

Cat and Mouse

By Gunter Grass

Reviewed by Mahfuz ul Hasib Chowdhury

I bought a copy of *Cat and Mouse* by Gunter Grass (1927–2015) around four years ago from Aziz Super Market, Dhaka and while going through the moving novel Gunter Grass seemed to me very close to Victor Hugo in terms of characterization. The bizarre physical and mental features of his protagonists in *The Tin Drum* and in *Cat and Mouse* reminded me of some of the people Victor Hugo portrayed in his novels *Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *The Man Who Laughs* taking into account the inevitable paths that underpin the frisky narrative mode of the author.

Another notable point about Gunter Grass is most of his fictional works are discourse novels due to frequent shifts in point of view while telling the story. The ambience of World War II is strongly felt while reading most of his books. He was awarded Nobel Prize for literature in 1999.

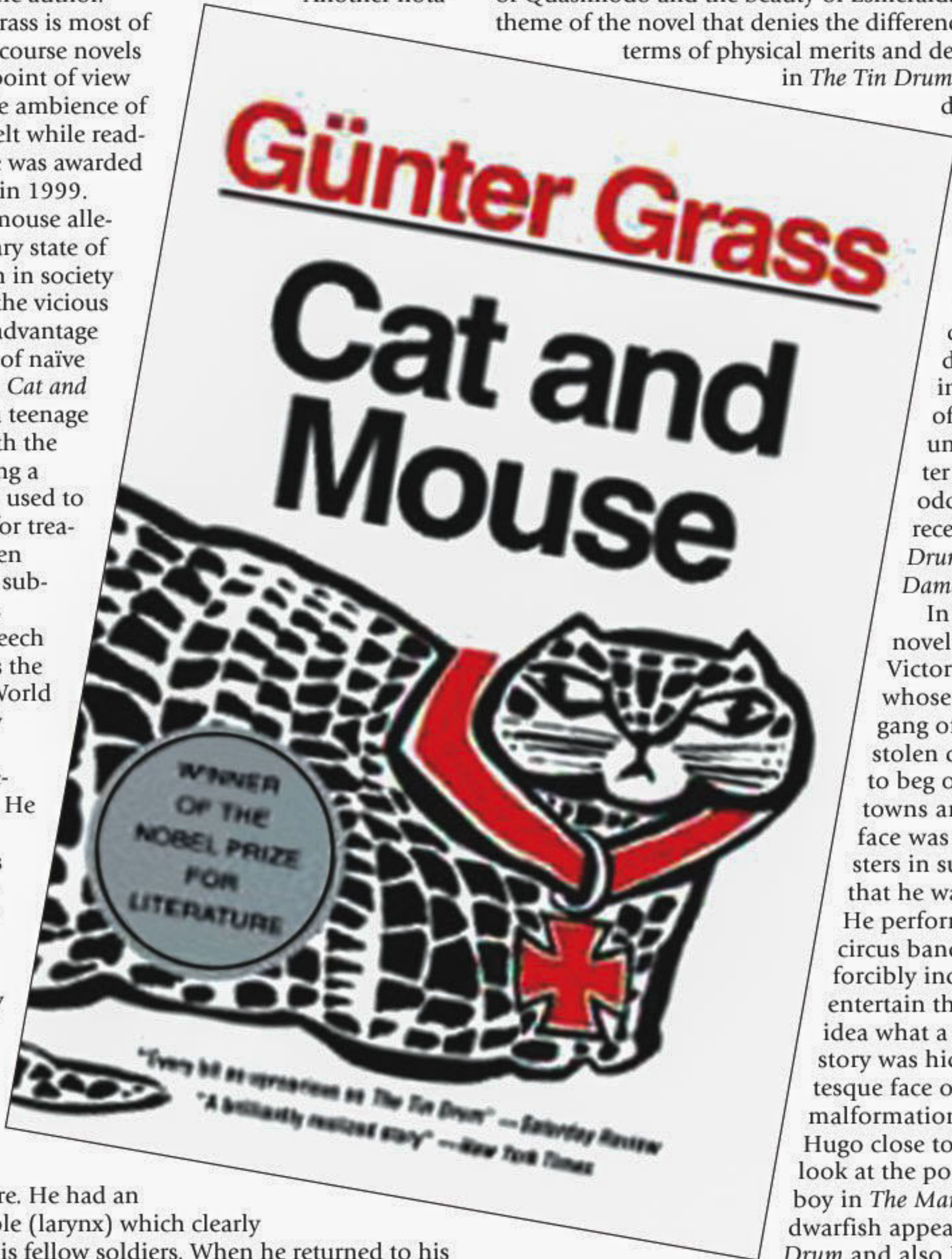
In *Cat and Mouse*, the mouse allegorically refers to the dreary state of ordinary men and women in society while the cat symbolizes the vicious role of a predator taking advantage of the unprotected plight of naive and vulnerable people. In *Cat and Mouse*, Joachim Mahlke, a teenage German boy grows up with the freakish desire of becoming a clown. He and his friends used to dive into the sea to look for treasures in the relics of sunken ships. One day a German submarine captain visited his school and delivered a speech on the glory of war. It was the time while the winds of World War II just started to blow across Europe. Joachim Mahlke had been mischievous since his childhood. He stole that captain's iron cross, even though he was later on caught and rusticated from the school for this offence. However, he received training in a German military academy and joined World War II. He proved his worth by destroying a large number of enemy tanks by means of which he secured his own iron cross for courage under fire. He had an unusually big Adam's apple (larynx) which clearly differentiated him from his fellow soldiers. When he returned to his boyhood school, the principal didn't allow him to speak to the audiences on his war experience because of the theft he had committed several years earlier. This incident upset Joachim Mahlke and he left his military job. The novella ends with Joachim Mahlke diving once again into the sea to search for wreckage but he doesn't return any more. Naturally, it seems to the readers that Mahlke disappeared because of the school principal's denial to recognize his achievement as a brave soldier. The principal's stony attitude may be considered the "cat" in this context while Mahlke is the victim of the cat's repugnance.

Gunter Grass to some extent stands on equal terms with the finest ever French novelist Victor Hugo keeping in view the absurdities both these authors depicted in their fictional figures. *Les Miserables* is Victor Hugo's masterpiece. However, in Victor Hugo's another widely perused novel *Hunchback of Notre Dame* readers come across a physically deformed man called Quasimodo who is the protagonist of the novel. Quasimodo is found saving a girl named Esmeralda from execution. The unavoidable contrast between the physical deformities of Quasimodo and the beauty of Esmeralda underlines the focal theme of the novel that denies the differences between humans in terms of physical merits and demerits. Oskar Matzerath in *The Tin Drum* is a dwarf with great drumming skills and he can be compared with Quasimodo in *Hunchback of Notre Dame* in light of the physical shortcomings they were born with but these corporeal handicaps did not prevent them from doing extraordinary things in these novels. The value of humanity cannot be underrated just for the matter of looking fine or odd—that's the message we receive from both *The Tin Drum* and *Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

In another much acclaimed novel *The Man Who Laughs*, Victor Hugo illustrated a boy whose face was mutilated by a gang of thugs who maimed stolen children and forced them to beg on the streets of French towns and countryside. The boy's face was distorted by the gangsters in such a way that it seemed that he was laughing all the time. He performed various tricks for a circus band owned by the gang. The forcibly incised smile on his face to entertain the audiences who had no idea what a horrendously inhuman story was hiding behind the grotesque face of that boy. So, physical malformations once again get Victor Hugo close to Gunter Grass when we look at the portrayal of that ill-fated boy in *The Man Who Laughs* and the dwarfish appearance of Oskar in *The Tin Drum* and also Joachim Mahlke's abnormally huge Adam's apple in *Cat and Mouse*.

According to Aristotle, authors and poets should aim to simultaneously entertain and educate the people who listen to their verses and read their stories. Standing beside the downtrodden class of people in society is the greatest responsibility of mankind and litterateurs are gifted with the power to play this role in a more comprehensive way than those belonging to other vocations.

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Bangladesh-er-Swadhinota Sangrame Shilpishomaj

By Biren Shome

Reviewed by Enayetullah Khan

Art of War

IT'S not often you come across artists writing on artists. Painters especially, tend to be retiring sorts who most of the time, would much rather have their brush rather than the pen do their talking for them, whether they would like to reminisce on some fond memory or relay some essential truth about the world. All art ultimately offers some interpretation of the world around them. But some truths, by virtue of their inviolate nature, can only be expressed through words.

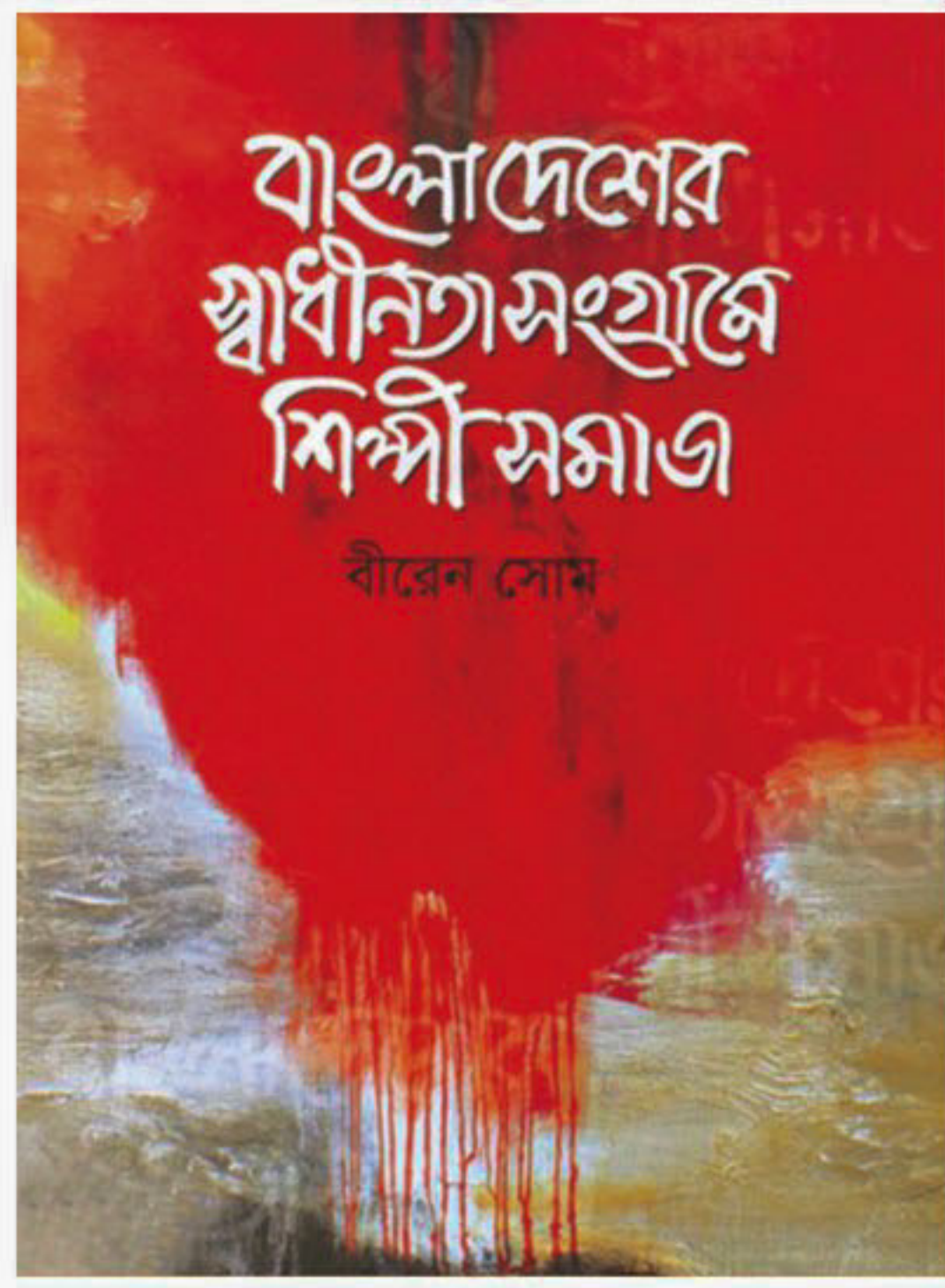
That distinction in itself is enough to make the artist Biren Shome's book on Bangladeshi artists' contribution to the Liberation War of 1971 a bit of a rarity. What truly sets it apart is the rich trove it provides of the imagery associated with the war, as seen through the eyes of the nascent state's mostly young, ragtag band of artists, expressed in a variety of mediums. Many of the works, especially the posters, will be familiar to readers. Now you can put a name to them. So for example, whereas previously the famous print proclaiming the unity of all religions among the Bengali freedom-fighters has hung on many a university student's dorm wall, now we know that it was the work of artist Debdas Chakroborty. Similarly, it was good to put a name to the iconic image of the woman freedom fighter above a proclamation that Bengal's mothers and daughters were all freedom-fighters, a personal favourite. Pranesh Mondol did that one.

Biren Shome, who escaped to Kolkata in April 1971 fearing torture, as did many other artists, delves into the making of some of these seminal posters at length in this book, including Quamrul Hassan's famous, or infamous image of a collaborator with the equally famous proclamation - 'This monster needs to be murdered.'

The book titled 'Bangladesh-er Swadhinota Sangrame Shilpishomaj' (Artists in the Independence Struggle of Bangladesh) is a testimony to the historical role that artists played along with people of other walks of life. The 152-page book, divided into seven chapters, contains the diverse and decisive roles that the country's artists played in the liberation war, made richer for being recounted by someone who was an integral part of that community.

The book opens with an account of artists' engagement in national struggles from 1952 to 1971. With drawings, paintings and banners the book becomes more authentic. In another chapter titled '71-er Pothe Prantore', Biren Shome offers a glimpse into his personal involvement in the Mujibnagar Government. The chapter also showcases some of the suffering of the tortured masses in heartrending photographs. Other chapters of the book detail artists' roles in diverse fields like working in the information ministry of Mujibnagar government, producing posters, banners, drawings and paintings on pertinent themes. Particularly interesting is a chapter in which the book showcases prints of the paintings of 17 Bangladeshi painters who held group shows during the war in Kolkata, Delhi and Mumbai. The chapter offers a rare opportunity to see around 50 paintings on the liberation war. The book ends with 30 paintings by the author himself, all drawing inspiration from what remains the epochal event in Bangladesh's history.

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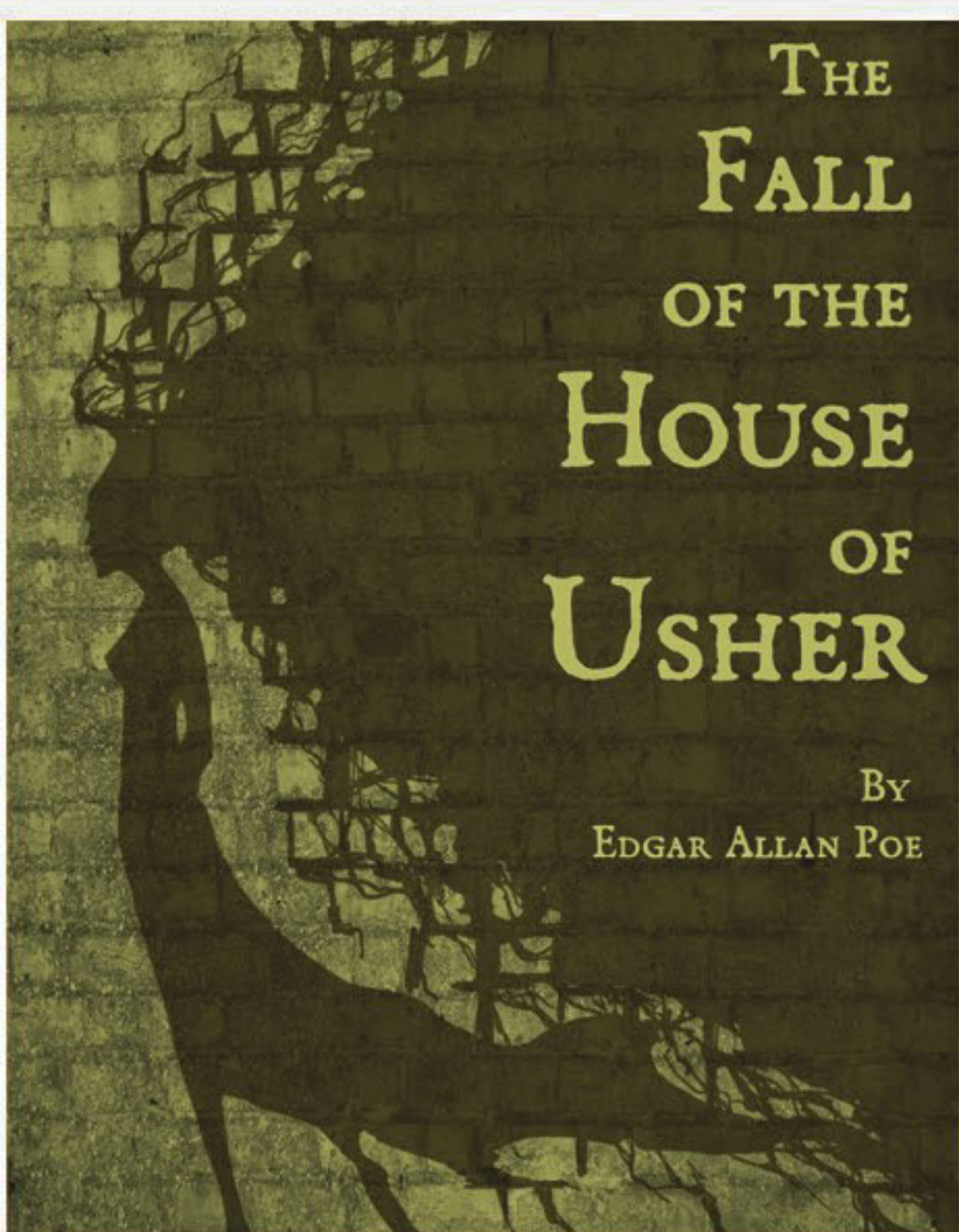


The Fall of the House of Usher

By Edgar Allan Poe

Reviewed by Anika Alam

The Sepulcher of Lost Hope and Sanity



CRAVING for some spinal tingling horror story? How about some classic Edgar Allan Poe Gothic Fiction that will leave you scared and confused? The American writer from the early 19th century was famous for his mesmerizing gothic horror fiction. As he was considered the master of subterranean crypts, the living dead, haunted mansions, blood, ghosts, suffocation, personality disorder, mental illness and all the other exquisite ingredients that make up a horror story: these delineate the key elements for one of his most famous short horror fictions called, "The Fall of the House of Ushers".

The six paged short story narrates the terrible incident that happened to the last of the once well-known Usher family, which eventually perishes. The story starts with an unknown narrator riding towards the house of his childhood friend, Roderick Usher, who had summoned him asking for his assistance in a letter. Since the narrator was the only close childhood companion, Mr. Usher hoped that he could help him improve his ailing health. Even though Roderick had been one of his "boon companions in boyhood," the narrator admits that "I really knew little of my friend". Roderick's condition is so horrid that the narrator's first impression of his complexion was that it

appeared to be cadaverous and thought his old friend was stricken by a fate that was utterly bleak and he had almost no hope to improve or recover.

While Usher and the narrator converse, Roderick's twin sister, Lady Madeline Usher passes quickly through the distasteful end of the room and disappears. The sight of her fills the narrator with a sense of dread that he cannot explain. Then he is explained that she is suffering from an unspecified but fatal illness. Which physicians have been unable to identify the exact cause of her illness, but its symptoms were as a settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptic character.

The motive behind his desire to have the "solace" of the narrator's companionship, it is not the only or most significant reason. Usher himself is suffering from a "mental disorder", which is "a constitutional and . . . family evil, and one for which he despaired to find a remedy." Even before the speaker had seen Roderick in his chamber, the narrator mentions that the ancient "stem" of the Usher family never "put forth . . . any enduring branch . . . the entire family lay in the direct line of descent, and had always . . . so lain." In other words, Roderick and Madeline Usher are the products and inheritors of an incestuous family lineage one that has remained predominantly patrilineal, so that the name of the family always remained Usher. Which is something Roderick is strictly against.

One of Usher's paintings depicts a long subterranean tunnel with a low ceiling and white walls. Although no torches line the walls, a ghastly light radiates from the scene. All of which are meant to indicate Roderick's preoccupation with anything that might help him understand his worries. Eventually he feels certain about the house itself is evil as it was built and lived in by his forefathers, and because he believes there is "sentience [in] all vegetable things" implying that the house consists of such sentient things that has a "terrible influence" on him and Madeline.

On one unfortunate evening, after Roderick informs the narrator that Lady Madeline has passed on. He states that rather than burying his sister in the family cemetery some distance from the house, he will preserve her corpse for two weeks in one of the many vaults within the house before the final burial. As someone suffering from catalepsy may seem dead but may not be actually dead. Therefore it would be horrifying to bury Madeline alive. The other reason behind this unusual step is also to keep the corpse out of reach of her attending physicians, who are curious about the malady that killed her. It will also provide a temporary resting place for the body while burial plans are decided.

So, the narrator assists Usher in lifting the body into the coffin and placing the coffin in the vault, situated beneath the part of the house containing the narrator's



bedroom. The archway in front of the vault was covered with copper, as was the huge iron door opening into the vault. After setting the coffin in place, they moved aside the lid to look one more time upon Madeline Usher. Noticing the very strong resemblance between her and Roderick Usher, the narrator wonders whether Madeline and her brother were twins; Roderick confirms that they were and says that they shared certain feelings that others would find hard to comprehend. Before screwing down the lid of the coffin, the narrator notices that her illness left a "faint blush" on her breast and her face. Her lips were locked in "lingering smile." As there she remains for a week, Roderick's mental illness worsened as he roamed through his house aimlessly or sits and stares vacantly at nothing for long hours.

On one tempestuously stormy night, with "mad hilarity in his eyes" Roderick enters the narrator's bedroom, where they sit together, the narrator reading to him and both of them trying to ignore the terrible grating sound they hear coming from below the bedroom which was the vault into which they placed Madeline's body, and the heavy door to that vault always makes a loud grating sound when it is being opened. As the sound continues more noticeably, Roderick suddenly informs the narrator that he has been listening to noises downstairs for many days, but apparently fearful that his sister was still living. Roderick jumps to his feet and says, "Madman! I tell you that she now stands without the door!" Immediately, the bedroom door swings open and Madeline in her white robes bloodied by her struggle to escape the coffin and vault is standing there. Then, giving out a low cry, she enters the room and in the throes of her final death spasms, falls upon Roderick Usher. During the fall, Usher "a victim to the terrors he had anticipated," hits the floor with "a corpse" and dies.

The narrator hastily flees the mansion and while escaping, from a short distance away he notices a blood red moon shining over the building. As he turns to look back and sees the House of Usher, it suddenly splits in two and crumbled into the dark waters of the tarn before it. The narrator in the end witnesses the dark waters of the tarn devour every last fragment of the House of Usher.

"The Fall of the House of Usher" demonstrates perfectly Poe's principle of composition that states that everything in the story must contribute to a single unified effect. Late in the story, Roderick Usher says: "I feel that the period will sooner or later arrive when I must abandon life and reason together, in some struggle with the grim phantasm, FEAR." Clearly, Poe has preferred the "grim phantasm, FEAR" for his prime effect to be achieved in this story. As a result, every word, image and description in the story is chosen with the central idea in mind of creating a sense

Born as Edgar Poe on the 19th of January in 1809, Edgar Allan Poe was an author, poet, editor and literary critic, and was considered part of the American Romantic Movement famous for his tales of mystery and macabre. One of the earliest American practitioners of the short story and considered as the inventor of the detective fiction he also contributed to the emerging genre of science fiction as well. He has an annual award named after him, the "Edgar Award", awarded to those with distinguished works in the genre of mystery. Poe established his own literary style of criticism through his work in literary journals and periodicals. In 1845 he published his poem, "The Raven" that became an instant success. He died at the age of 40 for reasons unknown.



of abject terror and fear within both the narrator and the reader. From the opening paragraphs, ominous and foreboding as they are, to the presentation of the over-sensitive, hopelessly frail and delicate Roderick Usher, to the terrible conclusion with the appearance of the living corpse, all of Poe's details combine to create the anxiety creating that "grim phantasm, FEAR."

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