

DEMONISING THE VICTORIAN HEROINE'S COMING-OF-AGE IN EDWARD BULWER-LYTTON'S *LUCRETIA* AND EDGAR ALLAN POE'S WOMEN'S TALES¹

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Abstract: In Victorian times, the female subject, as embodiment of domestic morality, contributed to the construction of middle-class ideology. In Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel *Lucretia* (1846), the female protagonist apparently incarnates the ideal Victorian heroine. Nonetheless, through her coming-of-age, Lucretia's privileged mind and lack of affection lead her to pursue ambitious aims in a men's world. Edgar Allan Poe also referred to the incipient power women began to achieve. This article aims to analyse in which ways Victorian women's awakening power is demonised through their coming-of-age, thus pursuing a transatlantic comparative analysis between Bulwer-Lytton's *Lucretia* and Edgar Allan Poe's women's tales.

Keywords: Transatlanticism, gender, Victorian heroines, gothic fiction, coming-of-age, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Edgar Allan Poe.

Resumen: En la época victoriana, los personajes femeninos, como personificaciones de la moralidad doméstica, contribuyeron a la construcción de la ideología de la clase media. En la novela *Lucrecia* de Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1846), la protagonista aparentemente encarna el ideal de la heroína victoriana. Sin embargo, a lo largo de su proceso de madurez, su mente privilegiada junto con la falta de afecto la llevan a alcanzar ambiciosas metas en un mundo de hombres. Edgar Allan Poe también aludió al incipiente poder que las mujeres empezaban a conseguir. Este artículo pretende analizar el modo en que el poder emergente de las heroínas victorianas es demonizado a lo largo de su proceso de maduración, proponiendo un análisis comparativo transatlántico entre la novela de Bulwer-Lytton *Lucrecia* y las narraciones de mujeres de Edgar Allan Poe.

Palabras clave: Transatlanticismo, género, heroínas victorianas, ficción gótica, paso a la madurez, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Edgar Allan Poe.

1. INTRODUCCIÓN

In a period marked by working class radicalism, urbanisation and the reorganisation of the private and public life, the question of women's place became a crucial issue in the decade of the 1840s, while incipient feminism began to test the limits of the politics

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of separate spheres. In Edward Bulwer-Lytton's novel *Lucretia*, published in 1846, the young female protagonist apparently seems naïve and compliant, and gradually, through her pretence and power to feign, she alters her appearance to look fragile and even sick. On the other shore of the Atlantic, Edgar Allan Poe's women's tales featured deceased female protagonists, whose presence was evocated by devoted and mournful widowers. Even though Poe's women apparently look delicate and frail, heroines such as Morella, Ligeia, Madeline or even Berenice manage to trespass the limits of life and death through their wilfulness and determination to persist in time, resembling female vampire figures, while their self-will is often demonised by mystified male narrators. Lucretia's ambitious goals in a male context results in her demonisation as a woman, while her powerful will is often disguised behind her weak appearance to please Victorian ideals of femininity. Eventually, her vivid existence as a woman needs to be subdued through her enclosure in a lunatic asylum. Thus, deprived of exerting any influence over young and innocent women, she is also metaphorically excluded from the Victorian society. In contrast, Poe's idealised and unearthly females, precisely because they perish, symbolise the narrator's will to persist in time. Nonetheless, Poe's women resuscitate, that is to say, they go back to the male narrator's memory only through the inevitable appalling influence they exert on their despondent husbands. Poe's heroines thus arise as men's construct of the poetics of eternal beauty, while male horrified narrators gradually discover their late wives' ethereal appearance betrays a decidedly, and repulsive, strong will.

2. POE'S AESTHETICS AND BULWER-LYTTON'S ETHICS

Poe portrayed his theory of aesthetics in his essays, while Bulwer-Lytton composed a series of novels portraying the ethics of young women and men coming of age. In his "Philosophy of Composition", Poe envisioned Beauty as a transcendental reality whose essence is beyond the empirical knowledge of humanity. Drawing on Plato and Schlegel's theories of beauty, Poe removed this concept from its ethical and theological context (Kelly 1956: 521-536), escaping the limitations of the mortal condition through a vision of the ethereal and eternal sphere of the Ideal (Gargano 1962: 339), which his heroines ultimately personify. Meanwhile, a rarefied ideal of women in the arts took hold in America toward the close of the 19th century, picturing females as being finer and purer than males, so that when women departed from these ideals they inevitably roused male anxieties (Springer 1986: 2, 7).

In Victorian ethics, since the family came together within the domestic space, where the woman was assumed to develop her role, it was also the woman who, by extension, became the embodiment of a series of values that she both preserved and personified. From then onwards, the woman, confined in her domestic space, exemplified the pillars of Victorian society. Nonetheless, despite the prevalent importance attached to family ethics, the Victorian society was evolving due to industrialisation, progress and scientific breakthroughs. In this sense, Bulwer-Lytton's *Lucretia* throws a note of caution. It dwells upon the disruption of the moral sanctum in the Victorian family and the result of seeking power outside the confines of the home, both as a reflection of the reshaping of modern society and the consequences of industrialisation on the Victorian moral and ethical structures.

3. WOMEN AS MALE CREATIONS AND WOMEN'S INITIATION THROUGH MALE TUITION

It can be argued Poe presents his women as male creations, while Bulwer-Lytton's *Lucretia* exemplifies the result of the eminently-male education of a girl. Poe's women exist due to the narrator's will, since their presence is always filtered through the male gaze. They represent romanticised women and act as emotional catalysts for their male partners. The concept of using females merely as a means to a male end appears in "The Philosophy of Composition", where Poe unveils his philosophy of beauty. The value of what is viewed lies solely in the response induced in the observer. Thus, the woman must die in order to enlarge the experience of the narrator, her viewer. As widely known, Poe asserted that the death of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world. While subjects of his creations, they are also objects of his thoughts (Weekes 2002: 148). Women are ripe for this objectification, the epitome of which is to fragment the female into parts and idealize one aspect of her body, such as is the case with Berenice's teeth, Ligeia's eyes, or Morella's black hair (2002: 153).

Thus, as Weekes asserts, Poe's female characters often become a receptacle for their narrator's guilt, a *tabula rasa* on which the lover inscribes his own needs. His fictional 'ideal' is a woman who can be subsumed into another's ego and who has no need to tell her own tale. Nina Baym asserts that there "are neither portrayals of women at all, nor attitudes toward them, in Poe's fiction and biography" (Springer 1977: 222), since he uses females to stand for ideas that can almost be construed as morals of his tales. Thus, Poe's feminine ideal can be perceived as merely a placeholder for some need in the narrator himself (Baym 1977: 222). Through language, he is granted the power to restore the lost women in his life (Bieganowski 1988: 177). The horror that Poe's stories dramatize is the impossibility of dying. Either the dead literally come back to life or their undying death is given form in the event of premature burial (Brown 1996: 449). Therefore, as Bieganowski mentions, the resurrection of his heroines becomes a linguistic event, an event re-enacted through the recall of fiction (Bieganowski 1988: 182). However, despite being his creator, the process is reversed, since it is often –the case that the husband's status is explicitly stated as child-like compared to the erudition of his spouse (Weekes 2002: 153). Thus, despite acting as their creator, the narrator is always dependent on his female creations.

While Poe's heroines are objects of his imagination, Bulwer-Lytton's *Lucretia* is the result of male education. Bulwer-Lytton contended that adult character and behaviour are determined by home circumstances and childhood upbringing. *Lucretia* is only four years old when she enters his uncle's house for the first time. Gradually Sir Miles, who is by this time approaching his old age, grows interested in his niece and considers whether he should make her heiress of all his possessions. The baronet, having paid no attention to the child previously, discovers the true nature of his niece for the first time. Astonished by such a rare female character at such an early age, Sir Miles resolves to supervise his niece's education by spending more time with her, as a result of which *Lucretia* manages to win her uncle's affection. Even in her childhood, *Lucretia* evinces "singular powers of readiness and reasoning" (Bulwer-Lytton 2004: 48) which are interpreted as unequivocal signs of a superior mind.

As Lucretia grows older, she becomes “more reserved and thoughtful” (2004: 48). In her uncle's mansion, she has no interaction with any child, but she carefully attends to her uncle's visitors' conversations, undisturbed by any corrective reprimand. Progressively, as she meditates upon the ideas she overhears from the conversations of grown-ups, as Mary Shelley did, Lucretia becomes acquainted with the world of adults. It is implied that the child's exposure to adult affairs, mainly of a financial nature, together with her exclusion from any relationship with other children of her age, exert an important influence on her personality. As is posited in the novel, “the evil depends upon the character and discretion of those the child sees and hears” (2004: 48), and these interlocutors have their inevitable effect upon Lucretia's quick and reflective intellect.

4. MALE POSSESSION TO DISPOSSESS FEMALES AND FEMALE DISPOSSESSION TO POSSESS MALES

A poetics of male possession and female dispossession and vice versa is enhanced throughout Poe's tales and Bulwer-Lytton's novel. According to Joan Dayan, all of Poe's fiction is about property and possession and moves rhetorically back and forth between the extremes of affect and dispassion. Whether we turn to the ultimate conversion of wife into object in “The Oval Portrait”, or to the many narrators involved in varying kinds of dismembering, we encounter the perils of possession. Poe's women, disabled by mysterious illnesses, make inevitable the narrator's obsession that transforms a once idealised beloved into personal property. The puzzling disappearance of these women means that the male narrator can possess them as “a thing to admire” and “an object of love” (Brown 1996: 458). According to Belton, to be in culture, a woman's body must be defamiliarised, masculinised, rendered less alien to males by simply being manipulated (Belton 1987: 8-12), thus objectified. Nonetheless, the speaker who has defined himself as possessor is in turn defined by his possession (Dayan 1994: 247), once he proves hopelessly devoted to his feminine ideal. Consequently, Poe's women, though adored or treasured, are never quite human (Dayan 1999: 405-425), but either the narrator's fetish or the subject of his idealisation, becoming subjects of art as well as the author's *subjects* (1999: 405-425). Thus, Poe enacts the male possession to dispossess his females. By contrast, in Bulwer-Lytton's *Lucretia*, the Victorian heroine and heiress to Sir Miles's fortune, is endowed with the mind of a male heir, ambitious and self-willed. Deprived of a family at a tender age and isolated from any young company, she embodies female dispossession with a view to possess the men around her, her uncle, her tutor and her suitors. Since her role is that of a male, she is demonised as a Victorian heiress, eventually deprived of her heritage, her title, and ultimately, her son.

5. REMINDERS OF THE POET'S MORTALITY AND REMINDERS OF MEN'S IMPO-TENCE

It has traditionally been assumed most of Poe's dying women represent Death, and consequently they become a source of male anxiety as they remind the narrator of his own mortality. In Bulwer-Lytton's *Lucretia*, the female heroine's physical strength and

her powerful intellect remind her suitors of their impotence in her presence. Poe's wife-figures are expected to ensure the happiness of their husband and, by maintaining their own youthfulness and vitality, to affirm his youth—that is, to save him from aging and death. The discovery of his female counterpart's vulnerability seems to deprive him of the illusion of his own immortality (Weekes 2002: 153). Thus, a dying woman who remains beautiful is to be adored as a poetic inspiration, but one who has the poor grace to show the revenge of disease is to be disdained, as she is merely a token of inevitable decay (2002: 154). Emblematic of the abhorrence of decay is the narrator's characterization of Madame Lalande in "The Spectacles". She is the opposite of Poe's feminine ideal: she is more than a match for the narrator in intelligence; she is active, neither young nor delicately beautiful. Thus, she terrifies him not only with her subliminal reminder of his own mortality, but also with her violation of what Poe's narrators have come to expect in their brides. Once a woman steps out of the narrow boundaries of the stereotypical feminine role, she is reviled rather than revered (2002: 153-154).

According to Gerald Kennedy, unable to comprehend the disappearance of his mother, Poe in later life continued on a subliminal level to deny her death. She became, as Silverman asserts, the prototype of all absent yet unforgettable women in his poetry and fiction; those encrypted yet deathless ladies who excited both dread and longing. He felt an irrational but powerful feeling of responsibility for the premature deaths of his beloved women. In the stories depicting the death of a beautiful woman, the protagonist often typically undergoes a metamorphosis in which grief becomes murderous rage—a process seen most clearly in the contrast between the two marriages in "Ligeia".

6. A FEW TRANSATLANTIC DICHOTOMIES

6.1. The transatlantic double-edged reactionary and rebellious gender discourse

Poe's women have often been interpreted from a reactionary discourse, since the deaths of Poe's women raise troubling questions about an inherent misogyny. However, focusing mainly on the tales, recent criticism has tended to regard Poe's destructive poetics as a deliberate, ironic critique of patriarchal attitudes toward women (Kennedy 1995: 113). Actually, according to Gerald Kennedy, seeing the narrator's final horror as evidence of a failure to control or repress the female, certain commentators have even credited Poe with an enlightened deconstruction of nineteenth-century gender roles (1995: 113-114). In his novel *Lucretia*, Bulwer-Lytton warned about the dangers of improper early influences upon young females. Nonetheless, it is also assumed that Lucretia's wicked deeds are the result of her surrounding circumstances rather than of any innate wickedness. The dichotomy of this both reactionary and feminist discourse can be perceived through the dialectics of female power and male rejection, male guilt and female redemption, masculine and feminine conceptions of women and sensuous knowledge versus intellectual love.

6.2. Female power versus male rejection

The dialectics of female power and male rejection is reflected through females' transformation of their bodies, which echoes moral shifts, intellectual threats and ultimately death (Halio 1968: 23). Instead of reciprocating her love, the narrator states his objectification of Berenice. As Berenice's disease progresses, the distancing of Egäus from his fiancée becomes more pronounced. His horror becomes unbearable as her physical condition deteriorates, and her poetic traits move from the realm of the beautiful to that of the bizarre and repellent (Weekes 2002: 155). The transformation of her body seems to reflect a moral shift from innocence to sexuality. Actually, what particularly horrifies the narrator is her smile; which may be a suggestion of the inevitability of the narrator's similar fate, or a sign of sexual desire, thus leading the narrator to be doubly overcome. Another moral shift may involve her naïve feminine role for that of the male sphere of knowledge. Either interpretation involves a threat to the narrator's power, either in his bookish realm or in their relationship (Weekes 2002: 156). Obsessed by the wasting illness of his lovely cousin, the narrator of *Berenice* ultimately violates her tomb and disfigures her still-living body to extract the teeth which, in his diseased imagination, remain unchangeable as they represent ideas (Kennedy 1995: 119), and thus, are unable to vanish with her body.

According to Weekes, *Morella* presents another passionless marriage. Despite her typically attractive appearance, the narrator comes to revile *Morella* without being able to say why. Different theories may account for this rejection. One of them is the intellectual threat to the narrator's masculine superiority and leadership. His admiration for her is mental rather than emotional, as he is impressed with his wife's vast knowledge and abandons himself to her educational guidance (Weekes 2002: 156). Another reason for his rejection could be *Morella*'s representation of death. According to Leslie Fiedler, *Morella*'s name is the symbol of mortality (Gargano 1975: 261). *Morella* represents to the intellect of the narrator the menace and certainty of recurring death and human insufficiency. Yet, she cannot die because she is Death itself. The narrator's refusal to name his daughter reveals his apprehension that she is death's child, thus suggesting death is reborn in every new life (1975: 262-263). As a third possibility, *Morella*'s daughter, born as her mother dies, raises the spectre of sex in the story. The narrator's revulsion could also be directed at *Morella*'s pregnant body, since it reminds him of carnality and maternity, and as a whole, as a threat to his persona, since he is deprived of the life force and the metaphorical reincarnation of motherhood. Thus, *Morella*'s child represents the independent strengths and talents for which *Morella* died (Weekes 2002: 157).

In "The Fall of the House of Usher", Roderick is so sure of his identity with his twin sister that he will not believe that she can be dead while he himself still lives (Stovall 1963: 417-421). In that realisation lies the source of his horror. Thus, Roderick commits the atrocity of burying his sister prematurely to protect himself from what *Madeline* represents: mortality, loss and abandonment. Considering Roderick's struggle with death, the live burial of *Madeline* was an attempt to escape death by transferring it to his sister (Stovall 1963: 417-421). Consequently, as a female vampire, she avenges the act by falling "heavily inward upon the person of her brother", bearing him to the floor (Kennedy 1995: 119).

Ligeia relates how the narrator becomes obsessed with the idea that he can eventually incorporate his ideal of beauty in the person of a real woman (Stovall 1963: 417-421). Stovall argues that Ligeia is Poe's "incarnation of feminine perfection". Nonetheless, in *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir argued the figure of adoration remains absolutely the other, although she embodies the poetic principle for the male. In this idealisation, she is paradoxically everything and nothing (Kennedy 1995: 114). As the last of Poe's women, Ligeia's mighty will proves more than an equal both over death and over her narrator. She is described in surreal or ethereal terms, setting her apart from the narrator and all humanity. Ligeia is the nurturing mentor figure for her husband. She even dominates him on her deathbed, requesting him to recite the poem she wrote. Ligeia's sexuality also proves a source of anxiety for the narrator, as she bends over him in his studies and fills his mind with vivid delight (Weekes 2002: 158). In Bulwer-Lytton's novel, Lucretia equally attracts both feelings of admiration and contempt. Lucretia's physical appearance commonly exerts a strange effect on other people. At first sight, her countenance invokes a sense of danger that is gradually mitigated through fascination at the intellectual power of her expression and the charm of her rare smile.

6.3. Masculine versus feminine conception of women

In "Ligeia," the scene of revivification enacts the struggle between the 'dark' and 'fair' ladies of Poe and crystallises the symbolism of his two female types. The Feminine Ideal, the beautiful, naïve maiden who dies an untimely death, is opposed to the wilful, dark-haired woman who fascinates but also threatens the narrator with reminders of his own decay. For the narrator, the true horror in these tales is that a beautiful woman can wield her own power. The narrator is terrified by Ligeia's reappearance not so much because it means she has conquered death but because she does it through an act of vehement will, a powerful volition (2002: 159). According to Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert, the monster-woman, threatening to replace her angelic sister, embodies intransigent female autonomy and represents the author's anxieties (Gubar and Gilbert 1984: 28). Moreover, the female monster is a striking illustration of Simone de Beauvoir's thesis that woman has been made to represent all of man's ambivalent feelings about his own inability to control his physical existence, his own birth and death (1984: 34). The nineteenth-century cult of such death-angels resulted in a veritable 'domestication of death', producing both a conventionalised iconography and a stylised hagiography of dying women. The aesthetic cult of ladylike fragility and delicate beauty –no doubt associated with the moral cult of angel-woman– obliged "genteel" women to "kill" themselves into art objects, thus becoming slim, pale, and passive beings (25).

Many women in Poe's life showed signs of consumption: a disease that kills its victims without destroying their appearance. The consumptive woman ironically becomes increasingly beautiful as her skin pales to translucence and her cheeks and lips redden from fever. As Weekes points out with regard to Kennedy (1987), "Poe implies that through this insidious transformation, temporal loveliness approaches the perfection of eternal beauty, and incarnates an ideality. But because death also entails psychological decay, the beauty of the just departed contains an element of terror" (2002: 149). This dichotomy is also dwelled

upon in Bulwer-Lytton's *Lucretia*. Lucretia has a half-sister, Susan, who is her female opposite. The contrast between the sisters, and by extension, the two embodiments of Victorian archetypes – Susan, “the angel of the house” and Lucretia, “the fallen woman” – is often hinted by one of Lucretia's suitors, Mainwaring, equally attracted by Susan's meekness and Lucretia's powerful intellect.

6.4. Male guilt versus female redemption

Critics have used biographical and psychological arguments to explain Poe's concept of women. Poe lost an unusual number of beautiful, relatively young females in his lifetime: his mother, Eliza Poe; his foster mother, Fanny Allan; the mother of one of his friends, Jane Stanard; her aunt, Mrs Clemm, and his own wife, Virginia Clemm. Consequently, Gerald Kennedy argues Poe “nourished himself on a young woman's death, in the sense that art was for him a form of mourning, a revisitation of his past and of what he had lost [...] he returned to the subject of “the one and only supremely beloved” again and again” (1995:118). Thus, Poe sought a loving female to protect him from desolation and death. According to Kennedy, in “The Murders in the Rue Morgue”, the brutal killing of Madame L'Esplanaye and her daughter represents Poe's unconscious expression or artistic sublimation of a real, repressed resentment of Mrs Clemm and Virginia for his own incestuous entanglement with them (Kennedy 1995: 546).

Similarly, in “The Black Cat”, it is his own wife who suggests, to the narrator who is so tender towards his pets, the old superstition that a black cat is a witch in disguise (Hoffman 1998: 231). Poe composed the story in the months following his wife's first pulmonary haemorrhage; an event that marked the onset of her fatal consumption. Inadvertently walling up with his wife's corpse the still-living cat, the narrator exposes an unconscious desire to be caught and punished. Because Poe could not openly accuse Virginia of deserting him, he turned the anger upon himself (Kennedy 1996: 542-543). Similarly, in *Eleonora*, the narrator's beloved but fated female cousin appears to sanction his subsequent marriage to Ermengarde. Read in relation to Poe's life, the story prefigures by several years his quest for a new bride after Virginia's demise (Kennedy 1995: 126). According to Weekes, *Eleonora's* main concern at death is whether the narrator will remain true to her memory or will marry another. Her jealous acceptance of the promise of fidelity introduces a question of power. Nonetheless, the power struggle is absolutely resolved in favour of the narrator, who not only loves Ermengarde with the passion he once felt for *Eleonora*, he even denigrates the previous relationship, proving faithless (Weekes 2002: 155). In Bulwer-Lytton's *Lucretia*, it is often hinted the heroine has been indebted to her tutor's wickedness. Thus, , as is often the case in Poe's tales, it is implied that his tutor, and potential husband, finds redemption through his death at Lucretia's hands.

6.5. Sensuous knowledge versus intellectual love

Poe's love for his dying women responds to an epistemological search for intellectual fulfilment through sensuous contemplation, through the materialisation of ideas. Poe's narrators are often removed from physical passion (2002: 151). According to Hoffman, the

very thought of a consummated marriage struck Poe's imagination with terror. He was beset by redoubled fears of committing incest and of connubial non-performance (Hoffman 1998: 241). In a way, for Poe, death is a metaphor of sexuality, and thus, ultimately, to examine the narrator's concern with his women is rooted in his own desire for ultimate knowledge (Eakin 1973: 1-22) about death without undertaking the experience himself. The allegorical construction in *Eleanora* strongly suggests that Poe had read Plato's "Symposium" prior to the publication of the romance in 1842. In Poe's story, "Eleonora", the heroine of the first part of the narrative, appears to stand for the Uranian Venus, the representative of heavenly love, of innocent love in Poe's terms. On the other hand, Ermengarde, the heroine of the second part of the narrative, appears to stand for the Pandemian Venus, the representative of earthly love, of married love in Poe's terms (Benton 1967: 294).

As Davis states, Ligeia's revivification exists only in the mind of the narrator. On the literal level, the story reveals the murder of Rowena by the deluded narrator in order to provide a body for his departed first wife. In reality, there is no physical Ligeia: thus the horror of the narrator's murder of Rowena is intensified when the reader discovers that the deluded narrator has murdered her to bring back an entirely imaginary first wife (Davis & Davis 1970: 171). It is thus implied the narrator has destroyed his real wife in a psychotic attempt to realize a purely imaginary one (1970: 175). According to Hoffman, in this sense, Ligeia transmits "the archetype of the fall of man through a beloved woman" (Hoffman 1998: 244), her forbidden knowledge, and the narrator's wish to possess the latter by possessing the former, that is, what Belton calls, the natural stereotype of women as principal cause of the downfall of men. Consequently, Morella and Ligeia present alternative narrative realisations both of one another and of the principle of forbidden female sexuality originally embodied in the Garden myth (Zanger 1978: 536). In Bulwer-Lytton's novel *Lucretia's* knowledge is rather hidden, while her female body takes precedence and becomes her suitor's focal source of attraction. Her sensual nature is undeniable, whereas her powerful intellect is never fully detected, or comprehended, by her male counterparts, who merely manage to decode some mannish behaviour which ultimately causes her rejection.

6.6. Lineal involution as slow destruction versus circular evolution as faked eternity

Finally, just some brief notes on the poetic of involution and evolution of female characters in this transatlantic analysis. Bulwer-Lytton's *Lucretia* seems to pursue an inverted evolution, since her will to increase her power comes to no end, when she accidentally kills her own son and is locked in an asylum, following a lineal involution of slow destruction. By contrast, Weekes argues Poe's poetic and fictional females lack individual development. His dying women pass silently from this life, rarely expressing their feelings or voicing their needs. Madeline Usher is speechless in her only pre-entombed appearance; Berenice smiles her ghastly grin but "speaks no word", and the wife in "The Oval Portrait" never dares disturb her husband's labour, but instead quietly dies in her chair as he paints her portrait. In other cases, such as those of Morella and Eleonora, their dying thoughts focus not on their own plight (Weekes 2002: 150). Ligeia seems closer to defeating death, as she represents Poe's feminine ideal. However, due to her idealisation, it is possible to argue

Poe's women undergo a circular evolution that merely resembles eternity, except in the text itself, where they truly remain immortal.

7. CONCLUSIONS

A poetics of a gendered coming-of-age can be identified through Poe's tales and Bulwer-Lytton's novel through the dialectics of different dichotomies, which underlie Poe's idealisation of women to transcend his art and Bulwer-Lytton's concern about the perilous effects of female education in his Victorian ethos. Through the artist's idealisation in Poe's case and through the Victorian social structure in Bulwer-Lytton's works, both authors' ways to shape and perpetuate women's idealisation and ostracism reflect transatlantic manifestations of the Victorian male gaze in both Europe and America. Despite their transatlantic differences, both seem to interpret women's coming-of-age as the art of self-postponement (Blake 1983). Either objectifying or idealising them, both authors only allow their heroines to pursue a faked process of growth that denies their integrity as mature Victorian females. Nonetheless, as noticed above, it is precisely in this male demonisation that lies these heroines' inner strength.

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