



UNIVERSIDAD DE SALAMANCA

FACULTAD DE FILOLOGÍA

GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

The Setting and the Self in Edgar Allan  
Poe: “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Fall  
of the House of Usher”

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Salamanca, 2023



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This thesis is submitted for the degree of English Studies

Date: June 2023

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## **Abstract**

This essay focuses on the relationship between the setting and the characters in “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” by Edgar Allan Poe. In the former, it is analysed how sensorial stimuli of light, sound, and motion create an obsession for the madman that leads to his destruction through confession. In the latter, it is examined how the House of Usher becomes the central motor of the Usher family, to the extent that it controls their lives and creates a supernatural bond structure-human that reaches beyond death. Finally, this paper discusses how Poe’s creation of claustrophobic and overwhelming settings affect the reader in order to analyse the human psychology through the central emotion displayed in his stories.

**Keywords:** Setting, Characters, Psyche, House, Narrator, Reader

## **Resumen**

Este ensayo explica la relación entre el escenario y los personajes en “The Tell-Tale Heart” y “The Fall of the House of Usher” de Edgar Allan Poe. En la primera, se analiza cómo los estímulos sensoriales de luz, sonido y movimiento desarrollan una obsesión en el demente, lo cual lleva a su autodestrucción mediante la confesión. En la segunda, se examina cómo la Casa Usher se convierte en el motor principal para la familia Usher, hasta el punto de que controla sus vidas y crea una unión supernatural estructura-humano que llega más allá de la muerte. Finalmente, este estudio expone cómo la creación por parte de Poe de escenarios claustrofóbicos y abrumadores afectan al lector para así poder analizar la psicología humana a través de la emoción principal que sus historias presentan.

**Palabras clave:** Escenario, Personajes, Psicología, Casa, Narrador, Lector

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## 1. Introduction

In his well-acclaimed poem “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” Samuel Taylor Coleridge chronicles how an extinguished crew in a vessel endures the harshness of the ocean after killing an albatross. The narrator of the poem states “’Twas sad as sad could be; / And we did speak only to break / The silence of the sea!” (108-110). Just as the ocean is silent and calm, therefore suggesting sadness, so is the crew. The sorrow provoked by an act of self-assertion—that is, killing the bird—later emerges among the crew. The mariner has detrimentally interfered with the natural world, the consequences of which are paid morally by the whole crew. The environment fuses with their spirits and one resembles the other, and therefore the vastness of the ocean becomes that of their own souls.

Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” is not the only work addressing the dichotomy between the self and the environment and the potential effect that one might cause on the other. This relation has been widely explored, especially during Romanticism. This literary movement celebrated the individual, the natural, the supernatural, and the emotional, while it also sought to explore the mysteries of human psychology and experience. A clear example of such is Edgar Allan Poe and his Gothic stories. Poe’s master use of the setting relates directly to the aforementioned human psychology, for Poe’s settings create a sense of confinement or isolation which strengthen claustrophobic and dreading feelings. In this sense, Poe’s settings reflect the mental state of the characters, the final purpose of which is to explore the deepest and darkest psychology of the individual—usually through madness, death or the supernatural. This is reflected in stories such as “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843) or “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1843), where the Gothic element of the setting becomes the route to access the characters and the

readers' psyche. Thus, this paper examines Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" with the aim of illustrating the fatal relationship between decaying and claustrophobic settings and mentally insane characters driven by this atmosphere, which intentionally translates into terror for the reader.

## **2.1. "The Tell-Tale Heart"**

"The Tell-Tale Heart" tells the story of a madman, his obsession with the pale blue eye of an old man whom he lives with, and the posterior murder of the elder. The narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" claims to be mentally healthy and to "have full control of [his] mind" (Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart" 64), yet several facts prove otherwise. He is not always completely conscious of his acts, but rather driven by external and internal forces, which can be separated into the forces of the senses and the forces of motion and obsession.

### **2.1.1. The Senses: Sight and Hearing**

Both noise and light play a pivotal role in the story. The lack of both provides tranquillity to the narrator—the presumed madman—who feels secure and calm as long as the setting is silent and gloomy. His serenity aligns with "the darkness in [the old man's] room [being] thick and black" (Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart" 65), where neither glimpse of light or noise can be spotted nor breathing can be heard. However, as soon as a sensual disturbance appears, the murderer stresses out. For example, his annoyance pops up immediately when he lifts the cloth covering the old man's eye as "small light escaped from under it to fall upon—to fall upon that vulture eye! (65). Unsettling as the narrator finds it, the old man's eye and the light there reflected captivate the narrator to the extent that he develops an obsession with any stimuli. Light brings anger and

rejection to the narrator, as does noise too. As the volume of the beating of the old man's heart increases, the narrator's levels of stress also rise. This shows his mental instability; he is unable to cope even with almost unnoticeable stimulants.

The old man murdered, his heart is buried underneath the house, yet the beating can still be noticed by the narrator, whose insanity has led him to believe that the beating is still going on. As Brett Zimmerman points out, "the narrator's claim to hear things in heaven, hell and the earth makes it more logical to conclude that the sound he heard was not the beating of his own heart, but rather was an auditory hallucination" (41). Since he is psychologically ill, loud noises and bright light cause him the highest-level of grief. The narrator states, "my head hurt and there was a strange sound in my ears" (Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart" 67). Those are the primal motives that determine his behaviour, Marco Caracciolo points out, as "it is because of this unsettling sound that the narrator resolves to attack and kill the old man: the heartbeat . . . as the prime mover of the plot" (62). The narrator's ill-based perception of the heart's sound growing "louder, louder, louder!" (67) unsettles him. Had it not existed any disturbing element for the narrator's psyche, none of the events would have occurred. In this sense, it is not the madman who guides the events, but the setting and its effect on his senses.

The beating of the heart and the small rays of light control the story. That same heart of the elder that when still alive causes the madman's "anger became fear—for the heart was beating so loudly that [he] was sure some one must hear" (Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart" 66) also determines the narrator's behaviour after the old man's death. As Jarkko Toikkanen brilliantly spots, "once it is gone, and the 'heart takes over,' the outcome is that the narrator 'no longer is master of his own speech'"(45). The narrator's speech becomes that of a man afraid of being consumed by his own guilt. Terror exists within the murderer, insofar as it is caused by the fear of the heart being listened



to by the neighbours or the police officers. He is now driven by forces out of his control: “I stood up and walked quickly around the room. I pushed my chair across the floor to make more noise, to cover that terrible sound. I talked even louder” (Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” 67). These illogical events are the result of the fear to be discovered by the police officers. Yet, the narrator’s madness does not reach its climax until more intrusions invade his space. Only through the officers’ cheerfulness when they arrive at the house does the setting reach the narrator’s peak of insanity. Towards the end of the story the murderer has reached a point of desperation and no return, the result of which is a futile attempt to disguise his mental illness. He is hearing unreal sounds that seem to be true, and, therefore, tries to camouflage them. At this point, the murderer does not have agency over his senses anymore; he is controlled by anxiety and agony. Consequently, that disconcerting setting leads the narrator to fulfil his ill-conceived idea of salvation: confession.

### **2.1.2. Motion and Obsession**

The aforementioned senses, however, do not work individually, but along with motion and obsession. It is motion, perceived by the senses, that triggers obsession. The motion of the heart, or the attempt to silence it, becomes the narrator’s main focus. Darkness, silence, lack of movement, no breathing, and stillness provide the most suitable atmosphere for slow-motion movements. “Every night about twelve o’clock I *slowly* opened his door” (Poe, “The Tell-Tale Heart” 65; emphasis added) quotes the murderer, in that he attends the old man’s room every night at the very same time merely to watch him sleep. That systematicity and tranquillity of actions keeps the narrator emotionally under control. Nevertheless, there is a turning point in the story on the eighth night. Poe’s narrator feels “the hands of a clock” moving faster than usual and the beating of the old man’s heart accelerating (65). The narrator’s impulses accelerate too. It takes

him too much time to decide whether to kill the old man or not and too little to do it. The more the sound of the elder's beating heart accelerates, the more the madman's psychological sanity dwindles. E. Arthur Robinson asserts that "three states of being are present concurrently: emotional tension, loss of mental grasp upon the actualities of the situation, and inability to act or to act deliberately" (373). Those three states of being lead to the consequent catastrophic ending for the murderer: his obsession with the beating and the recognition of guilt. Movements are speeded up owing to his lack of mental sanity to deal with sensual stimuli. This prompts a tramping obsession for the murderer, an "irrational motivation [and] the charge of unrecognized significance and underlying anxiety, dread, and terror that animate such apparently meaningless obsessions" (Shulman 259). He awaits for the beating of the heart just as Roderick Usher in "The Fall of the House of Usher" does with his sister's heart. That obsession reveals madness in both characters; they suffer from paralysis caused by unfitness for the setting. Their anxiety and paranoia are provoked by a changing environment. The beating of the old man's heart increases and creates a sense of unease that ravels the narrator's mental state.

The setting therefore induces them to act deliberately without moral sense, to feel forlorn and isolated. In a world where both Roderick Usher and the narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" live in the back of beyond, detached and alienated from the rest of their society, the intrusion of any external element in the setting—the narrator and Roderick's friend in "The Fall of the House of Usher" or the police in "The Tell-Tale Heart"—triggers the degradation of the psyche. They do not know how to behave anymore. The murderer in "The Tell-Tale Heart" is driven not so much by the mind as by the heart, both his own and that of the aged man, as well as by the sound of the police officers' laughter. Hence, just like Roderick Usher, the narrator's dynamics of obsession and accelerating pulse in "The Tell-Tale Heart" lead him to self-punishment and destruction. Little

can he do to rebel against his own illness; an illness caused by misleading senses, an accelerating and unsettling setting to which he no longer fits, and a hare-brained obsession.

## 2.2. “The Fall of the House of Usher”

“The Fall of the House of Usher” follows the story of a man who is urged by his boyhood friend Roderick Usher to pay him a visit. At his arrival, only death and decay await him. Despite the narrator being the main character, the emphasis must not be drawn on him, who is only a mere observer, but on the Usher family and their house instead. In the letter sent by Roderick Usher, the owner of the house, he “gave evidence of nervous agitation” and “spoke of acute bodily illness—of a mental disorder which oppressed him” (Poe, “The Fall” 4). Hence, from the beginning of the story the reader is aware that the Ushers suffer from fatal disease. They are a family who thoroughly believe in eugenics, the theory of planned breeding within a specific population so as to increase the occurrence of heritable desired characteristics. This might lead to malformations in the new-born generations. In this same vein, S. T. Coleridge writes about the Usher siblings: “Coleridge’s theory of identity fuses the genealogical with the aesthetic themes in ‘Usher,’ explaining the character’s entrapment within an incestuous house of horrors” (Allison 41). Simply put, the Ushers’ objective is accomplishing the pure and perfect Usher family member.

Described as a family who is little prone to mingle with other families; the Ushers relate exclusively among them. Thus, genetic transgenerational transmission could fail in all probability, and maladies appear. Incest led the way to physical weakening in the family. That illness is represented through the House of Usher, closely linked to the family’s souls. In fact, just as in other works such as E. M. Forster’s *Howards End*, domestic structures, Carl Jung spots, become “replications or images of mental structures, offering grounds, as Bachelard wrote, for ‘taking the

house as a tool for analysis of the human soul' . . . Not surprisingly, therefore, literary houses and their spaces constitute archetypes of the psyche" (qtd. in Mezei and Briganti 841). The house is thus used as a metaphor for the inner workings of the characters' mind and emotions. Just like the house is used as a sinister or oppressive entity in "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman; a representation of hope, wealth, and status in F. S. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*; or a symbol for the contrast between the wild and the refined in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*; Poe uses the house as the tangible equivalent for the characters' deepest consciousness. In this sense, it is possible to analyse the Ushers' soul and psyche through their house, paying attention to the function that the latter takes on the former.

### **2.2.1. The Tyranny of Usher's Manor**

At first sight, as proven later when discovering the Ushers' history, the House of Usher has an "excessive antiquity" (Poe, "The Fall" 6). However, it did not contain enduring components, but "decayed trees, [a] gray wall, [a] silent tarn—a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued" (6). The deteriorated and poorly-tended facade of the house gives the impression of decay to its viewers. The fissure in the building, which will be analysed later, already suggests the instability of the Ushers' dominions. Similarly, the description that the narrator provides of the interior suggests likewise: "I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. An air of stern, deep, and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all" (7). Although the narrator tries to be rational on seeing the house, he enters a trance of mystery and dreamlike events. This "atmosphere of sorrow" (7) emerges only indoors as soon as the narrator crosses the border that separates the natural world from the supernatural and haunted structure. In fact, the narrator alludes to the house as the prime controller of its inhabitants and as soon as the house is described,

supernatural events occur: “with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit” (3). In this sense, neither Roderick nor Madeline are masters of their lives; it is the paranormal and mystical forces of the house that control its tenants.

It is worth highlighting that the Ushers, as a self-isolating family, do not share a copious family tree. Roderick and Madeline’s parents are not shown in the story, so they are presumed dead. Consequently, due to this lack of parental affection and social relationships, the siblings seek emotional refuge in the last soul remaining at hand. That spare soul is the House *per se*. Sharon Furrow remarks that through “the picturesque mood of decay, melancholy, and gloom . . . the external world reflects the internal one. The landscape at the beginning of the tale is essential as the first stage of a journey into the interior” (19). Roderick and Madeline’s souls can be accessed through the physical world, in that the House and their souls are interconnected. Furthermore, Roderick believes in the sentience of “vegetable things” (Poe, “The Fall” 15). The narrator states that this belief “was connected . . . with the gray stones of the home of his forefathers” (15). Hence, we infer that Roderick’s mental instability emerges from the structure of the House. But, is Roderick’s instability what provokes the fissure or is it the other way round?

The presence of the building entraps its inhabitants, as it previously did with their predecessors. It is the House that inhibits the Ushers to relate outside of their domestic realm. The House acts as a Mother Earth figure, an omnipotent and almighty entity, the presence of which is the unique chink to which the siblings can hold. The absence of parental care is substituted by the ceaseless surveillance of the building. Such a key factor is suggested by the landscape surrounding the residence. The “remodelled and inverted images of the gray sedge” (Poe, “The Fall” 4) hint at these swapped roles. The owners become the owned and the property itself starts owning. Nonetheless, this substitution implies detrimental consequences for the siblings.

The House starts possessing the siblings' souls; it has the power to control their minds. Not only does it dominate their psyche but also their physical condition. Madeline's illness has most likely been caused by the aforementioned plausible malformed genetic transmissions between cousins or siblings, insofar as the house does not allow the Ushers to flee their self-isolation. Despite this illness not being explicitly shown in the text, the atmosphere of isolation and foreboding suggests that there is something wrong with the Usher bloodline. It even disturbs those who enter the house: "combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us [every tenant in the house], still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth" (Poe, "The Fall" 4). The power that the setting has on their inhabitants is out of their control or understanding; characters acknowledge that the House exists and alters them, yet they do not have the ability to fully grasp its energy. John S. Hill emphasises this poisonous relation between setting and characters in the following manner:

[Roderick] believes in 'the sentience of all vegetable things' and connects this belief with the House itself. Thus he can believe that the House has the power to dominate the lives of those within; also, because he believes in the consciousness of the very stones of the House, he can well add another human attribute—possession of a soul—to the House of Usher. (398)

However, since the House has been empowered by their familial background to "dominate the lives of those within" as if it were a human, for it has "possession of a soul," the House is an almighty presence that affects the psychological and physical well-being of those who live within its walls. As distinct from what the narrator may first believe, the House acts as a harmful Mother Earth to the extent that it guides Madeline to death and Roderick to mental insanity.

### 2.2.2. The Bond of Usher's Dwelling

Roderick Usher's mental sanity hinges upon his sister as much as his sister's does on his. Indeed, the 'deceased' one that the narrator refers to is not Roderick, but Madeline. However, they are both ill: Madeline is physically deceased, while Roderick is mentally sick. Their own house metaphorically represents that illness, in that there is a supernatural bond that attaches them to their home. That "terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which made him what I now saw him—what he was" (Poe, "The Fall" 16), a madman is symbolised through his home. His family, just as the House, is condemned to disappear, for they have not mixed with any different branch:

Its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. The discoloration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves. Yet all this was apart from any extraordinary dilapidation. No portion of the masonry had fallen; and there appeared to be a wild inconsistency between its still perfect adaptation of parts, and the crumbling condition of the individual stones.

(Poe, "The Fall" 6)

Metaphorically speaking, by not branching out, the Usher family has been "discolo[ured]" like the House, given their intention to reproduce among themselves in order to preserve their genetics. "Minute fungi" cover all over their souls, and although they have not "fallen" yet, there is "a wild inconsistency" among the members of the family. The "individual stones"—the siblings—that constitute the House—the family—are in a "crumbling condition" (6). As long as those stones are kept together the House can still stand.

However, the two siblings set apart: Roderick buries his sister under the house, settling not only a spiritual but also a physical barrier between them. Burying his sister in the very same house

and growing up distance between them causes Roderick to fall into an unbearable situation. That relates directly to the situation of the building, marked by a fissure between the stones that widens as the siblings split. This fissure of the house, a symbol for the emerging separation among the siblings, finally breaks as the siblings fall apart: “this fissure rapidly widened . . . the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight” (Poe, “The Fall” 25).

Distance, both mental and physical, becomes insufferable for Roderick and Madeline’s souls. The Ushers’ heritage has no bright future ahead with the separation of the siblings. This is represented by the large crack at the front of the mansion. The deterioration of the family has finally collapsed with the extinction of the last female figure in the Usher family, for there can be no more Ushers. Being supernaturally linked to the house, the building is shut down as the last Usher family relation extinguishes: “Roderick and Madeline die together because one cannot exist without the other, and the house falls because it is preternaturally connected to the family” (Gruesser 81).

The domestic realm goes in hand with the subjectivity of the individual. With Madeline’s death, Roderick has no longer the support of his sister and that anxiety of loneliness causes the building to collapse. Abeer Al-Mahdawi highlights that the siblings “are simultaneously splitting apart, Madeline into her mysterious cataleptic trance and Roderick into an irrationally surrealistic world of frenzied art-making” (7). He also underscores that with Madeline’s burial under the house, Roderick “will widen the fissure between them. This crack, or division, between the living [Roderick] and the dead [Madeline] will be so critical that it will culminate ultimately in the fall of the house of Ushers themselves” (7). The siblings separated, the house becomes dust and fragments and so do the Ushers. Since their love transcends death, both Ushers must leave this world together, just like they were brought into it. The physical illness of Madeline and the mental



insanity of Roderick must cohabitate; they cannot be separated for the sustenance of the family and the House.

This love is eternal, romantic, absolute. There is no sexual attraction; they identify with each other. It is love based on passion and intuition, on preserving the family's genetics and heritage. This explains how the lack of a specified setting—for we only know it is set in a mouldering house—“contributes to pointing out the unreadability of the Usher's past and the enigmatic core of their malady: in short, the ‘conflation of absence and loss’ that characterizes structural trauma” (Nadal 188). The isolation of the House in the natural world and the isolation of the family in the social world allow this love to spring and be consummated. The fissure—not precisely that of the House but that of the family—lastly shattered the whole house, and the setting resembles once again the soul of the Ushers. The destiny of the Usher family and their ancestral home is intertwined: Madeline being dead, isolation covers the place once more.

### **2.3. The Setting: A Central Element for the Reader**

Edgar Allan Poe believed strangeness to be an essential part of beauty. Thus, his gloomy characters, who never seem to socialise, constantly bury themselves in dilapidated settings. Kathryn VanSpanckeren states that Poe's settings “reflect the overcivilized yet deathly interior of his characters' disturbed psyches. They are symbolic expressions of the unconscious” (para. 30). This way, Poe can illustrate the theme of death-in-life and the disintegration of personality through the decay of the physical setting, a tangible reality. In doing so, he can achieve the ideal reality, which leads to the understanding of the excruciating suffering of the soul and spiritual agony in order to cause terror in the reader.

The two analysed stories are set in a burial-like atmosphere. The former in “The Tell-Tale Heart” is the burial of a heart; the latter in “The Fall of the House of Usher” is the burial of a relative. Although burials usually symbolise an end, these entombments however represent the beginning of a sequence of fatal events for the characters. Both the narrator in “The Tell-Tale Heart” and Roderick Usher in “The Fall of the House of Usher” are consumed by the guilt of a past miscalculated action. The former assassinated an old man, and the latter buried his sister alive. Since they are haunted by their past of which they cannot be shriven, the setting turns to be regarded by both as a menace to their psychological state. Margaret Kane indicates that the significance of Poe’s setting does not lay on “its original glory” but on the readers’ response “by contemplating its ruins” (149). Thus, Poe’s mouldering setting does not affect exclusively the characters, but also the reader. Kane explains later in her essay that the importance and purpose of Poe’s limited descriptions of the setting is to “be effective in producing the desired associations in the reader’s mind” (150). This longed-for association is no other than causing terror in the reader; therefore, achieving what Poe coined as the *central effect*.<sup>1</sup> He wanted to explore the deepest parts of the human psyche and personality. Terror, the grotesque, horror, and the macabre are Poe’s intended feelings for the reader. Hence, Poe uses the setting to accomplish this ‘totality of effect,’ the final aim of which is to study the human soul.

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<sup>1</sup> Poe’s concept of *central effect* refers to the notion of achieving a singular emotional or psychological effect on the reader using the short story and a dominant and intense emotional impression, such as horror, fear, or despair.

### 3. Conclusion

This essay has been designed to assess the significance of the setting in characters and the manner in which they interrelate, leading to the destruction of one or both of them. In order to do so, the focus has been drawn upon Edgar Allan Poe's short stories "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Fall of the House of Usher." As for the former, small disturbances of light and sound, along with obsession, have been analysed as the main cause for the narrator's downfall. It is this setting which takes the narrator out of his grim comfort zone that leads him to a disastrous end all by himself, that is, confessing his crime. The madman has been consumed by guilt, by his own emotions and workings of the mind. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," the distance grown between siblings becomes unbearable for the House, which has a soul on its own. Consequently, the House exerts its total control over the Ushers and, along with its complete dilapidation, provokes the family's final demise.

Overall, just as these crumbling settings alter the characters' behaviour or fate, they also affect the reader. Poe achieves his purpose of a central terror-ridden effect on the reader in order to explore the human soul through these gloomy, deteriorating, and bleak settings, as well as through the consequent psychological implications for the characters, with whom the reader may identify or sympathise. Poe, as a Romantic, rejects reason and convention and celebrates the supernatural, primal emotions, intuition, and spiritual experiences, i.e., leading the reader into his own world of imagination. Nonetheless, further research on these two stories will shed more light on the relationship between settings and characters. Just as it may provide new insights into the interpretation of the setting and the psychological state of characters, so too may it spot new responses of its effect on the reader's psyche.

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