



Original Article

Symbols of the Sentient House of Usher: An Ecocritic Approach

Antony Kago Waithiru

¹ Laikipia University P. O. Box 1100 – 20300. Nyahururu, Kenya.

* Author for Correspondence Email: kagoantony3@gmail.com

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajes.5.2.812>

Date Published: ABSTRACT

25 August 2022 This analysis is an attempt to examine usage of symbols in the ‘sentient’ house of

Keywords: to as *The Fall of the House of Usher*. The paper has been premised on an ecocritic

Ecocriticism,
Symbolism,
Environment,
Depicted,
Interdisciplinary. approach. Ecocriticism is a study that uses an interdisciplinary lens in its view on literature and environment. Mainly it concentrates on the relationship betwixt literary work and the surrounding, emphasizing on a habit of scrutiny that is vigilant to environmental issues. The main objective of such a reading is to highlight more ways of curbing environmental exploitation, minimizing or eliminating environmental violence, as well as end ecocide. This work evaluated Poes’ work and explored how symbolism has depicted nature and environmental concerns in his work. The analysis was guided by some of the major tenets of ecocriticism theory and hence, has been anchored on an ecocritic approach. Some of the tenets that guided it are death, tradition, and environmental rights. Symbolism is a technique of constructing literary and artistic work that is depicted through employment of symbols either because of interest in the craft and furnishing the piece work with an appealing literary fragrance or for whatsoever reason, such as portray environment. One of the main functions of symbolism in literary work is to censure society obscurely, securely, and devoid of any possible harm or victimization that may fall upon the author.

APA CITATION

Waithiru, A. K. (2022). Symbols of the Sentient House of Usher: An Ecocritic Approach *East African Journal of Education Studies*, 5(2), 369-376. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajes.5.2.812>.

CHICAGO CITATION

Waithiru, Antony Kago. 2022. “Symbols of the Sentient House of Usher: An Ecocritic Approach”. *East African Journal of Education Studies* 5 (2), 369-376. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajes.5.2.812>.

HARVARD CITATION

Waithiru, A. K. (2022) “Symbols of the Sentient House of Usher: An Ecocritic Approach”, *East African Journal of Education Studies*, 5(2), pp. 369-376. doi: 10.37284/eajes.5.2.812.

IEEE CITATION

A. K. Waithiru. "Symbols of the Sentient House of Usher: An Ecocritic Approach", EAJES, vol. 5, no. 2, pp. 369-376, Aug. 2022.

MLA CITATION

Waithiru, Antony Kago. "Symbols of the Sentient House of Usher: An Ecocritic Approach". *East African Journal of Education Studies*, Vol. 5, no. 2, Aug. 2022, pp. 369-376, doi:10.37284/eajes.5.2.812

INTRODUCTION

Katie (2001) avers that, symbolism in written work of art is one amidst a lot of instruments which authors utilize deliberately to spawn not only curiosity in one's artistic production but also to generate a new category of definition. Onyango (2011) and Waithiru, Ogola & Nabea (2020) add that, a symbol is a particular existent, such as an individual, body, idea, activity, term, or picture, which represents incorporeal entities that are latent in nature and hence giving it ability to delineate more than itself. They argue that it is part of something that represents the larger self. Further, they depict that, symbolism in literature is applied to provide literary work with definition that transcends what is evident to the reader. Waithiru, Nabea & Onyango (2021) argue that functionally, symbolism assists in camouflaging the authors' message in order to be safe while correcting poor governance and leadership. When used in literary works, symbolism aids in giving the work mood and feeling without the author having to literally spell it out. In arts, symbolism has plunged into art, so much that it has developed as an inherent component of most bookish works and more so in communication as a craft (Katie, 2001).

According to Nayar (2010), humanity in the world today is living in a planet that is progressively straying into environmental violence, political ecology, and fostered industrial biological catastrophe. While supporting him, Waithiru, et al. (2021) reiterates that humanity is effectively committing ecocide, making the universe uncondusive to living things, especially in the globalization era. In addition, he argues that ecocriticism emanates from a bio-social surrounding of unbridled capitalism, uncurbed exploitation of mother-nature, apprehensive definitions and configurations of 'blooming' and ecological imperil. Mainly, the task of ecocriticism is to contribute to promoting eco-consciousness rather than ego-consciousness among mankind and

also investigate the politics of development and construction of 'nature'. Glotfelty (1996) argues that, ecocriticism is the analysis of the association between literature and the tangible umbworld.

It assumes an earth-centred approach to literary studies, which instead promotes eco-conscience rather than ego-conscience. She adds that, ecocriticism reserves as its field of study the associations allying the universe and literature, particularly the societal artifacts of discourse and cultural writings. Thus, ecocriticism theory in literary works, transacts betwixt the anthropoid and the nonhuman. It therefore examines the interconnections between authors, narratives, and the surrounding. In essence, *The Fall of the House of Usher* symbolizes ecocide as a result of human effort. Hence, it is symbolic of a vast destruction to and loss of domain of a given ecology cultivated and promoted by day-to-day human activities. The aim of this analysis is simply not to show the death of a given ecosystem in a particular area but rather to contribute to prevention of such an unfortunate culmination of activities symbolically. Death is one of the major tenets of ecocriticism theory.

SYMBOLISM IN THE OUTER DOMAIN OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

The outer domain alludes to the environment surrounding the dwelling of Usher. Focusing on the outer domain of the dwelling of Usher required an eco-centred reading that focused more on the exterior, such as on the house, and its vicinity than in the interior on the occupier and the structural part of it. Essentially, the focus was anchored on an ecocritic approach while analysing ideas of energy. Energy such as entropy was analysed. Entropy is the natural decay of either an organization or a structure in a given social system (Davis, 1983). It tends to widen breakdown of the organization. The symbiosis is portrayed when there is literally living together a mutually sustaining and co-existing system in and out of the house. However, the house

prevails as a cloistered entropic system, which has absolutely zero symbiotic relationships with the larger biosphere. For instance, the still loch mirrors the house's own stagnant image. Essentially, this symbolizes nations in Africa that end up stagnating economically, socially, and politically. The house inhales in the ambiance of its possessed decay symbolizing nations which continue decaying due to corruption and poverty.

The occupants of the house gradually breathe a concession of their own aerosphere above the Adam's ale, and the walls distinct from the other world. This symbolizes some of the African nations that continue breathing polluted air and living in compromising surroundings. The house has its acquired impermeable microclimate and as the culmination dawns, the house appears to mishmash in its hemmed in and nullified vivacity. For instance, the moment Usher and the narrator takes a glance via the window, they observe the prodigious dense clouds, dangling closely, as if compressing upon the terrace. However, that did not hinder them from kenning the life effect-speed in which the wind blew narrowing from all directions against each other with a passing away into the valence it almost blew them off the floor.

It therefore follows that, the house of Usher is disintegrated from being a subset of a living system set, but rather has its own ecosystem in which it lives in. This symbolizes some of the African nations that live in their own environment infested with poverty and few rich greedy individuals. There are zero new elements that emanate from outside the house to energize it and empower it to only grant but to invigorate different sets of living structures. It is like a life that has withered, or a salty water body that cannot sustain life and instead drains life out of living things. It is like a failing state or a burning flame with nothing to consume. The aloofness of the sentient house of Usher from the foundation of the liberal life-force metamorphosis's into a crevasse, that in turn gets aborted and eventually its energies are drawn and ruined. When the narrator peeps through the window, he mentions that a whirlwind that had appeared, vividly and openly gathered its energy from its own vicinity.

Therefore, symbolically an ecosystem damaged beyond repair and in the verge of its demise is

vividly portrayed in a horrific style by Poe. Most of African countries are actually horrific to live in given their state of economic and food challenges (Waithiru, 2019). This symbolizes life on a cooling and despite the coolness, decaying planet. It is a planet under a thick blanket of dysfunctional systems obstructed by its own destruction and isolated from any feasible wellspring of catharsis. Poe wilfully created a work symbolizing ecological disasters, nuclear winter, or solar exhaustion.

The vacant eye – like has a number of symbolic definitions. First, it symbolizes the hollow, cadaverous eyes of Usher. Bearing in mind that Usher is symbolic of rich individuals in African countries, the vacant eye-like symbolizes emptiness and lack of interest in life at large since due to plenty life has become boring to them. Secondly, Madeline Usher's cataleptic gaze is symbolic of emptiness of life not only in the house but a prediction of her eventual death due to lack of purpose. Thus, the vacant eye is symbolic of evil and emptiness in the story. This is symbolic of vacuity in most rich families from African countries due to lack of challenges to spice their life. The narrator explains that, as he was approaching the house, he couldn't avoid to gaze upon the site that laid before him. On the same breathe, he stared at the mere house, sweeping his stare over the simple landscape attributes of the surrounding, and then stared on the desolate walls before finally settling his gaze upon the vacant eye-like windows.

The bridge over the tarn represents Roderick Ushers' connector to the exterior environment that is not polluted as much as his. It is also symbolic of how people use others as a bridge to ascend to cleaner environments. Poe uses the bridge to foreground the need for the Usher's house to associate with the exterior world at large as the link in one's life or as means to vent and share experiences. The narrator describes that, "...Which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn" (Poe, 1839, p. 3). The bridge over the tarn hence symbolizes the narrator who serves as the bridge between Usher's and the outside surrounding. Therefore, the storm in the narrative represents tempestuous feelings encountered by not only Usher and his twin sister but also the narrator. Polluted

environments lead to conflicted emotions among people (Robert & Christine, 2016). The storm is symbolic of dissatisfaction among citizens in a polluted country. The narrator says that, "The storm was still abroad in all its wrath as I found myself crossing the old causeway. 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 alone behind me" (Poe, 1839, p. 4).

The upside-down reflection of the house in the loch represents the upended reasoning of the house's occupants. This symbolizes different perspectives and views the rich have that citizen view as unfounded and unrealistic in relation to the challenges faced. In addition, the crumbling of the dwelling vertically downward into the loch represents the descending order in which the Usher's genealogy is organized and consequently, its eventual demise. Symbolically it symbolizes the descension of some rich families in African countries that have acquired wealth through corruption and other polluted means. Thus it represents the culmination of Usher's family and ultimately end of some polluted dynasties in Africa especially during the globalization era. For example, the narrator says that, "...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 'House of Usher'" (Poe, 1839, p. 26).

A rank atmosphere in the narrative symbolizes a negative effect of being in Roderick's presence. The mentioned atmosphere is symbolic of polluted air and environment at large. The narrator argues that, he had worked upon his imagination in order to believe that there was a peculiar atmosphere to them and the immediate vicinage, which was within and without the precincts. He adds that, the atmosphere had no affinity with the air above its own blanket of a dark cloud, but emanated from the decomposed trees, and the pearly wall, and the hushed lagoon in the conformation of an unyielding haze. The weather and moon are symbolic of climates in African countries. The author describes a tempest that crops up, structuring together with the narrative as it blossoms. Tempests in an artistic work are often used to symbolize various conflicts and misunderstandings (Waithiru, 2019). When the

dwelling crumbles downwards into the loch, a full, blood-red moon appears overhead. The moon represents carnage and quietus in most polluted African countries. The narrator agrees with this when he says that,

"The storm was still abroad in all its wrath as I found myself crossing the old causeway...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" (Poe, 1839, p. 26).

SYMBOLISM ON THE PHYSICAL HOUSE OF USHER

The house of Usher represents most of African countries in Africa. The dark cloud sucking the energy from the house is symbolic of powerful nations sucking resources from African countries, especially in the era of globalization. The atmosphere around most African countries is polluted and hence not conducive. It often makes residents to be sorrowful. The narrator hints that, "I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow. A stern, deep and irredeemable gloom hung over and pervaded all" (Poe, 1839, p. 4). The author in the short story has overused the term fungus. According to Poe, the term fungus represents the fall of the Usher lineage and ultimately the decline of a community. Thus, the fungus ridden mansion is a symbol of a dying community, whereas the fall of the Ushers' family symbolizes the decline of a community as a result of pollution and disregard of our environment. The narrator describes that, minute fungi has permeated the whole exterior and is suspending in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves. This is symbolic of an ecosystem that is decaying. If the inhabitants had taken care of their surrounding there would be no decay. Further, he argues that the level of decay outside the house and particularly on its physical structure was more than the extraordinary dilapidation normally experienced in an ordinary decaying process. He maintains that there was not even a single portion of the masonry that had dropped. Consequently, he adds that there seemed to be a ferocious variability between its yet flawless acclimatization of components and an

entirely permeable, as well as conspicuously putrescent surroundings of the discrete stones.

Mardeline and her doublet brother Roderick Usher endure a kind of discretionary incarceration in the hoary, crumbling, secluded house of Usher, which stands contiguous to a malevolent-looking pool. This voluntary imprisonment is symbolic of how the rich segregate themselves from the poor and live in guarded estates. The narrator says that there was a swart ghastly lake that rested in ruffled lustre by the habitation. The lake is symbolic of living evil from the symbol of life-water. Different from normal functions of water, this lake facilitates a perfect environment for decay to bloom-pollution. This decay leads to the fall of the house. This is symbolic of falling nations in Africa. However, the rich usually have a vivid vision of a failing state. For instance, in the beginning, Usher tells the death of his sister Madeline would expose him to hopelessness and emptiness. Eventually, the house the sister dies not withstanding her brief resurrection the house ultimately falls. The narrator supports this by saying, "...So identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the "House of Usher" – an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion" (Poe, 1839, p. 15). The fall of the house is also symbolic of the fall of the family of Usher.

The vacant eye-like windows are symbolic of evil. They symbolize how the rich see the poor as dirt on the face of the earth. The narrator says, "... gazed down – but with a shudder even more thrilling than before – upon the re-modelled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant-like windows" (Poe, 1839, p. 3). Generally, the house is in a state of decline. Its neglect is paralleled by steadily diminishing health of the Usher's family. The image in the lake of an upside-down reflection of the house symbolizes a mislead nation engulfed by pollution and poor leadership chosen and determined by the rich. The house is clouded with sadness despite the occupants being rich. The narrator says that, "... I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view

of the melancholy House of Usher" (Poe, 1839, p. 1).

The fungi and the physical deterioration of the house symbolizes the physical deterioration of Roderick and Madeline. This symbolizes the level of pollution caused by the rich in most African countries. The narrator supports this when he says, "Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves" (Poe, 1839, p. 3). Further, he argues that the level of decay outside the house and particularly on its physical structure was more than the extraordinary dilapidation normally experienced in an ordinary decaying process. He maintains that there was not even a single portion of the masonry that had dropped. Consequently, he adds that there was an emergence of seemed to be a savage variance between its hitherto fore adaptation of components, and the entirely permeable, and conspicuously putrescent surroundings of the discrete stones. The structural "House of Usher" symbolizes the family line. This is because, according to Claire (2005), family lines of the nobility in England are referred to as 'Houses'. The family line of the several kings and nobility of England were called the "House of Lancaster". That is why the narrator says that, "What was it – I paused to think – what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher? It was a mystery all insoluble; nor could I grapple with the shadowy fancies that crowded upon me as I pondered" (Poe, 1839, p. 2).

SYMBOLISM INSIDE THE HOUSE OF USHER

Roderick Usher is a symbol of rich people in the community who expect much from the environment but offers nothing to the environment. As much they contribute less in polluting the environment, they also do not prevent pollution nor conserve the environment. Instead of taking care of the environment, they blame the environment for their woes and troubles. For instance, Usher talks about the capacity of saplings on the terrain and the fungus on the stones of the dwelling to evolve gradually, a seemingly evil atmosphere that shaped the destinies of the vast ancestry of Ushers. Ultimately, these people face extinction over time as their surroundings also die. The name 'Usher' as a persona in *The Fall of the House of Usher* is

symbolic in a number of ways. Basically, an usher is a door keeper. Usher opens doors of fear, such as when he opened for the narrator. Roderick is the lattermost Usher in the lineage of the Usher kinfolk. Unfortunately, he has no heir to carry on the Usher family nor bloodline.

Carlson & Poe (1971) explains that, the twin sister to Usher suffers from a strange wasting disease while he himself, a being of lofty and spiritual ideality is affected by a clear acuteness of both sight and smell senses, which renders him impotent to bare any contiguity with the ecosphere. In addition, through the narrator they mention that, Usher was oppressed by odours of all flowers and his eyes would really get tortured by a mere faint light. This symbolizes the effort of the environment to maintain itself by fighting against its oppressors such as the rich-Usher. The environment has its own rights and can be very dangerous and devastating to both humanity and plants when its rights are threatened (Morton, 2012) Ecocriticism avers that environment has right of its own. As much as man has dominion over everything on the planet (Howarth, 1996), the environment has rights. The narrator expounds that, Usher's only touch with the environment beyond himself is via artistic craft and literature. Much focus in the story is given to the mindset of Usher and the bizarre manner in which the narrators' advent treats Madeline. The narrator is symbolic of patriotic citizens in African nations who understand that African challenges require an African approach emanating from Africans in their own environment and not from other powerful nations. The narrator tells Usher that,

"These appearances, which bewildered you, are merely electrical phenomena not uncommon – or it may be that they have their ghastly origin in the rank miasma of the tarn. Let us close this casement: - the air is chilling and dangerous to your frame. Here is one of your favourite romances. I will read, and you shall listen: - and so we will pass away this terrible night together" (Poe, 1839, p. 12).

The narrator symbolically shows that literature has a place in contributing solutions to African challenges. According to Morton (2012), literature and art have a big role to play in the fight against environmental pollution. The narrator read a

romantic story to Usher and together they overcome the terrible night. The night is symbolic of major challenges in all spheres of life in most African countries. Despite being rich, most African rich people still depend on others and particularly in exploiting their environment. However, since the environment has rights, the same environment is fighting back from oppression. Most earlier fall is Ushers' mind from which darkness is safe and immanent pragmatic calibre put forth an all options of the virtuous and corporeal cosmos in one ascension of bloom. Usher then rejects entropy voluntarily but it still finds him. In most cases, the rich do not care how the environment fights for its rights and thus pollutes it with complete disregard of the consequences. Usher dives into culture totally but repels nature. For instance, he is photophobic – hypersensitive to light, and cannot bare natural light at all and favors to observe represented light in paintings. He also cannot bare natural sounds either, only the refined sound of melody. All these are evident instances and efforts of the environment fighting back those that threaten it.

Inside the house of Usher there are some ghastly images that symbolize the conflicted thoughts the rich have towards most of African countries. They use the poor as a stepping stone towards richness and wealth with complete disregard of the lives of others. They actually view the poor as pollution on the earth or commodities for use. The narrator confesses that, "...I reined my horse to the precipitous brink of a black and lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down – but with a shudder even more thrilling than before – upon the re-modelled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems..." (Poe, 1839, p. 3). At the central of the narrative, Usher evinces a vivid image by portraying the inner perspective of the vault prior to opening the vault itself. Kusserow (2018) argues that, humanity can see itself and debate how it has raped and waged violence against the environment through art. In a kind of a flash-forward, Usher and the narrator eventually put the 'dead' Madeline in a similar vault. This symbolizes how the rich prepare tombs in advance for their fellow rich loved ones. The supposed death of Madeline is symbolic of how the earth dies from the chock of environmental pollution. Nayar (2010) explains that nature is

feminine and is motherly to humankind and the ecosystem at large.

The poem recognized as ‘the haunted palace’ narrates about a palace that was at one point charming in an environment that was previously green. In that setting, wicked stuff in dishdasha of dejection assaulted the monarch’s high parkland. Green is synonymous to a clean and vibrant environment. However, the evil things in robes of sorrow are symbolic of the attire that was attired Madeline after her supposed death. Given that the rich pollute the environment constantly, the green setting which is symbolic of a healthy environment fight back in order to conserve itself and in the process, some of the polluters die. This is because, the environment has rights and ultimately power to destroy anything that threatens its existence (Howarth, 1996). Poe says that, Usher felt a shudder and a thrill that brooded his fancy paintings and moved from vagueness into clear comprehension of the words from the vivid images of the paintings that were before him.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to scrutinize the short narrative of *The Fall of the House of Usher* anchored on an ecocritic approach. At the end of the story, Usher dies. His death is symbolic of hope for the future for most African countries. However, the challenge is that if not taken care of, their death will also bring down nations. This is because the house is symbolic of most African nations flooded and suffocating under pollution and decay of morals and values. The narrator rides away as the house falls. This symbolizes that the solutions to most African countries’ challenges are in Africa and not outside. Outsiders will only abandon them at their time of need. The paper aims at portraying a picture of environmental pollution in African countries, its extent of damage and its ability to bring down nations and thus the need to control it.

REFERENCES

- Carlson, E. W. & Poe, E. A., (1971). *The Fall of the House of Usher*. Columbus, Ohio: Merrill.
- Claire, L. (2005). The Meanings of Home in Postwar Britain. *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 40, No. 2 pp. 341-362
- Davis, C. (1983). The Concept of Entropy in the Arts and Humanities. *Journal of the Library and Information*. 9: 135-148
- Glotfelty, C. na Fromm, H. (Eds.). (1996). *Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press.
- Howarth, B. R. (1996). Climate Changes and Overlapping Generations. *Journal of Contemporary Economic Policy*, 14(4). Pg. 100-111. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-7287.1996.tb00637.x>
- Katie, W. (2001). *A Dictionary of Stylistics*. 2nd Edition. Harlow: Longman (Pearson Education).
- Kusserow, K. (2018). “Welcome Remarks.” *Picture Ecology: Art and Ecocriticism in Planetary Perspective Symposium*. Princeton University: Princeton University Press, December, 7.
- Morton, T. (2012). *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Nayar, K. P. (2010). *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory: From Structuralism to Ecocriticism*. Delhi, India: Longman.
- Onyango, J. O. (2011). Imagery as a Pervasive Feature of Style: The Case of Ebrahim Hussein’s Mashetani (1971). In Makokha TKS, Kahaji, E., & Dipio, D. (Eds.), *In East African Literature: Essays on Written and Oral Traditions (pp. 399 – 414)* . Logus-Verlag Berlin.
- Poe, E. A. (1839, Semtember). The Fall of the House of Usher. *Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine* 1839.
- Robert, T.T. & Christine, M. B. (Eds.). (2016). *Ecocriticism and Geocriticism: Overlapping Territories in Environmental and Spacial Literary Studies*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Waithiru, A. K. (2019). ‘Matumizi ya Taashira Kuangaza Jiografia na Utandawazi Katika Tamthilia za Zilizala na Sudana’. *Tasnifu ya Uzamili, Chuo Kikuu cha Laikipia (Haijchapishwa)*.

Waithiru, A.K., Ogola, J.O., & Nabea, W. (2020). Tathmini ya Kipengele cha Taashira za Wahusika katika Tamthilia za Kimani Njogu: Mfano wa *Zilizala*. *Editon Cons. J. Kiswahili*, 2(1), 34-47

Waithiru, A. K., Nabea, W. K. & Onyango, J.O. (2021). Uamilifu wa Taashira katika Tamthilia za *Zilizala* na *Sudana*. *Mwanga wa Lugha Jarida la Idara ya Kiswahili na Lugha Nyingine za Kiafrika Chuo Kikuu cha Moi*, Juzuu 6 Na. 1, (uk. 43 – 54)