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"THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER": POE'S PERVERTED PERSPECTIVE ON THE "MAIMED KING"

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Abstract || The themes of medieval literature had a profound effect on the works that would follow in later generations regardless of the writer's recognition of this influence, and one can see the way Poe leaves traces of the popular medieval motif of the "Maimed King" in his short story, "The Fall of the House of Usher". This thematic device, which predates the medieval period, gained prominence in the tales of King Arthur and the Grail Quest. Although there is no clear indication that Poe intentionally set out to create a gothic rendition of this traditional theme, that does not discount the possibility of "Usher" having been conditioned in some respect by this medieval notion. Through implementing a close reading of the story and comparing it to a framework of this conception of the "Maimed King", this paper points out a number of striking similarities between the two, as well as demonstrates the far-reaching influence of medievalism in one of nineteenth-century America's preeminent fiction writers, Edgar Allan Poe.

Keywords || Poe | "The Fall of the House of Usher" | "Maimed King" | XIX century | Medievalism.

The medieval theme of the "Maimed King" employs a ruler who is suffering from either a wound or malady that has rendered him impotent and unable to provide order and peace to his kingdom. His land is changed from a place of harmony and prosperity to a wasteland suggesting a symbiotic relationship between the king and his kingdom –the well being of one will directly affect the well being of the other –. Healing is only brought to the land through the healing of its king, whereupon order is restored throughout the kingdom.

In Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Fall of the House of Usher," we are presented with Roderick Usher, the last heir to the Usher household. Roderick Usher embodies many aspects of the Maimed King if in a twisted approach. There is potentially a self-inflicted malady with the insinuation of an incestuous relationship with Madeline (be it in thought or deed), and the effects of this possible union of brother and sister can easily be seen throughout the House of Usher – both the family and the house itself –. Unlike the Maimed King of medieval literature, however, the only healing for Roderick, Madeline, and the entire house of Usher is found in their eventual demise. This lends itself to the more demented and perverted image of the motif of the Maimed King.

In order to accurately draw comparisons from "The Fall of the House of Usher" to this medieval theme of sickness and renewal, it is important to outline this theme of the Maimed King. Roger Loomis best summarizes the arc of the Maimed King as consisting of "the mortal hero [that] visits a supernatural place, is hospitably entertained, witnesses strange happenings, and sometimes wakes in the morning to find that his host and dwelling have disappeared" (Loomis, 1991: 47). He does not mean that the hero is the Maimed King, but instead, the individual "who was invited by the […] King to his home" (48). The king is most often described as being "wounded through the thighs or the legs […] entertained his guests sumptuously", and ruled "a country laid under a spell which can be lifted only by the asking of a question" (54). We have then the framework for the arc of the Maimed King: the ruler of a domain who has suffered an injury to his thighs (often suggestive of his genitals and potency), which in turn, has laid waste to his kingdom. In order to bring healing and restoration to the wasteland, he sends for a hero who is presented with the opportunity of rejuvenating both the king and the land to a new state of increased health and happiness. This connection between the ruler and his lands is demonstrated clearly in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*, when

> Balyn saw the spere he gate hit in hy honed and turned to kynge Pellam and felde hym and smote hym passyngly sore with that spere, that kynge Pellam [felle] downe in a sowghe. And therewith the castell brake rooffe and wallis and felle downe to the erthe […] and moste party of that castell was dede throrow the dolorous stroke. Ryght so lay kynge Pellam […] sore wounded, and might never be hole tylle that Galaad the Hawte Prynce heled hym in the queste of the Sankgreal. (Malory, 1971: 53-4)

This one example provides some context for what this motif looks like in its original use. King Pellam is wounded by Sir Balin (a brash, young knight), and the wound that follows results in both the laying waste of the ruler and the realm. It isn't until the coming of Galahad and the Holy Grail that restoration can be achieved in Pellam's kingdom. When comparing it to the story of Roderick Usher, however, we will see that while there are a number of similarities, Poe's work moves in an altogether different direction.

The story opens with Roderick Usher's boyhood friend, the narrator, receiving "a letter from him… out of an earnest desire to see me… with a view of attempting, by the cheerfulness of my society, some alleviation of his malady" (Poe, 1996: 318). Roderick has summoned the narrator, like the hero, in hopes of his being able to provide healing for (or at least relief of) the "mental disorder which oppressed him" (318). Nowhere at this point in the story are we told what specific malady allays Roderick. The narrator does, however, mention that "the stem of the Usher race, all-time honored as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch… the entire family lay in the direct line of descent" possibly indicating the notion of incest within the family of Usher (318). A parallel could be drawn between a sexual act of this nature (thought or deed), as it would be considered sinful –a "wounding" of the soul, and a "wound in the thighs" as was the case for the Maimed King–. It is important to understand that while it is not directly stated that Roderick and his sister Madeline consummated or acknowledged desire for an incestuous relationship, the seeds of doubt are certainly sown throughout the story. Indeed, his acts are highly suspicious when looked at from this perspective. Coupling his "wound" and his status as the proprietor of the family and house, one can begin to see the connections forming between Roderick and the Maimed King.

As the story continues, there are more facts that Poe presents to the reader that reinforce this connection. As Loomis mentioned, the domain of the Maimed King is a supernatural place that has been placed under a spell as a result of the wound to its ruler –a bond between the man and the land where the well being of one affects the well being of the other–. After wounding Pellam, Sir Balin leaves the castle only to discover that "so he rode for the […] and founde the peple dede sleyne on every side […] for the dolorous stroke gaff unto

Pellam thes three contryes ar destroyed" (Malory, 1971: 54).

In Poe's adaptation of the story, the narrator provides a lengthy description of the house where the family of Usher resides, with its "vacant eye-like windows […] minute fungi overspread the whole exterior […] no portion of the masonry had fallen; and there seemed to be […] the crumbling condition of the individual stones" and running through it all, "a barely perceptible fissure [that] made its way down the wall […] until it became lost in the sullen water" (Poe, 1996: 318 - 320). The narrator presents the reader with the image of an immensely ancient house that appears to be held together only by the vegetative material covering it as the rest of the house has decayed to such an extent it seems improbable that it should still be standing. The narrator also makes an important observation when he mentions the fissure running through the center of the house. As we will see the effects of Roderick's malady, so too do we see it surfacing in his "kingdom" as well through the fissure. Silverman states that these stones, apparently solid when looking at the building as a whole actually show rot acting as "expressions of the deficiency" that was passed down from generation to generation in the incestuous Usher line (Silverman, 1993: 60 - 61). If we are to accept the concept of the ruler possessing a supernatural connection to the lands under his domain, then this is a clear sign that there is a fatal flaw within Roderick that could spell doom for him as this structural flaw indicates with the house.

Poe takes this connection a step further, however, with the House of Usher in presenting this symbiotic relationship as malignant where the land too can have an affect on its ruler –not simply the ruler affecting his kingdom–. Roderick makes specific reference to "the sentience of all vegetable things […] connected (as previously suggested) with the gray stones of the home of his forefathers, fulfilled in the method of collocation of these stones" (Poe, 1996: 327). He continues to explain that the arrangement of these stones and "the many fungi spread over them […] was to be seen […] in the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere" (327-8). Roderick not only believes there is a connection with his family to the house, but that the house is in fact alive, and the vegetable matter encompassing the building is sentient as demonstrated by the near-breath that Roderick describes the mist clinging around the estate to be. Poe reinforces the blurring of the boundaries between the landlord and the land when the local peasants tell the narrator that time had "merge[d] the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the "House of Usher" […] which seemed to include […] both the family and the family mansion" (319). The house is alive, and through its bond with the Ushers, has had a "terrible influence that has for centuries moulded the destinies of his family" (328). Because the "undeviating

transmission" of Ushers has given rise to the fissure in the house, the home itself is seen to repay its owners in its own malevolent shaping of the family generations, as Roderick points to himself as an example of this "suppositious force […] in the mere form and substance of his family […] had obtained over his spirit –an effect which the physique of the gray walls […] had brought about upon the morale of his existence–" (Poe, 1996: 328).

The narrator is briefly introduced to Madeline only a short time before she "dies" and is described as a "tenderly beloved sister" whose "approaching dissolution" appears to be the result of a mysterious illness characterized by a "partially catelyptical character" causing her to fall into a death-like state (323). On the "closing of the evening" that the narrator arrives, Madeline "succumbed to the power of the destroyer", and appears to have died (324). Roderick states his intention to lay Madeline in the vaults below the house for fear of grave robbers. During Madeline's burial, the narrator uncovers two important facts: the first is his observing the blush in the bosom and face of the lady causing the reader to ask whether she had in fact died, and secondly, that Madeline and Roderick were twins.

These are two especially important points. First, we have already been told of Madeline's death-like trances that she would fall prey to -this clearly indicating she has suffered yet another-. Secondly, Roderick admit to "sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature [that] had always existed between them" (329). The second point is particularly interesting, as we have already seen the development of a malignant relationship between Roderick and the House of Usher. It then begs the question that if Madeline and Roderick shared a sort of symbiotic relationship as well, the three entities (Roderick, Madeline, and the house) would have formed some sort of shared existence. In fact, Thomas Mabbott suggests that, "The House of Usher has only one soul which has its abode in the mansion, and in the members of the family […] since they are twins and childless, this soul is interdependent with them and the building […] if one dies, all must perish together" (Mabbott, 2000: 394). This would strongly reinforce the idea of the ruler's connection and well being to his domain. There is, however, the first issue that the narrator points out regarding the state of Madeline. While he glosses over her medical condition, the reader understands that she is not dead, and is being buried alive. One must wonder about Roderick's reasoning behind burying Madeline if they shared some form of "intelligible connection".

Kenneth Silverman asserts Roderick is attempting murder a part of himself through the premature burial of Madeline, and that his "problems are only overcome by self-annihilation" (Silverman, 1991: 151). He continues to state Roderick will not be able to avoid this

problem as his twin is a part of himself, and as such, the issues shared between Madeline and him are unavoidable –"nothing stays buried" (Silverman, 1991, 150)–. This becomes clearer when considering the actions Roderick takes following Madeline's burial in his retreat to singing dirges, painting, and the general immersing in various forms of art as an outlet for his grief. Despite his attempt at finding solace in the familiar, however, "his ordinary manner had vanished. His ordinary occupations were neglected or forgotten" (150). It is evident that he is unable to hide from this act, and Roderick possibly realizes this at a subconscious level. As Silverman states, "Madeline's body was not properly disposed but kept in the house" (151). While Roderick says that he is concerned about grave robbers, it can be inferred that his keeping of Madeline's body within the home suggests both "the past endures due to the characters' enamorment with it" (150). Roderick's love for Madeline betrays his belief that she is actually dead, and desires to keep her nearby. His refusing to let her go to the grave also demonstrates the possibilities of Roderick's "wound in the thighs" –the unhealthy fascination with his sister suggesting the incestuous relations between the two–. The premature burial of his sister is an act of attempting to "hide the evidence" of either Roderick and Madeline having physically consummated the relationship, or as a precaution to prevent the act from happening. He further admits to the narrator to hearing Madeline's voice for days after, and yet dared not speak (Poe, 1996: 334). If there was true concern on the part of Roderick for his sister, what reason could there be in keeping her buried alive in the catacombs of the mansion? Where the possibility for incest gains credence is in considering the inter-connected joining of bodies within the house, and here, Roderick and Madeline would be physically representing what has already taken place between their spirits all occurring within the confines of the house of Usher –all three physically and spiritually united–. Silverman puts it in this way: "latent in the undercurrent of an apparent sexual incestuous wish is the wish for spiritual merger" (Silverman, 1993: 62). This will be seen even more clearly at the end of the story.

As mentioned before, in order for the Maimed King to regain potency and return health and happiness to his domain, he must seek out a hero to assist him. Poe, in this story, provides Roderick Usher with the narrator; however, it is not a 'Sir Galahad' sort of individual. "Though the narrator strives to impress us with his altruism and therapeutic zeal, one suspects that he has responded to Roderick's summons in order to gratify his personal quest" (55). The question of the narrator's motivations for coming to see Roderick is raised when we are told that "many years had elapsed since our last meeting […] I knew little of my friend" (Poe, 1996: 318). What he does tell us is that he is aware of the Ushers' "peculiar sense of temperament […] in many works of art, and manifest of late, in repeated deeds of munificent yet

unobtrusive charity" (Poe, 1996: 318). Like many points in the story, Poe does not directly state the narrator's true intentions, but there is some indication this narrator has come for less altruistic reasons. This does not mean to say that the narrator acts completely out of self-centered reasons, but only to suggest Poe's ever so slightly twisting of the traditional notion of the selfless knight gallant.

As the narrator does wish to provide some means of alleviation to Roderick's vexed spirit, the two indulge themselves in the arts. While it would seem that by singing dirges, playing guitar, and painting would preoccupy Roderick from his malady, it does not provide him with the permanent remedy he sought after. In the Maimed King story arc, there is an icon of healing, often represented by the Holy Grail. It is this grail object that is presented to the king, and provides the healing to both ruler and land. The one object that could be seen as possessing a healing quality for Roderick then is his art. In his Poem, "The Haunted Place", Roderick describes in the third stanza what could be envisioned as the House of Usher in its most ideal state. "Spirits moving musically […] in his state of glory well befitting/ the ruler of the realm was seen" (322). This serves well as an image of the renewed Roderick. But, the poem does not end at this point seeing instead "evil things, in robes of sorrow/ assail[ing] the monarch's high estate" followed by his fall (322). This unnamed evil thing causes the fall of this monarch and his land, leaving it a "discordant melody" which others would avoid (322). Something evil has penetrated the land, the ruler, and the one thing that seems to be redeeming in the story –art–.

As they sit in the parlor room, the narrator reads to Roderick "The Mad Trist", which is nothing more than an "uncouth and unimaginative prolixity that could have little interest for the loft and spiritual identity of my friend" (322). The narrator intends to distract Roderick and provide some temporary healing with the reading of this story. This isn't a work of real art, however, and it does not bring any relief to Roderick. Poe does not keep Roderick waiting for healing, but will provide it in an unexpected manner compared to the Maimed King arc.

We see that Roderick grows increasingly agitated while the narrator continues to read the story with each sound in the story corresponding to the sounds heard growing closer to the study. Roderick realizes Madeline has survived her burial and was working her way through the vaults of the House to reach him declaring, "Madman! I tell you she now stands without the door!" (335). The next image we see is one of Madeline Usher with blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame" (335). She then fell upon Roderick, and both were dead before they

hit the floor, one on top of the other. Between the suggestive image of the bloody nuptial sheets, and the bodies connected one on top of the other, there should be little doubt at this point of the possibility of incest having entered into the relationship of Roderick and Madeline. "Madeline's return from the walled off place […] represents the return of Usher's repressed desires and the granting of his forbidden wishes" (Silverman, 1993: 63). Whether this death scene is representative of a sexual and/or spiritual merger, Madeline's "final enactment represents a destruction of the symbolic order and violation of social morality" (63). Both the spiritual and societal order is upset through violation of these accepted boundaries of marriage and familial relations. The storm outside, the wind blowing through the windows, and the clouds pressing against the house as if the building were breathing heavily suggests this realm anticipates the consummation of Roderick and Madeline. As all three, united in a perverted existence are outsiders to the natural order, they will fall. David Grantz likens this to "all elements come crashing inward, consummating yet another dance in a cycle of dances" (Grantz, 2001). Just as Madeline and Roderick come together in one final, deadly embrace, the House of Usher falls in on itself as well as embracing its lord and lady carrying them into "the deep and dark tarn […] which closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the "House of Usher" (Poe, 1996: 335).

One can see how there are many parallels between "The House of Usher" and the Maimed King storyline. The afflicted ruler resides over his afflicted land, is visited by someone who attempts to bring healing to the king and kingdom, and in the end, restoration is brought about –though certainly not in the expected manner here –. True to form, Poe perverts this motif. Instead of being wrongly injured, Roderick inflicts upon himself his "wound" to the "thighs". Instead of a beautiful queen, Roderick is paired with his sister, Madeline. We do see a definitive connection between the lord and his land, however the House seems to possess a mind of its own resulting in both sickness being passed down from one generation to the next as well as the lord's being negatively influenced by the very home in which he lives. We find Poe's "hero", the narrator, does appear to be mostly altruistic in nature if somewhat questionable at some points, but is unable to render the aid that Roderick needs to be healed –if that were at all possible–. The only healing Poe offers his "Maimed King", his court, and his land is to purge them. In one instant, they fall into the earth and are swallowed up –a truly twisted, and perverted perspective to this traditional medieval story–.

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