

Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Oval Portrait” and The Search for Literary Identity

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Abstract

This article intends to analyze the short-story entitled “The Oval Portrait”, by Edgar Allan Poe, in order to show how the narrative metaphorically addresses concerns and anxieties related to the search for literary identity in the Antebellum America, that was politically independent from England but continued to imitate European models. First of all, I’ll analyze the literary context where Poe produced his works, considering the critical texts in which he reflects about the search for literary identity and the tendency of imitating foreign literary models in North-American literature. Secondly, I’ll analyze the short-story, seeking to show the elements that allow us to interpret it as a metaliterary exercise used by Poe to criticize the literature produced in his time.

Keywords: literary identity; literary imitation; short-story; gothic fiction; European models.

1. Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) has been read, reread and analyzed during the years as an author of horror, mystery and detective stories. Recent criticism on his works began to question this view by presenting his narratives as totally related to the social context of the antebellum America in its search for literary national identity. Even though it is not evident, Poe was extremely concerned with this question, as it is possible to perceive in his critical texts on literary creation, and in the famous literary warfare called “The Little Longfellow War”, in which he criticized the poet and his contemporary Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) claiming he was a plagiarist. In his critical texts, Poe demonstrated to be extremely annoyed with literary imitation in a context whose independence was only political but not cultural, which can be demonstrated, for example, by the imitation of the style of literary criticism practiced in the *British Quarterly Reviews*. Poe’s critical attitude is also present in his narratives, in which he uses the strategies of gothic literary fiction to enact the search for literary national identity in North-American literature at that time. In this article, I intend to analyze the short story entitled “The Oval Portrait” in order to identify these strategies, present in the description of space and characters, aspects that reveal all the complexity of the view Poe conveyed in a subtle but not less incisive way.

2. Edgar Allan Poe’s Literary Context: a Brief Description

Poe produced his works between the years of 1830-1840, the period in which the United States was in its highest development after the War for Independence and before the Secession War. This period was characterized by a great territorial expansion and, as a consequence, by the search for the national identity that would transform the United States in an autonomous nation, and not in a copy of the British Empire, despite the efforts of the Mayflower pilgrims to create a region called New England. For Gary Richard Thompson (2004), Poe had an important role as a writer in this context, as he

Fought against the literary cliques that promoted inferior regional writing, especially those centered around the Northern periodicals. He defended the American struggle for literary independence from Europe. Yet, at the same time that he attacked slavish imitation of European models, he opposed the excesses of the American literary nationalism that forced critics into the dilemma of liking a stupid book because at least it represented an “American” stupidity. (14). Thompson’s excerpt leads us to the idea that Poe did not have a definite position in relation to nationalism and literary national identity, but the reading of his critical texts will show that his attitude was very well-defined, as he believed North-American literature should not be dependent on British models of representation. Thompson’s excerpt also brings strong evidence on Poe’s concern with the literature produced in the South of the United States, a literature seen as an inferior one due to Northern hegemony.

This dilemma appears in the short-story entitled “The Oblong Box”, in which the eccentric artist Cornelius Wyatt takes his dead beloved wife from the South to the North in a ship called Independence, in a clear allegory of a nation divided in two, and that was struggling for literary autonomy. Poe’s belonging to the South, even though he was born in the North, gave rise to the perceptions that his works would bring ciphered representations of slavery, as Terence Whalen (1999) and John Carlos Rowe (1997) point out. This controversy appeared in another literary warfare, called The Paulding Drayton Review, in which the review of two books, *Slavery in the United States*, by John Kirke Paulding, and *The South Vindication*, by William Drayton, were attributed to Poe due to the harsh style of the text. Besides, Rowe argues that *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* contains ciphered representations of the black slave in the orangutan that kills Madame L’Espanaye and her daughter. All these analysis aim to reinforce the links between Poe and the social aspects that surround the context where he produced his works, in an effort to deconstruct his image as an alienated artist addicted both in alcohol and opium, the image that Charles Baudelaire spread across the Atlantic with his French translations.

Another aspect that deserves attention is Poe’s collaboration in the periodic press of his time. The writer in fact collaborated in many periodicals and magazines, including *The Southern Literary Messenger*, edited by Thomas White and in which he had to face another literary controversy related with the short story “Berenice”, published in 1835. The readers complained about the horrific aspect of the story, since Berenice, the cousin of the narrator Egeu, is buried alive and has her teeth ripped out by this man, whose obsession by them is a projection of his own ideals of art and beauty. In his answer to White, Poe claims that

The story of all Magazines shows plainly that those which have attained celebrity were indebted for it to articles similar in nature to Berenice, although, I grant you, far superior in style and execution. I say similar in nature. You ask me in what does this nature consist? In the ludicrous heightened into the grotesque: the fearful coloured into the horrible: the witty exaggerated into the burlesque; the singular wrought out into the strange and mystical. (597).

Poe admits his story is horrible, but that horror is a successful strategy to attract readers, in a demonstration of his awareness in relation to the reading public he had to please. In this sense, it is important to emphasize that Poe depended upon the publication of his texts to survive, which also demystifies the image of the alienated man, as he had to adopt certain strategies to please his readers and, therefore, sell his work. Perhaps these strategies stimulated him to become a conscious artist and to use metaliterary devices with allegorical meaning, as in “The Oval Portrait”, in which the strategy of the “story within the story” plays a metaphorical role in the process of searching for a literary identity.

3. “The Oval Portrait” and the life-in-death literature in the Antebellum America

“The Oval Portrait” was published in 1842 in *Graham’s Lady’s and Gentleman’s Magazine*. The original title was “Life in Death”, summarizing the main theme of the narrative, which deals with an obsessive artist who painted the portrait of his beautiful and young wife until she dies during the process. There are some differences between the two versions of the story, as the first one contains an Italian epigraph, and a paragraph dedicated to the effects of opium in a man who is convalescent of war and seeks refuge with his servant in a castle in the Appennines. Gary Richard Thompson (2004) comments on the differences between the two versions of the narrative by saying that the omissions of the second version “radically change the emphasis and increase the ambiguity of the story” (295). Perhaps the first paragraph was taken from the story because of the detailed description of drug addiction, a problem that affected Poe himself and that was one of the responsables for the unstable behavior that led to negative opinions about him among North-American critics. Poe’s heavy addiction to opium and laudanum, however, only increased in the last two years of his life, more specifically after Virginia Clemm’s death, which allows us to demystify, at least partially, the image of alienated writer with psychological and existential problems. The British gothic writer Ann Radcliffe is cited in the next paragraph of the story, bringing not only evidence of Poe’s contact with her work, but also the existence of an editorial warfare in which Poe criticized Radcliffe not because he didn’t like women writers, as frequently argued, but because gothic fiction attracted many readers and Poe needed to attract them as well to pursue his living. The reference to a British writer also points to the search for literary identity, once that North-American literature still depended on British models even after a violent war for independence in 1776. The first version of the narrative mentions that the narrator was in a battle in Constantinople, an information that was taken off the second version, in which we discover that the narrator is wounded and seeking for refuge in a castle located in a harsh region:

The chateau into which my valet had ventured to make forcible entrance, rather than permit me, in my desperately wounded condition, to pass a night into the open air, was one of those piles of commingled gloom and grandeur which have so long frowned among the Appenines, not less in fact than in the fancy of Mrs. Radcliffe. To all appearance it had been temporarily and very lately abandoned. (296). Actually, it is not clear if the story takes place in Europe or in the United States, but what is clear is that the castle stands for the European model represented by Radcliffe's gothic fiction, the model which, despite having a great influence over Poe and his contemporaries, should be overcome in the process of searching for a true literary identity. This idea is clear in Poe's critical essays, in which he complains about the power of "the *dicta* of Great Britain", and claims for literary and cultural autonomy by arguing that it would not be achieved with the nationalism that began to appear in literary criticism at that time:

In throwing *totally* off that "authority", whose voice had so long been so sacred, we even surpassed, and by much, our original folly. But the watchword now was "a national literature"- as if any true literature could be "national"- as if the world at large were not only the proper stage for the literary *histrion* (632). At first, we would say that Poe was not interested in the search for national identity, as he argues that the word "national" is too restrictive for literature. However, what he refuses is not the idea of a national identity in itself, but the search for an identity established on romantic ideas of nation and nationality, which were practiced by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow in *Golden Legend*, a North-American epic poem with imagery of the Middle Ages. Poe thought that this kind of representation was at odds with a young and recently formed literature, or, what is best, with a young, modern and recently independent country as the United States.

The description of the place in "The Oval Portrait" reinforces both the association to European models and Radcliffe's gothic books, given the mysterious atmosphere of the castle and its isolation in the Appenines:

We established ourselves in one of the smallest and least sumptuously furnished apartments. It lay in a remote turret of the building. Its decorations were rich, yet tattered and antique. Its walls were hung with tapestry and bedecked with manifold and multiform armorial trophies, together with an unusually great number of very spirited modern paintings in frames of rich Golden arabesque. (296).

The castle's decoration is a mix of tradition and modernity, represented by the armorial trophies and by the paintings in frames of "Golden arabesque", a style of Arabic architecture that appears in other stories by Poe, such as "The Fall of the House of Usher". One of the paintings calls the narrator's attention, as it was hidden in the dark and is illuminated by the candelabrum the narrator is using to read the book which contains the story of the pictures. It is important to emphasize that the position of the narrator is suspicious, as he is half awoken, half sleeping when he identifies the oval portrait:

The portrait (...) was that of a young girl. It was a mere head and shoulders, done in what is technically termed a *vignette* manner; much in the style of the favorite heads of Sully. The arms, the bosom and even the ends of the radiant hair, melted imperceptibly into the vague yet deep shadow which formed the background of the whole. The frame was oval, richly gilded and filigreed in *Moresque*. As a thing of art nothing could be more admirable than the painting itself. (297).

The painting is a synthesis between the modern, represented by the "young girl", and tradition, represented by the *vignette* manner, used in European architecture. The reference to Thomas Sully (1783-1872) is also relevant, as he was committed with the search for artistic identity, having painted the North-American landscapes, as well as the portrait of Thomas Jefferson and other important personalities of the United States at that time. Gary Richard Thompson (2004) believes that Poe was probably referring to his son, Robert Sully, who was his friend and is supposed to have painted the portrait of his granddaughter, Julia Sully of Richmond. It has been said that the portrait was very faithful to reality, exactly like the one painted in the narrative:

I had found the spell of the picture in an absolute *life-likeness* of expression., which at first startling, finally confounded, subdued and appalled me. (298). The *life-likeness* of the picture has a relationship with the girl's youth, which is put inside an European frame with the authorship of a North-American painter or, what is more interesting, an artist who was born in England but raised in the United States. Poe experienced a similar condition, as he was born in Boston, studied in a British school when he was a child and produced most of his works in Baltimore, located in the South of his mother country. Therefore, it would not be exaggerated to affirm that Poe was probably projecting his own image in the image of the portrait's painter, which allows us to interpret "The Oval Portrait" as a metafictional exercise in which Poe reflected upon his condition as an artist and his search for literary identity.

Curious about the oval portrait, the narrator finds a volume and begins to read the story that originated the beautiful work of art. He discovers that the artist who painted it was “passionate, studious, austere, and having already a bride in his Art”, characteristics that correspond to the profile of an obsessive artist who isolates from the outside world and neglects his own wife because of his intense relationship with art. The “young girl” represented in the portrait “was a maiden of rarest beauty, and not more lovely than full of glee”, aspects that reinforce her youth, as well as the idea that she was an inspiration for her husband due to her beauty and purity:

It was thus a terrible thing for this lady to hear the painter speak of his desire to pourtray even his young bride. But she was humble and obedient, and sat meekly for many weeks in the dark, high turret-chamber where the light dripped upon the pale canvas only from overhead. But he, the painter, took glory in his work, which went on from hour to hour, and from day to day. And he was a passionate, and wild, and moody man, who became lost in reveries; so that he would not see that the light which fell so ghastly in that lone turret withered the health and the spirits of his bride, who pined visibly to all but him. Yet she smiled on and still on, uncomplainingly, because she saw that the painter (who had high renown) took a fervid and burning pleasure in his task, and wrought day and night to depict her who so loved him, yet who grew daily more dispirited and weak. And in sooth some who beheld the portrait spoke of its resemblance in low words, as of a mighty marvel, and a proof not less of the power of the painter than of his deep love for her whom he depicted so surpassingly well. (298)

It is clear the difference between the beautiful lady and her obsessive husband, who isolates in a turret to perform his work. There is a parallel between artistic creation and the complete decline of the lady as a human being, as the artist’s objective is to transform her in an artifact. Apart from feminist readings, which would interpret the narrative as a representation of female submission to male hegemony in a patriarchal literary context, it is possible to identify an aesthetical ideology according to which youth and beauty should be killed so that art can exist in its full totality and complexity. This idea is even stronger by the end of the narrative: But at length, as the labor drew nearer to its conclusion, there were admitted none into the turret; for the painter had grown wild with the ardor of his work, and turned his eyes from canvas merely, even to regard the countenance of his wife. And he would not see that the tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sat beside him. And when many weeks had passed, and but little remained to do, save one brush upon the mouth and one tint upon the eye, the spirit of the lady again flickered up as the flame within the socket of the lamp. And then the brush was given, and then the tint was placed; and, for one moment, the painter stood entranced before the work which he had wrought; but in the next, while he yet gazed, he grew tremulous and very pallid, and aghast, and crying with a loud voice, "This is indeed Life itself!" turned suddenly to regard his beloved:- She was dead! (298-299).

The portrait sucks all the girl’s life, as she is dead when the painter finishes his work. But what is perhaps not clear, and what I seek to show in this article, is the allegorical component of the narrative and its relation with the search for literary identity, more specifically the literary identity of a literature still dependent on European models of artistic representation. The castle in the Appenines represents the nation, that is, the American nation still located (I mean, metaphorically) in Europe, that is, England. This interpretation can also be applied to “The Fall of the House of Usher”, in which the old, decadent and decrepit house of Usher represents Europe, that falls in the end due to its inability to face the challenge posed by Lady Madeline’s return from her premature entombment. The narrator seeking for refuge in the castle is the American man convalescent of war, which is corroborated by the reference to Constantinople and use of opium during war in the first version of the story.

The portrait, by its turn, represents American art, and the obsessive artist represents the American artist searching for his identity in a context characterized by foreign literary imitation. In this sense, the reference to Thomas Sully is very important, as he was the artist in this situation, which was also Poe’s own situation. The portrait in itself is the representation of American literature in its synthesis between youth, beauty and freshness, also represented by the lady, and old models and techniques, represented by the *vignette* manner, the strategy responsible for the emphasis on the girl’s beauty. The young and beautiful literature in North-America, however, is killed by the obsessive artist still following European models, and kept inside an European castle in the Appenines to be discovered by a man who is wounded and escaping from war.

Based on the exposed above, we may conclude that “The Oval Portrait” can really be interpreted as a metaliterary exercise in which Poe reflected upon his own condition as a writer inserted in a context still culturally dependent on England. He tells his readers, in a metaphorical way, that the literature raising in the United States was being killed by artists relying on European models of representation, artists who should search for their literary identities and try to build an autonomous, independent literature.

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