Literature, Discourse and Ideology: Dialogizing Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of The House of Usher" in Terms of the Languages of Sexism, Classism and Racism

Adriana Jiménez Rodríguez
Escuela de Lenguas Modernas
Universidad de Costa Rica

Abstract

The article analyzes Edgar Allan Poe's famous short story "The Fall of the House of Usher" through the perspective of Mikhail Bakhtin's theories regarding literature and language. Bakhtin proposes that the novel in particular is an ideal medium that serves to study the interplay of many languages and ideologies. Taking that as a premise, the approach in the present discussion is historical-social, as it strives to trace three particular discourses in the short story: sexism, classism, and racism. The specific objective of the article is to prove that the dialogization of those discourses seeks, in a way, to point out the social and historical necessity to escape such oppressive systems.

Key words: Bakhtin, Poe, sexism, classism, racism

Resumen

El artículo analiza el famoso cuento "La caída de la Casa de Usher" desde la perspectiva de las teorías del lenguaje y la literatura de Mijaíl Bakhtín. Este teórico propone que el género de la novela en particular es el medio óptimo para el estudio del juego y de la interacción de muchos lenguajes e ideologías. Tomando sus ideas al respecto como punto de partida, el enfoque de esta discusión es socio-histórico, ya que intenta seguir el rastro de tres discursos ideológicos en concreto: el sexismo, el clasismo y el racismo. El objetivo específico del artículo es comprobar que la dialogización de dichos discursos busca en cierta manera señalar la necesidad social e histórica de escapar los sistemas de opresión que los producen.

Palabras claves: Bakhtín, Poe, sexismo, clasismo, racismo

A brilliant man once stated that "literary scholarship is one branch of the study of ideologies" (Bakhtin, *Literature as Ideological Form* 124). The problem most of the few academics who choose to undertake the study of literature as a discipline face when confronted to professionals of other fields is precisely convincing them that this statement is true. Any given work of literature functions as an ideological entity that questions, constructs, dismisses or modifies all other ideological entities, whether they relate to it internally or externally; "thus the printed verbal performance engages, as it were, in ideological colloquy of large scale: it responds to something, objects to something, affirms something, anticipates possible responses and objections, seeks support, and so on" (Bakhtin, *Language as Dialogic Interaction* 59). Furthermore, this characteristic of literature—that "in its 'content' [it] reflects [and refracts] the whole of the ideological horizon of which it itself is a part" (*Literature as Ideological Form* 128)—functions as a process that is in constant state of modification, like Bakhtin and Voloshinov confirm in their essay *Literature as Ideological Form*: "The ideological environment is constantly in the active dialectical process of generation. Contradictions are always present, constantly being overcome and reborn" (127). Following these theorists, one must certainly agree that the ideal genre for dialogical intercourse is indeed the novel—and by extension the short story. It is important to clarify to the reader that the two terms will be used alternatively throughout; that is, "novel" or "story" will here mean basically the same. In fact, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" presents most of the dialogical and literary ingredients for a Bakhtinian analysis of "discourse in the novel," for example in that "the logic of the novelistic construction permits the mastery of the unique logic of new aspects of reality. The artist organically places life as he [or she] sees it into the plane of the work" (Bakhtin, *Genres as Ideological Forms* 179). This story places life as Poe saw it, and my objective is to interpret it as belonging to social intercourse at its broadest level and therefore not separable from the ideological consequences evolving from it. Key terms from Bakhtin's dialogic theory—ideology, discourse, genre, social and historical heteroglossia, inner dialogue, intersection of languages, to name a few—are undoubtedly applicable to "The Fall of the House of Usher", and side by side with basic literary analysis, these elements conform a rich, intricate web of interplay and significance.

Bakhtin's theories fundamentally allow for an almost unlimited number of discourses to be present and in constant dialogization in one single ideological product, in this case, a literary work. In order to accomplish any analysis of such a broad band of possibilities, an active and conscientious reader is essential. In other words, an active reading is vital to the construction of the discourses that this essay will study and the discourse that the essay itself will become on its own right. "Responsive understanding," explains Bakhtin, "is a fundamental force, one that participates in the formulation of discourse, and it is moreover an active understanding, one that discourse senses as resistance or support enriching the discourse" (*Discourse in the Novel* 280-281). If, as this author expresses elsewhere, the "'languages' of heteroglossia intersect each other in a variety of

ways, forming new socially typified 'languages'" (Idem 291), then my specific purpose is to focus concretely on the languages of sexism, classism, and racism in Poe's short story. These choices are far from being the only discourses present in the text; indeed, it contains dozens of other very interesting sets of interacting languages, but I preferred to direct my analysis to a historical-social approach. The underlying current of my choice is Bakhtin's ratification that "a language gives expression to forces working toward concrete verbal and ideological unification and centralization, which develop in vital connection with the processes of sociopolitical and cultural centralization" (Idem 271). Concurrently, the languages of sexism, classism, and racism still inform even present-day societies all around the globe, and there can never be too many analyses of them if the ultimate result will be their elimination, or at least public condemnation manifested in strong social enforcement. That is the fundamental conception of the present study, which hopes to fulfill the premise of the ideological importance of the novel; namely that "both object and language are revealed to the novelist in their historical dimension, in the process of social and heteroglot becoming. For the novelist, there is no world outside his [or her] socio-heteroglot perception" (Bakhtin *Discourse in the Novel* 330). From the perspective of a historical-social discursive milieu, Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" is rich in the relationship and construction—both inter and intra-immersed—of three main discourses: sexism, classism, and racism, which will continue to pervasively engage in an intense Bakhtinian dialogization throughout the present study.

In order to plunge into the intricacies of the language of sexism as presented in the short story, the reader must first be informed that the premise in this instance is that there is an intense dialogue between what Bakhtin calls the author's intention and what a modernized version would call the reader's intention. According to Bakhtin, "we acutely sense two levels at each moment in the story; one, the level of the narrator . . . And the other, the level of the author, who speaks (albeit in a refracted way) by means of this story and through this story" (*Discourse in the Novel* 314). It is impossible to "sense the level of the narrator" without the aid of what would then be the level of the reader. In the particular case of this essay, my reading of the story inevitably leads me to believe that the discourse of sexism is indeed very much present, whether the author intended it consciously or unconsciously; in any event, we must keep in mind that "in an authentic novel there can be sensed behind each utterance the elemental force of social languages [like sexism, for example], with their internal logic and internal necessity" (Idem 356). In order to introduce the matter, it is useful to look at author Leila May's comment about the restrictive nuclear family structure of the nineteenth century in her article *"Sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature:' The Brother-Sister Bond in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher"* should be taken into account: "feminine desire had to will its own constraint and negation . . . Such purity and virtuousness [as was desired and required in female relatives] . . . could exist on earth only in the being of the sister" (2) since the mother had already being "sullied" by sexual intercourse and childbirth. Within the historical context of the story, then, sisters were expected to be models of (sexual)

virtue. This familial and social necessity put women in a position of profound stress and tension, being as they were forced to go against their nature. The consequences of such a state of patriarchal oppression are clearly present in Poe's story in the guise of Madeleine's "mysterious" disease that: "had long baffled the skill of her [male] physicians. A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character" (145). May's subsequent assertion regarding the exact cause of such an ill state is entirely accurate: "The precise nature of [Madeleine's unknown disease] is none other than that ¢family evil¢—nineteenth-century bourgeois domestic ideology itself" (6), an ideology whose real suppression of female identity is literally shown as physical entombment in Poe's short story. It cannot escape the attention of the reader that, in effect, his ending of utter terror at the resurfacing of Madeleine's character is in fact the realization of the worst fear of an asphyxiatingly patriarchal society: a coming back from the dead that can very well mean an a return of an un-domesticated, sexually explosive female—more awful and terrific because this particular female is violating the sacredness of the virginal sister figure by killing her brother, "a victim to the terrors he had anticipated" (157). Again, Leila May emphasizes by asserting that "it is significantly the sister who must be sacrificed—here literally entombed, buried alive within the foundations of the familial edifice—and it is her breaking fee from that entombment that provokes the collapse of the entire structure" (3). In terms of feminism, "The Fall of the House of Usher" stands for the ultimate doom and inevitable destruction of the metaphorical house of the nuclear family which is built upon the (literal and/or poetic) violently patriarchal entombment of female sexuality and overall identity.

In the story, there is further evidence of yet another variant of the discourse of sexism, which, indeed, is even tainted with undeniable traces of a latently homosexual misogyny. There are multiple references throughout the text that can easily be interpreted as evincing a markedly sexual connection between the narrator and Roderick Usher. These references increase as the narrator himself admits the "closer and still closer intimacy [that] admitted [him] more unreservedly into the recesses of his spirit" (145). Furthermore, Roderick continues to involve him in certain occupations of which one cannot help but wonder the nature of, especially when one is told: "Among other things, I hold painfully in mind a certain singular perversion and amplification of the wild air of the last waltz of Von Weber" (idem). The situation gets more complicated when the narrator's strange attitude towards Madeleine is taken into account, beginning with the first time he sees her: "I regarded her with an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread—and yet I found it impossible to account for such feelings. A sensation of stupor oppressed me, as my eyes followed her retreating steps" (144). In this instance, the words of Leila May again strike an accurate chord: "These fears and anxieties take the form of a dread—that is, of a horrible attraction to the thing feared . . . the failure of disciplined feminine desire" (2). This particular discourse—the language of sexual relationships in the closed environment of a retired family seat where two out of the three people involved are siblings—is

the most complicated, at least in my opinion as a reader. Is there a ménage a trios going on at some level—or all? Is it that Roderick is jealous of the narrator snatching his sister's (deviated) sexual love or is it the other way around? The answers to these questions would require a paper of their own, but the fact that is certain from the textual evidence regardless of the prior psycho-sexual entanglements is that the narrator in fact acts as Roderick's accomplice in the burial of his (not quite dead) sister's body. When they place Madeleine in the appallingly secure vault, the narrator admits that they "could not regard her unawed" (151). On explaining the reason why, he goes on to say: "The disease which had thus entombed the lady in the maturity of youth, had left . . . the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death" (idem). It seems that the peculiar references to the blush and the lingering smile are a hint of a sexual nature. Could it be that they were "so terrible" because they were reminiscent of the physical state after such a thing as an orgasm? Might that not be exactly why they are burying her alive? Is the narrator truthful when he claims that he did not know she was not dead? Or is he more likely to be a knowing participant who joins Roderick in the literal entombment of the sexually rebellious female? I believe the latter to be the most likely explanation, and it would make sense in terms of the female body as the site of such an undesirable rebellion which would certainly threaten the patriarchal structure. Even if presented in a somewhat ambiguous manner—and very likely with an equally ambiguous intention—both the latent homosexuality and its sprung misogyny are indubitably dialogic elements that participate in the heteroglot environment of the *House of Usher*.

In his interesting article "Foucault in the House of Usher: Some Historical Permutations in Poe's Gothic", author Stephen Dougherty accurately claims that "what one notices foremost about 'Usher' is the emphasis on class and aristocracy. At the beginning of the tale, class affiliation is the primary means of marking division and establishing identity" (4-5). And the identity of the Ushers is in fact so embedded in their aristocratic class affiliation, that even Roderick admits that him and the house are enmeshed in one single unit when he explains to the narrator the effect that the building has on him: "an effect which the *physique* of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down, had, at length, brought about upon the *morale* of his existence" (144). This embodies to perfection Bakhtin's claim that "a social language, then, is a concrete socio-linguistic belief system that defines a distinct identity for itself within the boundaries of a language that is unitary only in the abstract" (*Discourse in the Novel* 356). In the construction of his argument, Stephen Dougherty explains that the Gothic movement of the late eighteenth—and early nineteenth—century literature belongs to a residually feudal Europe is referred to as the Gothic of cruelty, and it is characterized by being "obsessed with filiation and patrimonial inheritance" (3). In the story, the Ushers "lay in the direct line of descent" (140), and that indeed was "the family evil," the fact that their bloodline was aristocratic *and* unmixed. The house lacked vitality precisely because the House was dying with its last members. From this perspective, it is paramount to ask

what the position of the narrator is in this matter, and what possible authorial intentions, or visions of reality, might be refracted in his position. There are several clues in the text that may lead to the conclusion that the narrator is at least aware of the deficiencies of this aristocracy system in the process of disappearing. For one, he does notice the small, almost imperceptible fissure (or the line of descent flaw, if you will) in the front of the house, which will end up being the cause of the collapse of the entire building. Secondly, he is also perceptive enough to become aware of the state of decadence of the House, which parallels the decadence of Roderick and Madeleine and of the class system of aristocracy: "The general furniture was profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered . . . I felt that I breathed an atmosphere of sorrow" (142). The reality refracted in these attitudes seems to be a new socio-political reality where the discourse of classism is already failing. But sadly, the failure of one hierarchical dominant and oppressive structure did mean anything but the mere substitution; that is, a new way of organizing social strata and a sense of identity that was needed. "After . . . the rise of scientific medicine in the eighteenth century," explains Stephen Dougherty, "blood lost some of its old associations, but it gained some important new ones. Blood came to represent not the character of the individual, but the purity of the race or nation" (1). And this transition, however complicated is part of the reality refracted in "The Fall of the House of Usher". In terms of the way different discourses interact with each other in a work of literature, and in the specific context of Edgar Allan Poe's short story, the presence of the language of an aristocracy in process of decadence becomes particularly interesting when the language of racism comes to supplant it, in a way.

Taking external historical development as a point of departure, it becomes clear in "The Fall of the House of Usher", that the dialogic interplay of classism and racism becomes paramount, especially in the context of a growing nationalism in the democratic identity of the United States' cultural ideology. If it is true that, as Bakhtin says, "in the novel, formal markers of languages, manners and styles are symbols for sets of social beliefs" (*Discourse in the Novel* 357), then what underlies the markers in Poe's short story is the shift from one cultural-political system of social differentiation to another, namely, from a decadent European classism to a growing American nationalistic racism. This shift meant that racism would then come to serve the same purpose that classism before it, with just enough obvious modifications to fit the new historical context; thus, "the racialization of culture in the nineteenth century empowered the bourgeoisie by providing its members with a racial Other against which to constitute their own social identity" (Dougherty 6). In practical terms, this meant that now people were not as afraid to mix with the lesser classes as they were terrified of contaminating their bloodline with the unhealthy and inferior blood of inferior races; furthermore, "the fear of miscegenation, or tainted blood, belied deeper fears of disease and death" (idem 5). This racist fear can be seen in the inserted poem "The Haunted Palace," which, if read from this perspective, can be identified with the fall of the monarch (read as slave owner) after what several critics have qualified as a black slave uprising, "evil things, in robes of sorrow, / Assailed

the monarch's high estate" (148). These evil doers can very well be the "troop of Echoes"—transformed into rebellious mutineers—from the previous stanza, "whose sweet duty / Was but to sing, / In voices of surpassing beauty, / The wit and wisdom of the King" (idem). But even more dramatically, the fear of racial contamination is clear in the rationalized explanation for storing Madeleine's body "for a fortnight" in the vault before burying it. Other than the symbolic and literal patriarchal overtone of the entombment act analyzed in previous paragraphs, this section also comes to illustrate how various discourses intersect at many points throughout the narrative: "The worldly reason, however, assigned for this singular proceeding, was one which I did not feel at liberty to dispute. I will not deny that . . . I had no desire to oppose what I regarded at best but *a harmless, and by no means an unnatural precaution* [my italics]" (150). "Extrapolating from 'Usher' to the cultural history of the nineteenth century," explains Stephen Dougherty, "we can read in this shift the translation of an essentially aristocratic concern with genealogy and inheritance into the bourgeois obsession with biological integrity and the dangers of heredity" (6). Let us go back to the text and consider a very remarkable and insightful comment by the character of Roderick (which hints quite strongly at a refracted authorial intention, by the way): "I have, indeed, no abhorrence of danger, except in its absolute effect—in terror . . . [sooner or later] I must abandon life and reason altogether, in some struggle with the grim phantasm FEAR" (144). This in fact is the fear I have tried to trace throughout: precisely the *fear* of untamed female sexuality, of the disappearance of class lines, and of race equality. What these discourses have in common is that they are all mechanisms of defining a people's sense of identity via differentiation, and what this means is that classism and racism are in essence stems of the same root. Dougherty affirms that "there is, in other words, a process of historical re-scription at work by which elements in an earlier discourse resurface and take on altered meaning as they are aligned with new elements, for the purpose of legitimizing new power structures" (13); certainly, the power structure being ratified in the external historical discourse of the formation of nation in nineteenth-century America is the rising of the bourgeoisie as the new dominant class.

In his essay "Discourse in the Novel", M. M. Bakhtin sums up the sociological-ideological relevance of the novel—and by delegation, the short story—as a genre when he writes: "[The] distinctive links and interrelationships between utterances and languages, this movement of the theme through different languages and speech types, its dispersion into the rivulets and droplets of social heteroglossia, its dialogization—this is the basic distinguishing feature of the stylistics of the novel" (263). This analysis has certainly strived to understand Poe's short story in these terms, and to be aware that from this standpoint it is not really possible not to take a position as an active reader; a position which inherently involves making choices, organizing social languages present in the text, and dialogizing with it as well. In the present study, the discourses of sexism, classism, and racism have at least been tested for their presence in "The Fall of the House of Usher", and it has indeed been possible to observe at a

practical level that "languages do not exclude each other, but rather intersect with each other in many different ways" (Bakhtin, *Discourse in the Novel* 291). An inevitable but undeniably interesting last question would be the matter of the position of the author in the story, however vague or hard to pinpoint it is. I firmly believe that, in Bakhtinian terms, the centrifugal element in the narrative structure is the fact that the narrator manages to escapes from the complete annihilation of the House of Usher, even if he is clearly a member of such a decadent line of aristocracy himself. What I am suggesting is that the narrator has a sensibility of intellect and a sharp social perception that enables him to choose adapting himself to new structures rather than perishing like the Ushers. There is an unmistakably positive view of change in the closing of the story, if one considers the characterization given to the storm that breaks out just before Madeleine makes her eerie appearance and kills her brother: "The impetuous fury of the entering gust nearly lifted us from our feet. It was indeed, *a tempestuous yet sternly beautiful night, and one wildly singular in its terror and its beauty* [my italics]" (152). Could it then be that Poe is (whether inadvertently or not) pleading for an embrace of change? And in so doing, is he not questioning the validity of oppressive discourses such as the ones analyzed here? Then we could certainly find truth in Bakhtin's wise words when he states that "novelistic images, profoundly double-voiced and double-languaged . . . seek to objectivize the struggle with all types of internally persuasive alien discourse that had at one time held sway over the author" (*Discourse in the Novel* 348). In the end, and in the midst of the discourse created by this essay, the inner and outer dialogization of the languages of sexism, classism and racism in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" seem to point in the direction of the social and ideological necessity of escaping from these oppressive and obsessive discourses and in fact constructing a new, truly socialist type of political and cultural discourse where these obsessive and virulent languages finally become obsolete.

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