

POE'S "MORELLA": A CASE OF CONDEMNATION OF MISOGYNY

Francisco Francimar de Sousa ALVES¹

RESUMO: Este artigo apresenta uma breve análise do conto "Morella" de Edgar Allan Poe a partir da visão feminista de Christine Cavalier, como sendo um caso de condenação da misoginia. Assim, este trabalho tenta mostrar que, o retorno de Morella do além significa o grito das mulheres contra o preconceito masculino – mulheres idealizadas e mortas criadas pelos escritores em suas obras de ficção; mulheres privadas da autonomia da voz. Neste conto Poe, possivelmente, condena a misoginia e permite as mulheres a chance de serem mais fortes do que os homens.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: misoginia; visão feminista; preconceito masculino; Morella.

ABSTRACT: This article provides a brief analysis of Poe's short story "Morella" from Christine Cavalier's feminist view as a case of condemnation of misogyny. Thus, this paper tries to show that Morella's return from the dead signifies the voice of women against male prejudice – the idealized-dead women created by male writers in their works of fiction; women deprived of the autonomy of independent speech. In this tale, Poe possibly condemns misogyny and gives women the chance of being stronger than men.

KEY-WORDS: misogyny; feminist view; male prejudice; Morella.

Edgar Allan Poe is one of the main writers in worldly literature who most "kills" his heroines in the literary texts. It is common in Poe's best tales to encounter the device of the frightening reappearance of a person believed to be dead, especially of women returning from the beyond. The death of a beautiful woman is certainly one of his best themes, if not the best.

"Morella" (1835), one of Poe's interesting tales, deals with the idea of metempsychosis, specifically a dead mother's return in her own daughter's body at the moment of the childbirth. The tale expresses similar archetypal ideas regarding reincarnation, and the visions of the dead are linked either to the narrator's insane mind or to a dream, which is typical in Poe's short stories. However, the idea of reincarnation may lead to amazing interpretations such as that of the condemnation of misogyny from a feminist viewpoint, according to which Poe was supposedly giving women the chance of speaking. This feminist interpretation comes from Christine Cavalier's article "Women Coming Back From the Dead: A Feminist Interpretation of Poe's 'Berenice' and 'Morella'," and is the main point of our analysis.

¹ Mestre em Literatura Anglo-Americana pela UFPB. Professor do Departamento de Letras na Universidade Federal de Campina Grande (UFCG)/Campus de Cajazeiras-PB-Brasil/CEP 58900-000. E-mail: f-francimar@uol.com.br

In order to analyze Cavalier's feminist point of view above, we should make a brief comment on the plight of the idealized woman that peopled the male author's literary work in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Throughout that vast period, male writing directed to women proliferated by inducing them to be submissive, selfless, angelic. By nature, woman was supposed to be subservient, dependent, passive, and suited for the tasks of the hearth: to care for and educate children, clean the house, cook for the family, and sew and launder clothes. Male writers created images of the "'eternal feminine' virtues of modesty, gracefulness, purity, delicacy, civility, compliancy, reticence, chastity, affability, politeness" (GILBERT and GUBAR, 1984, p. 23); but that's not all. Woman in the nineteenth century, mostly, was framed in male literary texts as imprisoned, silenced, and dying, that is, patriarchal writers both generated and imprisoned their female fictive creatures, as well as silenced them by depriving them of the autonomy of independent speech. As GILBERT and GUBAR (1984) note: "...in the severity of her selflessness [the woman's], as well as in the extremity of her alienation from ordinary fleshly life, this nineteenth-century angel-woman becomes not just a memento of otherness but actually a *memento mori* or, (...) an 'Angel of Death' " (p. 24). Furthermore, "... the nineteenth-century cult of such death-angels (...) resulted in a veritable 'domestication of death,' producing both a conventionalized iconography and a stylized hagiography of dying women and children." (p. 24-5) On this very matter of the idealized-alienated woman created by male writers, we should quote an important passage from two women scholars on the related issue:

O eterno feminino é ilusão de completude, ficção ideal criada pelo horror da castração. Horror que cria o fetiche, corpo fálico do feminino, com as roupagens e o brilho do seu próprio encarceramento. A voz que aí se ouve não é feminina, mas seu simulacro, fina modulação da ilusão que a faz existir. Gesto alheio que cria espaço onde se aliena a mulher, estrangeira de seu desejo, boneca que faz fluir o som da voz de seu ventríloquo. Passageira da voz alheia, na medida em que se cala, calando seu próprio desejo desconhecido. (BRANCO and BRANDÃO, 1989, p. 19)

It is worthwhile pointing out that Poe is among the writers who created idealized women – the death of a beautiful woman was unquestionably for him, "the most poetical topic in the world," (POE, 1951, p. 369) and it was common for him to create images of violently silenced women. Dealing with the same aspect, Branco and Brandão see Poe's "The Oval Portrait" (which resembles "Morella" in some aspects) as an example of the poet's tendency literally to kill his heroines and symbolically immortalize them:

...aquela [mulher] que não fala, é falada, mantida santa e assexuada, na sua petrificação de morta. O amor imaginário, como fonte de todos os reflexos e especulações, prende, captura e eterniza esse objeto privilegiado que é a mulher idealizada, nesse artefato ilusório que é o texto literário. Fantasma sempre reinventado, ele aparece em *O retrato oval* de Edgar Allan Poe, onde um jovem marido pintor mata literalmente a mulher amada, enquanto simbolicamente a torna eterna, imortal, presa no retrato oval, ovo (talvez cósmico), início e fim, estratificação do desejo de beleza, lugar onde tudo se torna alucinadamente possível. (BRANCO and BRANDÃO, 1989, p. 28)

We should point out that although male writers "killed" their female characters in their literary work, they also praised them as angels, fairies, saints, etc. Nevertheless, they also

used bad names such as witch, bitch, fiend, monster, to scorn drastically (in their writings) female characters and even those who attempted the pen. On this matter, GILBERT and GUBAR (1984, p. 30) asserts that "...the female monster populates the works of the satirists of the eighteenth century, a company of male artists whose virulent visions must have been particularly alarming to feminine readers in an age when women had just begun to 'attempt the pen'." According to these scholars, "...such authors devised elaborate anti-romances to show that the female 'angel' was really a female 'fiend,' the ladylike paragon really an unladylike monster. (...) the two kinds of misogynistic attacks definitively merged." (p. 31)

On the same point, Norma TELLES in her "Autor+a", refers to male writing as simply linguistic fantasies that defines women's discourse as mere foolishnesses, and the feminine ideal as an articulated genitalia:

De Coleridge, Thoreau, Poe, Hopkins até Lawrence, Williams, Olson ou os teóricos contemporâneos, as fantasias lingüísticas masculinas podem ser lidas como uma revisão da língua materna realizada por um vidente que percebe o poder das palavras comuns ao mesmo tempo que define as palavras das mulheres como meros balbucios. As defesas contra a fala feminina tornaram-se mais ferozes desde que as mulheres de classe média começaram a escrever. Assim, por exemplo, William Faulkner explicita o ideal feminino: - "uma virgem sem pernas para me deixar, sem braços para me abraçar, sem cabeça para falar comigo", meramente uma genitália articulada. (JOBIM, 1992, p. 48)

After discussing shortly the matter of the unvoiced women in male literary texts, we should go to a brief analysis of the significance of Morella's return from the dead from Christine CAVALIER's feminist interpretation in her "Women Coming Back From the Dead: A Feminist Interpretation of Poe's 'Berenice' and 'Morella,'" in which she considers this return to be psychological. On this point, she states that "one of the thematic devices that Edgar Allan Poe loves to revisit within his stories is the chilling reappearance of a person believed to be dead". And adds: "To the psychoanalytical critic, this returning individual can symbolize a repressed memory or desire that is banished from one's thoughts only for a time but eventually returns, demanding attention." (<<http://www.valpo.edu/christc/abstracts.html>>). Nonetheless, Cavalier points out that this psychoanalytical view of Poe's "returning dead" motif may bring out within "Morella" other issues different from repressed memory. She notes that, in this tale, "the theme of women returning from the dead is related as both a horrible and an empowering experience which allows women to receive some degree of justice that otherwise would have been lost." Cavalier further observes that if we examine the tale "in terms of men's feelings of alienation and women's roles in realizing justice, we recognize that, while Poe focuses upon male aggression and resentment before defiant or devoted women, he also gives these women the physical or metaphysical power to break free of death and to indict misogyny." She ends by reasserting her feminist view that "the condemnation of misogyny found in 'Morella'," plainly argues "for a feminist reading of the 'returning dead' motif." (<<http://www.valpo.edu/christc/abstracts.html>>)

We may take Cavalier's feminist view into account to the extent that, mainly in the nineteenth century, male prejudice against women was really a fact: women did not have the same education as men, and they were supposed to be inside the home caring for their children and doing housework; moreover, they should never write, for writing was a sort of activity for men only. If any woman had to attempt the pen, she would surely deal with incessantly patriarchal prejudice. It was even usual in male authors' criticism to use scornful words to attack vulnerable women writers, as we have mentioned. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for

instance, clearly expressed his prejudice against women who attempted the pen. His contempt for woman's culture is stated in his famous pronouncement of 1855: "America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women, and I should have no chance of success while the public taste is occupied with their trash." (SHOWALTER, 1994, p. 12) Robert Southey, in a famous letter to Charlotte Bronte, expressed the same notion: "Literature is not the business of a woman's life, and it cannot be." (GILBERT and GUBAR, 1984, p. 8)

We may think that Cavalier's view makes full sense if we take into consideration all the above questions concerning woman as one manipulated, or shaped, or castrated by man's unjust will of possessing her as nothing but an object he can use for his own pleasure. Thus in "Morella" "the condemnation of misogyny" (according to Cavalier) may apply to the point that woman in the nineteenth century longed for freedom - she wished to complain against male domination; she desired to be free of the plight in which she hovered; she wanted at last to demand respect, attention, and a well-deserved place in society. So in Poe's tale the author seems to give women the power of domination, and not to be dominated; the chance of having their own will, their own voice, their own place.

Applying the above considerations to Poe's tale, we can best judge Morella's return from the dead in the light of Cavalier's feminist view as regards "the condemnation of misogyny." First, we observe that the story's narrator is frightfully defied by Morella's obsession with the idea of identity that leads to the insoluble question of that identity "*which at death is or is not lost forever*"; Morella proves capable of transcending death and of being reborn into another being:

...the *principium individuationis* – the notion of that identity *which at death is or is not lost forever*, was to me – at all times, a consideration of intense interest; not more from the perplexing and exciting nature of its consequences, than from the marked and agitated manner in which Morella mentioned them. (POE, 1951, p. 92)

Morella is then rejected by her husband on account of the mystery that oppresses him. He promptly desires her death: "Shall I then say that I longed with an earnest and consuming desire for the moment of Morella's decease? I did" (POE, 1951, p. 93). Yet she complains against her husband's desire to have her dead by asserting that she is dying, but shall return: "I am dying, yet shall I live." (p. 93) Then Morella is even more emphatical when promising her return in her own child: "I repeat that I am dying. But within me is a pledge of that affection – ah, how little! – which thou didst feel for me, Morella. And when my spirit departs shall the child live - thy child and mine, Morella's." (p. 93) We observe that Morella is first rejected, and hearing that her husband wishes her death, she plans her vengeance with the promise of being reborn in their offspring, and she does carry out her terrible and deathless project. In contrast with the narrator's desire to have Morella's name die "with her at her death," (p. 94) he, at the baptismal font, unconsciously pronounces "within the ears of the holy man" (p. 95) Morella's name, and his child is taken to death.

"Morella" seems to be a story of vampirism if we consider that the heroine sucks her daughter's blood until death, for she accomplishes her will in keeping alive. As Allen Tate (BLOOM, 1985, p. 36) observes: "Poe's heroines – Berenice, Ligeia, Madeline, Morella, with the curious exception of the abstemious Eleanora – are ill-disguised vampires." Morella is fragile, delicate, submissive, but just until the very moment her freedom is threatened; when this happens she becomes a powerful monster or vampire. She does not allow to be subservient to her husband's desire to have her far away. On the contrary, she insists that she will not be forgotten and returns indeed.

Taking into account Morella's return from the beyond in the light of Cavalier's feminist reading, this returning may as a matter of fact stand for women's complaint "to receive some degree of justice" from men. Morella's return, nevertheless, tends to be the representative struggle against the plight of all those women who suffered on account of male prejudice - those who could not have a well-deserved education, those who were not allowed to work outside the home; those who were submissive, silenced, and murdered in male literary texts, and those who were scornfully criticized for attempting the pen. So, that's the way Poe probably found to give women "the physical or metaphysical power" to break patriarchal rules and "to indict misogyny." In the creation of a powerful feminine character, one who carries out the promise of being unforgotten or perhaps immortal, Poe yet grants women the chance of being stronger than men, for Morella really accomplishes her promise.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BRANCO, Lúcia Castello and BRANDÃO, Ruth Silviano. *A Mulher Escrita*. Rio de Janeiro: Casa-Maria Editorial / Milmam Edições Ltda., 1989. p. 19; 28.

CAVALIER, Christine. *Women Coming Back From the Dead: A Feminist Interpretation of Poe's "Berenice" and "Morella."* Disponível em: < <http://www.valpo.edu/christc/abstracts.html> > Acesso em: 27 out. 2000.

GILBERT, Sandra M. and GUBAR, Susan. *The Mad Woman in the Attic: the woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984. p. 8; 23-25; 30-31.

POE, Edgar Allan. *Selected Poetry and Prose of Edgar Allan Poe*. MABBOTT, T. O. (Ed.). New York: The Modern Library, 1951. p. 92-95; 369.

SHOWALTER, Elaine. "American Questions." In: *Sister's Choice: tradition and change in American women's writing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. p. 12.

TATE, Allen. "The Angelic Imagination." In: BLOOM, Harold (Ed.). *Edgar Allan Poe: Modern Critical Views*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1985. p. 36.

TELLES, Norma. "Autor+a". IN: JOBIM, José Luís (Org.) *Palavras da crítica: tendências e conceitos no estudo da literatura*. Rio de Janeiro: Imago, 1992. p. 48.

Francisco Francimar de Sousa Alves
Rua João Coleta, 25 – Ed. Maria de Lourdes Guimarães Braga Barreto, apto. 3 – Cj.
Leopoldina; CEP. 58900-000 - Cajazeiras-PB
E-mail: f-francimar@uol.com.br