



Edgar Allan Poe: A Source for Miriam Allen Deford

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Abstract: The influence of Edgar Allan Poe on North American culture and literature is still a subject of debate in contemporary literary theory. However, Poe's creative legacy regarding the writings of Miriam Allen Deford remains neglected by the literary critics. Deford's fiction explored a set of literary genres, such as biography, science fiction, crime and detective short stories. Taking these premises as a point of departure, this article aims to identify similarities between "A Death in the Family" and some of Poe's works. Drawing on studies by J. T. Irwin, James M. Hutchisson and others, the objective of this paper is to analyze passages from Deford's tale in comparison with the poetry and fictional prose of Poe. The analysis suggests that Deford's horror short story "A Death in the Family," published in 1961, was mostly inspired by Poe's gothic tales, detective stories, and poems.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe; Miriam Allen Deford; detective fiction; psychological horror.

Resumo: A influência de Edgar Allan Poe na cultura e literatura norte-americana é tema de debate contínuo na teoria literária contemporânea. Entretanto, o legado criativo de Poe para os escritos de Miriam Allen Deford permanece negligenciado pela crítica literária. A ficção de Deford explora uma gama de gêneros literários, como biografia, ficção científica e contos detetivescos. Observando tais premissas como ponto de partida, este artigo pretende identificar similaridades entre "A Death in the Family" e algumas obras de Poe. Apoiando-se nos estudos de J. T. Irwin, James M. Hutchisson e outros, o objetivo deste artigo é analisar passagens do conto de Deford em comparação com

a poesia e prosa ficcional de Poe. A análise sugere que o conto de horror “A Death in the Family,” publicado em 1961, foi inspirado por contos góticos, histórias de detetive e poemas de Poe.

Palavras-chave: Edgar Allan Poe; Miriam Allen Deford; ficção detetivesca; horror psicológico.

And many more, whose names on Earth are dark,
But whose transmitted effluence cannot die.

Percy Bysshe Shelley

Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe’s intellectual heritage has been well documented, as his successors inherited specific lines in prose fiction thereby developing stories of post-modern subjectivity. The influence of an author is not measurable. In this respect, Burton R. Pollin noted that Poe’s “seductive influence” requires “a variety of approaches.”¹ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Joaquim Ruyra, Jorge Luis Borges, Joseph Conrad and Julio Cortazar were authors influenced by Poe. Certainly, Auguste Dupin is more refined and intellectually attractive than Egaeus and others untrusted narrators. However, these complex characters highlight the psychological dimension of contemporary literature.

The influence of Poe on Miriam Allen Deford’s work is present in her detective stories such as “A Death in the Family,” whose protagonist recalls some of the obsessive and reclusive narrators of Poe’s stories. The tale represents Deford’s interest in his major themes: solitude, grief, insanity, macabre happiness, self-destructive dilemma and death. She creates images of comedy and nightmare to deal with these subjects. However, the story remains practically forgotten by the critics.

Historical research constitutes the core of the work developed by Deford. In fact, this matter led her to reconstruct biographical and criminal profiles. Legal insanity was one of the subjects that inspired Poe to create the narrators of “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Imp of the Perverse.” The gradual loss of identity, associated with moral decline, which “Metzengerstein,” “Berenice” and “William Wilson” are well-

¹ POLLIN. *Poe’s Seductive Influence on Great Writers*.

known examples, as they create a number of characters captives of their instincts and bizarre passions. “A Death in the Family” summarizes these arguments with a realistic perspective. The narrative is full of suspense, but the plot suppresses drama or violence. Deford also explores Poe’s technique of converting an initial scenario, apparently harmonious, into a dysfunctional situation, instituting an atmosphere of horror and mystery. Hugh Pentecost noted that:

Miriam Allen Deford is one of those rare writers who can build almost unbearable suspense without using the conventional techniques of the suspense story. In ‘Walking alone’ there is no mystery, no question of ‘whodunit?’; there is no frantic action, no atmospheric locale. Using ordinary people in an ordinary setting, Miss Deford had created an interior drama of character which is likely to haunt your thoughts long after you have forgotten more usual stories. Who was the real criminal anyway?²

This paper is concerned with the study of literary relationships between “A Death in the Family,” a story of the 20th-century American writer Miriam Allen Deford and some of Poe’s major works. The analysis describes Poe’s influence on the author’s narrative, especially the device of the grotesque and the topics of insanity and solitude. Deford’s detective story combines the motifs of melancholy and solitude, characteristic of Gothic literature, with the nature of Poe’s grotesque. The analysis comprises three sections: the first part comments on the influence of Poe on detective fiction genre; the next part contains a synopsis of the story; the final section aims to examine the motifs of Poe’s detective stories combined with themes of his gothic tales and poetry present in “A Death in the Family.”

Poe’s influence and the detective fiction genre

Controversy prevails in studies of Poe when literary criticism discusses his influence, but there is a widespread consensus that *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* is his most popular legacy. Rather than an immediate impact on politics of American magazines, Poe proposes

² DEFORD. Walking alone, p. 131.

an original aesthetic perspective on the Gothic prose fiction, maintained “that terror is not of Germany but of the soul.”³ Fascinating characters and narrative voices came from this premise. Ever since then, several studies expose how this standpoint has pervaded contemporary author’s writings.

According to Scott Peeples, critics in the 1980s and 1990s examined Poe’s work in terms of intellectual history, philosophy or cultural phenomena. They emphasize the “history of ideas” and “display a poststructuralist awareness of issues of textuality and language but do not come across as deconstructionists,” such as Joan Dayan’s *Fables of Mind*, John T. Irwin’s *The Mystery to a Solution*, and Shawn Rosenheim’s *The Cryptographic Imagination*.⁴ J. T. Irwin also analyses Jorge Luis Borges’s “doubling” of Poe detective stories, taking into account a range of cultural and intellectual contexts.

Poe Abroad, edited by Louis Davis Vines, includes essays by scholars from different nationalities. They discuss Poe’s influence on the short story in many countries. The trilogy “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The Mystery of Marie Roget” and “The Purloined Letter” offers the model for Paul Valéry’s Monsieur Teste and

inspired a number of detectives possessing similar traits: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, the French sleuth Monsieur Le Coq created by Emile Gaboriau, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s detective Porfiry Petrovitch in *Crime and Punishment*.⁵

Dostoyevsky refined Poe’s strategy to conceive psychological profiles.

Comparing biographical information of Poe and Dostoyevsky, Jeffrey Meyers theorized that the Russian novelist employed Poe’s narrative technique “to create an extended confession of self-loathing, or physical and psychological illness, of pathological despair.”⁶ Meyers resumes a particular formula used by Poe as a magazinist: by juxtaposing

³ POE. Preface to *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, p. 129.

⁴ PEEPLES. Bibliographical Essay: Major Editions and Landmarks of Poe Scholarship, p. 223.

⁵ VINES. *Poe Abroad: Influence, Reputation, Affinities*, p. 3.

⁶ MEYERS. *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy*, p. 228.

images of the daily life and his aesthetic view of reality, he combines plausible situations with violent or threatening scenarios. When the reader prefigures these scenarios and bizarre situations, experiencing a specific impression in response to an effective plot, the author tries to make possible some impossibilities and vice-versa:

Poe's creative imagination ranged from the detective story that was meant to entertain by appealing to the intellect to "The Premature Burial" that was designed to terrify by appealing to the emotions. The latter achieved its effect by describing a fear that was deeply rooted in Western culture during the nineteenth century.⁷

Burton R. Pollin's memorable studies, *Images of Poe's Works* (1989) and *Poe's Seductive Influence on Great Writers* (2004), comprise a collection of essays resulting from twenty-eight-years of research. The scholar explained how Poe's narrative strategies shaped his detective tales exploiting the relationship between imagination and reasoning. Pollin's reflections on the topic could complement Meyers's thought:

Habitually he displayed the physically repulsive and humiliating facts of mortality, often with a hint of satire or irony. A man of genius but below the greatest, he abnormally focused, telescopically and microscopically, on disease and death, with no serenity. In masterly short stories he showed logical lucidity, intellect, passion for proportion, climax and crisis and also capacity for plot detail, applying both imagination and analysis together, as in his three detective fictions.⁸

Peeples follows the line of cultural studies and described Poe's contributions to American modern poetry and literary detective genre, commenting works such as "The Man That Was Used Up" "in terms of historical evolution" and critical reception. The author focused on representative ways of seeing Poe in fiction, films, plays, comics and graphic art, arguing that "[...] since he takes so many forms in literary

⁷ MEYERS. *Edgar Allan Poe: His Life and Legacy*, p. 156.

⁸ POLLIN. *Poe's Seductive Influence on Great Writers*, p. 90.

criticism and other media [...] he is quite possibly America's most famous literary figure."⁹

Irwin discussed Poe's analytic detective fiction influence on Dashiell Hammett's *The Maltese Falcon*, Raymond Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, James M. Cain's *Double Indemnity*, William R. Burnett's *High Sierra* and Cornell Woolrich's *Night Has a Thousand Eyes*. He detected themes of "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Imp of the Perverse" in the works of these hard-boiled writers.¹⁰

Lucy Sussex proposes "a polygenetic approach to the history of crime fiction's origins and its development in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries." She refuses the idea of a "sole point of origin" "of what is variously termed crime/mystery/detective fiction." However, the trilogy involving Dupin has become a modern reference by linking Poe's tales of ratiocination with the emergence of contemporary crime fiction: "As if depicted in a neoclassical portrait, the genre emerges in 1841, fully formed like the goddess Athena, from out of the febrile imagination of Edgar Allan Poe."¹¹ Douglas G. Greene was emphatic: "Edgar Allan Poe invented the detective story."¹² Greene had in mind texts considered predecessors to Poe's detective fiction, indicated by "industrious scholars," underlining a key feature distinguished by Dupin's creator:

In none of these works, however, is the rational investigation of a crime the major subject of the narrative. But in Poe, detection is the subject, and the detective is the main character. Or, to be more precise, as Poe indicates in the opening pages of "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," the subject is Poe's theories of analysis.¹³

According to James M. Hutchisson, "'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' was the very first detective story." Nevertheless, Hutchisson considered a historical aspect: in the nineteenth century, crime was the "subject of much discussion in the papers." With the exception of the professional police force in London, there were still no municipal

⁹ PEEPLES. *The Afterlife of Edgar Allan Poe*, p. ix.

¹⁰ IRWIN. *Unless the Threat of Death is Behind Them*.

¹¹ SUSSEX. "Origins are Multifarious and Unclean!": The Beginnings of Crime Fiction, p. 6.

¹² GREENE. *Classic Mystery Stories*, p. 1.

¹³ GREENE. *Classic Mystery Stories*, p. 1.

police forces. “American cities were just beginning to formalize police operations and to employ the methods of ‘scientific’ detective work, such as forensic analysis.” The author concluded that: “Ever the journalist, Poe was the first to spy a trend in modern society and write about it, for crime on the rise.”¹⁴

“The Mystery of Marie Roget,” “The Tell-Tale Heart” and “The Premature Burial” (1944) are related to events widely disclosed by the American press at the epoch of Poe’s life. Likewise, working as journalist and writing about historical crimes, Deford presumably made use of some authentic historical data to create the protagonist of “A Death in the Family.” It is not possible to discuss this kind of source here, since the scope of analysis is restricted to the similarities (and their respective characteristics) between Deford’s tale and Poe’s work.

Miriam Allen Deford and “A Death in the Family”

The American writer Miriam Allen Deford was born on August 21, 1888, in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and died on February 22, 1975, in San Francisco, California. Her parents, Moïse and Frances Allen Deford were physicians. She was educated at Wellesley College and Temple University. In 1912, she received a scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania. She worked as journalist, stenographer and editor; her publications included science fiction, mystery fiction and nonfiction.

With *The Overbury Affair: The Murder Trial That Rocked the Court of King James I* (1960), Deford earned a 1961 *Edgar Allen Poe Award from the Mystery Writers of America* for Best Fact Crime book. According to Eric Leif Davin (2006, p. 379), she authored biographies and Latin translations of Catullus, Cicero, Juvenal, and Tacitus, edited anthologies, published articles, novels and fantasy stories, contributing for magazines such as *The Westminster Magazine*, *Tales of Magic and Mystery*, *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, and *Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine*.

Barrie Hayne distinguished two categories of crime writing in Deford’s work: “the true crime documentary, and the short story of crime.”¹⁵ The first category “is marked by the social conscience which

¹⁴ HUTCHISSON. *Poe*, p. 114.

¹⁵ HAYNE. Miriam Allen DeFord, p. 447.

involved her always in civil rights issues” and includes *The Overbury Affair*, *The Real Bonnie and Clyde* and *The Real Ma Backer*. The second category refers to her 28 short stories published over three decades in *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*. Published in *The Dude* of November 1961, “A Death in the Family” takes place in Middleton, Tennessee, twenty years after the Great Depression and shows “the author’s well-established skill in historical reconstruction”.¹⁶ The author possibly got inspiration from the social problem of abandonment and institutionalization of children in the first half of twentieth century to describe the main character.

The protagonist of “A Death in the Family” is a child that has grown up facing an uncertain future during a time of social upheaval. Faithful to the “habits of a lifelong bachelor,” Jared Sloane, fifty-eight years old, had a laborious lifetime during the period of First World War, the crash of the New York stock market, and the time of post-Second World War reconstruction. Abandoned very early, Sloane lived his “lonely boyhood” in an orphan asylum until the age of sixteen:

He still remembered bitterly how the others had jeered at him, a foundling whose very name had been given at the whim of the superintendent after he had been found, wrapped in a torn sheet, on the asylum steps. The others were orphans, but they knew who they were; they had aunts and uncles and cousins who wrote them letters and came to see them and sent them presents at Christmas and birthdays, whom they visited sometimes and who often paid for all or part of their keep. Jared Sloane had nobody. That was why he had wanted so large a family.¹⁷

Settled in Middleton, he bought the single funeral parlor of the city, “and if he had never been a mixer or made any close friends, he was well-known, respected – and, beyond all, above suspicion”.¹⁸ For years, he had loved, “quietly and patiently,” Gussie Stiegeler, the wife of the Middleton Drugstore owner. When she died, the practice of his job (he became a competent embalmer) allowed him to look for “[...] the fulfillment of his dearest and most secret dream – to have a family of

¹⁶ HAYNE. Miriam Allen DeFord, p. 448.

¹⁷ DEFORD. A Death in the Family, p. 6.

¹⁸ DEFORD. A Death in the Family, p. 2.

his own. And he had won. After Gussie, the rest had been easy”.¹⁹ The unburied bodies of men, women and a child remained at his cellar, just like a disturbing archaeological treasure in a death chamber. According to Scott Skelton and Jim Benson, the scene shows Sloane’s “bizarre Norman Rockwell-meets-Charles Addams version of the all-American-family”.²⁰

They were always there, waiting for him. Dad was in the big easy chair, reading the *Middleton Gazette*. Mother was knitting a sock. Grandma was dozing on the couch – she dozed all the time; she was nearly ninety. Brother Ben and sister Emma were playing whist, sitting in straight chairs at the little table, the cards held cannily against Ben’s white shirt and Emma’s ruffled foulard print. Gussie, Jared’s wife, sat at the piano, her fingers arrested on the keys, her head turned to smile at him as he entered. Luke, his ten-year-old son, sat on the floor, a half-built model ship before him.²¹

Nevertheless, the family needed a daughter to be complete. Sloane envisaged that his dream could become true every time he received “a call from a household where there were children”.²² One night, he awoke by a knock at the front door. He heard a car driving away and opened the door: the street was dark and desert. “Then his eyes fell to a little bundle, wrapped in a blanket, lying on the porch at his feet. He stooped and picked it up, knowing at once what it must be. Inside, he drew the blanket away from the little corpse”.²³ Sloane recognized immediately the child, Diana Manning, nine years old, murdered by her kidnappers. Her photography was in all the newspapers:

Why they had deposited their victim on the doorstep of a country undertaker two hundred miles away, in another state from the city where the millionaire’s child had been snatched, Jared Sloane could not imagine. Probably, making good their escape with the ransom money, they had chanced on the sign as they drove through

¹⁹ DEFORD. *A Death in the Family*, p. 2.

²⁰ SKELTON; BENSON. *Rod Serling’s Night Gallery*, p. 138.

²¹ DEFORD. *A Death in the Family*, p. 1.

²² DEFORD. *A Death in the Family*, p. 4.

²³ DEFORD. *A Death in the Family*, p. 5.

Middleton, and as a bit of macabre humor had presented him with the body. Much as he disliked the idea of being brought to public notice and having FBI men and police officers and reporters invading his privacy, Jared knew his duty; he must telephone at once to the sheriff's office in McMinnville.²⁴

Sloane did not alert the authorities: "He was moved; he whispered it to Gussie first".²⁵ Diana's body was prepared, dressed and coifed in order to become the little Martha. For three days, there was no news on the radio or in the press about the case. In the meantime, an investigator arrives at the Sloane's office to ask him "About the Manning child's body".²⁶ Their final dialogue is fraught with tension. Sloane refuses to cooperate with the investigation. The sleuth promises to return within an hour with a search warrant and the sheriff. Sloane went downstairs to be with his family, turned on all the jets of the old gas chandelier, kissed Gussie on the lips "for the first time" and struck a kitchen match on the sole of his shoe.

The shared loneliness

Some of Deford's "best stories – 'The Oleander', 'Farewell to the Falkners' – are concerned with twisted relationships within families, suppressed by virulent sibling feelings which burst forth into murder".²⁷ However, this principle does not apply to "A Death in the Family". Sloane created an ideal home in which daily relationships with his loved ones seemed peaceful and harmonious:

Jared would sit down in the one vacant place, a big comfortable club chair upholstered in plum-colored plush, and would chat with them until bedtime. He told them all the day's doings upstairs, commented on news of the town and of the people they knew, repeated stories and jokes (carefully expurgated) he had heard from salesmen, expressed his views and opinions on any subject that came

²⁴ DEFORD. *A Death in the Family*, p. 5.

²⁵ DEFORD. *A Death in the Family*, p. 5.

²⁶ DEFORD. *A Death in the Family*, p. 5.

²⁷ HAYNE. *Miriam Allen DeFord*, p. 448.

into his mind. They never argued or contradicted him. They never answered.²⁸

The sense of mystery and suspense is latent in the tale, but when compared with classic detective stories, the plot is not complex and does not offer an elaborate riddle, there is neither murder nor enigmatic characters with unclear motivations, and, above all, there is no Cartesian hero. At the origin of a traditional detective story, the main idea is that of a crime or enigma solved by a privileged mind, such as occurs in Poe's trilogy protagonized by Dupin. Although these stories and Deford's tale have motifs in common: a celibate protagonist seen through the eyes of the narrator, a sagacious investigator, bodies of deceased and the theme of confinement, Deford combines such issues to expose the psychosocial idea of alienation and solitude.

The story may be seen as a textual *mise en abyme* when the investigator Ennis appears to interrogate Sloane, and their discussion could evoke, with due proportion, Porfiry inducing Raskolnikov's voluntary confession. However, Ennis is not in full control of the situation, as Deford's detective is neither the patient, Porfiry, nor the strategic, Dupin. In turn, Sloane is not a rude sailor or a megalomaniac murder.

However, "A Death in the Family" dialogues with many themes pertinent to Poe's detective fiction, gothic tales and poems. The correspondence between alienation and loneliness is a central theme in Deford's narrative, but also in Poe's fiction and poetry. "M.S. Found in a Bottle," "Berenice," "The Man of the Crowd," "The Murders in the Rue Morgue," "The Oval Portrait," "The Gold-Bug," "The Mask of the Red Death" and "The Pit and the Pendulum" represent interpretive variations of seclusion, imposed or voluntary, by fantastic contingencies, madness, solitude, hedonism or punishment. In "Spirits of the Dead," the poet advises the soul that "shall find itself alone": "Into thine hour of secrecy: / Be silent in that solitude, / Which is not loneliness".²⁹ "Alone" reinforces the feelings of social inadequacy and negative expectations about oneself:

²⁸ DEFORD. A Death in the Family, p. 1.

²⁹ POE. Spirits of the Dead, p. 32.

From childhood's hour I have not been
 As others were – I have not seen
 As others saw – I could not bring
 My passions from a common spring –
 From the same source I have not taken
 My sorrow – I could not awaken
 My heart to joy at the same tone –
 And all I lov'd – I lov'd alone –³⁰

Orphanhood is a key theme in this autobiographical poem. Psychoanalytic literary criticism has evaluated the role of traumas and psychopathological disturbances of childhood and adulthood in Poe's professional life. Elizabeth Phillips noted that Edward H. Davidson's study "The Necessary Demon: The Poetry of Youth": "[...] characterizes Poe as an imaginative seeker investigating the 'inner world' of reality, the romantic dilemma of self-awareness – 'narrow and static' themes that persisted throughout his life".³¹ In "Alone," Poe stated that this "demon": "Then – in my childhood – in the dawn/ Of a most stormy life – was drawn".³² Some of Poe's major stories mentioned this dark influence. In "Berenice," the recollections of the "earliest years are connected with [...] a memory like a shadow – vague, variable, indefinite, unsteady,"³³ in "William Wilson," the narrator theorizes about the development of his personality:

Yet I must believe that my first mental development had in much of the uncommon – even much of the *outré*. Upon mankind at large the events of very early existence rarely leave in mature age any definite impression. All is gray shadow – a weak and irregular remembrance – an indistinct regathering of feeble pleasures and phantasmagoric pains. With me this is not so. In childhood I must have felt with the energy of a man what I now find stamped upon memory in lines as vivid, as deep, and as durable as the *exergues* of the Carthagian medals.³⁴

³⁰ POE. *Alone*, p. 60.

³¹ PHILLIPS. *The Poems: 1824-1835*, p. 68.

³² POE. *Alone*, p. 60.

³³ POE. *Berenice*, p. 225.

³⁴ POE. *William Wilson*, p. 341.

“Sloane” can be an anagram of the word “alone.” Ironically, managing a funeral parlor allowed him to start a new life: “He remembered his terribly lonely childhood and youth, and to his grateful little silent prayer he added thanks that by his own efforts he had compensated for it”.³⁵ The “compensation” is exposed in the final scene: “An orphan and a foundling, but he had a family, he had not gone lonely through all his life”.³⁶ In “A Death in the Family,” the description of Sloane’s profile evokes Poe’s bereaved protagonists, including the pathos of the poems: “Spirits of Dead,” “Alone” and “The Raven”. According to Dawn B. Sova,³⁷ “Spirits of Dead” “relates a dialogue between the spirit of the dead speaker and a visitor to his gravesite”.

When Deford uses the stream of consciousness technique, exposing Sloane’s ‘inner world’, the story assumes a discourse peculiar to some Poe’s narrators. There is a predominant “argument of self-defense” in “The Tell Tale Heart,” according to Brett Zimmerman’s: “The tale, then, is not so much a confession as a defense”.³⁸

This confessional or defensive model of discourse is variable. It is bomphiologic, comic, and hyperbolic in “Loss of Breath.” In “Berenice,” the discourse of Egeus is “buried in gloom.” In “William Wilson,” the voice of the narrator follows the classical tradition of rhetoric, longing “for the sympathy – I had nearly said for the pity – of my fellow men.” In “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” the arguments of the protagonist denote the code of enigma and the code of science.³⁹

Confession or inner moral dialogue, in “The Imp of the Perverse” and “The Tell-Tale Heart,” both narrators try to justify their acts rationally: “If still you think me mad, you will think so no longer when I describe the wise precautions I took for the concealment of the body. The night waned, and I worked hastily, but in silence”.⁴⁰ Deford’s protagonist is not a murderer, but his premeditated way of acting is similar to the meticulous assassin of the “old man”:

³⁵ DEFORD. *A Death in the Family*, p. 3.

³⁶ DEFORD. *A Death in the Family*, p. 7.

³⁷ SOVA. *A Critical Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, p. 165.

³⁸ ZIMMERMAN. *Frantic Forensic Oratory: Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart,”* p. 34.

³⁹ BARTHES. *Textual analysis: Poe’s “Valdemar.”*

⁴⁰ POE. *The Tell-Tale Heart*, p. 558.

The instant the last back was turned, bending under its load of flowers, Jared moved like lightning. Quick – lift the body out of the casket. Quick – lay it on the couch concealed behind the heavy velvet curtains. Quick – bring out the life size, carefully weighted dummy prepared and ready, and put it in place. Quick – close the lid and fasten it. [...] Then, with the office and display room and slumber room and chapel dark, he went behind the velvet curtain and lifted the new member of his family respectfully and tenderly from the couch and took him or her back to the preparation room.⁴¹

Jeannot Szwarc directed an episode in the *Night Gallery* series, which Rod Serling was producing. He depicts Sloane as a tragic character, not “[...] like a weird freak. There was a kind of logic in his sickness. I thought it was so sad, that kind of loneliness”.⁴² Daniel Hoffman identified in “The Imp of the Perverse” the depiction of a “malignant force” or impulse that precedes “[...] the very themes of self-destruction and escape of reality which elsewhere comprise the ballast of Poe’s more serious tales”.⁴³ Similarly, in “The Oblong Box,” alienation, hopelessness, seclusion and suicide are themes personified by Cornelius Wyatt, the bereaved husband. According to Kenneth Silverman, Poe’s tales reproduce sad events of his life through details and themes:

Nevertheless, whether writing in the Gothic or ratiocinative modes, whether relating hair-raising adventures or slapstick domestic events, Poe concerned himself above all with death. In nearly every one of his tales, characters confront death, and sometimes annihilation. [...] Poe’s preoccupation gave rise to two types of dramatic action, narratives that treat either the devastating loss of a beloved woman, or the fate of the self in the afterlife.⁴⁴

The dramatic image of the “lost love” reverberates in “Morella,” “Ligeia,” “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Oblong Box.” Only Roderick watches over Madeline outside of her “temporary entombment.”

⁴¹ DEFORD. *A Death in the Family*, p. 6.

⁴² SZWARC apud SKELTON; BENSON. *Rod Serling’s Night Gallery*, p. 138

⁴³ HOFFMAN. *Grotesques and Arabesques*, p. 15.

⁴⁴ SILVERMAN. *New Essays on Poe’s Major Tales*, p. 16-17.

The unnamed narrator of “The Oblong Box” “[...] believes that Wyatt uncovers the box nightly ‘in order to feast his eyes on the pictorial treasure within’”.⁴⁵ As Therese Rizzo remarked: “At times, Poe’s fiction and poetry seem to bring an added aura of beauty and mystery to the practices of mourning, thereby contributing in his distinct way to the Cult of mourning”.⁴⁶ The hope of transcending death is a theme evoked by the legend of Orpheus and Eurydice. Guy Davenport examined comparatively this myth of grief in Poe’s poetry and fiction:

Israfel for instance is an arabesque, and Roderick Usher a grotesque Orpheus; Orpheus himself does not appear in Poe in his native Greek self. But once we see Orpheus in Usher, we can then see that this masterpiece is a retelling of his myth from a point of view informed by a modern understanding of neuroses, of the inexplicable perverseness of the human will.⁴⁷

The funeral parlor is a symbol of the Hades or the underworld in Deford’s tale. The cellar, which “had been furnished for Gussie,” is unlocked only when Sloane “went downstairs for the evening with his family”.⁴⁸ When Sloane descends the stairs without grief, he follows the route of Roderick Usher, Cornelius Wyatt or the man of the crowd: “He refuses to be alone”.⁴⁹ Tzvetan Todorov recognized the motif of “resurrection through love” in “Morella,” “Ligeia” and “Eleonora”.⁵⁰ “Although Ligeia dies, the narrator somehow mysteriously resurrects her by using his second wife, Lady Rowena, as a bodily vessel for Ligeia’s reemergence.”⁵¹ Similarly, embalmed bodies became Sloane’s relatives in the funeral parlor:

The family had not always played their present roles. Once they had all had different names. They had been other people’s grandmother and father and mother and sister

⁴⁵ POE apud SILVERMAN. *New Essays on Poe’s Major Tales*, p. 17

⁴⁶ RIZZO. *The Cult of Mourning*, p. 149.

⁴⁷ DAVENPORT. *The Geography of the Imagination*, p. 8

⁴⁸ DEFORD. *A Death in the Family*, p. 1.

⁴⁹ POE. *The Man of the Crowd*, p. 396.

⁵⁰ TODOROV. *Genres in Discourse*, p. 95.

⁵¹ RIZZO. *The Cult of Mourning*, p.152.

and brother and wife and son. Now they were his. He had waited a long time for some of them – for relatives of just the right age, with the right family resemblance.⁵²

The ambiguous and morbid motif of the body preserved unburied, sometimes hidden, can be found in “Ligeia,” “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Oblong Box” and “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar”. The origin of this motif in “A Death in the Family” reports to “The Raven”:

Every night, in bed [...] Jared Sloane uttered a grateful little unvoiced prayer to someone or something – perhaps to himself – a prayer of thanks for the wonderful, unheard-of idea that had come to him ten years ago when, in the middle of a sleepless, mourning night, he had suddenly realized how he could make Gussie his wife and keep her with him as long as he himself lived. [...] Out of nowhere there had come to him the daring, frightening scheme, full-fledged as Pallas Athene from the head of Zeus.⁵³

A second mention to Poe’s poem occurs when Sloane is missing a little daughter: “In the early hours of March 31st Jared Sloane was wakened from a sound sleep by a loud knock at the front door. [...] when he opened the door, the street – the main business street of Middleton was part of a state highway – was dark and deserted”.⁵⁴ The first stanzas of “The Raven” introduce the Gothic motif of the nocturnal visitor, acting like a messenger of the fate in compliance with the fears and hopes of the soul. Poe usually constructs an atmosphere of loneliness, mystery and oneirism with allusions to timeless fears, displaying them in universal images of terror:

Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary,
Over many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore –
While I nodded, nearly napping, suddenly there came a tapping,
As of some one gently rapping, rapping at my chamber door.
“Tis some visitor,” I muttered, “tapping at my chamber door –
Only this and nothing more”

⁵² DEFORD. *A Death in the Family*, p. 1.

⁵³ DEFORD. *A Death in the Family*, p. 2.

⁵⁴ DEFORD. *A Death in the Family*, p. 3-4.

[...] – here I opened wide the door; –
Darkness there and nothing more.⁵⁵

In “The Raven” and “A Death in the Family,” the longing raises a painful impasse, which Roman Jacobson called “the illusory glimmer of hope”.⁵⁶ Deford avoids the subjects of life after death and metempsychosis, but explores others themes of “Morella” and “Ligeia”: the disrupted mind of a male protagonist, the death of a beautiful woman and her resurrection. Like the narrator of “Morella,” Sloane intends to see the image of his wife perpetuated in her daughter: “[...] a seven or eight-year-old girl, with dark hair (both he and Gussie were dark), a pretty little girl because her mother was pretty”.⁵⁷ Poe’s verses combine hope with reverie: “Deep into that darkness peering, long I stood there wondering, fearing, / Doubting, dreaming dreams no mortal ever dared to dream before; / But the silence was unbroken, and the stillness gave no token”.⁵⁸ Poe and Deford suggest the idea of silence to expose the contrast between the hope and the inexorability of death: “They never argued or contradicted him. They never answered”.⁵⁹ Jacobson stressed the idea of incommunicability in “The Raven”:

[...] the colloquy between the lover and the bird is an anomalous communication about the severance of all communication. This pseudo-dialogue is tragically one-sided: there is no real interchange of any kind. To his desperate queries and appeals the hero receives only seeming answers – from the bird, from the echo, and from the volumes of *forgotten lore*.⁶⁰

Self-seclusion, but above all, the determination to preserve obsessions, and a kind of “loneliness unbroken” are topics that approximate the protagonists featured by Poe and Deford. “A Death in the Family” narrates actions proceeding from a disturbed mind and explores themes undeniably present in Poe’s fiction and poetry.

⁵⁵ POE. The Raven, p. 81-82.

⁵⁶ JACOBSON. Language in operation, p. 13.

⁵⁷ DEFORD. A Death in the Family, p. 6.

⁵⁸ POE. The Raven, p. 82.

⁵⁹ DEFORD. A Death in the Family, p. 1.

⁶⁰ JACOBSON. Language in operation, p. 14.

Conclusion

“A Death in the Family” is a tale filled with references to Edgar Allan Poe’s work and the narrative reflects “the Poesque style of ‘tale’” depicted by G. R. Thompson.⁶¹ She selected themes shared by his poetry and fiction, especially the protagonist’s idealization of his beloved dead wife. The unreal image of this idealization is a fantasy that Sloane persists in cultivating, similar to the narrators of “Morella” and “Ligeia”.

The symbolic projection of a character’s psychological state onto the scenario is a feature of Poe’s narratives. In “A Death in the family,” the staircase that leads to the cellar – “he walked downstairs to the family” – prefigures the dramatic decision of Sloane. The cellar may have represented a kind of emotional “maelstrom,” to which Deford’s protagonist often returns. Sloane’s insanity creates the psychological horror.

Delusions and solitude affect the moral conduct and psychic life of the characters in Poe’s tales. It was very difficult for his protagonists to conciliate their passions with reality. “A Death in the Family” contains many allusions to Poe’s poetry, gothic fiction and detective stories. The major allusions are the nocturnal atmosphere, crime, the motif of the secret simultaneously exposed and occult, depicted in “The Purloined Letter” and “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”; the confrontation between the investigator and the perpetrator; a mind that lives a double life and the autopsied or embalmed corpses. Due to the skills of great narrators, these “correspondences” between Poe’s work and Deford’s fiction may represent an interesting contribution to contemporary literature.

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⁶¹ THOMPSON. Literary Politics and the “Legitimate Sphere,” p. 169.

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