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Gothic elements in Edgar A., Poe's "The fall of the House of Usher" and Guillermo del Toro's *Crimson Peak*

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyses two Gothic texts, the tale of Edgar Allan Poe, “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) and the film directed by Guillermo del Toro, *Crimson Peak* (2015), highlighting the similitudes and differences between both works. After the contextualization of the Gothic in the cultural and historical period where it originated in the second half of XVIII century, this essay continues with an analysis of the most important Gothic elements such as violence, the figure of the double or the decay of aristocracy. Furthermore, the paper discusses how the classical Gothic characteristics evolved and adapt to a new geographical, political and social context since its origins in Great Britain until its incorporation in US literature several decades later.

Este ensayo analiza dos textos Góticos, el cuento de Edgar Allan Poe, “La caída de la casa Usher” (1839) y la película de Guillermo del Toro, *La cumbre escarlata* (2015), poniendo de relieve las similitudes y diferencias entre ambos. Tras situar el género Gótico en el periodo histórico y cultural en el que surgió a finales del siglo XVIII, este ensayo continúa con un análisis de los elementos del Gótico más característicos como la violencia, la figura del doble o la aristocracia en decadencia. Así mismo, se incluye un análisis detallado de como las características clásicas del Gótico varían y se adaptan a un nuevo contexto geográfico, político y social desde su origen en Gran Bretaña hasta su incorporación un siglo más tarde a la literatura de los Estados Unidos.

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GOTHIC ELEMENTS IN EDGAR A. POE'S "THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER"
AND GUILLERMO DEL TORO'S CRIMSON PEAK:

The Gothic has become a central presence in literature and culture since its official creation in the second half of the eighteenth century. The main characteristics of the Gothic remain, but have evolved through the centuries as an answer to the changes in society. Although the Gothic first appeared in Europe, especially in England and Germany, it was not until its arrival in the US that there was a clear evolution in the literary genre, through the master of Gothic fiction, Edgar Allan Poe. His adaptation of Gothic features into a very different environment and the incorporation of new characteristics gave a new and innovative turn to the Gothic models that came from the old continent. In fact, Poe's tale "The Fall of the House of Usher", first published in 1939, can be taken as a master text for this new kind of Gothic, which even maintains classical Gothic features, departs from previous clichés to explore "the terror of the soul".

With the passing of time, the Gothic has continued "infecting" literature and culture, and many contemporary films exemplify its pervasive influence. There are diverse examples of Gothic films, many of which are based on literary works, such as the multiple versions of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. Therefore, the main focus of this essay will be the analysis of the most relevant Gothic features in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) and Guillermo del Toro's *Crimson Peak* (2015) in order to find the main similarities and also the most outstanding differences between them, especially because Poe's "Usher" was an important intertext in the making of del Toro's film. This analysis attempts to demonstrate how the Gothic has kept its most important characteristics all over the centuries, but it has experienced a process of adaptation that reflects new techniques and perspectives. Among other things, more emphasis is put on women's roles and more openness in the treatment of sensationalist or taboo topics, such as incest.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: the origins of the Gothic

The birth of the Gothic as a genre took place in the second half of the eighteenth century, in part as a response to the predominance of the Enlightenment in the western world. The Enlightenment, a philosophical movement that began with the scientific revolution in the seventeenth century, reigned over Europe in the realms of science, politics and philosophy during these two centuries. The principal aspiration of Enlightenment thinkers was the understanding of the universe and the improvement of the human condition through man's capacity for reason and rational thinking. (Miles189). Such an approach to life and the human experience meant a disregard for the mysticism

of religion, and in its place knowledge and systematic order took precedence. However, many social and political changes took place in different parts of the world, eventually threatening in a radical manner the existence of the Enlightenment which, although framed as a humanistic movement, remained intrinsically tied to the aristocracy of Western Europe. Ironically, what threatened the Enlightenment were the effects of changes the movement itself championed, such as “urbanization, industrialization, and revolution” (Botting 23). That is, a revolution of the working lower classes against the previous order, embodied by the French Revolution of 1789, rose in response to the tightly-held power of the aristocracy and the period of decadence they had engendered.

As an artistic movement, the Gothic challenged the principles of the Age of Reason, arising in response to the Enlightenment’s classical view of the universe, which was characterized by “order, purity, rules and limits”. The Gothic, on the other hand, was a chaotic world full of “ornamentation, convulsion, excess and exaggeration” (Punter & Byron 7). The first work considered as the point of departure of the Gothic genre was *The Castle of Otranto*, written by Horace Walpole in 1764, which would serve as a model for future developments of the Gothic literary movement.

The Gothic soon spread throughout Europe, and its manifestations in German and British literature became especially influential. The genre grew in tandem with the rise of Romanticism in the early nineteenth century, where both movements became wildly popular among readers in Georgian and Victorian audiences (MacAndrews 4). In the United States, the roots of the gothic can be found in Charles Brockden Brown’s 1798 novel *Wieland, or The Transformation*, which marked the beginning of American Gothic literature (Miles 200). However, the many social issues that plagued U.S. society in the nineteenth century soon demanded a new take on the Gothic. Slavery, the treatment of Native Americans and the strict Puritanical rule over Northern society were just some of the elements that shaped this new and transgressive literary genre. Again, the Gothic appeared as an answer to the necessity of a new literature that could encapsulate the social and political changes that were at work in U.S. society. The imitation of European Gothic models, however, proved to be not enough for American writers of the period. These writers, among whom were Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Edgar Allan Poe, adapted the genre to satisfy the unique characteristics of a different environment. In fact, it was Edgar Allan Poe who laid the groundwork for this new take on the Gothic, which would be followed by later writers not only in the US but all over the world.

Poe’s innovative approach to the Gothic featured an inversion of the source of terror in his fiction. Previously, terror in the Gothic found its source in external elements such as violence,

diverse manners of oppression, or the overly evident use of the supernatural (ghosts or vampires). Poe, on the other hand, developed a terror which comes from within, a device that is now known as “psychological terror.” Indeed, in the preface to *The Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, he explained that “[i]f in many of my productions terror has been my thesis, I maintain that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul - that I have deduced this terror only from its legitimate sources, and urged it only its legitimate results” (1). Poe’s work also combined this new approach with other literary devices such as the unreliable narrator and open-ended plot, which offers no clear resolution and invites further thought and a variety of interpretations.

MAIN GOTHIC FEATURES:

To further understand the Gothic as it was developed in the U.S. by Poe and his Dark Romantic contemporaries, it is important to establish the fundamental elements of the genre in its European form. According to Botting, during the eighteenth century, notions such as “extravagance, superstition, fancy or wildness” began to shed their negative connotations and instead saw an imaginative expansion which favored a new aesthetic production which became known as the Gothic (22). In general terms, the main characteristics of British Gothic fiction during the course of the eighteenth century were “chivalric customs of romances, descriptions of the wild and elemental natural settings, the gloom of the graveyard and ruin, the scale and permanence of the architecture, [and] the terror and wonder of the sublime” (Punter & Byron 10). Such characteristics worked in obvious opposition to those of the Age of Reason, and the radical changes that coalesced in the Gothic appeared as an answer to those questions that logic could not explain, and stepped beyond the boundaries of rationality and moral order.

SETTING:

One of the key elements in Gothic fiction is the setting. The use of old palaces and castles, very often haunted, was quite common and took its inspiration from Gothic architecture. These historic buildings were an inheritance from the Middle Ages, and their appeal for Gothic writers lay in their past and gloomy, decadent appearance. Among the cold stone and mournful character of these Gothic castles were “shadows,” a typical element in Gothic settings that contrasted to the “light” that characterized the previous movement. Shadows and darkness allowed writers to give free reign to “unnatural imagination and marvelous creatures” (Botting 32). Additionally, there was also an interest in ruins and graveyards, whose significance evolved from a negative perception of death and abandonment to testified settings of a “temporality” which exceeded “rational understanding and human finitude” (Punter 32).

Nonetheless, this use of old castles and palaces for Gothic literary settings proved difficult to recreate in the U.S. without a certain kind of adaptation. As a result, “the subterranean rooms and corridors of a monastery” were transformed into the “wilderness and the city”. In Edgar Allan Poe’s tale “The Black Cat,” for example, terror is developed not in typical Gothic isolation, but in a domestic environment where the setting is a house surrounded by neighbors. In the case of the “old castles and palaces” that populated European Gothic fiction, their physical absence in the U.S., a country much younger than its European counterparts, was filled with “remote houses”, which were often related with aristocratic ascendance. Apart from the buildings used in Gothic literature, the environment itself also went through a metamorphosis. The landscape that was “infested with mountains” which appeared in European Gothic works was done away with and replaced by the “dark and dangerous woods” of North America, exemplifying the shift in focus on the wilderness that occupied the minds of American writers (Lloyd-Smith 4).

That being said, in the case of Edgar Allan Poe the use of isolation and confined space was key. Indeed, in his 1846 essay “The Philosophy of Composition,” he states that “a close circumscription of space is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident—it has the force of a frame to a picture (Poe 2). Such a small space for his fiction creates, at the same time, a feeling akin to claustrophobia, or of being trapped within a confined space. Isolation is thus critical in Poe’s tales because the main characters “cannot and do not subsist outside the physical spheres in which they dwell” (Magistrale and Poger 15). Consequently, the plots of his stories usually take place within closed spaces such as houses, chambers or libraries, where the main characters are confined both physically and psychologically while cut off from reality (Hammer 23).

SUPERNATURAL:

Another intrinsic element of Gothic fiction is the supernatural. As stated before, Gothic writers used darkness, which is typically associated with terror and uncertainty, as a tool in the creation of a landscape that is dominated by the fanciful and supernatural. Gothic fiction is often populated by supernatural features such as monsters, vampires, ghosts and haunted houses. The appearance of the supernatural, then, creates a feeling of terror in the reader on both a conscious and unconscious level; not only does it challenge existing views of reality, but it also invites imaginative flights of fancy that can lead to the taboo or unspeakable. (Punter & Byron 283).

“Gothic excesses transgressed the proper limits of aesthetic as well as social order in the overflow of emotions that undermined boundaries of life and fiction, fantasy and reality.” (Botting 4). Therefore, the Gothic implies contamination, impurity and excess represented by the mix of the supernatural and the fantastic. Gothic writers also transformed ordinary elements such as storms or foggy weather into something fanciful, thus creating an ideal setting for Gothic fiction.

In particular, Poe also used the supernatural, but within his oeuvre many critics have found a possible double reading, changing the interpretation of the supernatural via a psychological approach of the landscape of the mind (Perry & Sederholm 18). The vampiric figure, violence, uncertainty, abrupt endings and the return from death are also some of the elements employed in his fiction.

ARISTOCRACY

Aristocratic families are another recurrent feature in Gothic fiction. In the aftermath of the French Revolution and its violent tremors, the rise of Romanticism brought with it a new appreciation for “lost pastness”. This nostalgia for what was considered a simpler and more pleasing society structured by the aristocracy grew vis-a-vis the increasing industrialisation and commercialism of Western society. However, this fascination with a past through an aristocratic and decadent lense was “counterbalanced by accounts of criminal underworlds, incarceration and individual corruption” (Lloyd-Smith 7). Thus, the aristocracy became a recurring feature of Gothic fiction, yet it was usually portrayed in a dark manner where characters were often used as tropes for villains or malicious intentions.

In the British novels of the early Gothic, “the feudal antagonists” represented the antiquated and powerful aristocracy, marked by privilege, and an unbalanced relationship with the rest of society. In the wake of fast-changing economic relationships, the anxiety felt by the “emergent middle class” towards the aristocracy represented not only a clash between past and present, but also an increasing risk of class revolution (Lloyd-Smith 9).

In Poe’s fiction, the aristocracy went hand-in-hand with decay and decline, which was connected with the emerging social reality of the United States in the early nineteenth century. During this period, many established aristocratic families were finding themselves left behind in the rising wave of capitalism, and were faced with the threat of economic ruin and oblivion. In such a climate, the ancient European Aristocracy represented old values and privileges that were no longer accepted in the quickly evolving society of the U.S., where effort and personal work were regarded as the keys to success. However, “the relationship of the Gothic to cultural and historical realities is like that of dream, clearly somehow about certain fantasies and anxieties, less than coherent in its expression of them”(Lloyd-Smith 9).

THE NOTION OF THE UNCANNY

If History alone cannot clearly explain the expression of the Gothic in Western literature, then one of the most important elements for its analysis lay in the concept of the “uncanny”. There have been many definitions of the term in literary criticism, but perhaps the most common use of the “uncanny” was formulated by Sigmund Freud in his essay “The Uncanny” in 1919. According to Freud, “[t]he uncanny is that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud 1). In his essay there is an a type of opposition between the terms “heimlich or homely” and “unheimlich or uncanny”. He discusses extensively the notions of “uncanny” and “homely”, and defines the “homely” as something which is known and comfortable, yet also something hidden and secret. He believes “home” is a kind of secret place, while the “unhomely” or “uncanny” is something “which should have been kept as a secret but it has been revealed” (Punter & Byron 286). Indeed, the term “uncanny” does not describe something unknown that enters our consciousness, but it describes a sense of estrangement within the homely, something which lies within the boundaries of the intimate but at the same time is both threatening and tempting (Punter & Byron 285). On the one hand, our fears find their source not in what is new or unknown, but rather when the powers of reason prove ineffective to explain the dark and mysterious elements of the everyday. At the same time, however, Freud argues that those threatening elements of the everyday are in fact manifestations of our own repressed emotions and memories, which arise from our subconscious and confound our rational perception of our surroundings. The “uncanny” is, therefore, that feeling of anxiety which occurs when something that was once internally concealed is rediscovered and disfigured externally.

THE FIGURE OF THE DOUBLE

In connection with the notion of the “uncanny” is the figure of the double. “Otto Rank has gone into the connections that the ‘double’ has with reflections in mirrors, with shadows, guardian spirits, with the belief in the soul and the fear of death; but he also lets in a flood of light on the astonishing evolution of this idea. [...]Probably the ‘immortal’ soul was the first ‘double’ of the body, against extinction. From having been an assurance of immortality, the double becomes the ghastly harbinger of death (Freud 9).

The figure of the double is found in folkloric traditions of civilizations from all over the world, and it has also been employed by contemporary authors in Western literature and psychological theories. In the 19th century, it was considered as a “signaling crisis of identity,” the opposing tendencies within the individual, and man’s fundamental incompleteness” (Botting 108). The idea of the double is the duplication and splitting of the self, in which there is an incorporation of the sense of otherness, strangeness and potential danger within the familiar (Punter & Byron

290). The double, then, is a notion directly linked with that of the “uncanny”. Something one knows intimately, or even loves, is transformed by fear and returns as a source of terror. According to Botting, “horror is produced at the recognition of seeing one’s self from an external position, in the realization that a tragic figure that the subject has been observing is actually that of his own” (Botting 113). With the figure of the double, a character see himself or herself manifested as an external being, another person, and such an experience quickly becomes one of sheer terror, and on many occasions works as an anticipation of death.

TERROR AND HORROR

Another significant feature in the Gothic is the distinction between terror and horror. As Ann Radcliffe points out “terror and horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them” (50). In US Gothic, headed by Poe there is an evolution from traditional horror, also known as “visceral horror” to “psychological terror”, into a terror which comes from the mind. There is a development of terror coming from within, from the unconscious, which is impossible to decode. Let's recall Poe’s words in the preface to his first compilation of tales: “If in many of my productions terror has been my thesis, I maintain that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul- that I have deduced this terror only from its legitimate sources, and urged it only to its legitimate results (Preface to the Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque)”

Some of the elements which contribute to the construction of terror in Gothic is mystery, fragmentation, the supernatural, the use of unreliable narrators, which produce ambiguity and uncertainty: many questions remain unsolved, even at the end, which in turn, open the text to divergent interpretations.

“THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER”

“The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839) is one of the most emblematic tales in American Gothic, and is considered as one of the best examples of the unity of effect by Edgar Allan Poe. The tale itself is also an example of the impenetrability of the Gothic tradition; the descriptions of the building, its interiors, and environment do not clarify, but rather make the reading more difficult and thus unnerving.

In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” the narration is at once internal and intradiegetic, where the narrator of the tale serves as both storyteller and character within the fictional world of the text. Poe descriptive language vividly recreates the scenes of the story in the reader’s mind through the use a mournful and melancholic tone, following the rules of his “Philosophy of

Composition”¹. In addition, due to Poe’s use of an unreliable narrator works to blur the lines between the events from the narrator’s rendering of them, because he is the readers only source of information. It is revealing that the only time that the reader has access to Roderick’s voice, he calls the narrator “madman”

THE FAMILY MANSION:

The setting of the tale is indeed the house of Usher, a mansion which immediately brings to mind the ruined castles that populate traditional examples of the Gothic written in Germany and Britain during the eighteenth century. It is an isolated, mysterious house that shares many characteristics with a prototypical architecturally Gothic mansion, replete with tall and non-accessible windows reminiscent of a prison, long corridors, high roofs and an overall sense of darkness invading the house (Perry & Sederholm 17). The description of the building evokes the personality of its dwellers. It resembles the face of a person, with its “eye-like windows”

I looked upon the scene before me — upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain — upon the bleak walls — upon the vacant eye-like windows — upon a few rank sedges — and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees — with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation [...] (Usher 64)

The mansion, however, is Poe’s point of departure that allows him to achieve more complexity in the story, employing an internal psychological terror alongside the external, physical terror that marked the European Gothic fiction. “Usher” is an excellent example of Poe’s idea of “the circumscription of space”, for the plot is confined within the decadent mansion, achieving at once a heightened intensity of feeling and a creeping sense of claustrophobia that is characteristic of his work.

The “uncanny” is deployed here as the everyday elements that make up a home are described in ways that make the reader second guess what is being described to him or her, creating a sense of unease and tension. “I was forced to fall back upon the unsatisfactory conclusion,” says the narrator, “that while, beyond doubt, there *are* combinations of very simple natural objects which have the power of thus affecting us, still the analysis of this power lies among considerations

¹ “The Philosophy of Composition” is an essay where Poe established the main features to write well, to create a perfect structure where all the elements of the text are interconnected. For Poe, it is important that before start writing, the author should have a clear idea of what he wants to express. Originality is also important for Poe. For Poe, originality is the combination of previous works, something very hard to achieve and very different from plagiarism. Organization and hard work are other premises to write well, because Poe considered that writing is not an automatic activity or something spontaneous, but the opposite, the texts should be written, and later rewritten and revised as many times as necessary. He even compares writing a poem with the solution of a mathematical problem. Another characteristic that Poe recommends is brevity. Poe preferred short texts because they are more intense and there are no interruptions. This pursued intensity was also achieved through limited spaces, known as “circumscription of space”, for his stories and poems. In addition, as an “art for art’s sake writer, he prefers aesthetic, rather than didactic purposes. Poe found beauty in the sad or melancholic tone of the narrator; in the topic of death; and especially in the death of a beautiful woman, “as the most poetical tone”. However, the most important characteristics in “The Philosophy of Composition” is the searching for an effect on the reader, achieved through “Unity of Effect”. After the author knows the ending and the emotion response he wants to achieve, he can decide the rest of the elements such as the tone, setting, characters, or plot.

beyond our depth” (Poe 4) These elements that establish the house of Usher a terrifying place are also what make it the “first truly American haunted house”, and the mansion has been a major influence on horror across all forms of art including films such as *The Shining* or *The Others* (Magistrale 64).

The house has belonged to this aristocratic family for centuries, but is deteriorated by the passing of time, and even moulded. Although the structure seems “fairly solid”, there is a small crack in the middle of the mansion from the roof to the ground in the front of the building (Botting 68). Because the Usher family has lived for so many years in the same mansion, the lines drawn between person and place have become blurred. “At this point, it should be emphasized that the word “house” can also denote “family”, thus suggesting from the outset a connection between the decaying building and the degenerate family” (Herrmann & Kostis 36).

I considered, while running over in thought the perfect keeping of the character of the premises with the accredited character of the people, and while speculating upon the possible influence which the one, in the long lapse of centuries, might have exercised upon the other — it was this deficiency, perhaps, of collateral issue, and the consequent undeviating transmission, from sire to son, of the patrimony with the name, which had, at length, so identified the two as to merge the original title of the estate in the quaint and equivocal appellation of the “House of Usher” — an appellation which seemed to include, in the minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion.(Usher 66)

Apart from the house, the landscape which surrounds it also has its role in the tale. The lake, or tarn as it is called in the story, is thought by many critics to be the cause of Roderick’s disease, due to the narrator’s description of the “pestilent and mystic vapor” that hangs over it and the entire Usher property (Magistrale 74). While it remains unclear whether or not the lake affects Roderick’s health, it is surely the reason why the narrator also feels infected by an evil influence from moment of his arrival. Indeed, the more time he spends there, the more he is poisoned by the “dull” and “sluggish” vapor.

I had so worked upon my imagination as really to believe that about the whole mansion and domain there hung an atmosphere peculiar to them selves and their immediate vicinity-an atmosphere which had no affinity with the air of heaven, but which had reeked up from the decayed trees, and the gray wall, and the silent tarn-a pestilent and mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, and leaden-hued (Usher 66).

Apart from its potentially poisonous fumes, the lakes serves as a foreshadowing device that anticipates the destruction of both house and lineage. Wasting no word or short phrase in achieving the terrifying unity of effect in “Usher,” Poe writes how the house’s reflection in the lake’s still water inspires a sense of dread in the narrator, acting as a prelude to the end of the mansion and its inhabitants, when “everything crumbles into dust” and rests in the lake forever.

Such, I have long known, is the paradoxical law of all sentiments having terror as a basis. And it might have been for this reason only, that, when I again uplifted my eyes to the house itself, from its image in the pool, there grew in my mind a strange fancy — a fancy so ridiculous, indeed, that I but mention it to show the vivid force of the sensations which oppressed me (Usher 66).

ARISTOCRACY IN DECLINE:

Roderick and Madeline belong to an aristocratic family with a history of privilege. However, it is clear from the opening paragraph that everything under the name of Usher has fallen into decay: the property full of “decaying trees”, the mansion almost in ruins, the atmosphere of the house full of “gloom and sorrow”, and even its own lineage, for both Roderick and Madeline are ill and described by the narrator in sepulchral terms.

In the US, the first half of the nineteenth century was dominated by what is known as “Jacksonian Democracy”. Andrew Jackson, who served as president from 1829 to 1837, attempted to achieve equality and democratize the country by his championing of the “common man” in US society. He enacted policies that promoted the abolishment of the old aristocracy and its privileges, which generated a fervor to democratize all aspects of national life “by eradicating any semblance of class-based distinctions” (Punter and Byron 27). Some literary historians have observed similarities between the Usher family and the situation of American elite families of the time. “The legitimate terror of Usher” resides in its description of the collapse of “patrician privilege and power” (Spitzer 351). Roderick and Madeline have not left the Usher house for years, a habit that had been passed down generation after generation in their family, and as a result they have lived in an archaic past and have become an anachronism. Although there being no evidence of the exact time where the story takes places, the house of Usher resembles the feudal world of the Middle Ages. When Poe was writing this tale, US society was rapidly changing, so the Ushers and their way of life represent an anachronism in a society that was moving towards democracy and progress. Roderick and Madeline keep “haunted by the mute ghosts of the past,” quickly becoming obsolete in a society which “rapidly redraws its boundaries and redefine its system of identity construction” (Spitzer 352).

INCESTUOUS RELATIONSHIP:

As mentioned before, the stagnation and ruin that permeates the Usher residence is also to be found in the family itself. In the beginning of the story, the narrator mentions that the family line cannot go further because it is suggested that the Ushers have been committing incest for generations. Despite the fact that the Usher family had distinguished themselves “by intelligence and social position”, the family tree survives only within “the direct line of descent”, insinuating not only a trend of inbreeding but also the consequential debilitation of the lineage (John 45). I had learned,

too, the very remarkable fact, that the stem of the Usher race, all time-honored 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 66). In “Usher,” the family line has ended with Madeline and Roderick, both sick with strange diseases, probably the result of generations in breeding, and morally affected by isolation and fear. Another way incest can be read in the Usher family and between the two siblings is how Roderick abstracts his mind painting. The narrator describes one of his paintings as

a small picture which presented the interior of an immensely long and rectangular vault or tunnel, with low walls, smooth, white, and without interruption or device [...]. No outlet was observed in any portion of its vast extent, and no torch, or other artificial source of light was discernible; yet a flood of intense rays rolled throughout, and bathed the whole in a ghastly and inappropriate splendor (Poe 72).

In connection with the principle of Unity of Effect in “Philosophy of Composition,” the painting suggests a crypt without any way out, reminding one of a prison as well as anticipating Madeline’s entombment. Furthermore, although Roderick is presented as a tormented character, conscious of the evil atmosphere of the house and of its influence, he takes no action in neither preventing his own end nor that of his sister. According to Magistrale, the siblings feel cursed by the guilt of a secret sin, perhaps “a singular and vaguely incestuous bond” which “eroded their spirits, making death and madness welcome releases from the daily reminders of their shared burden” (65). Roderick may very well be conscious of the taboo and sinful and abnormal nature of his relationship with his sister and, paralysed by generations of guilt, accepts his own fatal destiny and that of Usher’s dynasty.

The topic of incest in “The Fall of the House of Usher” is indeed one of the most discussed elements of the story, due to Poe’s “quasi-incestuous” marriage with his cousin Virginia (Magistrale 66). That being said, the evidence is by no means unequivocal and no explanations were given by the author, because the parallelism does not solve or justify the mysteries of the tale’s plot.

DOUBLING IN “USHER”:

In “Usher,” the trope of the double and its effect on the story can be seen in the relationship between Roderick and Madeline. Indeed, one possible reading is that of Madeline as the double of her brother Roderick, for they are not only siblings but twins.

A striking similitude between the brother and sister now first arrested my attention; and Usher, divining, perhaps, my thoughts, murmured out some few words from which I learned that the deceased and himself had been twins, and that sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them. (Poe 76)

Roderick is portrayed as a tormented character, frightened and obsessed, who has projected “his own fears of psychological decay on her (Madeline), making her at once akin and alien to himself” (Perry & Sederholm 16). Madeline only appears on two occasions in story, both times without saying a word, yet the effect she has on both the narrator and Roderick is one of sadness and intense sorrow. It is only after Madeline’s entombment, however, that the reader finds no improvement in Roderick’s mood nor in his health, and instead he becomes more isolated and anxious than ever, as if a part of himself had been entombed with Madeline.

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. When a door, at length, closed upon her, my glance sought instinctively and eagerly the countenance of the brother — but he had buried his face in his hands, and I could only perceive that a far more than ordinary wanness had overspread the emaciated fingers through which trickled many passionate tears. (Poe 71)

Moreover, another relationship in the story that invites a reading of the double is that between the narrator and Roderick. Poe’s narrator is an unreliable one, after all, and an example of his unreliability appears at the moment when, instead of waiting for a doctor to confirm Madeline’s death, he does not question Roderick’s decision to entomb her. In the wake of Roderick’s impulsive decision to bury his sister without any confirmation that she had indeed passed away, the greatest supernatural feature of the story occurs when Madeline returns, looking for revenge on her brother. Roderick’s words to the narrator are highly significant: “We have put her living in the tomb”. Somehow, they seem to be partners in crime.

The narrator is the “controlling consciousness of the story” who apparently embodies rationality, attempting to explain in a logical manner a series of “bizarre and supernatural events” present in the text (Magistrale 65). However, the reader has the opposite impression from the beginning, perceiving him as an unreliable narrator. As a double of Roderick, a possible interpretation is that everything occurs in the “landscape of the mind”, and that is the reason when everything “crumbles into dust” the only survivor is the narrator, as saving the “rationality of the person”. (Magistrale and Roger 15)

ANALYSIS OF *CRIMSON PEAK*:

“Crimson Peak” is a 2015 Gothic Romance film, directed by Oscar winner Guillermo del Toro. It is a Victorian romance filtered through del Toro’s dark aesthetic. The film tells the story of Edith Cushing, a lovely and innocent girl who dreams of being a writer. From the beginning, supernatural elements such as ghosts haunt the story, creating an immediate feeling of suspense in the audience. However, the plot turns on its axis when Sir Thomas Sharpe, an attractive and mysterious aristocrat

from England, appears in Edith's life. After a brief courtship they fall in love and, after the cruel murder of Edith's father, get married and move to Thomas' residence, Allerdale House, in England. The trouble starts, however, with Edith's new sister-in-law Lucille, whose strange reaction to their marriage sets the tone for the rest of the film. Soon enough, Edith discovers that something odd is happening in Allerdale House. True to Gothic form, she ventures through the house on her own, only encountering more clues, and rooms locked behind closed doors. One night, Edith discovers his husband in an affair with his own sister, a climatic moment of the film where she uncovers the truth of their relationship and the strange happenings in the house. Thomas and Lucille are criminals, who not only killed her father, but many other rich and young women after stealing their fortunes.

THE FAMILY MANSION:

The setting of the film is first and foremost a traditional Gothic space, much like that of "The Fall of the House of Usher". It follows the traditional Gothic pattern first established by Horace Walpole in *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), as a site of family horror, which serves as the point of departure for the narrative line (Salvesen 15). However, at the beginning of the film, Del Toro prolongs the appearance of the mansion on the screen. The plot itself starts in North America, where Edith comes from. As Edith belongs to a wealthy mercantilist family, the house and spaces that appear are fully equipped, with luxury and comfort; such shots of a middle-class home contrast strongly with the decadent, gloomy look of Allerdale Hall, England, where Thomas and Lucille come from. Allerdale Hall is a house almost in ruins, where everything is in decay. "It is huge yet empty, cold and damp, home to ghosts of violently murdered people and bleeding decrepit floors" (Musap 4). Additionally, there is a great contrast between the sunny weather and the light-filled colors full of the scenes in North America and the old aristocratic home in which Edith will live after her marriage with Thomas, where darkness and cold reign. The mansion looks as "fantastically surreal; geometrically irrational; plagued by black moths; [...] and it stands rigid, proudly emerging from the snow-covered Crimson Peak" (Horne 5). With her first step into the house, Edith notices the drop in temperature, and his just-married husband answers "with the cold and the rain it is impossible to stop the damp and erosion, and with the mines down below, well, the wood is rotting, and the house is sinking" (Crimson Peak). As with Poe's "Usher", in *Crimson Peak* there is also a slowly sinking mansion with a hole in the ceiling, as a metaphor for the decay of the aristocratic family.

"Allerdale Hall stands isolated, miles removed from the nearest house and a half-day's walk from the nearest town. It is home to shadows, creaks, uncanny moans, piercing shrieks and groans, spilling over with the otherworldly." (Musap 7) Like Poe's tale the "House of Usher", alienation

and decay are the stand-out elements of this Gothic plot. In *Crimson Peak* there are no neighbors close by, nor surrounding towns, creating a feeling of isolation in the owners. In addition, during the winter, there are many snow storms that prevent the inhabitants of the house from getting out. Furthermore, the decay of nature is highlighted, as it is impossible to farm in such an infertile land. Despite the fact that there is not lake surrounding the house like there is in *Usher*, there is another supernatural element which is even more thrilling: “when the ore and the red clay leach up from the ground and stain the snow. It turns bright red” (*Crimson Peak*). It is a supernatural effect directly linked to the murders and horror experienced in Allerdale Hall, and it is also the reason why it is called “Crimson Peak”.

ARISTOCRACY IN DECLINE:

In *Crimson Peak*, aristocracy in decay is also an important topic. As democracy developed in the United States, the decline of the old order in the South eventually led to the Civil War (Di Placidi 16). The film, set at the end of 19th century, portrays two main social classes: the mercantilist represented by the figure of Edith, and the old aristocracy through Thomas and Lucille Sharpe. The first group, the mercantilist, were the monetary power of the time. At the beginning, Edith’s father appears in a meeting with Sir Thomas, who tries to find economic support for a new farm machine. However, Edith’s dad neglects his support, precisely because as he points out “in America, only hard work is praised, not ancient lineages or old aristocratic privileges” (*Crimson Peak*). In a time where old aristocratic privileges were no longer accepted, and working hard was the only way of success, the Sharpes were in decadence as the majority of the aristocracy of the time. The Sharpes, in words of del Toro, resemble the inevitable decay of the American and European aristocracies of the past. As it occurs in Poe’s fiction decay marks the destiny of old aristocracy in both works, paralleling to the emerging social reality where old values and privileges were disappearing.

In a period where the old aristocracy had to adapt to the new times, Lucille and Thomas Sharpe fight actively against the end of their lineage, in contrast to the passive and picky attitude of Roderick and Madeline, who are dying slowly in expectation of death. Lucille and Thomas are the complete opposite, they know that they are in decay, but they fight in order to change their fatal destiny and continue their lives as usual. As aristocracy is typically presented in Gothic fiction as a corrupt class, *Crimson Peak* is not an exception. In order to avoid extinction of their lineage, they start cheating rich and young women in order to sustain themselves, and then after taking what they need, they just killed them. A great difference between “*Usher*” and *Crimson Peak* is the topic of guilt. While in Poe’s tale, anxiety is a heavy burden for Roderick and Madeline; in *Crimson Peak*, they are conscious of their monstrosity but they continue with their plan.

In both works aristocracy finally decay as a possible view that unfair governs and old privileges are destined to disappear. As Di Placidi reveals, a society governed by patriarchal and aristocratic notions of kinship that in turns “incites, idealizes and ultimately forbids incestuous desire” serves to strengthen the unjust system of inheritance and wealth” (95). These unjust systems are being destroyed in Gothic.

INCESTUOUS RELATIONSHIP:

Thomas and Lucille are siblings, and their sexual relationship is made evident since Edith discover both in the attic. However, in *Usher* incest is a topic which is never clarified in the text, and it is only suggested by the narrator.

At the beginning, when the siblings are in the US, Edith’s father discovers something about the Sharpes, but it is not showed to the audience until Edith discovers the reality of her husband and new life.

Incest between the Sharpe does only take place in Allerdale Hall, the family mansion. For Lucille, “the mansion” is the place which functions as “a safe haven, harboring illicit behavior, and a privilege the Sharpe family was born into, their only possession” (Musap 11). Incest is not discovered by Edith, until they are in their refuge again. Another difference observed in *Crimson Peak*, in relation to *Usher*, is that Lucille and Thomas are the first generation of incest, something which is repeated generation after generation in *Usher*’s family. “Del Toro utilizes these images in order to create a multilayered text which simultaneously interprets and reinterprets the well known Gothic tropes of decrepit mansions, innocent maidens in distress and raving lunatics well hidden in the attic” (Salvesen & Shedden 5)

The incestuous relationship between Lucille and Thomas reveals a female character which Gunn and Welch describe as “the new woman, or more correctly perhaps, a more powerful and feminized being in which binaries are combined and thus collapsed: male and female, erotic and familial, hunter and hunted, victim and perpetrator” (4). In fact, In *Crimson Peak* the mad figure is not incarnated by the man as it happens with Roderick in “*Usher*” but it is embodied by Lucille. She represents not only the traditional “Dark Woman”, tempting men, but the “raving madwoman” who lives in the attic, and who has a complete control of the domestic life (Gunn & Welch 5). As a result she is punished at the end, loosing his most beloved one, Thomas, and then being murdered by Edith. “Therefore, the release of Lucille’s sexuality is presented as monstrous and excessive – a repression perverted beyond redemption” (Kermode 10)

Isolation in both works, “*Usher*” and *Crimson Peak* are one of the main reason for incest between the siblings. In *Crimson Peak*, the mother of Lucille and Thomas did not allow the children to go out from the attic. Hence, when they grow up, they started a incestuous relationship in this

attic, where Lucille still lives. Lucille's madness led her to kill her own mother, after she discovered the incest, and all the women (Edith is the exception) who married Thomas. However, she does not commit all these crimes because of her desire for incest, but because "Lucille is driven throughout the narrative by her fear of being taken away from both Thomas and Allerdale Hall" (Kermode 10).

DUALITY IN *CRIMSON PEAK*:

"There is no such thing as uncanny as architecture [...] The uncanny is not a property of space but a representation of mental state of projection that precisely elides the boundaries of the real and the unreal in order to provoke a disturbing ambiguity, a slippage between waking and dreaming." (Horne 2).

Ever since the 19th century, Gothic architecture buildings have provided an especial favored site for uncanny disturbances, as it occurs in Allerdale Hall, which becomes "locus of the uncanny" simultaneously displacing its inhabitants while situating them in a seemingly secure space (Musap 8). In fact, there is a duality in the house between the intimate, private and comfort place; and Allerdale Hall as a source of terror. This duality in the mansion is the result of the duality between the two main female protagonists of the film: Edith and Lucille. They represent both archetypal roles of the Gothic, heroine and the mad woman. In some way, Edith represents everything Lucille will never be: she is innocent, pure and delicate. However, it is when Lucille discovers Thomas is falling in love with Edith, when this view of the women roles is triggered.

Musap refers as "felicitous space, the space that may be grasped, that may be defended against adverse forces, the space that we love" (9). Hence, Allerdale Hall for Lucille means a place of liberation, where she can be happy with Thomas. And the duality comes with the meaning of Allerdale Hall as the opposite, a place of oppression and danger, which is the meaning of the mansion for Edith. In fact, it is not the Sharpe's mansion uncanny in itself but all the supernatural features that appear along the film such as shadows, creaks, moans, piercing shrieks, blood and ghosts. "It is believed that all of the uncanny qualities emerge when those who live in a particular house begin to project their hidden and repressed fears on it" (Horne 2). According to Freud's theory of the uncanny, these fears stem from something that has been repressed but has now returned to haunt its inhabitants. And in Sharpe's case, what it is founded is a very dark past, especially in the character of Lucille, who murdered her own mother, after discovering the incest between the siblings, and all the women who fell under Thomas machination. In *Crimson Peak*, the uncanny is located at the heart of the family and is identified with sexual repressiveness. Although the repressed can return in different forms, del Toro has chosen the form of incest – monstrous love shared between brother and sister" (Salvesen 11).

CONCLUSION:

As this analysis has tried to demonstrate, “The Fall of the House of Usher” and *Crimson Peak* share many similarities, although there are also interesting differences, which are related to the evolution of the Gothic with the passing of time. The relationship between Poe’s famous story and del Toro’s film works to show how the use of the Gothic in art has changed over time. First, the importance of the setting in both works is evident: the aristocratic mansions, where these families live are old and decrepit, and both look as metaphors of the decaying families who live there, aristocrats in decline. Both works emphasize that aristocracy and old social values should adapt to the new changing times, because the alternative is the impotence and death, as it finally occurs in both families, the Ushers and the Sharpes. However, the manner of perishing is completely opposite. While Roderick and Madeline Usher let themselves die, Thomas and Lucile Sharp react aggressively in order to avoid extinction.

Another similarity shared by both works is the topic of incest, a recurrent element in the history of Gothic fiction. However, there are differences in the portrayal. In “Usher,” it is suggested that incest has occurred generation after generation in the family, and probably the disease of Roderick and Madeline is one of the consequences of this practice. However, it is only suggested, never clarified. In del Toro’s film, incest is too evident and it is shown in a very clear manner. It can be considered as a cinema tool to engage the audience, or also as it is my contention, an evolution towards a different manner of approaching difficult topics in a more open manner, in comparison with the past when Christian or traditional values in general were strong influences in society.

Despite all the similarities in the setting, and plot, there is something which is completely different in these texts: the role of women. Although Madeline is finally a crucial character in terms of plot, she only appears twice in the story and never speaks in her own voice, being filtered by the narrator’s focalization and description of her. However, in *Crimson Peak* the female role is completely opposite. As del Toro pointed out, he aimed to emphasize and visualize women in the film. On the one hand, Edith, as a Gothic heroine, who fights against the mad aristocrats who hold her as a prisoner. On the other, Lucille, as the incarnation of the mad and wicked aristocratic woman, determined to destroy all the obstacles in her path because her only Desiree and obsession is staying with Thomas forever.

In short: through the analysis of the most important Gothic features in “The Fall of the House of Usher” and *Crimson Peak*, I have found how Gothic has maintained its essential features along the centuries, but there has been an adaptation and evolution in their portrayal. The new features reflect that times have changed, that there is a tendency to unveil what had been concealed, and, in this case, they highlight the expertise of Guillermo del Toro, who has been successful in the revision of a Gothic master text.

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