

«IT REMINDED ME OF POE'S STORY»: EDGAR  
ALLAN POE'S LEGACY, THE GHOST STORY AND  
THE AMERICAN GOTHIC IN RICHARD  
MATHESON'S *A STIR OF ECHOES*

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Recibido: 10-01-2014  
Aceptado: 16-04-2014



#### RESUMEN

Pese a que la novela *El último escalón* (1958) a menudo ha sido eclipsada por otros títulos más conocidos de Richard Matheson tales como *Soy leyenda* (1954) o *El increíble hombre menguante* (1956), debería otorgársele la importancia que merece como reflejo a la par que como fuente de intertextualidad. *El último escalón* se enmarca en la tradición del relato de fantasmas y del gótico americano, pero ante todo, amalgama imágenes, personajes y giros argumentales que evocan, de forma significativa, algunos de los relatos más representativos de Poe. Asimismo, por tratarse de la novela que vio la luz con inmediata anterioridad a las adaptaciones cinematográficas de los relatos de Poe, es harto probable que Richard Matheson tuviera en mente su novela *El último escalón* a la hora de desarrollar y transformar algunos de los relatos de Poe para sus guiones cinematográficos. Este artículo tiene el objetivo de analizar la novela *El último escalón* en relación a su intertextualidad con los relatos de Poe, especialmente con aquellos que Matheson adaptaría poco después a la gran pantalla.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Matheson, intertextualidad, relato de fantasmas, gótico americano, Edgar Allan Poe, adaptaciones cinematográficas.

#### ABSTRACT

Even if *A Stir of Echoes* (1958) has often been overshadowed by Richard Matheson's best-known novels *I Am Legend* (1954) and *The Shrinking Man* (1956), it should be given the credit it deserves as a novel that functions both as a reflection as well as a source of intertextuality. *A Stir of Echoes* is rooted in the tradition of the ghost story and the American gothic, but above all, it comprises motifs, characters and twists in the plot

that are significantly reminiscent of some of Poe's most representative tales. Likewise, being the novel that saw the light of day immediately prior to his film adaptations of Poe's tales, Richard Matheson must have had *A Stir of Echoes* in mind in order to expand and transform some of Poe's stories for his screenplays. This article aims to analyse *A Stir of Echoes* regarding its intertextuality with Poe's tales, especially with those that Matheson would later adapt to the screen.

KEYWORDS: Matheson, intertextuality, ghost story, American gothic, Edgar Allan Poe, film adaptations.



#### 1. THE INFLUENCE, LEGACY AND CREATIVITY OF RICHARD MATHESON

When his novel *A Stir of Echoes* saw the light of day in 1958, Richard Matheson was already a best-selling novelist, having published four novels and three collections of short stories. One year later, he was also on the way to becoming the highly-acclaimed scriptwriter of some episodes of *The Twilight Zone*, a result of his fruitful association with its executive producer Rod Serling. Likewise, in the early years of the decade of the 1960s, Richard Matheson also began an association with American International Pictures to write the script for a film adaptation of Edgar Allan Poe's tale «The Fall of the House of Usher», which would become the first of a series of film adaptations of Poe's tales in which Matheson was to play a major role. All through his career, he proved to be a thoroughly prolific and versatile writer, as he wrote short stories, novels, plays and scripts that comprised a wide range of different genres such as science-fiction, terror, suspense and even western. Given the eclectic quality that characterised his writings, in an interview held in the year 2000, Stanley Wiater asked Richard Matheson whether he had given any thought as to how he would like to be remembered in the years to come. In response to that question, Matheson gave good signs of the importance he attached to his craft as a writer, stating that he would simply like to be remembered as a story-teller.

The seeds that triggered Richard Matheson's fertile imagination were mostly rooted in the fact that he was an avid reader as well as a curious viewer extremely fond of films, from which he admitted having drawn much inspira-

tion for his writings. Accordingly, it is in the following way that he himself unveiled the process whereby he would usually come up with an idea to write a story: «I would say the majority of my ideas have come from seeing movies. Usually, poor movies. If they're wonderful movies, you're totally involved with it. If they're poor movies that have an interesting premise, the premise intrigues you, but you pay very little attention to the movie because it's so *bad*. And that's when, for me, the ideas start coming» (Wiater, 2009: 7).

In addition to seeing films, Richard Matheson also declared having grown up reading stories that would necessarily exert a deep influence on the narratives he was to write later on. Consequently, he acknowledged having been significantly influenced by films as well as by stories in order to produce his own writings. As a case in point, the idea for his first best-selling novel, *I am Legend* (1954), which has nowadays turned into a contemporary classic, came to Richard Matheson when he saw Tod Browning's classic film *Dracula* as it was being shown again in theatres when he was a teenager. While seeing the film in the cinema, young Richard Matheson wondered what would happen if the whole world was made up of vampires since he realised that, apparently, one single vampire on the screen seemed enough to scare the whole audience. It was precisely this reasoning back in his youth that would eventually give rise to his popular novel of vampires years later. In addition to being influenced by Tod Browning's classic film, Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend* also pays homage to Bram Stoker's seminal novel, which played a major role in turning the vampire into an archetypal character within the horror genre, since the protagonist, Robert Neville, reads the novel *Dracula* as he struggles to defeat the plague that has turned the whole of humanity into a mass of vampires. Ironically, through the perusal of this classic of horror literature, Robert Neville even quotes from Bram Stoker's novel as he comes to the conclusion that vampires have finally managed to defeat the whole of humanity because, through the course of history, nobody had ever seemed to believe in them.

As the genesis of his novel *I am Legend* reveals, on different occasions Richard Matheson relied on classics of the genre – either from literature or from the cinema – which he would take as a point of departure with the aim of updating them and giving shape to his own stories. In this respect, Matheson's combination of tradition and individuality was, in due course, taken over by one of his greatest disciples, Stephen King, who, as a contemporary best-selling writer of horror fiction, has mostly been given the credit for adapting the fundamental motifs of the horror story to the emotional needs of a

contemporary audience (Hoppenstand and Browne, 1987: 5). Given this shared quality, it is no wonder that Stephen King has often declared he considers Richard Matheson to be the author who has influenced him most as a writer. Like King, in some of his novels Richard Matheson also drew from motifs pertaining to the classic horror genre, setting the story within a contemporary temporal framework and in a middle-class suburb, where, all of a sudden, the peaceful existence of its inhabitants is strangely brought to a halt. The ultimate result of this approach is to render his stories more believable as well as more appealing to a contemporary readership. In this sense, if his novel *I am Legend* was rooted in the tradition of vampire fiction, with direct references to Bram Stoker's novel, Richard Matheson would, later, return to horror fiction with his novel *A Stir of Echoes* (1958), which is enmeshed in the established tradition of haunted houses and ghost stories as portrayed from a contemporary perspective.

Richard Matheson's novel *A Stir of Echoes* is a good example of a story that amalgamates features pertaining to the classic gothic fiction and brings them up to date. As the title of the novel seems to suggest, it presents significant echoes and intertextual links that relate it to the tradition of the classic ghost story and the fiction of haunted houses, the American gothic, and most significantly, some of Edgar Allan Poe's best-known tales. It must be acknowledged that *A Stir of Echoes* was the novel that Richard Matheson published immediately before he engaged himself in writing the scripts for Roger Corman's film adaptations of Poe's tales. In the span of scarcely three years, Richard Matheson was asked to transform some of Poe's short stories such as «The Fall of the House of Usher», «The Pit and the Pendulum», «Morella», «The Black Cat», «The Cask of Amontillado», and «The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar» into the full-length films *House of Usher* (1960), *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1961) and *Tales of Terror* (1962). Given the fact that, for the most part, these film scripts are not strictly faithful to the original stories on which they are based, it is assumed that, in most cases, Richard Matheson took Poe's tales as a point of departure, preserving the atmosphere and ultimate significance of Poe's texts. But he also transformed them ostensibly, giving vent to his imagination as a story-teller. It is through the important role that Matheson's creativity played when he wrote the Poe scripts, that his novel *A Stir of Echoes* may well have exerted an important influence on the expansion and adaptation of Poe's tales for the screen.

In fact, as a novelist as well as a scriptwriter, Richard Matheson knew his craft well and managed to shift smoothly from cinema to literature and *vice*

*versa*, admitting he found inspiration in films to create his stories while his literary imagination also influenced the scripts he would write for the screen. When he wrote *A Stir of Echoes*, Richard Matheson took basic features pertaining to the classic gothic genre as well as to Poe's tales with a view to updating them and making them appealing for contemporary readers, in clear resemblance with his subsequent adaptations of Poe's tales for the silver screen, which were also aimed at popularising Poe's stories and rendering them alluring to contemporary spectators. Accordingly, Richard Matheson may have been mindful of his immediately preceding novel, *A Stir of Echoes*, as a likely source in order to expand and transform some of Poe's tales which he came to adapt for the screen. It is in this respect, it can be argued, that Richard Matheson's novel *A Stir of Echoes* presents important intertextual links with some of the scripts that he would subsequently write for the film adaptations of Poe's tales.

Richard Matheson considered Edgar Allan Poe one of his favourite writers ever and used to acknowledge him as such. As a matter of fact, in a speech he delivered at the World Fantasy Convention held in Los Angeles in October 1977 when he was chosen as guest of honour, Richard Matheson felt obliged to pay tribute to all those writers that he had learned to enjoy and revere all through his life. Significantly enough, Edgar Allan Poe was the first writer that he mentioned in his personal list, as shown in the quotation below:

I would like to mention the years of enchantment, thrills, and delight I've received from the many writers who've contributed their talents to the world of fantasy. Writers like Poe, Kafka, Lovecraft, Dunsany, Machen, Blackwood, Stoker, James, Walpole, Meritt, T.H.White, Bradbury, Bloch, Kuttner, Sturgeon, Leiber, Moore, Kersh, Tenn, Finney, Miller (Ward and Walter), Brown, Bester, Van Vogt, Beaumont, Neville, Russell, Nolan, Ellison *et al.* They've provided me with days of spellbound joy and nights of delicious insomnia. (Matheson, 2009: 113)

When Richard Matheson began to write the scripts for Roger Corman's film adaptations of Poe's tales, he took his new assignment very seriously, as he was well aware that, after all, he was adapting Edgar Allan Poe, for whom Matheson had always felt great awe and respect. Nonetheless, even if his association with Poe came to the fore through his scripts based on Poe's tales, his admiration for the American master of the short story had already taken shape years prior to adapting his tales to the screen. As a case in point, his novel *A Stir of Echoes* gives evidence of the influence Poe's legacy had already exerted on Richard Matheson's writings.

## 2. UPDATING THE CLASSIC GHOST STORY

Apparently, Richard Matheson's *A Stir of Echoes* follows the classic formula of the ghost story. Its plot revolves around a young and happily married couple, Tom and Anne Wallace, who live with their little son Richard in a suburban area of Los Angeles. They make friends with other young and married couples from their neighbourhood, particularly with Ron and Elsie as well as with Frank and Elizabeth, but they soon realise their tenants, Harry and Mildred Sentas, stand somewhat apart from the rest of their neighbours. From time to time, the Wallaces are also visited by Phil, Anne's brother, who is a psychologist as well as a keen practitioner of hypnotism. Unlike his brother-in-law, Tom takes great pride in regarding himself as a pragmatist, which is what ultimately prompts Phil to try to hypnotise him with the aim of transforming his sceptical views. Once he agrees to be hypnotised and the mesmeristic session comes to a close, Tom realises that a significant change has taken place, as he feels his senses and his capacity for perception have acquired the most extraordinary qualities. As evidence of this, from then onwards, Tom is capable of reading people's minds and, furthermore, he has prophetic dreams and visions that cause great distress both to him and to his wife. However, what scares him most is the spectre of a threatening lady dressed in black who regularly makes her appearance at night. Tom believes her to be Mildred Sentas' sister, Helen Driscoll, who used to live in their house before they moved in. From then on, in an attempt to recover his peace of mind, Tom needs to unravel this mystery and find out who is actually hiding behind this apparition and the reason why it persistently haunts their house.

Bearing in mind the fact that Richard Matheson claimed he often found inspiration to write his stories while watching films, it is tempting to refer to Lewis Allen's classic film *The Uninvited* (1944) as one of the possible sources of *A Stir of Echoes*, since Matheson himself admitted feeling chills run up his spine whenever he watched this film, while its storyline also presents many points in common with his novel (Bradley, 1993: 167-168). *The Uninvited* unfolds a plot usually found in the classic ghost story, as music composer Roderick Fitzgerald and his sister Pamela move to Cornwall to live in Windward House, purchasing the house from neighbour Commander Beech, only to discover that it is haunted by the presence of ghosts. When Roderick falls in love with Beech's granddaughter, Stella, and notices that a strong connection seems to bind together Stella and the spectres, he decides to solve the puzzle and discovers startling secrets lurking beneath Stella's family origins. Motifs

such as those of a haunted house, the tenant's suspicious behaviour, a love triangle, and the need to unveil the reason why the spectre arises to haunt the living, are also found in *A Stir of Echoes*. In fact, from a contemporary perspective, Richard Matheson's novel illustrates many of the tenets pertaining to the classic ghost story, which also come to the fore in Lewis Allen's film.

Drawing on Julia Briggs's structural approach to the ghost story, *A Stir of Echoes* can be claimed to be clearly entrenched within its tradition, taking into consideration that it illustrates many of the tenets pertaining to the formula of the classic ghost story. As Briggs suggests, these narratives pose a challenge to the rational order and the laws of nature, as they unveil supernatural events that cannot be explained by merely logical reasons, thus disclosing a tension between the familiar world of life and the unknowable world of death (2000: 122). As a matter of fact, in *A Stir of Echoes*, once Tom has been hypnotised, he becomes receptive to stimuli previously unknown to him, and he gains insight into another dimension he never thought could exist, especially given his former sceptical bent of mind. His new condition makes him question the ideas and beliefs he has held so far, thus becoming more sensitive towards and more understanding of those events that apparently seem to lack any rational explanation. Likewise, in this kind of narrative, the figure of the ghost embodies what Sigmund Freud would term «the return of the repressed», as the spectre represents the duplication or double of a human being that has been neglected, and often, violently murdered (Briggs, 2000: 124). In this respect, one of the commonest motifs in the ghost story is that of revenge, which equally plays an important role in Matheson's novel, as the ghost makes her appearance to avenge herself and ultimately get to know who was responsible for her death. Helen Driscoll haunts the place where she was murdered to vindicate her memory and punish those who put an end to her life.

Furthermore, as Briggs also notices, the ghost, often appearing in the guise of a woman, also brings to the fore the traditionally patriarchal link between women's experience and the physical state of abjection (2000: 128). Actually, in Matheson's novel, it is ultimately revealed that Helen Driscoll was killed in what is perceived to be an act of retribution given that she was found to have drawn several men to commit adultery. The fact that, after her death, Helen Driscoll ultimately becomes transformed into a ghost that haunts the living exposes how, from a patriarchal perspective, a woman can literally become the source of abjection. While alive, Helen Driscoll was feared for the fatal attraction she exerted on men, and even after her death, she still remains

a source of fear and trouble for the living. Finally, the classic ghost story also focuses on the family as a source of concealed secrets among its members, secrets that can no longer be contained and must eventually come to light (Briggs, 2000: 127). As a matter of fact, in Matheson's novel, Tom's newly-acquired abilities to make predictions and perceive realities that others cannot even imagine threaten to upset his up-to-then happy and peaceful marriage. This can also be extended to most of the families living in their neighbourhood who are also found to have many secrets they would like to hide. In this respect, in an increasingly postmodern world, where mistrust and uncertainty prevail, the family as an institution also becomes a matter for concern.

### 3. THE LEGACY OF EDGAR ALLAN POE IN *A STIR OF ECHOES*

In addition to comprising many features pertaining to the ghost story, Matheson's novel *A Stir of Echoes* also includes numerous examples of intertextuality with some of Poe's tales, to the extent that it can be claimed to be conceived in Poe's shadow, which acquire great importance from early on in the novel. As a case in point, just as Matheson included a direct reference to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in his novel *I am Legend*, so, too, he paid homage to Edgar Allan Poe in *A Stir of Echoes*, literally making reference to the short story «The Tell-Tale Heart». In Matheson's novel, once Tom realises that the house where they live is haunted by a ghost, he waits anxiously for the spectre to make its appearance in their living room every night. Tom's increasingly agitated state clearly brings to mind that of the neurotic narrator in Poe's «The Tell-Tale Heart», who, as a result of distress, cannot help hearing the beatings of the old man's heart once he has murdered him and has placed his body under the planks of the floor. The narrator in Poe's tale describes this fearful sound as follows: «[i]t was a low, dull, quick sound – much such a sound as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton» (Poe, 1986g: 295). Similarly, in Richard Matheson's *A Stir of Echoes*, Tom Wallace describes the anguishing moments prior to seeing Helen Driscoll's ghost, stating that: «[i]n the cupboard I could hear the alarm clock ticking – it reminded me of Poe's story about the telltale heart – it *sounded* like a heart beating hollowly behind the shielding of the cabinet door» (Matheson, 2013: 33). The character's awareness of Poe's earlier fictional tales serves the purpose of endowing Matheson's novel with a significant metafictional component. Tom Wallace thus becomes Matheson's alter ego, acknowledging he is rooted in a literary tradition while he also updates these references to classic texts in order to suit



a contemporary readership. These intertextual references thus ultimately underscore Matheson's tribute to tradition but also his adhesion to his individual talent as a writer.

This direct reference to one of Poe's most well-known tales shows Matheson's will to reveal Poe's legacy, as well as his intention to establish an explicit connection between his novel and some of Poe's tales. In both cases, in Matheson's *A Stir of Echoes*, like the sound of the watch in Poe's «The Tell-Tale Heart», the ticking of the clock not only signals that a dark secret is about to come to light, but it also reflects the acute nervousness that the two narrators experience, which, in turn, betrays some sort of guilt on their part, even if, in each case, this guilt responds to very different reasons: in Poe's tale, the narrator feels guilty for having committed a murder, whereas in Matheson's novel, the narrator feels guilty because he may feel tempted to commit the same act for which Helen Driscoll was ultimately murdered. Likewise, if in Poe's tale it is assumed that the beatings of the old man's heart are the product of the narrator's agitated state of mind, Tom Wallace's capacity to see Helen Driscoll's ghost lies, rather, in his newly-acquired faculty which enables him to perceive what others are simply unable to.

### 3.1 THE TRACE OF «THE FALL OF THE HOUSE OF USHER»

In addition to a direct intertextual reference to Poe's tale «The Tell-Tale Heart», *A Stir of Echoes* also presents some scenes and situations that are reminiscent of Poe's masterpiece «The Fall of the House of Usher», which, significantly, happens to be the first of Poe's tales that Matheson adapted for the screen. In Poe's tale, Roderick Usher falls victim to a nervous agitation and «a morbid acuteness of the senses» (Poe, 1986e: 251) which makes him incapable of being exposed to certain kinds of garments, odours, food or light, given his acute sensitivity. Likewise, in *A Stir of Echoes*, once he agrees to be subjected to hypnosis, Tom Wallace acquires an extraordinary faculty of perception, which brings to mind that of Roderick Usher and which he describes, stating that «[s]omething was rising in me. As if I were a vessel into which was being poured alien cognizance, I felt things, sensed things – things I couldn't understand, things I couldn't even clearly see; shards of strange perception. [...] Awareness deluged into my mind. I was the channel for a million images» (Matheson, 2013: 25). Accordingly, both Roderick Usher and Tom Wallace suffer from an acute sensibility that renders them capable of gaining entrance into a dimension from which most individuals are excluded.

This gift with which Tom is endowed causes much trouble and suffering both to him and his family, even though, sometimes, it also proves to be of great help. In fact, critic Murray Leader equates Tom's gift with that of a detective's skilled vision (2012: 82), since, owing to his newly-acquired faculty, Tom Wallace becomes an extremely gifted individual capable of unraveling a case of murder. It is in this sense that Tom's great powers of perception also bear a striking resemblance with those of Poe's famous detective, Auguste Dupin, whose peculiar analytic ability and powers of observation lead him to unravel cases that appear to be completely unsolvable in each of the tales comprising Poe's detective trilogy.

Likewise, Tom's perceptive faculty also draws him closer to his own subconscious self. When Tom Wallace is hypnotised by his brother-in-law, Phil, the former decidedly becomes more perceptive and better able to gain insight into a dimension that is not perceptible at first sight. In this sense, Tom is empowered to read people's minds, his dreams become prophetic, and he has visions that enable him to avoid dangerous situations. Having been a pragmatist all his life, Tom succumbs to the existence of a different kind of reality that escapes any logical explanation. The important role that the world of the subconscious plays in *A Stir of Echoes* again establishes Matheson's novel as a likely source for his subsequent film adaptation of «The Fall of the House of Usher». The role of the unconscious in the film acquires particular relevance, as Roger Corman himself admitted having been reluctant to shoot his film realistically and intended, rather, to portray the landscape as highly symbolic in order to keep it in tune with Poe's original story, taking into consideration that, in Corman's view, «the world of Poe, to a large extent, was the world of the unconscious» (Smith, 2003: 106). In this respect, Phillip's nightmarish dream of Madeline in the film *House of Usher* becomes particularly illustrative of Roger Corman's concern to infuse his film with significant references to surrealism and the domain of the unconscious.

Likewise, in resemblance to Poe's original tale, Roger Corman was also well aware that the house of the Ushers should acquire as much weight as any other character in the story. In fact, the identification of the house with the Usher family remains constant throughout the film. As a case in point, Roderick reveals that the Ushers come from a lineage of wickedness and depravity, as for many years, all its members have perpetrated acts of evil within the walls of the house of Usher, and, consequently, a strong connection is ultimately established between the Ushers and the family manor. Significantly, the motif of the haunted house also acquires particular relevance in *A Stir of*

*Echoes*. In Matheson's novel, Helen Driscoll's ghost haunts the house where Tom and Anne Wallace live in order to expose that she was murdered within that house and that the remains of her body still remain concealed in its basement. Accordingly, there is an important connection established between the house and the ghost that keeps haunting it. In fact, Helen Driscoll used to live in that same house, and it was also within its walls that she committed adultery with her sister's husband Harry Sentas; hence, it is assumed that her murder ultimately responds to a punishment for her misdeed. The house is thus full of echoes that Tom needs to be receptive to in order to unravel the puzzle. As a matter of fact, when Tom takes hold of a poker to fix the fire in their living room, he has a vision, ultimately realising that the poker he is holding was used as the weapon to murder Helen Driscoll. It is only when the crime is solved and Helen's memory is vindicated that the Wallaces are allowed to regain the peace and quiet that used to characterise their former life in their house.

Accordingly, Matheson's novel *A Stir of Echoes* presents important similarities not only with Poe's tale but also with the film adaptation that Matheson made as based on Poe's original story. Roderick Usher's peculiarities of temperament and acute sensitiveness clearly bring to mind those of Tom Wallace after he undergoes a hypnotic session that awakens his senses to a new dimension. Likewise, if the unconscious plays an important role in the film, given Corman's romantic portrayal of Poe's story, it also has a significant presence in Matheson's novel, as Tom's dreams and visions become essential to the development of the narrative. Similarly, if the house of the Ushers remains clearly linked to its residents both in Poe's tale as well as in its film adaptation, in Matheson's novel, the house where the Wallaces live is also full of echoes that revert back to its former dweller, Helen Driscoll. These significant parallelisms prove Matheson may well have had in mind echoes of his own novel when producing the script for *House of Usher*, even though, on the whole, his first film adaptation of one of Poe's tales remains rather faithful to the original text on which it is based, except for the love story between Phillip and Madeline that Matheson introduced in the script, which is evidently non-existent in Poe's original tale.

### 3.2. «THE PIT AND THE PENDULUM» AND THE AMERICAN GOTHIC

The next script that Richard Matheson wrote for Roger Corman was the adaptation of Poe's tale «The Pit and the Pendulum», which ultimately proved to be more challenging than his previous screenplay, as this time

Matheson felt obliged to reconstruct a whole story taking Poe's original tale as a mere point of departure. In his own words, Richard Matheson openly described this process, stating that he «took a little short story about a guy lying on a table with that razor thing going over him, and had to make a whole story out of it» (Bradley, 1993: 172). Matheson thus admitted to having resorted to his own creativity as a writer to expand on Poe's tale, and to having tried to solve the enigmas that remain unexplained in Poe's story, such as why the narrator is about to be sentenced to death and what events might have occurred prior to this pivotal scene around which Poe's entire narrative revolves. In this case, Matheson literally felt the need to «fill in the gaps» of Poe's seminal text, making use of his own resources as a story-teller. Being the film adaptation in which Matheson mostly gave free vent to his inventiveness, the script that he wrote for Corman's film *The Pit and the Pendulum* is also the one which presents a more striking resemblance with his novel *A Stir of Echoes*, not only in terms of plot but also in terms of discourse.

In that respect, at the core of Matheson's novel *A Stir of Echoes* also lie features pertaining to the American variant of gothic fiction, which is traditionally known as «American gothic». According to critic Allan Lloyd-Smith, precisely owing to historical reasons, the Puritan legacy is considered one particularly idiosyncratic characteristic of gothic fiction produced in America, which centres upon the Puritan consciousness, presents a tendency to clearly differentiate good from evil, and also contributes to developing a sense of guilt (2000: 110). Likewise, as Lloyd-Smith further asserts, the ideal society that the early settlers of the country had envisioned, which was inscribed in the constitutional principles of the nation, also brought about the danger of entrusting its society to the rule of an undisciplined great majority, which contributed to reinforcing the values of rigidity and restraint that used to characterise those puritanical beliefs, and which were often responsible for creating a double standard. In this respect, critic Teresa Goddu has claimed that the American gothic arose to reject the nation's official myth of innocence and newness (1997: 10). These issues and concerns, which took shape in the rise of the nation, are inscribed in the fiction known as American gothic, with outstanding exponents such as Charles Brockden Brown and Nathaniel Hawthorne, to name just two of the most classic authors representative of the genre.

In Matheson's novel *A Stir of Echoes*, this Puritan legacy prevails throughout, as Tom Wallace's newly-acquired gift allows him to gain deeper insight into the darkest aspects of the apparently respectable middle-class

suburban area where he lives with his family. As Tom gets to know his neighbours, he begins to discover the skeletons in the cupboard that seem to lurk beneath this apparently peaceful and quiet neighbourhood, thus ultimately becoming aware of the existence of a double standard that regulates life in the suburb: «All these things taking place in this peaceful neighborhood of quiet, little houses basking in the sun. I thought of that. It reminded me of Jekyll and Hyde. The neighborhood was two creatures. One presented a clean, smiling countenance to the world and, beneath, maintained quite another one. It was hideous, in a way, to consider the world of twists and warps that existed behind the pleasant setting of Tulley Street» (Matheson, 2013: 104).

This double standard of living, which literally brings to mind Robert Louis Stevenson's Victorian classic, is exemplified through failed marriages and relationships gone wrong that usually end up in betrayal and adultery. Tom is thus able to gain insight into the dark secrets of his apparently friendly neighbours. As a matter of fact, by means of his powerful gift, he discovers that his neighbour Frank is unfaithful to his wife Elizabeth, even though she is expecting their first child. Tom also notices that his neighbour Elsie, being apparently a contented wife and mother, increasingly feels sexually attracted towards him. Likewise, he also notices a growing tension established between his tenant Harry Sentas and his wife Mildred, which seems to respond to no apparent reason. Tom thus realises that, in spite of first impressions, all the married couples in his neighbourhood appear to have something to hide, and ultimately, this double standard also seems to affect his own family, as Tom's newly-acquired capacity to sense what cannot be perceived at first sight also has an effect on his relationship with his wife. Given this situation, Tom reaches the conclusion that «maybe we're all monsters underneath» (Matheson, 2013: 102), thus stating that, no matter how unthinkable it might be, every couple and every family are likely to hide skeletons in the own cupboards.

Accordingly, troubled relationships that often end up in betrayal and adultery acquire much importance in *A Stir of Echoes*. In fact, issues that are often discussed in works pertaining to the American gothic, such as infidelity, guilt, and retribution for what is perceived as sinful behaviour, become essential in Matheson's novel as a means by which the facts that ultimately give rise to the apparition of Helen Driscoll's ghost are unravelled. As a matter of fact, since Helen Driscoll committed adultery with different men in the neighbourhood, her death is perceived either as an attempt to guarantee her silence or as a punishment for her dissolute conduct. In the view of the rest of her «highly respectable» neighbours, Helen Driscoll is considered an adulteress in

a 1950s middle-class suburb of Los Angeles in a not entirely different fashion from Hester Prynne in the 17th-century Salem of Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter*. Consequently, Helen Driscoll's ghost arises not only to take revenge for her death, but also to ascertain the true identity of her murderer. In this respect, even if Tom initially assumes that Harry Sentas is responsible for the death of Helen Driscoll, after his neighbour Elizabeth attacks her husband to avenge herself for his dissipated behaviour, she surprisingly confesses that it was she who murdered Helen Driscoll on realising her husband was having an affair with her. This final revelation becomes particularly startling since, from the beginning, Elizabeth is portrayed as a pious, decent, and suffering wife, who happily awaits the birth of her first child. Elizabeth thus personifies a distinctive character within the American gothic; considering herself part of a respectable set, she feels entitled to inflict justice and punish those who have dared trespass the boundaries of decency and morality that she holds so highly. Accordingly, Elizabeth murders Helen Driscoll and attacks her own husband Frank so as to punish them for having committed adultery.

In many of his works, Richard Matheson introduced the motif of the love triangle and the resulting disruption of marriage and of family life as perceived in an eminently traditional way. As a case in point, Matheson's film adaptation of Poe's tale «The Pit and the Pendulum» precisely revolves around a case of adultery that reverberates from generation to generation. As Don Smith claims, when Matheson wrote the screenplay for the second of Roger Corman's films based on Poe's tales, the plotline even strayed further from its original source (1999: 116), which gave him the opportunity to introduce the motif of the love triangle so recurrent in many of the adaptations that Matheson made of Poe's tales as well as in his immediately preceding novel *A Stir of Echoes*. In this respect, Don Smith further argues that the film *The Pit and the Pendulum* «introduces the theme of the dominant female and submissive male that would recur in the AIP Corman/Poe series» (1999:116), which often manifests itself through a love triangle that turns most of these films into what are popularly known as gothic romances. In fact, in Poe's original tales which Matheson adapted for the screen, the motif of the love triangle remains virtually absent, and accordingly, it can be assumed that Matheson was mostly responsible for the major attention this motif acquires in many of his Poe film adaptations. Matheson's recurrent addition to Poe's plots of a love triangle is both rooted in his biographical background as well as in the cultural context of American gothic in which Matheson's novel is particularly ingrained. As a

matter of fact, according to William Nolan, once the Matheson family moved from New Jersey to Brooklyn, Matheson's father abandoned the family because, apparently, he could no longer accept the responsibilities of a growing family. As a young boy, Matheson could find escapism within the realm of fantasy, while his mother took refuge in religion. Matheson thus became acquainted with the failure of his parents' marriage as well as with the deep influence that religion began to exert on his mother, which inevitably came to the surface in his fiction. The disruption of family as an institution and the inevitable arising feeling of guilt in a puritanical and conservative environment become a constant presence in Matheson's novel.

In Roger Corman's film *House of Usher*, Matheson introduced a love triangle established between the narrator, Roderick and Madeline, thus further elaborating on some critical interpretations that point at an incestuous relationship established between brother and sister in Poe's original tale. In his second script for Corman, Matheson definitely transformed Poe's tale «The Pit and the Pendulum» so that it would entirely revolve around the issues of adultery, the failure of marriage, and the disruption of family life. The film, set in medieval Spain, focuses on Nicholas, who mourns the death of his young and beloved wife Elizabeth. Since childhood, Nicholas has been haunted by the terrible memories of the death of his mother, Isabella, who was tortured by her husband, Sebastian, when the latter discovered that she had committed adultery with her brother-in-law, Bartholomew. When Elizabeth's brother, Francis, arrives at the castle to visit Nicholas, some strange events begin to take place and Nicholas claims he feels the presence of his late wife Elizabeth in the castle. Later on, it is unveiled that Elizabeth is still alive and has feigned her death with the purpose of releasing herself from Nicholas and freeing herself to live with the family doctor, Leon, with whom she has been having an adulterous relationship. When Nicholas becomes aware of the treachery that both his wife and friend have plotted against him, he goes insane and intends to inflict on the adulterers the same atrocious punishment that his father had imposed over his wife and brother upon discovering their unfaithfulness.

In clear parallelism with the plot of *A Stir of Echoes*, Matheson's script for Corman's film *The Pit and the Pendulum* also begins like a ghost story, leading to the revelation, later on, that an adulterous relationship lies at the core of the puzzle. Like Tom Wallace in Matheson's novel, in the film Nicholas Medina is also capable of perceiving a ghostly presence that compels him to discover why his late wife Elizabeth is haunting him. Like Helen Driscoll in



the novel, in *The Pit and the Pendulum* Elizabeth Medina also commits adultery, and both female characters are harshly punished for their misdeed in what is perceived as an act of retribution. In his madness, Nicholas imprisons Elizabeth in the torture chamber of his castle, and, upon his demise, as everyone else believes Elizabeth departed as a result of having feigned her own death, she is left to face her fate in the torture chamber when it is decided no one else will ever enter that terrible place. Accordingly, the plot and main discourse of Matheson's novel *A Stir of Echoes* and his subsequent adaptation of Poe's tale «The Pit and the Pendulum» appear to run significantly parallel to each other. They both follow the formulaic plot of a male protagonist who witnesses what he believes to be the apparition of a female spectre. However, if in *A Stir of Echoes* Helen Driscoll's ghost haunts the living to take revenge for the punishment that was inflicted upon her for her misbehaviour, in Corman's film the deceitful and living Elizabeth Medina comes back to haunt Nicholas so as to abandon him, a fact for which she is harshly punished and ultimately finds her own death.

### 3.3. OTHER TALES OF TERROR

As shown above, *A Stir of Echoes* presents important intertextual links with Matheson's film adaptations of Poe's tales «The Fall of the House of Usher» and «The Pit and the Pendulum», as well as with classic motifs in gothic fiction such as the haunted house and the American gothic. However, Matheson's novel *A Stir of Echoes* also displays other motifs that acquire particular significance in other tales by Poe which Matheson would also subsequently adapt for the screen. For Roger Corman's third film adaptation of Poe's tales, instead of stretching one story into a full-length film, this time Richard Matheson was asked to adapt three of Poe's tales into the same time frame (Smith, 1999: 132). Corman's film *Tales of Terror* comprises three short films which adapt Poe's tales «Morella», «The Black Cat», «The Cask of Amontillado», and «The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar». Even though his script was ostensibly faithful to Poe's tales, on this occasion Matheson also gave vent to his creativity, mostly introducing the motif of the love triangle in the plot of some of these short films, even though it was totally absent in Poe's original tales.

Matheson's *A Stir of Echoes* bears resemblance with Poe's story «Morella» and its subsequent adaptation to the screen inasmuch as the novel also portrays scenes illustrating confused identities between different women and an overt concern with motherhood. As a matter of fact, when Tom Wallace



begins to perceive the ghostly presence of Helen Driscoll, his relationship with his wife is put in jeopardy, as the latter becomes suspicious of all the attentions Tom pays to the female ghost, to her own detriment as his wife. In fact, every night Tom gets up and leaves Anne's bedside in response to Helen Driscoll's requests for attention. On some occasions, still in a state of drowsiness, Tom even finds it hard to distinguish whether he is actually addressing his wife Anne or, instead, his spectral 'lover' Helen. This blatant confusion of female identities brings to mind «Morella», which is one of Poe's best-known tales of metempsychosis. In Poe's tale, Morella's ghost gradually takes possession of the body of her daughter in the presence of her astonished widower who ultimately finds himself unable to distinguish one from the other. Likewise, in clear resemblance with Poe's tale of metempsychosis, in Matheson's novel, the ghost of Helen Driscoll takes possession of the little son of the Wallaces, Richard, with the purpose of frightening their neighbour Harry Sentas, as Helen believes him to be responsible for her death.

Likewise, given this intrinsic relation between mother and daughter in Poe's tale, motherhood also acquires great importance in Matheson's novel. Most of the young couples in the neighbourhood where Tom and Anne live either have young children or are expecting to have them. Actually, the Wallaces themselves have a little son, Richard, and they are also expecting a baby girl. Nonetheless, even though Elizabeth and Frank have been married for years, it is only now that they are expecting their first child. In fact, it is truly Elizabeth's obsession with motherhood wherein lies the key to unravelling Helen Driscoll's murder. Well aware that her husband is unwilling to have children, and upon finding out that, instead, he is being unfaithful to her with their neighbour Helen, Elizabeth resolves to kill her rival so as to regain her husband and accomplish her wish of becoming a mother. Later on, in her delusion, she also attacks her husband out of jealousy, and as a result of shock, she has a miscarriage. It is at this stage that Tom, given his extraordinary sensitivity, begins to perceive Elizabeth as an actual menace to his family. Since Tom's wife, Anne, is expecting a baby, Elizabeth envies her the possibility of giving birth to a child and badly wishes she could swap places with her. As a case in point, Tom has a terrible vision which materialises Elizabeth's feelings at the time: «The vision was of Elizabeth. She was reaching down with talonlike, trembling hands. She was clawing at Anne's loins. She was ripping open Anne's flesh and tearing loose the child in bloody shreds. She was screaming and screaming. She was tearing her own stitched flesh open – and placing our child inside her body» (Matheson, 2013: 180).

This gruesome scene in Matheson's novel brings to mind echoes that are strikingly similar to the closing scene of Poe's tale «Morella». In Poe's original tale, the narrator is unable to distinguish Morella, the mother, from her child, as the former has taken possession of the latter. As evidence of this, the narrator in Poe's tale thus admits: «[b]ut she died; and with my own hands I bore her to the tomb; and I laughed with a long and bitter laugh as I found no traces of the first, in the charnel where I laid the second – Morella» (Poe, 1986: 224-225). According to Tom's vision, Elizabeth literally intends to take possession of their still unborn child in order to make up for the tragic death of her own, just as, in Poe's tale, Morella also literally takes possession of her child as she intends to take her place.

Richard Matheson's *A Stir of Echoes* also presents further examples of intertextuality with the two Poe tales that he adapted for the second short film within *Tales of Terror*, they being «The Black Cat» and «The Cask of Amontillado». Matheson fused both stories given the notable similarities existing between them, especially as, in the film, they both portray ghastly murders in which the perpetrators wall up their victims in the cellar for having committed adultery. Towards the close of Matheson's novel, in order to find evidence to verify the murder of Helen Driscoll, Tom needs to find her body and decides to look for it in the basement of their house. Accordingly, Tom needs to retrace the murderer's actions so as to find Helen Driscoll's remains, thus not only emulating her murderer, Elizabeth, but through intertextuality with Poe, Tom also emulates Montresor in «The Cask of Amontillado», as well as the unnamed narrator in «The Black Cat». In this respect, the description of Tom's acts echoes the account of the misdeeds depicted in Poe's tales but brought up to date in the 1950s: «There was no cellar; you rarely find one in a California tract house. There was only a small concrete half wall by the hose outlet pipe and an opening just big enough to squeeze through. Letting down the lantern and shovel, I pulled out the metal-framed screen and leaned it against the house. Then I switched on the lantern, grabbed the small shovel and crawled under the house» (Matheson, 2013: 200). Montresor's vault and the unnamed narrator's cellar in «The Black Cat» are not entirely different from Tom's basement in his house, where he finally manages to unearth Helen Driscoll's corpse and provide enough evidence to open a case of murder.

Finally, *Tales of Terror* comprises a third short film in which Richard Matheson focused on the pivotal theme of mesmerism and hypnosis, which he had also ostensibly addressed in his novel *A Stir of Echoes*. In Poe's tale «The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar», a professional mesmerist tries to

stretch the mesmeric process up to the very point of death in order to determine whether death could be forestalled through the mesmeric trance. In the screenplay he wrote for Roger Corman's film, Richard Matheson expanded on this point of departure introducing a love triangle, whereby the doctor intends to take advantage of his mesmeric power by submitting the will of his patient and ultimately gaining his approval to marry his widow. In *A Stir of Echoes*, hypnosis also plays a major role as, from the moment Tom Wallace accepts to be mesmerised, he gains access to an unknown dimension that allows him to leave behind his sceptical views and become more perceptive in his reading of all the signs around. Likewise, as a result of experiencing the transcendence, Tom undergoes a spiritual transformation as he gains insight into the existence of life after death. Accordingly, both in Poe's tale as well as in Matheson's novel, the existence of the afterlife is ultimately verified through mesmeric practices. In this respect, Valdemar is able to communicate even after his demise, while in Matheson's novel, Tom Wallace is still capable of perceiving Helen Driscoll's trace in spite of her death.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

*A Stir of Echoes* is a novel that has its roots in the tradition of the ghost story and American gothic, but that also shows the significant and undeniable influence that Edgar Allan Poe exerted on Richard Matheson as a story-teller. Matheson's novel thus becomes a vessel of echoes that reverberate in different directions, showing Poe's legacy through either literal or subtle intertextual links that bring to mind motifs, characters, and plot twists pertaining to Poe's tales. Hence, even though Richard Matheson's association with the American master of the gothic tale mostly came to the fore through the screenplays for the film adaptations based on his tales, it can be argued that Poe's shadow was much longer than that, and that it had begun to exert its effect even earlier. In this respect, even if overshadowed by other novels which have attained more attention up to now, such as *I am Legend* and *The Shrinking Man*, Matheson's *A Stir of Echoes* should be given the credit it deserves not only as an important contribution to updating the genre of horror fiction, but also as the novel that paved the way for some of the subsequent scripts that Matheson would write for Corman's films based on Poe's tales.

In order to adapt Poe's original texts to the screen, Matheson mostly took them as a point of departure so as to accomplish the challenge of transforming a short-story into a full-length film. Hence, Matheson's film adapta-

tions of Poe's tales should be heralded not only for popularising Poe's tales, but also for the creativity that Matheson infused in them. As a story-teller himself, having published a horror novel comprising obvious echoes of Poe's tales, Matheson may have looked back to find inspiration in his own novel in order to expand and develop Poe's original sources. Rooted in the gothic tradition but updated to suit the contemporary readership, *A Stir of Echoes* is one of Matheson's most outstanding contributions to the horror genre, which partially gained more attention when cinema director David Koepp turned it into a film released in 1999 under the title of *Stir of Echoes*, introducing different alterations to please an even more contemporary audience, as this film saw the light of day forty years after the publication of Matheson's original novel.

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