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Dark and Dark and Terrible Ladies": The Female Undead in Edgar Allan Poe's Short Stories

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Abstract

This article examines Edgar Allan Poe's depiction of the female undead. It demonstrates that the representations of female characters who die only to return from death via reincarnation or premature burial can be substantiated via two-fold discourses in the nineteenth century: the discourses on death, grief, and mourning, on the one hand, and the changing ideations about the roles of women, particularly the construct of the femme fatale during that time, on the other. By engaging with the feminist discourses on Poe's women, this article argues that Poe's female undead challenge the stereotype of the femme fatale that came to prominence during the nineteenth century through competing dynamics of death, agency, and madness that are in play in Poe's short fiction. Additionally, this article argues that Poe's female undead defy the frameworks of traditional female representations in stories such as "Berenice" (1835) and "Ligeia" (1838), highlighting how these women are endowed with power and agency as they lead men to madness and destruction. By so doing, Poe's short stories subvert traditional gender roles and the sociocultural norms and conventions against which women were judged during the nineteenth century.

1. INTRODUCTION

Edgar Allan Poe is known for his creation of tormented characters, convoluted plots, and dark, eerie settings in stories that are defined by perversity and morbidity. With an "indefinable stamp of melancholy," Poe's fictional world is characterized by violence, chaos, and madness (Baudelaire, 2018, p. 22). His stories show "hallucinations . . . absurdity installing itself in the intellect … hysteria usurping the place of the will" and manifest a sharp contrast that divides "the nerves and the mind" (Baudelaire, 2018, p.31). Poe delves into the anguished psyche of his characters and invites the reader into a morbid world that is equally terrifying and intriguing. Poe's stories also show a particular interest in women— tales such as "Berenice," "Morella," "Ligeia," "The Oval Portrait," and "Fall of the House of Usher," all have the recurrent pattern of a beautiful woman facing a grave illness that leads to her death. However, death is not the end for Poe's female characters; they are resurrected from death and often maintain a status of the undead— that is, they are deceased but still animate and behave as if they were alive, inhabiting an obscure space between life and death. Poe's female undead are vampire-like figures who allure and terrify the isolated male characters. These women, as James Twitchell proposes, embody the "forces of maternal attraction/ repulsion" (Twitchell, 1986, p.5). Poe "nourished himself on a young woman's death," and his art can be described

as "a form of mourning" (Silverman, 1993, p.21). Indeed, Poe's work establishes a connection between storytelling, death, mourning, and women, which this article aims to examine. [1]

Poe's short stories seek the "aura of the feminine, the idealized abstract Platonic woman" that he only finds in the dying and/or undead women (Buranelli, 1977, p.37). In *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Fiedler describes Poe's female characters as "dark and terrible ladies," and as carriers of "madness and death." These women become a symbol of "mortality, the figure of death itself" (1960, p. 398). Love and death are entwined in Poe's fiction to the extent that this connection sets the ground for the psychological horror that outlines the stories and establishes the gender dynamics featuring obsessive men and dying/undead women. The women, thus, become both the "victims of men and … a cause of destruction" (Symons, 1978, p.205), and their rise from death is the culprit for the complex web of revenge, suffering, and madness in Poe's narratives. Poe's female undead, including protagonists such as Berenice, Ligeia and Morella, and Madeline, all fill in the pattern of the beautiful, dangerous women who come back from death to exact revenge and/or inflict suffering and harm on their male partners after their resurrection. They occupy a precarious space oscillating between life and death in a way that defies death in its most basic definition of the end of physical life, and allows for women to exist in a state of the undead. Hence, when Poe's women do not stay dead (sometimes they are buried alive, like in "Berenice," and in other stories they are reincarnated, like in "Ligeia"), their return to life, often the key moment in the stories, indicates the incompleteness of death and mourning.

Therefore, the link between death, beauty, and danger turns out to be embedded in Poe's characterization of the female undead, and his stories infuse compelling images of female characters with an allure and sexuality that are personified only when they become ill and die. As Tsirakoglou explains, Poe's female characters are "both deathly and deadly, both fated and fatal, both weak and strong," and their beauty is the "device that while it projects them as weak and objectified nonentities, simultaneously creates a haunting effect upon their male counterparts" (2018, p.336). This article examines Poe's portrayal of the female undead and argues that the representations of female characters who die only to return from death can be substantiated via two-fold discourses in the nineteenth century. Poe's female undead can be understood in light of the discourses on death, grief, and mourning, on the one hand, and the changing ideations about the roles of women, particularly the construct of the femme fatale during that time, on the other. This article will examine how these two-fold discourses impact Poe's depiction of women and explore the dying and undead female body in relation to illness as well as the intricate histories of death, madness, and femininity during the nineteenth century.

Contrary to many of Poe's scholars, I will argue that Poe's female undead are endowed with power and agency as they lead men to madness and destruction and impose their will on the male protagonists. By engaging with the feminist discourses on Poe's women, the prominent question this study poses is whether Poe's female protagonists are indeed femmes fatales who fit the bill of what Creed calls "woman as life-in-death" in her discussion of the

[1] For a psychoanalytic analysis of Poe's work, see Praz (1960) and Bonaparte (1949).

monstrous feminine (2015, p. 1). This article contends that Poe's female undead challenge the stereotype of the femme fatale that came to prominence at that time through competing notions of femininity, agency, and madness that are in play in Poe's stories.

It is noteworthy to mention that Poe's female characterization has attracted substantial critical attention. Many of Poe's critics stress the marginalization and fetishization of Poe's female characters. Poe's heroines can be seen as passive – they do not act as agents and have limited roles in the stories. To the male protagonists, the women are objects who are rendered as mere fetishized bodies, idolized or feared, or perhaps both. In this regard, Person asserts, "Poe and his narrators typically anatomize women, inventorying their bodies, often reducing them to a single body part or a single word" (2001, p.142). Also, Magistrale and Poger point out that Poe's women, "as in most Gothic tales, are often victims … all die or are prematurely buried, victims of brother, lover, husband" (1999, p. 58). Hayes also illustrates that Poe's stories "contain his women, to punish the recurring lack of feminine nurturing that early death brought to the betrayed male" (2020, p.2). According to these readings, Poe's stories showcase female "incarceration and objectification, and the containment of the threat of the feminine monstrous" (Hayes, 2020, p.1). Conversely, some scholars advocate for more empowering roles of Poe's female characters, such as Johanyak, who describes Poe's women as "feminist prototypes" and not as mere "sexual stereotypes" while his male narrators enact "antifeminist sentiments" (1995, p.63). Jordan, who supports this feminist stance, also proposes that Poe highlighted women and did not undermine or suppress their narratives (1989). Dayan also believes that Poe's "superlatives" about his female protagonists are invalidated and are mere "tautological circlings around the overplayed idea"— hence Poe subverts traditional gender roles instead of affirming them (1993, p.2). I want to argue, however, that Poe's female protagonists prove to be not easy to box in or categorize. Although the women in many of Poe's stories die, they have a hold on the male protagonists as they return from death. For example, Ligeia demonstrates her power through her authority over the male protagonist's mind, while Morella holds power over the narrator through the reincarnation of her daughter, and Berenice dominates Eguags's mind and takes over his thoughts. The death and revivication of Peo's beautiful woman constitute the gender dynamics, which are inseparable from the discourses of death and mourning. To understand Poe's female undead, it is important to contextualize and theorize Poe's interest in death, resurrection as well as grief and mourning especially in relation to women during the nineteenth century, as the next section will illustrate.

2. POE'S WOMEN: DEATH AND MOURNING DISCOURSES DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Poe's themes of death and revivication are framed within the Victorian convoluted rituals and the unique treatment of the grief and mourning processes. The "cult of death and memory," as Kennedy puts it, was represented by figures such as Lydia Sigourney, H.F. Goul, and E.F. Eilet who were part of the "American publishing scene" (Kennedy, 1987, p.15). Poe's attachment to this "cult" is correlated to his own personal loss and bereavement as he declined

to "soften or idealize mortality and kept its essential horror in view" (Kennedy, 1987, p. 17).[2] Jonathan Elmer illustrates that during Poe's time and all through the decades that followed his death, "the socially ameliorative effects of fellow-feeling came to be dramatized almost obsessively by the means of 'the death of the other'— in deathbed scenes, in consolation verse, in of other, depictions right and wrong mourning" (1995, p. 94). In the 1830s, gravesites changed from neglected places into ones that people visit to "actively mourn the dead" (Halttunen, 1982, p.127)— death became the topic of conversation especially among the middle class instead of being a terrifying topic to be avoided. Halttunen explains that:

> By the mid-nineteenth century, death had come to preoccupy sentimentalists, who cherished it as the occasion for two of the deepest "right" feelings in human experience: bereavement, or direct mourning for the dead, and sympathy, or mournful condolence for the bereaved. Mourning … was held sacred by sentimentalists as the purest, the most transparent, and thus the most genteel of all sentiments. (1982, p.124)

Mourning thus became the subject of consolation literature from obituaries to poetry during the nineteenth century, and this preoccupation with death was accompanied by an equal fascination with rituals relating to mourning. Stobert argues that the "expressions of grief" during the nineteenth century were "deeply complicated" (2000, p.283); there were incongruities that assigned a sentimental "sincerity of emotion" as a requirement for mourning, yet there was also a "threat of hypocrisy" associated with expressions of grief and mourning (Halttunen, 1982, p.144). Sentimental mourning was also key to Victorian culture— the sentimentalization of death was not only meant as a way to grieve and have closure after death but also to "modulate grief into mourning" (1995, p.95). Conversely, Kennedy reflects that while Victorian mourners refused "to see dying as a physical process," they nonetheless developed "a paradoxical attachment to the dead body: death masks, portraits 'in death,' and locks of hair woven into floral designs all reflect these preoccupations" (1987, p.10-l1). As such, the "corpse" became essential to coming to terms with death during that time. As Bronfen argues, the corpse is "neither the living person nor someone else, is neither present nor absent, is 'nowhere'" (2017, p.231). When seen, the "corpse" is destabilized by "the real" and by the "strangeness of the corpse's presence, which promises to further an insight into that not yet known, however, quickly becomes a form of resemblance" (Bronfen, 2017, p.231). The rejection of the physicality and/or finality of death and the attachment to the dead (female) body are the main components of Poe's characterization of the female undead that will be discussed below.

Women were also part of Poe's sentimental project during the Victorian era, which saw women's bodies as key to the idealization of death.[3] Death, horror, and sentimentality are connected in Poe's work in a way that invites us to see that "sentimentalized grieving ultimately suppressed and romanticized the physical process of death" (Stobert, 2000, p.284). His

[2] For more information on Poe's life and Quinn (1997) and Meyers (2000).

[3] See Person (2001) for a more on the position of the female body in the tradition of the Victorian idealization of death.

bereavement stories do not renounce the sentimental traditions of his century, nor do they subscribe to all of the rituals of mourning. His stories depict and evoke extreme emotions— terror, sadness, grief, anger, disgust— and create an imagined world full of darkness and mysteries that leaves the door wide open to interpretations. So, while the stories are contextualized within the traditions and rituals of his age, Poe provides a creative, albeit macabre, lens to view death.

Despite the centrality of the body, especially the female body, in Poe's fiction, the focus on the spiritual/supernatural is equally significant. The conflict between the physical and the spiritual, as far as the female body allows us to interrogate the question of whether Poe's undead women are contained or if they have agency in the way they impose their will on the male narrators when they return from death. For example, the endings of stories such as "Berenice," "Morella," "Ligeia," and "The Fall of the House of Usher" all leave female protagonists, who are either buried alive, reincarnated or we are unsure if they are alive or dead, in an ambiguous place between life and death while the male narrator is in total disarray. As such, Poe's female undead can be considered to have "an uncanny effect" that "often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred" (Freud, 2003, p.185). The uncanny, which is "represented by anything to do with death, dead bodies, revenants, spirits and ghosts," brings forth a "primitive fear" ready to "manifest itself if given any encouragement" (Freud, 2003, p.183; p.184). Women are also associated with the "occult", which denotes "the hidden"— there is a tendency to suppress rather than express these "uncanny meanings," but they eventually "break into cultural consciousness again" (Paglia, 1990, p. 23). This can be seen in Poe's themes of premature burial and the resurrection of women. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar consider the treatment of premature burial of women in Poe's narratives as emblematic of the state and the "plight" of women in Victorian culture being suppressed by a culture that sees women as limited to their "cave-shaped anatomy" that defines their "destiny" (2020, p.94). The scenes of women buried alive depict disturbing images that are associated with Poe's vision of nature as a "hostile womb from which humanity can never be fully born," and his work often depicts the "trauma of life and death" (Paglia, 1990, pp. 577-578). In Poe's stories, the grief and mourning processes are cut short, and there is a sense of disruption and unfairness with death, which often results in a dead body that does not stay dead. This denotes the failure of the "sentimental project" and the "realizations of the sensational underside of that project" (Elmer, 1995, p. 96). In this regard, Punter and Byron note:

> In Poe, things constantly return, but whether they return from an outer world or because they have never been banished from unconscious depths of the psyche remains a problem which is irresolvable, and the very brevity of the tales serves to reinforce the fundamental impossibility of answering such a question. (2004, p.156)

In Poe's fictional world, women represent an idealized version of "erotic death and parodies of this" while men are "idealizations and parodies of the genteel mourning process" (Stobert, 2000, p.285). This "[s]olitary mourning" (Halttunen, 1982, p.132) involves Poe's male protagonists experiencing the death and resurrection of women, which ultimately leads to their ruination. Poe's depiction of women as dying and/or undead can therefore be approached via the contextualization of the representation of women, particularly the representations of women as femme fatales during the nineteenth century. I want to argue that Poe's undead women

destabilize the dominant image of the femme fatale, as Poe's work can be addressed through the medical and (pseudo)scientific information that the stories embrace. The shocking effect of Poe's narratives is not merely the result of generic and gendered horror, but it is also related to how medical discourses are utilized to undercut the agency of women and relegate them to madness, as will be analyzed in the next section.

3. ARE POE'S UNDEAD WOMEN FEMMES FATALES? THE CONSTRUCTIONS OF WOMANHOOD AND MADNESS DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Allen describes the femme fatale of the nineteenth century as "immortal, queen, goddess, and therefore separated from ordinary men and women by a vast gulf." The femme fatale is also viewed as "less human" with "indifferent and chilling remoteness from human feeling" (1983, p.4). These adjectives that Allen uses aptly apply to Poe's undead females—they are beautiful, otherworldly, subversive, and defying the frameworks of traditional female representations. The pertinent questions regarding the portrayal of Poe's female undead, which open the door to examine the juxtapositions between death, femininity, and madness, include: Are Poe's female protagonists femmes fatales who are the culprits behind the men's fall to madness and/or destruction? Do Poe's dark women have agency in the way they haunt and dominate their male counterparts? Or are they suppressed and violated women who are the victims of male protagonists?

In order to answer these questions, a quick overview of the scholarship on the representations of the Victorian woman, especially the femme fatale, is needed here. Nina Auerbach, in her prominent work on women during the Victorian age, examines the dominant image of women as "sirens" and proposes that these "[i]ntellectual and volatile as well as dangerously beautiful, these divine-demonic women possess absolute power" (1982, p.36). Bram Dijkstra points out the binary nature of the representations of women during the nineteenth century as the angel versus the demon; the housewife versus the vixen, the siren (1996). He sums up these representations with the image of the female vampire as a cultural symbol of the dangerous sexual female, that is, another face for the femme fatale. An archetype as old as Eve herself, the femme fatale uses her body and sexuality as a means for her crusades. Praz observes that up till the mid-nineteenth century, there was not one specific type of 'Fatal Woman', but by the late nineteenth century, the femme fatale became a dominant figure of femininity (1951).

The Victorian femme fatale also showcases the fascination with death, along with a transgressive female persona during the Victorian era.[4] The Victorian understanding of sexuality and eroticism was tied to death, suffering, and mourning. The femme fatale was the product of the "mystique of the connection between mother and child … Family romance operates at all times" (Paglia, 1990, p.14). If viewed as a "Medusan mother or as frigid nymph,"

[4] Craciun (2002), for example, investigates the complex relationships of women to power and violence and examines women's violence in the context of larger, political and ideological debates. She also challenges the assumption that feminist criticism should demon- strate that women do not replicate systems of "masculinist" power and violence.

the femme fatale refers to the feared and at the same time contained woman, a perspective relevant to the understanding of Poe's female characterization (Paglia, 1990, p.15). The contradictions inherent to the femme fatale and the depiction of the Victorian woman more generally speak to how Poe's women challenge female typologies of their time. That is, Poe's stories bring forth and subvert the stereotype of the dangerous female seductress, the femme fatale.

Poe's tales are parodies of the effects of the "doctrine of separate spheres" of the Victorian era, which refers to how domesticity was used to highlight the separation between "comfort and compensation, instilling a morality that would encourage self-control, and fostering the idea that preservation of home and family sentiment was an ultimate goal" (Cott, 1977, p.69). Poe's undead females subvert the values and conventions that women were judged against during the nineteenth century, which stemmed from the so-called "the Cult of True Womanhood" (also known as The Cult of Domesticity), that included four female "cardinal virtues"— "piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Welter, 1976, p. 21). While it parodies the separate sphere ideology, Poe's fiction also undermines contemporary values of domesticity with stories that show the home as a nightmarish and unsettling place, the opposite of what had been popularized about the bliss of domestic life at the time. Some of Poe's female protagonists (for example, Morella, Berenice, Ligeia) look like the 'New Woman' that are "posited as a legitimate alternative to True Womanhood" (Person, 2001, p.134).

Thus, Poe's work can be viewed as mocking the reforming power of piety and other domestic values through complex interconnections between representations of women, death, and violence. Poe's female undead can be seen as a conduit to consider the larger cultural and ideological discourses on women, power, and femininity. Indeed, Poe's women occupy a precarious position in relation to power;. However, it is hard to reconcile with the violence and horrors inflicted on the female characters in Poe's stories, their state of the undead speaks to the conflict between women and the society that rejects their power and influence on the male characters, yet ironically, these women demonstrate this power again and again. As Johanyak points out, the "supraordinary learning" of Peo's women constitutes a threat to the male dominance of his protagonists, which reveals a "startling role exchanges that vindicate the dark heroine and convict her lover as destroyer or murderer" (1995, p.63). I tend to agree with the Person who argues that Poe "reverses the flow of power … as his male characters are reduced to conditions of passivity. . . in the presence of women who refuse to be repressed" (1988, p.175). This refusal to be oppressed is embodied in how Poe's women return from death to exact their revenge and haunt the male narrators. Poe's female heroines are more than mere objects to the male, and they are more than mere stereotypes— they are the result of a complicated history of women and madness and intricate associations between agency, mental illness, and women during the nineteenth century. It is the stance of this article that Poe's stories create effective dynamics of female agency in relation to death, mourning, and madness, arguing against the above-mentioned readings that deny women's power and dismiss Poe as merely a sexist. However, this discussion on female agency is inseparable from the historical context, especially the discourses on madness and femininity during the Victorian era.

Poe's fiction in stories such as "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Black Cat," "The Fall of the House of Usher" as well as "Berniece" and "Ligeia" provide examples of narratives about

madness; and reveal "a similar preoccupation with the *idee fixe*, or obsession, in an extreme form of monomania which seems intended by Poe to be the psychological key to its plot" (Basler, 1967, p.51). When examining the nineteenth-century discourses on madness through a widely interdisciplinary stance, it can be noted that the connection between gender and madness was based on stereotyped and biased frameworks. A reproductive outlook to women dominated the medical discourse and colored the way women were treated in medical science. Critics such as Ehrenreich and English have noted that such "medical views of women's health" went beyond "acknowledging [ing] the specific risks associated with reproductivity"; instead, these views emphasized "all female functions as inherently sick" (1978, p.126). The nineteenth century was thus a time of competing attempts to understand not only the tie between femininity and gender roles but also how this tie is attached to complex cultural and medical frameworks. Famously, Showalter claims that madness during the nineteenth century was mainly a "female malady." Showalter's work illustrates the pathologization of women and how the mental illness of women, an incurable condition, was brought about by societal gender expectations at that time— "how, in a particular cultural context, notions of gender influence the definition and, consequently, the treatment of mental disorder" (1987, p.5). As such, Showalter critiques the belief that women suffered "mental breakdown" when they "defied their 'nature,' attempted to compete with men instead of serving them, or sought alternatives or even additions to their maternal functions" (Showalter, 1987, p.123).[5]

However, the notion that the medical discourse on women in the nineteenth century "was tainted by its maleness" has been recently challenged, as Theriot proposes (1). Feminists started to theorize methods to "view the interaction between a dominant male discourse and women's minority-positioned subjectivities" (Theriot, 1993, p.1). Chesler identifies the etiology of the madness of women in their inability to meet patriarchal expectations, which is considered madness, "whether it appears in women or in men, is either the acting out of the devalued female role or the total or partial rejection of one's sex-role stereotype" (Chesler, 1989, 56). The "victimization model" of women and medicine being "a male system of knowledge/power" is still dominating the discussion, but there is a counter discourse that poses that women are not always victims of the medical system and that they are able to use this to their advantage (Theriot, 1993, p.1).

Poe's work speaks to the vast changes in medical sciences and psychology during the nineteenth century. Poe's depiction of illness and femininity offers a critique of medical discourses of the time. By portraying an array of female characters struggling with mysterious illness that leads to death, Poe's work provides a lens to read the treatment of ill women in the nineteenth century and at the same time critiques this treatment. According to Gilbert and Gubar, the Gothic genre emphasizes that "imprisonment leads to madness, solipsism, paralysis" (2020, p.279), which Poe's narratives showcase. Renzi also argues that Poe "obscured" what she refers to as an important aspect of the psycho-medical history, which is hysteria. Based on Showalter's prominent study on women, sexuality, and medical discourses, Renzi theorizes a reading of Poe's tales, focusing primarily on "Berenice," that speculates that hysteria is key to the understanding of the female body and issues of embodiment, sexuality,

[5] For a detailed account on the discourse of women and madness, see Showalter (1980), and (1987).

and agency. The use of hysteria, Renzi proposes, "contributes to current critical debates that use feminist perspectives to think through Poe's tales" (2012, p. 605). She explains:

> Poe's work makes available an alternative model of hysteria, one which more clearly grapples with the complicated history of nineteenth-century gender discrimination and patriarchal attitudes toward female sexuality, embodiment, and illness that the term hysteria has come to signal in medical-historical and feminist discourse. (Renzi, 2012, p.602)

According to this view, this model of hysteria reshapes the outlook to Poe's dying women, whilst the portrayal of women in relation to femininity and death provides a critique of the "emerging pseudo-science of hysteria" (Renzi, 2012, p.602). The dying women are not merely an aesthetic that Poe is known for; they are part of a bigger project about "gendered miscommunications and gendered violence that arise within the oppressive climate of nineteenth-century hysteria" (Renzi, 2012, p.602). This "diagnosis" of women having hysteria is noteworthy and is based on her view of the "patriarchal attitudes" in Poe's work (Renzi, 2012, p.602), but it lacks insights into how the resurrection of women provides another perspective to see women's power. In what follows, I will discuss two of Poe's early stories—"Berenice" and "Ligeia." These stories have undead women and their troubled relationship with men, and how, in their undead state, these female characters illustrate that the gender dynamics in Poe's fiction are based on the medical history of women and the discourses on death during the nineteenth century.

4. BURIED ALIVE: THE FEMALE UNDEAD AND THE MONOMANIAC NARRATOR IN "BERENICE"

In 1835, Poe published "Berenice," a story of an obsessive mind preoccupied with the teeth of his bride-cousin. Egaeus, whose mother died when he was born at the family library, seems to suffer from "nervous *intensity of interest*" (644).[6] First, he reveals he dislikes Berenice, but asks her to marry her in an "evil moment" (118). When Berenice gets ill and presumably dies, Egaeus's obsession finally leads him to break into her tomb to pull her teeth out, but it is finally revealed that she was still alive. The conclusion of the story sees Egaeus in the library with mud on his clothes and a box full of teeth. As a representation of Creed's "woman as the deadly *femme* castratrice" (2015, p.127), Berenice is buried alive, but she survives and proves to be both a victim of the male narrator and, at the same time, a threat to his sanity as he seems to suffer from a mental breakdown at the end.

From the beginning of the story, a sharp contrast is evidenced between Egaeus and Berenice, which emphasizes her illness. Initially, while Egaeus has grown "ill of health, and buried in gloom," Berenice is described as "agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy" (113). Egaeus says that during the "brightest days of her unparalleled beauty," he loved Berenice, but his "passions always were of the mind" (118). He is drawn to her intellect and sees her as "a thing … to analyze" (118). Yet, like many of Poe's female characters, when

[6] All subsequent citations from "Berenice" is from *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe: Tales-Horror and Death (VI)* (1904). A page number will follow each quotation from the story.

Berenice falls sick with a "fatal disease [which] fell like the simoon upon her frame … pervading her mind, her habits, and her character" (113), Egaeus develops a pathological interest in her, particularly her teeth. Berenice's illness is the turning point in the story that defines not only her relationship with the narrator but also her state of being 'undead.' When her body becomes excessively emaciated and her "eyes were lifeless," Egaeus becomes afraid of her "glassy stare to the contemplation of the thin and shrunken lips" (119). Her power is evident in a "smile of peculiar meaning," and when the "teeth of the changed Berenice disclosed themselves slowly," he became completely preoccupied with her (119).

The focal point of Egaeus's obsession with Berenice is her teeth, "The teeth! – the teeth! -the teeth!- they were here, and there and everywhere, and visibly and palpably before me; long, narrow and white" (120). The teeth have a dual significance; they refer to life and death motifs. They are a symbol of sustenance and self-preservation due to the association between teeth and eating, but teeth are also associated with inflicting pain, tearing down things, and destruction. Additionally, there is a sexual connotation to the teeth in "Berenice." The teeth serve as a displacement of Egaeus's sexual desire towards his cousin's bride. Berenice, as Porte suggests, symbolizes the 'vagina dentata' whose threat must be eradicated through dental extraction (1969, p.83). According to this reading, Egaeus carries the guilt of his mother's death, so when Berenice enters his chamber (the library), Egaeus regresses to the earliest memories of his mother in the chamber. D. H. Lawrence remarks on the significance of the teeth in "Berenice" as the "instruments of biting, or resistance, of antagonism. They often become symbols of opposition, little instruments or entities of crushing and destroying … the man in "Berenice" must take possession of the incredible part of his mistress" (Lawrence 1962, p.115).

Berenice's illness and the horrific ending of the story have been examined from many angles— the scholarship on "Berenice" has explored the relationship between Egaeus and Berenice as well as the fate that Berenice encountered at the hand of her husband. For example, Porte has focused on (repressed) desire and sexuality, the narrator's insistence on the "passion" of "the mind" is a mechanism that reveals "the enormous temptation from which Egaeus' hypertrophied attachment to the mind was designed to protect him is the familiar dark lady in the person of his cousin Berenice" (Porte, 1969, p.80). Freedman examines Egaeus's mental illness and how it affects his mind and his "successive efforts to achieve that desexualizing and disembodying end" would destroy Berenice's "body as erotic object" (2003, p.71). Berenice's "premature burial, mutilation, poisoning, psychic cannibalization" (Kot, 1996, p.388) defines the troubled relations between males and females in Poe's world that ends with her in a mysterious state of the undead. Some readings support the controlling role of Egaeus, in which Berenice "fascinates but also threatens" as the male protagonist tries to contain her to render her harmless with her death (Weekes, 2002, p.159). Both Doyle (1991) and Brown (1996) grant Egaeus the control to "will the transformation of the dark Berenice into a pale and wasted shadow of herself" (Doyle, 1991, p.16) and in "undying death" the female protagonist becomes "a literary object, existing only in description" (Brown, 1996, p.459). I take issue with the readings that diminish Berenice to an extension of the male narrator, take away her power, and erase her identity altogether. The narrator tries to get rid of her, but she survives. Not only does she defy death, but she also seems to haunt him by fully controlling his mental faculties. The conflict between Berenice and Egaeus leads to the grotesque violence aimed at the woman, but

it is a violence that is defined by a madman who loses control within the parameters of Poe's world. It is noteworthy to mention that Poe uses mystery and ambiguity to set up the relationships in his story, that is, Egaeus's servant tells him that Berenice died, and later adds that her grave was violated, but she was alive. Hence, the reader does not see Berenice die, and the scene of Egaeus presumably pulling her teeth is absent. The story withholds information, which only intensifies the mystery and the air of darkness that governs the story.

Berenice initiates a repetitive pattern in Poe's work in which a young woman dies in mysterious circumstances, which leads to the male protagonist's path to madness, but she also reveals the dynamics and complexities of this pattern. She is the prototype of many of Poe's protagonists who expose both the Victorian interest in death and the medical discourses around women. In a story that paints a grim picture of love and relationships, Berenice and Egaeus show the pathology of mourning and grief as an incomplete, complicated, and questionable process surrounded by violence, but at the same time expose the position of women in this formula: women have the power to lead men into a shocking ending, but they are also destroyed in the process.

In "Berenice," Poe pushes the mourning process to the domain of the grotesque. The story transforms the sentimental, even romantic, ideation about a young woman's death into a physical investigation of death and its association with disease, decomposition, and revulsion. When Berenice catches a disease "like a simoom upon [her] frame," the narrator is also afflicted with "monomania" – a form of insanity that demonstrates itself in a single obsession on Berenice (120). Egaeus's "undue, earnest, and morbid attention" is directed towards his wife's "moral condition" rather than her physical body, her "startling changes wrought in the *physical* frame of Berenice in the singular and most appalling distortion of her personal identity" (115; 117). Here, Poe undermines the mourning traditions of the Victorian age that glorified the dead; instead, his story creates a dark scene of death, devoid of sentimentality and romanticism.

The focus of the narrative – the transformation of a woman from a healthy and beautiful woman to being undead – is a radical one, which sums up Poe's compelling themes that connect femininity to death, illness, and agency. There is a "second story" for the woman providing a "voice to those victimized, disempowered, and silenced by patriarchal culture" (Jordan, 1989, p.106). Berenice's illness is denoted as epilepsy in the story, which is now a known medical condition, but back in the nineteenth century was more like an umbrella term that referred to madness. Egaeus considers Berenice's epilepsy as the "most distressing and obstinate" among "the numerous train of maladies superinduced by that fatal and primary one" (114). It "swept over her, pervading her mind, her habits, and her character … even the identity of her person" (114). Eventually, what Egaeus describes as the "destroyer" changed Berenice to such an extent that he could not recognize her. Renzi, along with other critics, interprets Berenice's state as her going through sexual maturation, puberty (2012, p.610). Berenice's puberty speaks to a common belief about nineteenth-century femininity— "female sexuality could only be pathological" (Ehrenreich and English, 1978, p.134).

Egaeus takes the responsibility of diagnosing Berenice with epilepsy. Although he is ill himself, admitting to suffering from monomania, he seems persistent in how he medicalizes

his wife and diagnoses her with "fatal disease" (113). The "imbrications of body and mind, physical symptoms and moral attributes" make hysteria a more "apt" diagnosis for the female protagonist. Hysteria offers a means to connect Berenice's illness to "the disease—her mature female sex that also, in a socio-cultural sense, stifles and kills her" (Renzi, 2012, p.611). Berenice's illness can be regarded as an "a medical vehicle" that represses the female story, and it is also an "alternative form of discourse" (Jordan, 1989, p.136), and a "bodily indexing of women's linguistic repression" that provides "a language by which we might analyze Berenice's bodily vocalizations and account for the linguistic second story that remains untold" (Renzi, 2012, p.611),

However, Poe narrates the story of a young woman in the face of medical bias in a male narrative that attempts to victimize her. Berenice's state of the 'female undead' – her survival and defiance of death only tells a "second story" but not one of victimization, rather one of empowerment. Her "voice," although absent in the story, is present in the way she faces male dominance and violence and her triumph over him. This pattern adds to the feminist scholarship on Poe and reshapes the discussions around women, power. This pattern, where the medical discourse on women is connected to the dynamics of power, femininity, and death, also recurs in Poe's other stories, as the discussion of "Ligeia" in the following section will illuminate.

5. REINCARNATED: THE FEMALE UNDEAD AND THE OBSESSIVE NARRATOR IN "LIGURIA"

> *And the will therein lieth, which dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigor? For God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness. Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will— Joseph Glanvill. (Ligeia 134)* [7]

"Ligeia" (1838) is another story of a female protagonist who suffers from illness and death and returns from death to haunt and control the male narrator. It tells the story of the anonymous narrator who witnessed what he thought his deceased first wife, Ligeia, reincarnate and take over the body of his second wife, Lady Rowena Trevanion. The conclusion of the story, which sees the narrator standing over the body of Lady Rowena crying as he sees not the blue eyes of his second wife but the black ones of Ligeia that haunted him, captures the horror and the intrigue of Poe's story of the female undead.

By delineating "a relationship so obsessive that it transcends time, and ultimately death itself" (Hayes, 2020, p.4), Ligeia is a supreme example of Poe's beautiful and undead women. The narrator describes Ligeia both in physical and intellectual terms; she has a beauty of a "radiance of an opium – dream, an airy and spiritifting vision" (136), and she walks lightly, she "came and departed as a shadow," and her beauty is "strange." Her features are described

[7] All subsequent citations from "Ligeia" is from *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe: Tales-Horror and Death (VI)* (1904). A page number will follow each quotation from the story.

in detail, praising her beauty in words such as "lofty", "purest ivory," "the most brilliant of black," and the narrator seems to be in awe of her (136-7). Ligeia is also intellectually superior to her male counterpart. She surpasses the narrator on many intellectual and mental levels, hence the narrator seeks "her purity, her wisdom, her lofty ethereal nature" and "her passionate idolatrous love" (149). However, like many of Poe's female protagonists, Ligeia falls sick and dies. Poe repeats the pattern of the death of a beautiful woman; however, in this story, it is even more evident that the narrator is unable to come to terms with her death. Although the narrator remarries, the effect that Ligeia has on him extends beyond the physical realm and goes into an eerie and powerful domain, that of reincarnation. The conflict between life and death and the will of the woman to defeat death are the parameters of the female undead in this story, and Poe seems to suggest that Ligeia was able to conquer death through reincarnation.

Reincarnation, a key theme of the story, is used to show the power and the allure that Ligeia possesses. The fact that Ligeia is resurrected in the form of another woman evokes horror and at the same time allows to reassess female roles and the contrast between the two women in Poe's narrative. Unlike Ligeia, Rowena is blond; she comes from a family who have "thirst of gold" (146). In fact, gold, perhaps a reference to the materialistic physical world, is associated with Rowena, whose chamber has a "huge censer" of gold on a chain of "golden candelabra and golden tapestry" (147). Ligeia, on the other hand, is always shrouded by blackness and darkness, which endow her with mystery and an enigmatic aura. She "came and departed as a shadow" has "raven-black" hair, her eyes as "orbs of the most brilliant . . . black" (135; 136; 137). This contrast is evident in the scene of Ligeia's reincarnation which reveals Rowena's body with signs of both cycles of life and death – her cheeks are "flushed" with the ghastly expression of death" (154). Rowena's body revivifies and then dies in a horrific manner that invokes death in its most visceral picture. When the narrator feels the presence of the "shadow of Ligeia" as she moves on the "golden carpet" (151) Rowena's features become

> blacker than the raven wings of mid-night! And now slowly opened the eyes of the figure which stood before me. "Here then, at last," I shrieked aloud, "can I never – can I never be mistaken – these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes – of my lost love – of the lady – of the Lady Ligeia. (157)

This scene illustrates death and its distinction and simultaneously paradoxical closeness to life. Poe also provides an enactment of the connection between death and beauty. As Weekes opines, this story is different from stories like "The Fall of the House of Usher" where the woman dies and the narrator witnesses her death, "Ligeia," on the other hand, draws a vivid, albeit repugnant and unwavering image of death and resurrection— the "vacillation between flushed, warm cheeks and the shrunken-lipped, clammy corpse is horrific because of the stark contrast between these states" (Weekes, 2002, p.149). The story also follows a pattern that reveals the cycle of loss and regaining, death and life with the failure on the part of the male narrator to distinguish between these cycles. Ligeia's resurrection as perceived by the male mourner can be interpreted in the context of the Victorian traditions of mourning and death— the expressions of grief in Victorian culture were marked by "contradictions" that "lurked within the cloying sweetness of sentimentalism" (Stobert, 2000, p.283), and "the dead vied for

attention with those who mourned them" (Halttunen, 1982, p.127). Still, the story can also be taken as a critique of these traditions.

Ligeia's beauty, dominance over the male narrator, and most prominently her incarnation at the end have all been the subject of many critical appraisals. For example, Davis and Davis (1970) and Byers (1980) argue that Poe's story is about the fantasies of an opium-induced narrator. However, Cantalupo proposes that the narrator murdered his second wife in an attempt to resurrect Ligeia, and the tale is a confession story of a man who killed his wife. There are also more recent readings that examine the story from different angles. Kim sees the story through the lens of incest (2021), while Jones (2018) and Rohy (2006) present a queer reading of the story. Jordan proposes that there is a conflict between the narrator and Ligeia as far as power is concerned, and the "'closed' room" is no more than a symbolic representation of the narrator's mind (1989, p.136). Reading the story as parody of domesticity offers a subversive view of the Victorian traditional values. That is, Poe's tale portrays an image of a powerful woman who defies contemporary domestic values and the perception of death as final and absolute. I also want to add to Jordan's proposal that there is a power dynamic, "a psychic struggle" between the narrator and Ligeia that manifests itself in the narrator's "subconscious usurpation of her authority" (135-6), and argue that the story highlights the Victorian traditions of death and mourning, but deviates from the norms of nineteenth century regarding women roles. While Ligeia serves as an authority figure in a domestic space, she seems to defy the "Angel in the House" in the Cult of True Womanhood, which is based on the male-dominated "separate sphere" ideology— Ligeia does not fit in the box of the traditional Victorian woman. As an erudite woman, Ligeia's intellectual capabilities and her control of the household only challenge the domestic values of the Victorian age, and by functioning more like a teacher than a wife to the male narrator, the story relates his "child-like" dependence on Ligeia as she guides him "through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation" (141). "Ligeia" showcases the position towards the "new woman," and Poe utilizes the "conventions of gothic horror to explore the woman's new power" (Herndl, 2000, p.91).

Poe's story is filled with horror, which is part and parcel of the Gothic story. The source of the horror, however, is not merely tied to the revivification and the reincarnation of Ligeia. Poe infuses his narrative with horror elements— the setting, the theme, and the characterization all establish a darkness and eeriness that are compelling. But there are also subtle ways that Poe's tale establishes the nineteenth-century horror story in the way the plot gives way to "metaphorical and symbolic interpretations based on a knowledge of the Gothic tradition and of Poe's zymology and philosophic perspective" (Carlson, 1996, p.6). Moreover, Poe's story focuses on madness as a central theme and displays "obsession, in an extreme form of monomania which seems intended by Poe to be the psychological key to its plot" (Basler, 1967, p.51). That is, Poe's story, in its focus on the seclusion and isolation of the obsessive mind of the male narrator, has Ligeia at the heart of what Engel calls "the language and imagery of enclosure" (141). So, the narrator is hesitant to let her in his "closed study," but he could not resist her beauty as he confesses that her "beauty passed into my spirit, there dwelling as in a shrine" (139). But the pattern of the female getting sick and then dying is repeated twice in "Ligeia." Both Ligeia and Lady Rowena become ill and face death. When faced by the death of his second wife, the narrator is distressed and frightened and feels like he is also haunted by death; what Bronfen calls "death by proxy" (2017, p.x). He visualizes death and confesses, "I

had felt that some palpable although invisible object had passed lightly by my person … a faint, indefinite shadow of angelic aspect" (151). So, facing the horror of death in the corpse of his wife, Rowena, he may have lost his faculties; the impact of seeing the death of a woman for the second time has weighed immensely on him. He sees a movement in Rowena's body:

> I strained my vision to detect any motion in the corpse, but there was not the slightest perceptible motion. Yet I could not have been deceived. I had heard the noise, however faint, and my soul was awakened within me. I resolutely and perseveringly kept my attention riveted upon the body. (166)

"Ligeia" thus carefully crafts the death scenes and adds horror and an eerie picture of the death of women. The narrator sees the "pallid, rigid figure upon the bed" (152), and the impact of death consumes him and starts confusing the two, Legia and Rewena. In a story that deliberately blurs the lines between life and death, Poe creates a female protagonist who has power over the narrator in spite of, or perhaps due to, her death.

Poe's interest, one can say obsession with death, especially dying women, is inseparable from the "cult" of death during the nineteenth century. Women in Poe show that death can be used to resist the objectification of control of male protagonists, but it is also posited that the resurrection of women overturns "the prevailing image of death's loveliness" to reveal the dark and grim reality of death (Kennedy, 1987, p.2). Poe's fiction also speaks to the nineteenth-century conceptualizations of femininity with all its complexities and contradictions. Poe "idealizes and hyperbolizes" women, hence the questions that Dayan asks – "was Poe a feminist?" and how this "qualification help[s] us to get at what makes Poe's treatments of women—whether idealized or violated— so unsettling, and subversive?" (1993, p.1)— are pertinent to understand not only Poe's female characters and their relation to the male narrators whose fate seems inseparable from that of the females, but also to the array of socio-cultural and medical discourses of women in the nineteenth century, which this article examined.

Indeed, at the heart of Poe's treatment of women and the feminist considerations around his work are the questions: Are they a blank canvas for the male characters to write on? Or are they so dangerous and culpable that they come from the grave to cause trouble for the male characters? The answer is not a simple one, and the dichotomy of a yes/no answer "restricts" the understanding of Poe's fiction.

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