

**Anna Lüscher**

## **Immortality as Body Horror: T. Kingfisher's *What Moves the Dead***

In Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Fall of the House of Usher" story, the narrative's horror comes to a head when the unnamed protagonist and his friend and host, Roderick Usher, discover that Roderick's sister Madeline was mistakenly buried and that she had been hearing her cries for help for nights.

Twice throughout the story, fungi are mentioned. First, when the Usher's home is described as overgrown by fungi, "hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves" (Poe 294) and, second, when Roderick's belief in the "sentience of all vegetable things" (Poe 301) is portrayed. He claims the sentience is rooted in "the gray stones of the home of his forefathers" (Poe 301), where the stones and "the many fungi which overspread them" (Poe 301) are part of the sentience which influence the Ushers.

These two instances are taken up by the short story *What Moves the Dead*, a retelling of Poe's tale by T. Kingfisher, published in 2022. Now, the fungus is not just around the house and itself a sentient being but can also be found in the local animal population and the water – posing a threat to the protagonists, as Madeline discovers to her detriment. What should be sustaining the body's regular functions, food and drink, paradoxically bestows both immortality and death upon the characters. Similar to Poe's original narrative, these story elements combine to form an even more amplified story of eco- and body horror (as Poe's story was described by Scenicdiver and also by Keetly and Sivils).

While the fungus keeps Madeline alive after she should have drowned in the nearby lake, Madeline "haunts" the house because the fungus's collective consciousness is taking over her body. Madeline's self dies as a consequence of this threat, as the fungus renders the body immortal but not Madeline's mind. However, the body does not remain intact either, as fungal filaments grow like fine hair from Madeline's body.

At this point, at the latest, it becomes apparent that immortality acquired via the fungus is not a positive experience but one of horror, whereby both the character's self and body are altered or killed. The fungus facilitates Madeline's slow transformation towards either death or immortality without her consent. The horror is such that Madeline's maid, who has also been infected, chooses death instead of this type of immortality. The whole story focuses on the horror of the decaying body and the loss of self while approaching immortality.

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