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OBSSESSION IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S "THE BLACK CAT" AND "THE TELL-TALE HEART"

Trabalho de Conclusão de Curso

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ABSTRACT

While reading Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, it is possible to notice that many of his narratives are filled with obsessive characters, but only few studies are concerned with the question of obsession in Poe's stories. Much of what was written until now has been in relation to the short story "Berenice" in which the protagonist is obsessed with his cousin's teeth. In this sense, the purpose of this study is to analyze the theme of obsession in Poe's short stories "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart" once it seems to have a key influence in the most relevant actions in the short stories. According to Nöel Carroll, narratives are supposed to elicit a certain effect (14). Based on this, the main objective of this study is to understand how obsession, in these short stories, contribute to create a Gothic-terror effect. In this regard, it was possible to notice that obsession in "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart", when interpreted as the main theme of these narratives, creates effects such as suspense, a feeling of being haunted and also an uncanny effect.

KEY WORDS: obsession, "The Black Cat", "The Tell-Tale Heart", Edgar Allan Poe.

RESUMO:

Quando lemos os contos de Edgar Allan Poe, é possível notar que muitas de suas histórias estão repletas de personagens obsessivos, mas há poucos estudos interessados na questão da obsessão existente nos contos de Poe. Muito do que foi publicado até agora foi em relação ao conto “Berenice”, no qual o protagonista é obcecado pelos dentes de sua prima. A partir disso, o propósito deste estudo é analisar o tema da obsessão nos contos “O Gato Preto” e “O Coração Delator”, uma vez que nestes contos a obsessão parece ser uma influência central nas ações mais relevantes destas histórias. Segundo Nöel Carroll, narrativas supostamente têm que gerar certos efeitos (14). Baseado nisto, o principal objetivo deste estudo é entender como a obsessão, pode contribuir para a criação de um efeito de terror-Gótico nos dois contos. A partir disto, foi possível notar que a obsessão em “O Gato Preto” e em “O Coração Delator”, quando interpretada como o principal tema destas narrativas, cria efeitos como suspense, uma sensação de estar sendo assombrado e um efeito perturbador.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: obsessão, “O Gato Preto”, “O Coração Delator”, Edgar Allan Poe.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In his own time, Edgar Allan Poe was known for being a magazine editor and especially a poet; he wrote several successful poems, such as “Annabel Lee” and his most well-known poem “The Raven”. However, Poe was a versatile writer, who also produced literary criticism and many short stories. Some of his short stories were satirical, others were crime-investigation stories, but he is most famous and remembered nowadays for his Gothic tales.

Poe’s Gothic short stories usually address themes such as death, decay, murder, vengeance, and obsession. The latter theme can be seen in several of Poe’s stories such as “Berenice”, “The Tell-Tale Heart”, “The Cask of Amontillado”, among others. Even though obsession is present in many of Poe’s tales, few studies have been carried considering this theme and when it is possible to find studies that debate obsession in Poe’s stories, they are tangential and mostly focused on the short story “Berenice”.

One example is McGhee’s article “Morbid Conditions: Poe and the sublimity of disease”. In this study, the author shows how the obsessed protagonists of “The Fall of The House of Usher” and “Berenice” can only achieve the sublime by means of their diseases (55-70). This is precisely the case of “Berenice”, in which Egaeus’s disease makes the protagonist obsessed with normal objects. However, the focus of this work is not obsession, but the theme of disease in the short story. The same can be noticed in Givhan’s essay “‘Que tous ses dents etaient des idées’: Egaeu’s Determination to Reassert Male Power in Edgar Allan Poe’s *Berenice*”, which addresses obsession as a catalyst that helps the protagonist to overcome his feelings of inferiority towards his cousin Berenice, once she starts taking control of him (198-200). These studies do not focus directly on the theme issue of obsession; although it has an important role in the narrative, it is only a peripheral aspect of their analysis.

It can be argued that the theme of obsession in Poe's short stories does not receive the attention it deserves and, in this regard, this research proposes a study of obsession as a central theme in the short stories "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart". These stories bear many similarities: they are both narrated in first person, which makes them more personal and dramatic, and also both narratives bear a resemblance in terms of plot. Strong feelings of obsession seem to be what drives the characters actions in the story. In this sense, it could be said that obsession has such an importance on both narratives that it becomes an essential element in the construction of these plots.

I will argue here that, when obsession is comprehended as a central theme in these short stories, it becomes a key element in the creation of an effect. According to Noel Carroll, Gothic narratives have a certain function, which is: to raise a terror effect in the stories (14). In "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart", obsession can be seen as responsible for building the terror effects in the narrative. In this regard, this study aims at analyzing both shorts stories to understand how the theme of obsession fulfills this function. Therefore, the purpose here is to discuss how obsession contributes to the creation of a Gothic-terror atmosphere in the stories.

The definition of obsession in this work is given by Pierre Janet, who states that:

. . . *obsession* is constituted of an idea that completely thrills the individual, leading it to an intense emotion, in which the individual seeks to free him/herself by a reaction, whose value it cannot outweigh. Emotion is an essential condition, and in this, it differs from the fixed idea, in which the individual only thinks about one thing, but does not get thrilled with the content of the idea.¹ (qtd. in Roxo 669)

¹In the original: "A obsessão é constituída por uma ideia que empolga completamente o indivíduo lhe acarreta uma emoção intensa, de que busca se libertar por uma reação, cujo valor não pode sopesar. É

According to Janet, obsession and fixed idea are similar cases, the main difference being that for a fixed idea to be characterized as obsession, it must be connected with an “intense emotion” (qtd. in Roxo 669), which the individual “cannot outweigh” (qtd. in Roxo 669). In other words, fixed idea is present in both cases, the difference however is that emotion “is an essential condition” (qtd. in Roxo 669) that makes a fixed idea become obsession.

Obsession has been a common theme in literature at least since Horace Walpole wrote the Gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto*², and it is also a recurrent theme in Edgar Allan Poe’s works. Snodgrass affirms that “as a motivator of the Gothic novel and short fiction, obsession becomes a controlling form of aberrant behavior in characters” (258). This “aberrant behavior” appears in “The Tell-Tale Heart” by means of the narrator, who is obsessed with the blind eye of an old man. This particular eye frightens the character to the extent that, for him to be in peace, it is necessary to end the old man’s life. In “The Black Cat”, obsession is characterized by an intense aversion (that later is transformed into fear) towards a cat. The narrator is obsessed with the cat due to the fact that it reminds him of another cat he had before, named Pluto, which he murdered. Although the object of obsession takes a different form (a blind eye and a black cat), in each short story, they converge in terms of plots and theme.

In short, and to come to the point, this work is concerned with how obsession as a theme can contribute to create a Gothic-terror atmosphere once, narratives are supposed to elicit an effect on the stories. According to Gancho, “theme is the idea in which the story is

condição essencial a emoção, e nisto há a diferença com a ideia fixa, em que o indivíduo só pensa em uma coisa, mas não se emociona com o conteúdo da ideia.” Henceforth, all translations will be mine.

² The Castle of Otranto, from 1764, is a novel written by Horace Walpole in which set many characteristics of the Gothic genre (Botting 31).

developed around³” (30), that is, the theme is the main idea in which the story is built. Once obsession is identified as the theme of “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart”, it can be seen that indeed this motif has a key function in both stories. In this regard, in this study, the theme of obsession will receive the attention it deserves, since only few works have studied it, and in doing so, obsession was treated only as a coadjvant, as it happens in Givhan’s and McGhee’s works.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This section will be divided into three subsections: the first contains a critical review and contextualization on Edgar Allan Poe’s life and works; in sequence, the second subsection discusses the connection between psychoanalysis and the Gothic as tools for academic criticism. Finally, the third subsection debates obsession as an essential element for the creation of terror in the short stories. Theorists such as Susan Amper, Nöel Carroll, David Punter, Glennis Byron, and others will be used as theoretical background for this research.

2.1 Contextualizing Poe’s life and works: a critical review

Edgar Allan Poe is a nineteenth-century American writer well-known nowadays for his poems and short stories; he is also notorious for being a disturbed-minded alcoholic. However, according to Amper, in his life time, Poe was much more known for his work as a poet, by his work as a sharp literary critic and as magazine editor. In fact, the terror short stories for which he is famous nowadays i.e. (“The Fall of the House of Usher”, “The Black Cat”, “A Descent into the Maelström”, etc.) received many negative reviews at the time of publication, criticized for resembling old-fashioned German Gothic stories (37). Poe did not only write terror short stories, he was a resourceful author who also wrote satiric short stories

³ In the original: “Tema é a idéia em torno da qual se desenvolve a história” (Gancho 30)

such as “Few words with a Mummy”, and crime-investigation tales such as “The mystery of Marie Rôget” and “Murders in the Rue Morgue”, which granted him the title of the “inventor of the modern detective story” (PoeMuseum) and the title of creator of the short story genre (Amper 37).

Poe was born in Boston on January, 19, 1809; he was the child of actors Elizabeth Arnold Poe and David Poe. He lost his parents early in life: his father left the family some time after he was born, and his mother died when he was only three years old. After his mother’s death, Poe went to live in Richmond, and was adopted by Frances and John Allan, a rich tobacco merchant. His adoptive father had plans for him to be a businessman, but Poe’s dream of becoming a poet emerged already in his childhood. A fact that shows his interest in writing are the verses that were found in the back of John Allan’s accounting sheets, showing that Poe did not have any interest in turning into a businessman (Bio.)

In 1826, Poe enrolled in the University of Virginia. He was an excellent student, but he could barely maintain himself due to little money that John Allan sent him. For this reason Poe went back to Richmond only to find out that the woman he was engaged with, was now engaged to someone else. He joined the United States Army in 1827 and, in that same year he published his first book *Tamerlane and Other Poems*. Two years later, Frances, his adoptive mother died of tuberculosis. After her death, he and his father put aside their differences for a moment and Allan helped Poe to get a position in the United States Military Academy in West Point. Still in 1829, Poe published his second collection of poetry, *Al Aaraaf, Tamerlane and Minor Poems* (Bio).

After his period in the military academy, Poe moved to Baltimore to live with his aunt Maria Clemm and her daughter Virginia, who later would become his wife. There, Poe

started publishing some short stories, and one of them even won a literary contest organized by the periodical Baltimore Saturday Visiter. Winning the contest helped him to start a career of magazine editor at the magazine The Southern Literary Messenger, where he wrote a sharp and offensive critic to, also poet, Rufus Griswold, who became his rival. In 1837, Poe moved to New York in order to find a job in another magazine and he wrote *The adventures of Arthur Gordon Pym*. In 1838, Poe was writing for several magazines in New York such as Burton's Magazine, Graham's Magazine and Alexander's Weekly Messenger (Bio).

Even though Poe was publishing for several magazines and gaining some fame, money was still a problem. When Poe published a book of short stories called *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*, he received no money as payment, only some copies of the book. In 1845, he published his most famous poem “The Raven”, which granted him some fame, including international recognition, and he was able to publish two books and buy the Broadway Journal. However, he did not succeed as a journal owner and already in 1846 he had to leave New York. One year later, his wife Virginia passed away, which brought him much grief. Two years later, in October 7th, 1849, Edgar Allan Poe passed away. He spent his last days on the Washington College Hospital and until nowadays no one knows precisely what caused Poe’s death (PoeMuseum).

After his death, Rufus Griswold, in an attempt of getting revenge, wrote a derogatory obituary in which he exalted the idea that Poe was a “drunken womanizing madman with no morals and no friends” (PoeMuseum). His intention was to make the public forget about Poe, but the plan backfired as, it increased the sales of Poe’s books, and nowadays Griswold is only remembered by the biography he wrote about Poe (PoeMuseum). However, Rufus Griswold was not the only person who helped to create the myth that Poe had a disturbed mind. Charles Baudelaire, who translated *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* into French

in 1856 under the title of *Histories Extraordinaire*, wrote in his introduction to the book that Poe was a “*poète maudit*” (damned poet). However, unlike Griswold, Baudelaire’s text was laudatory, stating that Poe wrote one of the finest and best literary works of his time (Amper 39). The infamous reputation created by Griswold about Poe led scholars to misinterpret his works, as it will be better explained in the following section.

2.2 Gothic and Psychoanalysis

According to Punter and Byron, “the history of the uncanny as an instrument of literary criticism was essentially fixed by Freud’s great essay, ‘The Uncanny’ (1919)” (283). In this essay, Freud explains this feeling by using examples of real life experiences and situations. Freud also resorts to several literary works to present his ideas, including E.T.A Hoffmann’s short story “The Sandman”, which was the narrative chosen to better illustrate the uncanny for the reader. “The Sandman” narrates the experience of a child, named Nathaniel, who was frightened by the legend of the Sandman, a terrifying creature that steals people’s eyes. The narrator believes that such figure is his father’s lawyer and that this man is responsible for the father’s death. Later in his life, as an adult, the main character believes that the lawyer assumed a different identity and reappears in his life, causing him several misfortunes, which culminate in his death.

From this short story, Freud reaches some conclusions: the first one is that the uncanny effect is mostly represented by “the fear of being robbed of one’s eye” (7), a trauma that the narrator keeps since he was a small child. Another component of the story that exemplifies uncanniness is the dual nature that lifeless objects may embody or contain. In “The Sandman”, this is represented by Olympia, a doll which Nathaniel falls in love with.

Moreover, Freud argues that the feeling of uncanniness is connected with a person's suppressed experiences or feelings that reappear in this person's life. Finally, Freud affirms that literary texts are much more capable of raising uncanniness feelings than real life. Considering these statements, it can be understood why academic criticism embraced the uncanny as a literary tool.

With the development of Freud's theories in the first decades of the twentieth century, academic criticism soon incorporated psychoanalysis as a critical tool for analyzing literature. Many works by Edgar Allan Poe were read in that light, some examples of psychoanalytical interpretations of Poe's texts were developed by theorists such as Lorine Pruette, John Robertson, Joseph Wood Krutch, and Marie Bonaparte. However, according to critic Susan Amper, "much of what was written about Poe from the 1920's to the 1940's continued to focus on his presumed psychopathology" (40). Amper considers that Edgar Allan Poe's works were largely misinterpreted, due to erroneous critical perception that considered the narrator's voice was the same as the author's. Once Poe's stories are written mostly in first person, psychoanalytic critics of this generation tended to interpret his works as a reflex of his personality. She explains that this idea was largely spread by the obituary that Poe's rival, Rufus Griswold, wrote after his death, which exalted the idea that Poe had a disturbed mind, once his tales were macabre, and contained death, murder, and madness as recurrent themes (38).

It can be seen that psychoanalysis had an important impact on Gothic criticism after Freud's essay, once it is a tool that has been contributing to the field since the early twentieth century. This suggests that Gothic literature is a mode of exposing psychoanalytical traits, since many stories from this genre explore psychological issues, such as psychopathy, madness, vengeance, fear, obsession etc. According to Culler, "psychoanalytic theory had an

impact on literary studies both as a mode of interpretation and as a theory about language, identity, and the subject” (128). From this it can be seen that although psychoanalysis was an important tool for the interpretation and analysis of Gothic literature, it also has been contributing to literary criticism as a whole.

2.3. *The Horror/Terror Effect in Literature.*

In the book *The Philosophy of Horror or Paradoxes of the Heart*, Nöel Carroll explains why people get frightened while reading/watching horror book/movies, even though they are conscious that what is being read/watched is fictional. Moreover, he discusses the reasons why spectators *willingly* want to be frightened. Carroll intends to define what is “art-horror” or, in other words, how artistic horror is presented in different medias: books, movies, TV series, operas, theatre, radio programs and so on. Concerning the horror genre, he states that:

Like suspense novels or mystery novels, novels are denominated horrific in respect of their intended capacity to raise a certain *affect* [effect]. Indeed, the genres of suspense, mystery, and horror derive their very names from the affects they are intended to promote — a sense of suspense, a sense of mystery, and a sense of horror. (14)

According to Carroll, the horror genre has a key objective: to cause a horrific impact in its audience; in other words, horror texts have the function to frighten the reader/spectator who are reading or watching a book/movie. Carroll is particularly concerned with the responses that the genre is supposed to raise in the public. Once audience response is not the main purpose of the present study, the short stories will be analyzed under the perspective that the genre is actually supposed to create a narrative effect in the story. In other words, this

research looks at Poe's stories from a textual and compositional perspective (not reception), and it is interested in analyzing the horror genre function and ways of creating a certain atmosphere in the narrative, written or filmed.

It can be said that not every “macabre” story or movie belongs to the horror genre. According to Ann Radcliffe⁴, there is a distinction between terror and horror. For her, terror narratives are the ones which “expands the soul and awakens the [mental] faculties to a high degree of life” (5). In other words, terror narratives are much more connected with psychological issues. In these short stories, the dreadful effect is created by a lack of rationality on behalf of the characters, who are caught in a dilemma between the real and the supernatural. Conversely, Radcliffe defines horror as something that “contracts, freezes, and nearly annihilates them [faculties]” (5). For Radcliffe, horror is more connected with something in which a person cannot control, or cannot fully understand, preventing a person to rationalize. Another definition that is in accordance with Radcliffe’s is given by Nöel Carroll, who states that terror tales “achieve their frightening effects by exploring psychological phenomena that are all too human” (15). In this regard, terror narratives are the proper term for Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories analyzed here, for they deal with obsession, which is a largely personal and psychological matter .

However, once Poe’s stories are defined as terror, it must be said that this genre is also capable of raising other effects such as uncanny, suspense or mystery. The point here is that definitions should not be taken as absolute and clear-cut, for different kinds of effects may co-exist in one narrative. Therefore, terror tales can encompass many different effects and have many similar functions as tales of horror. More to the point, it can be argued that in

⁴ Ann Radcliffe is an eighteenth-century Gothic writer who is famous by the novels *The mysteries of Udolpho*, from 1794 and *The Italian*, from 1797. Her novels were very famous among the public, and were well received by the critics at the time (Botting 41).

order to accomplish its terror effects, some narrative elements have to be present. In the case of “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart”, this component or element appears in the theme. Since obsession is the main theme in both short stories, it bears the responsibility of creating such narrative effects. To have a better understanding of how it is developed in both short stories, the following sections will present a detailed analysis.

3. “THE BLACK CAT”

“The Black Cat”, first published in the magazine *The Saturday Evening Post*, in 1843, is a story narrated in first person that tells the story of a man who was very affectionate to animals, especially to his cat Pluto. At first, he was a good person, but after he started drinking, he became an angered man. Pluto was the only one that escaped his “ill temper” (Poe “The Black Cat” 3), but it did not last long; one night when he got home “much intoxicated” (Poe “The Black Cat” 3), he took out one of the cat’s eye just because the cat bit him. After this, he felt some remorse, but again it did not last long. One morning he decides “to do wrong for the wrong’s sake” (Poe “The Black Cat” 4) and hangs Pluto on a tree. After a while, in another night, another cat uncannily similar to Pluto appears in his life and is welcomed by the man’s wife. However, he gets obsessed with the cat, believing that it is Pluto reincarnated. As time passes by, the man becomes more aggressive, and in one attempt to take the life of this cat also, his wife interferes and, consumed by a “rage more than demoniacal” (Poe “The Black Cat” 6), he “buried the axe in her brain” (Poe “The Black Cat” 6) Then, he decides to hide his wife’s body in a hole in the wall.

Four days had passed after he murdered his wife, and there was no sign of the cat as well. When the police arrive in his house to investigate the disappearance of his wife, they severely search the place, and after looking for her in the house four times, the police goes to

the basement where he hid the body. When the police is about to leave, once they had not found anything, the man starts to brag about how that was “an *excellently* well-constructed house” (Poe “The Black Cat” 8), then, he beats on the wall in which he had immured her, and suddenly “a cry, at first muffled and broken, . . . one long loud and continuous scream, utterly anomalous and inhuman -a howl- a wailing shriek came from inside the tomb” (Poe “The Black Cat” 8). The police hurried to destroy the wall, and found inside the woman’s corpse and “upon its head . . . sat the hideous beast” (Poe “The Black Cat” 8).

3.1. Obsession in “The Black Cat”

Obsession in “The Black Cat” is introduced to the reader only in the second half of the short story, after Pluto’s murder. Subsequently to the killing of the animal, the narrator cannot stop thinking about his brutal act: “for months I could not rid myself of the phantasm of the cat; and during this period, there came back into my spirit a half-sentiment that seemed but was not remorse” (Poe “The Black Cat” 3). The narrator’s obsession stems mostly from thoughts that kept reminding him of the atrocity he had committed, and that arouse in him a “half-sentiment”, that is possibly guilt. It is noticeable from the example that he shows signs of what Pierre Janet defines as obsession; the narrator has a fixed idea, strongly connected with a sentiment. In this case, he has a fixed idea related to the act of hanging the pet that is linked to a “half sentiment”, showing that the trigger for his obsession was the murder of Pluto. Also, the second cat can be seen as a trigger when strongly associated with Pluto, thus bringing memories of the crime, as it will be shown below.

As the story develops, the “half-sentiment” starts to get more specific, after the appearance of the second cat in the narrator’s life. At first, the similarities between both cats are only related to the color and, therefore, it was not troublesome for him. When he first

encounters the second cat, he is gentle to it but, once he starts to see closely the characteristics that reminded him of his wrongdoing, the way the narrator/character sees the cat changes: “what added, no doubt, to my hatred of the beast, was the discovery, on the morning after I brought it home, that, like Pluto, it also had been deprived of one of its eyes” (Poe “The Black Cat” 4). In connection with Freud’s reading of “The Sandman”, the eye emerges here as a pivotal symbol in the narrative. The missing eye of this cat is a problem for the protagonist, for it symbolizes a reminder of his perverseness to Pluto. Before killing Pluto, he plucked one of the pet’s eye, thus, when he realizes that this cat also does not have one eye, it becomes a constant reminder of his “former crime” (Poe “The Black Cat” 4).

The association of Pluto with this new cat makes that first sentiment that was related to guilt or remorse change into hatred of the animal. One could argue that this change may have occurred due to the awakening of a sense of *doppelgänger* on the narrator. In other words, this animal that followed him home had an uncanny connection with his former pet Pluto. According to Freud, the *doppelgänger* is “the idea of a double in every shape and degree” (8), that is, a sense of duplicity in which an individual could completely resemble another. Even though the cats are not exactly the same, they have specific characteristics that make one very similar to another; in addition to the color being the same, another characteristic that connects both cats is the lack of one of the eyes.

The appearance of the second cat in the narrative adds to the story an uncanny dimension. According to Freud, the presences of *doppelgängers* in a story are elements capable of creating an uncanny effect on a narrative (8-9). The very title “The Black Cat” (and not the black cats) is indicative of this duality and uncanny dimension that, via the narrator’s obsession, creates the terror effect in the story. The effect is gradually constructed in this short story according to the way the protagonist sees the cat, i.e., initially for him, this

cat was only another animal that by its color resembled Pluto, and the white mark on the second cat's chest was a way to differentiate both of them. As the narrator becomes more and more obsessed with the cat's appearance, what once seemed a mere coincidence, such as the cat's missing eye, starts to become an evidence that proves to him (and to the reader) that this cat did not only look like Pluto, but it would seem that it could actually be Pluto's ghost. One example that supports this idea is the white mark that first was used to distinguish both of them, and initially was described by the narrator as an "indefinite splotch of white" (Poe "The Black Cat" 5) is now given a more precise description.

The reader will remember that this mark, although large, had been originally very indefinite; but, by slow degrees — degrees nearly imperceptible, and which for a long time my reason struggled to reject as fanciful — it had, at length, assumed a rigorous distinctness of outline. It was now the representation of an object that I shudder to name — and for this, above all, I loathed, and dreaded, and would have rid myself of the monster had I dared — it was now, I say, the image of a hideous — of a ghastly thing — of the GALLows! (Poe "The Black Cat" 5)

The necessity of having to prove that the cat is indeed a "monster" can be seen earlier in the narrative, when the narrator is still at the initial level of his obsession. Some time after the cat had been accepted in the house by his wife, the narrator starts to feel that the animal was following him around the house, and he starts feeling persecuted by the animal:

It followed my footsteps with a pertinacity which would be difficult to make the reader comprehend. Whenever I sat, it would crouch beneath my chair, or spring upon my knees covering me with its loathsome caresses. If I

arouse to walk it would get between my feet and thus nearly throw me down, or, fastening its long and sharp claws in my dress, clamber, in this manner to my breast. (Poe “The Black Cat” 4)

From the excerpt it can be seen that the man was feeling haunted by the cat, thus creating the image that the cat could be Pluto’s *doppelgänger*, its Gothic ghost. The murder, as mentioned above, can be seen as the trigger of his obsession, thus the act of the cat following him can be interpreted as a remembrance of his atrocities. Once the cat embodies the personification of his crime, it can be said that the narrator is actually being “haunted” by the feeling of guilt, shame or remorse related to the killing of the cat. In this regard, this sense of being haunted felt by the protagonist is also a sign of his obsession, once this can be seen as a construct of his mind.

Consequently, this idea of being constantly haunted leads the narrator to change his feeling in relation to the cat once again; instead of hating it, he was now fearing it: “at such times, although I longed to destroy it with a blow, I was yet withheld from so doing, partly by a memory of my former crime, but chiefly — let me confess it at once — by absolute dread of the beast” (Poe “The Black Cat” 4). The awe that he felt of the cat is also an important element regarding the development of his obsession. This terror is what led him into a higher degree of his obsession illness. It can be noticed that the fear had great influence on the way he was seeing the cat, thus making him believe that this animal could be Pluto, and thus become obsessed with this idea.

In conclusion, the motif of obsession is developed throughout the short story in the following way: it is clear that the narrator was indeed obsessed; however, it was noticed a variance in the feelings attached to his fixed idea that evolves from guilt/remorse to

anger/hatred to awe/fear to murderous desires. Initially, he felt that “half-sentiment that seemed but was not remorse” (Poe “The Black Cat” 3), then it changed to hatred, and finally to fear. This progression of feelings and the ways it is constructed in the narrative is directly related to the creation of certain narratives effects on the story. In “The Black Cat”, the narrative organization is capable of raising an uncanny effect through the use of the *doppelgänger*, arousing a sense of obsession and haunt in the narrative.

4. “THE TELL-TALE HEART”

The short story “The Tell-Tale Heart”, first published in January 1843 in the inaugural issue of the magazine *The Pioneer*, tells the history of a madman who is afraid of the “Evil eye” (Poe “The Tell-Tale Heart” 1) of an old man he lives with. The narrator of the story is so frightened by that eye that it makes his “blood ran cold” (Poe “The Tell-Tale Heart” 1) every time he saw it. For this reason he plans the old man’s death for eight days. After the murder, he butchers the old man and hides the body parts under the floorboard. When the police officers arrive at the house looking for the old man, the murderer believes that nobody would discover that he assassinated the old man, as he believed he had hidden the body so well “that no human eye . . . could have detected anything wrong” (Poe “The Tell-Tale Heart” 3), and so he invites the police to chat. What happens next is that he starts to listen to “a low, dull, quick sound - much such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton” (Poe “The Tell-Tale Heart” 2). The man then thinks that the sound that he is hearing is the old man’s heartbeat echoing in his ear, that drives him into despair and he ends up confessing to the police that he had assassinated the old man.

4.1. Obsession in “The Tell-Tale Heart”

Even though “The Tell-Tale Heart” repeats a number of elements present in “The Black Cat”, it is structurally different from the latter, since it presents obsession since the beginning of the narrative. On the second paragraph, the narrator intends to explain his reasons for committing such atrocity to an elderly person, once there was no apparent motive for the murder: “I think it was his eye! yes it was this! One of his eyes resembled that of a vulture — a pale blue eye, with a film over it. Whenever it fell upon me, my blood ran cold” (Poe “The Tell-Tale Heart” 1). It is possible to notice that the catalyst for the murder was the old man’s blind eye, which had the power to frighten the narrator. What indicates that this man was obsessed with the eye in this excerpt is the quantity of times that the word “eye” is presented, and repeated here; this suggests that the narrator has a fixed idea in relation to the eye. Also, the way the narrator says that this “Evil eye” (Poe “The Tell-Tale Heart” 1) is the main reason that he is killing the old man are indicative that he is obsessed with the eye, once the evilness of the eye terrifies him.

The fear that the narrator feels of this eye was so enormous that it had a great influence on the decision of killing the elderly man. The narrator had the strongest belief that if the “Evil eye” (Poe “The Tell-Tale Heart” 1) could not disturb him, he would be in peace once again: “very gradually — I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye for ever” (Poe “The Tell-Tale Heart” 1). Fear of the blind eye is what characterizes this narrator as an obsessed person once again, as according to Janet, obsession is a fixed idea associated with a strong feeling. It can be noticed, the protagonist has a fixed idea in relation to the eye, once the protagonist sees this blind eye as dreadful and evil, and as this thought could not leave his mind, this narrator can be considered obsessed.

It can be argued that, alongside with his obsession with the blind eye, the narrator also developed an obsession with murder, and this idea is reinforced by the following excerpt: “It

is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain; but once conceived it haunted me day and night" (Poe "The Tell-Tale Heart" 1). In this example, it is possible to see how this character develops a second obsession: the sentence "haunted me day and night" indicates that he had a fixed idea. Obsession emerges here in relation to the passing of time, showing that this recurrent idea was in his mind the whole time. The sense of being 'haunted' also contributes to demonstrate that both obsession triggers are strongly associated, since the narrator believes that his torment will only cease if he kills the elderly man to get rid of the eye.

As the narrative evolves, the narrator conducts the reader to the time in which he will assassin the old man. He believes that by killing him, he will not be troubled by the eye anymore, but what happens is that the object of his obsession is no longer the eye; it is transferred to the sound of the old man's heartbeat. Moments before he commits the murder, the old man is scared by a noise he hears, and due to the silence in the house, the protagonist thinks he is able to hear the heartbeats: "now I say, there came into my ears a low dull quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I knew *that* sound well too. It was the beating of the old man's heart" (Poe "The Tell-Tale Heart" 2). From the moment the protagonist hears it, he starts to monitor it, every instant that he is listening to it, until he is sure that the old man is dead, this also are an indicative that he is obsessed with the heartbeat, once he spends some time just listening, and monitoring how the heartbeats increased. Moreover the sentence "*a low dull quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton*" (Poe "The Tell-Tale Heart" 4) reappears at the end of the short story, while the narrator is with the police officers in the house. These examples are indicative that the sound of the heartbeats had been in his mind all this time, once he says that he recognizes it as a sound coming from the heart.

The same happens with the way the narrator describes the heartbeats, firstly at the moment he starts to hear it, and then later, while he is interacting with the police officers. The first description of the heartbeat is the following:

Meantime the hellish tattoo of the heart increased. It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant. The old man's terror *must* have been extreme! It grew louder, I say, louder every moment! . . . But the beating grew louder, louder! I thought the heart must burst. And now a new anxiety seized me – the sound would be heard by a neighbor! (Poe "The Tell-Tale Heart" 3)

It can be noticed here that the sound has a clear influence on the way he feels, giving him strong emotions of anxiety, and also showing that the sound started to be constantly present in the protagonist's mind. As it happens in the previous example of the heartbeats, some words present in the excerpt above will reappear at the end of the narrative. The repetition of the word "louder" indicates that he is obsessed with the sound, due to the way the narrator describes the sound of the heartbeat; as in the example above, he also monitored the heartbeats and the way they increased. This demonstrates that the protagonist is constantly thinking about this element, causing him strong feelings such as despair, which will ultimately, makes him confess the murder. The obsession with the heartbeats is an important factor in the story, it contributes to the creation of an effect of suspense in the story, whether it really is the old man's heartbeat that he is listening to or if it is his own heartbeat, generated by fear of being discovered by the police.

One could argue that the narrator's obsession manifested initially in relation to the eye and then to the heartbeat, was only possible due to the fact that this man was not sane. On the

initial lines of the short story, the narrator already hints to the readership the possibility that he might be insane, given that he needs to assure the opposite to the reader: “but why will you say that I am mad?” (Poe “The Tell-Tale Heart” 1). Throughout the story, the narrator feels the necessity to reinforce his mental capabilities to the readers several times but, this is only another indicative that indeed he does not reason as a person with a healthy mind. What can also reinforce this idea is that he intends to prove his sanity by describing how he had butchered the old man’s body before hiding it under the floorboards: “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” (Poe “The Tell-Tale Heart” 3). The narrator affirms that a mad person would not be so intelligent to plan someone’s death, but paradoxically, his arguments only contribute to reinforce that indeed he has lost his mind.

Comparing both short stories, it is perceptible that the motif of obsession in “The Tell-Tale Heart” is depicted in a different manner than in “The Black Cat”. In “The Black Cat”, there is a change in the way the narrator feels about the object of his obsession, that is, from one indefinite “half-sentiment”, evolves from possibly guilt, to hate, and later fear, while the object of his obsession, Pluto’s murder and the second cat, remains the same. However, in “The Tell-Tale Heart” what happens is different: what changes is the object of the character’s obsession, from the blind eye to the heartbeats, and it can be argued that the emotions linked to them also changes. Firstly, the narrator is obsessed by the old man’s blind eye that scares him; alongside to this obsession there is the obsession with the plan to kill the elderly. Then, before the assassination, his obsession is transferred to the sound of the old man’s heartbeat heard seconds before the crime. Instead of fear, the narrator’s sentiment now could also be despair, guilt or remorse. Yet it does not change the fact that both narrators also show characteristics of being obsessed.

5. FINAL REMARKS

In this study, it was proposed an analysis of two of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, "The Black Cat" and The Tell-Tale Heart", in order to understand how the theme of obsession presents itself in both short stories and how it contributes to the creation of a Gothic atmosphere in these narratives. Nöel Carroll states that narratives are supposed to elicit an effect in stories, in the case of these two short stories, they are supposed to raise a terror effect (14). It can be said that narratives have a function they need to fulfill, in this sense, the element responsible for fulfilling this function on both narratives is obsession. I have discussed here the role of obsession as the main theme of both short stories and how it helps in the creation of a terror effect in those narratives.

From the analysis presented, I argued that both narrators are obsessed, based on Pierre Janet's definition of obsession. Janet states that an obsessed person has strong feelings or emotions necessarily connected to a fixed idea (qtd. in Roxo 669). The character's/narrators's obsession is a central element for both short stories once most of the character's relevant actions are decided or strongly influenced by it. In "The Black Cat", the man assassinates his wife in order to try to get rid of the object of his obsession. Thus, it can be argued that the murder of his wife was a consequence of his obsession illness, which took control of his every thought. In "The Tell- Tale Heart", the narrator also decides to kill the old man in order to get rid of the old man's blind eye that terrifies him. The main difference in here is that this protagonist's act was not sudden. His obsession achieved a level that led him to create a plan to assassin the old man.

Murder and death are characteristics known to be present in Gothic stories and novels. Once both murders happen due to the narrators' desire to get rid of the objects of their obsession, it can be argued that the murder is the consequence of their obsession. Thus, it can

be seen that the influence of the obsession of the narrators in “The Tell Tale Heart” and in “The Black Cat” fulfills the function of raising a terror effect in the stories, in accordance to Carroll’s art-fear theories.

Another effect that the theme of obsession in these short stories helps to create is the sensation of being “haunted” that the two protagonists felt. In “The Black Cat”, the narrator had the feeling that the second cat had been constantly following his footsteps, thus causing him to feel as if the animal was persecuting him. Also, it could be said that the narrator believed that the second cat could actually be Pluto’s ghost haunting him. Differently, in “The Tell-Tale Heart”, the narrator was not being “haunted” by something he believed to be a ghost, but actually by one idea: the idea to kill the old man. The idea can be interpreted as a “haunt” once the narrator mentions that the idea of killing the old man kept in his mind for days.

It can be argued that the presence of these Gothic “hauntings” in the narratives also contribute to the creation of a terror effect, since the obsession of the protagonists is what urged them to murder. The desire to get rid of the object of their obsession, led both narrators to consequently kill someone. In the case of “The Black Cat” there is the possibility that the narrator’s belief that the second cat could be Pluto’s ghost could be true, but despite this, the belief derives from the fact that the similarities between the two cats, the missing eye, and the white splotch that resembled a gallows, were reminders that he had assassinated his pet.

Although the obsession of each narrators is responsible for the terror effect in both stories, in “The Black Cat” there is a noticeable terror effect that is not present in “The Tell Tale-Heart”: the uncanny effect. The uncanny effect in this narrative is brought by the second cat that appears in the narrator’s life. This animal arouses in the protagonist a sense of

doppelgänger due to the similarities between this cat and Pluto. Though this effect is constructed gradually in the narrative it is quite relevant given that the narrator gets more and more obsessed with this cat, the more he finds characteristics that linked this cat with Pluto. In this sense, his obsession is responsible for the creation of the uncanny effect in the narrative. The narrator's obsession has great influence on the way the narrator sees the characteristics that could be used as a 'proof' that that cat could be Pluto's ghost, as the white mark on its chest, and the missing eye.

In "The Tell-Tale Heart", it can be said that the terror effect is mostly created by word repetition. The recurrence of the word "louder" is responsible for creating a certain suspense effect in the short story, influencing on the narrative's outcome. The word "louder" appears repeatedly at the moment that the protagonist is about to kill the old man, creating thus, an anticipation effect before he commits murder. Later when the police officers are in the house, the narrator starts to hear the sound of heartbeats, which he assumes to be old man's heartbeat, due to what could be remorse or guilt. As he starts to hear the heartbeats each time "louder — *louder!*" (Poe "The Tell-Tale Heart" 4), the narrator becomes anxious, and this anxiety that he is feeling is pivotal in the creation of a suspense effect in the narrative. It is expected that something important is going to happen due to the degree of anxiety generated by word repetition and what happens is that the protagonist ends up confessing the murder to the police.

In both narratives it is possible to see that the obsession of the protagonists have different peculiarities, and also that the objects of their respective obsession are quite different: one protagonist is obsessed with the idea that a cat could be his pet's ghost, Pluto, which he had murdered, and the other is obsessed with an old man's blind eye and the sound of the old man's heartbeat. Still, there is one characteristic in both short stories that troubles

the narrator's equally: the eye. For the narrator of "The Black Cat", the missing eye of the second cat disturbed him because it connects the cat with Pluto, bringing him memories of his atrocity, and for the protagonist of "The Tell-Tale Heart" the old man's blind eye is something evil, therefore he dreads it, thus making him develop a fatal obsession.

The eye impairment in these short stories could be interpreted as if the narrators are unable to see clearly, as a mentally healthy person would see. In this sense the two men cannot perceive that their actions are full of perverseness. The protagonist of "The Black Cat" impulsively murders his wife, and his single concern after he hid his wife's body is whether the cat that tormented him disappeared. In "The Tell-Tale Heart" the protagonist plans a man's death for eight days in order to get rid of the fear he felt of the old man's blind eye. In this regard, it can be said that the damaged eye present on both short stories could be interpreted as both a symbol and a metaphor for the central theme, once their obsession had 'blinded' them.

In this analysis, it can be seen that the theme of obsession bears indeed a great influence in the construction of the Gothic-terror effects and atmosphere present in "The Black Cat" and in "The Tell-Tale Heart". Obsession in these narratives encompass a more psychological aspect, which is expressed by the feeling of being "haunted", by the sense of duality raised by the *doppelgänger*, leading to a more physical effect or consequence , which is the act of committing murder. Therefore, it can be said that when obsession is interpreted as a more relevant aspect on these narrative, as being their theme, it becomes the element that drives the story.

Studies such as McGhee's and Givhan's address the theme of obsession, however they did not treat it as the most relevant matter in the narratives they analyze. In this sense, it

is proposed here that future works should consider obsession as a key element for the interpretation of these narratives. Future studies may apply the framework used in this study to the interpretation of other of Poe's stories, such as "Berenice", "The Cask of Amontillado", or even to short stories by a different author, such as "The Birth-Mark", by Nathaniel Hawthorne. Another suggestion is that the theme obsession in "The Black Cat" and "The Tell-Tale Heart", or in other short stories, and novels, could be analyzed using different psychoanalytical theories (Jung, Lacan, Reich, Moreno).

Obsession is not only a recurrent theme in Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, but it is also a recurrent theme in several of short stories and novels existent in Gothic literature, such as Hawthorne's "Rappaccini's Daughter" and Shelley's *Frankenstein*. Studying how obsession could contribute to these stories could be a great way to have a better understanding of how this theme/motif functions inside the narratives, and to what purposes. Since obsession is a characteristic only attributed to people, it would be interesting to study how a character's obsession would influence his or her actions in the stories, and how they deal with the consequences of theirs acts when induced by obsession. In this regard, it can be said that the study of obsession could contribute a lot to the field once it has the power to be the most important element in some narrative, as it could be seen in "The Black Cat" and in "The Tell-Tale Heart".

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