Edgar Allen Poe’s View Of Death In ‘The Fall Of The House Of Essay, Research Paper

Edgar Allen Poe?s Symbolism of Death in “The Fall of the House of Usher”

Death is defined as, “The termination or extinction of something” (American Heritage Dictionary). Edgar Allen Poe uses this description in “The Fall of the House of Usher” in different ways. Poe?s intention when writing “The Fall of the House of Usher” was not to present a moral, lesson, or truth to the reader; he was simply trying to bring forth a sense of terror to the reader. Poe?s mind works this way, and critics believe this statement, especially when related to this story.

Edgar Allen Poe was born in Boston on January 19, 1809. His life was filled with tragedies that started when he was ten months old and until he died at age forty. These tragedies might be the answer to why Poe wrote in a way that confuses most of his readers. “Abandoned, misunderstood, and broke throughout his life, few would have predicted that Poe would one day achieve the fame and respect now offered him in literacy circles in America and Europe?particularly France” (”The Fall of the House of Usher” – Analysis, 5).

Poe is grouped with other writers in the Romantic period. Writers of this period focused on life, emotions, and the existence of the human race. Although Poe?s work has many characteristics of Romanticism, “The Fall of the House of Usher”, falls into the Gothic category. “It is usually admired for its ?atmosphere? and for its exquisitely artificial manipulation of Gothic claptrap and decor”(Abel, 380).

Bringing forth the symbolism of death is a major part of this writing. All of the characters in “The Fall of the House of Usher” are linked to death; by physical objects or by other people. “There are no symbols of absolute good” (Abel, 382).

The physical aspect of the House of Usher symbolizes death, in the chain of events, during the story. Even Poe?s description of the house has deadly characteristics. Poe describes the house as having “eye-like windows” and being covered by “minute fungi?hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves (fungi eats off the dead remains of other organisms); 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”(Poe, 6-13) . This “fissure” is presented to the reader, early in the story, to represent that Roderick?s love for his twin sister, Madeline, was dying, because she was suffering from a mysterious malady, or disease, that baffled her doctors. This caused Roderick to be emotionally and physically depressed, and was described as a madman at this point. “He was convinced that his whole surroundings, the stones of the house, the fungi, the water in the tarn, the very reflected image of the whole, was woven into a physical oneness with the family, condensed, as it were, into one atmosphere?the special atmosphere in which alone the Ushers could live. And it was this atmosphere which had molded the destinies of his family” (Lawrence, 378).

Roderick invites a friend (the narrator) to the “House of Usher” to visit and support him during this crisis. The narrator is involved in all of Roderick?s emotions and problems during the course of the story. He sees Roderick?s compassion for his sister during her illness. After Madeline dies he assists Roderick in the placement of her body in a steal coffin in a vault under the house. The reason for such protection of Madeline?s body was the fear of her doctors. They were so fascinated by the strangeness of her disease that Roderick feared that they would steal her body for pathologic reasons.

Poe uses this whole scenario to show that Roderick really cared for his sister. It was as though they were one being, relying on each other for life; “?a brother, his twin sister, and their incredibly ancient house all sharing a single soul and meeting one common dissolution at the same moment”(Lovecraft, 380). Once Madeline died, Roderick had lost part of himself. Madeline was his connection in the human “realm”. He knew that his love would eventually kill her, and it did. They loved without any resistance and eventually dragged each other to death. “For the Holy Ghost says you must not be as one thing with another being. Each must abide by itself, and correspond only within certain limits” (Lawrence, 378).

In the end, Roderick?s guest (the narrator) finally expresses that Roderick is truly a madman. The purpose for this is that Madeline was alive when they sealed her in the coffin. Usher knew that he had done this many days before, “Long-long-long-many minutes, many hours, many days, have I heard it-yet I dared not-oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am!-I dared not-I dared not speak! We have put her living in the tomb!” (Poe, 182). After Usher finally speaks about what he knew, a figure of Madeline appears to them, “?but then without those doors there did stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher” (Poe, 182). She came back to receive Roderick?s soul that had been lost because of her non-existence. He fell to the floor and the narrator flees the House of Usher. Roderick experiences physical death, and at that instant his soul is set free restoring perfect unity.

Poe shows, in this instance, that their love for one another had ceased, thus, breaking apart this “one being”. The narrator notices the fissure again while running away

from his fear and terror. This time the fissure was widening, and the House of Usher was no more. It had crumbled to the ground, representing the no longer “human” existence of the Ushers. “While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened-there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind-the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight?and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the “House of Usher” (Poe, 183).

Not only was the physical state of the “House of Usher” gone, but the ancient family name or dynasty ,as it might be called, died also. Isolation and paranoia caused the decay of the Usher roots. In the past, the Ushers were noted for a long lasting family existence. Displayed through works of art and “musical science”. Roderick Usher fretted the death of his family, thus, making him even more insane; which then, eventually led to his death.

Edgar Allen Poe achieves his lasting effect on the reader at the end. The horror that he wanted the reader to experience is linked to the death or “fall” (as in the name of the story) of a brother, sister, family name, and house. All this desired effect puts the reader into shock, but also brings out a good side. Life after death was the underlying meaning to this story.

Death usually means the end, but in a spiritual sense the soul is brought back to a state of comfort and pleasantness. Even though all of the characteristics of the Usher

name were completely obliterated, it will live on through the minds of Poe?s readers. The readers can draw conclusions about what happens after the death of Usher.

Poe was trying to present death as being so horrific that others involved would be affected by what was to come. Realizing that his friend had changed over the years, the narrator, feared for Roderick as for himself. Usher was already in a state of madness when the narrator arrived. In this case, the narrator could have been drawn into Roderick?s lost state, but he did not let himself get attached to the situation completely. If he hadn?t left the scene of terror, the narrator, would have died in the collapse of the house.

Understanding the symbolism of Poe?s work can make the reader confused. It seems as if all the characteristics of a person or an object are linked to one theme. Death was the main theme of “The Fall of the House of Usher”. Poe scorned the use of symbolism in readings. “He said that as soon as the reader became preoccupied with meaning, the emotional effect was lost?on the other hand he believed that short stories should have ?undercurrents of meaning?” (”The Fall of the House of Usher”- Analysis, 4). These statements are contradictory to each other. He believed “both sides of the story”.

Poe may not have realized that he was using some symbolism in “The Fall of the House of Usher” when writing it. The expressions, in this story, were usually not used by other writers. His viewpoint of life was unique compared to the Romantic writers of the century. Most ideas that he wrote about were wicked, but readers of all ages and interests enjoyed his work even a century after his death. Poe was raised in harsh conditions, and for this reason, probably could not control what he wrote.

Edgar Allen Poe?s stories will live on through the hearts of readers for years to come. They will scrutinize the symbolic meanings of his passages and figure out their meanings. Poe was obsessed with death and, thus, his life ended in his middle years. He might have been waiting for death to come to him. He watched his life decay just like the narrator viewed the death of the Ushers. Poe is “alive” in the minds of his readers and they are still horrified by his work.

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