

Cultural Perspectives and “the Tomahawk Man”

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Abstract

This paper deals with a classic of American literature, a master of the short story and poetry, a literary critic who demanded seriousness, professionalism and high standards of literature – Edgar Allan Poe – along with his contribution to literature in his native Appalachia and to world literature, and the way his literary legacy has been cherished in modern times and seen from different cultural perspectives. The paper will also shine additional light on the way the literary works of the “Tomahawk Man” influenced new generations of artists.

Keywords: *Poe; short story; anniversary; cultural perspectives.*

“Happy birthday, Edgar Allan Poe. Seems strange using that word ‘happy’ in the same sentence. A tragic and morose figure in his short life, Poe is celebrated today, two hundred years after his birth, as the mad genius who started it all rolling in the genre of mystery fiction. His influence in other genres and field of entertainment – from poetry to music to film – is incalculable. [...] The idea here is simple. This is a birthday party. The twenty guests invited here by the Mystery Writers of America have come to honor Edgar Allan Poe on his hundredth birthday. We celebrate his work, and we celebrate all that his work has wrought.” (Connelly 2009: xix-xx.)

Michael Connelly wrote these lines in order to introduce the essays of "Edgar winners, best-selling authors, and practitioners of the short story," (Connelly 2009: xx.) Poe's disciples, who had gathered with the same mission on their mind - to celebrate the bicentennial of his birth. All of them gave a vivid insight into the "nature" of their connection with the master of literature after whom the "Edgar Award" was named in order to pay tribute to and honour the classic of American literature. All of them are connected to Poe, all of them "directly or not so directly" (Connelly 2009: xx) were inspired by the magic of Poe's words. We will comment on a few of them.

T. Jefferson Parker, a winner of two Edgar Awards for Best Mystery, recalls his childhood in Orange County, California in 1966 and his "introduction" to Poe after his mother's "breathtaking revelation" which was that Poe described the guilty conscience: "Read 'The Tell-Tale Heart' and you'll see what I mean." (Jefferson Parker 2009: 21) For Jefferson Parker, a sixth-grader at that moment, it was a revelation indeed, since he "speculated" that Mr. Poe "knew" certain things concerning insanity and murder -

"how else could he write in the voice of a madman who remembers to use a tub to catch the blood and gore when 'he cut[s] off the head and the arms and the legs' of the old man he has murdered and places the parts beneath the floorboards" (Jefferson Parker 2009: 21-22).

Decades later, Poe's stories still make him shiver. As he claims in his essay, these stories taught him that darkness exists in the world which leaves deep traces during life. But there are also the words that can be "beautiful and mysterious and full of truth". (Jefferson Parker 2009: 22)

Lawrence Block, a proud owner of the five "busts" of Edgar, in his essay "The Curse of Amontillado" explains his "hopes" of winning this prestigious award. He had been nominated several times but failed

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to win it. After “deep contemplation” and “serious brooding” of the possible reasons that were holding him back from getting an Edgar, he finally discovered the real cause of his “misfortune” and identified it as “the curse of Amontillado”. A boomerang effect, indeed, for wrongly naming, at some point, Robert Louis Stevenson as the author of “The Cask of Amontillado”¹.

While that may have been the only time I publicly handed Poe’s classic tale to Stevenson, I’d been confused about its authorship ever since I read the story. Which, if memory serves [...], came about in the seventh grade, some fifty-seven years ago. (Block 2009: 41)

However, Block claims, he managed to “lift the terrible curse” by the omnipotent virtue of marriage since his mother-in-law’s last name was Poe! Eventually, the curse was broken, the strong “ties” unleashed. His story “By the Dawn’s Early Light” won the Edgar and for the first, and not the last time, he went home “with a porcelain bust of [his] bride’s great-great-great-etc.-uncle.” (Block 2009: 42)

“[...] Poe knew exactly how to summon our fears,” claims Jan Burke, the Edgar-winning author of twelve novels in her essay entitled “Under the Covers with Fortunato and Montresor” in which she

¹ As Benjamin F. Fisher claims when discussing the urban context in Edgar Allan Poe’s works, Poe may be considered one of the first American men of letters who “put the city locale to effective literary uses”, which is not surprising if we bear in mind that he lived mostly “in or near cities”. According to Fisher, Poe was undoubtedly the first American who exploited “urban environs as centers of great interest to his characters (and, presumably, to his readers)”. Furthermore, he identifies cities’ vastness as a perfect setting “for crime and mystery” in his works such as “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”, “The Purloined Letter”, “The City in the Sea”, “The Man of the Crowd”, “The Assigment”, and “The Cask of Amontillado” (Benjamin F. Fisher, *The Cambridge Introduction to Edgar Allan Poe*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 21–22).

describes her first “encounter” with the magic of “The Cask of Amontillado” as a young, inexperienced book-lover. The thrill of the reading made her shiver and her “covers got tossed back” which resulted in her “refusing to sleep with the bedroom door closed”. (Burke 2009: 35) However, some time later, as an adult, she recognised Poe’s master lesson in storytelling, emphasised the effects he achieved and the fact that every part of the text “contributes to its mood, its tension, and its relentless drive to its conclusion”. (Burke 2009: 36) Lisa Scottoline was cognisant of Poe’s mastery in narration as well, his craft being at its best in “William Wilson”. Scottoline claims, in a humorous manner, that she “got interested in Edgar Allan Poe only after he got interested in her” (Scottoline 2009: 93), since she had not read Poe’s works before her adulthood simply because Poe was “presented to [her] in high school the way he was probably presented to you. As broccoli.” At the time she was fifteen she did not like broccoli, she was “craving French fries and cheeseburgers, but all they have in the English syllabus is broccoli” and they do their best to “convince you that reading is fun(damental)”. (Scottoline 2009: 87) To be more precise, Scottoline points out, after she had won an Edgar she “felt like an impostor for never having read him”, so she became inspired and took the collection of Poe’s stories and read several of them. She was enchanted with “William Wilson”, a story of dual identity, a story in which “the nemesis may be the hero himself” (Scottoline 2009: 88). Scottoline discusses the effect of doubling in the story and the way it influenced some recent examples in popular culture ranging “from benign sitcoms like *The Patty Duke Show* to the comic-book conflict of Spider Man and his evil flip side, Venom” (Scottoline 2009: 91), as well as *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *The Stepford Wives* or Robert Ludlum’s Jason Bourne novels and Stephen King’s *The Shining*. She herself had “William Wilson” on her mind when crafting her novels *Mistaken Identity* and *Dead Ringer*, though the true inspiration came from her personal life.

Michael Connelly, a past president of the Mystery Writers of America and a winner of the Edgar for Best First Novel by an American

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Author, in his essay “Once Upon a Midnight Dreary”, recalls a road trip and research he undertook for his book, conceived to be “about a cross-country killer who leaves obscure phrases from the work of Edgar Allan Poe as his calling card”. (Connelly 2009: 137) Connelly assures us that regardless of always having liked Poe’s stories, primarily because of the “blood and guts thrills”, during the trip he also read Poe’s poetry and came across “The Haunted Palace”, originally included in the text of “The Fall of the House of Usher”, a story which undoubtedly offers “claustrophobic dread” and a “descent into the unexpected” (Connelly 2009: 137-139).² Under the spell of Edgar Allan Poe that night in the Hilton, a hotel with a proper “creep factor” since it was the place where an attempted assassination of President Ronald Reagan took place, Connelly was overwhelmed and “succumbed” to the world of

dark imagination, where common things become uncommon, where the routine becomes the ghastly unexpected, where a slamming door becomes a shot in the night. (Connelly 2009: 139)

Tess Gerritsen claims that watching films based on Poe’s stories³ when she was a child enabled her to become the thriller writer she is now. It was by watching the B-movie versions of Poe that she was taught the art of thriller writing. Having been introduced to Poe as a

² Also see Gillian Brown, “The Poetics of Extinction” in Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman (eds), *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, pp. 330-344.

³ “Throughout the 1960s, horror filmmaker Roger Corman churned out a cycle of Poe-based movies for American Pictures International. When the first, *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1960), was successful, Corman loosely adapted other Poe stories and poems for a total of thirteen movies, including *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Tomb of Ligeia*, and *The Masque of the Red Death*, that starred horror greats Vincent Price, Peter Lorre, Boris Karloff, and Lon Chaney, Jr.”, Shelley Costa Bloomfield, *The Everything Guide to Edgar Allan Poe*, Avon, Massachusetts, Adams Media, 2007, p. 236.

seven-year-old girl in a “darkened movie theater” due to the persistence of her Chinese immigrant mother, Gerritsen thinks that it was Roger Corman who managed to make Poe’s work understandable even to a seven-year-old child and he undoubtedly “gave a whole generation of kids our very first look at Poe’s genius” (Gerritsen 2009: 178) Stephen King in his essay “The Genius of ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’” admits that there are two pieces of fiction that have particularly scared him – William Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* and Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart”. Not only did Poe invent the modern detective story, claims King, he presented to the world the “first work of criminal sociopathy in ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’” and made distinguished crime writers of the twentieth century, such as Jim Thompson, John D. MacDonald and Thomas Harris, “the children of Poe” (King 2009: 189). And when it comes to the aforementioned story itself, according to King, it is “a story of lunacy” in which Poe masterfully announced “the darkness of generation far beyond his own” (King 2009: 190).

Poe’s mastery of language is something that left a remarkable impression on S. J. Rozan from the age twelve when she, suffering from pneumonia, was consigned to her sickbed for two weeks with a set of complete works of Mark Twain, as well as Edgar Allan Poe. What she learned those days she confirms now, stating “I defy anyone to find a story more perfect in rhythm, cadence, and sound, sentence by sentence, than ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’.” (Rozan 2009: 229) This winner of two Edgars claims that she has always been astonished by something she found in Poe, and that would be “inevitability, and the laughable nature of human intention” or “the best laid plans/gang aft agley” (Rozan 2009: 229-230), primarily recognisable in “The Masque of the Red Death”. Jeffrey Deaver, in his essay “Poe in G Minor”, besides recalling his youth and performing folk songs in the evenings in a coffeehouse in 1971 as well as his career path from a poet and songwriter to a novelist, poses questions such as “why does Poe appeal to so many musicians?”⁴ and

⁴ Many composers and songwriters were inspired by Poe’s literary oeuvre. Some very successful adaptations of his works include The Alan Parson’s

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is it possible to think of another popular writer who in his poems embraced “nothing less than love, tragedy, and death” and succeeded in making them “find their way into concert halls and recording studios one hundred years later”? (Deaver 2009: 352-353). Not only did he himself perform Poe’s “Bells” on the stage, the melody of which was created by Phil Ochs, and make an adaptation – a musical version of “A Dream Within a Dream” – but Deaver also names a number of well-known artists who found their inspiration in Poe’s works, such as Bob Dylan, Marilyn Manson, and Iron Maiden (Deaver 2009: 352-353)⁵, or were attracted by his lines, from Claude Debussy, Sergei Rachmaninoff to Joan Baez, Judy Collins and Lou Reed. He concludes that a key answer would be that “Poe’s work is inherently musical”. (Deaver 2009: 352)

Besides the book collection *In the Shadow of the Master* in the context of commemorating the bicentennial of Poe’s birth in the USA, we will mention an interesting event organised at Symphony Space in New York on 21 January 2009. The special occasion was dedicated to the short story (*Selected Shorts – A Celebration of the Short Story, the 25th Anniversary Season*). As a part of the event “Scary Stories for a Winter’s

Project’s 1976 concept rock album *Tales of Mystery and Imagination: Edgar Allan Poe*. Eleven years later, as Mark Neimeyer states, a re-released version included “the added attraction of previously recorded narration by Orson Welles”. There are also many well done dramatic performances of Poe’s works such as “the 1997 double CD *Closed on Account of Rabies: Poems and Tales of Edgar Allan Poe*, which includes Iggy Pop reading ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ and a Marianne Faithful rendition of ‘Annabel Lee’”, Mark Neimeyer, “Poe and Popular Culture” in Kevin J. Hayes (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, Cambridge, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 221.

⁵ Poe appears on the cover of the Beatles’ album *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967). “Let your eye scan to the very last row of ‘assembled’ figures, and you will see Poe’s face looming at the center,” *The Everything Guide to Edgar Allan Poe*, p. 242; The line “Man, you should have seen them kicking Edgar Allan Poe” appears in “I Am the Walrus” (*Magical Mystery Tour*), “Poe and Popular Culture” in *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*, p. 205.

Night with Joyce Carol Oates”, one of the “shorts” performed that winter night was Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart”, read by the actor Terrence Mann.

The Tomahawk Man: A Celebration Overseas

Ten years after the book *In the Shadow of the Master* was published to mark the bicentennial of Poe’s birth, hundreds of miles away from Poe’s native Appalachia, a group of scholars gathered under an umbrella of “The Classics of World Literature: Jubilees” (Vuka Jeremić, ed., 2019) and contributed to two publications dedicated to Poe, Walt Whitman and Ernest Hemingway. All of them wanted to give a contribution with their essays to honour one hundred and seventy years since Poe’s death (as well as the bicentennial of Walt Whitman’s birth and a hundred and twenty years since Hemingway’s birth). The University Library of Belgrade, in cooperation with the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade, organised the project in which prominent scholars and connoisseurs of American literature were involved.

Professor Radojka Vukčević, in her essay “Edgar Allan Poe and Walt Whitman: The Most Influential Poets of American Romanticism” (“Edgar Alan Po i Volt Vitmen – najuticajniji pjesnici američkog romantizma”), which is mainly adapted from her book *A History of American Literature*, names the two most significant writers of the old American South before the Civil War as Edgar Allan Poe and William Gilmore Simms. She observes that, unlike Simms’s works, which abound in themes, settings and characters connected to the south, there are a small number of Poe’s works that describe a southern milieu or characters; the issues of slavery or southern separatism were by no means of major concern to him. Professor Vukčević emphasises Poe’s true desire to achieve independent criticism and genuine professionalism and finds his achievements in different areas of creation such as poetry, prose, criticism and journalism, highly impressive. Despite a continuous disagreement on Poe’s literary achievements,

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claims Vukčević, critics agree that there is no other American antebellum writer more popular and distinguished today.

Writing in a historic moment when the state education and mundane, capitalistic mass culture began to push the organized religion as a major influence on a personal opinion and belief, Poe gave an easily remembered literary form to the conflicted imagination of modern consciousness.⁶ (Vukčević 2019: 9-16)

Professor Ivana Đurić Paunović in her essay “Edgar Allan Poe from a Century to a Century” (“Edgar Alan Po iz veka u vek”) points out that the “regions” Poe depicted in his works do not correspond to the concepts of borders or nations, which is why they can never be conquered or discovered completely. On the contrary, they abound in freshness and newness. This is why we can recognise a certain paradox in “counting” years and anniversaries,

two hundred and ten since Poe’s birth and a hundred and seventy since his death – since everything with this writer is larger than life, timeless and irreducible.⁷ (Đurić Paunović 2019: 69)

⁶ “Pišući u istorijskom trenutku kada su državno obrazovanje i svjetovna, kapitalistička masovna kultura počeli da potiskuju organizovanu religiju kao glavni uticaj na lično vjerovanje, Po je podario lako pamtljivu književnu formu konfliktnoj imaginaciji moderne svijesti”, Radojka Vukčević, “Edgar Alan Po i Volt Vitmen – najuticajniji pjesnici američkog romantizma” in Vuka Jeremić, (ur), *Klasici svetske kniževnosti: Jubileji – Čudovišno blistavo ili trijumf originalnosti povodom 200 godina od rođenja Volta Vitmana (1819 – 2019) i 170 godina od smrti Edgara Alana Poa (1849 – 2019)*, Univerzitetska biblioteka “Svetozar Marković”, Filološki fakultet u Beogradu, Beograd, 2019, p. 16.

(* the quote translated into English by S. Simović)

⁷ “dvesta deset od Poovog rođenja i sto sedamdeset od smrti – jer je kod ovog pisca sve veće od života, bezvremeno i nesvodivo”, Ivana Đurić Paunović,

Popular culture of the twentieth century offered a mythologised version of Poe, claims Đurić Paunović,

“an agonised soul which seeks for oblivion in alcohol and opium, a wanderer and restless poet in a constant search to satisfy various kinds of hunger”⁸ (Đurić Paunović 2019: 69)

while researchers at the beginning of the new millennium are dedicated to finding out the truth about his life and “which of these numerous portraits of this writer of ‘dark Romanticism’ most credibly represents the real one” (Đurić Paunović 2019: 69).⁹ Poe gave his contribution in the fight for national literature and the improving of readers’ taste in literature since “the fight for independence of a young nation is not led only with a rifle but with pen as well” (Đurić Paunović 2019: 70).¹⁰

S. Simović in her essay “In honour of celebrating a hundred and seventy years since the death of Edgar Allan Poe” (“U čast obilježavanja 170 godina od smrti Edgara Alana Poa”) points out that Poe left a recognisable stamp on American and world literature, and the literary legacy that he left behind him to his “disciples”¹¹ is invaluable. This

“Edgar Alan Po iz veka u vek” in *Ibid*, p. 69. (*the quote translated into English by S. Simović)

⁸ “napačene duše koja zaborav traži u alkoholu i opijumu, lualice i nesmirenog pesnika u stalnoj potrazi za utaživanjem svakojakoh gladi”, *Ibid*, p. 69. (*the quote translated into English by S. Simović)

⁹ “koji od mnogobrojnih portreta ovog pisca ‘mračnog romantizma’ najverodostojnije predstavlja onog pravog”, *Ibid*, p. 69. (*the quote translated into English by S. Simović)

¹⁰ “borba za nezavisnost mlade nacije ne vodi /se/ samo puškom već i perom”, *Ibid*, p. 70. (*the quote translated into English by S. Simović)

¹¹ One of the most prominent men who highly regarded Poe’s oeuvre was a famous filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock who once stated that both he and Poe “were [...] prisoners of suspense”. Bloomfield points out that both artists dealt with “[t]hemes of deception and self-deception, confusion of identity,

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Bostonian, at the same time a “representative” of Richmond, has been considered one of the most complex and controversial figures in American literature. He developed critical standards and theories which implied, above all, literary excellence; he demanded professional literary criticism, not superficiality; he dreamt about launching an elite literary magazine and cultivating the readers’ taste. His contribution to the development of the short story is remarkable, his statements “scattered” in numerous literary reviews make up an elaborate theory of the short story. (Simović 2019: 91)

Conclusion

Edgar Allan Poe presents one of the most distinguished and unique figures in American literature. His literary legacy proved to be “priceless” to generations of modern writers, musicians, composers, songwriters and filmmakers. Decades after his death, his “followers” and “disciples”, people who cherish and respect his literary oeuvre, still celebrate his works, not only in the United States but abroad as well. And many of his followers can identify with Jorge Luis Borges’s statement

We, reading the detective novel, are an invention of Edgar Allan Poe [...] Poe projected multiple shadows [...] How many things begin with Poe? (Merivale 1994: 101)

Indeed, how many things begin with Poe?

psychological brinkmanship, the laying bare of crime”, *The Everything Guide to Edgar Allan Poe*, p. 237.

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