

The Functions of Landscape in The Fall of the House of Usher

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Abstract

Landscape originally refers to the paintings of natural scenery that developed from background settings, but the meaning of landscape then varies as the professional field changes. Specifically, it has played a significant role in literature, especially Gothic literature. Gothic literature uses landscape as the sublime, an extraordinary experience beyond oneself, to its readers. Edgar Allan Poe is an American writer, poet, and critic who has been reputed as a central figure of Gothic literary works. This paper will use Poe's work of *The Fall of the House of Usher* to identify the concept of landscape in literature, as well as its major functions in a literary work. This paper will also address the origin and development of Gothic literature.

Keywords

Gothic; Landscape; Definition; Functions.

1. Introduction

The landscape is a term that originally refers to the background settings of finger paintings. In the 15th century, it became an independent painting subject during the renaissance period because the concept divided nature and human society. Since then, the landscape has always been a vague word. It is challenging to define the exact concept, especially the landscape boundary. Through research, people gained more knowledge of nature, which started people's path to seek freedom in human nature. Such pursuit is the essential foundation of humanistic ideas. The pursuit also paved a road to re-create nature through painting and landscaping gardens. Historically, landscape developed into various concepts in different professional fields (Zhu and Zhou 48). However, in literature, the paper believes that the most convincing definition is "Descriptions of the environment are never merely empirical. They are strategies which encode the interests and concerns of the writers as well as the physical nature of the terrain, the climate, and so on." (Lawson-Peebles 6) The paper identified landscape as settings that have functional purposes to the story, such as creating the atmosphere, reflecting the character's minding, and expressing the writer's ideas. Nevertheless, this paper will demonstrate how landscape serves as diversified aids to the literary work using Poe's Gothic short story of *The Fall of the House of Usher* as an example.

Edgar Allan Poe is the author of the short story *The Fall of the House of Usher*. He is an American writer, poet, and literary critic, considered the "father of detective fiction" and pioneer of short stories. However, he is seen as a significant American representative of Romanticism. Yet, the majority of his work is absurd and horrible, indeed carrying heavy traces of Gothic style. In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, "I" received a letter from a childhood friend, Roderick Usher, asking for help. And then "I" decided to visit the old friend. In Roderick's house, "I" met his twin sister, who caught a sickness that no doctor could help and passed away a few days after "my" arrival. Later, "I" helped Roderick put her body in the dungeon. Several days later, Lady Madeline crawled out from her tomb and died in the arms of Roderick. Roderick is also dead because of panic. Immediately after "I" fled out, the house fell into the lake.

Poe lived in the first half of the 19th century when the US underwent rapid development in economy and social structure. Writers had different reactions to new emergences. Romantic

literature represented by Emerson's "Transcendentalism" became the popular literature genre at that time, which Poe remarkably disliked. As a counteract, most of his works are decadent, grotesque, built around sicked psychology, decadence and death, and full of pessimism, terror, and depression. Although his creative theory and practice were always different from mainstream literature, Poe insisted on his literary path and faithfully practiced his literary ideas. He adapted a highly conscious and idealistic writing concept and the pure aesthetic theory of "art for art." With the development of the Gothic style in the 19th century, it vigorously grew from England to the United States. Such novel's characteristic was a perfect match to Poe's creative idea. Thus, Gothic novels became flourished by Poe. (Yao 23)

2. The Origin and Development of Gothic Fiction

The gothic style came from Goth, which refers to the Germanic people who undeniably contributed to the collapse of the Western Roman Empire and the merge of medieval areas. ("Goth" 623). During the renaissance, in memories and pursuit of the prosperous Roman culture, the Italians referred to medieval arts as Gothic to imply barbarically. Of course, there are sub-branches under Gothic arts such as literature, painting, architecture, music, and much more.

Some scholars suspected that the birth of Gothic literature was associated with English political turmoil. The dreadful cultural fear and political suppression accumulated from the English Civil War to the Jacobite rebellion eager the merge of villain characters in early Gothic literary pieces. The early Gothic literary works gave those defeated Tory barons or Royalists another life in between the pages to terrorize the readers from the middle-class capitalist of the late 18th century. Evidence of the scholars' suspicion would be *The Old English Baron* by Clara Reeve. (Cairney).

Although its significance varies as the narration differs and under specific historical background, the landscape has always been an essential tool that Gothic writers use to compose the necessary pleasure for their readers. In early Gothic literary works, the protagonist usually is a naive and innocent child who travels too far away. During the protagonist's journey, they would pass through a dangerous, extreme, and uncivilized land. This land often contains a hint to the traditional Catholic regions in Italy or Spain. People living on this land are described as barbaric, uncontrollable, and short-tempered. Compared to the protagonist's home, which is socially and politically safe (Crookenden).

In modern days, Gothic fiction commonly presents doubling, death, decay, darkness, and emotional aesthetic characteristics. For instance, everything is doubled in the *Fall of the House of Usher*. "I" saw two houses; one is the actual house, another is the reflection in the lake. Rodrick and Lady Madeline are twins. "I" met two servants inside the house.

3. Functions of Landscape

3.1. To Depict the Story's Atmosphere and Indicate Story Setting

One of the most predominant landscape features may be sublime, which is environmental description to trigger an unexceptional experience for the audience. Where in most situations, the experience is horrified. An additional function of the landscape is to encode the story's setting information.

"It was a dark and soundless day near the end of the year, and clouds were hanging low in the heavens." "None of the walls had fallen, yet the stones appeared to be in a condition of advanced decay." From these two lines, it is reasonable to conclude that the story happened in the winter, probably in the eastern of America. The reason is that stone-structured residential homes were more common in the east. Many stone houses symbolized British styles and were built by

wealthy noble families. People who lived in the western part had less income compared with eastern people, and it was more costly to build a stone-structured house. Besides, British-style houses were less popular when people traveled to the western. Another evidence that the story takes place in eastern America is "It was, indeed, a stormy but beautiful night, and wildly strange." Geographically speaking, in the United States, most storms happen in the eastern, while more earthquakes are attached to the west.

In this short story, Poe used first-person narration to provide a more intensive immersion for his readers. Following with the mysterious narrator, "I" witness everything first-hand. When clouds hand low from the sky, people usually feel suffocated as if the sky were falling from heaven. "I" rode on the horse alone on such a dark, cloudy, and freezing day. I talked to no one because the road is silent, "with little life and beauty." All "I" heard maybe was the wuthering wind. Suffocated and exhausted, "I" saw an also mansion-like house surrounded with air that "rose from the dead, decaying trees, from the gray walls, and the quiet lake." Poe personified the house in the first paragraph. If the windows were empty eye-liking, it is reasonable to think that the entrance is the mouth. Imagine, who would not feel frightened when stared by an old and big face with empty eyes? To walk into the entrance is like being swallowed by the house. Everything inside there is unknown, which is the most fearful thing. Moreover, Poe used words such as "dark, gloomy, frightened, fearful" repetitively in landscape description throughout the story to constantly keep readers' thoughts wandering around horror, just like in Gothic architecture, the designer use figures that suggest death to lead people's thought into fear.

3.2. To Imply the Personality of Characters in the Story

When reading closely, readers may find the landscape description symbolized the protagonists' personalities, another key feature of the landscape. Similarly, in films, each setting is deliberately calculated to reflect the personality or psychological state of the character.

"None of the walls had fallen, yet the stones appeared to be in a condition of advanced decay." The house symbolizes Roderick's general condition. Came from a famous, rich, and old family, Roderick once had a solid foundation. However, pieces of him are rotting. The room is full of instruments and books, suggesting that Roderick is intelligent with superior artistic aesthetics. "The room I came into was very large and high. The windows were high and pointed at the top and so far above the black floor that they were quite out of reach. Only a little light, red in color, made its way through the glass and served to lighten the nearer and larger objects." Black implies to hopeless and void, while red represents flame and enthusiasm. The contrasting color combination indeed can be seen as the inner struggle of Roderick. The struggle will be explained further in the next section.

"... a crack making its way from the top down the wall until it became lost in the dark waters of the lake." Some people argue that the crack represents the separation of Roderick's psychological world. The paper agrees with this perspective. From the first lyric section of the "Haunted Palace" that Roderick sings, "a palace—in a green valley, where all was light and color and beauty, and the air was sweet. In the palace were two bright windows through which people in that happy valley could hear music and could see smiling ghosts—spirits—moving around the king." It is the first time the short story used optimistic words, "green" triggers thinking associated with plants, vigorous, and growing. "Sweet" and "smiling" Further confirmed that Roderick was once healthy, both physically and psychologically. More importantly, Roderick himself realized he once had well beings. Yet, he became mentally ill as he sang in the second part of the song. Additionally, the paper suggested the wall's crack as a break to Roderick and his twin sister, Lady Madeline. Lady Madeline has never spoken throughout the book. Perhaps we can see her as the other identification of Roderick. Firstly, they are twins with extraordinary connections. Secondly, they are the only Ushers left. They have been kept each others' company for their entire life. The same night of the day "I" saw the

crack, Lady Madeline passed away. Roderick put her body inside the casket and locked her in the dungeon. At the time, Lady Madeline is not dead yet. At the end of the story, Lady Madeline came back to life, crawled out of her casket, walked to Roderick, then died in Roderick's arms. The wall's crack deepened and widened when Lady Madeline truly died. Eventually, Roderick died when Lady Madeline did. The house tore apart and fell down. However, it became a whole when drowned in the lake. The appeal of the house, a process of split, break and reunited, shared many similarities with the Usher's twins. It is reasonable to see Roderick and Lady Madeline as the two identifications and inner conflicts and reconcile a person.

3.3. To Reflect Author's Personal Ideas and Experiences

This section will first discuss landscape in terms of space created in the short story. Following, this paper will introduce Poe's personal life. And finally, the paper will include a demonstration of how the space of the short story served to reflect the author's ideas and experiences.

The entire story is divided into two spaces. One is the opening space outside of the house. Another one is the isolated space inside the house. The Ushers is never a big family with many decedents. As the inherits of an old and famous family, instead of joining the dazzled and glamorous upper-class society, they rather "had long been famous for its understanding of all the arts and many quiet acts of kindness to the poor." The family had isolated themselves in the limited space to explore the unlimited and boundless inner mind. From one perspective, the house functioned as a shield protecting Roderick and Lady Madeline from threats and invasion from the external world. Simultaneously, they had suffered the mental torture the limited environment brings to them. The anxiety and panic that "I" experienced when seeing the house were depressions of the Usher twins. Such depression is a pure fear that is detached from artistic beauty. It is shapeless. It is unseeable and inevitable.

Under any circumstances, space collaborates with objects to depict the atmosphere. A closed environment generally causes panic. Objects inside the closed environment will further terrorize the panic to make the inside person yield to the environment. The design of a lecture hall would be an example. Teachers arrange the classroom seating differently to achieve diverse interactions with students.

The antique furniture pieces, scattered books, and instruments tell the story of a family with a profound history. Yet, the profound history omits a sense of decay and death, filling the room with gloom and depression. As an outsider from the open space, "I" am unwelcomed by the house because it refused to show me his "into the far, high corners of the room" under the red light. The fear of the unknown triggered the wanders in the unconscious mind and the inner fear.

The desolate and dilapidated atmosphere obviously penetrates through the Usher twins, especially Roderick. He believed all objects in the house were emotional and rational creatures that "could feel and think." The atmosphere weakened and eventually destroyed Roderick and Lady Madeline's sensitive minds.

Poe's father abandoned the family when he was one year old. A year later, his mother passed away. Then, a successful Virginian merchant family took Poe. However, the family never officially adopted him. Although spoiled, Poe's foster father disciplined him aggressively. Poe was apart from his foster family for approximately ten years. Poe's foster father refused to continue to support him after remarriage. Poe then sought help from his auntie, where he married her cousin. His marriage of the happiest time of his life. Unfortunately, his wife died 11 years after their marriage (Meyers 54). Afterward, he could not pull himself out from massive sadness and became an addict. Finally, he died poorly and miserably.

House is where people live engage activities with least guards in most relaxed status. However, the house of Usher is filled with fear and horror. The description of Usher is indeed Poe's inner suffering. His miserable and unfortunate personal life, especially in youth, deformed his

psychological world. Poe injected the anxiety and fright he experienced into Roderick and Madeline. Humans are creatures capable of thinking and reflected thinking. Such ability is constantly breaking a person's normal minding and psychological well-being. One's mental world would ultimately collapse in a case without firm willpower. The action of Roderick putting Madeline's cask in the dungeon symbolize Poe trying to hide his cousin in his unconscious mind. Both the character and the writer recognized the sickness in their mental world. They strive to fix their problem, which indicates their introspection. Unfortunately, such self-reflection broke down their psychological defense. The fall of the house is indeed the collapse of a person's spiritual world. Poe tried to alert his readers to the Usher twins.

3.4. To Hint and Set up for Lateral Plot

The last, definitely not a minor feature of the landscape, is pushing the storyline forward. The plot forwards as the environment changes. A scene of the landscape is a popular transition used for the film. An isolated environment is an ideal setting to cultivate a Gothic literary piece. Poe set the story in a detached space like the house of Usher and laid the primary tone of depression and anxiety for the story. The story begins as "I" entered from an open space into the house, a sealed environment. The story further develops as the interior space moves from a room to a dungeon. The switch of space directed the outbreak of the next conflict, which leads to the climax and the end of the story.

An exciting and admirable fact of the landscape in the short story is that after Poe's careful setting and everything integrated as a whole, the landscapes echo to each other. In the end, the house sank into the lake echo to the crack on the wall that "making its way from the top down the wall until it became lost in the dark waters of the lake." Another example would be the picture Roderick painted. "It showed the inside of a room where the dead might be placed, with low walls, white and plain. It seemed to be very deep under the earth. There was no door, no window; and no light or fire burned; yet a river of light flowed through it, filling it with a horrible, ghastly brightness." It is indeed the description of the dungeon where Madeline's cask is stored. The brightness may indicate Madeline, as Poe's beloved cousin is the only light and happiness of his life. Furthermore, each detailed landscape, both indoor and outdoor, depicts horror, scare, anxiety, depression, and gloom. Poe repetitively used words like "dark, sick, dead, and decay" to keep the fear inside his readers' thoughts.

4. Conclusion

Edgar Allan Poe is unquestionably a talented writer. He was the first writer in America who made a living with his works when alive. However, his miserable and unfortunate personal life supported his writing with extended darkness and mental sickness. He immersed his experience into his story to alter his readers. His tender care for humanity is hidden behind the frightening atmosphere he composed. As Professor Yaoxin Chang stated, the most remarkable thing about Poe is that he is the first writer who explored the darkness in people's unconscious minds (Chang 155).

The landscape is a notable contributor to Poe's successful career. It is an art form created by men. As the old Chinese saying, to put feelings into the landscape (Love the scenery). More importantly, this "feeling" refers to diverse items in a different situation. Through the paper, the writer used Poe's short story to demonstrate how landscape functioned in the method described in the old Chinese saying. One function is to explain and drive the plot (plot). From the description of the open space and house's exterior, this paper concludes that the story takes place in the winter, most likely, in eastern America. The story began when "I" entered the house, a closed environment from the outer world, an open space. Then, the change of space takes the story to progress and floats the clue to the surface. The other function of the landscape is to depict a certain atmosphere (mood) for readers. In this particular short story, Poe

overwhelmed his readers with negative and pessimistic feelings about the landscape. The landscape has created diversified atmospheres in other literary works, such as the sweet and joyful atmosphere in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the epic and glorious atmosphere in *Les Miserable*, and the mysterious atmosphere in *The Chronicles of Narnia*. An additional function of the landscape is to express emotions (emotion) of the story's characters as well as the writer's. The short story, traces of Roderick and Madeline's emotions are found in the landscape setting.

In conclusion, landscape serves a remarkable role in a literary piece. Landscape shall be reviewed from more than aesthetic appreciations. Understanding the landscape will also offer a more comprehensive understanding of the story.

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