

A BRIEF VIEW ON EDGAR ALLAN POE

Cristiano Paulo Pitt

Defined by Professor Robert Regan as “the most misunderstood writer” in U.S.A., Edgar Allan Poe is also one of the most read authors around the world and a name of undeniable importance in the American Literature. Born in 1809, he lived for only forty years - a short time, but enough for him to produce a big and excellent work which has been influencing many writers of the most various languages until our days. About this, we must say that even writers who didn't like Poe, as Mark Twain, were influenced by him, recalling elements that were developed by Poe along his career. To be clear, it's good to remember that Poe developed a complete theory on Literature, what he described in his “Philosophy of Composition”.

Edgar Allan Poe produced poems, tales and critical essays. Some of his most famous poems are “The Raven”, “The Bells” and “The Valley of Unrest”. In these works - and others, of course - we can see the poet's terrific care with word-handling and musicality. Each word is used in order to perfectly mean and sound and reach what Poe called “elevation” of the reader's spirit, one of his greatest aims. Some critics argue that Poe's musicality is too much musical, that his poems seem to follow a “reach-me-down” music, and because of this consider his style vulgar. They also don't like when Poe uses proper names to rhyme and sound well. We can easily agree with them: Poe's music is simple, it goes easy on the reading, but the problem is that it's simply beautiful! It is a kind of simplicity only reached by complex minds and which really elevates the reader, what was, as we know, a poet's goal.

In his tales, Poe is known as a writer of mystery, death and horror stories, as “The Black Cat”, “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Masque of the Red Death”. He is considered the creator of the detective stories because of some tales as “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”. The critic Jaques Barzun says that Poe was the first to take the “entrancing idea

of detection and [make] it breed a distinctive literature by displaying it in an appropriate form. [...]“The Murders of the Rue Morgue put an end to the episodic and casual use of detection. And when four years later Poe had written his three other detective tales, all the elements of the genre were at hand”.

The “dark” side of the author is able to be found in a few lines of reading. “The Black Cat” starts with the narrator warning about events that “have terrified - have tortured - have destroyed” him. The tale is full of superstition and ambiguity - a great characteristic of Poe - what leads the reader to be in doubt between the presence of the supernatural or the reasonable explanation for the events that transform a peaceful common man in a murderer.

This fantastic-literature characteristic is also very present in one of his most debated tales - “The Fall of the House of Usher”. The reader faces with a couple of problematic brothers who are nearly a picture of death, living in a house impregnated of mystery and that is a stage for very strange events that aterrorize the narrator (and, as a consequence, the reader). The ghostly appearance of Roderick and Madeline Usher and, in the end, of their own house, in addition to the strange events that occur there, leads the reader to be in doubt if what is said really happens or if it is imagination or action of the supernatural.

“The Masque of the Red Death” is a tale full of blood and darkness, a typical horror story, written with Poe’s peculiar horrorizing touch. But it is more than this. Besides the aterrorizing action of the killing masqued creature, we can see - if we want - a very intelligent reflection about life and death, about the fantasy private world that each one of us creates to forget or try to be away of the unavoidable and universal end - death. For this, we can consider it as a modern parable. Nevertheless, it is needed to remember that this text, although his plot - and also because of its poorness - is near from what we could call poetic prose, if we look at the care Poe has with the words.

There are other sides of the author that are not so ostentained and not very known by readers in general. Poe was a man of a vast culture. His pieces have many references to Greek mythology, as we can see in “The Raven”, when the bust of Pallas is alluded, or in “The Black Cat”, in which the name of the cat - Pluto - can be a reference to the Greek god of hell.

Some of his texts are ironic, as “How to Write a Blackwood Article”, which brings the formula to write an article of success in a big magazine - Blackwood.

Poe created texts reflecting about problems with the alcohol - something normal as he was a great drinker. The tale “The Angel of the Odd” is a good example of this kind of short-story. Also “The Black Cat” comments on the habit of drinking and the problems it causes. Here we must remember that, for example, Poe was fired of his job in a magazine where he wrote critical essays because of his drinking habits.

On his work as a critic Poe was very recognized. Bernard Shaw said: “He was the greatest journalistic critic of his time, placing good European work when the European critics were waiting for somebody to tell them what to say”. However, Bernard Shaw goes against some critics who consider Poe more a good critic than a good writer. He says that Poe’s tales “are not merely stories: they are complete works of art, like prayer carpets.”

There are many aspects of Poe to be discussed: his narrators, the time in his tales, etc. By now, what seems to be more important after reading part of his work is that the remarkable idea we often have about him - an “evil genius”, writer of “dark literature” - can be reviewed. Actually, Poe was a complete literary man, an author who developed his own theory about composition (what can be discussed in another moment) and used it to produce elevating poems with an amazing musicality and word-handling. Besides of it, he wrote tales not only of horror, but talked about a good sort of themes and, in addition, was a critic of success and undeniable respect. That is why more than 150 years after his death we keep reading, debating and being influenced by him. And we do not need to be afraid of Edgar Allan Poe - he is not an “evil genius”. He is simply a genius.

