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“THE CASE OF VALDEMAR”: MELANCHOLY AS AESTHETIC RESOURCE IN EDGAR ALLAN POE’S WRITING

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Abstract: The American author Edgar Allan Poe offers readers a taciturn universe, whose texts recreate situations and environments that permeate the horror, the obscure and the grotesque, these being some of the essential literary marks of his works. Understanding the need to recognize intertextuality in the scientific sphere in the areas of Literature and Psychology, in this article we discuss the short story “O Caso do Valdemar”, present in the book *Contos de terror, de Ministro e de Morte* (1975). In order to outline aspects of the author’s writing, we investigated melancholy under the aegis of studies of the mind, especially the theories of Sigmund Freud (2012), Moacyr Scliar (2003) and Ricardo Araújo (2002), recognizing it as a powerful narrative and aesthetic resource (BRADY; HAAPALA, 2020) to portray the degradation of human beings.

Keywords: Tale; Narrative; Letters; Psychology.

INTRODUCTION

Edgar Allan Poe is considered a literary icon, known worldwide for presenting literature lovers with differentiated works that, for the most part, were absent from happy endings or placed readers in a space of discomfort, when dealing with mystery, horror, macabre and the grotesque involving its melancholic characters. In this study, we propose a literary reflection on the short story “O Caso do Valdemar”, from the book *Contos de terror, de Ministro e de Morte* (1975), approaching the relationship between the work and melancholy, with the exaltation of introspective reflection and the contemplation of more diverse feelings.

It is necessary, therefore, to point out that the tale in question contributes to this work, as it portrays the life of a lonely man, sick and aware of an imminent death. Valdemar accepts to be part of an experiment in which

two doctors, whose names have not been revealed, decide to hypnotize the patient in the hope of understanding the metaphysical impacts between life and death. In a letter he reveals his wish: “My dear P... You can come now. D... and F... agree that I can’t last past midnight tomorrow, and I think they’ve got the calculation right to a very close approximation. Valdemar” (POE, 1975, p. 35).

Therefore, it is through a melancholy and grotesque look at death that we weave a critical literary analysis from the perspective of the human mind, bringing together the theories of Psychology and Psychoanalysis (FREUD, 2012; SCLAR, 2003) and the studies of melancholy in the tropics and melancholy as an aesthetic element of literary work (BRADY; HAAPALA, 2020), especially mentioning the aforementioned tale by Poe, which portrays all the hopelessness and degradation of human beings.

POE AND MELANCHOLY: A DIVE INTO THE AUTHOR’S LIFE

Edgar Allan Poe brings in his works tales of terror, mystery and death and his biography is surrounded by countless situations of disenchantment and loss. He was born in Boston, Massachusetts, the second child of actors David Poe and Elizabeth Arnold. In early childhood, his alcoholic father abandoned the family, and soon afterward, Poe’s mother died of tuberculosis, leaving him and his brothers Henry and Rosalie orphaned. Poe is taken in by couples Francis and John Allan, of Richmond, Virginia, however, he was never formally adopted. His youth is marked by a turbulent relationship with his adoptive parents, provocative behavior, poor mental health, emotional imbalance due to excessive alcohol consumption and an unstoppable tendency towards self-destruction.

In Poe’s life, situations of hopelessness and uncertainty were a constant, aspects that were

reflected in his works, as many are marked by mystery, suspense and terror, which have become the writer's trademarks. For many years, he went through many difficulties, among them financial, a period of extreme poverty, which caused moments of darkness and discouragement. Still, he married at age 27 to his cousin Virginia Clemm, then just 13 years old. However, in 1842, she contracted tuberculosis and died at the age of 24. Poe's death, at the age of 40, is still shrouded in mysteries that arouse some curiosities. The event took place on October 7, 1849, shortly after the publication in the *New York Evening Mirror* of the poem "The Raven" (1845), which made him popular with literary critics and readers, before he could fulfill his desire to create his own novel. own newspaper, *The Penn* (which was later renamed *The Stylus*).

During this period, the author traveled to several cities to present his writings and ideas in order to raise funds for his enterprise. On one of these trips, Poe was supposed to board a ferry from Richmond to Baltimore, then on to New York, but that trip never took place. Literary archives of the time report that he was found in a gutter, with torn clothes (other than his black wool suit), semi-conscious and unable to move. After being taken to the hospital, he received medical treatment, but he never regained his full state of consciousness, dying days later. About this, Ricardo Araújo, in *Edgar Allan Poe, a man in his shadow* (2002), highlights that:

Edgar Allan Poe [...] lived four decades in poverty and relative obscurity. [...] the mystery of his death [was able to] create many myths and urban legends, but no one knows what really happened in the last days of his life. Did he die of alcoholism or was he murdered? His last words would have been, according to certain sources, "Lord, please help my poor soul" (ARAÚJO, 2002, p. 71).

Although the official cause of Poe's death is unknown, over the years there have been

many theories for such an event, from beatings, poisoning, brain tumor, excessive use of narcotics and alcohol, diseases such as tuberculosis, rabies and even an assassination attempt. The fact is that the last words of the American writer, spoken between delusions, still perpetuate in the minds of those who seek to speculate and establish relationships with his works.

It is possible to say that Poe's death, shrouded in mysteries, outlines, therefore, a path between his melancholic, obscure and tragic writings, whose touch of cruelty and discursive characteristics made him able to break with the structuralist ideas of texts until then produced, consecrating his style and productions in the canonical literary sphere. After his death, the writer gained even more prestige, his stories and poems were praised by the public and gained place in various types of artistic manifestations. Poe's works have been adapted for theater, film, television and animation, all with a strong presence of horror and the grotesque.

In addition, in many of his stories, melancholy is present as a guiding element of aspects of the human psyche, being still a possible reflection on a person's personality, even because the ego is satisfied with the energies produced by the body, whether good or not. bad. For Araújo (2002, p. 31), even "The name Edgar Allan Poe causes a certain shudder that springs from the core of the soul, a tremor throughout the body, releasing energies from deep and inhospitable regions of the 'ego'". According to Freud (2012), there are certain particularities that determine the melancholic aspect of people, which may be linked to intrinsic characteristics of individuals or external situations. So it is possible to say that:

The symptoms that characterize the melancholic are profoundly painful discouragement, lack of interest in the external world, loss of capacity for love, lack

of activity and decreased self-esteem, which makes this subject self-recrimination. These symptoms are also present in grief. What sets them apart is that in melancholy, loss is of a more ideal nature. It is not necessary for the love object to have died, but to have been lost as a love object, as in the case of an abandoned bride. It turns out that, in some cases, the patient is aware of the loss that gave rise to his melancholy, “but only in the sense that they know who he lost, but not what he lost in that someone” (FREUD, 2012, p. 36).

It is noticed that melancholy takes the individual to a state of deep sadness, pain and, consequently, the loss of will to live. The individual in a situation of deep psychological shock plunges into a bottomless abyss, in which he rarely manages to save himself. Melancholy is very present in mourning, in the feeling of unacceptable loss on the part of the individual, causing the awareness of the loss that gave rise to their melancholy, as there is a big difference between losing someone and losing something of that someone. Melancholy, then, is always present where there is a fragility of feelings, being linked to what each individual can analyze the world, as it comes from the emotions experienced day by day, when in contact with other people who affect us more intensely.

In Poe's works, melancholy is perceived in several aspects, from the silence of the place where the scenes take place, in the various reflections of the characters and in the situations in which the narrative figures are fragile. In the short story “O caso do Valdemar” a particular melancholic universe is created with elements of sadness and loneliness, since the protagonist is weakened due to his illness. In this study, we understand that melancholy can be seen as an expression of the human soul, since it is allied to other feelings, sensations and desires, such as: death, horror and fear. When it is related to some type of loss, in a context of mourning,

for example, it becomes an unstable and even ambivalent feeling.

Melancholy, in turn, can be seen as an inherent characteristic of the ambivalence of the human soul. Along with the concept of mourning, it goes beyond a sadness sustained by the past that finds its origin in something concrete that was lost. Although equally present in the loss process, melancholy starts from a common and necessary condition, to a pathological, unstable and undefined one (SANTIAGO; QUERIDO, 2018, p. 58).

When analyzing Poe's text, we have the representation of the ambivalence of the protagonist's human soul: “[...] - Yes, I wish to be magnetized - adding immediately afterwards: - I'm afraid you took too long” (POE, 1975, p. 28).). The highlighted passage marks two states of the individual: melancholy and mourning. They are interconnected and correlate, since the fatality of loss, in this case grief, stems from feelings of pain, dissatisfaction, questioning and often also guilt. In the case of melancholia, the loss is of a deeper nature and, in a way, an unspeakable pain, which overcomes depression, a psychiatric illness that affects the emotional aspects of a person. About these concepts, Freud (2013) clarifies that:

Mourning, as a rule, is the reaction to the loss of a dear person or an abstraction that is in their place, such as homeland, freedom, ideal. Under the same influences, a melancholy is observed in many people instead of mourning, which leads us to suspect a pathological disposition in them. It is also noteworthy that it never occurs to us to consider mourning as a pathological state [...] even though it causes serious deviations from the normal conduct of life. We trust that it will be overcome after some time and we consider it inappropriate and even harmful to disturb you. Melancholy is characterized by a deeply painful despondency, a suspension of interest in the external world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of

the feeling of self-esteem, which is expressed in self-recriminations and self-insults, reaching the point of delusional expectation of punishment. This picture will come closer to our understanding if we consider that mourning reveals the same traits, except for one: it lacks the disturbance of the feeling of self-esteem (FREUD, 2013, p. 27-28).

Poe's text brings a plot full of mysteries and melodramatic elements, creating an atmosphere of terror and suspense, being also marked by a strong melancholic characteristic of the protagonist, with a withdrawal from the outside world due to his illness and his weakened body, in addition to of a discouragement in establishing any kind of relationship with other individuals. Thus, in order to understand these particularities, it is necessary to study the literary aspects of the tale and how melancholy as an aesthetic category is present in the narrative.

MELANCHOLY AS A LITERARY EXPRESSION

If, on the one hand, melancholy demands a reflection and contemplation of feelings, as pointed out by Emily Brady and Arto Haapala in *Melancholy as an aesthetic emotion* (2020), on the other hand, the literary field becomes a prolific sphere for the production of texts that resort to the resource of thinking their works about how melancholy emerges as an aesthetic entity. In the quest to think about the different definitions in art, in this case, art with the word, Brady and Haapala (2020) point out that melancholy is an emotion that can often be caused by people or places and, in this way, refers to memories. of a place or people that intertwine the individual history of each being and their affective relationships.

The feeling of belonging, longing, love, love, abandonment, for example, are traits that often converge with the categories of the melancholic and how these emotions (often melancholic) can connect with a whole

construction of how each individual observes the world.. The silence of a place, excessive reflections, can be associated with the feeling of sadness and melancholy and, still in this thought, it is pertinent to list that the grandeur of nature is also related to melancholy.

On the other hand, but still in this perspective, Moacyr Scliar (2003), in *Saturno nos tropics: a melancholia european arrives in Brazil*, pays attention to a historical trait that discusses the concept of melancholy in three moments: classical antiquity and the Renaissance moving towards the Modernity. During the entire process that goes beyond the literary artistic universe, the history of humanity is permeated by the shadows of catastrophes that, directly and indirectly, build the sense of the sad/melancholic of great works. Scliar (2003), therefore, begins his thoughts with the Black Death in Europe, which decimated a third of the European population, causing the feeling of belonging to death and the divine punishments that the population attributed at the time. Therefore, it is important to point out that all these impacts that devastated humanity are (in)directly present in Poe's works – and, especially, in “O caso do Valdemar”:

There was no longer any sign of life on Valdemar's body. We were about to hand him over to the nurses when we saw a strong vibrating movement in the tongue, which lasted a few minutes. When that was over, a voice emerged from the parted, still chins. A voice such that it would be madness for me to try to describe it. Rough, broken, cavernous, coming from a distance as if coming from the bottom of the earth (POE, 1975, p. 30).

The concept of life, in the face of such tragedies, often put on the agenda what is the real meaning of living, as many families were cut off at the time of the epidemic, leaving children without parents and parents without children, causing repercussions in all social entities, from the religious to the artistic. What

remained was the way in which the historical/literary narratives presented their perspectives in the face of chaos – which to this day, is seen through the melancholy perspective of that time. On the subject, Scliar (2003) points out that:

In Renaissance art, there are numerous allusions to death, in paintings and engravings — allegories, as we have seen, are frequent. In the painting by Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors* (1533), we have two imposing male figures, surrounded, like Durer's *Melancholy*, by numerous objects evoking art, science, technique: a lute (with one of the strings broken), a celestial globe, two quadrants. At the bottom of the figure is a skull (SCLIAR, 2003, p. 26).

This relationship between the Black Death and melancholy, as Scliar (2003) points out, needs, in a way, to be differentiated, because according to the author, the Black Death was undoubtedly a disease, while melancholy, on the other hand, was not always configured itself as a disease. As highlighted above, there is an aesthetic aspect in melancholy/sadness, however, there is a parallel with feeling, emotion following in certain cases to depression. Melancholy, on the other hand, can be understood as a reflection based on this feeling, in which it can overcome sadness and remain within the scope of the reflective.

In view of historical advances, Shakespeare's productions, with the dilemmas of forbidden love in *Romeo and Juliet*, or the existence crises of *Hamlet*, about life being or not being - opened spaces for productions that walk along with the melancholy always on the agenda, because the way the world recognized/recognises connects directly with literary works (and in general), whose authors are attentive observers of the world. On the other hand, in the religious sphere, Scliar (2003) talks about guilt as a project for the rebuilding of man in the face of the fury of the Divine and as such feeling described

in biblical texts, for example, are scars that culminate in melancholy.

When we think about the conceptions of literary productions, such as the baroque writings or even those of Edgar Allan Poe, we are faced with the ambivalence of good and bad, day and night and how these analogies resort to the sad and melancholy existence of being. human. Scliar advances towards the end of his studies on melancholy, the author points out that the processes of globalization and mass social consumption are one of the questions that can explain melancholy and sadness syndromes that reflect the means of production, as is the case of literature. Thus, these different perspectives on melancholy, corroborate to understand the intricacies present in contemporary literature and, in this way, understand the literary constructions that seek to “mirror” the meaning of human existence and its weaknesses.

In the analysis of “O caso do Valdemar”, it was noticed that melancholy permeates the words chosen by Poe, evidenced by the presence of a deep sadness, fear and terror, on the part of the protagonist of the tale, but with touches of irony and criticism, distilled by the narrator, who tells the story in first person. The text still mixes the elements of horror and science fiction by exploring the technique of “mesmerism”, which sought to treat diseases through the use of hypnosis. The narrative is marked by mystery, suspense and grotesque, establishing a fine line between the life and death of the protagonist, Mr. Valdemar, due to his weakened health for having contracted tuberculosis, being on the verge of death. He then in his last 24 hours of life he undergoes a process of mesmerization.

Mesmerizing is the act of inducing hypnosis in order to cure disease. Mesmerism (animal magnetism theory) was a doctrine advocated by German physician Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815). He postulated the existence of a universal magnetic fluid, which could

be considered therapeutic. Considered as the precursor of the first large-scale movement that drew the attention of the Western academic world to paranormal phenomena, which intended to rationally interpret phenomena and energy, which when connecting to the human body, caused manifestations such as trances and cures (GÓIS, 2015, p. 22).

The specialist in said therapeutic practice uses his hands for the development of the same. The exploration of magnetism and its effects on the human psyche is one of the most recurrent themes in the tale, gaining even more prominence when the theoretical view helps to conceptualize the textual genre as a real chronicle, described by a supernatural event. In the story, the technique is carried out by the narrator (understood to be a doctor or a specialist in this type of practice), who reports the facts of the case having achieved notoriety and given “[...] came to be the source of much false and unpleasant news and, quite naturally, of great copying of incredulity” (POE, 1975).

Briefly, the narrator exposes his contact with the technique and his interests in performing the unprecedented experience of hypnosis in an individual at the exact moment of death. The investigation addressed the following issues:

[...] It remained to be seen, first, whether under such conditions there was in such a patient any susceptibility to influence; secondly, if there were any, whether it was attenuated or increased by this circumstance, and thirdly, to what extent or for how long the invasion of death could be prevented by the magnetic process. There were other points to check but these excited my curiosity more; the latter in a special way, due to the immensely important character of its consequences (POE, 1975, p. 28).

From the physician's point of view, for the development of the experience, the narrator's analytic sequence was punctuated in three conditions: first, whether on the threshold

between life and death the patient would be susceptible to hypnosis; second, attesting that the first situation was viable, such practice could harm or strengthen that condition; and, finally, if how and for how long the magnetic process could prevent the physical and psychic death of the individual. However, from the perspective of Mr. Valdemar, his issuing end was an anxiously awaited condition and the proposal was postulated a satisfactory exit, since his body had tiny vital signs, especially his lungs:

The left lung had been, for eighteen months, in a semi-osseous or cartilaginous state, and had undoubtedly become quite useless to any vital function. The right, in its superior part, was also partially, if not completely, ossified, while the anterior region was simply a mass of interpenetrating purulent tubercles. [...] It was the opinion of both doctors that Mr. Valdemar would die around midnight the following day, Sunday (POE, 1975, p. 28).

The patient's poor health status gives him the opportunity to participate in such an experiment, specifically meeting the conditions evidenced by the physician. When the time of death arrives, the mesmerism process is put into practice and the narrator begins to describe the dialogues he has with Valdemar's corpse. Among them, the following excerpt can be highlighted:

[...] was lying in the same position and the pulse was imperceptible, the breathing was light (barely distinguishable except by applying a mirror to the lips) the eyes closed naturally and the limbs were so stiff and cold like marble. [...] I decided to risk a few words of conversation.

- Mr. Valdemar... - I said - is he asleep?

He didn't answer, but I noticed a tremor around his lips, and so I was led to repeat the question several times. At the third repetition, her whole body shook with a slight shiver: her lashes opened, allowing the white band of her eye to be seen; the lips moved slowly and from between them, in a

barely audible whisper, came the words:

- Yes... I'm asleep now. Don't wake me! Let me die like this! [...] (POE, 1975, p. 29).

The narrative unfolds with the protagonist dying under the care of nurses and doctors who decided to keep him "active" under the effect of hypnosis. At this moment, curiosity takes over everyone, so much so that the narrator is surprised by the positive results of hypnosis and continues with the dialogue.

- Do you still have chest pain, Mr. Valdemar?

The response was now immediate, but even less audible than before:

- No pain... I'm dying!

[...]

- Mr. Valdemar, are you still sleeping?

As before, a few minutes passed before an answer was given, and during the break it seemed that the dying man was gathering his energy to speak. At my fourth repetition of the question, he said, his voice very weak, almost imperceptible.

- Yes... I'm still sleeping... I'm dying (POE, 1975, p. 29-30).

Despite the loss of vital signs and an increasingly faint face, Valdemar continues to respond to the hypnotist, which leaves everyone scared and horrified by the result of the experiment. Over the days, the experience became a frightening and worrying situation, as no one knew what could actually happen to the patient. In view of the fictional events, some questions are relevant: "The person lying on the bed was still Mr. Valdemar or just his consciousness trapped in hypnosis? Can Valdemar, through hypnosis, escape death? What will happen when he wakes up from his trance?" (GÓIS, 2015, p. 4). The issues raised by Góis (2015) highlight the dilemma experienced by the group of health professionals who attend to Mr. Valdemar. It was a consensus among physicians that the

patient must remain at rest, but the narrator insists with his questions.

At that moment, there is an evident change in the magnetized, "[...] the skin took on a cadaverous color [...], and the hectic circular spots, which until then had been strongly marked in the center of each face, immediately disappeared. [...] the swollen and blackened tongue" (POE, 1975, p. 32). The climax is established in the passage in which, after seven months of the first session and clear decomposition of the body, all the doctors decide to wake him up from the trance, starting with the following dialogue with the narrator:

- Mr. Valdemar... can you explain to me what your feelings or desires are now?

There was an immediate return of the hectic circles on the faces; the tongue fluttered, or rather rolled violently in the mouth (though the jaws and lips remained rigid as before) and at last the same hideous voice which I have already described ejaculated:

- For God's sake!... - Quickly... - Quickly!... Put me to sleep... or else, quickly. Wake me... quickly!... I say I'm dead! (POE, 1975, p. 32).

The dying man's reaction is terrifying. Mr. Valdemar lets out a cry of incessant pain that ends up scaring everyone. Such a reaction is noticeable in the text due to the ellipsis and the various exclamation points at the end of each of the words. The character was trapped in her body, she couldn't wake up, because hypnosis prevented her from resting, that is, from passing from life to death. The end of the tale is marked by the grunts of the word "Dead!", spoken by the protagonist. At this moment, the narrator is surprised by the result of his hypnotic practice, since the body: "[...] in the space of a single minute, or even less, contracted... it disintegrated, absolutely rotten, under my hands. On the bed, in front of all those people, lay an almost liquid mass of disgusting and detestable putrescence "

(POE, 1975).

Thus, in this proposal, by highlighting the excerpts and presenting an analysis of the tale, we intend to establish a parallel between the melancholic character of the narrative, the aesthetic conception of Poe's literary writing and the power of textual resources to understand the psyche of the sick character in the narrative plan. The author's discursive choices were able to build a reflexive story that presents emotionally complex characters, "[...] therefore, in the linguistic resources chosen by the author/narrator, in the impact of understanding that the reader feels when understanding the concepts of a description that comprises the parts of the work" (FREUD, 2012, p. 36).

The short story "O Caso de Valdemar" gained worldwide prominence for the structure of its narrative, based on the sentimentality of romanticism, as it has a philosophical depth of an analytical character, totally opposite to utilitarianism. Poe defended the literature of thought and that it must have a strictly aesthetic character, that is, his stories were strictly structured. The work itself shows that the author was a faithful defender of art for art's sake and made artistic manifestations the exhibition of his works, marked by peculiarities. His poetry, for example, had melancholy as its main characteristic, expressed by despair and the feeling of loss. It must be noted that Poe, in the production of his works, prioritizes reason, but brings traces of a dark romanticism, such as the presence of a grotesque and irrational tone in his aesthetic language. His narrative was linked to emotion and sentimentality, due to the strong presence of melancholy, fear and terror that instigated the reading of his works, almost always with tragic endings.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In view of the analysis of the short story "O caso do Valdemar" by Edgar Allan Poe, it was possible to observe the richness of the work itself, with its own characteristics and an explosion of feelings, whether good or bad. His productions are marked by melancholy, despair, strangeness and loss, strong traits of the author's literature. As can be seen, the tale presents a critique of the practice of mesmerism, which makes use of animal magnetism, whose function of hypnotizing a person at the moment of death was intended to seek a cure and prolong the person's existence a little longer. who was in a terminal phase, as was the case with Valdemar.

In addition to the melancholic features, the tale has elements of terror and suspense. Finally, it can be said that Mr. Valdemar served as a guinea pig for an experiment never used, all because his terminal illness didn't give him any more hope to stay alive. Since his life was hanging by a thread, with only 24 hours to live, he accepted his friend's request and stayed for a while still in hypnosis so that he later died tragically, being represented by the melancholy traits of an engaging, mysterious story. and with a hideous atmosphere of Poe.

In the text, hypnosis is in a way highlighted and its science questioned. At first it brought positive results, as the practice worked and, apparently, he was alive shortly after being diagnosed as dead by the doctors involved. In the second, melancholy sets in, as the body under the effect of hypnosis cannot disconnect from the conscious mind, presenting a frightening situation, arising from human degradation, be it the protagonist of all the characters that make up the plot.

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