Houses and the Fate of Families: A Comparison of “The Fall of the House of Usher” by Edgar Allan Poe and Absalom, Absalom! by William Faulkner

Abstract
In Poe’s short story “The Fall of the House of Usher” the house where the events unfold is described as a sentient being, and its first description forebodes the occurrence of dark events. In addition, Poe utilizes the house of Usher to show how the fate of the house and its inhabitants are connected. The House of Usher stands for the building itself as well as the family, and Usher himself believes that the house is alive and can also exert its influence on the people living in it. The house of Thomas Sutpen in Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom! is equally significant and is used to symbolize Sutpen’s will to establish his dynasty. The house is furnished luxuriously to establish his reputation in society, and Sutpen finally succeeds in bringing home a wife to the completed house. However, after the war the house is in ruins and Sutpen is unable to defy his fate anymore: he cannot rebuild the house, which – several years later – is burnt down by his own daughter, the partly black Clytemnestra. This paper compares and contrasts the houses and their function in the two works.

Keywords
Edgar Allan Poe, William Faulkner, Gothic, The Fall of the House of Usher, Absalom, Absalom!

Houses are often used as significant symbols in literary works. They can be understood as images of mental structures, hence becoming a possible tool for interpreting human mind or soul, and in general working as an archetype for the human psyche; for instance, in The Endgame by Samuel Beckett, where the room the play is set in is frequently interpreted as a human skull. This kind of reading is especially relevant in case of Gothic fiction, where the location of the events is uniquely important, and where in castles or isolated country houses a decaying and gloomy atmosphere prevails, suggesting the unavoidable presence of the dark, repressed part of the human mind. In addition, houses can “represent the human body itself or its extensions” (Mezey, Briganti 2002: 841); the house, body, and mind are in constant interaction, and the physical structure as well
as the mental image of the house shape and constrain the ideas and actions of those inhabiting them. Both archetypical readings of the house can be found in “The Fall of the House of Usher” and Absalom, Absalom!

In Poe’s short story “The Fall of the House of Usher” Poe not only uses the house of Usher to make the narrator and readers anticipate tragic events or to demonstrate the influence of the gloomy atmosphere on the characters and accentuate their isolation, which is quite frequent in Gothic fiction, but rather to show how the fate of the house and its inhabitants are connected. The House of Usher means the building itself as well as the family line, and Usher himself believes that the house is alive, exerting its influence on its inhabitants, disrupting their individual identities. Interestingly, Poe also “alters the formula of highly emotional Gothic heroines by presenting two male characters who suffer from overwrought sensibilities” (Zimmerman 2007: 47), which is also why they are so susceptible to the influence of the house.

The house of Thomas Sutpen, Sutpen’s Hundred, is shown equally important, and it is also the symbol of the family itself. It is created from nothing by the sheer will of Sutpen and the endurance of his few loyal people, and it symbolizes Sutpen’s wish to establish his dynasty: his grand design. Although he dies, his will is still contained in his house, inhabited by his descendants, who continue living their lives as if he were alive, watching over them. In the end, the house is destroyed at the same moment as the last ‘true’ – that is white – descendant of Sutpen dies, similarly to the twofold destruction of the House of Usher.

This paper compares and contrasts how the houses of the two families – Usher and Sutpen – are shown in the aforementioned works. Even though there are some similarities, especially the connection between the fate of the members of the two families and the houses’ condition, there are also several differences between them. Usher can only suffer under the influence of his family’s mansion, and he is unable to exert his own free will, while Thomas Sutpen ambitiously creates his own house and his destiny out of nothing, and it is willfully destroyed by one of his last descendants. Faulkner’s work seems to suggest that individual will is more important, even if in the end the Sutpens are all powerless against fate, just like the Usher family.

In Poe’s works, the identity of the self is repeatedly shown to be “disturbingly fragile, if not altogether illusory,” because cosmic forces, such as mesmerism, “undermine any meaningful sense of the discreteness or individuality of selves” (Taylor 2015: 198). Human life and consciousness are endangered, and hostile forces can disrupt characters’ lives at any time, without reason or warning. Jackson regards these features as general characteristics of (subversive) fantasy: “[t]ransgressive impulses towards incest, necrophilia, […] narcissism and ‘abnormal’ psychological states conventionally categorized as hallucination, dream, insanity, paranoia” all aim to erase the rigid
boundaries between human and non-human, and the “generic distinctions between animal, vegetable and mineral are blurred in fantasy’s attempt to ‘turn over’ ‘normal’ perceptions and undermine ‘realistic’ ways of seeing” (1981: 49). What is featured among these in “The Fall of the House of Usher” is not only incest and the disruption of the fine line between life and death, but perhaps most importantly, the blurred distinction between organic and inorganic matter.

In Gothic fiction in general, isolated houses are shown as influencing their inhabitants. Isolation makes people turn inward, hence incest and narcissism are recurring themes. In addition, the gloomy atmosphere can influence their moods. Poe accentuates this relationship between location and general atmosphere at the beginning of his short story, where the narrator already feels “a sense of insufferable gloom” “with the first glimpse of the building” (2004: 206). The house seems alive with its “vacant eye-like windows” (ibid. 206) and forebodes the occurrence of dark events: “about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to themselves and their immediate vicinity […] which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the grey wall, and the silent tarn – a pestilent and mystic vapor” (ibid. 208). The portrayal of the house as something alive can already be noted here as a result of the “eye-like windows” (ibid. 206); and there is already a sense of an alien and deadly force, “pestilent and mystic” (ibid. 208), waiting to destroy the lives of humans. The time when the narrator arrives is “when the evening drew on” (ibid. 206), which is also a non-definite time: neither daytime, neither night yet; a time of transformation. These features already imply the transgressive nature of the house which is located outside of human boundaries – between day and night, organic and inorganic, life and death; between distinct selves – and is a space where taboos can be broken. In addition, the narrator compares the “utter depression of soul” he feels while looking at the house to the “after-dream of the reveller upon opium – the bitter lapse of every-day life – the hideous dropping off the veil” (ibid. 206). The mention of opium suggests a state of mind different from our everyday perception, again emphasizing the otherworldliness of the house. It should be noted though that the narrator compares the house to what he feels after the opium’s impact starts to fade. For him, the house can only show this other world, but he cannot be part of it as Usher and his sister; eventually, he leaves and confronts “every-day life” (ibid. 206).

The House of Usher is described for a second time, but now as another realm at the edge of reality, by introducing it through a reflexive frame, the pool of water. After the narrator unsuccessfully tries to understand the reason for the strong influence the house exerts upon him, and reluctantly accepts that “there are combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us” (ibid. 206), he imagines that perhaps a slight modification could turn it into something less sorrowful; thus he approaches “the precipitous brink of the black and lurid
“tarn”, but only to look down, “with a shudder even more thrilling than before”, to the “remodelled and inverted images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant and eye-like windows” (ibid. 206-207). This second observation of the house as the inverted form of itself gives rise to the idea that over the mansion and its surroundings, “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 grey wall; but then he awakes himself from his trance-like state and decides that it “must have been a dream” (ibid. 208). Thus, it is already hinted that the house has its own will which is independent from any human or transcendental values, and that it has a strong influence on whoever happens to approach it. As Taylor points out, “[t]hat affects or atmospheres might actually reside in things and then possess persons, rather than the other way around, is a disconcerting proposition” (2015: 214). It is certainly discomforting for the narrator, which is why he tries to dismiss these considerations as mere dreams. Clearly, he is already worried, which is why he tries to emphasize that his state “must” have been only a dream, but sooner or later he realizes that the mansion he stays at functions as a separate entity, a place where the rules of the outside world do not work: it is a place of transgression, of taboos. This portrayal of the house, that is, as a place where the rules of the known world are ignored or inversed, is underlined by showing the house’s reflection in the water in a detailed way. Reflections, whether in a mirror or in water, can always hint at the existence of another world, an inversed reality.

Before entering the house, and still only observing its external features, the narrator also pays attention to the fact that some parts of it are still perfect, and he is reminded “of old wood-work which has rotted for long years in some neglected vault, with no disturbance from the breath of the external air” (Poe 2004:208). This is an adept image for the house: together with its inhabitants, it has been able to preserve itself without any influence from the outside; turning inwards, exerting its influence on its confined occupants, regardless of the rules, values, norms, and morality of humans living in the outside world. This is also a general feature of the Gothic Poe applies here: in isolation, human nature can grow in a way otherwise impossible in the outside world. However, this isolation is eventually broken, or it ends in destruction.

Even before meeting Roderick Usher, about whom he already knows that he is the last male descendant of his family lineage, the narrator ponders upon the “perfect keeping of the character of the premises with the accredited character of the people” and speculates on whether an influence of the former is possible on the latter; at least “in the long lapse of centuries” (ibid. 207). The double meaning of the title is already revealed here, when the narrator wonders about the inability of the family to produce more than one son in a generation:
it was this deficiency, perhaps, of collateral issue, and the consequent undeviating
transmissions, from sire to son, of the patrimony with the name, which had, at
length, so identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint
and equivocal appellation of the House of Usher. (ibid. 207)

Thus, the indistinguishable nature of family and the building is literalized. Consequently, as Taylor
observes, “[s]uffering equally from lines that are absences (the branchless family tree; the ‘fissure’
reaching from the top of the house’s roof to its foundation), the house and its eponymous owners are
connected by a common rupture that foreshadows their collapse into one another” (2015: 214).
Furthermore, it is also revealed here that members of the House of Usher have “a peculiar
sensibility of temperament” (Poe 2004:207), which is undoubtedly connected to the influence of
their family mansion on them, and which enables Roderick Usher to sense his fate beforehand; and
which later affects the narrator as well. In fact, it can even be questioned whether the narrator
remains trustworthy: although he “believes he is merely chronicling Roderick's precipitous descent
into madness, he is also documenting his own more subtle mental deterioration” (Gruesser 2004:
80).

After the narrator finally enters the house, a Freudian interpretation of his first impressions
suggests itself. The objects he observes are “such as which, [he] had been accustomed from [his]
infancy”, but he wonders why “the fancies which ordinary images” cause are “unfamiliar” (Poe
2004: 208). The house clearly has an uncanny effect on him: it is familiar and unfamiliar at the
same time. As Nadal observes, “the uncanny implies fear, haunting, possession, uncertainty,
repetition, a tension between the known and the unknown—the familiar and the unfamiliar,
heimlich and unheimlich, in Freud’s terms—and the intrusive return of the past” (2016: 180-1). As a
place of transgression – the place of incest, narcissism, and a place where animistic thinking can
still be applied, where objects can be sentient – the house represents something repressed early on
in human development, both on an individual and cultural level, hence its uncanny effect on the
narrator.

Finally, the narrator meets Roderick Usher, who has changed considerably during the years he
spent confined in his mansion. Above all “[t]he now ghastly pallor of the skin, and the now
miraculous lustre of the eye” (Poe 2004:210) – features which clearly highlight Usher’s non-human
characteristics – startle and awe the narrator. He also suffers from a very extraordinary disease, that
is, “a morbid acuteness of the senses” (ibid. 211); he cannot eat anything spicy; can only wear
clothes made of certain texture; is unable to bear the smell of flowers, or bright light, or most
sounds. What this illness suggests is that Roderick is uniquely subjected to his environment and is
thus dependent on the effects of his surroundings. He is aware of the implications of his condition,
and perfectly understands how the house, with its “mere form and substance”, can influence his “spirit” (ibid. 212); it is an “effect which the physique of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought about upon the morale of his existence” (ibid. 212). He, just like the narrator, understands how things can affect people, and how “physique” can affect “morale”; hence, he understands his “spirit” as a product of the long years he has spent in the mansion, without leaving its premises at all. Strangely, leaving the family house never occurs to him, although theoretically it could mean that he could be free from its effects at last. Rather, it seems that he conceives the fate of his family so interwoven with the fate of the building itself, and the influence of the house so decisive and complete, that escape as an option does not even cross his mind.

Furthermore, Roderick, who also believes in “the sentience of all vegetable things”, goes even further to suggest the “kingdom of inorganization” (ibid. 215), which is not that surprising given his hypersensitivity to objects. Therefore, he perceives the house as a living being, and that is how he can understand and explain its influence, which comes from its vitality and a certain kind of consciousness:

The conditions of the sentience had been here, … fulfilled in the method of collocation of these stones – in the order of their arrangement, as well as in that of the many fungi which overspread them, and of the decayed trees which stood around – above all, in the long undisturbed endurance of this arrangement, and in its reduplication in the still waters of the tarn. Its evidence – the evidence of the sentience – was to be seen … in the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and the walls. The result was discoverable … in that silent, yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which made him … what he was. (ibid. 215)

As organic and inorganic are unified in a new organic whole, the members of the Usher family, rather than being simple tenants, are possessed by their house, a sentient entity, which exerts its influence upon them, and with which their destiny is equated. The consciousness of the house disrupts the individuality and coherent identity of the Ushers, which can also be the reason why they are unable to leave. They have a strange symbiotic relationship with the mansion, and when the House of Usher as a building collapses, the House of Usher as a family must necessarily die as well.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, the house can function as a representation of the human body as well as the human mind. For the former, it is clear how the body of Usher and the building itself are connected. Regarding the latter, another example should be briefly discussed. Madeline’s burial “in one of the numerous vaults” (ibid. 216) of the house can be read as trying to repress her existence to a forgotten, dark place, similarly, to dismissing a memory to the unconscious; just as Bertha in Jane
Eyre is imprisoned in the attic. The vault in which Madeline is buried, “which had been so long unopened that [the] torches [were] smothered in its oppressive atmosphere”, was “small, damp, and entirely without admission for light”, and it was lying at “great depth” (ibid. 217). However, just as repressed memories tend not to stay unforgotten forever, Madeline also returns, to collapse finally in the arms of her brother and together with the House of Usher, in both of its meanings.

As opposed to the Ushers, who are only waiting passively for the end of their family lineage, Thomas Sutpen’s grand dream is to establish his own dynasty: or, as Porter puts it, to become “a dynastic father”, for which purpose he needs a son who bears his name and also needs a place for his “dukedom” (1995: 172). This is precisely the purpose of Sutpen’s Hundred, the spatial representation of his grand design. Not surprisingly, several Freudian interpretations have been offered on the main characters’ motivations and acts in Faulkner’s works: psychoanalysis is very efficient in analyzing family dynamics, incest, doubling and such, which are all recurrent features in many of his novels. For the purpose of this paper, only one will be briefly mentioned, namely Irwin’s interpretation of Sutpen’s desire to establish his own lineage. He locates the foundation of this desire in Sutpen’s traumatic encounter with the slave at the rich white plantation owner’s front door, after which the young boy “rejects his father as a model and adopts the plantation owner as his surrogate father” (1975: 98). As in the Oedipal conflict, Sutpen decides not to kill the planter, the father in this sense, but rather to become him. He ponders upon whether to kill him or not, which completely fits the pattern just described; but then concludes that it “wouldn’t do no good” (Faulkner 1990:181). The “man who owned all the land and the niggers and apparently the white men who superintended the work” (ibid. 176) seems to the boy a master, someone who is in control of his own life. Through observing him, the young Sutpen “incorporates into himself the patriarchal ideal from which that affront sprang in much the same way that a son comes to terms with the image of his father as a figure of mastery and power by impersonalizing and internalizing that image as the superego,” and he has no choice but “accepting the justice of the father’s mastery even though the mastery has been exercised against the son” (Irwin 1975: 98-9). Hence, this way Sutpen incorporates the patriarchal ideal, and it is important to note here that the threshold of the planter’s house is emphasized as the location of Sutpen’s humiliation. The threshold of Sutpen’s Hundred will also serve later as a spatial representation of distinction between white supremacy and white trash, although it will be blurred with the passage of time, not unrelatedly to the Civil War and its consequences. In addition, the archetypical reading of the house as a human psyche is also relevant here: what one does not want to recognize, cannot step over the threshold.

In other words, Sutpen’s traumatic experience as a boy plants the seeds of his desire for his own patrilineal lineage, and from that moment he sacrifices everything, even his first wife and his
own first-born son, to reach his goal: “[y]ou got to have land and niggers and a fine house to combat them with” (Faulkner 1990: 183). The family mansion is a representation of this dream. Consequently, after arriving in Jefferson, Sutpen’s first action is to obtain land, his own future plantation, and to start building his own house. He even brings a French architect to build an exceptional family mansion “the size of a courthouse” (ibid. 13), “creating the Sutpen’s Hundred, the Be Sutpen’s Hundred like the oldentime Be Light” (ibid. 7). As seen from the quotation, Quentin sees the construction of the building comparable to an act of God, a creation from nothing by sheer will. Although Sutpen himself does not need furniture nor decoration, after living three years “without a window or door or bedstead”, already calling his house Sutpen’s Hundred “as if it had been a King’s grant in unbroken perpetuity from his great grandfather” (ibid. 13), he starts decorating his house luxuriously to gain the respect of the citizens of Jefferson, and also to ‘purchase’ a wife. He needs a purely white wife to have a son and a legal heir, hence he makes a pact with Ellen’s father to gain her, “this Niobe without tears who had conceived to the demon in a kind of nightmare, who even while alive had moved but without life and grieved but without weeping” (ibid. 11): an essentially business deal, based on logic and cold-blooded calculation rather than emotions, which destroys Ellen after she realizes that she only has to pay her role in the design.

After the marriage and the birth of Sutpen’s two legitimate children, the family lineage seems secured. Sutpen continues with his occasional night parties, but other than that, the house becomes isolated from the outside. Ellen is barely visited by her family, and the three children, Judith, Henry, and Clyte, grew up to be very close to each other. Some features of the Gothic tradition and certain similarities with Poe’s work can be observed in these chapters. The house is isolated the same way as Sutpen himself is shunned by society; even if some fellow citizens visit the mansion from time to time to participate in Sutpen’s nighttime parties, where they see him fighting with his own slaves, he is still regarded as an outsider, and the citizens are clearly appalled by him marrying the respectable Ellen Coldfield. In a way, Sutpen is also a transgressive figure, like Roderick Usher; however, the most significant taboo Sutpen crosses is the special social taboo of the South: the distinction between African American slaves and white landowners. Later, he also crosses the boundary between the wealthy white and white servants, which underlies the fact that Sutpen in reality does not follow the social hierarchy of his time, although on the surface he observes these rules to gain the acceptance of the society – in vain. Wash Jones cannot step over the threshold of Sutpen’s Hundred until the end of the novel, regardless of the fact that he is the one Sutpen regularly drinks with, nor does he socialize with his slaves, even though they are the only ones on whom he can depend (e.g. in his marriage), he only fights them without pretension at night. According to the custom of the time, he does not regard his children from African American women
as legal heirs, but he still treats Clytie as his daughter: he gives her a name, just as he has given a name to Charles Bon – though not his family name – and lets her grow up with Judith almost as normal sisters, much to the horror of Rosa Coldfield. In addition, due to their isolated lifestyle in Sutpen’s Hundred, these social transgressions can blossom without the constantly judging eyes of the citizens in Jefferson.

Thus, another similarity between the House of Usher and Sutpen’s Hundred, besides the transgressive nature of both places, is their isolation, which obviously affects their inhabitants. Ellen slowly becomes “almost a recluse”, with her two “doomed children growing up whom she was helpless to save” (ibid. 15) – at least according to Rosa; it is arguable whether the children need to be saved at all. Judith and Henry grow very close together, like “on a desert island”, due to “the solitude, the shadow of that father with whom not only the town but their mother’s family as well had merely assumed armistice rather than accepting and assimilating” (ibid. 77). This isolation, as in several Gothic works and in “The Fall of the House of Usher”, results in narcissist tendencies and in the possibility of incest: “that single personality with two bodies both of which had been seduced almost simultaneously” (ibid. 71), indicating a threefold incest with their half-brother Charles Bon, but an incest initiated by Henry, who “seduce[s] [Judith] along with himself” (ibid. 77) instead of Charles. Interestingly, as Walter points out, while reworking Gothic tradition, Faulkner employs incest and “uses categories of bisexuality and polyamory to explore his interest in American anxieties over racial identity and miscegenation” (2007: 489). In addition, apart from the incestuous desire between the three characters, there is an unusual relationship between the two siblings:

the town knew that between Henry and Judith there had been a relationship closer than the traditional loyalty of brother and sister even; a curious relationship: something of that fierce impersonal rivalry between two cadets in a crack regiment who eat from the same dish and sleep under the same blanket and chance the same destruction and who would risk death for one another not for the other’s sake but for the sake of the unbroken front of the regiment itself. (Faulkner 1990: 62)

This can be interpreted in a slightly similar way to Roderick’s and Madeline’s submission to the will of the House of Usher. However, as a result of the main difference between the two works, while the Ushers are controlled by their house, or rather, submit themselves to the will of the house, here the siblings submit themselves to the will of their father. The regiment in the quotation above refers to the family line, and both Judith and Henry accept their roles in establishing the Sutpen dynasty: they would sacrifice themselves for the other not necessarily out of love, but out of loyalty to the family line itself. That is precisely what Henry Sutpen does: he sacrifices his own future to preserve the purity of their family line by killing Charles Bon. Also, based on the quoted paragraph,
there is a rivalry between Henry and Judith. Although Henry is the legitimate heir due to his gender, the true inheritors of Sutpen’s temperament are rather Judith and Clyte, where the latter is doubly problematic: she is not only a female, but partly black as well. Still, when Sutpen fights with his slaves, and as a kind of initiation rite takes Henry with him to witness the spectacle, Henry is only “screaming and vomiting”, and finally clings to his mother “crying” (ibid. 24), letting her rescue him. On the other hand, Judith and Clyte observe the fight of their own free will: “the two Sutpen faces … once on Judith and once on the negro girl beside her … looking down through the square entrance to the loft” (ibid. 24). This scene clearly shows that both Judith and Clyte have inherited the strong will of their father, which cannot be stated about Henry. In addition, it is Judith who enjoys the carriage races to the church, and she and Clyte are the ones who are capable of continuing their lives under all kinds of hardships, never bending nor showing their emotions, while preserving the legacy of Thomas Sutpen to the best of their abilities: Sutpen’s Hundred.

Another similarity between the two houses, concentrating on the buildings themselves, is their strongly felt presence. The House of Usher is described as a sentient being several times; but occasionally Sutpen’s mansion is also portrayed as something alive. While Rosa remembers their visits to Sutpen’s Hundred during her childhood, she confesses that she was “listening to the living spirit, presence, of that house,” and observes that “some of Ellen’s life and breath had now gone into it as well as his, breathing away in a long neutral sound of victory and despair, of triumph and terror too” (ibid. 22). Still, regarding the house as a sentient being another difference should be noted between the two works as well. The house of Sutpen is not only the representation of Sutpen’s will, but rather a symbol of his design, which is not just his creation anymore: it also shows how the other members necessarily contributing to the design affect it. Sutpen’ project, by definition, entails others, which is something he cannot understand: this is also the reason behind his fall. He does not calculate with his first wife, nor his first child; he is also ignorant of the personality of Rosa or Wash Jones. He only cares about Ellen to the extent of buying her lavish tombstones but is oblivious of the fact that her presence has an effect of its own on the house. Perhaps Ellen’s influence is negligible, but still she becomes part of the house, and she clearly has some influence on Henry, based on the scene when he clings to her. In addition, she can have a minor role in facilitating the courtship between Judith and Charles Bon, thus escalating the crash between father and son(s). If Sutpen had treated his family members as equal partners in his design and told Ellen about Charles Bon, or if he had communicated directly with Charles, things could have turned out differently. However, Sutpen’s tragic fault is his complete ignorance of others – which is also his innocence in a way – together with his pride. On the other hand, the reason behind the fall of the Usher family is rather their submission of their will to the house and the lack of will to take control
of their own lives, which is the exact opposite of Sutpen’s case, who has too much will and pride.

After Henry and Bon leave, Sutpen goes to war and Ellen dies, thus only Judith and Clyte remain in Sutpen’s Hundred. Soon, as a result of Bon’s murder by Henry, Rosa also joins their female community, but while immediately looking for Henry at her arrival, she meets Clyte first: “[i]t was Sutpen face enough, but not his; Sutpen coffee-colored face enough there in the dim light, barring the stairs”: the inheritor of Sutpen’s will, not letting Rosa see what is upstairs, in “the thunderous silence of that brooding house” (ibid. 105). Rosa cannot see anything at first, but then slowly sees “the Sutpen face not approaching, not swimming out of the gloom, but already there, rocklike and firm and antedating time and house and doom and all, waiting there” (ibid. 105). Although the house is again portrayed as somehow alive, and the scene is slightly similar to the narrator’s approach to the House of Usher in Poe’s short story, here the human presence is stronger than the house’s, preceding it and preceding time, as well. Clyte is shown as the guardian of Sutpen’s Hundred, “the cold Cerberus of [Sutpen’s] private hell”, “created in his own image” (ibid. 105), hence she serves as the extension of Sutpen’s will. The time of day is also relevant, just like in “The Fall of the House of Usher”: again, there is a dim light, not daylight nor darkness; an indefinite time, with a timeless presence of a person somehow living outside of time, like a mythical being, emphasized by her comparison to Cerberus. In addition, her face is “without sex or age because it never possessed either: the same sphinx face which she had been born with, which had looked down from the loft that night […] and which she still wears now at seventy-four” (ibid. 105). She can successfully stop Rosa and thus transgresses the racial boundaries, and she evidently stands for something greater than a human being: she is simultaneously Sutpen’s illegitimate daughter, the guardian of his house, the image of Sutpen, the extension of his will, and, finally, also an extension of the house itself.

While the three women live together in Sutpen’s Hundred, the presence of Sutpen feels stronger than ever, and it is still connected with the house. After the war, Sutpen is all they have left, “all that gave [them] any reason for continuing to exist”: they knew he would need them after his arrival, when “he would begin at once to salvage what was left of Sutpen’s Hundred and restore it” (ibid. 120). Again, the connection between the mansion and the destiny of the family is clear. As expected, when he arrives, riding a horse, seeming “to project himself ahead like a mirage” (ibid. 124), Sutpen immediately starts to restore what he can of his past glory. Although he is out all day, looking for ways to regain his land, he is always there as part of the house itself: he is “absent only from the room, and that because he had to be elsewhere, a part of him encompassing each ruined field and fallen fence and crumbling wall of cabin or cotton house or crib” (ibid. 125). Another marriage becomes an inevitable part of his design due to the disappearance and criminal status of
Henry, and Rosa is the obvious choice; however, while asking for her hand in marriage, Sutpen does not mention marriage itself (nor love), but “the very dark forces of fate which he had evoked and dared, out of that wild braggart dream where an intact Sutpen’s Hundred which no more had actual being now […] than it had when Ellen first heard it” (ibid. 129). Thus, the restoration of the mansion is compared to an ancient hero’s struggle in vain against his fate. Sutpen commits the same mistake, the ignorance of the personality of others’, and miscalculates Rosa’s reaction when he suggests having a child first and then marrying in the event that the baby turns out to be a boy. Rosa leaves, outraged by his proposal, and the hope that “[Sutpen] could restore by sheer indomitable willing the Sutpen’s Hundred which he remembered and had lost” becomes “hopeless” (ibid. 144), while his last attempt to conceive a son with Wash Jones’s granddaughter proves to be fatal.

However, even after his death, Sutpen’s will stays strongly present in the walls of the house. Charles Bon’s son inherits his “furious and indomitable desperation”, “as if the child and then the youth had acquired it from the walls in which the demon had lived” (ibid. 158) – but instead of choosing a white wife, Charles Etienne de St. Valery Bon does the opposite, as if in an attempt to take revenge on his father. His defiance proves to be more successful than Sutpen’s original design, and by the end of the novel the only descendant left is the “idiot boy to lurk around those ashes and those four gutted chimneys” (ibid. 280) – the only memento of Sutpen’s Hundred’s –, after Clytemnestra, in order to save the dying Henry from persecution, sets fire to the family mansion. The fact that the house is destroyed wilfully by one of Sutpen’s descendants, and the one who has previously been portrayed as the guardian of the place and a natural extension of her father’s will, is significant, and is ultimately the reason why this paper argues that regardless of the similarities, the houses in the two works have exactly reversed functions.

To conclude, although the houses’ narrative function is the same in the two works, that is, they are both equivalent to the fate of the family dynasty and used by the two authors as a symbol of it, they also signify completely different ideas. In “The Fall of the House of Usher”, the house is one of the malignant outside forces often employed by Poe to show the perilous nature of human existence and its dependence on outside forces rather than free, autonomous will. On the other hand, Sutpen’s Hundred is the extension of Sutpen’s dream, which fails due to his hubris: his disregard for the will of others, personalities, and opinions. The citizens of Jefferson can never acknowledge Sutpen the way he wants, because “while the townspeople clearly distinguish between themselves as white people and the black slaves as chattel, Sutpen does not draw the same conclusion. He works along with the slaves to build his house,” and he also “acknowledges Charles Bon as his son, even though he is aware of Bon’s racial background” (Sugarman 2002: 55). In a way, he refuses the role of a white plantation owner dictated by the South, no matter how hard he tries to achieve that
same status. While the House of Usher is a place of transgressions because the distinction between life and death, organic and inorganic are crossed and because the taboo of incest is ignored, Sutpen’s Hundred is equally a transgressive place, but rather because of Sutpen’s disregard of the particular social taboos of the South. Therefore, although the two works show several similarities, partly due to the employment of Gothic tradition – isolation, narcissism, incest – in the end their conclusion is exactly the opposite: the House of Usher is a symbol of the impossibility of human free will, while Sutpen’s Hundred is the spatial representation of the same human will, which might be destroyed, but only because of human mistakes. Hence, its collapse is also initiated by human will, as opposed to the House of Usher. Still, it should be mentioned that while Poe utilizes an ultimately unreliable narrator in his short story, in Absalom, Absalom! there are four main narrators and several minor ones who narrate from inside the narratives, thus “it becomes impossible for a reader to know precisely what happens in Sutpen’s story or why and how it has attained any significance” (Casero 2011: 86). A further study could investigate whether these narrative strategies undermine or question the apparent symbolism concerning houses in the two works.

Works Cited


