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The Monster House and the Cursed Family: A Deadly Combination

Written in 1839, “The Fall of the House of Usher” is a thrillingly grotesque short story by Edgar Allan Poe. It begins with a nameless protagonist visiting his anxiety-riddled friend, Roderick Usher. He learns that Roderick and his sister Madeline are the only remaining heirs of the destroyed Usher family. Both siblings suffer from physical and mental maladies. On a particularly restless night, the protagonist reads a medieval romance to Roderick in an attempt to calm the man’s hysteria and is startled when the sounds mentioned in the story are echoed within the eerie manor itself. Roderick’s sister Madeline, who they had mistakenly buried alive, bursts into the room and dies alongside her brother while the protagonist flees the crumbling House of Usher. Although there are several fascinating aspects worthy of discussion in Poe’s piece, this paper will pose the idea that the evil nature of the house and the harmful inbreeding of its residents combined to destroy the Usher family. Moreover, it will analyze how this situation is an interesting parallel to current times with the rise of epigenetics.

Delving into the first few pages of the story, readers discover the narrator’s unnerving description of the House of Usher. He describes a palpable sense of dread which seems to emanate from the house (Poe 1391). The unhealthy environment is so vividly illustrated that readers cannot escape the toxic atmosphere that permeates the entire story; it is undoubtedly a key feature of the piece. Furthermore, the narrator provides background information that hints at the Usher family’s inextricable intertwinement with their poisonous surroundings. Reflecting

upon his past with Roderick, the narrator explains, “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” (1392). Coupled with the fact that outsiders frequently meld the Usher line and the House of Usher into one entity, this history suggests a strong tendency toward inbreeding among the family members. They did not venture outside the estate and are almost entirely defunct when the story begins.

After Madeline’s alleged death from an incurable illness, Roderick finds his own poor condition to be intensified. Already unsettled by the unpleasant nature of the house, the protagonist is further bothered by this and states, “At times, again, I was obliged to resolve all into the mere inexplicable vagaries of madness, for I beheld him gazing upon vacancy for long hours, in an attitude of the profoundest attention, as if listening to some imaginary sound” (1399). This is a mere introduction to Roderick’s degree of mental instability—for later, it is revealed that his frenzied psyche is the driving force behind the unintentional murder of his sister. Moreover, while the sickness itself certainly plays a strong role in the Usher siblings’ corrupt states, it is brought to a deadly head by the evil coursing through the estate. Neither individual is able to cope with failing health when they are constantly bombarded with threatening happenings, such as the appearance of peculiar mist around the house that terrifies Roderick (1400).

Upon analyzing this information, readers find a deadly interaction of factors that developed over time. Roderick gives credence to this idea through his ballad, in which he begins by describing the incredible glory that marked the beginning of the Usher line. However, he later describes: “But evil things, in robes of sorrow, assailed the monarch’s high estate; (Ah, let us

mourn, for never morrow shall dawn upon him, desolate!) And, round about his home, the glory that blushed and bloomed is but a dim-remembered story of the old time entombed” (Poe 1397). From this cryptic narrative, readers can consider that the Usher family was born in reasonable health before continuing the line through inbreeding. Heather Lorimer, a biology researcher from Youngstown University, states that inbreeding is harmful to living organisms because, since both parents harbor identical genes, their offspring inherit many maladaptive traits, including weakened immune systems and truncated life spans. Contrastingly, genetically diverse parents yield children who typically replace a substantial number of negative genes from one parent with positive genes from the other (Lorimer). It therefore comes as no surprise that the Usher family suffers from a plethora of health problems.

In closing, regarding the relevance of Poe’s chilling piece to modern times, it is fascinating to relate “The Fall of the House of Usher” to the current intense focus on epigenetics research. The Max-Planck-Gesellschaft research website explains that epigenetics involves the study of external stimuli that influence the activation or inhibition of certain traits within an individual. Factors such as stressful atmospheres can bear a powerful impact on whether or not a person will express a maladaptive trait (Planck). When pondering the Usher line, it is probable that their propensity for inbreeding cultivated a wealth of harmful genes. Furthermore, this pattern of incest and isolation likely created the miserable environment of the estate, which, in turn, worsened the physical and psychological issues of its inhabitants. Through this deadly interaction of nature and nurture—specifically, inbred genes and an unhealthy home—the extinction of the Usher family was imminent. The ending of Poe’s tale is tantamount to this idea as the House of Usher crumbles into oblivion along with its corrupt bloodline (1403).

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