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The Fall of the House of Usher, and the Rise of the Civil War

Rich Campbell

Twenty years before the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter, Edgar Allen Poe may have predicted the Civil War in his short story *The Fall of The House of Usher*. Poe's family was Southern, and involved in the slave trade, records of Poe himself selling at least one slave have recently been uncovered, even if the authenticity of the record is still undetermined. What isn't in question though is that the Allen family had owned slaves. Poe even wrote about his view of the relationship between master and slave, though the way he described the slave's loyalty for the master seems to put a romanticized spin on the issue of slavery (Campbell). It is then no wonder that Poe would be interested in the ongoing events of the day, which in America meant the build up to the Civil War. As the government tried to placate and prevent hostilities, their actions seemed to be out of touch and worthless, often contradictory. Legal actions taken seemed to be disconnected from reality. The nation was in peril and seemed to be destroying itself from the inside, just like the Ushers and the house in which they dwelt.

The house of Usher is the United States. Even the name has connections to the U S with the opening letters. What is more important though is the symbolic connections. Poe described the house as follows, "It's principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity" (Poe 301). The house, or America, was obsessed with its own history. America with its military successes and its industrial rise as a global economic power. The one thing it really lacked was history, so it often stole aspects of other countries histories. Hence the use of Roman and Greek imagery when designing government buildings, and why Lady Liberty is shown as a Greek Goddess in traditional garb. America wants to look old, and nowhere is this better seen than in the South. Look at the typical plantation home. Often, they are shown as large white houses with massive pillars out-front. This is to imitate Greek architecture. The other common style was the Victorian mansion, at the time these state-of-the-art structures were built to

tie the families to the Aristocratic systems of Europe. They were tied to tradition so much so that even as the world moved away from slavery as an economic model, the south doubled down. They built up a mythology around the Southern Gentry to justify the trappings of decadence. The North was focused on industry and science, the Victorian idea of progress. The North was always looking to move forward while the South wanted to preserve the status quo at any cost. These ideals cannot coexist within the same system. "Perhaps the eye of the scrutinizing observer might have observed 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" (301). This zigzagging fissure is the Mason Dixon line. In 1820 it was used as the line that would separate slave states and non-slave states except for Missouri in what is called the Missouri compromise. This divide would later form the border between the US and the Confederacy, forming the roof of the Confederacy and ending in the Atlantic Ocean.

Roderick Usher, being an artist and man of science, was symbolic of the North. As his sister was on her death bed, he was doing research. The narrator describes it by saying, "Yet I should fail in any attempt to convey an idea of the exact character of the studies, or in the occupations, in which he involved me, or led me the way" (Poe 304). He is searching for knowledge, he has projects that he is doing, and yet he cannot or will not explain the end goals. He is running the house and leading others while at the same time unable to hear or see anything that might upset him. He is weak and squeamish, easily disturbed, and prone to fits. Further as the male heir he is head of household and has the power in the relationship. Like the North, which had more electoral power than the South like the son over the daughter, Roderick was more concerned with himself than the well-being of his sister. Even while she is wasting away, he is more concerned with these matters of research that according to the narrator have no obvious connection to any of the problems in the family. He has accepted his doom and is just going on doing his best to pretend that the end isn't nigh.

Madeline, the sister, isn't shown much in the narrative. Once in passing, and once at the end. When we first see her, she is a wasted entity, sickly and frail, in need of her brother's support. "The disease of the lady Madeline had long baffled the skills of her physicians. A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character, were the unusual diagnosis" (Poe 304). Her illness was a lack of interest, a general wasting away, and a frequent inability to perceive her surroundings. She is the South. Cotton plantations are an ecological nightmare. Years of cotton farming was destroying the soil making it unsustainable, literally wasting itself away. The lack of innovation, or progress technologically and industrially, due to a focus on a system that was becoming antiquated is apathy in action. The cataleptical state is the South's denial of the fact that most of the world's economic powers had moved away from the brutality of slavery, the times they were a changing and the South was unable or unwilling to acknowledge this fact. Given enough time the South would have consumed itself or been forced to change economic focus. Cotton out of India had already made their sole reliance on cotton no longer tenable. Yet, instead of moving on, or even just changing crops, the South doubled down. The election of Lincoln was in a way the North's last "screw you" to the South after which the Confederacy began to secede. The secession was the death of the Union, it was the death of the united family (Trigger events). Madeline's death broke the family, it was the real end of the Ushers. After the secession came the battle of Fort Sumter, the opening shots of the Civil War. Madeline's resurrection as an undead rage monster is the outbreak of war.

After her resurrection the house tears itself apart from the inside. "As if in the superhuman energy of his utterance there had been found the potency of a spell – the huge antique panels to which the speaker pointed. Threw slowly back, upon the instant, their ponderous and ebony jaws. It was the work of the rushing gust – but then without those doors there *did* stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood on her white robes, the evidence of some bitter

struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame. For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold – then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore hi to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated” (Poe 313) With an angry gust of wind the wall is blown away and the figure of a wrathful bloodthirsty monster enters the room and proceeds to attack the lone survivor of the family. Madeline is the South. With a strong gust of secessionist force the South blasted down the walls of Fort Sumter. From there the conflict was on. During the war the country was destroyed. More Americans would die in the Civil War than in any other conflict except WWII. In fact, all other conflicts America was involved in, except for WWII, barely comes close to the Civil War (Wikipedia). On top of that the image of siblings killing each other is fitting for the Civil War as many families had members of both sides. It was commonly said that it was a war of brother killing brother. The house was divided, and the fissure that marked the divide would swallow the house. This divide, the zigzagging crack, was the north south divide. The fissure opened up and swallowed America, and what rose from the wreckage would be a different nation. The Civil War opened like a massive fissure and swallowed the nation in a flash of gunfire and artillery blasts, much like the fate of the house of Usher.

Poe wrote this story 20 years before Fort Sumter. Congress was still trying to compromise and prevent the inevitable war. Like Roderick’s research, all the compromises only circled the root problem without actually addressing or offering solutions, Like Madeline’s illness is the stagnation of the South, the traditions for traditions sake and the blind adherence to the status quo. The deaths and fall of the House of Usher was inevitable from the start, as was the Civil War. Poe only told us what he saw, and that was the inevitable fall of the house of Usher, and of America.

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