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Chapter 8

# The fall of the house

## *Gothic narrative and the decline of the Russian family*

**Katherine Bowers**

"There are families over which an inescapable fatalism seems to weigh," observes Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin toward the end of *The Family Golovlev* (*Gospoda Golovlevy*, 1875–1880). He continues:

> This is especially the case among the petty gentry, who have no occupation, no connection to the common life, and no administrative meaning, who first huddled in the shelter of serfdom, scattered across Russia, but now are living out their final days on crumbling estates without protection.[1]

Saltykov-Shchedrin's novel focuses on one doomed family, but the unhappy Golovlevs are hardly unique in Russian literature. Across the long nineteenth century we see them in works ranging from Fonvizin's play *The Minor* (1782) to Chekhov's last drama, *The Cherry Orchard* (1904), from the declining estates in Gogol's *Dead Souls* (1842) to Tolstoy's famous meditation on unhappy families in *Anna Karenina* (1877). Serfdom's abolishment in 1861 led to a shift in the role of Russia's landed gentry class, but, as Saltykov-Shchedrin

[1] M. E. Saltykov-Shchedrin, *Gospoda Golovlevy*, in *Sobranie sochinenii v dvadtsati tomakh*, XIII:251. Hereafter *SS*. All translations are my own unless noted otherwise.

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suggests, the family was in a declining state even before Alexander II's reforms. Family decline narratives became increasingly prevalent in Russian realism as the fin de siècle approached, gothic elements in them marking portrayals of familial and social breakdown.[2]

The decline of a family is not a uniquely gothic plot,[3] but it is closely associated with the genre as the gothic has a long history of "fall of the house" narratives. The narrative convention derives its name from Edgar Allan Poe's 1839 story "The Fall of the House of Usher," although the plotline within the gothic canon predates Poe's tale considerably.[4] In

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[2] My research identifies three key characteristics that, together, define any gothic work: (1) the narrative focuses on a mystery's solution: curiosity propels the reader to continue turning pages, anticipating horrors hinted at but constantly deferred; (2) the narrative revolves around a transgression or broken taboo, the repercussions of which inform the work as a whole; and (3) the narrative is preoccupied with psychologies such as fear, dread, and revulsion – both their representation in the text and emotional impact on the reader – which give rise to a sense of anxiety that permeates the text. This definition builds upon the work of David Punter, Fred Botting, and Muireann Maguire. See Punter, *The Literature of Terror: The Modern Gothic* (London: Longman, 1996), 146; Botting, *Gothic* (London: Routledge, 1996), 2–3; and Maguire, *Stalin's Ghosts: Gothic Themes in Early Soviet Literature* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012), 10–14.

[3] Joost van Baak discusses the "House Myth" in *The House in Russian Literature: A Mythopoeic Exploration* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), including numerous examples of families in decline (69–75, 164–165). According to van Baak, "fall of the house" narratives depict cyclic routine and order "disrupted by catastrophic or fatal plot developments, especially where a family disintegrates or dies out, bringing their house to an end – the Death of the House" (261).

[4] The "fall of the house" topos appears in the first gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1767), and reoccurs frequently in the genre. Aside from Walpole's novel and Poe's story, the plot features in Clara Reeve's *The Old English Baron* (1777), Ann Radcliffe's *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (1789) and *A Sicilian Romance* (1790), Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1795), and Charles Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), among

the gothic variant, the family is cursed in some mysterious and yet palpable way. Transgressions that occurred in the family's history drive their current circumstances. Gothic tropes such as live burials, imprisoned innocents, villainous guardians or patriarchs, suggestions of the supernatural, and a fascination with fear, terror, and dread abound. Unsurprisingly, in the end, the cursed family is doomed or destroyed outright.

The gothic motifs that appear in nineteenth-century Russian family novels are symptomatic of a heightened sense of anxiety related to decline and degeneration, a key feature of the fin-de-siècle mood as we see in the present volume's chapters on family degeneration (Holland), decadent ecosystems (Newlin), and masculine degeneration (Connor Doak), among others. Describing the fin de siècle, Mark Steinberg observes that "'falling' and 'ruin' were common terms in what was often a melodramatic account of modern sickness," and describes an obsession with "excess, sickness, and decline."[5] While Steinberg discusses the experience of the individual in the city, the anxiety he identifies permeated Russian life – both urban and rural, as many scholars note.[6] The gothic genre

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others. For more information about the "fall of the house" plot in gothic fiction, see Anne Williams, *Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic* (University of Chicago Press, 1995), 38–48 (on houses and patriarchal systems), and 87–96 (on families and legacies). For an in-depth look at the "fall of the house" plot and domestic space, see Kate Ferguson Ellis, *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), especially 3–17, 33–52.

[5] Steinberg, *Petersburg Fin de Siècle*, 157.

[6] Nordau's discussion of the decline of culture in *Degeneration*, citing works by Turgenev and Tolstoy, points to this trend, as does the work of scholars such as Thomas Newlin, who concludes *The Voice in the Garden: Andrei Bolotov and the Anxieties of the Russian Pastoral, 1738–1833* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001) with a discussion about the anxiety of disillusionment in the pastoral by writers such as Tolstoy,

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enabled writers to access an array of tropes and conventions that combine melodrama, enhanced fear, and a backdrop of social breakdown to portray this feeling of overwhelming anxiety. Robin Feuer Miller and Ani Kokobobo's chapters in the present volume on the Christmas story and the grotesque, respectively, demonstrate similar examples of realist generic utility. In this vein, the gothic mode enables a way of describing the world that relies not only on a fascination with the gloomy or macabre, but also on the anxiety that emerges from encounters with these elements and the related psychologies of dread and fear.

The gothic "fall of the house" plot, then, is a narrative of family decline, but one that also incorporates an emphasis on dread and anxiety more closely associated with fin-de-siècle atmosphere. This chapter will examine this "fall of the house" narrative in three works – Sergei Aksakov's *The Family Chronicle* (*Semeinaia khronika*, 1856), Saltykov-Shchedrin's *The Family Golovlev*, and Ivan Bunin's *Dry Valley* (*Sukhodol*, 1911) – and the way gothic elements in each effect this fin-de-siècle mood, in the first two cases, avant la lettre. From early to late realism, each describes a family in a different stage of its life cycle, each oppressed in some sense by an "inescapable fatalism." Aksakov's work chronicles a

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Chekhov, and Blok (187–190). In *This Meager Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2002), Christopher Ely claims that the combination of "the abiding negation of the Russian landscape" (compared to Europe) and an "emerging tendency to celebrate a special, even virtuous, Russian misery … paradoxically made attractive an image of the Russian land as a uniquely grim and unappealing space" (135). This aesthetic view translates into anxiety in Russian novels chronicling gentry life. See, for example, Amy Singleton's argument that Oblomov's family estate becomes "an anxiety-provoking land of the dead" (77–79) in *No Place Like Home: The Literary Artist and Russia's Search for Cultural Identity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997).

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new dynasty's foundation and its first three generations, but gothic episodes hint at the family's underlying problems, while Saltykov-Shchedrin's novel uses gothic tropes to show a family in the process of decline across multiple generations. Bunin's novella rounds out the trilogy, describing a house that has already fallen, drawing on the gothic mode to create an atmosphere of gloomy nostalgia and anxious destruction.

The gothic's emphasis on looking backward initially seems at odds with the fin de siècle's anxious fascination with modernity. However, upon closer examination, the gothic mode and especially the "fall of the house" plot particularly resonate with fin-de-siècle anxieties about decline, degeneration, and destruction. While some recent studies have demonstrated specific connections between gothic writing and fin-de-siècle culture,[7] this chapter aims to show that, in Russia, gothic motifs appeared as an expression of fin-de-siècle anxiety avant la lettre. Indeed, episodes from the histories of Aksakov's Bagrovs, Saltykov-Shchedrin's Golovlevs, and Bunin's Khrushchevs demonstrate that the themes so prevalent at the fin de siècle – gloom, destruction, and fatalistic thinking – had already seeped into Russian realism in the guise of the gothic. The prevalence of these themes in the nineteenth-century Russian family novel points to the "inescapable fatalism" hanging over Russian society, exposing latent anxieties about family legacy and decline, the estate

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[7] Studies that explore the correlation between fin-de-siècle degeneration and gothic themes include Kelly Hurley's *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge University Press, 2004) and Andrew Smith's *Victorian Demons*. Both focus on the British tradition, arguing that Victorians' interest in technology, science, medicine, and sexuality resulted in an outpouring of gothic works toward the century's end, including Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886). Both Hurley and Smith link the fin-de-siècle obsession with degeneration back to the gothic imagination.

system, and Russia's alleged backwardness in the face of a rapidly modernizing Western Europe.

## Gothic elements and family decline in the early realist text

Aksakov began writing the sketches that became *The Family Chronicle* in the early 1840s, urged by Gogol to create a new literature based on life.[8] Gogol's own novel of the early 1840s, *Dead Souls*, evocatively depicts a conniving civil servant visiting a series of estates featuring "perverted or distorted forms of domesticity."[9] Pliushkin's home, the last stop on Chichikov's journey in , has degenerated so much that it appears like "a vast, decrepit invalid … amidst impenetrable gloom," set within the "picturesque desolation" of its overgrown garden.[10] Where Gogol's novel seems at times preoccupied with decay and corruption, Aksakov's work appears to take a more positive line. *The Family Chronicle* tells the Bagrov family's story across multiple generations, beginning with the establishment of Novoe Bagrovo, the family's estate. The family's patriarch, Stepan Mikhailych, resembles a legendary creator figure, and the work's early parts describe Novoe Bagrovo in nearly mythical terms. Life there becomes an ideal for the work's narrator, Stepan Mikhailych's

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[8] See S. T. Aksakov, *Istoriia moego znakomstva s Gogolem, s vkliucheniem vsei perepiski, c 1832 po 1852*, in *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh* (Moscow: Pravda, 1966), III:384–385.

[9] van Baak, *The House in Russian Literature*, 155.

[10] Nikolai Gogol', *Mertvye dushi*, in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v chetyrnadtsati tomakh* (Moscow: Pushkinskii Dom, 1951), IV:111–112. Trans. English, 110–111.

grandson and heir to the estate. The *Chronicle* ends on a hopeful note with the narrator's birth, seen as both a continuation of the family's legacy and an affirmation of its blessing.

Yet while the novel's structure and narrative voice do seem affirmative, the dysfunctional marriage of Stepan Mikhailych's ward Praskovia Ivanovna in  sharply contrasts with the Russian pastoral idyll established in . The narrative takes a Gogolian turn as it describes improbable extremes such as imprisonment and starvation, and even suggests devil worship. While not a true "fall of the house" narrative as the family eventually rallies and revives, the episode's preoccupation with disharmony and decline undermines Aksakov's idyll. The  gothic motifs highlight underlying anxieties, which center on notions of heredity and legacy, a theme that constantly emerges in "fall of the house" gothic writing.[11] While in *The Family Golovlev* and *Dry Valley*, as I will show, family houses decline and fall, *The Family Chronicle* presents a strong family, but one in which gothic motifs in one episode illustrate the anxiety surrounding the potential "fall of the house," with ramifications for our understanding of the work as a whole.

In , fortune hunter Mikhail Kurolesov tricks fifteen-year-old heiress Praskovia Ivanovna into marrying him. Despite Stepan Mikhailych's displeasure, the young couple is happy at first. Kurolesov takes Praskovia Ivanovna's neglected estates in hand, making them prosperous again, and is admired in the district for his good management. However,

[11] For example, in *The Castle of Otranto*, the main action is dictated by the family's curse, but sparked by the patriarch's obsession with building his legacy. For more information about the perils of legacy building and an overview of this theme in gothic literature, see Allan Hepburn, *Troubled Legacies: Narrative and Inheritance* (University of Toronto Press, 2007), 8–11.

as time passes, Kurolesov's tendencies toward violence and alcoholism become habit, and horrors escalate:

> Gradually rumors began to spread that the Major was not just severe as before, but actively cruel … that he had gathered together a company with which, carousing, he committed abominations of all types, but the worst offense was the merciless violence he inflicted on his serfs while intoxicated; it was said two men had already died under torture.[12]

Later, Kurolesov's behavior intensifies:

> [H]is continuous cruelty eventually developed into an insatiable thirst for torture and human blood. Spurred on by the fear and deference of those around him, he quickly lost all sense of humanity.[13]

Kurolesov's decline from respected landowner to cruel tyrant stems from his misplaced desire for material wealth and amusement, as well as his tendency toward alcoholism. Aksakov's narrator notes that hard work distracts Kurolesov, but, growing bored, he spins more wildly out of control.

Conversely, Stepan Mikhailych runs Bagrovo well and prospers, precisely because of his obsessive interest in continuing the family line. He chooses a wife for her bloodlines, not her fortune, and he puts the estate and wellbeing of his family above all. Although Stepan Mikhailych's relatives and retainers fear his temper, his honorable character sharply contrasts with Kurolesov's villainy. However, Kurolesov's striking similarities to Stepan

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[12] S. T. Aksakov, *Semeinaia khronika*, in *Sobranie sochinenii*, I:100–101.

[13] Ibid., 104.

Mikhailych – his authority, temper, and potential for cruelty – reveal the thin line between noble patriarch and destructive wastrel.[14] In this light, the gothic horror that colors Kurolesov's story emphasizes latent anxiety about the family's potential decline just as significantly as the deaths of the second generation's children in infancy. If, even one generation removed from the strong founder figure, destruction of estate and legacy is possible on such a scale, the family is undermined.

As the gothic episode continues, Praskovia Ivanovna eventually discovers her husband's activities and sets out to deprive him of authority over her estates.[15] Kurolesov beats her and locks her in the cellar to starve until she signs her property over to him. Stepan Mikhailych comes to rescue his former ward:

> You can imagine what Stepan Mikhailych was like when he heard of [it] … Parasha, beaten nearly to death by her villainous husband, Parasha locked for three days in a dungeon – perhaps already dead – the image appeared so vividly in his imagination that he sprang up like a madman.[16]

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[14] In contrast, Richard Gregg claims that, while Stepan Mikhailych's terrible temper establishes him as a gothic villain, the family's ability to come together in the end neutralizes his anger and prevents his decline. See "The Decline of a Dynast: From Power to Love in Aksakov's *Family Chronicle*," *The Russian Review* 50:1 (1991): 35–47.

[15] Andrew Durkin presents Praskovia Ivanovna as an oppressed gothic heroine. Aksakov's fascination with the gothic does not extend to its obsession with psychologies such as fear, Durkin notes; instead, this gothic episode serves to bring the work's inherent moral judgment into sharper focus. See *Sergei Aksakov and Russian Pastoral* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1983), 114–168.

[16] Aksakov, *Semeinaia khronika*, 114.

The gothic vision in this episode emphasizes the striking difference between Stepan Mikhailych's and Kurolesov's understanding of and loyalty to family. It takes an unnatural death to resolve the situation; ultimately Kurolesov is poisoned with a mixture of arsenic and kvass, thus freeing Praskovia Ivanovna and returning her lands to the Bagrov family's holdings.

In the character of Stepan Mikhailych, Aksakov puts forward a Slavophile agenda, calling for a return to moral and religious law, ancestral tradition, and the primacy of the right and just over the state's written laws.[17] Although Stepan Mikhailych represents order and wisdom, maintaining his estates justly and prosperously, the episode serves to emphasize his limitations, another source of anxiety. Praskovia Ivanovna has inherited his sense of duty and justice, as well as his honor and courage, but she is unable to act, oppressed by both her husband and the legal system that gives him power over her. Stepan Mikhailych's desire to continue his line depends not only on his will, but also to some extent on chance, on the influx of others into the family by marriage, and on the personalities of his descendants; ultimately, he is unable to control all aspects of his legacy.

These gothic plot elements, although sequestered in the second sketch, carry an ominous shadow. They appear out of place amidst the affirmative foundation narrative and pastoral idyll described in the *Chronicle*. Although the situation ends happily for Praskovia Ivanovna, who is rid of her husband and returns to Novoe Bagrovo, and for the Bagrov

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[17] For more information about Aksakov's Slavophilism, see Peter Christoff, *An Introduction to Nineteenth-Century Russian Slavophilism: K. S. Aksakov* (The Hague: Mouton, 1982), 148–149. Additionally, see Michael Hughes, "The Russian Nobility and the Russian Countryside: Ambivalences and Orientations," *Journal of European Studies* 36:2 (2006): 115–137, especially 128–130.

family patrimony, which regains her estates, the episode carries a hint of potential decline and degeneration. In this sense, the gothic mode in Aksakov's *Family Chronicle* can be read as an early indicator of the fin-de-siècle motifs that became pervasive in later Russian realism. While the novel's conclusion valorizes the family, the work as a whole seems to reject the grim present, characterized by marital discord, in favor of an idealized mythical past and bright future. However, the gothic anxiety that emerges in relation to marriage and legacy in Praskovia Ivanovna's sketch problematizes notions of family continuity and stability, and undermines the work's affirmative ending. While *The Family Chronicle* ends on an optimistic note, Aksakov's gothic interlude echoes intellectual rumblings against the family in Western Europe,[18] and informs Saltykov-Shchedrin's *The Family Golovlev*, a strong indictment against the contemporary family packaged neatly in a "fall of the house" narrative frame.

## The fall of the house of Golovlev

The prevalence of family novels throughout the nineteenth century points to a broader discourse about the family underway generally in Russia and Western Europe at this time. As the century progressed, the rise of industry led to a separation between home and workplace and, consequently, a shift in family values. Champions of the traditional family,

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[18] Although Aksakov was writing within a largely conservative Slavophile tradition, his critical depiction of violence against women within marriage bears certain similarities with the critique of marriage emerging among his socialist contemporaries in Western Europe, such as Charles Fourier and Robert Owen, who rejected the family unit as a significant hindrance to their visions of a socially equal society.

such as Hegel, put forward its economic strength and its moral stability as a societal unit. Leftists such as Marx and Engels spoke out against the traditional family as an institution. For them, the family stood for inequality because of the uneven division of labor between the sexes, and also represented an unsustainable economic unit. In *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), they call for the bourgeois family's abolition, writing, "The bourgeois family will vanish as a matter of course when its complement vanishes, and both will vanish with the vanishing of capital."[19] Upheaval in the family unit was a particular cause for concern in Russia where the traditional family provided the backbone of the estate system.[20]

*The Family Golovlev* stands as a biting satire on the family problem and an examination of the social ramifications of degeneration theory, as Holland's chapter discusses. Thematically and structurally linked with Aksakov's novel, *The Family Golovlev* provides a family chronicle across three generations.[21] Where Aksakov's novel ends on an optimistic note, however, Saltykov-Shchedrin's novel narrates the Golovlevs' decline and degeneration, ending with their doom. Despite this bleak subject matter, Saltykov-

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[19] Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party and Selected Essays* (Rockville, MD: Arc Manor, 2008), 19. For more information, see Richard Weikart, "Marx, Engels, and the Abolition of the Family," *History of European Ideas* 18:5 (1994): 657–672.

[20] For more information, see Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia, 1860–1930: Feminism, Nihilism, Bolshevism* (Princeton University Press, 1978), especially 29–115.

[21] Many critics argue that *The Family Chronicle* is a precursor to and inspiration for Saltykov-Shchedrin's later work, including Durkin, *Sergei Aksakov and Russian Pastoral*, 244; van Baak, *The House in Russian Literature*, 162; Todd, "Anti-Hero," 102; Kramer, "Satiric Form," 455.

Shchedrin's scathing satirical pen imbues the novel with dark humor. The work significantly undermines the traditional family novels that Saltykov-Shchedrin despised.[22] He equates these "false" family novels and their insincere portrayal of society with the Russian countryside's stagnation. The gothic elements in The Family Golovlev serve a dual function. On the one hand, gothic exaggeration strikes a humorous note, parodying the sincerity of the traditional family-oriented novel and adding to the work's overall satiric quality. On the other hand, Saltykov-Shchedrin's novel exploits the gothic conventions of the "fall of the house" plot to offer an ideologically charged indictment of Russian society and an implied call for change.

Saltykov-Shchedrin's Golovlevs are doomed from the start, "cursed" in the gothic literary tradition. While the narrator never gives specific details about this curse, the matriarch, Arina Petrovna, and her son, Porfiry, also known as Little Judas (*Iudushka*), seem preoccupied with this possibility. We learn that Arina Petrovna can curse Little Judas and others in the family, and she takes this power seriously.[23] Spreading out from interactions with Arina Petrovna, the fear of an unknown power permeates the novel, informing the family members' relations with each other. However, *The Family Golovlev* lends itself especially well to the gothic sensibility, even beyond its "fall of the house"

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[22] Kramer argues that *The Family Golovlev* parodies the conventional, family-oriented novel. See "Satiric Form," 453–464.

[23] Jenny Kaminer examines Arina Petrovna's maternal instincts (and lack thereof) in "A Mother's Land: Arina Petrovna Golovlyova and the Economic Restructuring of the Golovlyov Family," Slavic and East European Journal 53:4 (2009): 545–565.

narrative structure.[24] Family interactions are conducted through a veil of fear, exposing the dysfunction and disintegration of maternal and sibling bonds.

As relationships are perverted, the gothic mode signals their degeneration. For example, when Pavel first describes his brother, Little Judas appears as a monster, a basilisk.[25] Fear and dread characterize their relationship, and ultimately underscore the trajectory of the family's disintegration as this fear appears in gothic-tinged passages recounting other Golovlevs' degeneration or deaths. As some family members spiral into death, they become fixated on the idea that the Golovlev estate itself represents a tomb. Anninka, Arina Petrovna's granddaughter, perceives the estate itself as a harbinger of death:

> Golovlevo, that is death itself, malicious, spiritually empty; it is death always lying in wait for a new victim. Two uncles died here. Here two brothers, her cousins, received "especially serious" wounds, the consequence of which was death. Finally, Liubinka as well ... the beginning of [her]

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[24] As Ilya Vinitsky argues, Saltykov-Shchedrin forges a "realist-gothic" aesthetic, and his novel operates within the gothic's realm. Vinitsky uses his gothic interpretation of *The Family Golovlev* as a way into the work's resonance with spiritualism. See Vinitsky, *Ghostly Paradoxes: Modern Spiritualism and Russian Culture in the Age of Realism* (University of Toronto Press, 2009), 113–116.

[25] "He hated little Judas but at the same time feared him. He knew little Judas's eyes oozed an enchanting poison, that his voice would creep into your soul serpent-like and paralyze your will." *SS* XIII:67.

> "particularly serious" wounds doubtlessly lay in Golovlevo. All the deaths, all the poisons, all the pestulant sores – everything originated here.[26]

Golovlevo not only foreshadows deaths, but also causes them; return to the ancestral home figures in the death of nearly every family member. Like a monster waiting to devour its victims, even from afar, the estate becomes an object of fear and a catalyst for growing anxiety among family members.

Although they all live together in the same house, each lives in isolation. First Stepan, then Pavel, then Little Judas become wrapped up in their own affairs and lock themselves away. A tendency to forgetfulness allows this isolation to grow. Stepan becomes an alcoholic and drinks himself to death in the estate office; no one checks on him until it is too late. Similarly Pavel wastes away with his fatal disease alone, until the family members recall that they must arrange his affairs. Little Judas becomes so embroiled in petty busy work that he has little awareness of the outside world, even as his sons die one by one. He seems to give little thought to the disintegration of his legacy, or the loss of descendants who should be his heirs. Whereas, in *The Family Chronicle*, Stepan Mikhailych is concerned to the point of obsession with preserving his family legacy for future generations, the second-generation Golovlevs not only view their legacy with apathy, but they actively neglect it, ignoring the third generation or driving it away.

As the passage quoted above shows, this isolation is not only a characteristic of Golovlev family life, but another manifestation of the family home's destructive and

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[26] *SS* XIII:249.

anxiety-inducing properties. In a similar vein, earlier in the novel, the narrator describes a deathly silence that follows family members:

> The dining room emptied; everyone dispersed to his room. The house gradually stilled, and a deathly silence crept from room to room and finally reached the last refuge where ritual life persisted longer than in other secluded corners, the study of the master of Golovlevo.[27]

This "deathly silence" persists, mentioned again and again as the novel draws to a close. Similarly, the narrator constantly describes the house as plunged in darkness or playing host to an "impenetrable gloom." The silence, here a symbol of the family curse, pervades the space, eventually enveloping each Golovlev, and Little Judas last of all. The passage underscores a phenomenon widely reported in the early twentieth century as a symptom of modernity and the fin-de-siècle atmosphere: an "emptiness of solitude," to use Grigory Gordon's 1909 phrasing.[28]

Not surprisingly, given both the "fall of the house" trajectory and fin-de-siècle anxiety, eventually the house of Golovlev falls. Unlike Aksakov's *Chronicle*, which hints at decline in its central gothic episodes, this "fall of the house" narrative has an absolute end:

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[27] *SS* XIII:118–119.

[28] Gordon writes, "Now and at every step one meets individuals who are weak and without will, who feel alone and isolated amidst the very noise and intensity of life. They cannot find ideals to pursue. Always and everywhere they find themselves surrounded by the emptiness of solitude." Steinberg discusses Gordon's observation and the isolation of the self in society as part of a broader feeling of pathological melancholy symptomatic of fin-de-siècle anxiety. See Steinberg, *Petersburg Fin de Siècle*, 252.

> Everywhere, from each corner of the hateful house, the dead seemed to crawl out. In every direction, wherever one turned, the gray ghosts stirred. There's Papa, Vladimir Mikhailovich in a white nightcap, sticking out his tongue and quoting [vulgar poems]. There's brother Styopka-the-Dunce and near him Pashka-the-Silent; and here's Liubinka; and here are the final offspring of the Golovlev family: Volodka and Petka … drunkenness, wantonness, torment oozed blood … And above all these phantoms hovered a living ghost, none other than Porfiry Vladimirych Golovlev, the last representative of the empty line.[29]

The scene is reminiscent of the House of Usher's spectacular collapse in Poe's story. That story revolves around siblings Roderick and Madeline, last descendants of the Usher family. The family's final moment is anticipated by various escalating events: Roderick buries Madeline alive, Madeline escapes and attacks Roderick, and the two fall into a deadly embrace. The narrator, a passing traveler, flees, but looks back to see the house collapse and sink into the ground, dark water covering its last traces. In Poe's tale, both family and house are destroyed together, the one precipitating the other. However, instead of physical destruction, when Golovlevo falls, the house undergoes a metaphysical collapse, crumbling under a pile of family ghosts.

The lost Golovlevs, the family curse's victims, haunt Little Judas in the end. Here Saltykov-Shchedrin uses a hybrid gothic-satire genre to lighten the terrible scene with humor. The narrator lists the early curse victims almost gaily, as though they spend their

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[29] *SS* XIII:256.

time flitting about the estate without a care. While, earlier in the novel, these transgressions merely accumulated without consequences for their perpetrators, in this last scene, the victims return to haunt the living. As the list grows, the tone becomes more somber and, finally, the image of blood oozing from the family's transgressions lends an atmosphere of true horror and tragedy to the tableau. Little Judas's role as a "living ghost" (*zhivoi prizrak*), too, becomes humorless and bleak when we consider him as the doomed family's final representative. Tormented by conscience, this scene prompts the reconciliatory behavior that leads to his own demise: he begs his victims' forgiveness and begins a journey to his mother's grave, freezing to death on the way. And so Little Judas, the "living ghost," follows the other Golovlev phantoms in fear and anxiety, and, eventually, death.

Saltykov-Shchedrin's gothic use seems odd because, as a rationalist and materialist, he did not believe in the metaphysical. In his gothic realism, terror has a concrete cause, and the spiritual hierarchy relied upon by gothic writers such as Radcliffe or Lewis is absent. This materialism brings Saltykov-Shchedrin closer to the decadence – in the sense of spiritual emptiness – explored by fin-de-siècle writers such as Oscar Wilde, Aubrey Beardsley, or Joris-Karl Huysmans.[30] The phantoms that haunt, for example, Wilde's Dorian Gray or Huysmans's Jean des Esseintes are more in the line of psychological or existential torments than supernatural specters. Similarly, as Ilya Vinitsky observes, "Shchedrin's

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[30] For more information about decadence and its roots in darker genres of Romanticism such as the gothic, see Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* (Oxford University Press, 1978). Praz catalogues Romantic tendencies, such as Byronism, that grew into widespread ennui and emptiness in fin-de-siècle decadence.

phantoms come from within, rather than outside, historical reality: the supernatural here has social, economic, psychological, and biological causes."[31] As an example of the "fall of the house" narrative, *The Family Golovlev* evinces the gothic's role in the theme, but simultaneously showcases its fin-de-siècle preoccupations, exposing their presence in the ideological realist novel.

## *Dry Valley*: Gothic nostalgia at the fin de siècle

Building on Saltykov-Shchedrin's novel, thematically linked "fall of the house" works appear with increasing frequency in the Russian cultural context as the nineteenth century draws to a close. Milton Ehre names a few: " *The Golovlyovs* stands with Goncharov's *Oblomov*, Bunin's *Dry Valley*, Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard* as one of the great Russian literary epitaphs upon a dying social order."[32] Ehre's identification of the works as "epitaphs" plays on the idea of memorialization, a theme we see expressed in the particular nostalgic tone used throughout *Dry Valley*. This tone sets Bunin's work apart from Aksakov's or Saltykov-Shchedrin's family novels. Aksakov's novel rejects the present for the legendary past and the promise of an unknown but idealized future, paying homage to the family's past greatness while acknowledging its future potential. In Saltykov-Shchedrin's novel neither the past nor present merit accolades, and the future seems bleak. In Bunin's *Dry Valley*,

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[31] Vinitsky, *Ghostly Paradoxes*, 114.

[32] Ehre, "A Classic of Russian Realism," 9.

however, the narrative's emphasis shifts: it mourns the demise of a way of life, even as the gothic motifs describing it emphasize its inevitable decline.[33]

Dry Valley tells the story of the Khrushchev family and its ancestral estate, Sukhodol, through the eyes of its last descendants. In the beginning, the narrators are children, but, as the novella continues, they grow up. Accordingly, their initially naïve descriptions and retellings of Sukhodol's legends and history become increasingly tinged with awareness. At first, the narrators engage nostalgically with the image of Sukhodol's past glory: "Our passionate dreams of Sukhodol were understandable: for us it was a poetic image of the past."[34] The Khrushchev family chronicle, related by Natalia, a peasant on the estate, enthralls the house's young descendants, who clamor to hear more stories from "olden times." Characterized by violence, transgression, greed, and betrayal, these bygone days seem exciting and important to the children. The young Khrushchevs take pride in their legacy, boasting of their father's status as heir to Sukhodol and extolling their family's importance:

> My sister and I lived for a long time in the steady tow of Sukhodol, lived under the spell of its antiquity ... But it was always our ancestors, of course, who ruled that family, and we felt this through the ages. The history of family, kin and clan, is always subterranean, convoluted, mysterious, often

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[33] For a gothic reading of Bunin's novella, see Dale Peterson, "Russian Gothic: The Deathless Paradoxes of Bunin's *Dry Valley*," *Slavic and East European Journal* 31:1 (1987): 36–49.

[34] I. A. Bunin, *Sukhodol*, in *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh* (Moscow: Pravda, 1956), II:111. All Bunin translations are from *Ivan Bunin: Collected Stories*, translated by Graham Hettlinger (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2007), here 19–20. Subsequent citations provide the Russian edition page number first, followed by the English edition.

> terrifying. But it's that long past, those dark depths and legends, that often give a family strength.[35]

Pride in family for them includes pride in family secrets, transgressions, and fears; these trappings of legend become a source of strength, a way of binding a family together.

Hints of the supernatural attend the estate, contributing to this idea of legend. When the Khrushchev children first travel to Sukhodol, they meet Aunt Tonia, who appears suddenly, mystically from darkness, terrifying the children. Although she later becomes a beloved folk feature of the estate experience, the fear they feel is palpable in the moment. Their account of Tonia's appearance represents the first indication that Sukhodol's reality may contradict the stories told to the children. Similarly, other events tied to folklore carry a connotation of fear. A local sorcerer called in to cure the ailing mistress uses folkloric magic to provoke terror. Later the devil seems to haunt the house. Finally the constant discussion of thunderstorms reveals that several family members have died under mysterious circumstances during storms. In these instances, the family's legend seems to combine with some unnatural, destructive, and terrifying force.

The family's place in local society preoccupies the children as they repeat Natalia's tales, and, through their naïve assumptions, a picture of hierarchy and hegemony emerges. Natalia tells the children that Khrushchev, in the early days of the estate, carried a whip, a symbol of his authority. The children look forward to one day, also, carrying whips, thus continuing the family legacy, although they seem to have little understanding of the whip's meaning. Natalia's story further reinforces this point. The affectionate children at first see

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[35] 113; 22.

the peasant as a pseudo-family member and enjoy her jolly Sukhodol stories, but in adulthood they feel sadness and guilt when they hear Natalia recount her "broken" life spent at Sukhodol. For the children, the family and estate are legendary, but the adult narrators realize their oppressive role in the lives of the peasants they admired as children. This awareness adds to the anxious undercurrent that accompanies the story's gothic narrative.

As Joost van Baak remarks in his study of the house in Russian literature, "The disappearance of a way of life is accompanied by the inevitable dissolution of the spaces that supported it. Empty or derelict houses are 'read' by the reminiscing narrator as metonymic material images of the former inhabitants, often his direct ancestors, and the ways in which they lived."[36] For van Baak, it is the house and estate themselves, decaying and crumbling, that symbolize the transience of time and the dissolution of the way of life they supported. As in Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," the destruction of the decaying Sukhodol estate and the Khrushchev family's demise are linked. However, the "fall of the house" of Khrushchev is not spectacular as in Poe's story or *The Family Golovlev*:

> And now the Sukhodol estate is completely empty. All those mentioned here have died, as have their neighbors and their peers. And sometimes you think: Is it true? Did they really live on this earth? It's only at the graveyard that you feel they really did exist – feel, in fact, a frightening proximity to them. But even for that you must make an effort; you must sit

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[36] van Baak, *The House in Russian Literature*, 244–245.

> and think beside a family headstone – if you can find one. It is shameful to say, but impossible to hide: we don't even know where the graves ... lie.[37]

The peasants who worked the estate are entirely forgotten, and the Khrushchev graveyard is so overgrown and decayed as to suggest that the family lives on only in the stories told by the novella's narrators. From the narrative's beginning, the estate has been in a state of decay. The air smells of it, and the narrators describe the house's physical dilapidation, its rotting gardens and sagging balconies. But it is only in this moment in the graveyard that we understand that the family, too, has died out. The narrators' nostalgic ruminations reinforce this point:

> No knight's descendant could ever say that in half a century an entire class of people vanished from the earth. He could never speak of such great numbers of people who deteriorated, who committed suicide and drank themselves to death, people who went mad, let go of everything, just disappeared. He could never admit, as I confess here, that the lives of not only our ancestors but even the lives of our great grandfathers are a complete and utter mystery to us now ...![38]

Like its decaying estate, the Khrushchev family has become a sad husk that exists only in remembered stories, and those memories are growing dim. Here the narrators identify the true tragedy of a noble house's fall as its loss of identity and structure. They mention some causes of this malaise: suicide, alcoholism, madness. These, however, are the symptoms of a

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[37] 153–154; 72–73.

[38] 152; 71.

*This chapter is not the final version, but the post-print. For the final version, please see the published version.*

larger problem, caused by generations of decline. Unlike Aksakov, whose work is set in the present but idealizes the past and future, or Saltykov-Shchedrin, who sees only darkness and decay in the past, present, or future, in Bunin's novella there is no future; the family's gothic past has built a legacy of nothing, its estate crumbling and its legends forgotten. In an expression of fin-de-siècle anxiety par excellence, the Khrushchevs' end has already come, and all that remains afterwards are emptiness, melancholy, and the unknown. Despite its nostalgic tone and lack of overt violence, *Dry Valley* is the most destructive and bleak of the three "fall of the house" narratives examined in this chapter.

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Made rotten by stagnation and greed, the noble families of Russian literature collapse with increasing frequency as the twentieth century approaches. In chronicling the Golovlev family's downfall, Saltykov-Shchedrin invents an extreme case study, emphasizing what he sees as the gentry's problems – or transgressions. Whereas Saltykov-Shchedrin's *The Family Golovlev* stands as a model "fall of the house" narrative, Aksakov's *The Family Chronicle* is more ambiguous, contrasting the notion of the idealized happy family with a model for an unhappy, disintegrating one. For these writers, the gothic provided a means of accessing or describing a palpable fin-de-siècle mood, not yet articulated in the Russian cultural climate. Eventually, when Dry Valley takes up the plot as a lens through which to reflect upon a vanishing way of life, the gothic, with its historical emphasis, emphasis on destructive forces, and fascination with nostalgia, gloom, and death, seems a natural mode of expression.

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The “fall of the house” plot cannot avoid its ending, and its inevitable trajectory symbolizes destruction and doom, striking a chord with the fin de siècle’s emphasis on ending. The Golovlevs’ and other families’ curses, in this sense, become the curse of late tsarist Russia: the feeling of “inescapable fatalism” and approaching cataclysm, the mystery of moral transgressions committed but never confessed, stagnation, and decline over generations. And, indeed, reinforced by socioeconomic and historical circumstances, these gothic elements promoted a cultural climate in Russia that manifested in fin-de-siècle anxiety, revolutionary violence, and eventually led to what could be described as a much larger “fall of the house.”