

Edgar Allan Poe and Machado de Assis: An Overview

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Abstract

This article's aim is to analyze the confluence relations between the American author Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) and one of the most famous Brazilian writers, Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis, widely known as Machado de Assis (1839-1908). Both Poe and Machado are widely recognized for their works, which points out to the necessity of making an overview of the literary criticism regarding the two authors, including the ways in which scholars analyze their texts. First of all, we will briefly discuss their importance as writers in the contexts of American and Brazilian literature, respectively, showing the relevance of their ideas in the construction of a national literature that would be free of foreign literary imitation, as well as the misconceptions held by famous scholars in relation to Machado's and Poe's literary production. Secondly, we will analyze the similarities between both authors, considering the researchers who already explored these similarities, as well as the importance of the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) in the divulgation of Poe's work in Europe and also in Brazil, which is extremely relevant if we consider the problems related to Poe's insertion within the canon of American literature. Finally, we will briefly explore some of the possibilities of research in this area, considering the small amount of Brazilian scholars who are dedicated to study the confluences between Poe and Machado de Assis, which shows a certain negligence in relation to features that deserve more concern and research from these scholars.

Keywords

Confluence, American Literature, Brazilian Literature, Nationalism

1. Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe and Machado de Assis are considered to be extremely important writers for the American and Brazilian canon of literature, respectively. Both authors produced their works in countries that were recently independent and facing problems regarding the imitation of foreign literary models, as well as the search for a national identity. They expressed extremely critical views in relation to the literary establishment of their time, including the romantic constructions of both American and Brazilian literary nationalisms. Therefore, it is important to explore the confluence relations between these two authors, as these confluences provide an interesting overview of American and Brazilian cultures, demonstrated in the ways in which they reflected upon the societies and the literary contexts of their time.

2. Poe, Machado and Literary Criticism

Poe became widely known as a writer of horror short-stories and scientific fiction, although his reputation was not the best one among his contemporaries. According to Robert Tally Jr., "although Poe is in some ways a central figure in the history of the United States, and he remains the among the most popular authors born in the U.S, his work resist incorporation into the national self image." (TALLY JR. 2014: 2). About Poe's figure in the American literary context, Gary Richard Thompson (2004) states that "the Poe legend is based on a good deal of unfounded speculation and is fraught with assumption, presumption, conjecture, and error." (47). One of the responsables for the construction of the "Poe legend" was Rufus Griswold, the first Poe's biographer and

posthumous editor, who described the author as a wild and alienated figure, and as a man who was tormented with life deceptions and suffering. These ideas used to have a great influence on the interpretations of Poe's work, which lead to misconceptions and preconceived notions that began to be overcome only in recent decades. Scholars began to analyze Poe's works from another perspective, emphasizing the sociological and political meanings of his texts. In this sense, Thompson (2004) argues that "socioeconomic and political themes are present in many of (Poe's) writings, particularly his political and social satires. Like his contemporaries, he exhibited a strong interest in things American, but in a global rather than a provincial context." (16). Therefore, it is time to rehabilitate Poe's image in order to understand the ways in which he represented American culture and society, exploring a point of view that was neglected during years of literary criticism. To compare him with Machado de Assis would be a way to overcome this negligence, as this comparison reinforces Poe's relations with the sociopolitical, literary and cultural context of his time.

Machado de Assis became known as a realist writer, as his book *The Posthumous Memoirs of Brás Cubas*, published in 1881, is considered to be the starting point of Realism in Brazilian literature. Machado is probably the most analyzed and commented writer in Brazil, as his works depicted the Brazilian social context during Second Reign (1840-1889), discussing the particularities related to people, social classes and social institutions of that time. As it has already been mentioned, Machado, like Poe, was very critical of the assumptions brought by romantic nationalism, which lead literary critics such as Sílvio Romero to consider him as a writer who was not worried with the nineteenth-century Brazilian sociopolitical context. This view started to be changed in the 1930s and 1940s, when critics like Astrojildo Pereira, Roger Bastide and Lúcia Miguel-Pereira began to analyze Machado's writings from a sociological and political perspective. This point of view was consolidated by the end of the twentieth century, with the works of John Gledson (2006), Roberto Schwarz (1992) and Raymundo Faoro (1988), who perceived Machado as a writer who was very attentive to social mechanisms and political representations. Such perspective is nowadays very well explored, showing that Brazilian criticism on Machado has overcome the misconceptions held by critics like Romero, who developed his views in relation to Machado due to some personal problems faced in the beginning of his literary career.

In and outside Brazil, Machado's work continues to be the subject of many interesting interpretations, such as the ones proposed by Lúcia Granja (2009) and Hélio de Seixas Guimarães (2004), who analyzed the role of the reader in the author's novels. Granja, by her turn, works with the idea that Machado criticized Brazilian society through his chronicles, a view that can be extended to his novels and short-stories. It is important to emphasize that Machado started his career as a journalist, working in newspapers such as *Diário do Rio de Janeiro*, *Jornal das Famílias*, *Marmota Fluminense* and *Gazeta de Notícias*. As his texts were published in the

periodic press, Machado was obliged to use some strategies in order to please his readers and stimulate the purchase of the newspapers. The signature of *Jornal das Famílias*, for example, was paid by the families that used to read it, and therefore the authors, including Machado, had to follow some rules imposed by the editors. According to Lúcia Granja, these rules led the writer to develop a subtle and indirect way to criticize society, a subtlety that originated the misconceptions that affect Brazilian criticism on Machado still nowadays. Granja's research represents a turning point in this perspective, showing that Machado was not alienated in relation to the problems faced by Brazilian society, as well as the dilemmas concerning nationality and the establishment of a culture that would be free of bias and foreign literary imitation.

The collaboration in the periodic press is another aspect that approximates Poe and Machado. Poe also became known as a journalist, having worked in the *Southern Literary Messenger*, where he became an editor. Poe was a very harsh critic, which can be seen in the series of five articles in which he criticized the famous poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882). In these articles, Poe argued that Longfellow's poetry lacked a true sense of Beauty that, according to what the author exposed in "The philosophy of composition", was the main aim of literature and art in general. Actually, Poe criticized the romantic conception of nationalism that emerged from Longfellow's poetry, arguing that there were other ways of constructing American nationality. Similar attitude can be observed in Machado's essay entitled "Instinto de nacionalidade", in which he advocates for an "intimate feeling", that is, a feeling experienced by an author who belongs to a certain country and lives in a certain time, without necessarily constructing idealized representations of his mother country. Thus, it is possible to reinforce the confluences between Machado and Poe, as both authors were very critical and attentive to the intellectual's concerns observed in the nineteenth century.

3. Poe's Influence on Machado de Assis

Machado de Assis has recognizably read Poe's work, which can be demonstrated by the polemic translation of "The raven", published in 1883 in *Gazeta de Notícias*. Machado's contact with Poe's writings was possible due to the influence of the French poet Charles Baudelaire, who was the responsible for the diffusion of Poe in Europe and also in Brazil. In this sense, it is relevant to emphasize that nineteenth-century Brazilian cultural establishment was characterized by a strong tendency to imitate French literary models, as France was the main cultural and literary center of the world at that time. Therefore, it is comprehensible that an author such as Machado de Assis would get in contact with Poe through the readings of Baudelaire, who, according to Ian Walker (1996), "strove to make Poe a great writer in France, and he succeeded in his endeavors." (31). Walker also stresses that the image of Poe as "the alienated artist struggling in an uncaring, utilitarian

environment attached Mallarmé and the Symbolist writers; and his translations inspired French scholars such as Lauvrière, Maclair and Marie Bonaparte (...)” (31). In Brazil, Poe influenced authors such as Monteiro Lobato, João do Rio and also the symbolist poets Cruz e Sousa and Alphonsus de Guimaraens, with his images of the dead beloved women, who are objectified by obsessive and tormented men.

Machado recognized the problem of literary imitation of French models, as it is possible to see in the articles published in the beginning of his career, such as “Ideias sobre o teatro” (1858) and “O folhetinista” (1859). In these short texts, Machado developed a very harsh criticism on cultural foreign imitation, showing a great concern with Brazilian theater, which was, at that time, constituted mainly by French translations and Brazilian imitations from French plays. Poe, by his turn, was also concerned about the American tendency to imitate British models, as we can see in this excerpt of “Letter to B” (1836): “Our antiquaries abandon time for distance; our very fops glance from the binding to the bottom of the title-page, where the mystic characters which spell London, Paris or Genoa, are precisely so many letters of recommendation.” (Poe, in Thompson, 2004: 589). Based on this critical view, Poe advocated for a literary creation that would be free of bias and preconceived ideas, and for a model of criticism that would be absolutely independent: “(...) a criticism self-sustained; guiding itself only by the purest rules of Art; analyzing and urging these rules as it applies them; holding itself aloof from all personal bias (...)” (Poe, in Thompson, 2004: 622). A similar attitude can be observed in Machado’s text entitled “O ideal do crítico” (1865): “The critic must be independent (...) independent from the authors’ vanities and from his own vanity (...) In order to be masterful, criticism needs to be impartial, and armed against his friends’ insufficiencies (...)” (Assis, 2008: 1103, my translation).

Recently, authors such as Renata Philipov (2004) and Patrícia Lessa Flores da Cunha (1998) started to explore the confluences between the two writers, considering the fact that both Poe and Machado wrote short-stories and also that Poe was cited by Machado in some of his stories, such as “Alone!”, in 1885, and “A miraculous excursion”, written in 1866. In her doctoral thesis, Phillipov explored the poetical relations between Poe and Baudelaire, arguing that the poetical form performed by both is characterized by the fragmentation that will be recurrent in post-modern literature. Patrícia Flores da Cunha took into consideration the short-story as an aesthetic form to analyze the similarities between Poe’s and Machado’s work, showing that both authors used to express very similar opinions regarding the ways in which their short-stories were composed. Poe became very famous with his theory of the unity of effect, in which he states that a text needs to be short in order to make a good and lasting impression on the reader. Machado demonstrates to assimilate his theory, as many of his stories are fairly short and create the unity of effect that was proposed by Poe. The theory has created a significant resonance on literary criticism, as writers such as the Brazilians João do Rio, Monteiro Lobato and Guimarães Rosa, as well as the Argentinian Julio Cortázar were greatly

influenced by the idea of literary shortness.

4. Foreign Presence in Machado de Assis: Recent Studies

The foreign presence in Machado’s texts has always been explored by scholars. The French presence is analyzed by Gilberto Pinheiro Passos (2006) and Jean Michel Massa (2008), who compares the Brazilian and the French translation of “The raven” in order to reinforce the confluences between Poe, Machado and Baudelaire. Massa (2008) comes to the conclusion that Machado, even knowing the English language, could have only had access to Poe’s texts with the intermediation of Baudelaire, as Machado’s translations presented the same errors committed by Baudelaire in his own translation. Massa also emphasizes the importance of Machado’s role as a translator, as this function allowed him to get in contact with foreign culture and, mainly, to diffuse this culture in the nineteenth-century peripheral Brazilian context.

The British presence in Machado is analyzed by Eugenio Gomes (1938) and more recently by José Luiz Passos (2014), who studies Shakespeare’s influence over the Brazilian writer in his book *O romance com pessoas: a imaginação em Machado de Assis*. Passos also studies the influences of the American writer Henry James over Machado’s works, especially when it comes to a cultural displacement, experienced by James, between the United States and England. Similar displacement was experienced by Poe, who was born in the North but was raised in the South, and also by Machado, who was a black writer in a context where blacks were slaves and did not have many chances of social ascension. According to Pascale Casanova (2002), this displacement would be recurrent in authors considered as “outsiders”, who belong to peripheral contexts such as Brazil and the United States. The peripheral condition would create a very lucid perception regarding nationalism and literary imitation, something that, as we have already analyzed, can be observed in Poe’s and Machado’s texts.

The American influence over Machado is analyzed by Hélio de Seixas Guimarães (2008), who claims that the references to Longfellow aimed to construct Machado’s perceptions in relation to Brazilian nationalism and the quest for a national identity. In fact, Longfellow is cited by Machado in the essay “Instinto de nacionalidade”, when the author argues that the “local color” could not be conceived as the only way to construct a national literature. According to Machado, Longfellow was the author of both “Song of Hiawatha” and *Golden Legend*, and was considered to be an “admirable singer” of the American land. Actually, what Machado does is to denounce the invalidity of the search for the “local color” in literature, using Longfellow as an example on how this search can be useless and limited for the establishment of a true national literature, as the literary establishment and even the readers do not seem to consider an author as national only because he describes the features of his own land.

The confluence relations between Poe and Machado can also be analyzed in a modern perspective, that shows the ways in which modernity has taken place in nineteenth-century literature and also in Brazil and in the United States. This view is not very well explored by scholars, even though the modern perspective can be found in José Luiz Passos's analysis of Machado's novels. (2014). Brazil's modernity is also emphasized in the analysis by Gledson and Schwarz, but none of these authors consider the confluence relations with Poe as a key to understand modernity. The references to Poe and modernity can be found in "Alone!", a story in which the narrator uses "The man of the crowd" as a starting point to tell the story of Bonifácio, a cosmopolitan man who decides to spend some days outside city and is incapable of being alone. Like the man of the crowd, Machado's character has a strong dependency on people, something that emerges with modernity and with the new forms of sociability that it brings together. Machado's texts can be considered extremely modern, as they bring the representations of Rio de Janeiro as a city that was already experiencing the effects of modernity, with all the changes that it may introduce in society. Poe is also a very modern author, as "The man of the crowd" brings a very realistic representation of modern London, that could be interpreted as a ciphered representation of New York, a city that was also experiencing the effects of modernization.

The fact of representing London instead of New York can be related to Poe's attitude towards nationalism and the quest for national identity. According to Robert Tally Jr., (2014), Poe's opposition to nationalism can be interpreted as a "scarcely disguised critique of the project of American literature itself." (4). Based on this, Tally Jr. believed that Poe called for a "world literature", something that signals "his anticipatory break with the emerging national tradition into which he has never really quite fit." (4). Similarly, Machado, as it has already been mentioned, held a very strong opposition against romantic nationalism, something that was synthesized in the idea of "intimate feeling". Machado's perceptions regarding nationalism and national identity are widely analyzed by scholars such as José Luiz Jobim (2013) and João Hernesto Weber (2013), but none of these authors have pointed out that these perceptions may come from Poe's work. Therefore, some research needs to be done in this area, in order to show that Machado's impressions and representations on nationalism are constructed in a productive dialogue with Poe, an author who also belonged to a context like the United States, considered to be peripheral before Civil War.

Another aspect which lacks research is the confluence relations among Poe, Machado and Baudelaire. Renata Phillipov's work had already compared Poe and Baudelaire, as well as Patrícia Flores da Cunha had compared Poe and Machado, but there is not a single research comparing the three authors. To compare Poe, Machado and Baudelaire would be an interesting key to understand modernity in Machado's works, an understanding that could be situated in a transcultural perspective, which takes into consideration the cultural contacts among different nations in the nineteenth century, a period in which modernity and also globalization

started to emerge. This importance is due to the fact that Baudelaire is considered to be the "poet of modernity", besides being the intermediary between Poe and Machado. It seems obvious that the Brazilian writer has read Baudelaire's work, even though he does not refer explicitly to this. However, as Jean Michel Massa (2008) points out, the lack of explicit references to a certain author does not mean that this author was not read by another one, as intertextual references are frequently subtle and indirect, especially when it comes to a writer like Machado de Assis, whose style was characterized by subtlety and vagueness. Some aspects of Baudelairean presence in Machado's work can be found in "Capítulo dos chapéus" (1884), a short-story that brings the representation of women as participants in the public sphere, something that is shown by Baudelaire in his poems, mainly in "A une passant" (1857). This poem describes a mysterious woman wandering through Parisian streets, an attitude that can also be observed in Machado's narrative. Another aspect that would approximate Machado and Baudelaire is the concern with female fashion, as the French poet, in "The painter of modern life", claims that women and also female fashion are the greatest representations of modernity. Machado does something similar in many of his narratives, including "Capítulo dos chapéus" and "Três consequências" (1883), which shows that he has probably had a productive contact with Baudelaire's work, a contact that is not explored as it should by Brazilian criticism on Machado de Assis.

Some up-to-date references in the field of comparative literature admit the possibility of revising the concept of influence and study literary relationships that would not be direct or based on plagiarism. Jean Bressière (2011) argues that new literary models may arise from this new perspective, reconfiguring the place of nations considered to be peripheral and not belonging to the "center" of the canon. According to Márcia Martins (2011), translation has a very important role in this sense, as it is via translation that innovations and new ideas can be introduced in literary systems. Paulo Sérgio Nolasco dos Santos (2011) states that the concerns in relation to these aspects are the object of contemporary comparative literature, that aims to revise the notions and ideas of traditional comparative literature in order to create new perspectives and forms of understanding the relations among different authors. Therefore, the necessity of exploring new possibilities of interpreting Poe's and Machado's works is reinforced, as this necessity is linked with the most up-to-date efforts which take place in order to break some old-fashioned ideas regarding writers who belong to the world literary occidental canon.

5. Conclusion

This article's aim was to offer an overview on the critical studies regarding Machado de Assis and Edgar Allan Poe, stressing the studies that have already been made and pointing out possibilities of studies to come. It is possible to observe that, although Poe and Machado are already famous and recognized as belonging to the world literary canon, some

aspects still lack research, which shows a certain negligence of the literary critics in relation to these aspects. The fact that some features remain unexplored shows that certain authors and also literary texts are always objects of intense and never-ending speculations, and that research is needed to explore these features properly. The authors' ideas regarding nationalism, as well as the establishment of modernity in both Brazil and the United States, are aspects that need more attention from the scholars, as they may reveal some particularities that were not properly explored by literary critics. In this sense, comparing Poe and Machado, and also Poe, Machado and Baudelaire, could be a productive key for interpreting many aspects, such as society, culture, national identity and also, modernity.

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