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Female Representation in Edgar
Allan Poe's Marriage-Group Tales

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ABSTRACT

This essays analyses “Berenice” (1835), “Morella” (1835) and “Ligeia” (1838), three Gothic tales written by Edgar Allan Poe. Its aim is to study the representation of women in those tales. In the first part the essay analyses the main characteristics of the Gothic tradition in general, of the Gothic tradition in the United States, and of Edgar Allan Poe’s writing. In the second part, the essay focuses on the role of women in the tales “Berenice”, “Morella” and “Ligeia”, pointing out its similarities and differences; and finally, the essay provides the most important interpretations of such representations.

RESUMEN

Este ensayo ofrece un análisis de “Berenice” (1835), “Morella” (1835) y “Ligeia” (1838), tres cuentos góticos escritos por Edgar Allan Poe. El objetivo principal es analizar la representación de la mujer en estos cuentos. En la primera parte, el ensayo revisa las características principales del gótico, de la tradición gótica en Estados Unidos, y de la obra de Poe. En la segunda parte, el ensayo analiza el papel de las mujeres en “Berenice”, “Morella” y “Ligeia”, señalando sus similitudes y diferencias; finalmente la conclusión incluye las interpretaciones más relevantes de estas representaciones.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Edgar Allan Poe, a US writer of the 19th century, is popularly known as one of the key figures in the Gothic tradition. His Gothic tales are popular for his macabre plots, settings and characters. The representation of women in his tales is unique and a clear object of analysis, that is why I have chosen this author and his tales. Thus, this essay seeks to analyse the role of women in his tales “Berenice” (1835), “Morella” (1835) and “Ligeia” (1838).

In order to carry out my analysis, I will focus first on the Gothic mode, a writing of excess and transgression, in order to understand Poe’s mixture of terror, reality and the supernatural, the characters, the settings and landscapes, and the uncanny. I will also pay special attention to the features of American Gothic: issues of the frontier, the Puritan legacy, race, utopianism and trauma. Similarly, I will summarise the most remarkable characteristics of Poe’s writings. Although Poe belongs to the American Gothic tradition, he created his own variety of the Gothic, opening a new path to later writers. He combined traditional Gothic elements (such as decayed European buildings and settings, premature burials, ghostly effects, the haunting of the past) with what he called “terror of the soul”, which goes beyond the mechanical sources of fear used by his contemporaries. In the tales chosen, it is the memory of the dead beloved woman that keeps haunting the lover, whose role —like those of the female characters— oscillates between love, hate and revenge. Curiously, both male and female protagonists can be approached as victims and victimisers in the same tale, which reveals Poe’s originality.

Thus, my analysis explores the representation of women in “Berenice”, “Morella” and “Ligeia”, three tales that belong to the so-called “marriage group”. I focus on the most remarkable passages, paying attention to the complexities of the plot,

and also to the language and literary devices used to describe the different female characters. In my analysis I study the issues of identity, violence, trauma, family relationships, the closeness between love and hate, the narrator's monomania or *idée fixe*, and the idealisation and dehumanisation of women. The essay also compares the different representations of women in each tale, highlighting both similarities and differences.

In keeping with these aims, the essay is divided into two main parts. The first part includes the following sections, which go from the general to the particular: first, the basic characteristics of the Gothic are discussed; then, the Gothic tradition in the United States is also revised, specifying its differences from the British tradition; finally, there is some key information on Poe's work. The second part includes the analysis of the tales following a chronological order: "Berenice", "Morella" and then "Ligeia". Last but not least, the conclusion recapitulates the most important aspects of the essay, providing factors that may have contributed to the peculiar and original treatment of Poe's fictional women.

2. CONTEXT

2.1. The Gothic

Gothic fiction has played a major role in Western culture since the late eighteenth century, when Horace Walpole published the first novel to ever be considered Gothic, *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). The novel was originally subtitled *A Story*, but for the publication of the second edition in 1765, the author decided to add the word Gothic to the subtitle because the novel was set in the Gothic age, thus becoming *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story*. Nevertheless, as Hogle states, “the term does nothing to describe what was ground-breaking and influential about the novel, and Walpole does not use it again in his preface to the second edition, which constitutes a manifesto for a ‘new species of romance’” (21). In fact, it was not until the twentieth century that scholars started to use the word Gothic to refer to the literature of terror, and they did so by analogy with the Gothic Revival in architecture, which also took place in the mid-eighteenth century. Besides, many authors identified Walpole as the father of this literary genre, so *The Castle of Otranto* gained literary weight and so did its subtitle, *A Gothic Story* (Clery 21).

Lloyd-Smith defines the Gothic as a literary trend that revisits the past, bringing back repressed and buried secrets (2); secrets that assume monstrous forms to haunt and torment characters in order to expose wrongdoings and unsolved crimes. Gothic fiction, therefore, oscillates between the natural laws of reality and the supernatural. Many scholars distinguish two subgenres, terror Gothic and horror Gothic:

The first of these holds characters and readers mostly in anxious suspense about threats to life, safety and sanity kept largely out of sight or in shadows or suggestions from a hidden past, while the latter confronts the principal characters with the gross violence of physical or psychological dissolution, explicitly

shattering the assumed norms (including repressions) of everyday life with wildly shocking, and even, revolting, consequences (Hogle 3).

On the other hand, Botting defines the Gothic tradition as a writing “associated with supernatural and natural forces, imaginative excesses and delusions, religious and human evil, social transgression, mental disintegration and spiritual corruption” (2), and states that it is this mingling of supernaturalism and Nature that provokes excessive emotions in the reader; thus settling the Gothic as “a trend towards an aesthetics based on feeling and emotion and associated primarily with the sublime” (3).

In Gothic fiction, characters are haunted by the uncanny. The uncanny, a term coined by Sigmund Freud in his essay *The Uncanny* (1919) (*Unheimlich* in German) refers to all those aspects that exist within the area of what is frightening (Freud, 1). The German word “Unheimlich” means “not homely”, therefore, “what is ‘uncanny’ is frightening precisely because it is not known or familiar” (Freud 2). This is a complex and contradictory concept, since not everything that is unfamiliar or frightening is uncanny, and “what is experienced as uncanny... can be traced back without exception to something familiar that has been repressed” (Freud 16). Thus, the uncanny can be defined as ““that kind of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (Freud 1). The uncanny uses devices such as “doubles, alter egos, mirrors and animated representations of the disturbing parts of human identity” that complicate the distinction between reality and the apparent (Botting 11). The Gothic, then, can be defined, in Tzvetan Todorov’s words, as “a writing in which the Marvellous shades into the Real” (Lloyd-Smith 136).

The hauntings used to take place in “medievalist ancient stone buildings with elaborate ‘Gothic’ arches, buttresses, passageways, and crypts (...), replete with trappings and hidden doorways and secret chambers, incomprehensible labyrinths,

speaking portraits and trapdoors” (Lloyd-Smith 7). These buildings are presented in “gloomy and mysterious” atmospheres (Botting 1), in which “a chiaroscuro of shadows and indeterminate illumination inducing a sense of futility, despair, and the loss of hope” (Lloyd-Smith 7). Besides, the landscapes surrounding such buildings are “desolate, alienating and full of menace” (Botting 2). Modernisation and industrialization changed that landscape, since “in the 18th century they were wild and mountainous locations” but “later the modern city combined the natural and architectural components of Gothic grandeur and wildness, its dark, labyrinthine streets suggesting the violence and menace of Gothic castle and forest” (Botting 2). Nevertheless, with the passing of time, the architectural settings, the atmosphere, and the landscape made it possible for any setting to be considered Gothic, as “the mere use of darkness or barrenness could call up the Gothic mood” (Lloyd-Smith 7).

The Gothic, is, therefore, a writing of excess and transgression. Botting pointed out that the Gothic “seemed to promote vice and violence, giving free reign to selfish ambitions and sexual desires beyond the prescriptions of law or familial duty” (4); and Lloyd-Smith explains that the Gothic tradition is about pushing towards excesses and extremes and the exploring of those extremes, which are frequently related to “cruelty, rapacity and fear, passion and sexual degradation” (3) and involve “religious profanities, demonism, occultism, necromancy and incest” (6) as well as “circumstances of terror, oppression and persecution, darkness and obscurity of setting, and innocence betrayed” (3). This betrayal of innocence is another common trait of the Gothic, as the Gothic tends to portray free-thinking characters with dark intentions who proclaim to be superior and prey on innocent victims who had put their trust in them (5). In the eighteenth century the most common characters in Gothic fiction were “spectres, monsters, demons, corpses, skeletons, evil aristocrats, monks and nuns, fainting

heroines and bandits”, and in the nineteenth century others such as “scientists, fathers, husbands, madmen, criminals and the monstrous double signifying duplicity and evil nature” were added to the narratives (Botting 2). In any case, the figures most repressed and unconsciously trapped “between contradictory pressures and impulses” are female characters (Hogle 9). In general, there are two main female roles in Gothic literature, the predator and the victim: “the first is dangerous yet powerfully attractive; she helps portray the pain/pleasure paradox that has come to be synonymous with Gothic literature. The latter is fragile and vulnerable, she gives the heroes something to rescue, and is often the prize for their brave endeavours” (Nabi 73).

In her work *Literary Women* (1977), Ellen Moers coined the term “Female Gothic”, referring to the Gothic production written by women, about women, for women in the late eighteenth century; and pointed to Ann Radcliffe as the main author of such a genre. Ann Radcliffe is a key figure of the Gothic tradition and one of the most representative authors of the 1790s due to her production of Gothic romances, where she destabilises patriarchal and hierarchical structures (Miles 18). Radcliffe wrote mostly about dysfunctional families with “absent mothers, overbearing fathers, and suffering daughters” (DeLucia 101), which is considered to be the basis of the Female Gothic plot: “an orphaned heroine in search of an absent mother, pursued by a feudal (patriarchal) father or his substituted, with the whole affair monitored by an impeccable but ineffectual suitor” (Miles 96). In Radcliffe’s work *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), for example, the female protagonist suffers the death of her mother, and her father monitors her grief by teaching her to “suppress her emotions and maintain fortitude in the face of disaster” (DeLucia 105). His father demands for a last wish before dying, and while she is trying to fulfil it, his spirit comes back to haunt his daughter and keep on pursuing her. Then, the antagonist of the story, Montoni (who regards women as

inferior and property to be abandoned) imprisons her; and when her lover, Valancourt, learns about it, his reaction is to blame her for being “too frigid” (DeLucia 106). Emily also has the constant feeling of not belonging anywhere, except for when she is at the pastoral retreat: “Emily belongs to neither a modern feminine world that links luxury, refinement, and commercial expansion to the progress of women, nor a hyper-masculine ‘savage’ world of barely disguised passion and brutal feeling” (DeLucia 113). Emily is the clear victim of the story since she lives a life of suffering and control by the male characters who surround her. Radcliffe is also known for producing a Gothic narrative in which the female character is both a victim and a heroine at the same time (Nabi 75); in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Emily portrays that characteristic, since, although she is the victim of a patriarchal society, she also becomes her own heroine by “remaining mindful of her place in the world and the connections to other people” (DeLucia 108).

2.2. The Gothic in the U.S.

In the United States of America, the Gothic tradition flourished during the turn of the eighteenth into the nineteenth century, portraying the truth outside of the so-called American Dream (Savoy 167). The Gothic in America describes the terrors of its day, and gives a voice for “the culturally silenced and the repressed events of American history” (Lloyd-Smith 26).

According to Lloyd-Smith, the distinctive features of the American Gothic are “the frontier, the Puritan legacy, race and political utopianism” (163). During the colonial period in the United States, the concept of the frontier made settlers distinguish between the known land and the unknown wilderness, the latter implying the possible existence of a better future outside the physical limits of their land as well as a possible indigenous threat. On the other hand, it is the Puritan legacy that originated the common American Gothic distinction between good and evil, the kingdom of light and the kingdom of darkness, God and the Devil. Besides, the conflict between settlers and Native Americans back at that time, as well as the issue of slavery, helped reinforce the distinction between good and evil that Puritanism had previously made. Savoy summarised it by stating that “American gothic historiography generally ‘derives from a conflict between the inscribed history of civilization and the history of the other, somehow immanent in the landscape of the frontier’” (7). Finally, Lloyd-Smith argues how some intellectuals such as Jean Baudrillard pointed out how the worry about a perfect society shaped every other sphere of American life, especially politics:

The utopian visions of freedom and prosperity that brought the early settlers to North America gained new vigour from Enlightenment arguments about the possibility of an ideal society and were enshrined in the founding constitutional principles of the United States. But along with the utopian inspiration came

profoundly pessimistic insights into the dangers of trusting a society to the undisciplined rule of the majority, fear of faction in democratic government, the rule of the mob, and the danger of a collapse of the whole grand experiment. In the early years of the nineteenth century, as the franchise widened, such anxieties provided a political undertone in fiction as in the rest of public life (165).

What makes American Gothic distinctive from the British variant is also its “formal adaptability and innovative energy” (Savoy 168). It is a very powerful literature repleted with “verbal devices of figures”, “fictional spectres and authorial personae”, rhetorical techniques (used to address the complexity of the American history), and tropes such as metaphors and personification (used in a very uncommon way to describe the dark American desires) (Savoy 167). All these literary strategies help express a deep concern about historical crimes and twisted human desires that surround the United States of America. Savoy also points out that prosopopoeia, or personification, is the most important verbal device in this tradition, since it allows the narrative to achieve the ultimate Gothic brilliance:

Especially important in this tradition of verbal devices is prosopopoeia, or personification, by which abstract ideas (such as the burden of historical causes) are given a ‘body’ in the spectral figure of the ghost. It is also the strategy that enables the dead to rise, the ghostly voice to materialize out of nowhere, and objects to assume a menacing pseudo-life. It thus achieves the ultimate effects of the haunted, the uncanny, and the return of the repressed while placing these thoroughly in the depths of American life and the American psyche (168).

In 1798, Charles Brockden Brown published his masterpiece *Wieland*, in which he incorporated “the historiographical paradigm” that would become one of the bases of American Gothic:

The sins of the fathers – their excesses, their violence and abuses, their predispositions toward the irrational – are visited upon their children, who, despite their illusions of liberty, find themselves in the ironic situation of an intergenerational compulsion to repeat the past (Savoy 172).

This importance of trauma in American Gothic is again emphasised by Charles Brockden Brown since he believed that the Gothic managed to “resituate history in a pathologized return of the repressed whereby the present witnesses the unfolding and fulfilment of terrible destinies incipient in the American past” (Savoy 174). This is why he is considered the first representative of American Gothic as well as “the first native-born American professional writer” (Botting 115). In his writings, Brown discussed “persecution, criminality and social tyranny” as well as “Enlightenment notions of freedom and democracy” (Botting 115). He was also a key figure in the development of an American identity and influenced other Gothic American representatives such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and Edgar Allan Poe (Goddu 184).

According to Savoy, “the Gothic tradition realised its greatest artistic brilliance in Poe and Hawthorne, who exposed to ‘withering skepticism’ the Romantic faith in ‘the individual ego or selfhood’” (176). As Botting points out, Hawthorne’s writing is unique because he “demystifies Gothic representations of a haunting past and associated superstitions lingering in the present to look at the play of sunshine and shadow in family and society”, which can be seen in his work *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) (117). Nevertheless, it is in Edgar Allan Poe’s macabre stories that the best distortions of reality and imagination can be found (Botting 119).

The American Gothic also depicts a clear fear of the female and so is conveyed by almost every male author throughout the American Gothic production, even in early authors such as Richard Henry Dana Senior and Washington Allston, who, in their works “Paul Felton” and “Monaldi” respectively, represent how two husbands assassinate their wives. This fear of the female is also represented in other authors such as Washington Irving, who comically depicts the decapitation of a woman in “The German Student”; Henry Melville, who presents a woman (Isabel) as a threat to male desires and society in *Pierre*; Nathaniel Hawthorne, who sadistically elaborated on female death, such as in *The Blithedale Romance*, where he depicts the death and mutilation of Zenobia’s body. This fear of the female may be linked to the “political agitation for women’s rights” which developed a sense of consciousness about women’s situation in a patriarchal society, resulting in the writing of works such as “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman in 1892, defined as “a powerful expression of the Gothicism inherent in the experience of patriarchal society”, where the author expresses the imprisonment and liberation of a woman confined in a room and in her mind by her husband and his sister (Lloyd-Smith 174).

The differences between British and American Gothic are based on the different historical, social and cultural contexts of the two countries, since American Gothic focuses on issues related to Puritanism, the frontier, slavery and racism, a failed utopianism, and the shadow of patriarchy; and therefore, the writings resulting are more social and political.

2.3. Edgar Allan Poe and his Gothic production

Edgar Allan Poe is one of the best and most popular Gothic writers in history. He developed his own variety of American Gothic, since, for example, he ignored the established American Gothic settings and instead worked sometimes on European settings such as the school in “William Wilson” or the Gothic tower room in “Ligeia” (both located in England) (Lloyd-Smith 168). Poe even uses landscapes to play with the reader’s mind, as in “The Fall of the House of Usher”, “the reader is led to wonder constantly whether this landscape is indeed really external or rather a projection of a particular psychological state” (Punter & Byron 156).

The return of the past is a very frequent motif in his works, both physically and psychologically: “in Poe, things constantly return; but whether they return from an outer world or because they have ever been banished from unconscious depths of the psyche remains a problem which is irresolvable” (Punter & Byron 156). Poe is, therefore, a master of the uncanny, which is also demonstrated through his sophisticated depictions of morbid and horrendous situations which provoke a true feeling of terror and horror in the reader, such as the removal of the cousin’s teeth in “Berenice” or the discovery of the corpse of the woman in the wall while the cat feeds off her head in “The Black Cat”. Poe’s works are also unique because of how supernaturalism is represented, which is mostly explained and justified through the figure of an insane narrator, such as in “Berenice” or in “Ligeia”, in the latter, for example, the narrator sees his dead wife in the body of his abused new wife (Lloyd-Smith 168). Poe also elaborated on a new depiction of family lineage and relations:

(Poe’s) new formula involved not only the stripping down of a cumbersome conventional machinery to its essential elements but an accompanying clarification and highlighting of a theme long familiar to Gothic writing and to

the surrounding culture of Romantic sensationalism, although hitherto left hovering in the shadows: that of the decline and extinction of the old family line. Perfectly harmonizing the terminal involution of the Usher family with the final crumbling of its mansion —of ‘house’ as dynasty with house as habitation— Poe ensured that whereas before him the keynote of Gothic fiction had been cruelty, after him it would be decadence (Baldick 28).

All is a clear example of the innovative and renovative role that Poe played in American Gothic. It is also very interesting to remark the fact that Edgar Allan Poe was obsessed with women and their death, and he even justified and explained it in his essay “The Philosophy of Composition”: “The death [of] a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world — and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such a topic are those of a bereaved lover” (5). In both his poetry and prose, the dead women come back from death to torment the males who played an important role in their lives – male characters who tend to be the narrators of the stories. Nevertheless, there are clear differences in the representation of these women in his poetry and his prose: in his poems, such as “The Raven” or “Annabel Lee” the female characters, although they haunt their respective males’ psyches, remain physically in their tombs; while in his prose, male narrators are not only tormented psychologically but physically, since their beloved or not sisters, cousins and wives come back from their tombs looking for one last meeting (Magistrale 52). Besides, in his short stories, Poe’s males are represented as madmen who act following sadomasochistic motivations:

They experience a particular admixture of terror and excitement from both the situation they have helped to create (the torturing of women that culminates in apparent death and premature burial) and the consequent psychological

enslavement that follows (these women haunt the lives of their men long after death and into resurrection) (Magistrale 53).

However, in “Berenice”, “Morella” and “Ligeia”, tales which belong to the so-called “marriage group”, those madmen are replaced by a different type of male character, “emasculated males who wait and watch for the return of women they once tortured in one way or another” (Magistrale 53), women who return from the grave with dark intentions, to haunt and torment those men.

3. BERENICE

“Berenice” (1835) is the story of a beautiful woman who starts suffering from epilepsy, a disease that slowly weakens her and atrophies her flesh, and therefore, her beauty. The narrator of the text is Berenice’s cousin, Egeus, a non-reliable narrator since he presents himself as insane: “The realities of the world affected me as visions, and as visions only, while the wild ideas of the land of dreams became, in turn, - not the material of my every-day existence – but in every deed that existence utterly and solely in itself” (7).¹

First of all, Egeus and Berenice’s relationship implies incest since they are cousins. Egeus is very clear about the fact that he has never loved Berenice: “During the brightest days of her unparalleled beauty, most surely I had never loved her” (9). They are going to get married, not out of love but out of sorrow: “bitterly lamenting her fallen and desolate condition, I called to mind that she had loved me long, and, in an evil moment, I spoke to her of marriage” (9). Egeus would only marry Berenice because of her condition, not because he has any feelings for her as she is not a person worth of his love; and he clearly regrets it from the very beginning by saying “in an evil moment” (9).

As the disease debilitates Berenice, Egeus becomes more and more obsessed over her teeth. This implies a dehumanisation of Berenice, since not only does he not care about her as a person, as his future wife or relative, but he also turns her, just a part of her body, into an object of desire to possess. Berenice’s dehumanisation and loss of identity is obvious as she grows sicker, and so she is described through the use of the definite article: “the forehead was high (...) and the once jetty hair fell partially over it” (9), “the eyes were lifeless” (10), “the teeth of the changed Berenice disclosed

¹ Poe, Edgar A. “Berenice”, *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe: Volume 3*. NightBlade Press, n.d. In this section, the page number of the tale will be cited parenthetically in the text.

themselves slowly” (10).

In this tale Poe approaches the issues of obsession and madness, showing “a preoccupation with the *idée fixe*, or obsession, in an extreme form of monomania which seems intended by Poe to be the psychological key to its plot” (Engel, 140). Therefore, it can be said that the narrator’s *idée fixe* is Berenice, especially her teeth:

Then came the full fury of my *monomania*, and I struggled in vain against its strange and irresistible influence. In the multiplied objects of the external world I had no thoughts but for the teeth. For these I longed with a phrenzied desire. All other matters and all different interests became absorbed in their single contemplation” (10).

The narrator justifies his behaviour by stating that he is insane: “my *monomania*”. In his insanity, he associates what remains of Berenice’s identity with her teeth, that is why he believes that possessing them will give him mental peace:

I more seriously believed *que toutes ses dents étaient des idées. Des idées!* – ah here was the idiotic thought that destroyed me! *Des idées!* – and *therefore* it was that I coveted them so madly! I felt that their possession could alone ever restore me to peace, in giving me back to reason” (10).

On the other hand, scholars such as Magistrale state that the removal of her teeth may be related to a relief for his own sexual anxiety (58): “an icy chill ran through my frame; a sense of insufferable anxiety oppressed me; a consuming curiosity pervaded my soul (...) I remained for some time breathless and motionless” (9).

The climax of the story is the consummation of Egaeus’ obsession when he removes Berenice’s thirty-two teeth from her body once she is buried and presumably dead. This episode is considered one of Poe’s most morbid depictions of violence against women, since it is a violation similar to that of rape, given the fact that Berenice

struggles for her life with her nails: “he took me gently by the hand: it was indented with the impress of human nails” (11). It is probable that Berenice may have died after such a violent act. Besides, the suggested idea is that by “losing” her teeth, Berenice loses her identity; and therefore, Egeus, by possessing the teeth, possesses Berenice.

His obsession over Berenice’s teeth may be related to a childhood trauma, the lack of a maternal figure in his life, which could have resulted in a growing hate towards the female gender in general: “Here died my mother. Herein was I born” (7). Hoffman explains Egeus’ obsession over Berenice’s teeth by establishing a connection between the teeth and the vagina: “just as the vagina is the entrance to the mysterious womb, the unifier of all life (...) so is the teeth to the all-digesting stomach, in which the womb is lodged” (235). Egeus’ non-existent relationship with his mother results in a growing hate towards Berenice because he focuses his frustration on the figure associated with reproductivity. He has objectified his fear towards women into Berenice’s teeth and the idea of possessing them relieves him because having them stored in a box may suppose having the control and the power over the threat that women are to him.

4. MORELLA

“Morella” (1835) tells the story of a failed marriage between a beautiful woman, Morella, and the unnamed narrator, that results in the death of the former while giving birth to their daughter. Their daughter, nameless for ten years, grows up to be meaningfully and uncannily similar to her late mother, and dies abruptly at her baptism after being named Morella, like her mother.

There are many similarities between “Morella” and “Berenice”: both Berenice and Morella (the mother) used to be women of an immense beauty, both suffer an illness that diminish them, both are thought to be dead, and in both texts, the narrator feels no affection towards them. From the beginning, the narrator states that he does not even know why he married Morella: “Fate bound us together at the altar; and I never spoke of passion, nor thought of love” (32).² As Morella grows sicker, the narrator starts to feel annoyed by her mere presence: “the mystery of my wife's manner oppressed me as a spell. I could no longer bear the touch of her wan fingers, nor the low tone of her musical language nor the lustre of her melancholy eyes” (33). Not even does not he feel any sympathy towards his wife but even starts to see her as a burden and wishes for her death:

Shall I then say that I longed with an earnest and consuming desire for the moment of Morella's decease (...) Until my tortured nerves obtained the mastery over my mind and I grew furious through delay, and, with the heart of a fiend, cursed the days, and the hours, and the bitter moments, which seemed to lengthen and lengthen as her gentle life declined (33).

Morella is the narrator's *idée fixe* in this tale and so is perceived since the moment Poe uses the device of enclosure (mentioning an abyss) when Morella falls ill: “his soul

² Poe, Edgar A. “Morella”, *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe: Volume 3*. NightBlade Press, n.d. In this section, the page number of the tale will be cited parenthetically in the text.

sickened and became giddy with the giddiness of one who gazes downwards into some dreary and unfathomable abyss” (33). The device of enclosure is what helps Poe describe Morella as the narrator’s *idée fixe*. Poe himself believed that “a close circumscription of space is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident: it has the force of a frame to a picture” (7). After Morella dies, his *idée fixe* becomes his daughter, whom he loved with “a love more fervent than I had believed it possible to feel for any denizen of earth” (33). The language is important since a “denizen” derives from the Latin word *deintus* which means “from within”. The term means alive but within the earth, and the narrator applies it to the daughter, who “might be a reincarnation of her mother returning from a tomb within the earth” (Engel, 144).

The narrator obsesses over Morella’s eyes like Egaeus obsesses over Berenice’s teeth: “but then they too, often looked down into the depths of my soul with Morella’s own intense and bewildering meaning” (34). The similarities are not just physical “and in the contour of the high forehead, and in the ringlets of the silken hair, and in the wan fingers” (34) but also in the way she speaks:

In the sad musical tones of her speech, and above all — oh, above all, in the phrases and expressions of the dead on the lips of the loved and the living, I found food for consuming thought and horror, for a worm that would not die (34).

The narrator becomes insane as his daughter grows up to be uncannily similar to Morella: “but terrible, oh! terrible were the tumultuous thoughts which crowded upon me while watching the development of her mental being” (33), “for that her smile was like her mother’s I could bear, but then I shuddered at its too perfect identity, that her eyes were like Morella’s I could endure” (34). The narrator also expresses how much it tortures him that his daughter even speaks like her late mother: “the phrases and

expressions of the dead on the lips of the loved and the living” (34). He shows no affection towards Morella, Morella for him is just the dead, while the daughter is alive but also loved. All these similarities may be what motivate the narrator to name the daughter Morella at her baptism, the climax of the story, when Morella reveals herself to be possessing the daughter's body by shouting “I am here!” (34). The tale suggests that Morella has reincarnated in the body of the daughter (metempsychosis). This idea is reinforced when the husband takes his daughter’s corpse to where he buried Morella to bury them together and he finds it empty, “I laughed with a long and bitter laugh as I found no traces of the first in the channel where I laid the second—Morella” (34-35). All these episodes torment the husband for the rest of his life, as he himself states: “Years—years may pass away, but the memory of that epoch never” (34). All in all, Morella the daughter is a reincarnation of Morella the mother, so it can be said that Morella is a revengeful woman that haunts her husband after death for not corresponding her love.

The issue of identity was crucial for Poe, and in order to understand Morella's identity, it is essential to analyse the possible connotations behind her name. Gargano states that the first three letters of her name “contain resonant Latin root for 'death' and that the last four letters constitute a diminutive” (262). Therefore, Morella may be seen as the embodiment of death, “she cannot really die because she is Death itself (Gargano 262). Besides, it is also interesting to point out the blurriness surrounding Morella’s identity, since it is not clear when it is the mother acting on the daughter’s body, and when it is the daughter herself. Morella can be interpreted as a vampiric and supernatural force. Poe himself explained that Morella “was a 'timeless entity, if not at will in time and space, echoing the words of God in the Old Testament: 'I am here.'” (Gargano 260).

5. LIGEIA

“Ligeia” (1838), Poe’s acknowledged favourite love story, tells the events surrounding a widower that remarries after losing his beloved first wife, Ligeia. The husband torments and poisons his second wife, but then she mysteriously comes back to life to reveal herself as the late Ligeia. First of all, it is important to remark that “Morella” is considered to be the precursor to “Ligeia”.

“Ligeia” presents many resemblances to “Berenice” and “Morella”. The most obvious common aspect is the death of beautiful women. In all of these tales, beautiful women die as a result of diseases that debilitate and atrophy them. This tale presents two deaths, that of Ligeia and that of Lady Rowena. Ligeia’s death, like that of Morella, is natural and as a consequence of a disease. Nevertheless, Lady Rowena’s death is not that natural, like Berenice’s, who could have died as a consequence of Egaeus’ brutal removal of her teeth. Although she suffers from an illness that diminishes her, she is presumably poisoned by the narrator:

I saw, or may have dreamed that I saw, fall within the goblet, as if from some invisible spring in the atmosphere of the room, three or four large drops of a brilliant and ruby colored fluid (...) Yet I cannot conceal it from my own perception that, immediately subsequent to the fall of ruby-drops, a rapid change for the worse took place in the disorder of my wife (29).³

The narrator, as in “Berenice” and “Morella”, portrays himself as insane. This narrator justifies his insanity through his addiction to opium: “I had become a bounden slave in the trammels of opium, and my labors and my orders had taken a coloring from my dreams” (27). He uses his addiction to opium to hide the fact that he is the responsible for Lady Rowena’s death: “I saw, or may have dreamed” (...) “the circumstance which

³ Poe, Edgar A. “Ligeia”, *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe: Volume 3*. NightBlade Press, n.d. In this section, the page number of the tale will be cited parenthetically in the text.

must, after all, I considered have been but the suggestion of a vivid imagination rendered morbidly active by the terror of the lady, by the opium” (29).

The main difference between the three female protagonists of these tales is that the narrator loves Ligeia deeply and her love is corresponded until death, and so is expressed by the narrator on multiple occasions, by, for example, referring to Ligeia as my beloved: “the character of my beloved (23), “that in these eyes of my beloved lay the secret to which Lord Verulam alludes” (24), “How had I deserved to be so cursed with the removal of my beloved?” (26). This narrator is devastated when Ligeia dies, unlike Egaeus and the narrator in *Morella*: “She died; - and I, crushed into the very dust with sorrow, could no longer endure the lonely desolation of my dwelling in the dim”. (27) The narrator loves, thinks and grieves for Ligeia throughout the whole story, even when he is already married to his second wife, Lady Rowena Trevanion of Tremaine:

My memory flew back, (oh, with what intensity of regret!) to Ligeia, the beloved, the august, the beautiful, the entombed. I revelled in recollections of her purity, of her wisdom, of her lofty, her ethereal nature, of her passionate, her idolatrous love (28).

Nevertheless, like “*Berenice*” and “*Morella*”, “*Ligeia*” also tells the story of a failed marriage, which in this case corresponds to that of the narrator and his second wife, Lady Rowena Trevanion of Tremaine. Again, the narrator does not love his wife and he does not marry her out of love: “That my wife dreaded the fierce moodiness of my temper – that she shunned me and loved me but little – I could not help perceiving; but it gave me rather pleasure than otherwise. I loathed her with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man” (28).

In this text, the narrator's *idée fixe* is Ligeia and so is described through the idea of enclosure since the beginning of the tale: “I was never made aware of her entrance

into my closed study save by the dear music of her low sweet voice” (23), “Ligeia’s beauty passed into my spirit, there dwelling as in a shrine” (24). The “closed study” and the “shrine” indicate that the narrator only lets Ligeia enter his world. Once she does, she becomes the object of his love till her death.

The narrator also obsesses over Ligeia’s eyes like the narrator in “Morella” obsessed over Morella’s eyes:

And then I peered into the large eyes of Ligeia. For eyes we have no models in the remotely antique (...) They were, I must believe, far larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race (...) The expression of the eyes of Ligeia! (...) I was possessed with a passion to discover. Those eyes! Those large, those shining, those divine orbs! They became to me twin stars of Leda, and I to them devoutest of astrologers (24).

It is the eyes that at the climax of the text reveal that Lady Rowena is in fact Ligeia: “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.” (31). Throughout the text, the narrator feels both desire for and fear of her eyes – this could be interpreted as a merging of the emotions that Egaeus felt about Berenice (desire for her teeth) and the narrator in “Morella” about Morella and their daughter (fear of their eyes). This desire and fear that Ligeia provokes in the narrator may be related to the idea of femme fatale, which she anticipated and inspired:

Women whose radiant beauty was aligned with an imperial detachment and an air of power and domination. Men worship the femme fatale out of fear as much as of adoration; they aspire to be the powerless victim of the furious rage of a beautiful woman (Magistrale, 61).

After Ligeia's death, his new *idée fixe* is Lady Rowena. The narrator marries Lady Rowena and they move to a bridal chamber to live. The narrator soon discovers that Lady Rowena does not love him, in fact, she is afraid of him; but he seems not to care, instead, the feeling is mutual, even worse: "she shunned me and loved me but little – I could not help perceiving; but it gave me rather pleasure than otherwise. I loathed her with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man" (28).

The device of enclosure appears again in the text through the image of the Gothic bridal chamber where they live. The chamber is eccentrically decorated and it is possible to picture it like a tomb, since there are coffins around: "In each of the angles of the chamber stood on end a gigantic sarcophagus of black granite, from the tombs of the kings over against Luxor, with their aged lids full of immemorial sculpture" (28). After living there for one month, Lady Rowena falls ill and the mere fact of living in the chamber torments her, since she has hallucinations with the tapestries in the chamber and thinks they are alive: "in her perturbed state of half-slumber, she spoke of sounds, and of motions, in and about the chamber of the turret" (28), "she spoke again, and now more frequently and pertinaciously, of the sounds -of the slight sounds- and the unusual motions among the tapestries to which she had formerly alluded" (29). The narrator is aware of this since he may have provoked these effects; but he seems to enjoy her torment and he does not even suggest moving somewhere else.

As in the other stories from the marriage group, there is a sadistic violence and attitude towards women, in this case towards the innocent Lady Rowena: the psychological violence exerted on Rowena may be justified by the fact that the narrator was grieving for his true love, the late Ligeia, and by his apparent insanity as a consequence of such a loss and opium. This may be the reason why he later marries Lady Rowena, a woman who represents the opposite to Ligeia, and then and torments

her - a clear example of dehumanisation, as if Rowena were an object used to appease male anxiety (also present in “Berenice” and “Morella”).

The issue of identity also plays a significant role in “Ligeia”. Just as Morella (the daughter) can be taken to be the reincarnation of Morella (the mother), at the end of this text Lady Rowena uncannily reveals herself to be the late Ligeia. Again, like in “Morella”, the female character is portrayed as the reason for the husband’s torment and madness: “Could it indeed be Rowena at all? (...) Why, why should I doubt it? (...) What inexpressible madness seized me with that thought?” (31).

6. CONCLUSION

The Gothic tradition is popularly known for bringing back the past and exploring repressed secrets and thoughts, the representation of excesses and extremes, violence and vice; it focuses on the portrayal of the supernatural and the uncanny through hauntings, mysterious characters, and settings. All these aspects can be found in Edgar Allan Poe's works. Poe belongs to the American Gothic tradition, which deals mostly with issues related to the frontier, Puritan legacy, race, political utopianism and trauma. Poe is considered one of the most representative figures of Gothic fiction in general because he was an innovator, that is why it can be said that he developed his own Gothic tradition combining traditional and original elements. He wrote about the return of the past both physically and psychologically, sometimes he included European settings (as in "Ligeia"), his way of depicting the supernatural was unique and his motifs incomparable, especially his treatment of women, who appear as victims and victimizers in the same tale. He was a master of the uncanny; with his writings he managed to play with the readers' minds and provoked true feelings of terror – "terror of the soul".

"Berenice", "Morella" and "Ligeia" belong to the so-called "marriage group", which is ironic, since all three describe failed marriages (Morella's, Ligeia's and Lady Rowena's) or "almost" marriages (Berenice's). The representation of women in these tales is what makes them peculiar: Berenice is depicted as a helpless victim who suffers to death, but Morella is depicted as the opposite, as a revengeful woman who seeks to torture her husband. These depictions correspond to the two typical representations of women in the Gothic: predators or victims. Finally, Ligeia seems to be a mixture of both: at the beginning of the tale, Ligeia seems to be a Berenice, a poor woman suffering from an illness that diminishes her, but then she turns out to be a Morella, a

revengeful woman that comes back from death to torment her husband. Despite these differences, there are many thematic similarities among these tales: the death of beautiful women, the fact that all of female characters suffer from illnesses and/or male violence. These women are idealised but also dehumanised and the insane narrators suffer from obsessions (an *idée fixe*) and their love becomes hate with the passing of time (except for Ligeia). All these tales also have open endings, none of them clarifies what happens to the female characters: Is Berenice still alive after the brutal removal of her teeth? Where is Morella? What will happen after the transformation of Lady Rowena into Ligeia?

But the most important question is: why would Poe write about females like that? There are many uncertainties and unanswered questions about Poe. Why would he write about females being mutilated until death? Why would he describe hate towards women so vividly? Why would he portray the female gender as revengeful? And last but not least important: Why would he only depict failed relationships?

The answer, just like Poe's tales, is ambiguous. Poe's personal experience may be one of the reasons behind such representations: Poe saw both his mothers die, which would be an explanation to why he was so obsessed with the death of beautiful women. He grew up without a maternal figure, which may have resulted in a growing hate towards the female gender. Besides, he had to witness how his foster father treated him and his wife, which would explain his obsession with failed marriages and the depiction of insane husbands. Moreover, Poe was also a follower of the Romantic tradition and the idealisation of women is a very Romantic aspect, although he did it his own way. The most probable reason for such macabre representations is that Poe wanted to captivate readership through sensation and excess both to make a living and to be remarkable. He was determined to be original and exclusive by experimenting and

innovating with the Gothic tradition, and since he was a cultivated reader, he knew what was popular at the time and could fascinate readers and critics alike.

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