

“Delusion of Modern Man” A Study of Grotesque Elements in Poe’s *The Fall of the House of Usher*

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Abstract

The age of Enlightenment and the industrial revolution both affected people to doubt many old beliefs and form a new mentality. Man disregarded the spiritual side, imagination, and fantasy; the dominant concepts in society became logic, fact and science. This led to the death of the spiritual side in people. It turned to be a worrying subject to Intellectuals during the nineteenth century. In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Poe attacks modern man’s misconception believing that he can find an explanation to every phenomenon in the universe according to science and logic. He manages, through using grotesque elements, such as mystery, distortion, and the supernatural, to make the protagonist disregard his old belief and realize that cosmic, immeasurable, and, infinite powers do exist. This article aim is to analyse the story showing how the writer invested the elements of grotesque to create a broken fearful world which provokes horror inside the reader; to make him feel the possibility of having a similar experience to the one his protagonist has gone through.

The Theory

Critics have given variety of definitions and suggested many features to grotesque works. However, this article will only consider the definitions and qualities that are most obvious in the story. Sir Walter Scott sees the act of confusing “the supernatural with the absurd”... to be pushing “too far in the direction of the grotesque and fantastic;” (Lawson 1965:12) so, mystery, vagueness, and the supernatural are essential elements in grotesque works . By presenting mysterious and unexplainable situation the grotesque writer breaks the “boundaries of normalcy” in one way or another (Corey 1997:229) and presents a world that is estranged. The writer attempt is to motivate the reader to find new meaning through provoking the abnormal in the midst of the normal . All this is presented to the reader either through the visual imagery or the verbal explanation ; it should be kept hardly visible , and should be seen through glimpses .

Modern critics identify the characteristics and situations of grotesque in literature to be : “ the distortion of persons and objects , the yoking

of incompatibles , the fusion of the fearsome and ludicrous ” , in addition to “ inducing in the reader a sense of dislocation and insecurity ; ” (Nettels 1974 : 144) the reader here feels himself in a different world that is frightening and threatening . According to Wilson Yates (1997) : “ grotesque images distort , exaggerate , and present to us a world that is twisted and broken ; ” (55) no realistic world is presented , but usually a dream-like world in which we meet characters , animals and / or objects that are enormously distorted .

Human beings are given inanimate features and the inanimate are given human beings features , it is a “ categorical transgression , ” as Meindl (1996 : 15) calls it . This feature usually arouses mystery and fear too . When the transformation and loss of identity are highlighted , it causes the individual’s identity to be wholly or partially lost . As the identity “ fluctuate or be totally transformed ” it would contribute to either alienation or degradation or both . Hence , the reasonably structured world sees “ any destruction of symmetry or distortion of size which subverted the natural order came to be labelled grotesque ” which reflects “ such deviation as perverted and sinister ” (Benbow 1968 : 86) . The world-vision in which we have everything is normal and has predictable values and links , turn to be over thrown in grotesque work through “ giving full reign to the illogical and the absurd ” (Kayser, 1963 : 59) . For this reason , the suitable background for a grotesque “ is one of darkness and obscurity, suggesting something ominous or sinister ” (Timm 1972 : 79) . Poe presents these features in *The Fall of the House of the Usher* to create a strange world in which he forces his protagonist to realize and admit the supernatural in the world.

Elements of Grotesque in the Story

Deformity

Deformity is a vital element in the story; it is represented through two aspects sickness and decay. The characters’ deformity is represented physically and mentally. A sign of Usher’s serious sickness is his utterly changed features which arouses “a feeling half of pity, half of awe” inside the speaker. Usher is awfully changed to the extent that the speaker could hardly believe him to be the same “companion of [his] early boyhood,” and even doubted whom he is speaking to:

The now ghastly pallor of the skin and the now miraculous luster of the eye, above all things startled and even awed me. The silken hair, too, had been suffered to grow all unheeded, and as in its wild gossamer texture, it floated rather than fell about the face, I could not, even with effort, connect its Arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity (438) .

The narrator describes Roderick's eyes, skin and hair and connects them with "Arabesque expression" rather than "with any idea of simple humanity". Usher's " eyes and web-like hair " , as many critics have elucidated , are in great resemblance with " the windows and the fungi surrounding the house of Usher " (Fenlon 1994 : 2) .The " vacant eye-like windows " motivates fear for it inspires the image of a skull . When he speaks his voice varied quickly from a timid "in decision (when the animal spirits seemed utterly in abeyance) to that species of energetic concision" (439). Through this description, Poe is mingling the animate with the inanimate.

Usher is an artist for he draws paintings and plays music. His mental disturbance is shown in his isolation from the world, and it is also reflected in his drawings. He draws a painting , before his sister's death , in which he presented " the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel ; " it had low, smooth , white walls .The painting conveyed the idea that this dig lay at a very deep place below the surface of the earth . It had no passage, and "no torch or other artificial source of light was discernible; yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendor" (444). This is an exact image of the place he later buries his sister a life. Usher has maliciously plotted the living death of his sister; his sketch becomes a madman's phantasmagorical conception of an anticipated crime. Usher, "as the sharer of his identical twin sister's soul, had psychic knowledge that Madeline was entombed alive" (Guilds 1957: 220). His real problem is his illusions which imprisoned him in that house, thinking of nothing except vital death that was creeping to him. This gradually causes in their degradation and transformation into real sick people with a sickness that has no remedy.

Alteration in Usher's appearances increases greatly after the burial of Madeline. The paleness of his face became "a more ghastly 'hue - but the

luminousness of his eye had utterly gone out” (451). His normal manner had gone. His regular occupations were deserted or forgotten. He never slept and kept roaming from one room into another; he remained silent while deep inside he was expecting an approaching evil.

Madeline also suffers distortion. She is mentally disturbed like her brother because of her malady. It made her alienate herself from the world and, later, from her own brother too by secluding herself in her room. After announcing her death, she is buried in the vault at “great depth.” The place is protected by a door made of “massive iron” which produces a “sharp, grating sound ” caused by its heavy weight . After eight nights from her burial , she becomes enormously strong . Gaining a tremendous power , she frees herself from her tomb , and breaks the heavy door in order to have her vengeance on Roderick . This reflects a physical distortion , for she has obtained certain supernatural powers through her desire to have revenge .

Usher surrendered to the family’s fate and makes himself and his sole sister subject to death out of the mental sickness he suffered . They both alienated themselves and waited desperately for death .

As for the images of decay , they are shown in the description of the landscape and the house with the “ white trunks of decayed trees , ” the “ ghastly tree-stems , ” the “ [M]inute fungi overspread ” that formed a “ web - work from the eaves , ” in addition to the “ fissure ” that comes down from the roof of the building in front...down ... “ until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn ” (436) . The tarn is “ black and lurid , ” and when the narrator gazed down at it , the reflection of the house “ the remodelled and inverted images of the gray[sic] sedge , and the ghastly tree – stems , and the vacant and eye - like windows , ” (433) made him tremble and feel frightened .

The house is very old and has a large fissure , however , it stand still for no portion of it has fallen . The inside of the house is not much better ; the rooms are “ large and lofty , ” light is feeble, and dark curtains hung upon the walls . As for the furniture , it is “ profuse , comfortless , antique , and tattered , ” (438) in effect it makes the protagonist shocked . The first sight of the House irritates “ a sense of insufferable gloom , ” with “ utter depression of soul , ” and a sort of an “ iciness , a sinking , a sickening of the heart ” to him (433) . The house is one of “ excessive antiquity ; ” something noticeable through the “ discoloration of ages ” (436) . The vault in which they later burry Madeline , is described as being “ unopened ” for too long that the “ torches , half smothered in its oppressive atmosphere , ” the narrator describes it as “ small , damp , and entirely without means of admission for light ” (449) . Everything about the house

is decaying and rotten ; the surrounding , the inside , and the vault . This creates an image of anxiety and fear . There is the sense of coldness , stillness and death felt in the description , but it is for no specific reason . The mysterious ancient house with its old furniture , queer inhabitants , and gloomy landscape , all evoke fear inside the speaker .

Through creating images of decay , deformity , and sickness Poe manages to create a world that is estranged and fearsome . We have a different world in which everything is exaggerated ; the decay that is sensed everywhere both in humans and objects , and the deformity which is caused by mysterious incurable sickness . These aspects induce a sense of dislocation , anxiety , and insecurity .

The Unexplainable

The story is full of mysterious and inexplicable situations. These elements are obvious from the first paragraph in the story. In his way to Usher's house, the protagonist gets the feeling of unease inside. In an attempt to answer the question "what was it," he busies himself describing the scene around him. He looks constantly around the place; the house of the Usher and its natural surroundings, yet, his efforts are in vain for he cannot find the cause for that "utter depression of soul". It might be the gloomy feeling he gets from seeing the images of decay all over the place. But the reason behind the decay in the landscape around the house is not clarified.

There is contradiction in Roderick's summoning of his friend (the narrator) ; he is " one of [his] boon companions in boyhood ," (433) but they have not seen each other for years . However, Roderick hopes that the " cheerfulness " of his friend's company may lessen his sad and enigmatic malady (434) . This shows that Roderick and the narrator are not so intimate friends ; their friendship goes back to their days at school , and later on they were separated . So , the reason of summoning him , in particular , is not clarified .

Roderick is described to be in an agitated and unnatural state of terror . He used to be a very reserve in his manners , but , now he becomes a " wan being " for he suffered " an excessive nervous agitation , " and " a morbid acuteness of the senses , " with " an anomalous species of terror "(438) . He is afraid of both his sickness and the gloomy expectations of madness and death . Moreover, both Roderick, and his sister are the last descendant of a " very ancient family " (434) ; the family had lived in the

house for generations . However , the house , as Usher superstitiously believes , has a hideous effect over his health and being .

The action and conflict of story are created from the problem of the family ancestry and its extension. The narrator states that he :

Had learned ... that the stem of the Usher race ...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 (434 – 435)

The narrator is terrified to know the fact of the family's fatal death , and he remains with Usher , yet , he does not seem to be of much help . He never considers Ushers' words seriously; rationally, he cannot make a link between the malady and the house .

He does not have an opportunity to talk to Madeline - only to glimpse her on the day of his arrival . Usher had merely told his old friend that she was wasting away from some baffling disease , against which she “ had steadily borne up ” (424) . That is the sole incident in which he sees Madeline alive , so he did not get any idea concerning her sickness which inclined her to act in this strange , passive manner . Her attitude toward her brother is unknown , too , for she never speaks a word throughout the story .

The mysterious malady of Roderick and Madeline is not explained to the readers . Roderick states that his malady is “ a constitutional and family evil , and one for which he despaired to find a remedy ” (440) . His sickness display itself in many unusual feelings :

He suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses ; the most insipid food was alone endurable ; he could wear only garments of certain texture ; the odors[sic] of all flowers were oppressive ; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light ; and there were but peculiar sounds , and these from stringed instruments , which did not inspire him with horror.

He is positive that he will lose both mind and life as a consequence of this malady. He adds that his malady is linked with the family's house : the grey walls , turrets , and the dim tarn beside it . Nevertheless he remained living in it waiting for that sad destiny . Roderick's gloomy nature is largely due , as he confesses with hesitation , to his sole and twin sister who suffers from an unknown and incurable sickness . Her death is fatal and she is going to leave the world soon . She finally submits to the “ prostrating power of the destroyer ; ” as the narrator :

**And I learned that the glimpse I had
obtained of her person would thus probably
be the last I should obtain – that the lady ,
at least while living , would be seen by me no
more (442) .**

Madeline's sickness remains obscure ; and Roderick's decision to bury her in the vault makes things vaguer . The justification of his fear shows that he knows hidden reasons for his sister's malady. He makes precaution to save her body from the doctor who might steal her corps for scientific study . His fear also might possibly be a result of the physician's knowledge (or suspicion) of the mentally unbalanced Usher's plans to entomb his sister a life . Roderick entombing of his sister a live is a horrifying action that is inexplicable .

Everything about Madeline is fearful and puzzling including the ceremonies of her burial . Usher never let anyone carry the body or witness the burial except the narrator and himself ; the tom is located exactly under the protagonist's bedroom for no clear reason . The narrator says that the sickness has left on the dead body “ the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face , ” and a “ suspiciously lingering smile ” upon her lips while she was entombed (450) . They locked the huge iron door in the entrance of the vault not to let anyone go in or out of the place . But the fear is not over his sister's body, as later we see, but rather from it . Roderick hidden secret is the expectation of an evil approach. Madeline's sickness, seclusion, burial, and later reappearance are all mysteriously exaggerated to arise anxiety.

There is a symbolic relation between the state of the house and its inhabitants. The isolation of Roderick and Madeline is like the isolation of the house in a gloomy landscape. The decaying and collapsing condition of the house is similar to the degenerating and dying state of its inhabitants. The reasons behind Roderick's final madness; the death of both brother and sister ; the destruction of the house , are quite strange and unexplainable .

They seem to be embedded in some supernatural claim ; consequently this claim is not clarified .

The Sinister Atmosphere

The whole atmosphere of the story is gloomy , dark , and evil . When the protagonist is riding towards the house , he describes the day to be “ a dull , dark , and soundless day of the autumn of the year , ” while “ the shades of the evening drew on ” (432) . Autumn is the season of decay ; the evening , the quietness , stillness , and shades are all symbols for death . There is nothing in that area except a “ mere house ” in the mid of a “ simple landscape , ” with few sedges , and “ a few white trunks of decaying trees ” (432) . A gloomy landscape depicted in a sad season to create the confused mind of the narrator .

Images of decay , death and distortion are filling the whole place . The inside of the house reflects similar aspects ; it is lifeless , dark , and rotten . The vault’s long entrance which is “ sheathed with copper , ” is the place where Madeline’s body is later preserved ; it constructs a “ region of horror ” (449) . The narrator comments on the whole thing he observes saying :

“ the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity – an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven , but which had reeked up from the decayed trees , and the gray [sic] wall , and the silent tarn – a pestilent and mystic vapour , [sic] dull , faintly discernible , and leaden – hued ” (436) .

The house is unique in its features and atmosphere which has nothing heavenly; there is just rotten smell, grey walls, dullness, and sickly breath.

Roderick’s art of playing music and drawing paintings are bizarre which makes the protagonist “ shudder[s] knowing not why , ” (443) . He , yet , calls Usher a “ hypochondriac ” and his notions “ phantasmagoric , ” for the sense mystery and vagueness in Roderick’s paintings , and feels unease concerning the music he plays .

The narrator’s terror and anxiety increases when Roderick announces Madeline’s death , and his plan to preserve her corpse for a “ fortnight ” in one of the household vaults . Roderick’s believes in the possibility of the physician’s attempt to rob Madeline’s grave to perform an autopsy .

Trusting his memory of the “ sinister countenance ” (449) of the physician whom he had seen on the night of his arrival , the protagonist does not oppose the plan .

After Madeline’s burial, Roderick turns from bad to worse. The narrator is affected seriously by this deterioration. He admits that Roderick’s “condition terrified ... [and] infected” him (451) . Within the intensifying action of the story , a storm starts and the whole world of the story is frighteningly disturbed ; full of lively strange forces that are sick with evil . Their entombing Madeline in the vault highlights the proximity of psychological disturbance. Neither the narrator’s rationality nor his scientific explanations were useful to calm Roderick .

During the time before the appearance of the conjured Madeline , the night is described as “ wildly singular in its terror and its beauty ” : the “ violent alteration ” of the whirlwind , the “ exceeding density of the clouds , ” and the absence of the moon , stars , and lightening all predict to Roderick the approach of evil , while the narrator insists on interpreting the whole thing as “ merely electrical phenomena ” (453) . The terror permeating the place is revealed through the description of the powerful storm blowing over the landscape .The storm is described as being “ abroad in all its wrath ” (459) , bearing in upon the house with “ huge masses of agitated vapor ” (453) , and producing “ unnatural light of a faintly luminous and distinctly visible gaseous exhalation which hung about and enshrouded the mansion ” (453) . The powerful wind symbolizes the amount of terror alive inside the character .

In his attempt to calm Roderick , the narrator starts reading aloud *The Mad Tryst* ; a novel that tells a story of a knight named Ethelred who enters into

a hermit’s house to avoid an imminent storm . There he finds a palace of gold protected by a dragon . On the wall , there is a hanging shield of shining brass on which a legend is written . The legend says that who slays the dragon gains the shield . Ethelred , the knight kills the dragon , which dies producing a shriek . So he takes the shield which falls on floor causing a frightening clang. However, the story unfortunately gives an opposite result .

Instead of decreasing the horror inside Roderick, a real horror starts with the sounds that are heard somewhere in the house; there is cracking and ripping sounds while the protagonist is reading the knight’s forceful admission into the house; the dragon’s shriek sound is heard within reading

its slaughter; a reverberation also heard when he describes the dropping down of the shield from the wall. The “*Mad Trist*” story is invested by Poe to increase the fear and anxiety in the story. There is the break of normalcy; when within each event both men hear real sounds suggesting what is happening in the story. The existence of a supernatural power within the household is felt strongly within this part .

Usher is guilty of , knowingly , committing Madeline to a living death . He becomes increasingly hysterical for he senses the imminence of his punishment and end . Finally , he cries that the sounds are made by Madeline who is coming to take him away. Here , Roderick admits his guilt for entombing his sister alive . Madeline appears at the room’s door . She runs towards Usher , falls on him , and they both land as corpses on the floor .

Feeling extremely horrified , the protagonist rushes out of the house . While he is running away , he senses a flash of light that makes him look back , early enough to see the house breaking into two , and watches the remains sink into the tarn . Just as the author presents uncommonly strange storm , he also drives his narrator out of this storm into very awkward refuge . The house and its wild setting are abnormally alive with death .Whatever happened is not normal or natural ; the supernatural is evident and its influence is startling .

Poe creates a world in which the surrounding reality begins to collapse . It is a transitional world that may be linked to a dream . A dream that is horrifying that is more like a nightmare in its aspects .

Rationality versus Superstition

The narrator is a person who consistently quit any justification that is not in consensus with ordinary fact . He is rationalist and a sceptic regarding the supernatural , and he is the “ chief device for concealment ” (Bailey 1964 : 445). He refuses to see the incidents in Roderick’s way , thus never supplies the reader with any explanation for he never considers Roderick’s words seriously. His internal melancholy is underscored by the constant resolve on observing things superficially just to show how much it is a matter of something within rather than without . He contemplates sadly human being as he states :

It was a mystery all insoluble ... I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion , that while , beyond doubt , there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us , still the analysis of this power lies among considerations beyond our depth (433) .

The protagonist is convinced that life is based on facts and logic , the hidden reality is suppressed deep inside him . It struggles to find a way out , and , eventually causes a feeling of melancholy inside . The things he observes are “ bleak , ” “ vacant , ” “ rank , ” and “ decayed ” . There is no stimulating spirit , no soul . Poe stresses on this idea to let the reader critically sense it .

Within his arrival to the place , he gets the feeling that there is something shadowy about the house . He has some terrifying pattern forming in his mind , yet , he removes from his soul “ what must have been a dream , ” (436) for he avoids indulging himself in that portion of life where his questions cannot get logical answers . We are “ placed inside the mind of this leading character - narrator who becomes only a step away from insanity ” (Timmerman 228) because of the experience he goes through the Usher’s dwelling . At the beginning , he is not involved physically or psychologically in the events , later he becomes an insider and a participant in a drama obviously his own .

He is inflexibly rationalistic concerning Roderick’s notion about the link between the house and the Usher’s illness . The narrator mentions the notion , as he clarifies ; just because his friend has it , and insisted on its existence . While the narrator , with “ earnest abandon , ” sees it merely as creation of “ disordered fancy , ” and he does not comment on it . Actually , he is unable to comprehend the mystery of the house and prefers not to indulge himself in the unknown .

He tends to regard Roderick as a mad person , and rejects all his clarifications . He is a rationalist who disregards any evidence of the supernatural and sees no logic between the ancient house and the family’s malady. However , he feels deep inside the strangeness of the entire situation . The aspects of Roderick’s sickness , the specific things he could not deal which proves that his malady is caused by uncanny influences . Roderick tells him through his song of “ *The Haunted Palace* ” that the

house was attacked and altered into this ghastly shape by mysterious powers , yet he does not seem to get the hint .

The storm that takes place ; the appearance of dead Madeline who was entombed for many days in her coffin ; her extraordinary strength in breaking out from the vault and coming back to bear Usher to death ; the collapse of the house and its complete disappearance in the water of the tarn , all show the existence of supernatural power that controls the place and leads the family to its fatal destiny.

The sinking of the house into the reflecting tarn exaggerates the sinking of the rational part of the mind , which has vainly struggled “ to maintain some contact with a stable structure of reality outside the self , ” (Timmerman 229) and it also shows how Usher’s final state of hysteria infects the narrator . *The Fall of the House of the Usher* is confirming that nature “ has wonders and comprehensible systems far beyond the trivially limiting perspective of ‘ science ’ or man ” (Benoit 2000 : 2) . At the end the narrator’s rationality is defeated in the face of supernatural for he could not give one single justification for the events that took place in the house of Usher .

Through the use of the previous elements , Poe manages in presenting a typical grotesque story . There are the elements of fear , mystery , and distortion ; images of gloominess , darkness , decay and death indicated clearly. The story is created in a world that is twisted , strange , and paranormal in all aspects . The existence of the supernatural is felt in every corner in the house and with every event in the story . Poe desires to clarify that supernatural is part of this universe . Being unable to subdue it to scientific observation and examination does not eliminate it.

He intentionally creates vagueness in the story, something that is highly artistic . Reason is defeated for we are surrounded by phenomena that are not intelligible for the human mind . Poe’s aim is to agitate the reader into a wakefulness of the spirituality within , because he believes that all people are part and element of the divine . God has created the world out of nothing . The storm that struck the house indicates the supremacy of the supernatural powers over logic and science .

Conclusion

Poe uses the grotesque thematically in *The Fall of the House of the Usher*, because , here , it dominates the atmosphere of the whole story . The impression of grotesque is achieved when the audience feel life going wrong and see the distortion of the normal order of things . The sense in

lack of reason , logic , symmetry , balance or harmony grows within the events . The breaking down of reality evokes horror in the reader , and it extends as he understands that what happens to the narrator could happen to himself and then to the world . We can consider the appearance of Madeline in the stormy night and her action to be a miniature of the entire story . While attacking modern man's misconception in using logic and science to explain the world's phenomenon , he shows some romantic tendencies . However , he is not against Enlightenment thinking . In effect he hoped for a little agreement between the two . Usually grotesque occupies a space that is not definite between opposites ; faith and doubt , belief and disbelief . It is exactly the reason that enables grotesque to maintain the quality which makes it conform to Scott's concept of the " marvellous " .

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"الفكر الإنساني العصري المظلل" دراسة
عناصر اللا مألوف للكاتب بوو في انهيار قصر أشر
المدرسة هدى كاظم عنوان
وزارة التعليم العالي والبحث العلمي
مديرية العلاقات والبعثات الدراسية والثقافية

المخلص:

لقد كان عصر التنوير والثورة الصناعية الاثر الابرز في عقول الناس مما جعلهم يشككون في الكثير من المعتقدات السابقة وتبني طريقة حديثة في التفكير. فازداد الانسان للجانب الروحاني والخيالي والافكار السائدة في المجتمع اصبحت هي الأفكار المنطقية والعلمية ولقد أدى هذا إلى تلاشي الجانب الروحي لدى الناس مما شكل قلقاً لمفكري القرن التاسع عشر.

ولقد هاجم بوو في انهيار قصر أشر الفكر الانساني العصري المظلل حيث بإمكان الانسان أن يجد تفسير لأية ظاهرة في الكون علمياً ومنطقياً وقد تمكن من خلال تبني عناصر اللا مألوف كالغموض والتشويه وخوارق العادات من ان يجعل البطل يزدرى مفاهيمه القديمة ويدرك حقيقة وجود القوى الكونية اللامتناهية . يهدف البحث الى تحليل القصة لتوضيح آلية استغلال الكاتب لعناصر اللا مألوف لخلق عالم كاسر للخوف مما أثار الرعب في نفس القارئ وأعطاه الشعور بان يخوض تجربة مماثلة لما خاضها البطل.