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"Ushering" in the Fulfillment of Prophecy

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During the 19th century, a phenomenon known as "Holy Land mania" was sweeping the United States. Americans were intrigued by the state of the Holy Land and whether or not this state matched the images described in biblical prophecy (Robey 62). Interest in Israel's condition invaded many aspects of American life, including literature. Looking through the lens of historical criticism, it is easy to see how authors of this time period fed on the "Holy Land mania" to include references to prophecy and the Middle East in their writings. In particular, critic Molly K. Robey accurately points out in her article "Poe and Prophecy" that Edgar Allan Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher" alludes to biblical prophecy and represents the perceived degeneration of the Promised Land.

One of Robey's initial connections between the short story and the Holy Land is that Poe's main character Roderick Usher represents an Old Testament prophet from the nation of Israel (Robey 65). Explaining his primary foretelling, Robey writes, "Roderick Usher predicts his own and his sister Madeline's destruction, and the narrator observes as this prophecy is gradually accomplished" (64). Robey's statement lines up with the plot of "Usher," in which Roderick does in fact predict his and Madeline's death through a painting of a tomb and a poem about the destruction of a palace. Later, the house collapses into the lake, taking the family with it. Roderick's predictions bear similarities to those of a biblical prophet even beyond the critic's explanation, though, because the predictions

build upon one another to further reveal the future. For example, first, Roderick shows the narrator his painting of a tomb. This vague picture becomes clearer in the context of the next prophecy where the narrator reads Roderick's poem about a once great palace falling into ruins. The narrator sees these two prophecies finally realized when he reads "Mad Trist" with Roderick. During this reading, the men witness eerie noises and eventually see the downfall of the family and house of Usher. Roderick possesses other prophet-like qualities as well. Similar to many prophets in the Old Testament, Robey emphasizes that Roderick's voice and message make him sound like a madman (65). The text in "Usher" supports Robey's claim because Poe refers to Roderick's "incoherence" and "inconsistency" of speech (657). Moreover, Poe writes that Roderick "suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses" (657). Roderick's over-awareness of his surroundings, especially when paired with his confused speech and vivid predictions, make him the perfect representation of a biblical prophet.

The critic is also correct in asserting that Poe's short story actually "becomes a supplemental sacred text" due to the fact that its choice of language alludes to the "sacred space" of the Holy Land, the people of Israel, and "illustrates the accomplishment of prophecy" (Robey 66). One of Robey's main points is that, like the nation of Israel, the term "the House of Usher" denotes both the physical house and the family of Usher (66). The text affirms this claim when it reveals "the House of Usher" is "an appellation which seemed to include, in the

minds of the peasantry who used it, both the family and the family mansion” (Poe 655). Likewise, the Bible uses the term “Israel” to refer to God’s sacred people and the space he set aside for them. Many verses call the groups of Jacob’s descendants “Israel,” such as when Joshua writes, “Israel crossed the Jordan on dry ground” (Jos. 4:22, *New International Version*). Other verses seem to indicate a more physical location when using the term “Israel.” For example, Malachi 1:5 states, “You will see it with your own eyes and say, ‘Great is the Lord – even beyond the borders of Israel!’” Furthermore, “The Fall of the House of Usher” can be referred to as a “sacred text” because it is modeled after biblical prophecy predicting the fall of Israel to Arab nations. The fulfillment of this prophecy, then, is exemplified not in Israeli or Hebrew allusions, but in allusions to Arab culture. For instance, Poe makes use of imagery to represent the infiltration of Arabs and Muslims. Colors such as red, green, black, and white have long been associated with Islam. Throughout the story, Poe gives many descriptions incorporating these colors, particularly red and black, in relation to the deterioration of the house. For instance, he describes a room in the house as having a “black oaken floor” bathed in “encrimsoned light” (Poe 656). While these colors are used frequently throughout the story, the most convincing example of imagery is found when the house is actually falling. Just before it slips into the lake, Roderick turns back to look at the house and sees something in a crack. Poe writes, “The radiance was that of the full, setting, and blood-red moon, which now shone vividly

through that once barely-indiscernible fissure” (666). Not only does Poe describe a “blood-red” image, but the picture is that of a moon, a symbol long associated with Islam. Roderick sees this moon, representative of Muslims, shining through the cracks while the house of Usher, representative of Israel, crumbles around it. Other, more direct, references to Islam are found in “Usher” as well. At one point Poe writes from the voice of the narrator, “I shall ever bear about me, as Moslem in their shrouds at Mecca, a memory of the many solemn hours I thus spent alone with the master of the House of Usher” (658). The narrator bears the memory of his time in the house in the same grim way a Muslim would wear a burial shroud at his own sacred place. All of these allusions help emphasize the degeneration of the Israeli Holy Land into the Islamic Holy Land. This in turn makes “Usher” a fulfillment of prophecy and thus a representation of a “sacred text” in itself.

Finally, Robey is supported in her claim that the degeneration of the House of Usher signifies the degeneration of the Holy Land and therefore of God’s chosen people (65). She writes, “‘Antiquity’ and ‘ancientness’ are repeatedly used to describe the house, which, like the Holy Land, appears unchanged and unchanging, only deteriorating. The house’s ‘extensive decay’ and its ‘crumbling condition’ likewise echo portraits of the yet un-restored Holy Land” (Robey 66). The physical degeneration of the house and the family is evident throughout Poe’s writing. The house is seen to be falling apart from the

beginning, with growing cracks and discoloration. It is completely destroyed, though, when it collapses into the lake. Furthermore, the family is deteriorating along with the house. The narrator notices this when he first arrives, saying of Roderick that the “*physique* of the gray walls and turrets, and of the dim tarn into which they all looked down” had negatively affected his spirits (Poe 657). The mental and physical health of both Roderick and Madeline decline over the course of the story, eventually even leading to their deaths when the house is destroyed. Paired with the historical context of the belief that Holy Land had been taken over by Arabs, it can be concluded that the degeneration of the house and family of Usher represents the degeneration of the physical nation of Israel and the holy people who inhabited it.

Viewing “The Fall of the House of Usher” through the lens of historical criticism provides a well-developed interpretation of Poe’s writing. The imagery and events in “Usher” reveal strong connections to the Holy Land as well as to biblical prophecy regarding the destruction of Israel. Given the cultural craze over the Promised Land and Poe’s apparent interest in the subject, it is safe to say that allusions to the Bible and comparisons of the Arabic to deterioration were no accident. Poe clearly wanted his audience to have a detailed look into what he believed was happening in the Holy Land.

Works Cited

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