

How Professors of American Literature Teach Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" to Undergraduate English Majors at Arab Universities: The Hashemite University, Jordan as an Example

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As professors of literature in general, and of American Literature in particular, it is always important to raise certain questions about how to teach specific selected literary works to our students. Such questions deserve the attention of the researchers in this field as well. The question: "How to teach literature?" should, in our view, be addressed to all those concerned with the teaching and learning practices of literature at large; the most important of which is, of course, the teachers themselves. One can also get some feedback from students, specialists in teaching methodologies and researchers in the field. The aim of these questions is, to be sure, to find out about the existing patterns, and then to ensure how to improve them, hoping to achieve the best practices that help in bridging the gap between theory and practice, and thus achieving the best learning outcomes.

The focal purpose of the present study is to investigate how American literature professors teach Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" to undergraduate English majors at Arab Universities. As the researchers teach American literature in the Department of English and Literature at The Hashemite University, Jordan, the study will, therefore, concern itself with the professors who teach in this department only and take it as a study sample to represent all other similar departments at other Arab Universities as well. Many professors in this sample department have taught American literature at many Universities all over the Arab World, including the Middle East, the Gulf area and African Arab countries. Moreover, some of them worked as advisors to help all these departments put together their study plans and design their teaching methodologies. So, studying their responses will give a very close and subtle idea about the teaching praxis in all these Universities.

The Department of English Language and Literature at the Hashemite University is one of the three departments of the College of Arts. In addition to this department, the College has

two more other departments: the Department of Arabic Language and Literature and the Department of Human and Social Sciences. The College was established in 1995, which is the same year the University was.

The Department of English Language and Literature offers two majors for the BA degree: English Language and Literature and Literary and Cultural Studies. By the end of the academic year 2011/2012, more than 1200 students are enrolled in the two majors. At the onset of the coming academic year, the Department will admit some students in a newly established MA program in English Language and Literature. Twenty well-qualified professors teach in the Department. Their training covers the three major areas of Literature, Linguistics and Translation. Seven of these professors are specialized in American literature. These professors make up the main target group of the present study.

The BA degree study plan in English Language and Literature and that in Literary and Cultural Studies comprises 132 credit hours. Out of these, students have to study fifty-seven obligatory departmental requirements and twenty-four elective ones. The total is eighty-one hours, which makes more than 60% of the overall total number of hours. In these departmental requirements, students have to study several courses in American Literature and culture. When it comes to selecting the literary works to be discussed in these courses, most professors tend to pick the well-known American author, critic and poet, Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849). In particular, they tend to teach his renowned story "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1840), and it is the purpose of this study to find out how they teach this well-known and prominent story to their undergraduate students.

In order to find the answer to this question, the researchers have asked the seven professors of American literature in the Department of English at the Hashemite University to put their responses in writing, focusing on the literary details about the issues they usually raise in their classes when teaching Poe in general, and his story "Usher" in particular. After having analyzed their answers, the researchers found out that these professors had many things in common. The issues, we believe, that they usually emphasize can be divided into two groups; the first refers to the general; the second, to the specific ones that have to do with the inner story itself. As for the general issues, these professors discuss the following: Poe's personal life and achievements, his theory of "the unique or single effect," unity of the literary work, variety of the human mind, Poe's critical essays and literary theory.

When these professors discuss Poe's "Usher," they raise issues like: plot summary, series of images, the ending of the story, Poe's spatial theory, rule of two, the characters of the story, and elements of fiction, Poe's "modern" style, and Poe's concern with the reader, and many other related subjects.

When asked "How do you like to start your discussion of the story?" most professors answered by saying that they like to start by giving a brief idea about the writer himself. First they discuss his personal life very briefly, and then they discuss his literary achievements.

In as far as Poe's personal life is concerned, professors usually give the following information about him. Born on January 19, 1809 in the city of Boston, Poe is one of the writers who helped American literature come to life. His family consists of his two parents, and a brother and a sister. His family's life is a continuous struggle against poverty and ill health. His father died only one year after his birth, and his mother died a year later. The child, Edgar, suffered a lot as a result, and experienced more difficulties, especially in the last years of his life, which has profoundly influenced his imagination and outlook on life. Despite all hardships, Poe continued his education, studying Latin, French, classics and English literature. He died on October 7, 1849.

Regarding his writings and literary achievements, professors usually share the following information with their students. Poe published his first book of poetry, *Tamerlane and other Poems*, in March 1827. His first stories were published in 1832 when he won the first prize for his story "Ms. Found in a Bottle." In 1840, he published a collection of stories entitled *Tales of the Grotesques and Arabesque*. The story discussed in the present paper, "The Fall of the House of Usher," belongs to this collection.

In order to illustrate more of Poe's achievements, professors of American literature at the Hashemite University discuss with their students what Poe's critics say about his contributions to American Literature in general and to the short story in particular. During a very short life span, says J. R. Hammond, Poe was able to establish himself as a "pioneer of science fiction and of the detective story," as well as being the "undisputed master of horror and mystery"(3). Similarly, Geoffrey Rans emphasizes that Poe is the father of the detective story (17). Whether or not Poe has fathered the short story, Walter Evans argues that he "has a vast influence on the formal development of the short story" (137). Evans adds that Poe's "seminal anatomy of the tale in his *Twice-Told Tales* reviews did supply as sheltering theoretical home for the genre soon after his birth"(ibid). While Danforth Ross, on the other hand, suggests that "Poe brings

The Poetics to the short story and becomes the first American to visualize the story as an art form" (8). Besides being a skillful short-story writer, Poe is also an essayist, a critic and a poet. In general, no one can deny his vast influence on the nineteenth and twentieth-century American literature.

One of the most vital literary influences of Edgar Allan Poe is his theory of what he calls the "unique or single effect." Effect for Poe is an end in itself; he usually seeks the effects of horror and terror. Poe talks a lot about this effect in his literary theory, and he strongly adheres to it in his practice. In his review of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales*, he declares:

A skillful literary artist has constructed a tale. If wise, he has not fashioned his thoughts to accommodate his incidents; but having conceived, with deliberate care, a certain unique or single effect to be wrought out, he then invents such incidents, he then combines such events as may best aid him in establishing this preconceived effect (184).

So, the skillful writer for Poe is the one who can achieve one single effect. Everything in the story is designed to achieve such an effect. For Rans, "few have cared to deny Poe's power to move his readers, to draw them into an effect of terror that abides with them through all . . . [he is] a maker of finely calculated effects" (104).

The other related issue that the professors discuss with their students is about the "unity" of the literary work. They refer again to some critics who elaborate more on this idea of unity. The "single effect" that Poe usually seeks in his stories helps him achieve this unity. Poe's interest in and fascination with effect, argues David Karnath, lies in "his famous assertion of [its] unity" (263). Despite the structure which has diversity, Poe announces in his theoretical essays "a single acceptable kind of unity" and concludes that "it is only available in the short poem or story" (Karnath 266). The artist, for Poe, "leaps after unity," which will be created from without by the author, and from within by the mediatory characters" (ibid). Hammond (138-39) says that Poe wished his effect "to be felt emotionally, not merely experienced intellectually." In general, however, Poe avoids the long work of literature because it forecloses the sort of unity he is looking for. In addition to being short, the short story for Poe is a literary form that provides the reader with what Stone calls "intensity of impact" (5).

Poe discusses many of these critical ideas in his literary essays. Some of these essays are "The Poetic Principle" and "The Philosophy of Composition." In the latter, he tries to demonstrate how his poem "The Raven" came to be written. Rans (23) emphasizes how this essay "is in accord with a doctrine of unity of effect . . . and advances a view of art as a conscious creation of effect."

Poe's emphasis on the "single effect" does not mean that he rejects the variety of the human mind. Karnath (267) argues convincingly that even in stories of single effect, "Poe gives us images of varied and winding sort of art . . . [suggesting] that the human mind . . . has many passages and chambers." To resolve what seems to be a conflict between unity and diversity in Poe's writings, Karnath concludes his argument by saying that unity is something to be achieved, not perceived, "to achieve it, one carefully closes out all longer shapes and times and all multiples of mood and response in exchange for momentary illusion of clarity, completeness, and finality" (268). Similarly, Rans (28) refers to the ending of Poe's critical essay "The Philosophy of Composition" in which he emphasizes that the Poet's aim is "to free man from the shackles of time, and reinstate him in the eternity he has lost, to present man with a vision of unity in his world of chaos."

The reader of Poe's criticism will find that his theories can be applied to his poetry and to his fiction as well. After all, both poetry and fiction belong to the general field of knowledge called "art." Among many others, both J. R. Hammond (140) and Sulley Bradley (et al) (871) emphasize that for Poe, the theory of creation is valid for fiction as well as for poetry.

In his literary production, Poe strongly adheres to all the theoretical ideas mentioned so far. As an example of this literary production, the present paper chooses to discuss one of Poe's most well-known and famous stories, "The fall of the House of Usher." Professors of American literature at Arab Universities usually pick this story because it is one of the best stories in which Poe evidently applies his theory. Before highlighting how these professors teach this story, it is a good starting point to present a short plot summary of the story to be familiarized with its content. This summary is not a comprehensive one, it will be very brief and it will cover only the parts of the plot that the professors usually emphasize.

The story begins this way:

During the whole of a dull, dark and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing

alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country, and at length found myself, as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy House of Usher. I know not how it was-but, ***with the first glimpse of the building a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit*** [emphasis mine] (365).

It is evident here how Poe creates right from the very outset a general atmosphere of horror. The whole day is "dull, dark and soundless," the time is autumn, and the clouds seem to be "oppressive," the tract of the country is dreary and the House of Usher itself is melancholy. All these are images of gloominess that Poe preserves all throughout the story, as if he is taking the reader through a very dark and frightening cave, which will help him achieve his usually desired effect of horror.

In this first paragraph of the story, the narrator describes the situation accounting for his visit to Usher; the main character in the story. He describes the house and the people who live in it. From this description, the reader will expect a coming danger. Finally, the narrator enters the dismal house and then Usher's depressing, dull and murky private room which is full of books and musical instruments.

The narrator then goes on to describe how the story develops in a series of images: Lady Madeline passing stealthy and furtively through the hall, Usher's bizarre musical improvisations and eccentric paintings, his poem "The Haunted Palace," his books of "mystic knowledge," the dungeon in which Madeline is entombed after her death, the heavy wild storm, the tale of Ethelred, the image of Usher and his sister in a horrible deathly embrace, and the final image of the house sinking into the tarn this way:

While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened—there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind—the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight—my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder—there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters —and the deep and dark tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the "House of Usher" (382).

In a comment on this concluding paragraph of the story, John Steele says that it is "so catastrophic in its violence and cosmic in its implications" (xiii). He adds: the House of Usher, both story and building, "collapses into the artifice of a mirrored image, its (and Edgar Poe's) dread reflection" (xiv). One can also see how the collapse of the house symbolizes the collapse of its inhabitants, both happen at the same time. Many professors of American literature, including the seven professors who are addressed in this study, consider this ending as one of the most memorable endings in American literature. They emphasize that usually need a long time to analyze this last paragraph to reveal its significance and relate it to the story as a whole. In brief, the paragraph shows, among other things, Poe's brilliant style, especially his reliance on symbolic undertones that can be interpreted differently by different readers.

Four out of the seven professors of American literature in the Department of English at the Hashemite University emphasize the importance of discussing Poe's spatial theory to better understand his story "Usher." They refer to critics such as Seelye, Evans, Rans and others who consider this story the best representation of this theory. Poe's emphasis on architecture, for instance, is evident in this story. Each image of the successive images mentioned earlier in this paper can be considered as a building stone that contributes to the general structure without calling attention to it. Ross (9), for example, emphasizes that Poe usually uses place as a means to achieve his effects, "he chooses his locale in relationship to the effect that he is after."

Another important idea to take into consideration when reading Poe's "Usher" is his rule of two. The story begins with the narrator and his former schoolmate, Roderick Usher, and ends with Usher and his twin sister, Madeline, dying in each other's arms. The house, says Seeley (xii), "stares down into the dark tarn by which it is surrounded with "vacant eye-like windows." Poe repeats this phrase twice to emphasize the idea of doublings throughout the entire story. The collapse at its end is shared between the house itself and its inhabitant, Usher, who feels that the building has a very serious and devastating effect upon his own life and the life of his family as well. It is the effect of "matter over the mind, body over soul" (Seeley xiii). The resolution of this duality is death because, for Poe, the sum of two is one, "the unity of a void, compounded of parts equally that are held apart only by the will of the artist, be he God or Man" (xiii-xiv).

While teaching any work of fiction, professors often emphasize six elements that are usually referred to as "the elements of fiction." These elements include plot, characters, style, setting, point of view and theme. All these elements are evidently used in Poe's "Usher." All

professors who teach Poe's "Usher" give a considerable time to discussion and analysis of these elements.

When these professors discuss the characters of the story, they emphasize more the two main characters; Usher and his identical sister Madeline. One can describe these characters as incomprehensible. There are hints at hidden sins by Usher and his sister Madeline, but the reader can never grasp such sins or the hidden motivation of these characters. The reader, says Ross (10), "finds no clue to social context in which the Usher family suffers its fall." Such presentation of these two characters gives the reader an opportunity to understand their hidden motivations.

One can argue that Poe contradicts many traditional short-story writers by deemphasizing the plot and incidents and emphasizing the style instead. In particular, "Usher" is full of images, not incidents; it is full of description, not narration. For Walter Evans, the bulk of the story "consists of images rather than incidents, of description rather than narration" (139). Evans adds that the incidents that Poe employs in the story seem to be lost in the descriptive passage (ibid). To support his argument, Evans (ibid), says that the supposed death of Madeline "receives only thirteen words ('one evening, having informed me abruptly that the lady Madeline was no more . . .'), far, far fewer even than the narrator's description of Roderick's room, of the underground vault, or of the house and its reflection in the tarn." Poe's emphasis on imagery, atmosphere and mood instead of the logical organization of events makes him one of the first writers to anticipate the modern short story. This is not to say that the story lacks any incidents, but to emphasize that they are less important compared to the images created and upon which the effect of the whole story depends instead.

Another aspect of Poe's "modern" style that the professors emphasize is his concern with the reader and his/her reaction to the story. He seems to be addressing the reader directly in more than one occasion. To cite only one example, the narrator says the following about the moments he spent with Usher:

I shall never bear about me a memory of the many solemn hours I thus spent alone with the master of the House of Usher. Yet I should fail in any attempt to convey an idea of the exact character of the studies, or of the occupations, in which he involved me, or led me the way (372).

So, the narrator does not seem to be that much interested in the incident itself; instead, he is more interested in its effect on the reader.

In his article "The self-Consuming Narrator in Poe's 'Ligeia' and 'Usher,'" Roland Bieganowski refers to Stanley Fish who argues for "a transfer of attention from the content of art . . . to its effect: 'from what is happening on the page to what is happening in the reader' " (175). Such transfer of attention, says Bieganowski, can help clarify some of Poe's "elusive" stories like "The Fall of the House of Usher" (ibid). In particular, Bieganowski refers to the narrator of the story and describes him as a self-consuming narrator who seems to focus less on what he would seem to point to and more on what happens in him as he attempts to express the "ineffable." In general, Bieganowski suggests, in this article, that Poe's stories as a whole can be read as "utterances that affect the narrator as well as the reader" (182). Both the narrator and the reader, argues Bieganowski, have been "led by the imagination's power to create images more thrilling than the physical world" (185). Bieganowski goes on to say that the first point of Poe's stories becomes what an "idea, word, or utterance does to the narrator" (ibid). The readers, in this context, will be seen as "mediating presences" which suggests a new perspective to these stories in which the reader can be seen as a representation of Poe's ideal narrator, and the narrator as the representation of his ideal reader (ibid). Bieganowski concludes his discussion by saying that the structure and substance of Poe's stories is the self-consuming process of discovering his spiritual world. So, these stories, "Usher," included, can be seen, in a way, as an escape from the physical to the inner spiritual world.

In conclusion, our paper remains only an attempt towards highlighting a few literary issues that the Hashemite University professors thrash out in their American literature classes as they teach Edgar Allan Poe in general and his eminent story "The Fall of the House of Usher" in particular. We do not claim that our paper is comprehensive of all such issues, by any means, but it is an attempt to present the issues and topics that are usually raised in this regard. In addition, the issues randomly chosen for discussion are based on the response that the researchers get from the target group of the study, which is a sample of professors of American literature at an Arab University as an example. The researchers, therefore, expect that their findings will highlight the existing pedagogical practices and will point out to new ones that will hopefully improve the way Poe is taught and will bridge the gap between theory and practice, especially when teaching a writer like Poe who still causes, till nowadays, a lot of controversial debate about his art and criticism at large.

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