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Defamiliarizing Symbols in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*: A Formalist analysis

Shah Zeb Khan[1], Syed Abdullah[2]

[1] Department of Humanities: COMSATS University Islamabad, Islamabad. Email: shahzebmohman96@gmail.com
[2] Department of Humanities: COMSATS University Islamabad, Islamabad. Email: syedabdullah0009@gmail.com

*Corresponding Author: **Shah Zeb Khan.** Email: shahzebmohman96@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the symbolic elements of Edgar Allan Poe's The Fall of the House of Usher, with an emphasis on the ways in which the text defamiliarizes well-known symbols to highlight the themes of decay, insanity, and unavoidable devastation. This study examines the transformation of key symbols, including the decaying house, the air, the lake, the blood-red moon, and Roderick Usher's sickness, to uncover a disturbing and frightening effect on the reader, using a Formalist approach and Defamiliarization Theory. To closely analyze specific passages in the text, Greenham close reading method is employed to identify the ways in which Poe employs language and imagery to construct and defamiliarize these symbols. The study contributes to a more profound comprehension of the emotional and psychological complexity in Poe's work by emphasizing the defamiliarization of these symbols.

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Introduction

"The Fall of the House of Usher" by Edgar Allan Poe is a masterpiece in Gothic literature, renowned for its gloomy atmosphere, psychological complexity, and rich symbolism. The narrative is centered on the Usher family, whose members, Roderick and Madeline Usher, get caught in a deteriorating mansion that mirrors their declining mental and physical health. The story was published in 1839. The narrative is filled with symbols that not only serve as representations of the themes of death, calamity, and decay, but also as mechanisms by which Poe defamiliarizes ordinary concepts, such as home and family. These symbols are not merely descriptive; they also serve to confront the reader's conventional comprehension of well-known concepts by presenting them in a distorted, unfamiliar perspective.

The objective of this study is to examine the symbolic components of The Fall of the House of Usher from the perspectives of Formalist criticism and Defamiliarization Theory. The Formalist approach focuses on the text's internal structure, language, and form, emphasizing the role of symbols such as the mansion, the lake, the air, the red moon, and the characters themselves in the establishment of a psychologically charged and tense atmosphere.

In order to investigate the manner in which Poe transforms familiar symbols into weird and unsettling representations, Defamiliarization Theory, as introduced by Viktor Shklovsky, will be implemented in along with Formalism. Defamiliarization disrupts the reader's typical perceptions, requiring them to confront objects and concepts in short stories. Using this theory, the analysis will emphasize the defamiliarization of symbols such as decaying home, the isolated characters, and the supernatural elements, which worsens the emotional disturbance and psychological alienation throughout the narrative.

This study seeks to clarify the manner in which Poe's manipulation of symbolism contributes to the thematic exploration of isolation, mental decay, and mortality by utilizing these critical approaches. This study will investigate the impact of the interplay between the characters' mental states and these defamiliarized symbols on the reader's emotional experience, providing the story with a viewpoint on the ways in which symbolism may get more profound psychological responses through a close reading of the text. The objective of this paper is to not only examine the symbols in The Fall of the House of Usher but also to illustrate how Poe's narrative techniques grab the reader in a profound, unsettling manner by defamiliarizing familiar symbols to enhance the story's theme of psychological decay.

CONTACT Shah Zeb Khan shahzebmohman96@gmail.com. Pakistan
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Problem Statement

Despite extensive analysis of *The Fall of the House of Usher* through various theoretical lenses, limited attention has been given to how defamiliarization enhances the symbols within the narrative. This study seeks to address this gap by applying defamiliarization theory and close reading methods to uncover the ways in which Poe's symbols challenge conventional perceptions and deepen the psychological complexity of the story.

Research Objectives

1. To examine how symbols are used in *The Fall of the House of Usher* that contribute to the gothic atmosphere?
2. To explore how defamiliarization alters the reader's interpretation of the story.
3. To analyze the role of symbols in reflecting the characters' psychological states.

Research Questions

1. How do symbols in *The Fall of the House of Usher* enhance the gothic atmosphere?
2. How does defamiliarization affect the reader's interpretation of the story?
3. What role do symbols play in revealing the characters' psychological states?

Literature Review

The Fall of the House of Usher by Edgar Allan Poe has been the subject of extensive literary criticism, with scholars analyzing its intricate themes, gothic imagery, and symbolic use of architecture and family. The relationship between the psychological deterioration of the inhabitants and the physical disintegration of the house is one of the most frequently discussed themes in the narrative. Roderick Usher's mental and emotional state is allegedly reflected in the home, according to numerous critics, including Ketterer (1975). The "bleak and undulating" walls of the mansion are a representation of Roderick's own deteriorating mind, as well as the family's genetic decline. In the same vein, Hecker (1996) underscores the house's deteriorating structure as a metaphor for the Usher family's imminent collapse, claiming that the physical space functions as a character in its own right, both influencing and reflecting the fate of its inhabitants.

The relationship between Roderick and Madeline Usher has also been a subject of critical inquiry. Regan (2009) and other scholars have analyzed their bond as a psychological and physical entanglement that surpasses typical sibling relationships. Regan suggests that their connection is not only emotionally intense but also severely co-dependent, which may be the cause of their mutual downfall. In the same vein, Griffiths (1996) suggests that the incestuous undertones in their relationship introduce a gothic element of horror, further intensifying the thematic concerns of death, insanity, and identity. Spanos (1991) investigates the concept of the family as a closed, insular entity, contending that the Usher family's isolation from the outside world, in conjunction with their insular relationship, fosters an environment that is prone to tragedy.

Additionally, scholars have concentrated on the narrative's use of the tarn (the lake) as a symbol. Allen (2002) emphasizes the reflective quality of the tarn, observing that it serves as a mirror to the home, symbolizing the Usher family's decline. This interpretation implies that the lake is not solely a geographical feature, but rather a psychological reflection of the family's breakdown. Norris (2008) further elaborates on the lake function by highlighting its function as a space of transition that reflects the characters' descent into madness, acting as a boundary between the living and the deceased. The lake's dark waters, according to Norris, serve as a visual depiction of the characters' emotional and mental turmoil, as well as their psychological states.

Another area of critical interest is Poe's utilization of Gothic symbolism. The story's general ambiance of dread and unease is frequently examined in relation to the house's gothic architecture. Whitman (1992) explains that the home is a "symbol of inwardness," symbolizing the isolation and decay that befall its inhabitants. Additionally, the atmosphere of horror is significantly enhanced by Poe's incorporation of sensory experiences, particularly sight and sound. Rusk (1994) examines the auditory imagery in the text, with a particular emphasis on the dreamlike noise that pervades the Usher household and the sounds of music. These sounds, according to Rusk, defamiliarize the conventional perception of music, thereby transforming it into a tool of psychological manipulation and destabilization.

The symbolic use of death and resurrection in The Fall of the House of Usher is also a topic of intense debate. According to Thompson (2000), a strangeness is evoked by Madeline's apparent mortality and subsequent resurgence. Thompson suggests that Madeline's reappearance blurs the lines between the two realms and creates a sense of eerie ambiguity, linking this motif to Poe's broader investigation of the boundaries between life and death. Foster (2005) elaborates on this concept, contending that Madeline's death is representative of the Usher family's incapacity to transcend the cyclical nature of their own decline, which has people stuck in a state of ambiguity between life and death.

Although much has been written about the use of symbolism and gothic elements in The Fall of the House of Usher, there is a significant gap in the literature regarding the application of defamiliarization theory to the text. Defamiliarization is the act of presenting the ordinary as unusual or unfamiliar in order to disrupt habitual perception and compel the audience to engage with the narrative on a more subjective, meaningful level. By employing defamiliarization to analyze The Fall of the House of Usher, this paper endeavors to investigate the manner in which Poe's utilization of symbols including the decaying house, the lake, the moon, the air and the relationship between Roderick and Madeline disturbs the reader's conventional comprehension of these elements, thereby generating a sense of psychological estrangement and horror. This analysis aims to enhance our comprehension of how Poe employs defamiliarization to not only reflect decomposition but also to disorient the reader, thereby enhancing the gothic horror of the narrative.

Methodology

This study employs defamiliarization theory and close reading to analyze the symbols in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Defamiliarization, as introduced by Viktor Shklovsky, will be used to examine how Poe transforms familiar elements, such as the house, the lake, the moon and the characters, into strange symbols. This process disrupts the reader's normal perception and deepens the psychological impact of the story.

The analysis will be carried out using close reading, outlined by Greenham, which involves a detailed examination of key passages to uncover the meanings embedded in the text's language. Through this method, the study will explore how Poe's symbolic choices contribute to the gothic atmosphere and thematic concerns of the narrative.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs Formalist approach and Defamiliarization Theory to examine Edgar Allan Poe's The Fall of the House of Usher, with a particular focus on the impact of symbolic elements on the text's primary concepts of isolation, insanity, and decay. The internal structure of the narrative, particularly the use of language and symbolism, is the primary focus of the Formalist approach. This method examines the text as a self-contained entity, examining the manner in which the arrangement of symbols including the house, the lake, and the characters of Roderick and Madeline Usher influences the psychological ambiance of the narrative. Through close reading, the Formalist perspective enables an analysis in which Poe's narrative choices and the symbolic interplay between the setting, characters, and events establish a cohesive structure that enhances the text's meaning. While as, Defamiliarization Theory, which was developed by Viktor Shklovsky, offers an additional layer of analysis by clarifying how Poe employs well-known symbols including the mansion, death, and family but presents them in a manner that renders them unfamiliar and concerning to the reader. Poe disrupts the reader's conventional perceptions by transforming the familiar unfamiliar, thereby requiring a more profound and emotive connection to the narrative. This study explicates how symbols such as the lake or the decaying home do not merely serve as passive components of the narrative; rather, they actively influence the reader's interpretation of the story.

Data Collection

The study employs qualitative research methods to analyze Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*. The data for this analysis includes:

1. **Primary Text**:
   The original text of *The Fall of the House of Usher* is the main source, with specific focus on passages describing the seven key symbols.

2. **Secondary Sources**:
   Academic journal articles, literary critiques, and analyses of Poe's work were reviewed to contextualize the findings and align them with existing scholarship. Works on Viktor Shklovsky's theory of defamiliarization provided a theoretical framework for the study.
3. **Supplementary Materials**:
   Background research on Gothic literature, symbolism, and psychological themes in Poe's writing was incorporated to support the interpretation of the symbols.

Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis followed a structured qualitative approach, combining close reading with theoretical interpretation:

1. **Identification of Symbols**:
   The text was read multiple times to identify recurring symbols and their descriptions. Special attention was paid to phrases and imagery that transformed ordinary objects into strange or supernatural elements.
2. **Thematic Categorization**:
   The identified symbols were categorized into seven themes based on their narrative significance: the house, air, the lake, Roderick's illness, Madeline's return, the crack, and the red moon.
3. **Application of Defamiliarization Theory**:
   Each symbol was analyzed using Viktor Shklovsky's theory, focusing on how Poe's descriptions disrupted conventional perceptions of the symbols, making them strange and enhancing their Gothic resonance.
4. **Textual Evidence**:
   Specific quotes were extracted to support the analysis of each symbol. These were cross-referenced with scholarly interpretations to ensure accuracy and depth in the findings.
5. **Contextual Integration**:
   The findings were integrated into the broader Gothic themes of decay, doom, and psychological collapse to demonstrate how defamiliarization contributes to the story's emotional and symbolic impact. Through this meticulous approach, the study provides a comprehensive analysis of how Poe's use of defamiliarization transforms ordinary elements into powerful symbols, enriching the narrative's Gothic essence.

Analysis and Discussion

In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Edgar Allan Poe uses several key symbols that defamiliarize the reader's usual understanding of common elements like a house, a body of water, or even illness. Defamiliarization, as explained by Viktor Shklovsky, makes familiar things seem strange in order to help readers experience them in a new way. Below we have analyzed seven major symbols in the story, with multiple quotes for each, to show how Poe transforms normal things into supernatural, troubled elements.

1. The House of Usher: A Living Entity

The mansion in The Fall of the House of Usher is the central symbol, representing more than just a physical structure; it symbolizes decay, death, and the psychological deterioration of the Usher family. Poe defamiliarizes the house by presenting it as a living entity, closely tied to the emotions of its inhabitants. The house is described as having "eye-like windows", giving it a sense of being alive and watching the narrator.

"I do not know how it was — but, with my first sight of the building, a sense of heavy sadness filled my spirit. I looked at the scene before me — at the house itself — at the ground around it — at the cold stone walls of the building — at its empty eye-like windows…"

This sight overwhelms the narrator with an unnatural sense of dread, suggesting that the house possesses a supernatural force that creates fear. The "empty eye-like windows" make the house seem alive and watching, and this feeling of dread defamiliarizes the normal perception of a home, turning it into something ominous and cursed.

"What was it," I asked myself, what was it that was so fearful, so frightening in my view of the House of Usher? This was a question to which I could find no answer."

The house is not just a building but a symbol of decay and death. The narrator feels an intense, mysterious fear, contrasting with any rational explanation, reinforcing the supernatural impression of the house.

As the story progresses, the house is described as physically decaying, mirroring the psychological decline of Roderick Usher. The house and the family are intertwined, both deteriorating, and the house becomes a reflection of the family's impending doom.

"From the chamber, the vast house was no longer visible, but its existence, its meaning, had become a reality in the house and its inhabitants. The house was now intimately connected to its fate."

The crack in the house represents this division, both in the physical structure and in the Usher family's fate. The crack starts at the top and extends downward, symbolizing the growing divide and inevitable collapse of both the house and its inhabitants.

"Perhaps the careful eye would have discovered the beginning of a break in the front of the building, a crack making its way from the top down the wall."

Finally, the house is described as having a psychic hold on Roderick, emphasizing its deep connection to his mental state.

"He felt that the house, with its gray walls and the quiet lake around it, had somehow through the long years gotten a strong hold on his spirit."

In this way, the house is not just a structure; it is a symbol of doom, decay, and the psychological collapse of the Usher family, whose fate is deeply tied to the mansion's crumbling existence.

2. Air as a symbol of gradual decay

Poe also defamiliarizes the concept of "air" in the story. In the line,

"I really believed that around the whole house, and the ground around it, the air itself was different. It was not the air of heaven. It rose from the dead, decaying trees, from the gray walls, and the quiet lake. It was a sickly, unhealthy air that I could see, slow-moving, heavy, and gray"

The air is depicted in a manner that challenges our traditional comprehension of this vital element. In this setting, the air is not a neutral, invisible substance that supports life; rather, it is a tangible, almost oppressive force. It is a representation of the estate's evident decay and decay-related mortality. The "sickly, unhealthy air" becomes a sensory experience that appears to drag down the surroundings, thereby contributing to the characters' sense of mental and physical decline. Roderick Usher's psychological state and the house's decay are both reflected in the air, which implies that the family's curse has contaminated the atmosphere. By depicting the air "slow-moving, heavy, and gray," Poe transforms a familiar and essential element into something dangerous, thereby defamiliarizing it. The air is no longer merely a substance that we inhale; it is an oppressor that reflects the decline of both the environment and the individuals within it. This defamiliarization is intended to intensify the reader's awareness of the decay that influences the entire setting, transforming an ordinary occurrence into a symbol of death, illness, and unstoppable chaos.

3. The lake: As a symbol of fate

In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the lake symbolizes fate, death, and the inevitability of the Usher family's collapse. The lake's stillness and dark reflection of the decaying house turn it into a symbol of the family's doom. Rather than representing calmness or renewal, the lake becomes a passive mirror of decay, reflecting the house and its surroundings, suggesting that the family's fate is already sealed.

"I stopped my horse beside the building, on the edge of a dark and quiet lake. There, I could see reflected in the water a clear picture of the dead trees, and of the house and its empty eye-like windows."

In the above lines, the lake reflects the house's decay, making it more than just a natural feature. The water is defamiliarized from a life-sustaining element into a symbol of death and stagnation, mirroring the unavoidable collapse of the house and its inhabitants. The stillness of the lake makes it seem unnatural, emphasizing the unmoving fate of the Usher family.

Through these defamiliarized descriptions, the lake becomes a boundary between life and death, enhancing the themes of inevitability and psychological decay in the story.

4. Roderick Usher's Illness: A Symptom of the House's Decay

Roderick Usher's illness is another symbol that becomes strange through defamiliarization. Illness typically suggests something individual, but in the case of Roderick, his mental and physical state seems

deeply connected to the house's decay. His hypersensitivity is described in strange terms, as though his body and mind are more adapted to the atmosphere of the mansion than to the real world.

"He spoke in a low, tremulous voice, as if the very air around him was too harsh for his senses... his nerves were so sensitive that even the slightest sound caused him pain."

The description of Roderick's sensitivity is exaggerated to the point of absurdity, showing how his condition is unnatural, almost like an extension of the house's crumbling state.

Roderick Usher's sickness symbolizes the psychological decay and inevitable collapse of the Usher family. His extreme sensitivity to light, sound, and taste reflects both his mental and physical deterioration, which is tied to the decaying house. This condition symbolizes the family's hereditary illness and their inescapable fate.

Poe defamiliarizes the illness by exaggerating Roderick's symptoms, turning ordinary sensitivities into extreme, unnatural reactions. His hypersensitivity to simple stimuli, such as light and smell, transforms a typical mental condition into something unnatural and supernatural:

"He could eat only the most tasteless food; all flowers smelled too strongly for his nose; his eyes were hurt by even a little light; and there were few sounds which did not fill him with horror. A certain kind of sick fear was completely his master."

This makes the sickness feel more like a curse tied to the house, emphasizing the deep connection between the family's psychological collapse and the deteriorating mansion. Roderick's illness, in this way, becomes a manifestation of their doomed fate.

"He appeared not like a human being, but like a spirit that had come back from beyond the grave."

5. Madeline Usher's Return from the vault: The Defamiliarization of Death

Madeline's return from the vault is one of the most astonishing symbols in the story. In most stories, death is final and irreversible, but Poe defamiliarizes this by having Madeline rise from her tomb and appear in a form that seems both dead and alive. This challenges the reader's normal understanding of death, creating an supernatural effect.

"Her She is coming — coming to ask why I put her there too soon. I hear her footsteps on the stairs. I hear the heavy beating of her heart." Here he jumped up and cried as if he were giving up his soul: "I TELL YOU, SHE NOW STANDS AT THE DOOR!!"

Madeline's return from the grave is unsettling because she seems to be a living corpse. She is physically dead but somehow alive, presenting death as something that cannot be easily defined or understood.

6. The Crack in the House: The Symbol of Imminent Collapse

The crack running through the house is another defamiliarized symbol. Typically, cracks in a structure would indicate damage, but Poe transforms this crack into a symbol of spiritual and physical collapse. The crack grows over time, and it becomes a metaphor for the deterioration of both the mansion and the Usher family. The narrator first notices it as a subtle imperfection:

"Perhaps the careful eye would have discovered the beginning of a break in the front of the building, a crack making its way from the top down the wall until it became lost in the dark waters of the lake.

The crack is not just a physical defect; it is a symbol of the house's inevitable collapse, reflecting the Usher family's decline. As the fracture widens, so too does the fate of the family.

"Then only a little crack, it now widened as I watched".

When the crack finally leads to the house's destruction, it symbolizes the end of the Usher family. The collapse of the house is tied to the collapse of Roderick and Madeline, making the crack not just a physical imperfection but a symbol of total destruction.

7. Red moon as a symbol of destruction and an end

In The Fall of the House of Usher, the blood-red moon represents the unavoidable devastation of the Usher family and their house, as well as death and violence. Poe defamiliarizes the moon, which is typically a peaceful symbol of light, transforming it into an unconventional entity. The red color, which is associated with blood, contributes to a sense of end and disaster. Poe defamiliarizes the moon by transforming it into an unnatural and frightful symbol, replacing its conventional function of glowing the night with an image of violent collapse:

"The light was that of the full moon, of a bloodred moon, which was now shining through that break in the front wall, that crack which I thought I had seen when I first saw the palace. Then only a little crack, it now widened as I watched. A strong wind came rushing over me — the whole face of the moon appeared. I saw the great walls falling apart".

The house's destruction is indicated by the red light of the moon, which creates the illusion of a supernatural force connected to the family's tragic fate. The blood-red moon does not serve as a cozy aspect of the night; rather, it serves as a warning of incoming disaster, intensifying the sense of danger.

Conclusion

This study has investigated the manner in which Edgar Allan Poe employs symbols in The Fall of the House of Usher to defamiliarize common concepts, thereby enhancing the psychological and thematic depth of the narrative. Through the application of Formalist approach and Defamiliarization Theory, we examined the manner in which symbols like the decaying mansion, the lake, and the Usher siblings challenge the reader's perceptions, thereby establishing a troubling atmosphere. Poe's manipulation of these symbols not only reflects the themes of decay and calamity but also emotionally engages the reader by distorting familiar symbols, as demonstrated by this study. In doing so, the paper provides a novel viewpoint on the psychological complexity of the story by revealing Poe's use of symbolism and its impact on the reader's emotional experience.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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