

# Marek Wilczyński

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## The Rise of the House of Usher : "The Landscape Chamber" by Sarah Orne Jewett as a Textual Palimpsest

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Marek Wilczyński

**The Rise  
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The opening paragraph of Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) is one of the classic passages of American literature. Here is just its first, long, richly alliterated, and perfectly rhythmic sentence:

During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country; and at length found myself as the shades of the evening drew on, within view of the melancholy house of Usher. (Mabbott, 397)

Forty-eight years later, in November 1887, Sarah Orne Jewett published in *The Atlantic Monthly* a short story entitled "The Landscape Chamber," to be included just next year in *The King of Folly Island and Other People*, her fifth collection of short fiction. The opening paragraph of the story seems to provoke a vague sense of *deja vu*, though the tone of the hypothetical hypotext is indeed quite different:

I was tired of ordinary journeys, which involved either the loneliness and discomfort of fashionable hotels, or the responsibilities of a guest in busy houses. One is always doing the same things over and over; I now promised myself that I would go in search of new people and new scenes, until I was again ready to turn with delight to my familiar occupations. So I mounted my horse one morning, without any definite plan of my journey, and rode eastward, with a business-like haversack strapped behind the saddle. I only wished that the first day's well-known length of road had been already put behind me. One drawback to a woman's enjoyment of an excursion of this sort is the fact that when she is out of the saddle she is uncomfortably dressed. But I compromised matters as nearly as possible by wearing a short corduroy habit, light both in color and weight, and putting a linen blouse and belt into my pack, to replace the stiff habit-waist. The wallet on the saddle held a flat drinking-cup, a bit of chocolate, and a few hard biscuit, for provision against improbable famine. Autumn would be the best time for such a journey, if the evenings need not be so often spent in stuffy rooms, with kerosene lamps for company. This was early summer, and I had long days in which to amuse myself. For a book I took a much-beloved small copy of *The Sentimental Journey*. (Jewett, 185)

First of all and obviously enough, between the two beginnings – and the two stories in general – there is a difference in diction: fantastic vagueness and ambiguity versus realistic detail and socially conditioned precision. Second, in "The Landscape Chamber," unlike in Poe's tale, the first-person narrator-protagonist is a woman, which determines some circumstances referred to in the paragraph. She has to deal with a discrepancy between the rider's costume and the conventional female attire, but solves the problem easily and successfully.

**Marek Wilczyński** is professor of American literature and American Studies at the University of Gdańsk and American Studies Center of the University of Warsaw. He specializes in nineteenth-century literature and culture with a specific focus on the culture of New England.

It is perhaps due to the diminished male population of the post-Civil War New England that she may travel without a male companion without provoking at least a sense of surprise. Well-organized, she is a typical tourist traveling for pleasure. (We remember that Poe's narrator has a mission: he comes to the rescue of his friend and the reader is not supposed to care about the logistics of his errand.) At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, tourism was already a popular way of spending free time and the tourist infrastructure, including "fashionable hotels" and busy guesthouses available to individuals willing to enjoy "new people and new scenes," flourished not only in the historic locations along the east coast or near Niagara Falls. Significantly, the direction taken by the female tourist is "eastward," contrary to the standard west-oriented itinerary of most American literary characters even long after Jewett's times. One might say that going east is not only moving in space, but also in time – against the current of the U.S. history, towards its colonial prologue.

There are three more interesting details in the opening paragraph of "The Landscape Chamber," at least two of which can probably be read as metatextual clues, particularly at the second reading. First, the narrator complains that "[o]ne is always doing the same things over and over" and wants to break that vicious circle; second, to amuse herself, she takes a copy of Sterne's *Sentimental Journey*, and third, she realizes that "autumn would be the best time" for her journey, but because of the longest days in early summer – a practical reason – she chooses that time of the year. Autumn, most likely late autumn when the weather is not congenial at all, is exactly the time when Poe's protagonist goes on his errand, mentioning a book, a work of fiction, draws the reader's attention to textuality, while the idea that one would like to avoid repetition points both to repetition itself and to the wish to put an end to its disheartening rule.

Jewett's story is divided into three parts. It is at the beginning of Part II that the reader learns about the setting, which is New England, and this, of course, makes another crucial difference between her text and Poe's. Thus, "The Landscape Chamber" acquires both spatial and temporal coordinates – a double geographical and historical horizon, distinctly lacking in "The Fall of the House of Usher," an apocalyptic parable with no specific reference. Riding her horse with no particular destination in her mind, Jewett's narrator comes across a house in the middle of nowhere by accident. Her animal has lost a shoe and is unable to run or even walk so that she is quite happy, seeing high chimneys quite nearby, although upon a closer look the building turns out rather shabby:

It was disappointing, for the first view gave an impression of dreariness and neglect. The barn and straggling row of outbuildings were leaning this way and that, mossy and warped; the blinds of the once handsome house were broken, and everything gave evidence of unhindered decline from thrift and competence to poverty and ruin. A good colonial mansion ... abandoned by its former owners, and tenanted now by some shiftless outcasts of society, who ask but meagre comfort, and are indifferent to the decencies of life. (Jewett, 187)

The residents of the mansion, like in Poe's tale, are two, but they are a father and his daughter, not siblings. This certainly invites speculation in terms of the Freudian Oedipus complex or Klein's rejection of the hostile mother

(Church, 161–179), but also, through the generation gap, installs in the family relationship the dimension of time, i.e. history – the present and the future, when the father is finally no more. The house provokes in the visitor “the haunting sense of poverty” since “the floor [is] carpetless and deeply worn,” the furniture barely holds together, and the supper consists of just “some thin, crisp corn bread” and “a dish of field strawberries” oddly served with “some pieces of superb old English silver and delicate china.” (Jewett, 193) On her way to the guest bedroom, the title “landscape chamber” with a magnificent view, the narrator learns from the hostess that her father suffers from an “inherited monomania” which makes them live in self-imposed poverty even though they actually have resources and could afford at least some renovation, not to mention more abundant food. In the afternoon, her privacy is clandestinely violated by the old man who sneaks into the room to double-check that his savings kept in the closet strongbox are safe. The woman is quite shocked and next morning asks him to explain his strange behavior, which he does, apologizing and trying to dispel her anxiety. He admits to be “in bondage” of a hereditary “power” that restrains his natural “impulses” and cannot be resisted despite his lifelong effort:

We are all in prison while we are left in this world, – that is the truth; in prison for another man’s sin. . . . If there were an ancestor of mine, as I have been taught, who sold his soul for wealth, the awful price was this that he lost the power of using it. He was greedy for gain, and now we cannot part with what we have, even for common comfort. His children and his children’s children have suffered for his fault. He has lived in the hell of watching us from generation to generation; seeing our happiness spoiled, our power of usefulness withered away. Wherever he is, he knows that we are all misers because he was miserly, and stamped us with the mark of his own base spirit. He has watched his descendants shrivel up and disappear one by one, poor and ungenerous in God’s world. We fight against the doom of it, but it wins at last. Thank God, there are only two of us left. (Jewett, 200)

The father’s confession reads not so much like Roderick Usher’s, but like that of some protagonist of Hawthorne’s tale, who suffers under the burden of “sin.” Yet what matters is his interlocutor’s response: she considers him “insane,” in the language of modern psychiatry, and identifies his self-torture in terms of a “malady of unreason.” Since unlike Usher, he is not aggressive, her suggestion to the daughter is to move him “to some place where he would forget his misery among new interests and scenes.” (Jewett, 200) Unlike in Poe’s tale, then, the solution is not to succumb to a supernatural catastrophe or run for one’s life, but a proper medical treatment. The house does not fall and is expected to have a future that belongs to the girl, obligated by her mother to take care of the father for as long as he remains alive.

What is perhaps particularly significant is the composition of Jewett’s story. Poe’s tale includes the famous “Haunted Palace” poem, a nutshell recipe for genuinely American gothic that draws on incurable madness. In “The Landscape Chamber,” the role of Poe’s embedded poem is played by a picture

which the narrator finds in the room where she spends the night. Apparently, it shows the past colonial glory of the mansion, long gone and with time replaced by its present opposite:

The colors were dull, the drawing was quaintly conventional, and I recognized the subject, though not immediately. The artist had pleased himself by making a study of the old house itself, and later, as I dressed, I examined it in detail. From the costume of the figures I saw that it must have been painted more than a hundred years before. In astonishing contrast to the present condition, it appeared like a satirical show of the house's possibilities. Servants held capering steeds for gay gentlemen to mount, and ladies walked together in fine attire down the garden alleys of the picture. Once a hospitable family had kept open house behind the row of elms, and once the follies of the world and the fashions of brilliant, luxurious life had belonged to this decayed and withering household. (Jewett, 195)

In this way, history once again invades Jewett's narrative – this time it is the past. While Poe's *House of Usher* is suspended in the eternal present, undermined only by the rumors that "the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always, with very trifling and very temporary variation, so lain" (Mabbott, 399), Jewett's house is located in time that has all the three dimensions: the documented, glorious past, the miserable present, and the open future. Since most likely the father will die first, the daughter may still get a chance to have the inherited mansion restored and, as she does not seem to share the old man's obsession, she may also enjoy her future in the company of the visitor who promises to come back, as well as that of other people who will provide her with new, unpredictable opportunities. Hence, it appears that "The Landscape Chamber" is a deliberate intertextual polemic with Poe. Under the circumstances, his text is a genuine hypertext working like a pragmatic filter through which the audience may interpret Jewett's story as a realistic, gendered, specifically localized, and carefully historicized palimpsest scrawled upon a romantic-gothic hypotext that ignores all the above characteristics. (Genette, 7–10)

In psychoanalytical terms (the Freudian version), the death of the father will literally put an end to Electra's imprisonment in a devastating relationship, while the return of the female narrator (the Kleinian version) will allow the surviving daughter to find reconciliation with the caring mother. But the palimpsest in which, contrary to Poe's tale, history has been pushed to the foreground may have still another meaning. In his comprehensive study of turning points in the New England colonial and antebellum past, *New England's Crises and Cultural Memory. Literature, Politics, History, Religion 1620–1860*, John McWilliams examines a number of pivotal events and their textual representations, from famine in Plymouth, the destruction of Merry Mount, King Philip's War, and the trial of Anne Hutchinson through the political tensions in 1760–1775 and the ensuing Concord-Lexington skirmish. My argument is that McWilliams's perspective may as well be prolonged to include a major socio-economic crisis that hit the region after the Civil War, after the heavy war losses had decimated its male population and almost all

its former sources of wealth, including maritime trade and the cooperation between cotton plantations in the South and textile factories in Massachusetts, had significantly dried up. (Westbrook, 161–186) The far-reaching consequences of that crisis, the most serious in the whole history of the former northeastern colonies even though not as spectacular as those referred to by McWilliams, were perhaps best described in a nutshell by the Southerner Allen Tate in his classic essay on Emily Dickinson, published in 1928:

But by the 1850 great fortunes had been made (in the rum, slave, and milling industries), and New England became a museum. The whatnots groaned under the load of knickknacks, the fine china dogs and cats, the pieces of Oriental jade, the chips off the leaning tower of Pisa. There were the rare books and cosmopolitan learning. It was all equally displayed as the evidence of a superior culture. . . . But culture, in the true sense, was disappearing. Where the old order, formidable as it was, had held all this personal experience, this eclectic excitement, in a comprehensible whole, the new order tended to flatten it out in a common experience that was not quite in common; it exalted more and more the personal and the unique in the interior sense. Where the old-fashioned puritans got together on a rigid doctrine, and could thus be individualists in manners, the nineteenth-century New Englander, lacking a genuine religious center, began to be a social conformist. (Tate, 283–284)

That particular state of affairs – social conformity mixed with individual oddities – was represented by Mary E. Wilkins Freeman in her novel *Pembroke* (1894), a small-town catastrophic replica of *The House of the Seven Gables*, in which reconciliation always comes just a little too late, interpersonal communication is no longer possible, and characters pay for their own or their relatives' strong convictions with their lives or well-being. If there is any late nineteenth-century literary text published in the north of the United States that can be called decadent, it is most certainly Wilkins Freeman's somewhat forgotten masterpiece, inconspicuous because of its plain language and misleading down-to-earth realism. Interestingly, written and published after the Civil War, *Pembroke* portrays a post-Puritan community before the national conflict, in the 1820s or 1830s, as though the causes of the downfall could become visible only *ex post*, when their effects were already too obvious and devastating to be opposed.

Still, the open-endedness of “The Landscape Chamber” and Jewett's cultural translation of nowhere in particular into eastern New England, a mysterious unsuccessful rescue mission into a tourist excursion, and, perhaps the most notably, hypersensitivity and madness into a clinically definable mental disease give hope of a way out of the region's predicament. There is no such hope in “The Fall of the House of Usher” since there is no place to come back to for the narrator, and no future for the Usher siblings who both die at the same time, neither of them leaving behind any progeny. Poe's catastrophe, like that in “The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion” or “The Masque of the Red Death,” is absolute and irrevocable, total and final. On the contrary, Jewett, the first canonized local color woman writer from New England, portrays in her

story, and other works of fiction, a documented historical process with all its ups and downs. Even if the Golden Age, painted by an eighteenth-century artist whose picture decorates the landscape chamber, cannot be repeated, the house, which was once its scenery, needs only some repairs and can still be used as a comfortable abode, maybe a cozy hotel for tourists who wish to take a rest far from the madding crowd. The same direction – adjustment to the modern market of services to support life – has been indicated, for instance, in Wilkins Freeman's short story, "The Blue Butterfly," arguably a polemical hypertext of Hawthorne's "The Artist of the Beautiful." (Reichardt, 180–196) The protagonist Marcia Keyes successfully competes on a small town "dressmaking" market, and her composite "butterfly," a gown worn by a girl on the occasion of her first ball, sharply contrasts with the mechanical, easily destructible butterfly made by the clockmaker Owen Warland only to satisfy his ambition. While Warland, immersed in his project, decided to ignore the pleasures and duties of family life, and consequently excluded himself from the local community, Keyes, a service provider rather than an artist, works mainly for the benefit of others, and, too old to get married and have children, indirectly, through her sartorial craft, contributes to the cycle of life anyway.

In his famous review of Hawthorne's tales, Poe did not approve of allegory as a literary device – "In defence of allegory, (however, or for whatever object, employed) there is scarcely one respectable word to be said." (Poe, 582) – but Jewett used in her fictional dialog with him in "The Landscape Chamber" just that mode of representation. After all, hypertextuality is a kind of temporalized allegorical relationship since one text definitely refers to another, usually an earlier one, and can be understood only in such reference. New England writers of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, mostly women, widely employed allegory both to present the socio-economic and cultural crisis of the region after the Civil War, and to point to the ways of its possible overcoming. One might also say that through their short stories and novels Hawthorne, their unacknowledged literary mentor, posthumously responded to Poe's criticism.

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