

"American Horror Story" as Adaptation of E. A. Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher"

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Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskoga jezika i
književnosti i hrvatskoga jezika i književnosti

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"Američka horor priča" kao adaptacija "Pada kuće Usherovih"

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Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Ljubica Matek

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Bachelor's Thesis

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Abstract

In the year 1839 one of Edgar Allan Poe's greatest macabre masterpieces "The Fall of the House of Usher" was published. This piece, along with others Poe wrote, such as "The Black Cat", "The Cask of Amontillado", "The Raven", was used as an inspiration to numerous other authors and TV show producers in creating their horror works. Through comparative interpretation, this paper aims to highlight the similarities between Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Fall of the House of Usher" and FX's TV show *American Horror Story* which has eight seasons with more to be aired in the next couple of years. Themes used for comparison, which happen to be some of the most frequently used tropes in gothic literature, are the haunted house, mental illness, claustrophobia, incest, burying alive and coming back from the dead. In analysing the TV show, its four seasons were used: *Murder House*, *Asylum*, *Coven* and *Cult*.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, *American Horror Story*, "The Fall of the House of Usher," short story, horror, gothic

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Introduction

Sigmund Freud wrote a famous essay on “The Uncanny” in 1919, which he defined as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud 220). Many gothic literature authors used uncanny features in their works. In the year 1839 one of Edgar Allan Poe’s greatest macabre masterpieces “The Fall of the House of Usher” was published in *Gentlemen’s Magazine* (Bracken). Along with his other works, such as “The Black Cat”, “The Cask of Amontillado,” “The Raven” and many others, this famous short story served as an inspiration to other writers and TV show producers. One of those TV shows is *American Horror Story* by Ryan Murphy.

“The Fall of the House of Usher” (often referred to as “The House of Usher” or “Usher”) is a short horror story about a brother and sister who are the last of the Usher bloodline. The story intertwines themes of insanity, illness, terror and isolation. It starts with a narrator who visits his childhood friend Roderick who lives with his twin sister Madeline in a remote house. Siblings are the last of the Usher bloodline, and both are suffering from illnesses. Roderick invited the narrator to keep him company and bring joy back to his life. Madeline appears rarely, but her appearance brings uneasiness to the narrator. Time goes by, and two friends spend their days reading and discussing various topics. Suddenly, Roderick informs the narrator that his sister had passed away and he that needs help to entomb her body. He helps him, and one night they discover that she was buried alive when she appears in the doorway of the room in which they were. At that moment Madeline falls on Roderick and dies, which causes him to die of fear. The narrator escapes the house, which starts crumbling down and disappearing.

American Horror Story (AHS) premiered on cable network FX in 2011 with its first season subtitled *Murder House*, and seven other seasons have followed the first one so far. Each season has its own story and characters while the actors mostly remain the same. Throughout each season, many real historical figures, events and folk-tales, appear, such as Black Dahlia (*Murder House*), Willowbrook State School (*Asylum*), Madame LaLaurie (*Coven*), Marie Laveau (*Coven*), and many more. As mentioned before, the first season, *Murder House*, follows the story of the Harmon family that moves into a haunted house in Los Angeles. The house kills all of its occupants, and if their bodies are buried on that property their spirits haunt the house forever. The second season, *Asylum*, takes place in the

year 1964 in Briarcliff, an institution for the criminally insane. The story centres on patients and staff who try their best to keep the patients locked in the institution, whether or not they are mentally ill. The third season, *Coven*, follows a coven of witches who are descendants of the witches that survived the Salem Trials. They attend a boarding school that works to protect their identity in the modern world. The fourth season, *Freak Show*, takes place in Florida during the year 1952. The story revolves around the dying culture of freak shows in America and their struggles to find and keep the “freaks.” The fifth season, *Hotel*, goes back to Los Angeles to follow the story of a haunted hotel and its guests and staff. The sixth season titled *Roanoke* studies the deceased colony of Roanoke in North Carolina, where a TV show is to be produced in an isolated house. The plot of the seventh season titled *Cult* revolves around the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the cult that terrorises the citizens as aftermath. Finally, the eighth season, *Apocalypse*, merges the plots of the *Coven* and *Murder House* and brings the new story of fighting the Antichrist in an attempt to save the world from the apocalypse. The ninth season titled *1984* will air in September of 2019.

This paper aims to find and analyse similarities between the short story “The Fall of the House of Usher” and the TV show American Horror Story through analysis and comparison of several most frequently used gothic tropes in order to show that Poe's short story served as a source text (or one of the source texts) for the series. The most prominent ones are the motifs of haunted house, mental illness, claustrophobia, incest, burying alive and coming back to life, which will be analysed and further explained in this particular order. In order to study these parallels between “The Fall of the House of Usher” and AHS¹, this paper will focus only on four TV show seasons: *Murder House*, *Asylum*, *Coven* and *Cult*. In each chapter, the paper will delve into one of mentioned tropes by analysing parts of the story and episodes in AHS which contain them. Every section will also discuss how and when these tropes were used in Gothic fiction.

¹ From this point on, the TV show American Horror Story will be abbreviated as AHS.

1. The House

The motif of a haunted house has become one of the most prominent gothic tropes over the past centuries. In haunted house tales, the house as a symbol of safety and wealth comes under attack. What is supposed to be a “primary marker of class” and a shelter for its human inhabitants is haunted by the ghosts of a dreadful past (Schmitz 3). Steven J. Mariconda in his article “The Haunted House” defines the haunted house as “a dwelling that is inhabited by or visited regularly by a ghost or other supposedly supernatural being” (268). Mariconda later explains that haunted house stories should have the following plot structures and narrative elements:

The haunted house story has to have, needless to say, a house or, as it may be, a castle, chateau, etc. In theory, we need not confine ourselves to a family dwelling; in the broader sense we could take a house as ‘a building in which someone or something is sheltered or located.’ [...] In terms of plotline, the haunted house has to have a series of supernatural events; and the best tales will have a backstory [...] of the provenance and discovery of these events. The haunted house story has proved amazingly flexible in accommodating a wide variety of themes: good versus evil, science versus the supernatural, economic conflict, class, gender, and so on. (268-269)

According to Mariconda, haunting of the house is usually initiated by a murder of a guest whose spirit roams the house until it is properly buried. This plot structure has been the basis of haunted house stories and has not changed considerably over time (269).

In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the house is the first thing the narrator sees and explains. He describes its “bleak walls, vacant eye-like windows, and decayed trees” (Poe 643) and the sensation the house gives him: “I know not how it was --but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. [...] There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart--an unredeemed dreariness of thought [...]” (Poe 643). Poe is said to add a symbolic meaning to the exterior: “he is startlingly good at creating in short order a sense of an external landscape; but simultaneously the reader is led to wonder constantly whether this landscape is indeed really external or rather a projection of a particular psychological state” (Punter and Byron 156). The description of the aesthetic aspect of the house is also an important factor in creating the setting. The narrator gives a vivid and thorough depiction of the building before entering it:

Its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. The discolouration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine tangled web-work from the eaves. [...] No portion of the masonry had fallen [...] Perhaps the eye of a scrutinising observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure, which, extending from the roof of the building in front, made its way down the wall in a zigzag direction, until it became lost in the sullen waters of the tarn. (Poe 645)

Benjamin F. Fisher had a different interpretation of “The Fall of the House of Usher,” analysing it from a psychological standpoint. When talking about Poe, he concluded:

Many of his character's movements from place to place lead to actual or figurative vertigo or bewilderment. Many of the buildings or even individual rooms may symbolize the interiors of human heads, i.e., minds. Poe found in Gothic tradition the very kinds of settings and characters that, transformed in his imagination, would contribute wonderful symbolism to psychologically plausible narratives of multiple outreaches. (89)

The first episode of AHS: *Murder House* starts with an eerie preview of a house, where bones are hanging in the front yard. A couple of twins visit the house to play, but they are warned by a girl not to enter: “You are going to die in there” (“Pilot” 00:00:44-00:00:46). The House does not welcome the intruders merrily and kills them both in the basement. Throughout the season the viewers come to find that the house is “infested” with the spirits of its previous occupants. The house killed each of them and kept their spirits to haunt it forever. These spirits roam the house and introduce themselves to the families who live there as neighbours, patients or workers. They often refer to the house as a human being. Moira is a spirit who pretends to be a housekeeper so she can freely roam the house. While meeting the homeowners, she subtly gives them a warning about the house: “Have you ever owned a house this old before? It has personality, feelings. Mistreat it, and you will regret it” (“Pilot” 00:23:20-00:23:26). A haunted house is also shown in the season *Coven* where at the beginning of the first episode titled “Bitchcraft,” viewers are introduced to the notorious Madame Marie Delphine LaLaurie, who 179 years ago tortured black men. Her house in New Orleans is now available for tours where witches go on a “field trip.”

2. Mental Illness

According to Punter and Byron, the late nineteenth century saw the beginning of mental physiology (early psychiatry):

At that time Gothic fiction increasingly began to suggest that the chaos and disruption previously located mainly in such external forces as vampire or monster was actually produced within the mind of the human subject. Not surprisingly, the scientist who began to appear in twentieth-century Gothic fiction is frequently a psychologist. (20-21)

In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” many descriptions of physical decay and mental despair are found together. The story depicts life in the crumbling house as full of sorrow, disease, and dissolution. At first glance, the story seems to have a supernatural narrative where characters kill one another and mysteriously come back from the dead. However, numerous psychological phenomena are involved, which bring logical explanations for the events happening in the story (Röck 5). Mental and physical health of its occupants Roderick and Madeline are dwindling, so Roderick invites the narrator to cheer him up. From the moment the narrator approached the house, his mood is affected by its appearance: “I know not how it was - but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit” (Poe 643). The narrator speaks of his feelings of desolation and gloom, which causes the readers to gain insight into the characters’ mental processes (Röck 4). The narration of the story mostly consists of long, unorganised sentences which are unclear at some parts of the text:

I was aware, however, that his very ancient family 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, as well as in a passionate devotion to the intricacies, perhaps even more than to the orthodox and easily recognizable beauties, of musical science. (Poe 644)

This type of narration could imply that the narrator is confused and has difficulty expressing his thoughts. According to Röck, “[d]isorganized speech is a crucial symptom of schizophrenia, but an odd way of speaking can also indicate other illnesses, especially dissociative disorders” (8).

As mentioned before, Roderick Usher invites the narrator to his home by writing him a letter: “The writer spoke of acute bodily illness --of a mental disorder which oppressed him -- and of an earnest desire to see me, as his best, and indeed his only personal friend, with a view of attempting, by the cheerfulness of my society, some alleviation of his malady” (Poe 644). The narrator replies by visiting him. Upon arrival, he scans Roderick’s exterior features: “A cadaverousness of complexion [...] The now ghastly pallor of the skin [...] above all things startled and even awed me. The silken hair, too, had been suffered to grow all unheeded” (Poe 645). Roderick then further explains his illness to the narrator:

It was, he said, a constitutional and a family evil, and one for which he despaired to find a remedy [...] It displayed itself in a host of unnatural sensations. [...] He suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; the most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odours of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds, and these from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror. (Poe 646)

The narrator realises that Roderick's mental state might have been disrupted by him not leaving the house he lives in for years and that the “physique of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down” (Poe 647) have had an effect over his spirit. Roderick is haunted by the fear of his death and death in general, and by taking all of this into consideration, one comes to the conclusion that he suffers from a depressive disorder. He admits that this “gloom which thus afflicted him” (Poe 647) is also caused by the fact he might lose his sister Madeline to an illness. Madeline is his only relative and an only companion he had over the past years. The disease of Lady Madeline had long baffled the skill of her physicians: “A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character, were the unusual diagnosis” (Poe 647). This quote reveals Madeline’s illness – catalepsy. Madeline is present in the story only for a short time, but the previous quote implies not only her physical illness but also her mental disorder: “a settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person” (Poe 647). It could be argued that her mental disorder has been heavily influenced by her bodily illness, due to the fact that the body and psyche are connected, so both her body and mind are “wasting away.”

The discussions about mental health-related illnesses have become very popular in today's world. Websites such as Tumblr or Pinterest, movies, and even retail stores all contribute to promote and, according to Madison Gross, even “fetishize” this trend: “The 1967 cult classic, *Valley of the Dolls*, depicts Sharon Tate's character's suicide as beautifully tragic—almost too beautiful [...] it becomes apparent that her depression and mental illness is filmed to be a beautiful quality to her character” (Gross). Because of this trend, many young people have started introducing mental disorders and eating disorders as personality traits to fit in this mental-illness-welcoming society. The TV show AHS also deals with a plethora of mental health topics.

The trope of untrustworthy psychiatrists is one that AHS depicts in the first two seasons of the show, as well as in the seventh season – *Murder House*, *Asylum* and *Cult*. In the first season, Ben Harmon is a father, a husband and a psychiatrist who moves into a haunted home with his family. He helps his patients daily, but cannot help himself and his addiction to sexual thoughts. In *Asylum*, a psychiatrist, Oliver Thredson, is first introduced as a friend who will help Lana Winters, a journalist who was admitted to the institution against her will, to escape from Briarcliff. When he manages to get her out, it is revealed to the viewers that Oliver is a serial killer who makes skin suits out of dead bodies. Dr Rudy Vincent is a psychiatrist in AHS: *Cult*. As will be mentioned later in the chapter on “Claustrophobia”, Dr Rudy Vincent is one to help his patients. A patient named Rosie is mentioned, who overcame her claustrophobia, only to come home to a cult waiting to lock her and her husband up in coffins. Dr Vincent was a member of Kai's cult and enjoyed hurting his patients as a part of “treatment.” Juliette Virzi in her article “How ‘American Horror Story’ Profits Off Mental Health Stereotypes” discusses a study titled “The Demonisation of Psychiatrists in Fiction (and Why Real Psychiatrists Might Want To Do Something About It)” by Jacqueline Hopson. In the study it was found that psychiatry is presented in a negative light:

It is these fictional portrayals of psychiatrists that present the most prevalent and readily accessible images of the profession to the general public. These are the damagingly negative, widespread representations that dominate the way in which psychiatrists are seen outside the world of medicine. (Hopson 175)

Virzi tries to answer the question of why this is the case. The fact that “psychiatry has never enjoyed the respect and social prestige of other medical specialties” (Hopson 175) can be the reason why these fictional psychiatrists do not feel respected and they “end up exerting control over marginalized people in society — in this case, people with mental illness” (Virzi). Another reason is the diagnostic procedure which is prone to manipulation and people can be pronounced mentally ill even if they are not, which is historically evidenced by early diagnoses and treatments of “hysteria” in women.

The second season, *Asylum*, is the one that portrays a variety of mental illnesses. In this paper, however, every single actual mental illness portrayed in the season will not be further analysed. From “intellectually” disabled to criminally insane, all patients are kept in the institution and are emotionally, physically and sexually abused: “AHS: *Asylum* humanized the psychiatric patients to a certain extent, but demonized psychiatry in general by showing clinicians performing barbaric experiments and using stigmatized psychiatric treatments as punishment” (Virzi).

The first season, *Murder House*, portrays a few common mental disorders. Ben Harmon’s daughter Violet is a troublesome teenager who expresses her pain by cutting (as seen in the episode “Pilot”), which is frequent among adolescents. Violet also often has suicidal thoughts and thinks of ways to kill herself. Another form of disorder is a phobia which one of the patients has; he has a paralysing fear of urban legends, one, in particular, being the “Piggy Man” (“Piggy Piggy”). Vivien Harmon, Ben’s wife, also starts showing signs of deteriorating mental health by staying in the house and having many terrifying and disturbing interactions with the spirits that haunt it. She is falsely diagnosed by her husband and sent to an asylum (“Rubber Man”).

The seventh season titled *Cult* is the one that most vividly portrays the “trend” of having mental illnesses— not only the illnesses but also the (ab)use of medication. One of the main characters is Ally. She starts suffering from anxiety and multiple types of phobias after the 9/11 attack which causes her to have a breakdown. At times, when she does not take her medicine, she hallucinates, although later the cult members lead her to believe that she is seriously mentally ill in order to manipulate her. Ally suffers from trypophobia which is a new trending phobia many people believe they have. It is a fear of small holes and clusters, such as in corals or honeycombs (Cherry). She also suffers from coulrophobia, a fear of clowns. Kai is a young man who has made himself a leader of the cult. He is often portrayed

enjoying watching violence and murder. In episode four titled “11/9” a prescribed medication Adderall is shown. Adderall is used to treat attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and narcolepsy (Durbin), but is also widely known as a drug of abuse. It is significant that Kai is shown taking medication when he is excited by the prospect of violence because it reinforces the narrative the media presents about the link between medication, mental illness, and subsequent violence (Virzi). According to Drugs.com, aggression could be a long-term effect of heavy Adderall use, and Kai only got the drug because it is later found out that dr. Vincent is his older brother.

3. Claustrophobia

Claustrophobia is an irrational fear of being enclosed or trapped in a small space or room, despite being aware that there is no danger in that situation. The word claustrophobia comes from the Greek word, “phobos,” which means fear, and the Latin word, “claustrum,” which means “closed-in space” (Black). In this paper, the motif of claustrophobia is not included in the “Mental Illness” section of this paper because it is not used to describe someone’s literal fear of confined spaces, but to create an unnerving setting and bring the feeling of terror and uneasiness to the readers/viewers: “All Gothic writing seeks to induce in the reader a particular affect from within the spectrum of horror: [...] Poe’s characteristic emotional matrix is an acute claustrophobia” (Hogle 181). In “The Fall of the House of Usher” the claustrophobic tone is set from the very beginning when the narrator arrives at the house in which the Ushers live.

The isolation of siblings inside the mansion is instigating their unnatural closeness and furthers the factor of entrapment. The illnesses the siblings are suffering from may be due to the inbreeding of the family to keep the bloodline pure, which in itself is a type of genetic claustrophobia (Yockey 5). Many factors throughout the whole story contribute to the claustrophobic mood. The first is the fact that the house is isolated in a “dreary tract of country,” (Poe 643) standing alone surrounded by “the sullen waters of the tarn” (Poe 643) and sickly wildlife. The location of the house is unknown, which adds to the mystery.

Moreover, the interior of the house also makes the narrator feel fretful when the servant invites him in and walks him through “many dark and intricate passages” (Poe 645) on their way to the room where Roderick, the proprietor of the house was waiting. The

windows in the said room were high from the floor and inaccessible from within, making it harder to escape if needed. Roderick explains that he is ill and has not left the house in years. He feels as though the House is “trapping” him inside:

He was enchained by certain superstitious impressions in regard to the dwelling which he tenanted, and whence, for many years, he had never ventured forth --in regard to an influence whose supposititious force was conveyed in terms too shadowy here to be re-stated. (Poe 647)

A claustrophobic hint placed in the story is a painting the narrator saw in the house:

A small picture presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel, with low walls, smooth, white, and without interruption or device. Certain accessory points of the design served well to convey the idea that this excavation lay at an exceeding depth below the surface of the earth. (Poe 648)

The prevalent and the most evident claustrophobic event in the story is when Madeline is buried alive by mistake. Her seemingly dead body is placed in a coffin, then a vault, under the house. According to Yockey, that is the peaking moment of claustrophobia in the story as it is tripled. The final claustrophobic element is the fall of the house, the house going asunder and, again acting as a decaying edifice, symbolizing the fall of the House with the last Ushers deaths (6). Poe applied the motif of claustrophobia generously throughout “The Fall of the House of Usher,” not only to depict a real phobia and evoke uneasiness among the readers but also to illustrate the allegorical relationship between the members of the Usher family. Until the very end, there is a claustrophobic tension build-up that no one ever leaves the House of Usher, but it is ultimately broken by the narrator escaping. The ending can also suggest that no one from the Usher family can escape; only the outsiders can.

On the other hand, in the TV show AHS claustrophobia is present as it sets the tone of each season and creates an unnerving setting. In each season, there are claustrophobic moments such as being locked in a room, cell, or an asylum, being trapped, caged, or tied up. One of the examples is in AHS: *Coven*, when Madame LaLaurie would lock prisoners (mainly black slaves) in small cages in her dark, claustrophobic attic and cut them, to obtain their blood and pancreases. Later, she would use the pancreases to create a face cream that would make her youthful again, since her unfaithful husband fancied women younger than

her. Other mentions of claustrophobia are in *AHS: Cult*, where the focal point of the season is dealing with mental illnesses, one of which is claustrophobia. As mentioned in the previous chapter of this paper, in the third episode “Neighbours from Hell,” the only example of real claustrophobia is shown. Rosie, a woman who suffers from it, consults with Dr Rudy Vincent. She thanks him for the desensitisation of her fear. When she and her husband Mark return home, she is faced with her phobia again as people dressed as clowns attack them and trap them in coffins.

4. Incest

The motif of incest is seen in many literary works, beginning with mythology and the Bible. The incestuous relationship between parents and children or siblings is mostly associated with the horror genre. Differing forms of incest may carry different literary functions and a variety of connotations; intergenerational incest usually functions as critique, whilst sibling incest usually connotes rebellion (Nesteruk 2). In Poe, the incest theme belongs to the private world of his own tortured psyche rather than the broader arena of social life in the South (Fiedler and Harris 398). Edgar Allan Poe was in an incestuous marriage himself when he married his thirteen-year-old first cousin Virginia Eliza Clemm Poe. He was 27 at the time (Moore). In his short story “The Fall of the House of Usher,” there is an incestuous relationship between the twins – Roderick and Madeline. The narrator knows this, and he is not alarmed or disturbed, but rather fascinated by the fact:

I had learned, too, the very remarkable fact, that the stem of the Usher race, all time-honoured as it was, had put forth, at no period, any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain. (Poe 644)

The quote implies that the whole lineage of the Usher family is kept “pure,” meaning that they never mixed their blood with a “foreigners.”

Nesteruk describes “The Fall of the House of Usher” as “the classic example of its genre, complete with its symbolic utilisation of brother/sister incest.” He adds that “Poe's story may be read both as a Romantic experiment in sexual politics and as the charting of the

effects of a newly arrived feminism (linked to abolitionism) upon the male psyche” (Nesteruk 9).

An example of an incestuous relationship in AHS: *Coven* is different than in the story – it is a mother-son relationship. It was presented in episodes two and three (“Boy Parts” and “The Replacements”). A boy named Kyle dies when a witch, Madison, is raped by his friends after which she kills all of them. Her friend Zoe likes Kyle and convinces Madison that he is innocent. When Madison decides to bring Kyle back to life, she goes to the morgue where all the dismembered bodies are. She enters the room and says that she sees great potential, and by that, she means she would take Kyle’s head along with the best body parts and join them to create a perfect boyfriend. Zoe brings Kyle back home to his mother, who missed him in a romantic way. His mother is depicted as “white trash” who smokes marijuana. When Kyle lays in bed, she comes into his room and starts to kiss and sexually caress him, saying that no one could love him as she does. Kyle refuses this behaviour and kills her. That scene could imply that she sexually abused him even before he died, but there is no further information on how long this incestuous relationship lasted.

Another example of incest in AHS is presented in an episode “Winter of Our Discontent” in the seventh season, *Cult*. In the episode Kai, a cult leader who wants to take over the world, decides to create a “messiah” baby that will save his movement and ensure its future. The baby needs to be his and his sisters' (Winter). Kai refuses to make the situation downright incestuous, so he wants to complete the procedure by having a threesome involving Detective Samuels, who will impregnate Winter, explaining: “As he enters you, I will enter him” (“Winter of Our Discontent” 00:19:23-00:19:28).

5. Burying Alive and Coming Back to Life

According to Hogle, the idea of “the uncanny return of something which has been expelled” (211) represents one of the basic Gothic conventions:

For instance, the central figure of the Gothic, [...] has traditionally been some form of the undead, the revenant, the corpse, or a patchwork of corpses brought back to life. As the Gothic so chillingly seeks to remind us, the boundary between life and death is

not forever fixed; it may not be the oneway passage that we would like rationally to believe. (Hogle 211)

“The Fall of the House of Usher” contains both of these familiar Gothic tropes. After being in the “Usher” home for a few days, Roderick informs the narrator that his sister Madeline has passed away and that he needs help entombing her body (as mentioned in the “Introduction” and the chapter on “Claustrophobia” of this paper). The narrator, oblivious to what is happening, agrees and helps him. Before entombing Madeline, not knowing she is actually alive, the narrator observed the lively colour of her skin in confusion: “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” (Poe 651).

Roderick told the narrator that he had heard her move inside the coffin many days ago, but did not want to say anything. He blamed his improper judgement on his acute senses. Then, lady Madeline showed up alive, or “came back to life”: “but then without those doors there DID stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame” (Poe 655). Madeline falls onto her brother, who, seeing his sister alive, dies of fear.

The motifs of burying alive and coming back to life are mostly seen in *AHS: Coven*. Firstly, the burying alive trope will be reviewed. In the first episode of *AHS: Coven* titled “Bitchcraft”, a tour guide explains that Madame LaLaurie died in the attic, but her body was never found. After the tour, one of the witches sat outside and stared at the ground. The supreme witch Fiona approached her and asked: “What do you hear?” to which she replied: “Lady of the house” (00:43:08-00:43:12), implying that Madame LaLaurie was buried alive. Later, Fiona hires two men to dig her coffin up. She opens it to find Madame LaLaurie alive and releases her. In the second episode, it is revealed how Madame LaLaurie stayed alive. Marie Laveau avenged her tortured lover by giving Madame LaLaurie an immortality potion after which she had her buried alive to suffer for eternity (“Boy Parts”).

Coming back to life is one of the main parts of the plot of the *AHS: Coven*. In the first episode, a girl named Zoe arrives in the academy for witches. There, she is introduced to other fellow witches. Cordelia, the headmaster, shares stories about other witches, among which is Misty Day, a young girl who had the power of resurgence. One day she brought a bird back to

life and ended up burned alive at the stake for doing it. The second episode opens with two poachers who kill crocodiles. After the hunt, they go back to their lair where all the dead crocodiles are hanging upside down. They find Misty Day in there, fearing that she might report them for poaching. She asks them why they killed those God's innocent creatures and says that not all of them are dead. At that moment, she brings two crocodiles back to life, and they kill the poachers ("Boy Parts" 00:01:30-00:02:06). Later in that episode, a witch named Madison was raped at the frat party. She then killed the rapists by flipping the bus they were in, and one of the frats survived. Only one of the boys was innocent, and he died there. His name was Kyle and Zoe liked him. The survivor was in the hospital, and Zoe visited him hoping it was Kyle but when she saw that it was the leader of the rapist group, she decides to kill him with her witch power – kill by having intercourse. Madison returns the favour by bringing Kyle back to life with a Latin resurrection spell.

Coming back from the dead is also one of the main segments of the first season *Murder House*, though not entirely in the same way. As mentioned before, the House in which the Harmons moved into is haunted. They knew before moving in that several previous owners have committed suicide or have violently died inside the house. If they were buried in the back yard, the House could bring them back to life, but only as spirits who can roam the property as they wish, but cannot leave. The only way for them to finally rest in peace is if someone dug up their corpses and moved them to another property.

Conclusion

Themes of "The Haunted House", "Mental Illness", "Claustrophobia", "Burying Alive and Coming Back from the Dead" and "Incest" were analysed comparatively in Edgar Allan Poe's short horror story "The Fall of the House of Usher" and the TV show *American Horror Story* by Ryan Murphy. These themes were compared in both works to show that the TV show took some of the ideas from Poe's work and to show that contemporary horror (in literature, film and TV) contains and exploits elements of Gothic literature.

The motif of the haunted house was used to show psychological developments in the minds of the characters. It is the house and its appearance that creates the feeling of claustrophobia, depression and loneliness in Roderick, Madeline and later the narrator. In

AHS: *Murder House*, it is the other way around. It is the house that is the “trigger” of the action, as the characters find out their hidden secrets in it. In the end, all the characters die as a result of the workings of the house.

The next similarity between the series and the story is the motif of (mental) illness. While both mental and physical illnesses are intertwined in the story, the series emphasises mental illness, and there are many. Roderick and Madeline suffer from depression, which also affects their physical health, while the series focuses on the human psyche and mental illnesses that are most prominent today, especially in the season *Cult*.

Claustrophobia also appears in both works. There are many claustrophobic segments in “The Fall of the House of Usher”, such as burying Madeline, the interior of the house, even the painting on the wall. In AHS, real claustrophobia is only mentioned in the season *Cult*, but it is present throughout all seasons to create a suffocating and tense setting.

The theme of incest is also present in both the story and the series. In the story, incest is implied in the relationship between the twins Roderick and Madeline whose bloodline is pure and has never been mixed with foreigners’. In AHS: *Coven* incest occurs in the sexual intercourse of mother and son, while in the season *Cult* it appears between Kai and his sister Winter.

Burying alive and coming back to life are also frequent tropes in gothic fiction. In the short story, Madeline is buried alive mistakenly by her brother Roderick who blames on his “illness”, and she does not literally come back to life, but she does to Roderick because to him she passed away. In the TV show, coming back to life is prevalent in the season *Coven* where witches use resurrection spells to bring people back to life. In the same season Madame LaLaurie is an example of a person having been buried alive.

To conclude, *American Horror Story* is only one example of the major influence of Gothic literature in general and Poe in particular on both literary tradition and popular culture. Many books, movies and TV shows belonging to the horror genre are heavily inspired by Poe’s work, and those that are to come will continue to see Poe as the writer who has set the standards in creating works of horror.

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