“The Fall of the House of Usher” in EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe's masterpiece "The Fall of the House of Usher" has always received great critical attention. It is a typical Poean Gothic story which exploits some of the writer's most recognizable devices such as premature burial, "coming back" from the dead, the disintegration of the mind, the effect of doubling, special audio-visual effects, horror and decay, and the main protagonists as "isolato" characters detached from the realm of reality. The story was an excellent material to present the functioning of Poe's theory of the short story in class. When it comes to teaching this masterpiece in the EFL classroom, research was conducted in an American literature lesson with third year university students of English as a foreign language. The aim of this research was to check whether the teaching procedure in the American literature class helps students to digest Poe's masterpiece more easily and to comprehend it successfully and whether students understand Poe's theory of the short story as well as whether they consider it highly applicable to "The Fall of the House of Usher". The participants of this study were 14 university students with English as their foreign language in their third year of studies who had attended the American literature course during one academic year. The researchers constructed a questionnaire as a tool to measure the extent of students' understanding of Poe's short story and the applicability of its postulates to "The Fall of the House of Usher". The results of the study demonstrate that students improved in their identifying and comprehending the postulates of Poe's short story and their applicability to "The Fall of the House of Usher". This shows that the teaching approach, in the form of the described teaching procedure, was effective. The research implications for the EFL American literature classroom, concerning the short story aspect in Poe's work, suggest that there is no disadvantage to the teaching procedure and only potential benefits are to be found. As a result, though, further research is necessary to demonstrate some other, different or additional ways to teaching Poe and reasons as to how and why the teaching methods work where a larger sample of students is included in the teaching and research.

Keywords: short story, Gothic, plot, unity of effect, doubling, mystery, decay, EFL American literature classroom, research, questionnaire.

1. Edgar Allan Poe and His Literary Heritage

Edgar Allan Poe was a writer, a poet, a literary critic, a magazine editor and one of the greatest American Romantic writers who left a recognizable stamp on world literature. His creative writings include poetry, various types of short stories, ranging from Gothic stories to extravaganzas, hoaxes, post-mortem reveries, imaginary voyages, stories of ratiocination (Silverman, 1993) as well as a prose poem, novels, "Marginalia", "The Literati of New York City", reviews of American, British and continental authors, and essays. Poe contributed significantly to the development of the Gothic story, he invented the story of ratiocination and introduced elements of science fiction into some of his stories. He was one of the most outstanding minds of antebellum America. However, he was one of the most controversial figures of the time.

He did not only write poetry and fiction, he thought much about the very process of creation. Therefore we can discuss his theory of the short story which is primarily based on his well-known reviews of Hawthorne's *Twice-Told Tales* (1842) as well as *Twice-Told Tales* and *Mosses from an Old Manse* (1847). According to these, the short story is to be considered as the supreme form of prose which requires a half an hour to one or two hours to be read in one sitting in order to keep the unity of effect. If it cannot be read in a single session, "it deprives itself, of course, of the immense force derivable from totality [and] simple cessation in reading would, of itself, be sufficient to destroy the true unity" (Poe,

1984). This is precisely what happens with the novel since it cannot be read in one sitting – the unity of effect is inevitably destroyed. Poe insisted that the process of a story's creation should be planned in advance to the most minute details. He truly believed that every part of the story had the same significance for the story as a unit – if you try to replace or rearrange any of them, you will ruin the whole construction.

In his review of Edward Lytton Bulwer's novel *Night and Morning* (1841) he stated: "[The plot] may be described as a building so dependently constructed, that to change the position of a single brick is to overthrow the entire fabric." Four years later, in his "Chapter of Suggestions" he added: "[The plot] is that from which no component atom can be removed, and in which none of the component atoms can be displaced, without ruin to the whole." According to Poe the short story writer has to be a skilful artist able to plan every single step of the story's creation process. Otherwise, he would be doomed to artistic failure. That is why he claims in his "Chapter of Suggestions" the following:

"Most authors sit down to write with *no* fixed design, trusting to the inspiration of the moment, it is not therefore, to be wondered at, that most books are valueless. Pen should never touch the paper until at least a well-digested *general* purpose be established. In fiction, the dénouement – in all other compositions the intended effect, should be definitely considered and arranged before writing the first word, and no word should be written which does not tend, or form a part of a sentence which tends, to the development of the dénouement, or to the strengthening of the effect" (Poe, 1984).

In many of his stories, especially those written in the Gothic vein, he introduced the narrator and his disturbed mind, "isolato" characters, the effect of doubling, the Doppelgänger theme, the atmosphere of horror, fear and decay, special audio-visual effects, premature burials, the concept of the house as the mind, and the beautiful heroine that dies, leaving her companion bereft.

2. Poe and His Influences

Poe was a strongly influential writer. It was after him that The Mystery Writers of America (1945) named their famous award. The first Edgar Award was given to Julian Fast (1946) for his debut novel *Watchful at Night* (Connelly, 2009). During the 1940s the well-known horror film director Roger Corman made a series of films inspired by Poe's short stories such as "The Fall of the House of Usher", "The Tomb of Ligeia", "The Masque of the Red Death", "The Pit and the Pendulum" with the great actor Vincent Price in the main roles. Alfred Hitchcock once said that he and Poe were prisoners of suspense (Bloomfield, 2007). French symbolists admired Poe. Charles Baudelaire got to know Poe's work in the late 1840s when the first translations of Poe's stories appeared in *La Démocratie Poétique* and *Le Journal du Loiret*. Nevertheless, Baudelaire was so fascinated with Poe's stories that he himself translated some of them, such as "Mesmeric Revelation". In his letter to Théophile Thoré (20th January 1864) in which he comments upon "the attack" on Manet because of his alleged imitations of Goya, Baudelaire also states the following: "Well, don't they accuse me of imitating Edgar Allan Poe? And do you know why, with such infinite patience, I translated Poe? It was because he was like me! The first time I ever opened a book by him I discovered, with rapture and awe, not only subjects which I had dreamt, but whole phrases which I'd conceived, written by him twenty years before" (Baudelaire in Starkie, 1998).

Edgar Allan Poe heavily influenced many generations of modern writers. Therefore we are not surprised with Jorge Luis Borges's statement "We, reading the detective novel, are an invention of Edgar Allan Poe [...] Poe projected multiple shadows [...] How many things begin with Poe?" (Merivale in Merivale and Sweeney, 1994). Laura Lippman claims "Everyone wants a piece of Poe" (Lippman in Connelly, 2009). Stephen King answering a frequently asked question "Which works of fiction have scared you?" replies "*Lord of the Flies* by William Golding and *The Tell-Tale Heart* by Edgar Allan Poe" and states the following: "Many great writers of the twentieth century, from Jim Thompson and John D. Macdonald to Thomas Harris [...] are the children of Poe" (King in Connelly, 2009).

3. "The Fall of the House of Usher" vs. Poe's Typical Short Story

There can hardly be any American literature student who is not familiar with the epic introductory part of "The Fall of the House of Usher":

"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" (Poe in Quinn and O'Neill, 1989).

This is a typical Poean Gothic story presented as a journey into the depths of the self with the main protagonists the Usher siblings, the descendants of an old and once-upon-a-time distinguished family. We are not given much about

the main characters, their personalities and origins. Everything is rather vague and mysterious. What we do get to know is that Roderick Usher, who invited to the Usher mansion his childhood friend, namely the narrator of the story, suffers from mental idiosyncrasy while his twin sister Madeline suffers from catalepsy. They are strongly interdependent and make a "perfect" whole although their relation seems to be abnormally close. Everything in the story alludes to decay, gloom and rotting. Poe masterfully employed the problem of doubling which is especially evident in the reflection(s) of Roderick's personality as well as the mansion itself.

The story offers a series of the typical Poean devices such as a premature burial, "coming back" from the dead, corresponding sound effects in the Usher mansion and in "Mad Trist" by Sir Launcelot Canning, Roderick's verbal improvisation by reciting the poem "Haunted Palace" which represents an allegory of the process of losing one's mind, the disintegration of the house as well as the disintegration of the mind.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" has always received great critical attention. For example, one of Poe's contemporaries, James Russell Lowell stated that the story "has a singular charm for us, and we think that no one could read it without being strongly moved by its serene and somber beauty. Had its author written nothing else, it would alone have been enough to stamp him as a man of genius, and the master of a classic style" (Bloomfield, 2007). D. H. Lawrence wrote "All this underground vault business only symbolises that which takes place beneath the consciousness" (Hubbell et al, 1972). Richard Wilbur argued that this story should be taken "as a dream of the narrator's", H. P. Lovecraft stated that the story "displays an abnormally linked trinity of entities as the end of a long and isolated family history – a brother, his twin sister, and their incredibly ancient home all sharing a single soul and meeting one common dissolution at the same moment" (Hubbell et al, 1972). Patrick F. Quinn points out the following: "Like the house which represents him, Roderick Usher also seems to emanate an atmosphere of death" (Abbey and Mullane, 1987) while George Zayed claims: "The Fall of the House of Usher" is a symbol for that world which crawls and creeps in the depths of being" (Abbey and Mullane, 1987).

4. "The Fall of the House of Usher" in the EFL Classroom (The Procedure of Teaching)

"Edgar Allan Poe was presented to me in high school the way he was probably to you.

As broccoli.

You know what I mean. It's good for you, so you have to eat it. You're fifteen, craving French fries and cheeseburgers, but all they have in the English syllabus is broccoli. Then they make you read it and try to convince you that reading is fun(damental)" (Lisa Scottoline in Connelly, 2009).

This is what the writer and the Edgar Award winner Lisa Scottoline said about her very first "touch" with Poe's work in her teenage days. In an attempt to make Edgar Allan Poe and his masterpiece "The Fall of the House of Usher" more easily digestible than broccoli, highly understandable and close to the third-year college students in the EFL classroom we applied the following procedure in our American literature class:

1. The students were familiarised with Edgar Allan Poe's biography, the literary scene of antebellum America and his position in it.
2. The students were shown some representative pictures dealing with Poe's life.
3. The students were introduced to the major influences on Poe.
4. The students were introduced to Poe's major influence on the generations of writers to come.
5. The professor explained the basic postulates of Poe's theory of the short story.
6. Since the students were asked to read the story for the class, they were asked to discuss the most relevant aspects of the story such as: narration, plot, the Doppelgänger theme, Gothicism, the setting, characterisation, and audio-visual effects.
7. The students were asked to fill in a questionnaire. We wanted to see whether they understood Poe's theory of the short story and to what extent they considered it was applicable in "The Fall of the House of Usher".
8. As an extra activity the students watched the film "The Raven" (2012) in which the director James McTeigue gives a fictionalised version of Poe's last days. In "the entombment" of the main heroine, Emily Hamilton, although she was alive, we can surely identify the device used in "The Fall of the House of Usher" as well as in many other Poe's Gothic stories.

The procedure we describe here was a part of the research we conducted in American literature lessons with third-year university students of English as a foreign language.

5. Research Questions

The research questions for the study were framed as follows: Does the teaching procedure in the American literature class help third-year students to digest and comprehend "The Fall of the House of Usher" more easily and successfully? Do students understand Poe's theory of the short story and to what extent do they consider that it is applicable to "The Fall of the House of Usher"? It is hypothesised by the researchers that the teaching procedure in the American literature class helps students to digest Poe's masterpiece more easily and comprehend it successfully. It is also hypothesised by the researchers that students understand Poe's theory of the short story and that they consider it highly applicable to "The Fall of the House of Usher".

6. Research Methodology

6.1 Participants

The participants of this study were 14 university students of English as a foreign language in their third year of studies. They attended the American literature course over one academic year. It is believed that the participants who attended these lessons were equipped with high comprehension and identification of the postulates of Poe's typical short story.

6.2 Instrument

The researchers constructed a questionnaire as a tool to measure the extent of students' understanding of Poe's short story and the applicability of its postulates to "The Fall of the House of Usher". The questionnaire consisted of 22 questions. The students' task was to examine 22 statements referring to the postulates of a typical Poean short story. According to the scale offered in the questionnaire, students evaluated these postulates on a scale from one to five.

Table 1 shows the questionnaire which students were asked to fill in.

Table 1: Questionnaire "The Fall of the House of Usher"

Directions: Examine carefully each item of the questionnaire and check the responses by ticking (√) in the box that best indicates how well the statement describes you.

While I was reading and analysing "The Fall of the House of Usher" I *could identify and comprehend successfully* the following postulates of a typical Poean story:

Items	Contents	1	2	3	4	5
1	A single effect – a total and intense psychological/spiritual effect upon the reader.					
2	The short story created as a unit.					
3	The brevity of the short story: "We allude to the short prose narrative, requiring from a half-hour to one or two hours in its perusal" (a review of Hawthorne's <i>Twice-Told Tales</i>).					
4	A preconceived plan – a short story has to be planned in advance.					
5	Every element contributes to the harmony of the final effect.					
6	"Pen should never touch the paper until at least a well-designed general purpose be established." ("Chapter of Suggestions").					
7	"[The plot] is that from which no component atom can be removed, and in which none of the component atoms can be displaced, without ruin to the whole." ("Chapter of Suggestions")					
8	The writer is considered to be a skilful craftsman.					
9	"The Fall of the House of Usher" vs. an allegory of a dream experience.					
10	"The Fall of the House of Usher" vs. a house-as-mind- symbolism.					
11	"The Fall of the House of Usher" vs. the atmosphere of decay, disintegration and rotting.					
12	"The Fall of the House of Usher" vs. a typical Poean Gothic story – the main characters presented as a couple / siblings.					
13	"The Fall of the House of Usher" vs. a typical Poean Gothic story – the hero is a descendant of an old and once prominent family but he is not a completely defined figure; the heroine is usually affected by a mysterious disease and dies.					
14	"The Fall of the House of Usher" vs. a typical Poean Gothic story – the hero as a split personality.					

15	"The Fall of the House of Usher" vs. a typical Poean Gothic story – the main protagonists detached from reality and the physical world.					
16	"The Fall of the House of Usher" vs. a typical Poean Gothic story – a sense of remoteness, vagueness and mystery.					
17	"The Fall of the House of Usher" vs. a typical Poean Gothic story – the atmosphere of gloom, melancholy, dread and terror.					
18	"The Fall of the House of Usher" vs. a typical Poean Gothic story – specific audio-visual effects.					
19	"The Fall of the House of Usher" vs. a typical Poean Gothic story vs. typical elements of Gothicism (dreary setting, a hypersensitive hero, insanity, the death of a beautiful woman, premature burial)					
20	"The Fall of the House of Usher" vs. a typical Poean Gothic story – the process of dreaming.					
21	"The Fall of the House of Usher" vs. a typical Poean Gothic story – the problem of doubling.					
22	"The Fall of the House of Usher" vs. a typical Poean Gothic story vs. the narrator's disturbed, tortured mind.					

As shown in Table 1, there are 22 questions, or statements about the postulates of Poe's short story. The level of its identification and comprehension was evaluated on a 1–5 scale, that is, the postulates were marked from one to five.

Altogether, 14 questionnaires were collected. The results of the questionnaire were analysed in the program SPSS 15.0 which means that students' responses were analysed statistically by using percentage and mean scores of their responses on a 1–5 scale for each question.

7. Findings and Discussion

The results of the study demonstrate that students improved in identifying and comprehending the postulates of Poe's short story and that they found a high applicability of the postulates to "The Fall of the House of Usher". This means that the teaching approach, in the form of the described teaching procedure, was effective. Namely, the teaching procedure in the American literature class helps students to digest Poe's masterpiece more easily and comprehend it successfully. Also, students understand Poe's theory of the short story where they consider the theory postulates highly applicable to "The Fall of the House of Usher". Figure 1 shows the scoring average and percentage results of students' responses to each question.

Figure 1: Average and percentage score of students' responses

As illustrated in the graph, the average questionnaire score was 3.2 which means that 58% of students identified and comprehended the postulates of Poe's short story and found the theory applicable to *The Fall of the House of Usher* by ticking the response with mark 5 on the scale offered in the questionnaire. 23% of students identified and comprehended the postulates of Poe's theory of short story and its applicability to *The Fall of the House of Usher* by responding with number 4 in the questionnaire's scale. 17% of students responded by choosing number 3 in the scale. Only 2% of students gave their response by choosing number 2 in the scale. There were no identified number 1 responses.

In this case, the researchers' hypothesis that the teaching procedure in the American literature class helps students to digest Poe's masterpiece more easily and comprehend it successfully is justified. Also, the researchers' hypothesis that students understand Poe's theory of the short story and that they consider it highly applicable to "The Fall of the House of Usher" is justified.

Figure 2 shows scoring average and percentage results of students' responses evaluated with number 5 in the

questionnaire's scale.

Figure 2: Percentage score of number five responses

The following results present percentage scores of each question ranked with highest score (number 5 in the questionnaire):

Question 1	68.75%
Question 2	50%
Question 3	12.5%
Question 4	37.5%
Question 5	68.75%
Question 6	43.75%
Question 7	56.25%
Question 8	56.25%
Question 9	50%
Question 10	62.5%
Question 11	75%
Question 12	75%
Question 13	62.5%
Question 14	56.25%
Question 15	68.75%
Question 16	75%
Question 17	93.75%
Question 18	56.25%
Question 19	62.5%
Question 20	25%
Question 21	50%
Question 22	68.75%

According to the above illustrated results, we can conclude that students highly ranked the teaching procedure of Poe's masterpiece in the American literature class. The response to each question shows a high percentage of students choosing the highest number in the scale (that is, the number 5).

The researchers' hypothesis that the teaching procedure in the American literature class helps students to digest Poe's masterpiece more easily and comprehend it successfully is justified.

Also, researchers' hypothesis that students understand Poe's theory of the short story and that they consider it highly applicable to "The Fall of the House of Usher" is justified.

8. Conclusion

Based on the findings elaborated above, it was concluded, on the one hand, that the teaching procedure of *The Fall of the House of Usher* does have a positive effect on students' successful comprehension and understanding of Poe's postulates of a short story. On the other hand, it was concluded that the teaching procedure does have positive effect on

students' understanding of the high applicability of the postulates of the Poean short story, which they had been taught in the course, to *The Fall of the House of Usher*.

The research implications for the EFL American literature classroom, from the short story aspect in Poe's work, suggest that there is no disadvantage to the teaching procedure and only potential benefits are found. As a result, though, further research is necessary to demonstrate some other, different, additional, or new ways of teaching Poe and reasons as to how and why the teaching methods also work where a larger sample of students is included in the teaching and research. In such a manner, university teachers of American literature, with special interest in Poe's postulates of a short story, could benefit from new ways of approaching teaching in their teaching at the university level.

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