

# **Gnostic Philosophy in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher"**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Critics have noticed in the House of Usher, a disintegrating Gothic-style house in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," a force of evil that brings decadence and dissipation to the house and those who live in it. Some critics carry out this analysis in terms of psychoanalysis. In this, the dark, mist-wreathed House of Usher is compared to "a kind of dream or psychological journey" (Peeples). Some do so with a positive view of the dim interior of the House of Usher: in this, death and destruction are related to the idea of God's will of destruction (Drain). In the essay I examine the dark psyche of the protagonist—his suicidal inclinations—structured as a reclusive world of self-destruction. For further discussion on destruction, I read the House of Usher in terms of *Eureka* and Gnostic philosophy.

**Keywords:** Gothic house, decadence, Gnostic philosophy

## 以諾斯底哲學閱讀愛倫坡的《厄舍府的沒落》

高淑婷

### 摘要

許多評論家已注意到愛倫坡的《厄舍府的沒落》呈現崩解的哥德式古宅，而且，邪惡的力量也為古宅和屋主帶來衰落和消散的命運。有些評論家以心理分析解讀此篇故事，迷霧籠罩的厄舍府猶如「一種夢境或心靈之旅」。有些評論家認為死亡和毀滅與上帝的旨意有關。在本文，我探究主角結構化的黑暗心靈，也就是自殺傾向發展成自我毀滅的隱閉世界。另外，我用愛倫坡的 *Eureka* 和諾斯底哲學討論所有物質最終走向毀滅的現象，包括人的毀滅和房子的崩解。

**關鍵字：**哥德式房子；衰落；諾斯底哲學

Daniel Hoffman, in “Madness in Poe’s Tales as a Means of Escape,” associates Poe’s desire for killing the father in stories like “The Tell-Tale Heart” with an attempt to escape “away from the body and toward the spirit, away from the ‘dull realities’ of this world, toward the transcendent consciousness on ‘a far happier star’ ” (77). To reinforce the theme of escaping from reality, Gothic architecture is used as a space to suggest there are two levels in Poe’s Gothic houses: confinement in an evil world and a desire for spiritual release. Gothic architecture itself stores the memories of guilt, crime, and murders, as well as a revelation of evil and desire for escape from the bondages of life. Scott Peeples, in “Poe’s ‘Constructiveness’ and ‘The House of Usher,’” argues that the collapse of the house of Usher is a “further assertion of the writer’s control,” and the purpose of this control is to bring the Usher family to death, to “seal in their private world” (183-184). The collapse of the house, for Poe, is an escape from the material to the spiritual. What’s more, Poe looks for definite destruction in this case, as destruction is associated with spiritual union with God, as indicated in his *Eureka*. However, Poe’s house is not simply a building committed to one’s desire for spiritual release. His house, to some degree, is concerned with the physical conditions of decay and petrification—an evil force in Nature—that threatens one’s reason and spirit. There is a will in Poe’s house, a will greater than man’s, to which his characters submit. Kim Drain, in “Poe’s Death-Watches and the Architecture of Doubt,” discusses the links between “a murderer house” and God’s will:

And so we see that when the houses in Poe’s stories murder, when the walls sob, when the curtains terrorize, it’s because they are literally alive. There is, in Poe’s view, ultimately no division whatever between the spiritual and the material. (175)

Just as death is only a translation from one expression of God’s will to another (our corpses, according to Poe’s logic, are just as charged with God’s spirit as our living bodies are, or the walls of our coffins, for that matter), so the collapse of the universe is only the beginning of the next universe. (175-176)

Poe designs his house as a murderer, which moves towards destruction to create a new beginning, though at the end of the story the spiritual realm is unattainable. To examine the house in “The Fall of the House of Usher” as a structure that is designed for self-destruction as well as a force of destruction in Nature, I will explore the dark psyche of Roderick Usher, and apply Poe’s theories of withdrawal from the material

world in *Eureka* as well as his Gnostic philosophy. In doing so, I will emphasize that Poe has designed this house that contains a force of evil that propels all towards death.

### I . Mental Space—Mystery of Decadence

In “Key to the House of Usher,” Darrel Abel views the House of Usher as a human head, and thus explores the mystery of decadence in the mental space reflected in the building. Abel is not satisfied with seeing the ancient house as existing in a static state, and focuses not so much on the otherworldly space remote from the real world, but on the power of “vitality” in decadence that pushes the building and its occupants towards self-destruction. The evil that exists in the House of Usher is not just a sign, but is a power of movement towards extinction. Roderick resembles his house and his twin sister, Madeline, accompanies him in his journey towards decomposition.<sup>1</sup> The house itself is thus a mirror of the individual engaged in pursuing his destiny of decadence and dissipation. There is, as Abel points out, an inevitable submission to Death, or the triumph of Death, in the House of Usher:

The “cadaverousness of complexion” of Roderick Usher had been repeatedly remarked. Thus is indicated how nearly triumphant Death is in the Ushers from the moment when Anthropos first enters the house, how scarcely perceptible is the difference between a live Usher and a dead one....He needed only to cross a shadowy line to yield himself up to Madness and Death. (Abel 183-184)

Like Abel, Richard Wilbur in “The House of Poe” sees the House of Usher as the head of its owner. As the exterior of the house is the physical body of Roderick Usher, the interior is Roderick Usher’s “visionary mind” (Wilbur 264). Wilbur thinks that Poe circumscribes “protective desolation” (265), and sees the fall of the House of Usher as a journey into pure spirituality:

Poe’s preoccupation with decay is not, as some critics have thought, an

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<sup>1</sup> Some critics identify Madeline as Roderick’s self-reflective image, and claim that it is his own morbid, narcissistic self-destruction that makes him project himself onto his sister. John. T. Irwin, in *The Mystery to a Solution: Poe, Borges, and the Analytic Detective Story*, discusses Roderick’s inclination towards self-destruction. “In two tales Poe published in the autumn of 1839 that represent crucial steps in the development of the analytic detective story (“The Fall of the House of Usher” and “William Wilson”), this tendency of scenarios of incest and suicidal doubling to reverse into one another is particularly clear. In the first, Roderick Usher, who shares his ancestral home with his twin sister Madeline, projects his own morbid self-absorption onto the figure of his dying sibling, in effect turning his twin into an external mirror image of his deteriorating mental state. But this reflection of Ushers’ narcissistic self-regard back upon itself only serves to accelerate the disintegration of his personality, for his twin sister’s wasting illness confronts him with an image of what the narcissistic self fears most—the inevitability of its own dissolution” (Irwin 213-214).

indication of necrophilia; decay in Poe is a symbol of visionary remoteness from the physical, a sign that the state of mind represented is one of almost pure spirituality. When the House of Usher disintegrates or dematerializes at the close of the story, it does so because Roderick Usher has become all soul. *The Fall of the House of Usher*, then, is not really a horror story; it is a triumphant report by the narrator that it *is* possible for the poetic soul to shake off this temporal, rational, physical world and escape, if only for a moment, to a realm of unfettered vision. (267)

Wilbur's words remind us of Poe's nihilism, which for the author was a perfect state. Roderick is supersensitive, since he is frequently in a hypnagogic state, a kind of dream that protects him from the outside, material world (the real world) while absorbing him within its dreamy remoteness. As Wilbur observes, the decoration of the interior space of the house represents the world of remoteness. Furniture with "the circle, oval or fluid arabesque" evokes "the otherworldly imagination" (269). The building structure, such as its dim windings, symbolizes "the state of reverie" (268). The spiral or vortex symbolizes "loss of consciousness, and the descent of the mind into sleep" (257).<sup>2</sup>

## II. Gothic Architecture and its Dark Interior Space

In the poem "The Haunted Palace," evil haunts the palace as it does the Gothic house of the Usher:

In the greenest of our valleys,  
By good angels tenanted,  
Once a fair and stately palace —  
Radiant palace — reared its head.  
In the monarch Thought's dominion —  
It stood there!  
Never seraph spread a pinion  
Over fabric half so fair. (Poe 373)

The radiant palace in the following stanzas is attacked by evil, and it then collapses. This symbolizes the decline of reason and dissolution of the body. The monarch's palace parallels the House of Usher in its ruin. Just as evil haunts the palace, irrational

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<sup>2</sup> The images of a spiral or vortex, as Wilbur notes, also appear in "Ms Found in a Bottle," "Descent into the Maelström," "Metzengerstein," and "King Pest."

disturbance haunts Roderick and Madeline.<sup>3</sup>

Gothic architecture includes a number of dark interior spaces—such as dungeons, nooks, vaults, labyrinthine stairs, and so on—and these are often decorated with statues of gargoyles, dragons, and devils.<sup>4</sup> These space and grotesque statues are in stark contrast to the lofty domes, high gilded rose windows, or statues of saints seen in cathedrals, and indicate terror, anxiety, and death. Nathaniel Hawthorne, in *The House of the Seven Gables*, perceives such dark interior spaces as a metaphor for man's abominable soul:

And, beneath the show of a marble palace, that pool of stagnant water, foul with many impurities, and, perhaps, tinged with blood,—that secret abomination, above which, possibly, he may say his prayers, without remembering it,—is this man's miserable soul! (Hawthorne 213)

Nevertheless, between the gloomy interior space and the lofty dome there is an intervening state, one that can surmount the soul. The dark interior space that exists underground is inseparable from what is above ground. Joseph Campbell, in *The Power of Myth*, states:

A temple is a landscape of the soul. When you walk into a cathedral, you move into a world of spiritual images....Now, in a cathedral, the imagery is in anthropomorphic form....The message of the caves is of a relationship of time to eternal powers that is somehow to be experienced in that place. (80)

The appearance of the House of Usher that the narrator describes in "The Fall of the House of Usher" expresses the sense of horror and gloom so prevalent in Gothic novels. The exterior of the house is said to be one of "insufferable gloom" (Poe 365). It has "the vacant eye-like windows" (365) and "the bleak walls" (365), upon which "a fissure" run from the top to bottom. It is an old house surrounded by "the decayed trees" and "the silent tarn" (367). The interior decoration of the old house echoes the "insufferable gloom" of its exterior: "the somber tapestries of the walls" (368), "the ebon blackness of the floors" (368), "the gloomy furniture" (377), "the dark and tattered draperies" (377), and "the intense darkness of the chamber" (377). Poe's ancient House of Usher is a Gothic building, since it has "the Gothic archway of the

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<sup>3</sup> Wilber compares the haunted palace to a mind haunted by phantoms. See Wilber's "The House of Poe."

<sup>4</sup> See "Gargoyles and Grotesques." <<http://www.crystalinks.com/gargoyles.html>>

hall,” the “pointed” windows, “the vaulted and fretted ceiling,” and “the large and lofty” room (368), but its atmosphere has “no affinity with the air of heaven” (367). The House of Usher evokes a sense of fear and muffled inarticulate emotions in dark interior spaces. Poe presents a house in ruin, in a corrupted world where decadence ravages and evil brings about the fall of humans. Poe engages in creating the grotesque atmosphere of the House of Usher through the narrator’s adventure. The House of Usher mirrors the ruined spaces of a Gothic house as a metaphor for dark unconscious. Within the dark ruined house, Roderick and his twin sister Madeline struggle and suffer. This indicates that Poe may aim to elevate Roderick Usher from the realm of the human to that of the divine.<sup>5</sup> The mirroring of the house and a human head in “The Fall of the House of Usher” indicates man’s aspiration to reach heaven. In myth, men are believed to descend from a perfect state—paradise—and they can return there as long as they are inspired to live correctly on Earth.<sup>6</sup> This is reflected in various forms of ancient stone buildings that are designed to awaken this understanding. In the Egyptian pyramids, the Temple of Solomon, and Gothic Cathedrals, the symbolic features of the lost knowledge of heaven are demonstrated in the forms of stone carvings, mural hieroglyphs and frescos, or geometric shapes (Mann 103-105). The stones that are perfect in the House of Usher reflect a strong faith that one will eventually return to a lost paradise.<sup>7</sup> The dragons and evil that appear in the dark in Gothic buildings, and which are seen as barriers to heaven, are used to test the souls of mortals (Campbell).

There is a link between Poe’s house and Egyptian architecture. Poe decorates the House of Usher in miscellaneous styles, including Egyptian. Indeed, some critics attribute the dark, impenetrable atmosphere in Poe’s house to the Egyptian mode. St. Armand in “The ‘Mysteries’ of Edgar Poe: The Quest for a Monomyth in Gothic Literature” perceives the influence of the Romantic Revivals and the Egyptian mode in Poe’s works.

The most avant-garde of the Romantic revivals when he was writing the tale in 1839 was the Egyptian mode, and it is my contention that, in

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<sup>5</sup> Roderick Usher is one of Poe’s demigod characters. As Jean S. Stromberg in “The relationship of Christian Concepts to Poe’s ‘Grotesque’ Tales” observes, Roderick possesses the supernatural will that is recognizable in Jesus Christ in the Christian world.

<sup>6</sup> In A. T. Mann in *Sacred Architecture*, Robert Fludd’s *The Diapason Closing Full in Man* shows a “vertical line” that indicates “the stages of the soul’s ascent from body to spirit” (180 Fig. 273).

<sup>7</sup> John Ruskin admires the power of Gothic buildings to evoke passions. In *The Stones of Venice*, he states, Gothic architecture “recognized, in small things as well as great, the individual value of every soul. But it not only recognizes its value; it confesses its imperfection, in only bestowing dignity upon the acknowledgement of unworthiness” (160). Characteristic of the imperfection of the Gothic architecture, Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” contends vehement passions and struggles towards Gnostic spiritual realm.

experimenting with a daring mixture of the Gothic and the Egyptian, Poe managed to create a work of art which fulfilled the search of the Romantics for a monomyth which functions at two distinct levels: the surface level of the picturesque, or the decorative, and the subterranean level of the subliminal and the archetypal. (St. Armand 30)

St. Armand's perception is suitable for the contemplation of the gloomy atmosphere in Poe's mysterious houses. The symbolic features of the lost knowledge of heaven and the desire to restore it, as demonstrated in a sacred building, appear in Poe's house. The desire to reach heaven is also reflected in the interior structure of the house—labyrinthine and winding stairs symbolic of the intervening state, one that can surmount the soul.

### **III. *Eureka*, Withdrawal of Matter**

The fall of the House of Usher is paralleled by “the disappearance of Matter” in *Eureka*. Poe in *Eureka* argues that when the Universe is in the process of collapse, the disappearance of physical materials demonstrates the loss of individual identity and the absorption of all things into oneness, i.e., God. Yet, “the disappearance of Matter” does not mean termination of the Universe. Death, for Poe, does not mean the end of existence, but instead is one of the processes in the Divine Design. The Universe is the “heartbeat of God,” and its infinite repetitions of expanding and collapsing contribute to infinite cycles of life and death. Poe thus believes that evil and death take part in the reintegration of all souls into the Spiritual God.

God—the material *and* spiritual God—*now* exists solely in the diffused Matter and Spirit of the Universe; and that the regathering of this diffused Matter and Spirit will be but the re-constitution of the *purely* Spiritual and Individual God. (Poe 313)

In this view, and in this view alone, we comprehend the riddles of Divine Injustice—of Inexorable Fate. In this view alone the existence of Evil becomes intelligible. (Poe 313)

Poe also points out that feelings of pain and torture reflect the struggle that living things make to achieve Happiness in the process of reintegration with Divinity.

...*all* these creatures have, in a greater or less degree, a capacity for pleasure and for pain:—*but the general sum of their sensations is*

*precisely that amount of Happiness which appertains by right to the Divine Being when concentrated within Himself.* (Poe 314)

Jeffrey J. Folks, in *Heartland of the Imagination*, reviews Poe's idealism as a philosophy that asserts the existence of pain and physical decay, and finds a possibility of surrendering to the "transience of organic life":

The great mystery that Poe comes up against in *Eureka* is, of course, nothing less than the self's tenuous existence amid a world of pain and death. In the end, Poe's devastating sense of the transience of organic life forced him to surrender the physical and to embrace a position of philosophical idealism, a recognition of the collapse of the physical world in the face of the mystery of its own being. (68)

Poe's House of Usher is concerned with the natural processes of decay, decline, and destruction that appear as part of the Divine Design in *Eureka*. The idea of "the disappearance of Matter" for the return to God corresponds to Gnostic philosophy. In "Usher Unveiled: Poe and the Metaphysic of Gnosticism," Barton Levi St. Armand argues that Poe's metaphysic is related to Gnosticism. "Poe's metaphysic derives precisely from those very unorthodox and even heretical doctrines which were current at the beginnings of Christianity itself and then suppressed or driven underground by the actions of such dogmatic Church councils as that of Nicea" (1). This metaphysic, "is basically one of a radical dualism that sees the soul trapped in the materiality of a prison-house world, with escape possible only through a supreme act of knowing, or *gnosis*" (1). To be freed from the prison-house world one has to conquer the tyrants, the Archons, who are the seven old planetary gods. Moreover, the experience of liberation is extremely painful. The philosophy of the Gnostics draws on various theories—Hermeticism, Alchemy, Pythagorean harmonic theory, and so on, which are related to "the transmutation of base metals into gold" (2). Further, St. Armand applies the theory of Gnosticism to a reading of "The Fall of the House of Usher," finding clear evidence that enables the tale to be read as a metaphor of Gnosticism.

The brother, in fact, does eat up the sister who returns and eats up the brother. The poisonous dragon thus becomes transmuted into the prime Gnostic symbol of ultimate unity, the beneficent Ouroboros, or serpent who swallows his own tail. Moreover, the tarn "swallows" the House of Usher, while the House itself, like the Hermetic vessel of the successful alchemist, crumbles because a material shell is no longer necessary for

the ‘incorruptible body’ which Usher, the Great Initiate, has become. (St. Armand 7)

The House of Usher is a metaphor that refers to “the metaphors of imprisonment, transiency, and falling which were so important to the Gnostic philosophers” (St. Armand 3). The Gothic house is the abode of Archon, Chronos or Saturn, where Roderick and Madeline “begin at the bottom of the alchemical ladder” and their souls “must remain buried until [they are] resurrected by purification” through torture (3). The vault, crypt, and tunnel in the form of “the subterranean cavern of Hermetic wisdom” are “the subterranean recesses of Usher” (4). Roderick undertakes a quest for the Gnostic, and his twin sister, Madeline, helps them both complete their Initiation, in which they have to kill the dragon (their humanity or ego) to liberate themselves from the prison-house.

The ultimate spiritual liberation that Gnosticism promises, however, is unattainable at the end of the story. Gnostic idealism is one of the things that propel the protagonist towards self-destruction, but Poe emphasizes pain and horror of death more than he does the spiritual blessing of reunion with God. “Poe’s gnostic idealism,” William M. Etter notes, “committed to an aversion to bodily decay, remained deeply concerned with physical conditions that threatened to corrupt the powers of the intellect and the imagination” (21). The Gnostic experience of pain and death becomes significant for Poe’s protagonist in an epistemological quest for “ultimate unity” with the Divine.

#### **IV. Horror and Pain in the House of Usher**

Maurice Lévy, in “Poe and the Gothic Tradition,” traces the images of Poe’s Gothic house back to the Gothic novelists, Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, and Matthew Gregory Lewis, and concludes that Poe applied the traditional images of the Gothic novel for the expression of “anguish in dream” (28). In a comparison of Poe’s Gothic images to the more traditional ones, Lévy follows the Freudian model of psychoanalysis to anatomize each image of the House of Usher as showing Roderick’s mental space. “The threshold” represents the boundary between the rational and irrational realms. He seems to take less notice of the interpretation of the narrator when he identifies “the long fissure” as a sign of Roderick’s sickness (Lévy 22). Poe’s hero and heroine in the Gothic narrative are entangled with pain and self-destruction. Destruction in a confined space, in terms of Gnostic philosophy, helps those who are thus imprisoned move towards the Gnostic god of Abyss. The narrator, who senses horrors in the premature interment of Madeline and the hypersensitivity of Roderick, fails to perceive Gnostic idealism in the Ushers.

The fact that one of Roderick's favorite books in the library is *Chiromancy* by Robert Flud implies that he has some knowledge of Gnosticism.<sup>8</sup> This link between "striving towards divinity" and Gnosticism is seen when Madeline struggles to get out of the vault.

I *now* tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I heard them—many, many days ago—yet I dared not—I *dared not speak!* And now—to-night—Ethelred—ha! ha!—the breaking of the hermit's door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangor of the shield—say, rather, the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault! Oh! whither shall I fly...here he sprang furiously to his feet, and shrieked out his syllables, as if in the effort he were giving up his soul. (Poe 381)

Here, the introduction of 'Mad Trist' parallels the event of Madeline's confinement. Just as Ethelred kills the dragon, Roderick entombs his sister alive in the family vault. Before the dragon lets out an "unnatural shriek" (Poe 380), Madeline forces Roderick to give up his soul (ego) before the last moment when he sees her as "the lofty and enshrouded figure" (381), and he cries out "Madman." When both of the siblings fall, the ancient house collapses as if, as the narrator states, it is swallowed by nature. The destruction of the House of Usher is thus the work of nature, or more specifically, the work of God in Poe's design of self-destruction.

The Gothic house is the human body that imprisons the immortal soul, as well as a space where a mortal strives to free himself. The first glimpse of the House of Usher impresses the narrator as a dark dungeon with decayed surroundings, and as a place that is muffled by a gloomy atmosphere:

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 off of the veil. (Poe 365)

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<sup>8</sup> Mabbott, Thomas Ollive. "The Books in the House of Usher." *Books at Iowa* 19 (November 1973): 3-7, 17. Web. 12 Sept. 2015. <<http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/bai/mabbottusher.htm>>. See also Barton Levi St. Armand, "Usher Unveiled: Poe and the Metaphysic of Gnosticism."

Through the narrator's descriptions of the exterior of the house and its surroundings, the Gothic house is thus like a prison that serves as a medium for the movement of all materials towards destruction. The prison is a hell immersed in "an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn—a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued" (Poe 367). The narrator fails to see that it is in this house where a mortal embarks on his destined union with Poe's god of the Abyss. The "vaulted ceiling" symbolizes the body of the Mother Virgin Mary bending over the Son. "The interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel" (Poe 372) symbolizes the womb of the Mother. The House of Usher is in a decayed condition, but "a flood of intense rays [that] rolled" (Poe 372) throughout the dark tunnel signifies Roderick's destined reunification with the dead. "The gray stones of the home of his fore-fathers" (Poe 374) associate the destiny of the last Usher with that of the whole family. The "fissure" in the wall indicates Roderick's *madness* at being bound to the prison house. The unknown power (whether the will of Roderick or that of God, as explained in *Eureka*) encourages Roderick to approach death through an Initiator's experience of suffering. As Wilhelm Worringer notes in *Form in Gothic*, Gothic architecture is a space where "a vitality which appears to be independent of us, which challenges us, forcing upon us an activity to which we submit only against our will...but appears to have an expression of its own, which is stronger than our life" (42). A cosmic vitality operating in the ancient house thus urges Roderick to exert more energy towards destruction.

The decay and decadence of the building serve as metaphors for the potential collapse of all materials before the return to God. Before the fall of the house, the narrator notes a conspicuous crack in the building that indicates its potential collapse (Poe 367). If the dark House of Usher represents evil in the house, then the fissure and other features that suggest it will fall anticipate the triumph of evil. The intrusion of evil thus accelerates the falling of the house as well as the destruction of the rational realms. Destruction of matter in this context is not equal to termination or extinction. It is, as Gnostic philosophy says, a process of transmutation. Evil, for Poe, cannot be separated from Divinity, since it brings all to nothingness, to God, as indicated in *Eureka*.

The light or rays that go through a vault are metaphorically rendered as a divine quality penetrating the fallen realm, and a picture in Roderick's library mirrors the destiny of the House of Usher.

A small picture presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel...and no torch or other artificial source of

light was discernible; yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendour. (Poe 372)

Here Poe suggests a divine light mysteriously shining into the Gothic house and bringing death to those who live within it.

Jean S. Stromberg, in “The Relationship of Christian Concepts to Poe’s ‘Grotesque’ Tales,” notes that Poe was not an orthodox Christian thinker. Instead, he uses the Christian world of reference to give “depth and significance” to his grotesque tales and to enlarge “the dimensions of his characters.” Nature in Poe’s tales, Stromberg claims, is presented in two aspects—divinity and evil, light and dark—that are not set against each other.

First nature reveals God....Poe touches upon this same idea in “The Island of the Fay” where he speaks of the “happiness experienced in the contemplation of natural scenery”....It would seem more characteristic to claim that Poe sees nature as but a “half-way stage in the re-absorption of the Many in the Original One”....Secondly, in Scripture nature is invested with man’s sin and partakes of man’s fallen state....In the eschatology of the Scriptures and that which Poe implies in his tales, the physical world as well as man must be destroyed and a new earth created....He also can speak with assurance of the separateness of nature, as in “Eureka.” (Stromberg 152)

Stromberg holds that Poe’s world has “an exertion of the individual’s human will” to reach divinity through perverseness (155). “What is central in Poe’s tales,” Stromberg states, is “his view of dehumanized man” (154).

Poe usurps the prerogatives of the Son and claims for man the power of creation through the spoken word....This extension of consequences is a perversion of the Christian idea that through one man sin came into the world and through one man’s work, redemption came. (156)

Roderick Usher is one of Poe’s demigod characters, who possesses the supernatural will that is recognizable in Jesus Christ in the Christian worldview. “Poe makes explicit the human / house metaphor...Roderick, as the center of the action, maintains the necessary balance until the climax...[Christ] is holding within Himself the balance of the physical and spiritual” (Stromberg 157).

Roderick’s appearance itself conforms to that of the confined house that reflects

the Divine Design in *Eureka*, indicating withdrawal from material connections. The narrator describes the look of the hero as a “temple”:

...these features, with an inordinate expansion above the regions of the temple, made up altogether a countenance not easily to be forgotten....I could not, even with effort, connect its Arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity. (Poe 369)

The narrator’s description of how Roderick looks thus indicates the affinity that exists between the House and the Usher. The House itself is a temple where Roderick withdraws from the outside, material world and prepares himself for transmutation. He is also a temple that will, in the Devine Design, collapse into nothingness.

Roderick’s yielding himself up to Death in terms of Gnostic transmutation from base metals to gold contains elements of the afterlife’s bliss. He does not die alone with the collapse of the house, but with Madeline, “a tenderly beloved sister, his sole companion for long years” (Poe 370). This reflects Roderick’s inevitable destruction with his family or, from St. Armand’s perspective, liberation from the confined, fallen world. Roderick Usher is a self-immolated mortal, whose oversensitive energy corresponds to Poe’s desire to emancipate himself from the realities of this world.<sup>9</sup> As Madeline is placed in the crypt, which symbolizes the space of the womb (or grave), an uncanny power that bursts out of the fissure from the unconscious space accelerates the collapse of the house. The journey into the interior Gothic space represents an exploration of the psyche. As the plot gradually reveals its Gnostic initiation ritual, the Gothic space becomes more ghoulish, and evil occupies the House of Usher. Confined within this circumscribed space, Roderick becomes telepathic with the uncanny as various repressed memories return. When Madeline is buried alive, Roderick comes into even closer mental contact with the uncanny, and eventually falls into the abyss with his twin sister.

...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 him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated. (Poe 382)

This scene of the destruction features both violence and agony, and Poe’s redemption depends on perversity and death. Roderick has anticipated his destiny; he has dwelled in the sentient house, and perceived the connections that exist between the House and

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<sup>9</sup> See also Daniel Hoffman’s “Madness in Poe’s Tales as a Means of Escape.”

the Usher.

While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened...there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters—and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the ‘*House of Usher.*’ (Poe 382)

The collapse of the House reveals Poe’s mystic feelings with regard to the destiny of the Universe. Poe gives up words like “terror” or “victim,” and instead uses “sullenly and silently” to emphasize a vital, divine movement in nature, revealing his wish to escape “away from the body and toward the spirit.”

Poe’s house is concerned with physical conditions of decay and petrification, and his protagonist confronts the threats of physical decline with a strong will for seclusion or self-destruction. As Jerome McGann in *The Poet Edgar Allan Poe: Alien Angel* notes:

To his acute study I would only add that Poe’s gnostic forms necessarily operate in a discourse of Fear, and that the ultimate liberation they promise is for Poe unattainable. The environment of Fear in which Poe’s works operate is at once the reflex of a soul bound to a wheel of fire and an emblem of the soul’s grandeur for having made the conscious choice. (213)

The protagonist’s conscious choice is spiritual rest in the apocalyptic moment of ultimate destruction. The narrator fails to perceive the significance in the process of physical decline and the pain it brings the human soul. He senses only horror in the ancient house. For him, Roderick, influenced by the sentient house, is kept on the verge of madness.

His action was alternately vivacious and sullen. His voice varied rapidly from a tremulous indecision (when the animal spirits seemed utterly in abeyance) to that species of energetic concision—that abrupt, weighty, unhurried, and hollow-sounding enunciation—that leaden, self-balanced, and perfectly modulated guttural utterance, which may be observed in the lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium, during the periods of his most intense excitement. (Poe 369)

Fear leads the narrator to believe that Roderick falls into madness. The narrator senses

horror in the decline of Roderick and the house itself.

He [Roderick] roamed from chamber to chamber with hurried, unequal, and objectless step. The pallor of his countenance had assumed, if possible, a more ghastly hue—but the luminousness of his eye had utterly gone out. (Poe 376-377)

The narrator's account sounds exaggerated, and his capability of escaping from the "ghastly" house increases the enigma surrounding his identity. If something can be inferred from the survival of the narrator, then it should be that a dream, a hallucination, or a supernatural force can explain his escape. In the real, natural world, Roderick has completed the Gnostic initiation ritual and submitted to the will of God.

## **V. Conclusion**

The Gothic building in Poe's house reveals torture, imprisonment, and physical dissolution, without any hint of religious redemption, but of withdrawal of matter in *Eureka*. This suggests that Poe's House reflects the inevitable destiny that all things will eventually return to a gnostic god, or more specifically, the God of Death. As Drain writes, Poe's house is a murderer-house, and the director of the scene is Poe himself. The dragons and evil that appear in the dark Gothic buildings test the souls of mortals. Roderick's decline and Madeline's physical illness are tortures similar to those that befall the initiates in dark, interior spaces. Death is the end of all suffering on earth and, for Poe, a way to return to the Cosmic Universe.

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