

# The Gothic Incest Between Siblings

## —*The Monk and The Fall of the House of Usher*

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Incest is an important topic in the Gothic literature, which produces horror by reflecting a kind of morbid desire. The Gothic incest between siblings shows some conventions and transformations in the development. This paper analyses this motif by studying the siblings in Lewis's *The Monk* and Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*. It begins with two conventions—first, incest is driven by the victimizer's psychological problem, and second, it brings a catastrophe to the whole family. Then, it turns to two transformations—the first change is the narrative style of the incest, and the second one is the gender roles and sexual relations in the incest. Lastly, it comes to the conclusion that incest between siblings in our real life calls for more attention to the proper sexual education within family.

*Keywords:* Poe, Taboo, Sex, psychological Gothic, The Gothic conventions and transformations

### Introduction

Taboo is one of the most attractive features of the Gothic literature. Not only can it easily stir up fear and anxiety, but also satisfy people's psychology of seeking for thrill. Although taboos vary from culture to culture, one common taboo is incest. There are various kinds of incest, such as father-daughter, mother-son, siblings. None of these sexual relations is acceptable for their detrimental effects. However, it is the feelings of disgust and discomfort, together with the emotions of shock and horror that make incest a popular motif among the Gothic writers.

This essay aims to illustrate that the Gothic incest between siblings harms themselves and the family, and it reflects the social gender problem. The study is based on the siblings Ambrosio and Antonia in Lewis's *The Monk*, as well as Roderick and Madeline in Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher*. It first explicates the conventions that the incest is driven by the victimizer's psychological problem, and it brings a catastrophe to the whole family. Then it turns to the transformations in the narrative style of the incest, as well as the gender roles and sexual relations in the incest. Finally, it draws a conclusion that the incest in our real life calls for our attention.

## 2. The Conventions of the Gothic Incest Between Siblings

### 2.1 The Victimizer's Psychological Problem Drives Incest

Generally, incest is believed to be driven by the violator's psychological problem. In *The Monk*, the incest is a result of Ambrosio's psychological problem caused by asceticism and his mother's abandonment. First, the ascetic life in the abbey as a saint makes Ambrosio a hypocrite. On the one hand, he takes pride in his high morality. On the other hand, he feels the instinctive sexual desire. The harder he tries to repress his sexual desire, the stronger it grows. Thus, he constantly struggles in the conflict between divinity and humanity. At the same time, the incestuous desire derives from Ambrosio's search for the absent mother. His mother's abandonment of him in the childhood breeds an unconscious eagerness for the maternal love. This feeling is projected onto the picture of the Virgin. He sighs, "If such a Creature existed, and existed but for me! Were I permitted to twine round my fingers those golden ringlets, and press with my lips the treasures of that snowy bosom!" (Lewis, 1796, p. 32). In other words, he feels a sexual desire towards the Virgin. However, his identity as a friar means that the Virgin is supposed to be his spiritual mother. Hence, such sexual desire towards the Virgin symbolizes an incestuous desire. The sister Antonia, who is innocent, virtuous and beautiful, is an embodiment of the Virgin in reality. As a distorted image of the mother, she holds great attraction for Ambrosio. Consequently, Antonia becomes the target and victim of Ambrosio's incestuous desire.

Similarly, in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the incest between siblings is driven by Roderick's morbid mental state. Roderick himself is conscious of his "acute bodily illness of a mental disorder which oppressed him" (Poe, 1839, p. 2). Indeed, it has to do with the uncanny House of Usher. The narrator's first impression of it is "a sense of insufferable gloom" (Poe, 1839, p. 1), and he later finds that Roderick's mental condition is enchained by some superstition about the dwelling—"an influence which some peculiarities in the mere form and substance of his family mansion, had, by dint of long sufferance, he said, obtained over his spirit" (Poe, 1839, p. 5). In other words, the house with unusual melancholy seems to have the power to affect the mentality of the dwellers. Thus, the siblings demonstrate an unaccountable abnormal air and the eccentricities in their personality. Besides, Roderick leads the life of a recluse in the house. He considers the narrator, whom he has not met for years, as his best and only friend. This means that Roderick has little interaction with the outside world. Nor does he have a big family. Instead, the fact that "the entire family lay in the direct line of descent" (Poe, 1839, p. 2) suggests that there is a stronger family bond between the siblings compared with those from a big family. Without friends and relatives, they are the only companion for each other in the isolated house. Gradually, the incest is catalysed by the physical isolation in the house and closer emotional attachment between the siblings.

### 2.2 The Incest Leads to the Catastrophe of the Whole Family

It seems that there is a consensus that the Gothic incest between siblings will result in the destruction of the whole family. According to Jeff Sebo (2006), incest is immoral due to the physiological reason and the family reason – "it might lead to the conception of a genetically deformed child" (p. 1) and "it undermines the family, the emotional center for the individual" (p. 1). That is, incest as deviance goes against human evolution and family ethic.

Clearly, Ambrosio's unintentional incest leads to the catastrophe of the whole family. First, the unintentional incestuous desire drives him to kill his mother accidentally. After the guise of his friendship is

unmasked, he trembles “with rage, when He thought that had it not been for Elvira, He should now have possessed the object of his desires. With the direct imprecations He vowed vengeance against her” (Lewis, 1796, p. 195). The fear of being publicly unmasked breeds the resentment and contributes to his later murder. Worse still, finding he is able to escape from punishment, a criminal tendency is nourished with a greater desire to get Antonia at any cost. Driven by such morbid lust, Ambrosio goes further on the path of moral degeneration when he destroys Antonia’s chastity and kills her to conceal his crimes. In the end, the monk also meets his doom. He is sentenced to death as an “Inhuman Parricide” and an “Incestuous Ravisher” (Lewis, 1796, p. 324). Saying “hell boasts no miscreant more guilty than yourself” (Lewis, 1796, p. 324), the daemon announces Ambrosio’s heinous crimes. As a result of the incest, he commits the worst crime in the world—matricide. In fact, parricide is a capital offence in ancient Rome. Offenders would be placed in a leather sack with an animal, then thrown into the sea, lake, or river (Kennedy, 2018). The parallelism between the ancient execution and Ambrosio’s final death in the river reflects the common cultural belief in the primacy of the family. Hence, the incest which damages the family is intolerable all the time.

The doom of the House of Usher tells the enormity of intentional incest. The narrator learns that “the stem of the Usher race, all time-honoured 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” (Poe, 1839, p. 2). The lack of branch means that the whole family lineage is based on incest, which hinders the Ushers from being a flourishing big family. Their ancestors encourage marriages between their children in order to keep the aristocratic family blood pure. Due to the bad family decision in the way of living, the members suffer from “a peculiar sensitivity temperament, through long ages” (Poe, 1839, p. 2). That is, incest leaves the descendants deformed psychologically. It seems that Roderick has already foreseen his doom after Madeline’s decease due to their bond. The “dead” sister returns “with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated” (Poe, 1839, p. 15). We can see that the premature burial of Madeline causes the ultimate death of the siblings. While Madeline dies from her arduous effort to escape from the coffin, Roderick dies of fear of his Madeline’s return and revenge. With the death of siblings, the lineage of the Usher terminates. Indeed, the obsession with pure blood has already announced the predestined decadence of the family. Therefore, it is no wonder that the whole family ends up destruction.

### **3. The Transformation of the Conventions of the Gothic Incest Between Siblings**

#### **3.1 The Narrative Style of the Incest**

Despite the inheritance of the conventions, there are also some transformations in the Gothic incest. One of the most conspicuous differences is the narrative style of the Gothic incest. The explicit and sensational narrative of the incestuous rape contributes to the notorious fame of *The Monk*. Though Ambrosio’s initial affection for Antonia seems pure rather than erotic, the increasing desire for this legally unattainable girl contributes to his attempt to seduce Antonia. When Antonia is within his reach in the vault, “his lust was become madness. Of his fondness for Antonia, none but the grosser particles remained: He longed for the possession of her person” (Lewis, 1796, p. 280). Apparently, so enormously does his sexual desire grow that his initial pure love is overwhelmed. The poor Antonia, who seems like a prey under the predator, becomes an object to vent sexual desire. The morbid Ambrosio vents his long-repressed desire by raping this girl tyrannically. “He stifled her cries

with kisses, treated her with the rudeness of an unprincipled Barbarian, proceeded from freedom to freedom, and in the violence of his lustful delirium, wounded” (Lewis, 1796, p. 284). Such graphic and sensational depiction of sexual violence shows horrible moral degeneration of a respectable saint. When such dreadful rape turns out to be incest, the Gothic horror is totally aroused in readers’ heart. In fact, critics attacked *The Monk* for being too sensational and condemned it for the depiction of rape and incest. For example, Coleridge in his critique of the novel stated, “*The Monk* is a romance, which if a parent saw in the hands of a son or daughter, he might reasonably turn pale” (Maity, 2020). It seems that Lewis’s explicit and sensational narrative of the Gothic incest has gone beyond social acceptance for its potential poisonous effect on the readers, especially the young.

On the contrary, *The Fall of The House of Usher* shows an implicit and subtle narrative of the Gothic incestuous tendency. Poe took great care to convey the incest through the description of the unexpected nature of the siblings. First, as we have mentioned above, the fact that “the entire family lay in the direct line of descent” (Poe, 1839, p. 2) hints at the history of inbreeding practice within the Ushers. As a result, the incest prevents the family from flourishing. Besides, “a peculiar sensibility of temperament” (Poe, 1839, p. 2) is inherited throughout the family. This unusual quality of the family, and the physically and mentally unhealthy siblings, suggests the pernicious influence of the incest. Furthermore, the incestuous relation is carefully implied through the resemblance between the siblings. The narrator finds, “A striking similitude between the brother and sister now first arrested my attention; ... the deceased and himself had been twins, and that sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them” (Poe, 1839, p. 10). That is, their twinship produces an incomprehensible emotional bond between them. Specifically, the siblings as twins are the double of each other, whose stronger psychological connection will unconsciously pull them together compared with normal siblings. Perhaps the reason of such an implicit narrative is that incest as a taboo belongs to the realm of the “unspeakable”. The “unspeakable” mainstream discourse prevents many writers from presenting this theme explicitly and overtly. The careful treatment of the Gothic incest in *The Fall of the House of Usher* thus fits the social and cultural norms.

### 3.2 The Change of the Gender Roles in the Incest

Another great transformation in the Gothic incest is the change of the gender roles. Traditionally, as Hooks (2004) states, in a patriarchal society, males maintain their “dominance over females through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence” (p. 18). *The Monk* as a male Gothic novel shows the typical male domination-female submission relationship. Ruth Perry (2004) states that brothers and fathers are equally dangerous to the heroines, because they see their female relatives as possessions in their power and hence possible sex objects (p. 377). This is true. In *The Monk*, the incest serves as a way for Ambrosio to satisfy his male desire for power and authority.

Obviously, Antonia as a female is looked at as a sexual object under the male gaze. Ambrosio states, “Her [Antonia’s] cheeks were pale, her eyes dimmed with tears, and her hair fell in disorder over her face and bosom. Still her countenance was so sweet, so innocent, so heavenly, as might have charmed an heart less susceptible, than that which panted in the Abbot’s breast” (Lewis, 1796, p. 177). Undoubtedly, Ambrosio gazes at Antonia’s body from a erotic perspective, which means he projects his fantasy onto the female figure. Worse still, such male gaze further evolves into a desire to possess and dominate the female body with his power. He says to Antonia in

the vault, “I possess you here alone; You are absolutely in my power, and I burn with desires which I must either gratify or die: But I would owe my happiness to yourself” (Lewis, 1796, p. 282). That is, he uses his power to deprive Antonia’s freedom so that he can turn her into his personal property to fulfil his desire. He further rapes the girl with violence to completely control her body. “Heedless of her tears, cries and entreaties, He gradually made himself Master of her person, and desisted not from his prey, till He had accomplished his crime and the dishonour of Antonia” (Lewis, 1796, p. 283). It seems that he not only satisfies his male desire by dominating Antonia, but also gains a sense of superiority through staining her chastity. Here the sister in the Gothic incest shows an image of a “damsel in distress”. It can be seen that the female is a victim of the male desire in the patriarchal society, and the violence and horror of the Gothic incest are grounded in the female.

However, the gender roles in the incest between the siblings in *The Fall of the House of Usher* are reversed. Indeed, we can apply a feminist reading to the changes. First, instead of a domination-submission relation, the brother seems to be heavily reliant upon his sister. Roderick says that Madeline’s decease “would leave him (him the hopeless and the frail) the last of the ancient race of the Ushers” (Poe, 1839, p. 6). In other words, without his sister, the family would be left with a gloomier future. This is because the pure blood of the family cannot be preserved and continued without the incest between the siblings who are the only existing members of the family. We can see that the patriarchal family, which uses women as a tool to pass on the absolute male power, actually is dependent on women. This means that patriarchy is frail and nothing without women.

Furthermore, Roderick’s physical and psychological weakness symbolizes the decaying patriarchal power. Talking about Madeline’s illness, the narrator states, “he [Roderick] had buried his face in his hands, and I could only perceive that a far more than ordinary wanness had overspread the emaciated fingers through which trickled many passionate tears” (Poe, 1839, p. 6). This seems more like a weak feminine image which hardly fits the tough male image in the patriarchal society. Interestingly, Madeline herself demonstrates some masculinity. “Hitherto she had steadily borne up against the pressure of her malady, and had not betaken herself finally to bed” (Poe, 1839, p.6). What we can see here is not a weak damsel but a woman with fortitude and strong will like a man, who never succumbs to her illness and death.

More importantly, Madeline’s eventual revenge on her brother can be seen as the female defiance of the patriarchal family. The scene of her return is so horrible—“...without those doors there did stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame” (Poe, 1839, p. 14). Madeline’s control over her own body can be seen as resistance to the male dominance. Her struggle to escape the coffin symbolizes getting rid of the shackles, namely the repression, imposed on her by patriarchal family. Thus, it can be understood as women’s retaliation and liberation from the patriarchal power. Meantime, the “dead” sister in bloody robes seems to change from a victim into a vampire—like a figure who is hunting her victimizer brother as a prey. When her brother is scared to death, she destroys their paternal family line. In this way, patriarchy is being dismantled by the sister. This feminist reading allows us to see that the prosecuted women in the Gothic incest are not as weak and submissive as the past. Instead, the empowerment of women brings the defiance of the men, even the family.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay argues that the Gothic incest between siblings is not only an individual and family issue, but also a reflection of the social gender problem, through analysing the siblings in *The Monk* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*. We can see the conventions that the Gothic incest is driven by the victimizer's psychological problem, and it brings destructive result to the whole family. Meantime, there are also transformations in this Gothic incest. Obviously, the narrative style of the incest changes from explicit and sensational to implicit and subtle, and the reversed gender roles can be read from a feminist perspective. To sum up, it concerns us that the incest between siblings not only exists in the Gothic literature, but also in our real life. Hence, we should pay more attention to the proper sexual education within family.

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