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“But, Is It a Ghost Story?: Challenging What Makes a Ghost Story a Ghost Story”

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Abstract

Ghost stories have been around for centuries, and include certain features, such as a haunting feeling or an entity that haunts a space, which have become the building blocks to such stories; rules, essentially. However, what if those rules were challenged, creating new interpretations to what makes ghost stories, ghost stories? This report challenges the validity of these rules, which were created in the Victorian era of literature by accredited authors of the gothic horror genre. Through using a piece written by Edgar Allan Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” as the focal article, this point can be proven. Importantly, the novella does not constitute a traditional ghost story, since it is without the presence of a ghost. This report incorporates examples from secondary sources, such as reports, studies, and essays to provide historical contexts that thoroughly examine the psychological aspects of ghost stories, ways a person can become a “ghost” of who they once were, and the haunting of a space being more important than the haunter itself. Therefore, this argument demonstrates that ghost stories do not require a ghost in order to consider it a ghost story. It argues that the “ghostliness” of a story, in this case “The Fall of the House of Usher,” should not be restricted to just external apparitions, but should include the internal turmoil and psychological horrors that contribute the same, if not more, fear as a story with a ghostly entity present.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, ghost story, Gothic literature, horror, Occult, Psychology, Thomas Hood, Victorian literature

Introduction: A Ghost Story Without a Ghost

Ghost stories have been around for centuries. These thrilling stories of the afterlife never fail to make one's adrenaline rush with fear and excitement, prickling the skin with patterns of goosebumps as a wave of chills starts to creep up the spine. Whether it be a ghostly apparition haunting an abandoned house, or an undead entity stalking and attacking an unsuspecting victim, these stories bring a sense of thrill and paranoia that nothing else could compare to.

When thinking of gothic horror ghost stories, many authors may come to mind, but the one that will be the main focus here is, arguably, a household name: Edgar Allan Poe. Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts on January 19th, 1809, and, up until his death in 1849, he was a prominent writer and editor of short stories and poetry. Famously, he mainly focused on writing short stories that were of the gothic horror genre. This genre is a subgenre of fiction that focuses on morality, philosophy, and religion (Pagan 1). According to Amanda Pagan, romance is never the focus in gothic-horror, which is a somewhat controversial stance, due to the existence of spectral lover poetry (Pagan 1). To go along with the first point, these stories almost always have unhappy endings. Although Poe is famous for writing stories such as "The Raven" and "The Tell-Tale Heart," the story that fits the definition of gothic horror almost exactly; was the unnerving and chilling, "The Fall of the House of Usher."

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is a ghost story famous for its many interpretations of the themes involved in its plot, but the main themes that I was able to pluck out from the plethora of interpretations were that mental decline can lead to people becoming a shell of who they once were, and how someone can be "haunted" by their unfortunate past. This ghost story centers around how psychological changes and environmental changes can contribute to ghostly hauntings. However, there is one caveat to this supposed "ghost" story: there is no ghost! So, how can a ghost story be considered a ghost story if there is not a ghost present?

By using the definition of gothic horror, "The Fall of the House of Usher" takes on the more philosophical interpretation of what a "ghost" can be. Through psychological aspects of ghost stories, becoming a ghost of who the main character once was due to declining mental health, and how the haunting of a space may be more important to the story than the haunter itself, it can be confidently stated that "The Fall of the House of Usher" by Edgar Allan Poe is, in fact, a ghost story without the presence of a physical ghost.

An Unfortunate Fate

Roderick Usher was a rich, distinguished man with an unfortunate fate. He resides with his twin sister, Madeline, in the Usher house, which is slowly turning unearthly in its appearance and atmosphere. He was slowly falling victim to the suffocating hands of a mental disorder assumed to be dementia, an unforgiving malady. The story is written from the perspective of the unnamed narrator: an old friend of Roderick's from their youth.

After receiving a letter from the sickly man, the narrator makes a visit to the Usher residence, noting how much the house has changed from their youth:

I looked upon the scene before me—upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain, upon the bleak walls, upon the vacant eye-like windows, upon a few rank sedges, and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees—with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly

sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium; the bitter lapse into every-day life, the hideous dropping of the veil (Poe 14).

Upon entering the house, the narrator decides that this is where he will stay to accompany Roderick during his final days in his personal purgatory. Through the time spent with Roderick, the narrator is able to observe both the rapid decline of his childhood friend (Poe 30) and the residence. Unfortunately, the narrator begins to feel negative physical and psychological effects of being in the presence of such an ill person and the drastically deteriorating house.

Once the house falls, killing Roderick and Madeline and leaving nothing but rubble and the narrator behind, the reader is left with the unhappy ending that gothic horror is known for (Poe 55-56). Roderick was doomed from the start with his unfortunate fate in developing an unnamed mental disorder, which was the ultimate cause of his demise at the start of this story. However, the fact that he was crushed to death by the crumbling House of Usher so suddenly was the unfortunate, unhappy ending that this short story intended.

The Haunting: A Deeper Dive

Psychological aspects of horror stories can include the effects of mental illness being just as scary and “ghostly” as that of a physical ghost within the story. While reading “The Fall of the House of Usher” it can be concluded that Roderick Usher has a serious illness related to his mental health that has hindered him from living his life sufficiently. Poe writes, “The MS. gave evidence of nervous agitation. The writer spoke of acute bodily illness, of a mental disorder which oppressed him, and of an earnest desire to see me, as his best and indeed his only personal friend, with a view of attempting, by the cheerfulness of my society, some alleviation of his malady” (Poe 16). Throughout the story, the unnamed narrator is not explicitly diagnosing Roderick Usher with an illness, so it is left up to the reader’s interpretation. With the examples from the story in mind, the interpretation that I had come up with was dementia, or a form of illness that causes the rapid decline of one’s brain health.

Many sources claim that Roderick Usher’s psychosis was in fact triggered by a form of schizophrenia that was passed down from generations of Ushers before him. However, it is important to take note that this diagnosis would be considered modernized, since the term for such a disease was not coined until much later, after Poe’s time. Poe writes, “He suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odors of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds, and these from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror” (Poe 26).

Alessia Termini dives deeper into this psychological form of haunting, writing:

Although the narrator never diagnoses Roderick with schizophrenia,... Roderick possesses many symptoms an individual with schizophrenia would portray. His disorder, stemming from his family's genetics, was highlighted to have been passed down from generation to generation; and his sensitivity to certain sounds paired with his hatred of music, an activity he once enjoyed (Termini 1).

According to Termini’s article, these would be considered symptoms of schizophrenia, which was not researched as thoroughly in the 1800s as it is now in the 21st century. states that the presence of a malady such as schizophrenia was “not even close to being discovered and

instead placed under the ableist and umbrella terms of insanity and hysteria" (Termini 1). Therefore, the existence of modern medicine and diagnoses predates the period in which this story was written, so the fear of those who had these illnesses was much more prominent.

The mystery and fear of the unknown with regard to mental illness is comparable to that of ghosts and the afterlife. In the 1800s, having a mental illness that was not researched thoroughly, let alone discovered, was compared to being "haunted." In addition, during the 1800s, people who had mental illnesses and diseases were labeled as "insane" or, more appropriately in Roderick's case, moral insanity. Moral insanity was a term coined during the Victorian Era as a way to "justify the psychiatric treatment of a particular type of conduct in which the patient seemed otherwise rational but displayed certain inexplicable and undesirable behaviors deemed socially perverse or 'unfit,'" according to Cristina Hanganu-Bresch, a writer for the National Library of Medicine. Therefore, the definition of the term "moral insanity" will need to be considered throughout the rest of this piece to see maladies the same way as Poe, or other people who lived during the Victorian Era, to further understand their points of view.

In addition to the presence of undiscovered mental illnesses and psychological aspects of ghost stories that act as comparable representations to physical ghosts, the progressive changes in Roderick Usher's physical appearance contributes to him becoming a "ghost" of who he once was. Throughout the story, the unnamed narrator makes it known to the reader that Roderick Usher has changed in many ways since they were kids. The part of the story where the narrator makes it most known is when he first meets up with his unwell friend, describing how much he has changed since childhood: "Surely man had never before so terribly altered, in such a brief period, as had Roderick Usher! It was with difficulty that I could bring myself to admit the identity of the wan being before me with the companions of my early boyhood. Yet the character of his face had been at all times remarkable" (Poe 23). The narrator confesses to saying that, if it were not for the context in which he was given, he most likely would have not recognized his old friend given how much he has changed physically, but also in his likes and dislikes. To be specific, as stated previous on page 26 of the short story, "He suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odors of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds, and these from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror" (Poe 26). By saying all of this, the narrator is indirectly saying what Usher once enjoyed or loved immensely now brings him extreme displeasure. Overall, these two examples show that Roderick is unrecognizable in not only his physical appearance, but his mental and emotional state, leading to him being considered a "ghost" of who he once was. Julia Briggs this degeneration of Roderick Usher by referencing the uncanny in relation to this statement. She claims that, although Poe has never written a true "ghost story," his usage of "being buried alive, of the resuscitated or returning dead, of tormented bodies and minds, of irrepressible buried secrets" (Briggs 179), prove to be strong examples of the uncanny.

Additionally, it seems that Roderick had been behaving in certain ways that was unusual to the narrator. He describes his friend's presence as appalling, due to Roderick's incredible change in demeanor throughout the time that the narrator had stayed to accompany Roderick in the Usher household. Further into the short story on pages 44 and 45, both Roderick and the narrator are awakened by a sound that is not known to them, which inevitably intrigues both of them, but in particular, Roderick Usher. The way that Roderick approaches his friend in the

witching hours of the night confuses and appalls the narrator, which causes him to view Roderick in a more negative light. The narrator states, “His countenance was, as usual, cadaverously wan—but, moreover, there was a species of mad hilarity in his whole demeanor. His air appalled me—but anything was preferable to the solitude which I had so long endured, and I even welcomed his presence as a relief” (Poe 45). With all of this being stated, the narrator so much as preferred the obviously appalling nature of his friend to being truly alone, and this can lead to much more detrimental psychological issues in the future.

Considering this point, it can also be said that the narrator, who now considers his unwell friend’s presence as a *relief*, is starting to mentally feel the repercussions of being in such solitude from society while being in the presence of a house and a person who have both deteriorated so much. Therefore, the narrator is also starting to become a “ghost” of himself in the way that he is now behaving completely differently to how he used to. The decline and transition into this new, ghostly version of himself is most prominently seen when he helps Roderick bury his seemingly dead twin sister, Madeline. The narrator notices a faint smile on Madeline’s face, but he decides to wave it off, not thinking much of it. However, that shows that his rational thinking started to disappear along with his pre-house-of-Usher morale. Poe writes, “...the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death” (Poe 41). This shows that the narrator is aware of the signs of life that Madeline shows as she lays there, seemingly dead, which turns out to not be the case. The narrator disregards and abandons all of his rational thoughts while committing this act with Roderick that, in any other circumstance, he would have second guessed himself. With both of these characters’ mental illnesses in mind, it can be said that the progression of them caused Madeline’s resurgence to appear ghost-like, due to the fact that the narrator and Roderick were convinced that she was dead, therefore proving that they were acting like ghosts of themselves.

What Makes a Ghost Story?

Some may argue that, since there is no ghost within this story, that automatically disqualifies it from being coined a ghost story. No ghost equals no ghost story, right? Author M.R. James has been famous for the ghost stories that he has written, which include many qualifications for what a ghost story can and cannot be. Simon Hay writes a thorough explanation of James’s qualifications in one of Hay’s books, and these qualifications are stated below. These aspects of James’s ghost stories are descriptive in the context of his own works, but more prescriptive when considering that these stories, arguably, paved the way for many writers of ghost stories to come. Therefore, these requirements of James’s ghost stories would be considered rule of thumb when it came to classifying any sort of paranormal horror stories as ghost stories. To specify, Hay states that James would require the main characters to be people who could be very relatable to the reader (Hay 93-94). Additionally, James would require a specifically contemporary setting for the ghost story; a house or property from the time period that is old, dated, and described in such a way that everyone would know and be able to picture in their imaginations (Hay 94). Hay also writes that James would include aspects such as the dangerous consequences of “inviting that past to play a deadly role in the present” (Hay 95). Simply, this means that the resurgence of old events or aspects of the character in a

story would provide dangerous outcomes in the present. One of the aspects of ghost stories that James advocates for is providing narratively satisfying resolutions (Hay 98). In Hay's view of this aspect, the reader must feel a sense of relief and content after finishing the ghost story, knowing that the mystery within the ghost story has been satisfyingly resolved in such a way that leaves the reader with minimal to no questions. Finally, the most important aspect of ghost stories that James would consider when writing would be that a ghost must be present in one way or another (Hay 98-99).

Much has changed since James's criteria was established in the 1800s. The more contemporary qualifications of a ghost story include mystery and fear, omens and curses, supernatural and paranormal activity, and much more. In addition, as more elements of mystery, paranormal, and the macabre comprised nineteenth century literature, the definition of "ghost" also expanded to include specters, spirits, and visions (US Ghost Adventures 1). Even if Poe, or other writers, had taken James's characteristics into account when reading and critiquing Poe's stories at the time, that does not dismiss the fact that as time changes, interpretations and meanings change as well.

To be more specific, even though "The Fall of the House of Usher" does not have a ghost within the story, which violates one of James's key aspects of his ghost stories, it does seem to consider many other points that James had coined aspects of ghost stories. For example, the main characters, the narrator and Roderick Usher, are in fact relatable characters in the sense that they are both humans who go through mental turmoil, just like the rest of us. Sure, maybe not as extreme, but the narrator can definitely be much more relatable than Roderick Usher to the casual reader. The compassionate and empathetic qualities that the narrator possesses are relatable to almost everyone who reads the short story. Additionally, the setting of this story is quite contemporary and easily recognizable for its time: a large manor that has decayed overtime due to neglect and age, as well as Roderick's dangerous, almost haunting past of his cursed family illness, coming after him in his final moments on Earth. Similarly, Hay describes James's usage of a contemporary setting almost perfectly in the beginning paragraphs of James's story, "The Ash Tree," which describes what everyone should know about houses during the respective time period (Hay 94). However, "The Fall of the House of Usher" not contain a happy, satisfying ending at all, since both Madeline and Roderick are killed by the falling house, destroying any opportunity for a satisfying ending to such characters with incredible misfortune, but closure may be considered. Although the Usher siblings were tragically killed, the suffering that both siblings went through—Roderick's supposed mental illness and Madeline being buried alive—is now alleviated in the form of death. Additionally, this provides an out for the narrator, which no longer binds him to the shackles of the House of Usher.

Even though "The Fall of the House of Usher" violates only a few rules that M.R. James uses when considering if a story is a ghost story or not, such as there not being a classic ghost, the majority still stand. In addition, when compared to the more contemporary criteria of a ghost story, Poe's classic tale passes the test, especially with the expanded definition of a ghost. When considering the fact that the ghost in this story is metaphorically and philosophically represented as something more metaphysical—related to the nature of the mind and spirit within a person—than physical, it definitely makes this gothic horror story by Edgar Allan Poe a ghost story.

Even if this story is not technically considered a ghost story after this extensive overview of what actually makes a ghost story, the way that the atmosphere, setting, and the “haunting” of a space can be much more important than the “haunter” itself, which would be the ghost in this case.

The Haunting vs. The Haunter

Plenty of ghost stories focus more on the haunting of a space more than the ghost itself. Take the poem, “The Haunted House by” Thomas Hood, for example. Throughout the poem, Hood explains the effects of the hauntings of the house on the speaker that is exploring said house. Within each of the three parts in this poem, the hauntings of the house progressively get more unnerving, and that is before the ghost or entity unveils itself. To be specific, Hood writes in part one of this poem:

No dog was at the threshold, great or small
No pigeon on the roof—no household creature—
No cat demurely dozing on the wall—
Not one domestic feature.
No human figure stirr’d, to go or come,
No face look’d forth from shut or open casement
No chimney smoked—there was no sign of Home.
From parapet to basement (Hood 17-24).

By repeating “No” at the beginning of each line, Hood is showing and reassuring the reader that there is no living creature that has inhabited this house in quite a while. Later on, he continues to describe the unnerving, haunting aspects of the house, including details such as rabbits and crows calling this house home, which both symbolize death.

In part two of this poem, Hood focuses more on the inside of the house than the outside of it, which was previously described in the first part of this poem. Hood says that the hinges of the front door creaked loudly and in an eerie way as the main character entered the house after examining the outside of it in full detail (Hood 117-128). Additionally, he says that the character notices bugs such as centipedes and spiders all around the house, proving that the house has stayed vacant for a very long period of time:

The centipede along the threshold crept,
The cobweb hung across in mazy tangle,
And in its winding-sheet the maggot slept,
At every nook and angle (Hood 129-132).

Maggots are typically found in decaying matter, so the speaker is using the existence of maggots to show that the house has been by itself long enough to decay and attract maggots. Additionally, cobwebs being also indicate a decrepit, vacant house, since spiders tend to inhabit areas that are not particularly full of life.

As undisturbed as the prehensile cell
Of moth or maggot, or the spider’s tissue,
For never foot upon that threshold fell,
To enter or to issue (Hood 137-140).

Overall, by incorporating the appearance bugs, the speaker indirectly shows how lonely and creepy the house has become over the years while directly stating that no one has ever been

inside of this house at all, or at least recently. All of this shows that the eeriness of the house is very important in conveying the existence of a haunter, such as a ghost, or the idea that the setting can be just as scary, or haunting, as the haunter itself.

Eventually, at the end of part three of the poem, the ghost is revealed in a very anticlimactic way. The build-up for the reveal of the ghost was emphasized all throughout the poem with the descriptions of the haunted aspects of the house, creating an unnerving atmosphere that the reader could not ignore. Hood writes:

Across the sunbeam, with a golden gloom,
A ghostly Shadow flitted.
... O'er all there hung the shadow of a fear,
A sense of mystery the spirit daunted (Hood 343-350).

With this brief, short appearance of the ghost in this poem, it proves that the haunting of a space is definitely important—maybe even more important—than the haunter, or ghost, itself. Even though this poem only briefly mentions the ghost, the primary focus of this poem is on the house itself.

This is applicable to “The Fall of the House of Usher” in the sense that the decaying house of the Usher family is a main contributor to the psychosis that both characters go through, making the haunting atmosphere more important to the ghostly aspects of this story than a physical ghost itself. To be more specific, when the narrator comes up on the Usher household, he describes the state of the house in great detail, claiming that it has deteriorated so much since his youth, which is similar to that of Roderick Usher as well, who may just be a personified version of the house itself. Poe writes:

While the objects around me—while the carvings of the ceilings, the sombre tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of the floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies which rattled as I strode, were but matters to which, or to such as which, I had been accustomed from my infancy—while I hesitated not to acknowledge how familiar was all this—I still wondered to find how unfamiliar were the fancies which ordinary images were stirring up (21).

Similar to Hood’s poem, both narrators describe each house in great detail upon entry, describing them as if they have not been occupied or kept up in a long period of time. Detailed accounts and descriptions of haunted spaces like this are quite effective when it is taken into account of what a ghost could accomplish due to the mystery that comes with the haunting. The reader is unaware and fearful along with the narrator, unsure of whether or not to continue for fear of experiencing another haunting account at their time in the house, which is what makes a ghost story effectively scary and thrilling.

Conclusion

With regards to “The Fall of the House of Usher”, the absence of a ghost does not take anything away from this story. In fact, it adds to it in other ways. For example, the use of psychological “ghosts” in the form of mental illnesses that change a person physically and mentally adds so much to the thematic elements of the story. Having a ghost present in the story would make it a true “ghost” story on its most surface-level definition, but the ghost would feel quite out of place in the context of the story, especially since the Usher siblings do

not die until the final part, leaving the narrator to live the rest of his life traumatized and in pure horror of what he just witnessed in his time at the Usher household.

Overall, yes, this story “The Fall of the House of Usher” can be considered a ghost story, even if there is not a ghost physically present within the story. Through psychological aspects of ghost stories and how undiscovered mental illnesses can provoke the same, or even more disquieting, fear and mystery as a ghost, showing how hallucinations can trick the brain into seeing a paranormal apparition in and of itself. As well as showing how people, including both Roderick Usher and the unnamed narrator, can become ghosts of who they once were by succumbing to their unfortunate mental diseases that alter every perspective and preconceived notion that they have on life. This can physically and mentally change the person, making them unrecognizable to those who knew them prior to this change, making them a “ghost” of who they once were. And finally, describing how the haunting of a space is more effective than the haunter, or ghost, itself when determining if this story is a true ghost story, while also considering M.R. James’s aspects of a story that could consider it to be a genuine ghost story. All of these claims further prove that *The Fall of the House of Usher* by Edgar Allan Poe is not just gothic horror, but a ghost story as well through philosophical understandings of gothic horror and more modern interpretations of what a ghost can be considered.

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