



# WHEN HOSPITALITY BECOMES DEADLY

## Host-Guest Relations

in T. Kingfisher's *What Moves the Dead*

In literary studies, the concept of a “hostile environment” encompasses various themes, including the portrayal of violence, trauma, oppression, and struggles concerning identity. The present analysis will examine the concept of hospitality, highlighting its interpretation in relation to the dual meaning of the term “environment,” which encompasses both one’s immediate surroundings and the broader natural world. In T. Kingfisher’s novella *What Moves the Dead*, these environments manifest as increasingly hostile. By reimagining Edgar Allan Poe’s tale, “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Kingfisher transforms the familiar into the unfamiliar and invites the reader to leave the comforts of the beloved short story. Jacques Derrida claims that “when hospitality takes place, the impossible becomes possible but *as impossible*” (Derrida 387). The claim that something impossible proves to be a reality because of hospitality perfectly fits with Kingfisher’s story, where a fungus becomes sentient as a result of being a guest inhabiting one of the characters. By introducing a fungus that infects and possesses living organisms, Kingfisher turns its hosts into hostages. The visitors to the Usher mansion, while partaking of the hospitality extended by their hosts, ultimately find themselves in peril due to both the fungus and the hosts’ actions. The story demonstrates that hospitality, irrespective of its form, carries the potential for adverse consequences for both hosts and guests. Through the application of selected aspects of the notion of hospitality in Derrida’s understanding, as well as the contextual use of ecoGothic, ecohorror, and ecophobia, this article explores the dimensions of hospitality from invitation, welcoming, and hostility to overstaying one’s welcome and the risks of hospitality.

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At the heart of Derrida's claim is the distinction and relation between "host" and "guest." He distinguished between conditional hospitality, in which one welcomes the guest under specific rules, laws, and expectations, and unconditional/absolute hospitality, in which the other is welcomed without any prerequisites. Kingfisher's novella presents the notion of hospitality as the host-guest relation in the traditional sense, as well as deals with the act of hosting the other in a manner intricately connected with the idea that becoming a host involves exposing oneself to risk, just as Derrida notes.

One of the most prevalent understandings of hospitality is that it entails welcoming a guest into one's home. In the novella, the Usher siblings host two guests, Alex Easton and James Denton, in their home, but from the very beginning, their presence there is marked by stark differences. According to Derrida, true hospitality does not begin with an invitation; rather, it is its lack that makes hospitality take its true form (398). The Ushers' guests are both invited and uninvited, as each received an invitation only from one of the hosts, thus leaving the other in the dark. Therefore, one of the hosts is allowed to be surprised and possibly exert true hospitality upon the guests. Denton received Roderick's invitation, but there was nothing social about the act: "Please, I beg of you, if there is any kindness in your heart left for either of us, come and help me" (Kingfisher 141). Roderick's desperation and yearning to save his sister lead him to abandon all the pretenses of hospitality, and because of that, one could assume that the future guest does not expect a warm welcome. Derrida observes: "When one invites, not only mustn't one send invitation cards and say 'I invite you,' it is me who invites. Not only must one not say this, but one must also not think it nor believe it, nor make it appear—to oneself or to the other" (398). Derrida seems to suggest that not only must the host avoid the act of inviting, but the guest must also not experience the invitation. If one considers the lack of grounds for hospitality, Denton does not experience true hospitality, as he is not only invited but also expected to use his skills as a physician. Alex's possible experience of true hospitality is not as straightforward. Although Madeline writes to the narrator, she does not outright invite her old friend to visit the Usher estate. Because Madeline does not provide a clear invitation in her letter concerning her failing health and possible imminent death, and Roderick is in the dark about Alex's visit, the narrator can possibly experience true hospitality in Derrida's understanding. Judith Still states that "[c]odes of hospitality suggest that the host will entertain the [...] guest, and an unwritten contract guards them both from harm" (20). Given the reasons behind the guests' visit, neither

guest expects to be especially well taken care of, but they probably do not expect to be put in harm's way. However, as it is later illustrated, being welcomed into the Usher house means abandoning virtually all aspects of the codes of hospitality.

Denton's arrival is not portrayed but readers are privy to Alex's arrival and welcome:

No one awaited me. Eventually, long after I had given up hope and was eyeing the door knocker and wondering whether to make a second go of it, the door creaked open. An elderly servant peered around the door and stared at me. It was not an insolent stare so much as a puzzled one, as if I were not only unexpected but completely outside his experience. (Kingfisher 12)

The fact that even the servant is unaware of the guest's arrival underscores Madeline's deliberate decision to keep her correspondence with Alex a secret. This secrecy effectively inhibited any preparation on the part of both the hosts and the household. The narrator is not only not properly welcomed upon arrival but is also reluctant to enter the Usher manor. This ambivalence not only signifies the unsettling atmosphere that pervades the setting but also alludes to the thematic conventions prevalent in horror literature, where such reluctance often foreshadows the horrible events that await inside. Still points out that "[h]ospitality is always about crossing thresholds," and although many a time the threshold is metaphorical, Alex literally walks through the Gothic door to the Usher mansion (7). The description of the darkness of the house upon entering and the comparison to the gloomy landscape outside point to the inhospitality of the building itself.

In numerous explorations of Poe's short story, the house is a focal point of the analysis; for instance, Hisnul Mar'atil Huda and Nasirin observe that "[t]he anthropomorphism of the house, described almost as a sentient being, aligns with [Eve Kosofsky] Sedgwick's notion of Gothic spaces that reflect and influence the characters' psychological states" (1330). In some ecocritical readings of "The Fall of the House of Usher," the house is blamed for its impact on the environment and not the characters. Sara L. Crosby argues that "it isn't the tarn that infects and oppresses Roderick Usher and his House; rather, the lordly mansion and the lord infect and oppress the tarn" (519). The characters in Kingfisher's story outright blame the house for Madeline and Roderick's deteriorating health, but as the readers and the characters discover, the building is not to blame. The blame for the Ushers' illnesses slowly shifts throughout the story, from the house to the lake to the fungus. Initially, the narrator notices the house's faults: its darkness, the permeating cold, and the mold. However, when Alex observes the anomalies

surrounding the lake, such as the inexplicable lights inside the tarn, the worrying behavior of animals in its surroundings, and Madeline's eerie connection to the body of water, the object of blame shifts. In the story, a particular type of fungus inhabits the lake and serves as a catalyst for the depicted anomalies. While the detrimental effects of the fungus are notable, it does not directly harm Roderick Usher. Nevertheless, because the fungus affects Madeline, whose condition precipitates Roderick's deterioration, it is to be seen as the underlying cause of both siblings' ailments. Consequently, the house—the essential place of hospitality—is not the culprit in the story; rather, it becomes a secondary victim of the fungus and the tarn, as water degrades its environment and impedes the mansion from fulfilling its purpose—being a home.

Despite its failings, the house is the place where hospitality occurs in the story. When Roderick sees Alex in the house, he is surprised and forgets the proper etiquette for welcoming a guest, but justifies it by stating: "It's been so long since I've had visitors that I've forgotten all my manners" (Kingfisher 16). This statement proves deceitful as he soon introduces Alex to James Denton. James is not an inhabitant of the house; he is a guest. Therefore, Roderick's quip about not having had guests may reveal the true purpose of James's visit: he is to treat Madeline and not to socialize. Nevertheless, James is Roderick's friend and is visiting his house; thus, one would assume he is to be treated as a guest, especially since he is not being paid to work while he resides in the Ushers' house. The lapse in speech could be explained by Roderick's deteriorating mental health as well as by the idea that if he invited James, then, as Derrida points out no true hospitality can take place. This turns James's stay into one with conditional hospitality, which can be seen as "the norms, laws and procedures which shape the operation and practice of hospitality in the real world" (Shepherd 63). Nonetheless, even though Alex believes Roderick knew about Madeline's letter, this might not be true. The narrator observes that "Roderick hadn't expected me, whatever that meant—possibly that he hadn't thought I was enough of a friend to come when he needed me, or perhaps he didn't think he needed me" (44). If Madeline kept the letter a secret, then she inadvertently (or purposefully?) creates a small rift between Roderick and Alex, which brings feelings of uncertainty to the surface and thus impacts the host-guest relations as neither is clear on the role of the other. Another explanation for Roderick's behavior could be the fact that he may not wish to welcome guests into his home, not only due to his and Madeline's poor health but also because of their financial struggles.

When Alex notices the state of the house and notes the frugality with which the household is maintained, the narrator experiences guilt of being hosted and feels the need to “make it up to him [Roderick] without appearing to offer charity” (Kingfisher 33). This raises the question of whether a guest should feel responsible for being an imposition on their host, especially if they are uninvited. When the exceedingly eerie occurrences transpire, and Madeline dies, the narrator chooses to shoulder the burden of solving the mysteries that abound and forgets to experience guilt, going so far as to violate the privacy of the hosts in order to figure out what truly transpired at the Usher estate. “Why was I here? Why was I skulking around Roderick’s manor like a thief, disturbing his sister’s rest? I was an old friend, yes, but I was violating all laws of hospitality and friendship” (111). The questioning of the narrator’s motivations suggests that Alex feels uncomfortable as a guest in Usher manor and that everything that is happening transcends the ordinary guest experience. Due to the circumstances, the violation of the host’s privacy seems somewhat justifiable, but it nullifies the remnants of hospitality between Alex and Roderick. Still asserts that “[t]he breakdown of hospitality [...] [may] easily spiral into terror” (20). When Alex discovers that Madeline was killed, the narrator realizes that unearthing the host’s secret may have put them in danger: “I was now in enemy territory, and my life and Angus’s [Alex’s batman] might very well hang in the balance” (112). Despite this awareness, the character does not manifest terror; rather, this recognition galvanizes them into action, reflecting their background as a soldier and familiarity with danger. However, the characters do experience fear, but they are afraid for each other rather than of each other. Alex is consumed by concern for the fate of an old friend and is anxious about the implications that will arise once the truth of Madeline’s murder is revealed. Concurrently, Roderick becomes increasingly protective of the narrator’s safety in the Usher house. This reciprocal fear between the host and the guest may suggest that, despite the failure of traditional notions of hospitality, the characters retain a genuine concern for one another, often prioritizing each other’s safety over their own.

Madeline Usher’s fate is intricately linked with unconditional hospitality, which leads her to become a bodily host for another species. The host is only a host if there is a stranger; without the other, there is no hospitality. Therefore, the identity of the host is dependent on the presence of the guest. However, this can also lead to the destabilization of the host’s position, as according to Derrida, the host can become a hostage. Notably, Madeline is not merely subjected

to the possession or forced infection of the fungus from the tarn, but her state could be read as her willingly helping it. This dynamic can urge toward the reading of the novella in light of hospitality regarding parasitic guests. On the one hand, such a reading can situate Madeline as a symbol of the natural environment, with the fungus serving as a representation of humanity's invasive presence on Earth. On the other hand, the fungal infection that in the novella spreads through the animal and human world, can represent the uncontrollable aspect of the environment. This perspective aligns with themes prevalent in ecohorror and ecoGothic literature, where the complexities of interspecies interactions reveal the nature of hospitality within ecological contexts.

The editors of the monograph study *EcoGothic*, Andre Smith and William Hughes, claim in the introductory essay that the “volume is the first to explore the Gothic through theories of ecocriticism” (1) as well as that it “explores how current ideas about ecocriticism can be applied to Gothic narratives in order to help draw out their often dystopian ecological visions” (4). The notion of the ecoGothic has been reinterpreted numerous times since its initial introduction. Scholars such as David Del Principe (2014), Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils (2018) and Sue Edney (2020) have put forward their own definitions and interpretations, each focusing on ecoGothic's unique manner of interpreting the literature, from comparing it to ecofeminism to focusing on the analysis of gothic gardens (Fitzgerald 259). In literature, ecoGothic is often intertwined with ecohorror, whose “problems and anxieties . . . are [nowadays frequently] the result of broader forces, represented not only as mad scientists, creatures, or animal attacks but also a far-reaching events or processes such as pollution, species extinction, or extreme weather” (Tidwell and Soles 2). Christy Tidwell explains that “[e]cohorror is often defined in terms of ‘revenge of nature’ narratives in which nature enacts violence on humans in response to the damage caused by human behaviors” (238). The ecohorror elements present in Kingfisher's novella are evident in the grotesque descriptions of fungal infestations and the way nature reclaims the human domain, blurring the boundaries between life and death.

Tidwell and Soles note that while Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils, among others, link Simon Estok's ecophobia to ecoGothic, Jennifer Schnell emphasizes that numerous scholars set the two terms apart (4, 16). Estok initially defined ecophobia as “an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world, as present and subtle in our daily lives and literature as homophobia and racism and sexism” (“Theorizing in a Space” 208). Yet, he also posits that “[e]cophobia

is a condition that allows humanity to do bad things to the natural world” (*The Ecophobia Hypothesis* 11), and his research “focuses on fears about transgressions of bodily boundaries and norms and how these threaten notions about human particularity” (“Introduction” 384). As Teresa Fitzpatrick emphasizes, ecophobia is also closely connected to ecohorror, and “there are inevitable overlaps with ecogothic” (260). Even though “ecohorror and ecogothic share a concern with the human-nonhuman dynamic, ecohorror has a focus on the uneasy relationship between human and nonhuman, where the natural world is viewed as monstrous/monstrously wronged with humanity at its center” (260). For the purposes of the present study, the link between ecophobia, ecoGothic, and ecohorror should be acknowledged, as the characters in Kingfisher’s novella harm the fungus to some extent due to their fear and lack of understanding of it. The novella’s ecophobia stems from the fear of nature’s otherness and its capacity to enter and alter human bodies and spaces, representing the fear of the environment’s ability to diminish or even destroy human identity and control—situations in which the fear is no longer irrational. Madeline perfectly illustrates this notion, as with the progress of the fungal infection, she gradually loses control over her body and her mind, thus losing the very thing that makes her who she is. The uncanny aspect of the infection—its ability to mimic life and manipulate its hosts—heightens the abovementioned fear and creates a sense of helplessness and dread. However, one must recognize that not every act of violence toward the environment and its nonhuman inhabitants in gothic and/or horror fiction derives from ecophobia, because “some fears of the nonhuman world are justified, not irrational” (Tidwell and Soles 5). It could be argued that, in *What Moves the Dead*, the author presents ecophobia: the characters are wary of the tarn before they have evidence of the fungus’s presence, and they do not understand its motivations. On the other hand, their fear becomes rational when it comes to light that the maid’s suicide was rooted in her being forced to host the fungus, and the emotion intensifies when Madeline asks Alex to become the fungus’s next host, which may suggest the possibility of its further spread throughout the world. Considering both perspectives, it can be assumed that the characters exhibit rational ecophobia, which is justified by the predatory behavior of the fungus and its invasion of not only Madeline but also other living creatures.

Madeline becomes the host for the fungus in secret. She lies that she does not remember what happened when she drowned, and thus allows the fungus to settle in the new environment without anyone recognizing the possible threat. Although Roderick suspects that

something has “entered” his sister, his ideas are connected to traditional superstitions: “[W]hen I hear this voice she speaks in, I begin to think of stories of demonic possession, not of illness” (Kingfisher 141). No one in Madeline’s surroundings suspects the truth because it is beyond human understanding, and Madeline’s symptoms of being infected are almost unnoticeable, especially initially. This suggests that the fungus is cunning and wants to live in the host without the danger of eradication. If we were to look at it more metaphorically, then the silent development of the fungus’s hold on Madeline, as well as its sudden bursts of control of the host and the possible danger for other characters, may be perceived as a mirror of the ecological disasters humanity faces nowadays: small changes which lead to environmental disasters on a large scale; years of neglect and destruction of the environment lead to irreversible climate change; a once hospitable Earth becomes an inhospitable environment. Humans became guests who overstayed their welcome and impaired their host, just like the fungus does to Madeline—the only difference is that Madeline was dead at the infection’s genesis and the Earth was a healthy planet, which is slowly being killed.

Only when Madeline continues to deteriorate and “survives” her brother breaking her neck is her host state discovered. Madeline reveals that even before Roderick killed her, she had been dead for over a month, and that the fungus saved her after she drowned in the tarn. Because the concept is difficult to comprehend, Madeline explains to Alex, “*Va* could get into the animals. *Va* learned *van* senses that way. I can’t imagine what that must have been like, the first time” (Kingfisher 154). She describes how the fungus learned to manage the five senses and that it was an intelligent being. As she is talking, she refers to the fungus with the use of the pronoun “*va*,” which in Kingfisher’s world has a specific reference: “*Va* and *van* are what children use before puberty, and also priests and nuns, although they are *var* instead of *van*. [...] And it’s not unheard of for siblings to refer to each other as *va* for their entire lives” (24–25). The choice of the pronoun Madeline applies can be explained twofold. She either perceives the fungus as an innocent child, which her marveling at its learning skills and lack of understanding of certain concepts may suggest, or she feels a unique connection to it, as if it were her sibling.

When Madeline is the fungus’s host, she does everything in her power to aid it. Even before the fungus enters Madeline’s body, she is its host at the Usher house because the fungus used to inhabit her maid. “My maid and I—*va*’d take over Alice and then I’d teach *van* what I could. But then Alice killed herself, that silly creature, and it got

harder” (Kingfisher 156). The dismissive tone toward the deceased maid suggests that Madeline values the fungus over human life. Because she taught the fungus before she was infected, her initial connection to the fungus should not be ascribed to her being its hostage, but rather to her being its host. When Derrida discusses the notion of unconditional hospitality, he posits: “Let us say yes to who or what turns up, before any determination, before any anticipation, before any identification, whether or not it has to do with a foreigner, an immigrant, an invited guest, or an unexpected visitor, whether or not the new arrival is [...] a human, an animal, or divine creature, a living or dead thing, male or female” (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 77). The fungus in the story symbolizes the stranger or the other—someone who does not fit into the host’s category of identity, custom, or nation. It seems that in the novella, Madeline follows the approach sketched by Derrida, as she welcomes the fungus into her home (through her maid) and subsequently into her own body without questioning the guest or the possible detrimental consequences of becoming a host.

Madeline’s fate can be seen as an example of how Estok’s ecophobia and boundary fears, along with Derrida’s concepts of absolute hospitality and hostage risk, represent the link between the psychological and ethical dimensions of the relationship between humans and the environment. Estok’s concepts foreground human unease about the environment and its perception as a hostile other whose influence needs to be controlled. This can be interpreted as reflecting the human resistance to opening themselves to the natural or nonhuman world. On the other hand, Derrida’s idea of hostage risk is part of absolute hospitality, in which one must be open to the other, even if it means risking one’s sense of security. Estok’s boundary fears can be understood as a rejection of absolute hospitality towards the environment. Ecophobia can be understood as embodying a rejection of one’s ethical responsibility to welcome the nonhuman other; instead, it can lead to the construction of defensive walls to avoid the hostage risk of ecological openness. If one were to overcome ecophobia, welcome the environmental other as a guest, accept one’s own vulnerability, and abandon boundary fears, one would be able to embrace Derrida’s ethic of hospitality. Madeline seems to have done just that. However, her openness to the environmental other comes at a price, which, in turn, fuels boundary fears in other characters, whose irrational fears become justified.

The need to welcome the fungus into her home and her body can be linked to Madeline’s role in becoming infected. In the story, the specific fungus with which the characters interact is a liminal

microorganism that can inhabit both water and organisms on land. It is only when humans or animals encroach on the aquatic habitat of the fungus that they get infected. This can suggest a dual perspective of the fungus toward hospitality: it is a hospitable host; it saves Madeline and the hares from their final deaths, but once its guests return to land, where it does not dwell, the guests turn into hosts: sometimes hospitable, sometimes not, but always without a choice to bid their new guest goodbye. This inescapability of becoming a permanent host emphasizes the strength of the environment and humans' inability to rein it in. Madeline treats the fungus as a real guest, and she explains that through death and the welcoming of the fungus into her, she finally has a purpose. All this suggests that radical hospitality has taken place as Madeline unconditionally welcomes the fungus; their relationship is transformative for both parties, and the aspect of sacrificial giving (personal or communal sacrifice to meet the needs of the other) is fulfilled as well. Fungal infection can be a metaphor for unconditional hospitality. Such a reading reinforces the idea that radical hospitality, while noble, can become a liability when it involves inviting harmful influences into one's life. However, it is not the only manner in which one could interpret Madeline's state of being infected.

Derrida claims that

absolute hospitality requires that I open up my home and that I give not only to the foreigner [...] but to the absolute, unknown, anonymous other, and that I *give place* to them, that I let them come, that I let them arrive, and take place in the place I offer them, without asking of them either reciprocity (entering into a pact) or even their names. (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 25)

Madeline's hospitality towards the fungus is in line with Derrida's definition but can the readers trust that the character's actions are autonomous and not influenced by the need for reciprocity? Madeline receives a prolonged life for continuous hospitality toward the fungus, but one could question whether she expects it and whether it is her choice. Madeline confesses that the fungus is in her brain; thus, can we fully trust that her actions are truly her own? Moreover, the fungus maintains Madeline's body because without it, as a guest, it would not have a host to govern. This taints the purity of the unconditionality of her welcome of the fungus and embodies the virtually insolvable tension between conditional and unconditional hospitality voiced by Derrida. Judith Still reminds us that Immanuel Kant saw the rights of guests as limited to visiting, not to residence (35). If one were to see it from Kant's point of view, then the fungus overstayed its welcome as it controls and consumes Madeline. Alex notices, "Maddy's control of her body

stopped at the neck. Below the break [of her neck], the tarn was controlling her body like a puppet" (Kingfisher 157). With the developing skills of the fungus and Madeline's dwindling control of her own body, she turns from a host into a hostage; as the fungus fills her from the inside, she becomes more fungus than human, thus extending her hospitality towards the other indefinitely.

When discussing "plant-becoming," Fitzpatrick indicates that "[t]he ecological epithet 'at one with nature' takes an extreme uncanny turn when human and plant entanglements are depicted as a very physical transcorporeality ... demonstrat[ing] our consistent ecophobia: being part of the food chain rather than its apex" (266). The described concept is transferable to the events in the novella. Madeline is the fungus's sustenance: "[V]a couldn't help but feed a little" (Kingfisher 157). From the outsider's perspective, the fungus did more than take a little. Alex states: "It was a horror and it had eaten my friend" (157). This is illustrative of the violence in the host-guest relations that Still observes: "External violence [...] can break in upon the hospitable home, forcing violent choices [...] [but] true hospitality shines as a peaceful beacon against aggression" (262). One could argue that the fungus's "invasion" of Madeline constitutes a violent act as the consequences of becoming a host are unknown at the time of infection, and the infection itself is irrevocable. Still admits that there is a possibility "of the host-guest relationship becoming a host parasite relationship where the guest consumes the host" (262–263). In the story, Kingfisher turns this possibility into reality as the fungus gradually consumes its host, and the host maintains the hospitable nature of the relationship. As the fungus gradually consumes Madeline, host-guest sovereignty becomes increasingly blurred by the fungus's parasitism. Although it seems that Madeline extended absolute hospitality, the violence aspect and the impossibility to deny being infected suggest that she simply could have succumbed to the inevitable and become the perfect host because it was the only choice she could rationalize (as proven by the explanations of the process she extends to others).

After Roderick kills Madeline and her body recovers but is controlled by the fungus, she becomes a guest not only in her own body but in her house as well. Roderick recalls: "I heard her knocking last night" [...]. 'On the door of the crypt,' Roderick said. 'Trying to get out' (Kingfisher 106). The act of knocking suggests the need to be let in, which in turn often coincides with the act of welcoming. Madeline is dead at the time, which raises the question: do we owe hospitality to the dead, and if so, where does one's duty end? In the observation cited earlier, Derrida claims that in absolute hospitality, it does

not matter whether the one we welcome is dead or alive. Bearing this in mind, one could argue that one's duty as a host never ends; it should be fulfilled even regarding the dead. The story does not explore in detail the act of hospitality towards Madeline in the Usher house. Still, as Roderick ensures they both perish in the fire that consumes the Usher manor, it seems that in Roderick's mind neither his deceased sister nor the fungus is owed hospitality.

Despite the extent to which the fungus makes itself at home in Madeline's body, hospitality must come to an end because the body is too deteriorated to maintain its guest. But like every good host, Madeline does not want to leave her guest stranded and attempts to convince Alex to welcome the fungus into their body.

"Maddy, are you asking me to let that thing infect me?"

"Not *infect*." She looked offended at the word. "Just give van a home. Va's like a child, va needs someone to care for van, and I know you'll protect van and stand up for van, like you always did for me." (Kingfisher 159)

The narrator is unwilling to ingest the fungus; Alex regards it as alien and as triggering terror. Derrida forewarns: "Anyone who encroaches on my at home, on my ipseity, on my power of hospitality, on my sovereignty as host, I start to regard as an undesirable foreigner, and virtually as an enemy. This other becomes a hostile subject, and I risk becoming their hostage" (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 53, 55). Alex fears the fungus and treats it as an enemy who killed Madeline and thus wants to prevent it happening to themselves. It is also what happened to the maid: she killed herself as the fungus encroached on her individuality as a human being. The fear Alex and the maid exhibit is not what Estok dubbed ecophobia but rather a rational fear justified by the circumstances in which the characters find themselves. Because Madeline uses the phrasing of giving a fungus a home, readers can assume that she truly sees it as a guest, an other in need of hospitality.

The Ushers' willingness to welcome others into their home exposed them to external influences, both human and non-human, which contributed to their downfall. This highlights the dangers of hospitality if it is not balanced with self-preservation. Guests in Kingfisher's novella overstay their welcome, which leads to a tragic outcome. The fungus's prolonged presence in Madeline leads to the destruction of her body, and eventually also to her final death when Roderick Usher burns the manor and ensures that his sister and the fungus burn with it. As previously indicated, while it can be argued that Madeline succumbed to radical hospitality in connection with the fungus, she does

not do the same for her human guests. In fact, her unconditional hospitality towards the fungus puts her other guests and loved ones in mortal danger. One could postulate that the story illustrates the notion that unconditional hospitality is virtually impossible in the real world for a reason: it can have deadly consequences. Human guests remain in the mansion longer than anticipated as well. Roderick openly states that he did not expect Alex to come and that Denton was to have left before Roderick had to kill Madeline. What Roderick did not predict was his friends' need to help him. "How long did we stay? Until Roderick agreed to leave, whenever that was?" (Kingfisher 109). The narrator's uncertainty as to the length of the stay points to the unclear expectations on both host and guests' part. Because Alex and Denton choose to linger in the house, they become privy to Madeline's secret and are put in danger as the fungus needs to spread, and the house must be burned. "I thumped his back one last time and stepped away and Denton and I staggered away from that accursed house, while Roderick Usher went inside" (Kingfisher 163). The guests witness their host's return to the place of hospitality to die and to protect the others from her sister's guest. The act of self-sacrifice on Roderick Usher's part may be read as both his duty as a host to protect his guests and as an act of love for his sister—to make certain she is finally at peace in death. Just as Alex ensures Denton's rescue of an unconscious Roderick from Madeline, Usher saves his guests by prioritizing their safety over his own life. In a way, he becomes a hostage to the house, as he cannot leave it behind because of his sister's fate. When the human guests finally leave after they destroy the fungus remaining in the tarn, their hosts are dead, and the house is destroyed: "And then we drove away and left behind the dead lake and the smoldering timbers of the fallen house of Usher" (Kingfisher 169). Both the hosts and the primary place of hospitality are gone, and what remains are the guests who retain the trauma of the events. The codes of hospitality, which state that no harm should come to either host or guest, are violated as guests and hosts suffer to various extents, illustrating the dangers of hospitality.

In *What Moves the Dead*, hospitality is perverted. The novella subverts traditional notions of hospitality, showing how the invasive, uncontrollable forces of the natural world can corrupt it. The Usher house, which should be a haven, becomes a site of horror. The hospitality offered by the Ushers becomes a trap, as the invasive, fungal organism consumes the manor and its inhabitants. This inversion of hospitality reflects the broader ecoGothic theme of nature's encroachment into human spaces, impairing the boundaries between host and guest, human and non-human. Kingfisher's idea is not a revolutionary one,

as ecohorror is filled with stories of bodily possession, even by a fungus. For example, Rebecca Duncan discusses anthropocene gothic based on the film *Gaia*, in which “an ancient mycelium network has been growing beneath the forest since before humans evolved, and is now about to unleash itself on the Earth’s population in an act of retribution for the war on nature that has been waged by humanity since the industrial revolution” (116). The scale on which the fungus in *What Moves the Dead* is not as expansive as in *Gaia*, and the fungus does not specifically seek revenge and global control. Nevertheless, the moral of Kingfisher’s story, seen through an ecocritical approach, is one worth noting. The fungus’s prolonged cohabitation within Madeline can be understood as challenging the sovereignty of humans, thus pointing towards reading the story as illustrative of transcorporeal hospitality that refers to hosting and being hosted not only at the level of social spaces but also at the level of bodies. As illustrated in this article, the notion of hospitality is vast, host-guest relations never follow strict definitions and codes, and thus, hospitality is a continuous negotiation between its conditional and unconditional forms. Being a good host or guest entails something different depending on the circumstances, and as illustrated above, breaking the laws of hospitality, as well as being too hospitable, can be deadly.

*Abstract:* In *What Moves the Dead*, an American author, T. Kingfisher (a pen name of Ursula Vernon), reimagines Edgar Allan Poe’s well-known short story “The Fall of the House of Usher.” The novella introduces a parasitic fungus inhabiting a mountain lake that infects both animals and humans, transforming hosts into hostages, rendering the Usher manor, which stands near the infected tarn, a perilous space for its guests. This article explores the intricate dimensions of hospitality, ranging from the invitation and act of welcoming to the risks associated with overstaying one’s welcome. The concepts of “environment” and “host” are examined in their dual interpretations. “Environment” is understood both as the natural world and as the immediate surroundings of an individual. At the same time “host,” a gender-neutral alternative to “hostess,” is perceived as an individual who receives guests and as a reference to an organism on or within which a parasite resides. The brief overview of such concepts as ecoGothic, ecohorror, and ecophobia allows for the subsequent analysis to situate the examination of the host-guest relations in the ecological framework. The hospitality presented in the story mirrors human interaction with nature, illustrating that both hosts and guests may suffer dire consequences when hospitality is distorted. The article highlights the complexity of host-guest dynamics, emphasizing that the principles of hospitality are fluid and context-dependent, with potentially dangerous ramifications for both human and non-human beings.

*Keywords:* hospitality, ecohorror, ecophobia, T. Kingfisher, *What Moves the Dead*

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