

«A SERIES OF MERE HOUSEHOLD EVENTS»: EVOKING AND QUESTIONING NINETEENTH-CENTURY ETHICS OF VICTORIAN FAMILY LIFE IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S TALES

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My immediate purpose is to place before the world,
plainly, succinctly, and without comment,
a series of mere household events.
Edgar Allan Poe, «The Black Cat»

The rise of the emergent middle-class in nineteenth-century America spread the gospel of refined culture. Conduct manuals, etiquette books and sentimental literature informed the middle-class how to behave, since it was assumed that good manners and gentility would empower the emerging classes with renewed rank and position. Nevertheless, as Cindy S. Aron (2005) remarks, the acquisition of refinement proved troublesome for the middle class, since gentility had its source in the aristocratic order, that is, the decadent regime the emerging classes aimed to replace¹. As a matter of fact, while spreading genteel and refined manners, middle-class ethics were rooted on values such as hard work, discipline, and self-control. Thus, this ambivalent attitude was felt to characterise the middle-class ethics of the period and so Victorian standards of conduct were defended as a means to fortify the status of the American middle-classes. It was estimated that by regulating and imbibing moral and conduct codes, the emergent American middle-classes would be endowed with a similar status the aristocracy enjoyed in Europe.

In Victorian times, the institution of the family was alleged to be a model of stability; an ordered microcosm to be exalted and promoted in front of the multiple changes and innovations that characterised the new times. Actually, it

¹ Aron, Cindy S., «The Evolution of the Middle Class» in William L. Barney (ed.), *A Companion to 19th-Century America*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2006, pp. 178-191.

was precisely through the socially-sanctioned domain of the family that refinement and good manners were imbibed. Thus, the Victorian family became both the embodiment and the epitome of Victorian ethics. As Steve Mintz points out, «the image of the Victorian family suggests a more stable and ordered past, a model of hierarchical organization, deference, and discipline contrasting sharply with our own disordered times».² As dutiful sons, men were supposed to show respect to their elders, choose a good career to become self-made men and provide their family with economic stability. As prospective husbands, men were encouraged to find a good wife that would exemplify the virtues of true womanhood and embody the socially-sanctioned values of purity, piety, submissiveness and domesticity. As fathers, men were regarded as both patriarchal heads of the family and socially-sanctioned embodiments of authority and self-respect. Correspondingly, women, as daughters, were supposed to learn the domestic values to become angel-of-the-house figures. As wives, they were presumed to show respect to their husbands and provide them with the peace and rest of which the chaotic world of public life was deprived. As mothers, they were responsible to inculcate their children the appropriate values to become good men and women, while encouraging gender differentiation, vividly manifested through the type of education that boys and girls received, thus promoting a separation of spheres according to gender once the period of puberty was initiated.

British Victorian novels often contributed to maintaining the image of the ideal Victorian family as an epitome to be imitated. Similarly, in nineteenth-century America, there was a significantly high amount of published conduct books that compiled and promoted the values and duties that every family member was supposed to typify³. Nevertheless, such blissful and sanctioned image of the family seemed to be as much fantasy as reality, especially in America. The separation of roles for the sake of order and stability suggests that the relationships between the different members may not have been as close and exemplary as it seemed at a first glance. Men worked outside the home to fulfil their role as bread-winners, and were often too occupied to indulge in their family duties. In middle-class households, women spent their lives in their domestic space that, though, protective, may also prove fairly claustrophobic. Children often maintained a distant relation with their parents, since nurses and governesses were mainly responsible for the daily care of children. The

² Steve Mintz, *A Prison of Expectations. The Family in Victorian Culture*, New York and London, New York University Press, 1983, p.xi.

³ Some well-known examples of American family manuals of the time are J.G. Holland, *Plain talks on familiar subjects: a series of popular lectures*, New York, Charles Scribner and Co., 1866, and Timothy Trainer's *The family manual, containing things worth knowing*, New York, 1845.

elderly were progressively deprived of their authority, since the cult of youth substituted the prestige often attached to any old patriarchal figure, as a result of the War of Independence. David Hackett Fischer even alludes to a pervasive gerontophobic feeling that replaced the customary and traditional gerontocracy in former times⁴. Moreover, numerous families underwent outrageous conditions in the tightly tiny houses of the industrial urban slums. Precarious conditions of city life increased the rate of orphaned children and solitary elderly people. Pollution and lack of hygiene increased the death rate, while birth rate began to increase sharply. Immigration also contributed to diminishing the idea of stability that the family household entailed. Moreover, war and battles were also a major cause of family destabilisation. Fathers and husbands died in the battlefield, leaving mothers and wives in charge of the family members and obliged to gain some independence both inside and outside the family household. Historical and social circumstances often brought about the destabilisation of the American family, where the clearly-differentiated family roles that conduct books defended were shared or fulfilled by other family members, and on some occasions, they became even reversed.

As Marchand argues, making reference to Emerson, despite the fact Edgar Allan Poe has traditionally been characterised by aloofness and detachment from his time and environment, it is impossible to extricate an individual from the questions in which his age is involved, and «nor was Poe able to extricate himself from these questions»⁵. Through Edgar Allan Poe's life and tales, it is illustrated that the idealised image of the American family as an institution that promoted stability and order was fairly utopian. As Marchand argues, Poe's time was characterised by discussions of democracy, social reform, and progress. Nevertheless, Poe's tales often ascertain the loneliness of the individual despite the surrounding social institutions. In this respect, Shawn Rosenheim and Stephen Rachman define Poe's work as a celebration of «the isolation of art from 'external' social pressures»⁶. However, many of Poe's tales depict relationships established between different family members, as a far prospect from the blissful and clearly-differentiated roles appertaining to each family member that were carefully described in the conduct books of the time. Throughout Poe's tales, it is possible to identify relationships established between father figures and sons («The Assignment»), fathers and daughters («Morella»), mothers and daughters («Morella», «The Murders in the Rue Morgue»), mothers and sons («The Assignment», «Ligeia»), husbands and

⁴ Hackett Fischer, D., *Growing Old in America*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1978.

⁵ E. Marchand, «Poe as a Social Critic», *American Literature*, 6.1 (1934), p.30.

⁶ S. Rosenheim and S. Rachman (eds.), *The American Face of Edgar Allan Poe*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995, p. ix.

wives («Ligeia», «Eleonora», «Morella», «The Black Cat»), brothers and sisters («The Fall of the House of Usher»), brothers («A Descent into the Maelström», «William Wilson»), cousins («Berenice», «Eleonora»), the elderly and the young («A Descent into the Maelström», «Three Sundays in a Week», «The Tell-Tale Heart», «The Spectacles»), uncles and nephews («Three Sundays in a Week»), and even, between members of different families («Metzengerstein»).

Father figures are not frequently found through Poe's tales. Poe was the second son of the American actress Eliza Poe and the unsuccessful Irish actor David Poe, Jr. Poe's father deserted the family when Edgar was only two years old. When his mother died, Poe was separated from his brother and sister, and adopted by John and Fanny Allan⁷. John Allan was often too absorbed in business and maintained a distant relationship with Poe, while Fanny was an affectionate woman but too ill to provide Edgar with motherly warmth. As Poe grew of age, his quarrels with John Allan increased, especially due to Poe's dissolute behaviour at the University of Virginia. As Kenneth Silverman remarks, after his first year at university, Poe left «owing two thousand dollars or more in gambling and other debts»⁸, which caused a serious rift between Poe and John Allan. As a consequence, he left the Allans home in 1827 and returned to his birthplace, Boston. Poe's perception of cold and distant father figures, represented by both his own father and his foster father, are illustrated in «The Assi gnation». In the city of Venice, the narrator beholds how a child slips from the arms of his mother, Marchesa Aphrodita, to fall into the deep canal. The Marchesa is the young wife of old Mentoni; a mystifying man who appears within the arch of the water-gate and gives directions for the recovery of his child. At first, the scene seems to describe the accidental death of a son to discover later it is an attempted infanticide committed by Mentoni. His behaviour after the event has taken place is fairly revealing. Fortunately, a figure in a cloak saves the child and places him into the Marchesa's arms, after which she begins to blush. It is implied that the child is not Mentoni's son, but a child born of illicit love. In the end, the Marchesa is poisoned, presumably at Mentoni's hands. Thus, the child is eventually rendered motherless and at the mercy of a deviant stepfather. Similarly, one year after her husband's desertion, Eliza Poe, died during a theatrical tour of the South. Kenneth Silverman argues that her children, included Edgar, were probably present.

Some tales illustrate the relationships established between fathers and daughters. Poe never had children of his own. In «Morella», the narrator

⁷ Kenneth Silverman admits that the Allans never formally adopted Poe, and they only «provided him with material comfort rather than attention and warmth», p.1.

⁸ K. Silverman (ed.), *New Essays on Poe's Major Tales*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995, p.2.

expresses the love he feels for the daughter his late wife Morella gave birth to before her death. As a father, the narrator states that «she grew strangely in stature and intellect, and was the perfect resemblance of her who had departed, and I loved her with a love more fervent than I had believed it possible to feel for any denizen of earth»⁹. Taking into consideration the infatuation the narrator felt towards his wife and the emphasis he places on his daughter's resemblance with his late spouse, we may doubt whether he loves his daughter because of the family bond that unites them or simply because she reminds him of his deceased wife. In any case, daughters often appear as reincarnations of their dead mothers, especially due to the fact their mothers died as a consequence of giving birth to them. The roles of mother and daughter are often blurred to the extent that daughters, due to their strength and self-will, often act as mothers of the weak narrator, since he feels dependent on them, believing them to be reincarnations of his deceased wife.

The relationships between mother and daughter are also developed through «Morella» and «The Murders in the Rue Morgue». Morella thinks of her daughter as the embodiment of her permanence in life after her death, and thus, she concedes to her husband on her death-bed that «when my spirit departs shall the child live – thy child and mine»¹⁰. Gradually, as his daughter grows up, the father becomes aware of the striking resemblance between the child and her late mother, and it is precisely when the child also dies that the father bears her to her tomb and realises there are «no traces of the first [Morella], in the charnel where I laid the second, Morella»¹¹. There is a significant identification between Morella and her daughter to the extent that the father is unable to distinguish them. In «The Murders in the Rue Morgue», Madame L'Esplanade and her young daughter are found brutally murdered in their apartment. At first, since both had some money, it is assumed the murder was committed as a consequence of theft. Nevertheless, at some point, Dupin entertains the conjecture of «whether the old lady could have first destroyed the daughter, and afterward have committed suicide»¹². Due to the old lady's lack of strength, Dupin immediately rejects this possibility. Nevertheless, it seems noteworthy that infanticide is admitted, while matricide is discarded. Inherently, innocence and dependence is often associated with the young, especially in the case of females, whereas this presumption is not so credited in the case of mature women. This conjecture somehow betrays the cult of youth

⁹ E. A. Poe, *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*, New York, Penguin, 1982, p.669.

¹⁰ E.A.Poe, *loc.cit.* p.669.

¹¹ E.A.Poe, *op.cit.*, p.671.

¹² E.A.Poe, *op.cit.*, p. 155.

that pervaded nineteenth-century America according to authors such as D. H. Fischer.

As regards the relationships established between mother and sons, many biographers remark Poe idealised his mother and adored his aunt Maria Clemm. In «The Assigination», there is a tender mother-son relation between Marchesa Aphrodita and his child, especially when he is saved from death and is brought back to his mother, who «will now receive her child – she will press it to her heart – she will cling it to its little form and smother it with her caresses»¹³. The relationship established between mother and son is that of protection and care. However, the tragic event that precedes the reunion between mother and son in which the child slips from the bosom of his mother results ambiguous. Due to the posterior careless behaviour of Mentoni, the Marchesa's husband, it seems plausible that the accident was caused by the presumptuous father. Nevertheless, this is never totally ascertained, and readers are left to wonder whether the mother would willingly sacrifice the son of an adulterous relationship. Moreover, in some of Poe's tales, the relationship the narrator maintains with his wife often resembles the bond established between mother and son. In «Ligeia», once the narrator's wife has perished, he finds himself orphaned and admits that «without Ligeia [he] was but as a child groping benighted», which implies how hopeless the narrator feels after his wife's death. Ligeia's immense knowledge and erudition belittles her husband to the extent he appears childlike at her presence. Thus, the roles of husband and figurative son are often intermingled throughout this tale, as also happens in tales such as «Morella».

It has often been remarked that Poe was infatuated with his young wife Virginia. After a quarrel with John Allan, Poe left Richmond and settled in Baltimore with the family of his father, David Poe Jr. The new family household consisted of Poe's widowed forty-one-year-old aunt, Maria Clemm, her nine-year-old daughter, Virginia, with whom he fell in love, and Poe's elder brother, Henry David. Many of his tales depict the relationships between husband and wife, especially the so-called «marriage group»¹⁴, including «Ligeia» and «Eleonora». Ligeia's husband describes his late wife through her shadowy presence, immense knowledge and unsurpassable beauty. Although he never mentions the affection he felt for her, the narrator remarks her capacity for love since he admits that «she loved me I should not have doubted; and I might have been easily aware that, in a bosom such as hers, love would have reigned no

¹³ E.A.Poe, *op.cit.*, p.295.

¹⁴ D. Hoffman (1972) uses this terminology to refer to Poe's tales depicting a husband-wife relation as happens in «Ligeia», «Morella», and «Eleonora».

ordinary passion»¹⁵. Nevertheless, after Ligeia's death, the narrator marries the blue-eyed Lady Rowena Trevanion, whose sweetness and delicacy sharply contrasts with the powerful will that characterised Ligeia. Unable to forget his former and stronger love, the narrator beholds Rowena's dead body transforming into Ligeia's as an unequivocal proof of the obsessive attraction Ligeia exerted over him. In «Eleonora», the narrator states his love for his young cousin and wife, Eleonora, with whom he has dwelled in the Valley of the Many-Colored Grass since their youth. The narrator states that «hand in hand about this valley, for fifteen years, roamed I with Eleonora before Love entered within our hearts»¹⁶. After Eleonora's death, the narrator marries Ermengarde, while a sweet voice confesses to him that he is absolved of the marriage vows that united him to Eleonora. Poe also fell in love with his cousin Virginia and married her in 1834 when she was only thirteen years of age. After some time, the family moved to New York City and Philadelphia. In 1842, Poe had to undergo one of the hardest events of his life. While his wife Virginia was singing, she began to bleed from her mouth; an unequivocal sign she had contracted tuberculosis. In Fordham, Virginia's health deteriorated. In 1847, Virginia died of tuberculosis when she was only twenty-four years of age, leaving Poe in grief pain. Unable to face the loss, according to Silverman, «Poe tried frantically to stabilize himself by remarrying»¹⁷. It is assumed in the summer of 1848, Poe became involved with three different women, among them Sarah Helen Whitman and Annie Richmond. Poe's need to remarry may bear some resemblance with the narrator in «Eleonora» who, after his wife's death, marries Ermengarde, feeling absolutely unable to live in perpetual solitude.

Other tales provide an even less favourable portrait of married life, as is the case with «Morella» and «The Black Cat». In the case of «Morella», the narrator admits with regard to his wife that «fate bound us together at the altar; and I never spoke of passion, nor thought of love»¹⁸. In clear resemblance with «Ligeia», Morella's erudition renders him «her pupil», emphasising the fact his wife's character was stronger than his own. Nevertheless, when Morella is ill, the narrator's coexistence with his wife becomes unbearable, since he admits that he «could no longer bear the touch of her wan fingers, nor the low tone of her musical language, nor the lustre of her melancholy eyes»¹⁹. His rejection of her presence leads him to question: «Shall I then say that I longed with an

¹⁵ E.A.Poe, *op.cit.*, p.658.

¹⁶ E.A.Poe, *op.cit.*, p.650.

¹⁷ K. Silverman, *op.cit.*, p.5.

¹⁸ E.A.Poe, *op.cit.*, p.667.

¹⁹ E.A.Poe, *op. cit.*, p.668.

earnest and consuming desire for the moment of Morella's decease? I did»²⁰. Once the child is born, the father states his love towards the child. Nevertheless, as she grows up, she closely resembles her mother and he becomes unable to distinguish both even at the moment of his daughter's death. In «The Black Cat», the narrator states that he «married early, and was happy to find in [his] wife a disposition not uncongenial with [his] own»²¹. His marriage seems to respond to matters of congeniality rather than affection. Nevertheless, the progressive tedium and hatred he feels lead him to kill his wife when she tries to protect Pluto from her husband's outbursts of rage.

Poe had a younger sister, Rosalie, from whom he was separated at a tender age, but who outlived him for some years. As regards the family bond between brother and sister in his tales, the most illustrious example is the relationship established between Madeline and Roderick in «The Fall of the House of Usher». Roderick concedes that part of the gloom that debases his life is caused by «the evidently approaching dissolution – of a tenderly beloved sister, his sole companion for long years, his last and only relative on earth»²². Roderick knows that his sister's death will render him alone. After Madeline's death, Roderick entombs her while she is still alive, preserving her body for a day. Roderick's grief at the poor condition and final outcome of his twin sister ambiguously contrasts with his resolution of burying her, even if aware that her sister is afflicted with catalepsy. Some critics have often alluded to the incestuous fraternal relationship between brother and sister, mainly to preserve the existence of their race.

Poe had also an elder brother, from whom he was separated at a tender age to live with the Allans. Through his tales, there is not a clear brother-to-brother bond between any of the characters, apart from a brief remark in «The Descent into the Maelström», in which the elderly narrator explains he started his journey in the company of his two brothers. Nevertheless, some kind of fraternal relationship can be inferred in tales such as «William Wilson», where the dual nature of the protagonist admits the interpretation of the other as a figurative brother. Actually, the narrator admits that «this latter trait in Wilson's conduct, conjoined with our identity of name, and the mere accident of our having entered the school upon the same day [...] set afloat the notion that we were brothers, among the senior classes in the academy»²³.

Some of the male narrators' wives are also their cousins. It is meaningful to notice here that Poe married his own cousin Virginia, and the family relation

²⁰ E.A.Poe, *loc.cit.* p.668.

²¹ E.A.Poe, *op.cit.*, p.223.

²² E.A.Poe, *op.cit.*, p.236.

²³ E.A.Poe, *op.cit.*, p.630.

between wife and cousin is often blurred. In «Berenice», the narrator admits that they «were cousins, and [they] grew up together in [his] paternal halls»²⁴. Nevertheless, she becomes his muse and marries her, despite the fact that he admits «most surely [he] had never loved her»²⁵. In «Eleonora», the narrator shares his blissful existence in the Valley of the Many-Colored Grass with Eleonora, about whom he says that he «loved in youth, and [...] was the sole daughter of the only sister of [his] mother long departed»²⁶. Similarly, in the «Three Sundays in a Week», the narrator also proposed to his cousin Kate provided his grand-uncle accepts the union.

In some of his tales, Poe described relationships established between the elderly and the young. Sometimes, the old play the role of wise men, misers, egocentric men, or even grotesque witty elderly ladies. Through all his life, Poe was well-aware of the economic dependence on his foster father. Nevertheless, John Allan's presence as a tutor, even if distant, and his preaching ways bear some resemblance with the relationship established between the old man and the young boy in «A Descent into the Maelström». Through this tale, an old man narrates to a young listener the events he and his brothers experienced during their excursion to the summit of a crag, near the Norwegian coast. His narration is meant to be exemplary for the young boy. Thus, even though the relationship that is established between the old and the young man is not explicitly stated, the narrator assumes the role of a father figure for the young listener. Nevertheless, elderly men are not given such a positive portrait in other tales. In «Three Sundays in a Week», the narrator's future happiness lies entirely in his grand-uncle's acceptance of his marrying Kate, his grand-uncle's daughter. Similarly, in «The Tell-Tale Heart», the narrator takes care of an old man that he explicitly states to love. Nevertheless, the carer, who must watch over the old man, cannot bear to be watched over by the old man. As he admits, «it was not the old man who vexed me, but his Evil Eye»²⁷. The permanent coexistence with his elder and the obligation to take care of him exhausts the young narrator to the extent that he ends up killing the old man. However, the resulting remorse he feels when he neglects his duties will inevitably lead him to his own condemnation. In «The Spectacles», the young, inexperienced and short-sighted Simpson falls in love with a young woman at first sight to discover later she is an elderly lady. Moreover, Madame Lalande, aware of the family bond that unites them decides to teach his great, great grandson a lesson, accepting his proposal of marriage to reveal, in due time, her true identity. As a

²⁴ E.A.Poe, *op.cit.*, p. 643.

²⁵ E.A.Poe, *op.cit.*, p. 645.

²⁶ E.A.Poe, *op.cit.*, p. 649.

²⁷ E.A.Poe, *op.cit.*, p.303.

result of his great, great grandmother's actions, not only does the young Simpson learn a valuable lesson, but he also gains an engagement to Madame Stephanie Lalande, a relative of his grandmother. The last reflections of Simpson are worth quoting:

I am not the husband of my great, great grandmother; and this is a reflection which affords me infinite relief; - but I am the husband of Madame Lalande - of Madame Stephanie Lalande - with whom my good old relative, besides making me her sole heir when she dies - if she ever does - has been at the trouble of concocting me a match²⁸.

Thus, the blurring of multiple family relationships is illustrative through the entire tale. Madame Lalande appears to be Simpson's fiancée, despite the fact she finally concedes she is his own great, great grandmother.

Poe had a dubious relationship with the father of his youth sweetheart Elmira Shelton, since Shelton disapproved of Poe marrying his daughter because of his insufficient income. In «Three Sundays in a Week», the narrator's grand-uncle Rumgudgeon opposed his grand-nephew's marriage to his daughter Kate. In this satirical tale, the narrator treats his uncle with due respect, while he thinks about him as «an old rascal»²⁹ because he disapproves of his marriage to Kate. Through this tale, it is assumed the influence the elders exerted on the lives of their sons and daughters, since marriages could not possibly be contrived unless parental figures gave their consent.

Eventually, there is sometimes rivalry between different families for the sake of land or property. Poe himself was disinherited due to his gambling habits. John Allan did not include him in his will, and all his fortune passed on to his new wife and daughters. In «Metzengerstein», it is stated that «the families of Berlifitzing and Metzengerstein had been at variance for centuries»³⁰ as a result of an ancient prophecy. The enmity existing between the two families will give rise to the competence between the two male heirs of both family sagas.

The family relationships contemplated through Poe's tales question the assumptions tradition and customs developed as regards the institution of the family. The authority of father figures is often questioned by sons, mothers' devotion to sons and daughters cannot always be taken for granted, married life can also be tiresome, husbands remain childlike subjects under their wives' powerful will, and the dutiful respect and care for the elderly can often

²⁸ E.A.Poe, *op.cit.*, p.707.

²⁹ E.A.Poe, *op.cit.*, p.730.

³⁰ E.A.Poe, *op.cit.*, p. 672.

diminish the wish for freedom of the young. Family roles are blurred and confounded; wives and daughters prove more self-willed than dependent and weak husbands and fathers; ideal households with clearly-differentiated spheres are scarcely ever found. In the newly-founded American nation, the individual gradually severed his roots with the old continent; institutions and authorities sanctioned by tradition began to lose their relevance, and the traditional family inherited from Europe gave way to new and different roles and relationships of the nineteenth-century American family.

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