afraid of danger but I am afraid of its effect
60 terror. I feel that sooner or later I must abandon life and reason together in this battle with the grim phantasm, FEAR.'

65 He also believed that the gloomy house itself and the dark lake had a great effect on his existence.

He admitted, however, that much of his sadness came from the long illness and the approaching death of his beloved sister - his only companion for many years and his last and only relative on earth. 70 'Her death,' he said, 'would make me the last of the ancient race of the Ushers.' While he spoke, his sister, the lady Madeline, walked slowly through the other end of the studio, and, without seeing me, disappeared.

None of Madeline's doctors had been able to help her. She 75 suffered from apathy, a gradual wasting away of her person and frequent attacks of catalepsy. Until then she had fought the disease, but that evening she finally gave up, and I learned that the glimpse I had of her would probably be my last - that the lady, at least while living, would be seen by me no more.

80 For the next few days we did not mention her name, and during this time I tried to make my friend feel better. We painted and read together; or I listened, as if in a dream, to the wild improvisations of his playing the guitar.

One of his paintings was particularly striking. It presented the 85 interior of an immensely long and rectangular tunnel with low walls that were smooth, white and without decoration. You could see that it was far below the earth. It had no window, nor any other light. Still, the whole was full of a ghastly and inappropriate splendour.

He also told me his strange belief that not only did plants have 90 feelings but also inorganic things as well. He believed that the home of his ancestors was somehow alive. The result of this could be seen in the silent, persistent and terrible influence which for centuries had shaped the destinies of his family and which made him what I now saw.

95 One evening Usher told me that Madeline had died. He was going to keep her body in a family vault for two weeks before burying her in the family cemetery. He had decided to do this

because of the strange nature of his sister's disease, his distrust of her doctors and the great distance of the cemetery.

100 So, I helped Usher with this temporary burial of his sister in the family vault, which was deep underground, directly below my bedroom. In feudal times this vault had been a dungeon and later it was used as a deposit for gunpowder.

When we had placed the coffin in the vault, we lifted up the lid to 105 look at her face. The first thing I noticed was the great similarity between the brother and sister. Usher, guessing my thoughts, told me that he and the deceased had been twins, and that there had always been a strange understanding between them.

Still, we could not look at her for long without fear. This woman 110 who had died so young still had a faint colour, and a strange smile which is so terrible in death; this is not unusual for those who have died of some form of catalepsy. So, we put back the lid of the coffin and returned to our rooms above.

Several days later I began to see a great change in my friend. He 115 no longer read, painted or played music. He wandered around the mansion and his pallor increased. His voice shook when he spoke, as if from extreme terror. At times I thought that my friend was fighting to tell me some oppressive secret. Other times I thought that he was just mad because he stared into space for hours, as if he were listening to some imaginary sound. It is no wonder that his 120 condition terrified - that it infected me. Slowly I myself began to believe his fantastic superstitions.

Then on the seventh or eighth night after placing Madeline in the vault I felt the full power of these feelings. It was stormy outside and 125 I could not sleep. I tried to convince myself that my feelings came from the gloomy furniture of the room in the dark. Then, for some strange reason, I began to pay attention to some low and indistinct sounds. I could not stand it any more and began to walk back and forth in my room. A few minutes later Usher entered my room

130 holding a lamp. He was as pale as usual, but now there was a kind of mad laughter in his eyes.

‘And haven’t you seen it?’ he said suddenly, after having stared at me for a few moments in silence. ‘You have not seen it? – but wait! You will.’ Then he hurried to one of the windows and opened it to
135 the storm outside.

The wind entered the room and nearly lifted us from our feet. It was a windy night of singular terror and beauty. A kind of whirlwind blew around the house, and a heavy vapour blocked out all light from the stars, but all around us was the unnatural and faint
140 glow of that vapour.

‘You must not – you will not look at this,’ I said to Usher, and I led him with gentle violence from the window to a seat. I then explained to him that the strange light outside was just an electrical phenomenon or perhaps it came from the rotting plants in the lake.
145 So, I picked up a book, ‘Mad Trist’ by Sir Launcelot Canning, and began to read it to Usher. I hoped that this would bring him some relief.

I then came to that well-known part of the story where Ethelred, the hero of the story, tries to break into the home of the evil hermit.
150 Here the story goes like this:

‘And now the courageous Ethelred began to break down the door with his stick. As he hit the door, the wood cracked apart and the sound could be heard throughout the forest.’

At the end of this sentence I started because I thought that I heard from some remote part of the mansion a sound just like the sound described in the book. Perhaps, though, it was just the sound of the wind, and so I continued the story:

‘But Ethelred, when he finally entered, did not see the evil hermit. Instead, he saw a giant dragon with a fiery tongue that was guarding a palace of gold with a silver floor. On the wall a shield hung on which was written –

*‘Whoever enters here, a conqueror has been;
Whoever kills the dragon, the shield will win;*

‘And Ethelred lifted his stick and struck the head of the dragon, which died with such a horrible shriek that Ethelred had to cover his ears. Indeed, such a dreadful noise had never been heard before.’
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Here again I stopped suddenly. I was now certain that I heard somewhere in the mansion the exact same shriek described by the novelist. However, I remained calm because I did not want to frighten my friend. I was not at all certain that he had heard those
170 sounds. He had, though, moved his chair so that he faced the door of the room and now his body rocked slowly side to side. I continued the story:

‘And now Ethelred, having killed the dragon went to get the shield on the wall. But before he even put his hand on the shield, it fell with a terrible ringing sound.’
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As soon as I had said these words, I heard the same ringing and metallic sound in the house. Completely unnerved, I jumped to my feet, but Usher continued rocking gently in his chair. I rushed to the chair, and he stared in front of him. I put my hand on his shoulder and his whole body shook, and there was a horrible smile on his
180 face. He spoke quickly and indistinctly. I bent over him and finally understood what he was saying:

‘Don’t you hear it? – yes, I hear it and have heard it. Long – long – long – many minutes, many hours, many days I have heard it, and yet I didn’t dare to speak! We have put her living in the tomb! Didn’t I tell you that my senses were acute? I now tell you that I heard her moving in the coffin. I heard it many, many days ago – yet I dared not – I dared not speak! And now tonight – Ethelred – ha! Ha!, the breaking of the hermit’s door, and the death-cry of the
190 dragon and the ringing sound of the shield! No we didn’t hear those things! We heard, the opening of the coffin, the sound of the doors of her prison and her fighting to escape from the vault! Where can I escape to? Won’t she be here soon? Isn’t she hurrying here to scream at me for having buried her too soon? Have I not heard her coming up the stairs? Can’t I hear the horrible beating of her heart? MADMAN!’ At this point he jumped up and shrieked –
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'MADMAN! I TELL YOU THAT SHE NOW STANDS OUTSIDE THE DOOR!'

200 As if the superhuman energy of his words was magical, the door opened. It was the wind that did this, but then outside the door there DID stand Lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood on her white clothing and signs of the terrible struggle to escape from the coffin on her thin body. For a moment she stood trembling and then, in her violent and now final death-agonies, fell heavily on her
205 brother, pulling him to the floor. In that moment he too died, a victim of the terrors he had anticipated.

I ran from the room terrified. The storm was still blowing with all its force and I crossed the old causeway. Suddenly there was a flash of wild light. I turned around to see where it came from – because
210 behind me there was only the mansion and darkness. The light was of the full and blood-red moon which now shone vividly through that zigzag crack in the house which I described before. While I watched, this crack widened rapidly and then the wind suddenly blew fiercely and the entire moon suddenly appeared. I was amazed
215 as I saw the mighty walls fall apart. Then there was a loud shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters, and the deep lake below me closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the 'HOUSE OF USHER'.