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Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) is a story about both a “house” and a “family.” It starts with the narrator visiting his old friend Roderick Usher’s house, and ends with the house collapsing with its residents still inside. It is clear that “the House” of its title represents both the building and the family, and “The Fall” means both the collapse of the house and the extinction of the Usher family. When we are reading this story, we visit this old mansion with the narrator, and then we have to escape with our bare lives. We could neither read nor narrate this story without the house.

Many critics focus on the house in this story. Richard Wilbur wrote in his paper “The House of Poe,”

Since Roderick is the embodiment of a state of mind in which *falling*—falling asleep—is imminent, it is appropriate that the building which symbolizes his mind should promise at every moment to fall...the house threatens continually to collapse because it is extremely easy for the mind to slip from the hypnagogic state into the depths of sleep; and when the House of Usher does fall, the story ends, as it must, because the mind, at the end of its inward journey, has plunged into the darkness of sleep. (109, underlines mine)

Scott Peeples also points out, “Poe uses the house to reflect upon literary structures” and analyzes the structure of this text precisely (187). Many critics have pointed out that in this story, there is an interrelationship between the house and its residents. We can see the influence of this

interrelationship on the people who live in the house. However, I would like to focus on a relationship between a house and its owner, not a house and its residents. I will also investigate the Ushers' inheritance and ownership of the site where the House of Usher stands. In the story, when Roderick's name first appears, he is identified as "its [Usher's] proprietor," and his right of ownership is emphasized. Moreover, in the poem within a story "The Haunted Palace," which is reputed to match the story itself perfectly, describes how once the beautiful country prospered with the palace in a valley, but was deprived of the estate of the monarch and declined: "But evil things, in robes of sorrow, Assailed the monarch's high estate" (407). It is not irrelevant, therefore, to argue for Roderick Usher's proprietary right in "The Fall of the House of Usher."

In this paper, I will focus on an inheritance system that connects past and present, based on the concept of ownership that is founded on the relationship between the house and the people. I will analyze the House of Usher, which the Ushers inherit successively, and consider its collapse, its disappearance, and the land ownership of the Ushers.

1. The Inherited House

When we examine the curious relationship between the house and its residents, Roderick and Madeline, it becomes clear that the house has an influence on them. Roderick explains the influence to the narrator.

He was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and whence, for many years, he had never ventured forth—in regard to an influence whose supposititious force was conveyed in terms too shadowy here to be re-stated—an influence which some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of his family mansion, had, by dint of long sufferance, he said, obtained over his spirit—an effect which the physique of the grey walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought about upon the morale of his existence. (403)

Roderick told the narrator that not only has the house affected his mind, but his family mansion, including the dim tarn, has influenced “the morale of his existence.” From Poe’s descriptions of them, such as “your [Roderick’s] frame” (413) and “her [Madeline’s] emaciated frame” (416), we can infer that Poe uses “frame” for Roderick and Madeline’s bodies to indicate that their framework is similar to that of the house. Not only are Madeline and Roderick closely connected with the house, but it is dependent upon them as well. That is why the mansion falls down after the deaths of Roderick and Madeline: it cannot stand without the support of their two beautiful frames.

To return to the main subject, the ownership of the house, the Ushers initially prosper. The narrator remembers his old friend, Roderick, and his family:

I had learned, too, the very remarkable fact, that the stem of the Usher race, all time-honored as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain. (399)

In the point of inheritance, “no enduring branch” is a serious problem. The Ushers have inherited their house through successive generations, and Roderick is its proprietor. However, Roderick and Madeline are the last two survivors of the Usher family, so if one of them does not have children, the Usher lineage will become extinct.

French political thinker Alexis de Tocqueville published *Democracy in America* in 1835, four years before “The Fall of the House of Usher” was published. Regarding the laws of inheritance, he points out:

[...] These laws do belong, true enough, to the civil code but they ought to take their place at the head of every political institution since they have an unbelievable effect upon the social

conditions of people, while political laws only mirror what the state actually is. They have, moreover, a reliable and consistent method of operating on society since they take a hold to some degree on all future generations yet unborn. (60)

It is worthy of note that there are many similarities between the reasons for the Usher's deficiency and de Tocqueville's explanation of inheritance. The narrator presumes the reason below.

It was this deficiency, I considered, while running over in thought the perfect keeping of the character of the premises with the accredited character of the people, and while speculating upon the possible influence which the one, in the long lapse of centuries, might have exercised upon the other... (399)

The narrator thought the reason of the Usher's deficiency was the house itself. De Tocqueville points out that a family which practices primogeniture becomes identified with its land.

Among nations where the law of inheritance is based upon the rights of the eldest child, landed estates mostly pass from generation to generation without division. The result is that family feeling takes its strength from the land. The family represents that land, the land the family, perpetuating its name, history, glory, power, and virtues. It stands as an imperishable witness to the past, a priceless guarantee of its future. (62)

As de Tocqueville said, the Usher's inheritance is based on the rights of the eldest child. The house of Usher and its land have been inherited from fathers to sons without division. As the narrator notices, "House of Usher" includes both the family and the family mansion; the house represents the family, the family the house. On the other hand, de Tocqueville states,

When the law of inheritance institutes equal division, it destroys the close relationship between family feeling and the preservation of the land which ceases to represent the family. For the land must gradually diminish and ends up by disappearing entirely since it cannot avoid being parceled up after one or two generations. (62)

However, because the Ushers have no collateral branches in their family, the relationship between fathers and sons becomes deeper and deeper. In the law of inheritance, no collateral family means inheritance without division, so the ties between house and family become gradually stronger.

It is notable that the narrator refers to the “repeated deeds of munificent yet unobtrusive charity” (398) of the Ushers, a result of their “peculiar sensibility of temperament” (398). This means the Ushers have used their movable property for charity; in other words, they divided their property as charity. If they had no collateral family or descendants, they could scatter their money to others as charity. However, they can’t help but inherit real estate, such as a house or land, directly from father to son from generation to generation.

Poe was the one of those affected by an inheritance. As Arthur Hobson Quinn said,

When the death of [John] Allan’s uncle [John Allan is Poe’s foster-father and also his uncle], William Galt, in March, 1825, made his nephew [John Allan] a rich man, he purchased this house for \$14,950.[...] When John Allan purchased the house, June 28, 1825, there were not many buildings in the neighborhood, and the lot was an ample one. Poe’s room, on the second floor, northeast corner, therefore gave him a charming view of the river and the surrounding country. On the wide porch stood a telescope, brought from England by John Allan, from which Poe learned his first lessons in star-gazing.” (92-93)

However, Poe had to move away from this house to enter the University of Virginia only two months later. After that, Allan took him back from the University because of his gambling debts, Poe left the

house soon and never returned. As we know, he was one of the first well-known Americans to try to live by writing, resulting in a financially difficult life and career. He wrote letters to his uncle time after time to ask for his financial support, and sometimes received it. Nevertheless, when Poe's foster-father, Allan passed away, nothing was left to Poe. In contrast to Roderick Usher, who inherited the house and its site, Poe never got a piece of property.

It seems that Poe felt instinctively the influence of houses and lands mostly passing from sire to son without division, just as de Tocqueville penetrated the bedrock of the law of the inheritance.¹⁾ The House of Usher that is inherited through the generations represents the negative aspect of the law of inheritance, so Roderick, the owner of the house, can be called the victim of the negative estate.

The narrator assumes that the reason for the decline of the Ushers is "this deficiency" of descendants. "Branch" has two meanings, "a division of a family" and "a tree's limb." It is natural that a tree with no branches is gradually dying, and a family with no branches is also declining. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," the inherited house represents a family that has no branches, can't divide its property, and is becoming weaker.

2. The Vanishing House and Native Americans

"The Fall of the House of Usher" is often compared with Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, published in 1851. In 1956, Maurice Beebe wrote a paper entitled "The Fall of the House of Pyncheon." He points out that there are many similarities between the two works. Toshio Yagi also mentions in his paper "The Fall of Usher/The Fall of Pyncheon" that the two works are similar at some points (44).

Certainly, we can see common points between the two families in these works. They live in old mansions that are declining. The survivors of each clan are an elder brother and a younger sister, and there are strong interrelations between the houses and their residents. There's also the possibility that Hawthorne read Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," which was published 12 years before

Hawthorne's novel. It is no wonder that Poe's work may have inspired Hawthorne to write a story about the fall of a noble family.

However, there is a decisive difference between the two stories: the endings. On the one hand, Hawthorne's Pyncheon family moved to their country house from the cursed mansion and began to recover their prosperity again; on the other hand, Poe's Usher mansion collapsed with its residents' bodies and vanished into the tarn.

Yagi points out that for the readers, the image of a *collapsing* building is more impressive than a building itself (41, Italics mine). Nobody who reads this story will object to his points. Preoccupied with the intense image of the *collapsing* building, we tend to forget that the mansion vanishes into the tarn; it slips our minds. I'd like to focus on the mansion and its site that disappear in the ending. What is the tarn that the Usher house is swallowed by? According to OED, "tarn" means "a small mountain lake, having no significant tributaries." "No significant tributaries" shows that, like the Ushers, the water doesn't circulate, so the tarn may accumulate various things and its water may be stagnant. David C. Miller, who wrote *Dark Eden: The Swamp in Nineteenth-Century American Culture*, explains the swamp as an image whose complexity and elusiveness could lure awareness through an endless array of dissolving surfaces and shifting dimensions (2). He points out that the tarn in "The Fall of the House of Usher" has an effect that "pervades his [the narrator's] soul" and has "the mirror like reflection" (24).²⁾

Miller said, "The 'dark tarn' of Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' is a symbol of the swamp's insidious influence, of the dangers of the irrational" (11). As he suggests, the tarn at the Ushers' site is not just the swamp. The narrator describes how it reflects the house itself.

I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled luster by the dwelling, and gazed down — but with a shudder even more thrilling than before — upon the remodelled and inverted images of the grey sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows. (398)

The narrator is frightened by the tarn, feels an urge to peek into it and shudders at the sight of “the remodelled and inverted images.” Not only does the tarn increase the power and influence of the house, it stimulates the narrator’s fear for the house and the landscape of Usher. In the last scene, the house of Usher is swallowed by the tarn.

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—brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder—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.”* (335-36, Italics mine)

At once the zigzag fissure widened and the wall collapsed asunder, the dark tarn swallowed the fragments of the house up, then both the story and the house were closed with the words, “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

A small mountain lake is metamorphosed into a strange and weird monster, and the family’s inherited ancestral property vanishes, together with the last two Ushers, Roderick and Madeline. It is interesting to note that the house vanishes in fragments. The Ushers also scatter their money as charity. Because there are no branches in the family, the house of Usher is never sold nor exchanged for cash; however, it is divided at the end.

What is the difference between a collapsing house and a vanishing house? In terms of fortune or inheritance, a collapsing house is literally collapsing property; in other words, it means losing property. If a house collapses, land remains. However, in the case of the house of Usher, the house is swallowed by the monstrous tarn, so the land where the house stands also disappears. It is possible that the tarn itself is part of the Usher land, so that swallowing the house does not necessarily mean reducing the area of the Ushers’ land. If land where we could build a house turned into a barren

swamp, it could be called a loss of property. The weird tarn has expanded onto the Ushers' real estate as if there was never anything there. Although the scene of this story is not named specifically, assuming that the setting is in America, the ownership of the land swallowed by the tarn is likely to be complicated. When we think about landownership in America, we cannot ignore the matter of Native Americans.

In August 1839, one month before this story was published, Poe published "The Man that Was Used Up" in *Burton's Gentlemen's Magazine*. The subtitle of "The Man that Was Used Up" is "A Tale of the Late Bugaboo and Kickapoo Campaign." Kickapoo was the name of a real tribe of Native Americans. In this story, Brevet Brigadier General John A.B.C. Smith is a fictional character who plays an active role in the battle with Native Americans. He is a war hero who lost his own limbs in the battle and then had to wear artificial legs, arms, and so on.

As Leon Jackson says, Smith is "a composite of technological innovation, territorial greed, and racial suppression" like the country he serves (113). Shoko Ito also points out that "The Man that Was Used Up" is a political satire that reflects Poe's complicated consciousness of Native Americans and his critical attitude toward the invasive expansionism of America (30). Although Poe did not have a favorable attitude toward Native Americans, he was interested in their customs and was attracted by repeated territorial disputes like Seminole Wars.

When "The Man that Was Used Up" was published in 1839, the year was in the midst of the second Seminole War. Thomas Ollive Mabbott observes, "The story was timely, for the newspapers were full of references to the troubles with Indians in Florida in 1839, in which the Kickapoo tribe was involved" (377). In 1830, the Indian Removal Act was passed by Congress, and following it, Native Americans were forced to move from their residential districts. The Act instituted a number of forced relocations of Native American nations in the United States, including the infamous "Trail of Tears." Mabbott explains:

It is not surprising that some readers have thought to find a political satire in "The Man that

Was Used Up.” The basis for this seems to be that the 1840 campaign song beginning “Van, Van’s a Used Up Man,” in ridicule of Martin Van Buren, is now well remembered by people unaware of how commonly the colloquial phrase “used up,” now applied chiefly to supplies, was applied to books, plays, authors, and actors receiving notices as well as to politicians in our author’s time. (377)

William Whipple says that Poe’s satire in this story is pointed at Richard Mentor Johnson, Vice President under Martin Van Buren, who was widely known for the murderer of Tecumseh, the Native American leader of the Shawnee and a large tribal confederacy (91). Keiko Noguchi affirmed that John A.B.C. Smith represents the Seventh President of United States, Andrew Jackson ³⁾, because Smith is a war-hero who won the battle against Indians. It is clear that “The Man that was Used Up” is a satirical short story in which Poe criticizes Andrew Jackson and Martin Van Buren, the presidents who supported and enforced the Indian Removal. If “The Man that Was Used Up” satirizes American invasive expansionism, it is no wonder that we can see elements of satire against American society and politics in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” which Poe wrote in the same period.

When Madeline revives at the end of the story and appears in front of Roderick and the narrator, her white robe turns red with blood, and the moon that shines at the back of the house is a blood-red moon ⁴⁾. The bloody *red* robe and a blood-*red* moon are the metaphorical expressions of Native Americans. Indianized Madeline in red is no longer Roderick’s sister. She, who has no title, is confronted with Roderick, as the proprietor of the land. Her role is to make Roderick, his house, and his land sink into the dark tarn with herself. A blood-red moon is also seen in the collapse of the house.

Suddenly there shot along the path a wild light, and I turned to see whence a gleam so unusual could have issued; for the vast house and its shadows were along behind me. The radiance was that of the full, setting, and *blood-red moon*, which now shone vividly through that once

barely-discernible fissure, of which I have before spoken as extending from the roof of the building, in a zigzag direction, to the base. 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...*(417, Italics mine)

As the blood-red moon is a metaphor for Native Americans, it becomes visible only when the owner, who has a title to the house and land, collapses.

In this story, Poe makes land vanish land from America, the country that forced Native Americans to move and deprived them of land. He arranges a red moon behind the Ushers' house. Native Americans are the symbol of other people that American society tried to remove. Madeline's white robe turns red with blood, and the moon that shines at the back of the house is a blood-red moon. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," those who were removed from American society, Native Americans, come to the forefront when the house vanishes.

3. The Collapsing House and Witnesses

As the narrator points out, when you use the name "The House of Usher," it means both the family and the family mansion: "an appellation [The House of Usher] which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion (399)." Who is the subject that uses the House of Usher? It's the peasantry. According to OED, peasant is "a person who lives in the country and works on the land, esp. as a smallholder or a labourer; a member of an agricultural class dependent on subsistence farming." The only characters in this story are Roderick, Madeline and the narrator, except for a doctor and a servant. However, because the peasantry who live around the "House of Usher" and use the words appear in it, the circumstances surrounding the Usher mansion becomes multilayered.

The land where the house of Usher stands vanishes into the tarn, and the barren swamp extends around it. The existence of the peasantry reminds us that the area where the house was stood is not

the secluded world, but a part of a community in which the peasantry work. The peasantry who work on the land play a role in obscuring the unreality of the “House of Usher.” They have also witnessed the fall of the Ushers.

As the eyes of the surviving narrator see how the mansion is collapsing and vanishing, we can know the state of it. I would like to think about the impact of collapse on the community in which the Ushers and the peasantry belong to. Is the narrator the only witness of the collapse of the mansion? It can't be denied that there is a possibility that someone of the peasantry witnesses the scene of collapse. We usually consider a story about someone who was “buried alive” or a house which was “swallowed by a swamp” as a fiction. In fact, many critics point out that this story is about the spiritual world, the narrator's inner life or his hallucination. We naturally read this story as a fiction. However, because we, as readers in the 21st century, experienced 9-11, we can't help but feel reality in collapsing buildings. We reflect on the impact of solid buildings that collapse instantly and quickly vanish away from our sight.

Conclusion

After Roderick and Madeline die, there is nobody to inherit the Ushers' property. Both people and property, including house and real estate, are swallowed by the tarn. In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Poe narrates the last moments of two descendants and the fall of the mansion of Usher literally. At the same time, he narrates the collapse of the inheritance system. Motoyuki Shibata mentions that “In Poe's world, every border is doomed to fall down” (36). For Poe, the borders between life and death, sanity and insanity, fantasy and reality, are extremely fuzzy. The potency of fantasy is often compared to the efficacy of opium. When the narrator first sees the mansion, he likens “an utter depression of soul” to “the after dream of the reveler upon opium” (397). He also describes Roderick's voice as “the lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium, during the periods of his most intense excitement” (402).

When we reread “The Fall of the House of Usher,” which unfolds in a fuzzy world, in the light

of the law of inheritance in the real world, the negative aspect of inheritance is revealed. We also see the unreal conclusion like a collapsing house as the way to vanish both a mansion and real estate. It evokes Poe's unconscious desire for American land. "The Fall of the House of Usher" is a device that illuminates the fray of the reality of American society in 1839 under the light of a bloody red moon—the law of inheritance, the Native Americans dispute, and American invasive expansionism.

As of 2016, when the readers in 21st century finish reading this story, many people might conjure an image of the crash of World Trade Center. With modern telecommunications, people all over the world witnessed the sight of crumbling buildings and twisted metal, the sound of screaming people. The hundreds of millions of eyewitnesses shared the shock of it and built a gigantic community. Two big pools have now been built on the ground where the Twin Towers once stood. They are surrounded all around by water, like waterfalls that flow into the bottom of these pools. The names of the victims are engraved around both pools. The Twin Towers were transformed from crumbling buildings into waterfront, as if the tarn swallowed and vanished the fragments of the "House of Usher."

Next to the pools, huge skyscrapers are being built. The highest of them is "One World Trade Center," which boasts a height of 1776 feet—1776, of course, being the year the Declaration of Independence was signed. It is not clear that the height of it is designated to honor the philosophy of independence, or recall the sublime ideals of liberty and equal. If the act of collapsing buildings was a "Declaration of Independence," we would have to confront the question of whether the light shines on the others shaded by the high-rise buildings in American society.

Notes

¹⁾ De Tocqueville wrote, "...not only does the law of inheritance cause difficulties for families to keep their estates intact but it also removes the incentive to bother and, to some degree, it compels them to cooperate with the law in their own ruin. The law of equal division proceeds along two paths: by acting upon persons, it affects things. In these two ways, it manages to strike at the root of landed property, achieving the rapid dispersal of both families and fortunes" (63).

2) Miller wrote, “The description recalls the opening passage of Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher”: the narrator’s mysterious journey on horseback to the abode of his boyhood friend, Roderick Usher, on a “dull, dark, and soundless day...through a singularly dreary tract to country”; the “sense of insufferable gloom” that pervades his soul; and the mirrorlike reflection of the “black and lurid tarn” that affronts his at the foot of Usher’s forbidding edifice” (24).

3) Andrew Jackson, who was known as a war hero of the Seminole Wars, massacred hundreds of Native Americans. He was also known as the President who enacted the Indian Removal Act. At that time, the Vice President is Martin Van Buren.

4) In the last scene in which Madeline appears, she is described as follows: “There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame” (416).

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