

LAUGH BUT SMILE NO MORE: IDEOLOGY AND HISTORY IN THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER

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ABSTRACT

Edgar Allan Poe's The Fall of the House of Usher is a gothic masterpiece which marked the history of American literature as well as the history of world literature. The story focuses on a short trip of the narrator to the family mansion of Roderick Usher who mysteriously invited him to visit Usher and his sister, Lady Usher. Upon Lady Usher's death, the house literally falls apart and the narrator hardly manages to escape to tell the story to the rest of us. The House of Usher story is not significant for horror elements and its gothic atmosphere but beyond that it has been regarded as a cornerstone in the history of literature as it reflects radical historical and social transformation in the 19th century America, it successfully portrays the dilemmas of the enlightenment intellectuals after the fall of aristocracy, and it highlights the disillusionment of modern industrialization. In this respect, this article will seek to investigate the story that presents a world of anxiety, ambiguity, and collapse with a new historicist approach which enables a historical and ideological analysis of gothic genre, and the House of Usher story in particular.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, The Fall of the House of Usher, gothic, 19th century literature, new historicism.

KAHKAHA AT AMA GÜLÜMSEME ARTIK: USHER KONAĞININ ÇÖKÜŞÜ ÖYKÜSÜNDE İDEOLOJİ VE TARİH

ÖZ

Edgar Allan Poe'nun Usher Konağının Çöküşü öyküsü, yalnızca Amerikan edebiyat tarihi değil, dünya edebiyat tarihinde de, dönüm noktası olagelmüş bir gotik şaheserdir. Öykü, dostu Roderick Usher'in daveti üzerine Usher Konağı'nı ziyaret eden anlatıcının yaşadığı dehşet verici birkaç günü ve Usher'in kızkardeşi Lady Usher'in ölümü üzerine konağın çöküşünü anlatır. Usher'in Konağı öyküsü, yalnızca içerdiği korku öğeleri ve yarattığı gotik atmosferi sebebi ile değil, aynı zamanda 19. yüzyıldaki tarihsel ve toplumsal dönüşümleri yansıtmaya, aristokrasinin çöküşü ile Aydınlanmanın ürettiği modern şehirli aydının yaşadığı ikilemleri temsil etmesi, sanayileşme ve endüstrileşmenin yarattığı hayalkırıklarının yarattığı kimlik karmaşalarını merkeze alması açısından da önemli bir öyküdür. Bu bağlamda, bu makale, Edgar Alan Poe'nun yarattığı endişe, bilinmezlik, ve yıkım dolu öyküyü, Yeni Tarihçi bir bakış ile ele almayı ve bu yaklaşım çerçevesinde, gotik türü, ve özelden de Usher'in Konağının Çöküşü öyküsünün, yaratımında tarihsel ve ideolojik etmenlerin belirleyici önemini tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Edgar Allan Poe, Usher Konağının Çöküşü, gotik, 19. yüzyıl edebiyatı, yeni tarihselcilik.

D.H. Lawrence, in his famous *Studies in Classic American Literature*, stated that the fundamental motivation of American artistic creation was dualistic, that is, it had stemmed from the universal dilemma of the dissolution of the old and creation of the new (Lawrence 1996: 90). It was true to some extent that American belles lettres has been struggling to free itself from the burdens of the old and laboring to form a brand-new artistic form since the very beginning.

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Only a few works of literature could thrivingly illustrate the tension between the dissolution of the old and creation of the new among which Edgar Allan Poe's marvelous *The Fall of the House of Usher* stands out a unique masterpiece.

The *House of Usher* tells the story of an urban intellectual visiting upon a mysterious invitation from an old friend, Roderick Usher who lives in his family mansion with his sister, a decrepit monument of the aristocracy. As soon as the narrator arrives in the house, he learns that Usher's sister is suffering from an incurable disease and even worse, Roderick Usher has become mentally unstable due to the illness of his sister as well as the gloomy atmosphere of the house. Upon the death of Lady Usher, everything, literally, falls apart, and the narrator manages to escape in the nick of time. The story was often celebrated for its success in portraying the dilemmas and conflicts of the fall of the common man on the brink of industrial revolution and the rise of capitalism in the United States. It was often regarded as the magnum opus of Edgar Allan Poe who was the "dark double" of Emersonian optimism and belief that nature was a vast symbol of God inscribed within every living thing existing harmoniously and peacefully. For Poe, "the imagination had an opulent symbolizing potential, but it led toward obscurity and solitude" (Ruland and Bradbury 1991: 137). Poe was suggesting a more chaotic portrait of universe leaving human being hopeless and unaided. Reflecting a psychological devastation and inconsistency, Poe's nature was essentially dead and gloomy, which coincided with the social and political collapse of the 19th century America. Therefore, an analysis of the literary genius of Edgar Allan Poe is considered to provide considerably significant insight into the social and psychological changes in the life of 19th century people in the States. This article, thus, will seek to analyze *The Fall of House of Usher* to illustrate the historical and ideological issues in light of the new historicist approach.

The new historicist approach to literature mainly focuses on social and historical conditions which inevitably contribute to the process of artistic creation of the text. An important achievement of New Historicists has been to prove that literature and history are inseparable. History, according to New Historicists, is not a coherent body of knowledge but, on the contrary, a subjective field of survey through which literature reveals the processes and conflicts embedded in the historical changes. For New Historicism, the object of study is not the text, nor literature and literary history but "literature in history" (Brannigan 1999: 418). Marxist criticism had already shown that history is not monolithic and universal, and that all historical accounts have primarily been the ideological documents of the ruling class in which the historical credentials of the proletariat and minorities, ethnic or religious, haven't been the principal concern. In Marxist school of thought, the mode of production reshapes commodities and cultural domain that witnesses a conflict between the base and the superstructure, between the laborers and the owners of the means of production, which seems to be the main force of historical progress. Classical Marxist understanding insisted that social and material conditions determined consciousness, which, in this case, reflected the interests and projects of the ruling class, the bourgeois class, yielding a kind of false consciousness (Barrett 2000: 72-77).

Reification of the cultural artifacts and recognition of the discursive qualities of the historical texts, including both fictional and non-fictional works, led many theoreticians to question the validity of historical character of the texts as well as the textual character of the history.

The New Historicism, in this sense, mainly focused on the rereading and refiguration of the canonical and classical texts to decipher the “fictional characters and actions in their reference to specific historical persons and events” (Montrose 1992: 397) although “the slogan of return to history is “misleading insofar as ‘history’ itself today [is] not the opposite of ‘theory’ but rather very precisely itself a lively plurality of various historical and historiographic ‘theories’” (Jameson 2000: 184). New Historicism is a form of discourse analysis that basically promoted a return to historical texts deconstructing the ideological patterns and cultural practices that were inevitably the products of ideological and discursive formations of the dominant class or social group of that particular time. Assuming the role of the historian, the writer’s “personal traits, his ideological position, his ambitions are important in understanding the version he proposes” (Taniyan 2015: 56). As there is nothing in the text but power relations that have diffused into the discursive formations of ideologies, the investigation of power networks is woven around textual statements and to what extent literature participates in forming dominant ideological constructions (Brannigan 1999: 426). Therefore, the main drive of New Historicist critic is to enlighten the interreferential and contiguous relations between the forms of expression, which seeks to unravel “the textuality of history and the historicity of texts” (Montrose 1992: 410). Subjectivity of the text on behalf of the reader and poststructural multiplicity of the levels of meaning allowed multiple readings and interpretations of the historical texts, historicizing the present as well as the past meanings and historicizing “the dialectic between those pressures by which the past has shaped the present and the present reshapes the past” (Montrose 1992: 415).

Edgar Allan Poe represents a break down in national culture and the collective unconscious of American people in reference to the overarching industrialization and capitalism’s overwhelming power in sweeping away the old and imposing the new. Unlike, Emerson and Whitman, Poe takes a cynical stance and foretells the ills of the rootless new age, which was in fact his main motivation to drive him to write Gothic tales. It is no coincidence for Poe to choose gothic as his literary style to produce melancholic sagas for the dying age because gothic is a form of romance and the romance, according to Northrop Frye, is nearest of all literary forms to the wish fulfillment dream, and the dreamy character of romance is emphasized by “its extraordinarily persistent nostalgia, its pursuit for an imaginative golden age” (Frye 2000: 99). Gothic literature’s manifestations are indeed related to the perceptions and frustrations of the old world and the unpredictability and ambiguity of the coming age (Waugh 1988: 170). Fictional structure of gothic and, fantastic in general, reflects an alienating insecurity, doubt and fears caused by rapid changes in social and cultural structure, resulting in a kind of relief and catharsis (Oskay 1982: 15). Frederick Karl, in his article “Gothic, Gothicism, Gothicists” suggests that

“The nature of fear represented in Gothic literature, fear of imprisonment and entrapment, of rape and personal violation, of the triumph of evil over good and chaos over order, appears to reflect a specific historical moment characterized by increasing disillusionment with Enlightenment rationality and by bloody revolutions in France and America” (Karl 1974: 236).

19th century was the peak point of many developments and innovations. Rise of the Protestantism and, still more so the emergence of bourgeoisie, brought the universality of thought and culture to an end and led to a vast terra incognita of artistic production. These two revolutions, religious and economic, went hand in hand and provided shelter and protection to each other where and when needed. Capitalism, as a result, emerged as a new power in shaping the culture and society and the idea of progress became the new prophet of roaring innovations in technique

and social formation. The old was condemned as bad and infertile and driven away in every possible way. Bourgeois romance caricatured heroism and chivalry of the old ages and made them a consumable item sucking out the historical and cultural gist of the aristocracy. Many Gothic tales, and especially those of Poe, include an intellectual clash of two worlds, ensuing in ambiguity or nebulosity on behalf of the traditional. The narrative structure of Gothic tales implies that the coming age may not be secure and embracing but the old has already been dying and the progressive dilemma seems to be inexorable. In this respect, some Gothic tales may reflect a revolutionary character triggering the questions about the coming age and “demonstrating the potential of revolution by daring to speak the socially unspeakable” (Punter 1980: 13). As a form of romance, Gothic representations express the ritual passage of death in which disappearance and revival motives recurrently show up (Frye 2000: 100).

The main character of the story, Roderick Usher, represents an alienation and isolation in his physical and mental being, which were apparently caused by the dramatic passage of an age and a culture. Physically, he lives in a castle-like house in the middle of nowhere, away from human habitat and green meadows. The narrator arrives at the house after a riding “through a singularly dreary tract of country” and he finds himself “within the views of melancholy of House of Usher” (76). He has to walk “through many dark and intricate passages in his progress to the studio of the master of the house” (79) where “the eye struggled in vain to reach the remoter angles of the chamber” and where the narrator “breathed an atmosphere of sorrow” (80). The narrator seems to be perplexed due to the “unfamiliar fancies which ordinary images were stirring up” (79). wandering through tunnels and labyrinth-like corridors. Labyrinth, in Poe’s stories, are mainly referred as symbols of the unexpected obstructions and unpredictable maneuvers in the course of a journey where one is deprived of a fixed point of navigation and orientation, which results in a feeling of being lost both literally and metaphorically (Leatherbarrow 2004: 77). The narrator feels insecure while wandering around the corridors of the house and intuitively relates the unending corridors with many dark and uneven gates with the deep darkness in the soul of his mate.

Roderick Usher is also psychologically isolated. He lives with his sister, who is suffering from a terminal disease. However, their physical appearances resemble each other so much that one can say that they are one soul in two separate bodies mirroring each other, which is suggested by different statements of the narrator throughout the story that they are the last members of an ancient family who “had been noted, time out of mind, for a peculiar sensibility of temperament, displaying itself, through long ages, in many works of exalted art, and manifested, of late, in repeated deeds of munificent yet unobtrusive charity” (77). Usher rarely leaves his room and the house and doesn’t contact anyone except their family doctor and their servant, who are the shadow figures in the story and of little importance. When Roderick calls his old friend, the narrator, he doesn’t hide his surprise as he hasn’t heard of Usher for many years and he confesses that they weren’t the best friends. What the narrator portrays in Roderick Usher –“a cadaverousness of complexion” (80) and which he “could not connect its Arabesque expression with any idea of simple humanity” (81)- implies a man physically and spiritually devastated imprisoning himself in a house full of old books, music, painting and old furniture that bears the traces and memories of a longstanding family.

The narrator, and indeed Poe, occasionally makes references to the analogy between the house and his physical appearance, both of which reflect a process of desolation and putrescence

that the narrator explains with the deadening effect of the pond and their intrinsic energies that eat their minds and bodies. It appears that that energy of artistic creation and ancient roots of the family have long been restricted and hidden from the external world resulting in a collapse and termination. The fact that “in the minds of the peasantry both the family and the family mansion” (78) were being referred as the House of Usher reveals that with its bleak walls, eye-like windows, a few white trunks of decayed trees, the House impersonates the Usher family, representing the death of an entire age and culture of aristocracy and order, embodied, eventually, in the death of Lady Usher. What has driven Roderick Usher into insanity and isolation is, indeed, his sister’s death in which he knows that the one who is dying is, in fact, their golden age and aristocracy with all its cultural and social conventions and life styles. That also elucidates the liveliness of Lady Usher and the deadly appearance of Roderick Usher implying that the one who radiates the energy of life and has the capacity of resurrection is the one who dies and the one who is already dead is the survivor in this barren land (Abel 2004: 87).

Usher buries himself alive, long before he does so to his sister, deep into the books, poems, music and fine arts to shield him from the malice of the external world. Especially after his sister’s death, he sinks into poetry and torturing music, which seem to have lost the order and beauty of the old times. His mutterings and insane obsession with the music cut the links of communication with the narrator and they spend their time reading and listening to music in the same room but quite isolated and far away from each other. Usher, assuring himself about the irresistibility of the existential loneliness and disconnectedness with the external world and society, mourns for the death of his sister, as well as the death of the culture and unfulfilled promises of the old times. He juxtaposes the traditional culture with the scientific obsession of the new age protesting the audacious interference of the science in their lives. Usher buries his sister “in one of the numerous vaults within the main walls of the building” in order to prevent “certain obtrusive and eager inquiries on the part of her medical men and the remote and exposed situation of the burial ground of the family” (88).

The narrator, on the other hand, tries to order and systematize the unreasonable and the inexplicable through analysis and reasoning. He, step by step, unveils the secrets of a world where every object merges with its dark double, reason with unreason, known with unknown, body with soul, Roderick with Madeline and the House with the tarn (Ruland and Bradbury 1991: 136). Those binary oppositions, also, discloses the fundamental difference between Roderick and the narrator that while Roderick “dreads the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results” (82), the narrator depicts the portrait of a modern man with his irresistible eye questioning, analyzing and reporting every detail about the people and the places. The narrator seems to be drawn into the disordered world not by the considerate feelings for an old friend but by the irrecoverable curiosity towards the mysteries of his old friend’s malady. From another point of view, it can also be maintained that the modern man of the 19th century, the flaneur, can not resist a call coming from his past he has been trying to suppress and leaves the urban life and goes back to the country, the heart of wilderness, to encounter the dark side of his soul. In this respect, The House of Usher may as well be read a story of a journey into the human soul and symbolizes the victory of modernity and reason over tradition and spirit. In light of such an analysis, it can be further stated that the reader is forced to identify himself with the narrator by the usage of first person singular since the reader’s role in fantastic tales is identified with that of the witness, which allows the reader to share the hesitancy for the unexplainable phenomenon

and experience the moment when the reason couldn't find a proper outlet (Todorov 2000: 205). Hence, our position as the reader and the consumer of the literary artifact is to participate in the production of the text at the time of reading by rereading the sensibilities and dilemmas of the late 19th century.

Furthermore, that The House of Usher stands for both the family and the building itself reinforces the organic connection between the people and the space. It was "once a fair and stately palace in the greenest of our valleys by good angels tenanted in the olden Time long ago" (85) but later it was defeated by the "evil things, in robes of sorrow" which "assailed the monarch's high estate" and now became nothing "but a dim-remembered story of the old time entombed" where "travelers through the red-litten windows see vast forms that move fantastically to a discordant melody" and "laugh -but smile no more" (86). Associating the history of the building with his ancestral past, Roderick Usher recounts the story of his now diminished family overwhelmed by the sorrow of their incapacity against the power of roaring industrialization and capitalism that terminated the aristocratic orderly system and values of "the olden good times". Not only Roderick Usher but also the narrator occasionally relates the physical description of the house with the appearance of his host and thus with his personality. Even he concludes that

"This opinion, in its general form, was that of the sentience of all vegetable things. But, in his disordered fancy, the idea had assumed a more daring character, and trespassed, under certain conditions, upon the kingdom of inorganization. I lack words to express the full extent, or the earnest abandon of his persuasion. The belief, however, was connected (as I have previously hinted) with the gray stones of the home of his forefathers. The conditions of the sentience had been here, he imagined, 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, he said, (and I here started as he spoke,) in the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and the walls. The result was discoverable, he added, in that silent, yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had moulded the destinies of his family, and which made him what I now saw him -- what he was" (87).

The narrator, with the certainty of a scientist and self-assurance of an explorer, ignoring the psychological and social agents that may have brought the family to the verge of mental and physical oblivion, reasons out that the physical conditions of the house and the right combination of the chemical elements are sufficient to explain the sufferings and conflicts Roderick Usher and his family have been going through. Moreover, correlating the detailed description of the house and the nature surrounding the place and the personal agonies of Roderick Usher may enable the reader to get ready to accept the extraordinary and terrorizing events and to grasp the exact motivation underlying this description, in this case, the death, oblivion in the heart of darkness and corruption and the loss of hope and salvation. The description is strengthened with the images of dying trees, dark and misty ponds and cracking walls in a far land where no people could dare to draw close.

The outskirts of the House of Usher, as well as the inside decorum, gloomily reflected the mood of Roderick Usher. The lights, furniture, long and labyrinth-like corridors and the maddening loneliness and desertedness contributed to the ambiguous feelings of the narrator, who, like a scientist, attempts to explicate the spiritual and physical agony of Ushers through reasoning. Inside the house, however, stands for the unconscious of Roderick Usher, whose mind is perplexed and lost in the loneliness and termination and rejects, like any other living organism, the idea of death and oblivion. The walls of the house are cracked and about to fall apart through a “barely-discernible fissure, extending from the roof of the building, in a zigzag direction, to the base” (95) but interestingly keeping its unity as if it was resisting to the detrimental effects of the outer world. The death of the siblings signals the collapse of the house and “among a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters” (95) and chaos of the death of Ushers, the narrator could barely escape and witness “the deep and dank tarn at his feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the ‘House of Usher’” (95). What is collapsing is in fact the mind of the old aristocracy and the man of tradition and the collapse of the house can not be read the victory of the new age but as a retreat of the aristocracy and “going underground”. The shock of the narrator also marks the awestruck we, as readers and witnesses, go through. The collapse of the house as the grim and saddening tombs of Ushers corresponds to the collapse of an old tradition and aristocracy with all its institutions and values contradicting and averting the values and institutions of the capitalist new age, that is based on progressive delirium which has eliminated all established norms and values.

Genres do not come out over a night but instead they evolve from one another, according to Todorov and each epoch has its own system of genres, which maintains its existence in relation to the domination ideology and like any other ideological apparatuses, genres elicit the constitutive features of the society to in which they are moulded (Todorov 2000: 200). Therefore, narrative structures as well as the characteristics of the protagonists depend on the ideological framework. Romance, then, can be understood as an imaginary solution to the contradiction between the older position of good and evil defined by feudal nobility, emerged as a social class after overcoming social and spatial isolation in the 12th century (Jameson 1993: 177). As a dominant ideology, aristocracy identified itself at the center of the discursive positions and created an Other, whose difference constitutes a real and urgent threat to its own existence. Positing itself at the heart of the matter as a power struggle, therefore, the clash of good and evil, weak and powerful and new and old corresponds to the narrative climax of Romance, and especially Gothic literature, and creates archetypes of outsiders and spiritual beings, in the House of Usher the narrator and Roderick Usher, respectively, based on the collective unconscious of the societies.

Gothic literature, in particular, outstandingly clarifies that the most fundamental feelings of human beings, fear and desire, fear from the unknown that might lead us to the darkness of human soul and disintegration, fear from losing the power and faith and the guidance of reason and knowledge, and at the same time a desire for knowledge and experiences and for encountering the unfamiliar and the perverse and conquering them may guide us into an unknown land where one has been cut of his history and past and left unaided and desperate (Ruland and Bradbury 1991: 86). Gothic, as a genre, emerged at the edge of a new time when the new man of the 19th century Europe and America as well were much offered with the promises of the industrialization and capitalism, yet left perplexed against the inconsistency and unfamiliarity brought by the progressive delirium. Gothic literature was the product of such a cultural and social pandemonium

and provided relief and comprise to the reader in order to overcome the confusion and perplexity the uproaring modernity brought out. According to David Punter, the Gothic writer maintains his existence "between two structural poles; rejecting realism's account of the world, he establishes the validity of his writing within the text itself" (Punter 1980: 408). Punter goes on to argue that

"this reflexivity intensifies the main characters' alienation from society in general and from fellow human beings. Thus the Gothic novel is not to be considered an inferior version of the realistic novel because the aim of each is different: the gothic defines itself on the borderline or 'middle ground' of 'bourgeois culture' The alienated man of the late 19th century society can make sense of his existence only in the world depicted in Gothic form." (Punter 1980: 417).

Poe occupied quite a distinct place in Gothic tradition. Denying the Emersonian universal oneness and order, Poe posed a more "thanatogenic entity, an elusive beauty" in an inverted, labyrinthine world of the imagination offering no secure and redemptive mystery beyond (Ruland and Bradbury 1991: 130). Though alternative interpretations of Poe and the House of Usher extending the social and historical conditions so as to associate the ideological inscriptions of his artistic creativity with the Southern Gothic including the "southern conditions" of that time are also fairly possible, Poe seems to reflect more than a temporal and regional sensibility and awareness, but a personal and universal estrangement surfacing as an incoherent imagination and psychic mutterings, seemingly hallucinatory at first sight. In this sense, the House of Usher is not a story of horror and rising dead bodies from their tombs but a delicate account of the historical and social sufferings and agonies of the common man, troubling him in the depths of his soul and alerting him against the mysteries of the coming age. Like Roderick Usher, Poe was suspicious and dreadful about "the events of the future, not in themselves, but in their results".

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