Gender Roles in Edgar Allan Poe
- A study of oracles in "Ligeia" and "Berenice"

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Motivation

“Deep in earth my love is lying
And I must weep alone”

(CTP:72)

1.1 Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe is renowned for his grotesque tales and twisted poems, and while the opinions on his works are manifold, one cannot deny the impact of his oeuvres, nor diminish his well-earned posthumous fame. From H.P. Lovecraft to Arthur Conan Doyle, Poe’s influence is apparent in many authors, and his legacy is carried on by the ongoing debate and analysis of his works. Seldom has one man, a writer, a poet, and a literary critic, been the topic of such disagreement between scholars and debaters, his works to some seem a fleeting glimpse into the mind of a madman and a genius, to some a romantic and a man beyond his time, and to some a pervert and a misogynist.

Why is it that Edgar Allan Poe’s literary works can still excite, thrill and divide readers across cultures and lifespans? Are his works simply too ingenious to ever succumb to the toll of time? Or has he, intentionally or otherwise, struck upon some nerve so central to the human psyche that the poignancy of his words penetrate our mental defenses and touch/disturb us to the very core, if one such even exists? Certainly, the shock-value of his stories had a large impact in his own time, but in today’s society where death, resurrection, vampires, ghouls, mysteries and other-worldly love can all be experienced in 10 minutes of prime-time television, why do his stories from the middle of the nineteenth century still excite us so?

One possible explanation for Poe’s continuous hold on readers throughout time could be that the themes of his stories and the ordeals with which his characters struggle are indeed still as much a part of human life today as it was in Poe’s time. Love seems a theme as timeless and relevant as life and death themselves, and so Poe’s famous cocktail of love in death has ironically proven to be an undying combination.

Edgar Allan Poe’s own life proved to be as tormented as the lives of many of his characters, and just as death permeated Poe’s stories, it followed Poe himself throughout his brief life, claiming his young mother, foster-mother, and his wife. However, in Poe’s stories, death in itself seemingly meant little if it wasn’t of someone for whom the protagonist felt a deep love, passion or
fascination. Thus, bereavement of a beloved became a major theme in Poe’s literature, as it did in his own life until his death at 40 years of age.

As his stories never included homosexuality, and nearly all of his protagonists were male, the role of the dying character always fell to a woman, preferably a young and beautiful one. This has become a catalyst for many discussions on Poe, and this was also what initially sparked my interest in Edgar Allan Poe’s writings. For how can a man who kills nearly every woman in his stories, sometimes even more than once, be anything but a misogynist, or at least someone who considers women’s one redeeming quality their beauty in death? The obvious similarity of Poe’s own life and his stories has also been the object of many a psychoanalytical reading and comparison, perhaps further enhanced by the fact that many of Poe’s characters seem to be rather an extension of himself than a result of pure imagination.

I have concerned myself with gender studies for quite a large part of my education, from the lack of male employees on crisis centers for battered women to children’s production of meaning regarding gender roles and their apparent restrictions. To me, engaging in gender studies has been akin to the opening of Pandora’s Box. Gender exists in every area and every layer of society, and every discursive action is one of power and reinforcement of power structures. Gender permeates everything, including literature and poetry, and much and more can be discovered about societies and persons when engaging in gender studies.

This has naturally lead me towards a gendered approach to this dissertation, and gender and Poe are highly compatible, as his stories nearly always include men and women, usually bound for some grim and tragic end. However, merely the presence of men and women does not necessitate a particular gendered perspective, as their actions and their purposes could just as easily be reverted and completely different in the next story. Only, they aren’t. Not in Poe. So what is the purpose of this apparent repetition of themes? Why must a woman die before a man can truly feel? And what does this say about Poe?

1.2 Problem Area

How can we truly ascertain anything about Poe’s original intentions towards women? Many psychoanalytical readings of his texts have already provided a variety of explanations and theories as to why Poe’s stories possess the very distinct traits that make them so unique, so when I say
that I mean to examine a selection of Poe’s stories while including psychoanalytical theory, the first question to emerge in the diligent reader’s mind could very well be: “Why?”

The questioning of my motive is indeed warranted, however, I seek not simply to tie Poe’s life to his stories and thus conclude that he is or isn’t a misogynist or a romantic. I will, to the extent which it is possible, leave Poe’s original intentions to himself and instead discuss the psychoanalytical perspective in his stories, as well as the gendered perspective. It is entirely possible that one of the reasons Poe’s stories continue to hold sway with today’s reader is because it seemingly reduces women to side-stories in the torment of the male character, whose suffering is the central point of the stories, rather than the life or death of his dying or deceased female companion. This is bound to stand out to the gender-aware reader, as women solely serving a role in death could be, and has been, interpreted as a devaluation of women and a display of misogyny. Gender roles are constantly going through a continuous development, and particularly the striving for equality between the sexes can be perceived as the major result of the feminist movement and revolt against the androcentricity in society.

The gendered perspective is what makes this dissertation unique from other discussions and readings of Poe. I seek to provide an in-depth analysis of a select few of Edgar Allan Poe’s works, and discuss and analyze the similarities with his personal life and his stories. My focal point will be on the (omni)presence of gender roles in his oeuvres, and my dissertation shall encompass gender discussions and psychoanalytical literary analyses of his stories.

There are multiple approaches towards discussing gender roles, and I shall attempt to take several of these into account insofar as regarding Poe in his own time as well as taking on a modern perspective on gender. As I have stated above, gender roles differ not only in time but also in context, which means that today’s perspectives on gender are vastly different from the views in Edgar Allan Poe’s time. Therefore I seek to apply a modern perspective while maintaining the contemporary norms and tendencies of the 1800s in America, hopefully avoiding decontextualization while still offering multiple perspectives on Poe’s works.

Edgar Allan Poe’s works cannot themselves be classified into one singular category. From his poetic masterworks such as *Ulalume* and *The Raven* to his tales of ratiocination like *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, Poe is not only a pioneer of several literary styles, he is also a diverse writer with many facets. This naturally complicates any utterances regarding “Poe’s works”, as they
cannot be grouped together so easily. Therefore, I do not seek to encompass and assess all of Poe’s writings in this dissertation, but I shall analyze a select few of his works, all of which I find to represent the genius and diversity of Edgar Allan Poe.

The works which I have chosen are “Ligeia” and “Berenice”, two short stories which both feature what has been labeled as Poe’s “Dark Ladies”. What has sparked my interest in these two stories is the theme of love, and the unique way which Poe portrays it. I also considered including vastly different tales from Poe’s large catalogue of works, but while his detective story The Murders in the Rue Morgue was originally intended to be one of the core texts in this project, I have chosen to focus solely on his love stories. The Murders in the Rue Morgue, as a tale of ratiocination, relies on completely different themes from Ligeia and Berenice, but it still contains what has been considered Poe’s trademark: dead women. So why not include it in this project? Because nearly all of Poe’s stories have dead women - but my particular focal point is the dying women in his love stories, simply because the combination of love and death usually means tragedy the romantically involved. But is it also like that in Poe?

To answer the question of “Why this project?”, I say this: We live in a time where gender roles and the equality between the sexes are more discussed and in the spotlight than ever. This evolution has continually provided scholars and theorists around the world with new perspectives on gender roles in literature, and throughout time these views have differed greatly, as exemplified by the vast differences in the reception of Edgar Allan Poe’s works. This calls for further investigation simply because of the many opinions on his stories, as the stories themselves have not changed since they were first published. This could lead to the conclusion that Poe’s stories do indeed have a gendered perspective, but this perspective differs according to the eye of the beholder. Therefore I find it important to take another look at Poe’s stories using modern theories of psychology as well as offering a critique of the critics themselves.

This has led me to a claim which shall serve as a premise for this entire project: Edgar Allan Poe has a feminine ideal. The nearly compulsive repetition of themes in his stories seems to have sprung from a set of ideals as to what constitutes a good story. Poe himself has committed his definition of “(...)the most poetical topic in the world(...)” to writing in his The Philosophy of Composition (1846), and he describes it as such:

I asked myself— ‘Of all melancholy topics, what, according to the universal understanding of mankind, is the most melancholy?’ Death — was the obvious reply. ‘And when,’ I said, ‘is
this most melancholy of topics most poetical?’ From what I have already explained at some length, the answer, here also, is obvious — ‘When it most closely allies itself to Beauty: the death, then, 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 topic are those of a bereaved lover’ (Poe 1846).

Here we have it: Edgar Allan Poe’s feminine ideal!
Or is it? While Poe himself describes this as the pinnacle of poetry, he does not equate that all women must die to be beautiful, but their death serves the beauty of poetry. I believe that this calls for further analysis, as the above quote describes Edgar Allan Poe’s poetic ideal, which isn’t necessarily the same as his feminine ideal.

1.3 Research Question

All of the above musings and thoughts have led me towards the following research question:

Based upon an analysis of “Ligeia” and “Berenice”, what is Edgar Allan Poe’s feminine ideal and why is it achieved through death?

1.4 Overview

I will provide a brief overview of the project to aid the reader in navigating through this thesis, as well as providing the reader with information as to how I will carry out this thesis.

Chapter 1, in which this paragraph is included, provides an introduction to the purpose of the project and what has inspired me to write it.

Chapter 2 is dedicated to the methodology which this project is built upon. This includes an introduction to psychoanalytical readings and examples of these, stressing the differences in psychoanalytical theories and a critique of these, including Marie Bonaparte’s Freudian approach and Shoshana Felman’s Lacanian approach. It also provides a basic understanding of Jacques Derrida’s “Deconstruction”.

Chapter 3 is dedicated to Edgar Allan Poe and the historical period during which he wrote. A biography of Poe is presented to enlighten the reader to the crucial events that shaped his life, as well as creating a basis for the Freudian approach of psychoanalysis. Another feature of this chapter is a description of the literary movements and contemporary influences in Poe’s time.
Chapter 4 will briefly provide a perspective on gender roles in Poe’s time, and how they have evolved and can be used in literary analysis.

Chapter 5 consists of analyses of the two selected works, namely “Ligeia” and “Berenice”. I provide an in-depth analysis against the background of the various approaches presented in the chapter on methodology in order to achieve an understanding of the various symbols, characters, plots and underlying themes in the stories.

Chapter 6 is the discussion, taking into account the results of the analysis and discussing the topic of gender roles in Edgar Allan Poe.

Chapter 7 is the conclusion of the project.

1.5 Delimitation

I find it necessary to include a brief section in which I describe what I will not do in this project, as there already is a plethora of literature on Edgar Allan Poe with which I do not seek to contend.

While my research question might appear to incite a general and all-encompassing analysis of Poe’s works, this is absolutely not the case. My work in this dissertation is centered on the two selected stories, and while I will make comparisons and analogies to some of Poe’s other works, I do in no way claim my conclusion to be universally applicable to all Poe stories. I provide an in-depth analysis of some stories that have already been analyzed multiple times by many different authors because I believe to have found something different - something which might change our view of life, death, women, men, beauty and truth in these particular stories. Thus I claim validity of my conclusion only insofar as the stories I have analyzed, and I will not embark on a similar crusade as Marie Bonaparte in her biographical treatment of Poe’s poetry.

While I maintain this dissertation’s focus on gender roles in Poe’s literature, I do not seek to discuss the evolution of gender roles throughout history in great depth, nor will I subscribe to any distinct theories regarding gender. I do not seek to provide a feminist, structuralist, psychoanalytic or religious perspective on gender, and I have chosen not to include any major gender theorists in my project. This can, at first, seem like an evasive maneuver or a refusal to subscribe to any particular theory, and while I do of course have a political and humanist standpoint regarding gender roles and equality, I do not seek to discuss these as a focal point in themselves. This project is not on the ramifications or consequences of gendered literature and its impact on society as a whole, and while such a project would indeed have relevancy and potency in the ongoing debate on gender roles, it is not what I have chosen to do.
This project is about the beautiful stories of Edgar Allan Poe, and much like he claimed to write poetry for poetry’s sake, this project is written for - and about - poetry.
Chapter 2: Methodology

2.0.1 Overview

In this chapter I will present several theorists and their take on literary analysis. The field of literary analysis is a diverse area within which many different opinions can be found, and I have chosen theorists whose arguments differ, but still have a connection in their application to Edgar Allan Poe’s literary works.

Marie Bonaparte, one of Sigmund Freud’s many students, wrote *The life and works of Edgar Allan Poe, a psycho-analytic interpretation* in 1933, which provided a very thorough psychoanalytical reading of Edgar Allan Poe. Her view of Poe is a clear-cut Freudian analysis of Poe’s life and its representation in his stories.

Jacques Lacan held a series of seminars on the rediscovery of Freud’s psychoanalysis and his later works (Felman 1987). In these seminars, he dedicated a large part of his time to analyzing Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Purloined Letter*, which to him exemplified the psychoanalytical practice in the way it actually works. Lacan uses some of Freud’s terminology but he applies it in a different way, thus providing a critique of Freud exemplified in Lacan’s analysis of *The Purloined Letter*. I will employ Shoshana Felman’s perspective on Lacan, which is far more recent. Not only does she give further insight into the Lacanian reading of literature, she also widens her theoretical scope and provides a critique of other analysts, amongst whom we find Marie Bonaparte.

Jacques Derrida has, in turn, provided a critique of Lacan’s analysis, using the perspective of deconstruction instead of Lacan’s psychoanalytical and post-structuralist approach.

2.0.2 A Note on Theory

These authors each provide a different argument in the reading of Edgar Allan Poe, and their theories are neither completely mutually exclusive, nor are they fully compatible with one another. This will serve to strengthen my point of the many ways of reading a literary text and its consequences, as each different perspective is likely to find a different answer from the other theories. However, the theories are not too different from one another, insofar as I can still use them to underline importance of certain points while illuminating different aspects of it. The fact that all the selected authors have, in one way or another, offered critique on each other, serves to strengthen the intertextuality between these authors, as one is sure to have commented
on something the other has said, thus enabling comparison while maintaining a visible distance between them.

While a diverse theoretical framework can certainly aid a literary analysis such as mine, I have a strong intention of not adopting any one theoretical point of view completely. Instead, I have these theories to supplement and challenge my own point of view while serving as a basis of analysis and discussion themselves. My own analysis shall serve to illuminate the vast impact the theoretical framework has on the outcome of an analysis, as I will continually juxtapose my own opinion and findings to those of my selected theorists. They shall, in a way, serve as the background upon which my analysis will lean, but not as a specific set of rules by which I must abide. The discussion of the theories will, in turn, prove a major point in my analysis and discussion in showing that the reader’s gaze will define the analysis of a story just as much as the story itself will affect the reader.

As this project is not a project of psychology but one of English, I shall not seek to account for the entirety of the psychological aspects of the following theories. It would be redundant to meticulously describe Freud’s, Bonaparte’s, Lacan’s and Derrida’s oeuvres, as I shall not adopt any of these frameworks as my own, but instead they shall serve as supplementary theories to contrast my own reading.

2.1 Marie Bonaparte and Psychoanalysis

A diligent student of Freud’s, Marie Bonaparte adheres to the classical school of clinical psychology, utilizing Freud’s framework for psychoanalysis as her basis for providing an analysis of Edgar Allan Poe’s works. My primary reason for choosing Bonaparte for this project is the extreme depth of her analysis of Edgar Allan Poe. Her analysis is very closely based on Poe’s biography, and she ties several crucial moments in Poe’s life to his writing, which is something Felman/Lacan and Derrida do not value to the same degree.

2.1.1 Theoretical Background

One of the major axioms of Freudian psychoanalysis is that our childhood has a significant impact on the rest of our lives. Indeed, the clinical practice of psychoanalysis itself often searches for
traumatic events in the childhood of the analysand, and, to Bonaparte, the act of creative writing is itself an object worthy of analysis from the same standards: “(...) creative writing (...) gratifies the artist’s deepest infantile, archaic, and unconscious wishes in imaginary and, more or less, disguised form” (Muller & Richardson 1998:101). This itself proves to be the most important axiom of Bonaparte’s analysis of Poe, namely that literature provides a window into the very psychology of the author (ibid).

A noteworthy fact of classic psychoanalysis is that it is constructed around the analysand and the analyst, and the job of the analyst is to diagnose the source of his or her patient’s neurosis. Since Poe is not readily available for a psychoanalytic session, we must make due with other means to analyze him, should that be our intention. It proves to be Bonaparte’s intention, and she transfers the Freudian concept of the analysis of dreams to apply directly to literature as well, as she claims the construction of literary works is very similar to that of dreams (Muller & Richardson 1998:101-102). Thus she makes the claim that literary works are an extension of our subconscious, just as Freud claimed dreams to be. This is obviously very convenient for Bonaparte, as a posthumous psychoanalysis would prove impossible otherwise.

As I have previously stated, Bonaparte ties Poe’s stories to his personal life in a very detailed degree. Her elaboration of Poe’s early childhood trauma in the death of his mother, Elizabeth, and the disappearance of his father, David, provides ample ground for Freudian analysis, especially the application of the Oedipal Complex. I shall not go into great detail describing the many facets of the Oedipal Complex, but it roughly constitutes the child’s love for its mother turning into sexual desire, which the father, in turn, will deny the child and thus provide the first authoritative “no” for the child, sparking animosity between father and child (Muller & Richardson 1998). The mother, as the first object from which we learn to differentiate ourselves, serves as a great object of affection from the child, and the bereavement of such an important character in the child’s life, as was the case in Poe’s life (see Chapter 3.1), is likely to cause neurosis later on in life. What Bonaparte labels as Poe’s “necrophilist tendencies” stems from the loss of his mother, as she proclaims in saying: “all beauty, for Poe, whether in woman or nature, in faces or scenes, was ‘drawn from the cheeks’ of the cherished and dying mother” (Muller & Richardson 1998:126). Indeed, Bonaparte goes on to argue that Poe chose his wife, Virginia Clemm, simply because she was obviously consumptive and therefore very likely to suffer an early death in the same fashion of his mother, thus reproducing “(...) the sadistic drama, for himself, of an agonizing death like that he had watched so breathlessly as a child” (Muller & Richardson 1998:129). Just as dreams, which Freudians hold in high regard as a window into our unconscious, can at times seem prophetic, so can Poe’s stories Ligeia, Berenice, Morella, Madeline and Eleonora be analyzed, as they all feature young women
dying in the fashion of his wife and mother (ibid). This leads Bonaparte to conclude that all reasoning, in literature as well as in life, is strongly affected by our unconscious memories and drives, and that our reasoning and reason itself oftentimes seem to traverse one another (Muller & Richardson 1998:122)

2.1.2 Important Terms

Allow me to present a lengthy quote to facilitate the transition to this section, while stating the utmost importance of the infantile drives and memories in the Freudian reading:

To the reader, our analyses may at times have seemed overmuch to stress these symbolic devices which, monotonously, bring everything in the universe back to the same human prototypes - father, mother, child, our members and organs, and, in particular, the genitals. The fault, however, is not ours. We cannot help it that the unconscious monotonously reiterates certain themes, governed as it is by our most primitive memories and our most archaic instincts (Muller & Richardson 1998:109).

This not only serves as a statement to underline the primal drives in the human psyche, it also justifies the psychoanalytical perspective of Bonaparte if one accepts the premise of the similarity between dreams and creative writing, simply because of the dominance of the unconscious in these two aspects.

The workings of the unconscious operations in dreams and in literature are generally attributed to certain predominant mechanisms, some of which I shall briefly describe in the following.

Displacement is a mechanism in dreams which serves to veil repressed memories and urges by replacing them with entities which the author himself will find acceptable or at least less uncomfortable than the act from which his moral censor is trying to shield him (Muller & Richardson 1998:107). As such, displacement serves to transfer certain attributes from the repressed memory to a harmless object, but often maintaining certain emotional ties to the originally displaced object. Bonaparte emphasizes displacement as the "(...) warp and woof of the writer's fabric" (Muller & Richardson 1998:105), exemplifying it with Poe's transferral of his original affect towards his mother to the imaginary women of his stories, who often share some attributes with his mother (ibid). Displacement is therefore a pre-conscious act, an act of censorship or regulation to protect the dreamer/author from his unconscious proper.
Condensation, while sharing some symbolic traits with displacement, serves the purpose of transforming several thoughts and objects into one condensed object. Condensation, as its name reveals, is the process of materializing multiple thoughts into one, in the same sense as the transformation of water from its gaseous state to a drop of water. Contrary to displacement, condensation takes place in the unconscious (Muller & Richardson 1998:110). As a product of the unconscious, condensation is weaved into the conscious writing of the author as a result of unconscious processes being at work simultaneously. Thus, while displacement occurs as a transferal of certain feelings to a new subject, condensation appears in Poe in the shape of the women his stories, unconsciously depicted with remarkable similarities to the women he cherished in real life (Muller & Richardson 1998:111).

The splitting of one individual into several is more common than condensation, in the effect that several of Poe’s female characters are often analyzed as images of his mother. Where many analyses focus on the similarities of Poe’s women in real life and in fiction, I also find it noteworthy that so many of the male protagonists in the stories resemble Poe himself. Freud argues that the splitting of the author’s own ego into characters across multiple of his works could function as a personification of the conflicting emotions of the author’s own mental life, thus depicting fractions of himself as different characters in his own works (Muller & Richardson 1998:115).

Another important element of the psychoanalytic analysis is causation, in which immediate changes of scenery or images as well as the substitution of characters indicate more than just a change - a causal relationship is established using the effect of succession (Muller & Richardson 1998:117). Thus a substitution or change of characters is used to establish a reason or a system of meaning, an unwritten because (Muller & Richardson 1998:118). Marie Bonaparte provides an example of succession as causation in Poe’s The Murders in the Rue Morgue, where the first display of Dupin’s ingenuity is followed by the story of the orangutan’s intrusion and butchery of the two L’Espanaye women. This succession, to Bonaparte, displays first the character of Chantilly, in whom Bonaparte sees a displaced David Poe (Edgar Allan’s biological father) suffering from impotence, immediately followed by a rigorous display of violence and phallic language, which symbolizes Elizabeth Poe’s supposed infidelity, resulting in Edgar Allan Poe’s little sister, Rosalie: “So my mother was the victim of a man’s (the suppositious lover’s) aggression. He forced his way into her genitals and there, with his mighty penis, implanted my sister” (Muller & Richardson 1998:118), and the unknown lover did this because of Poe’s father David’s impotence.
Here we see a display of the importance Poe’s personal life had in Bonaparte’s analysis. Had she known nothing of Poe’s biography, her analysis of his works would doubtlessly have looked very different, if she would have undertaken it at all.

This leads me to stress an important point: Although Bonaparte can read Poe’s entire childhood in his stories, it does not mean that she claims Poe had no conscious part in their telling. “Literary creation”, she writes, “being a conscious product, is subject to reason and logic” (Muller & Richardson 1998:118). If this is true, then how can she treat a text like she would a dream, as largely a product of the unconscious? This question is answered by another key element of the Freudian analysis, the last which I will define in this section: The capital of the story. Much like dreams often include some recent occurrence from our everyday lives, literary creations include a consciously created story, but it only serves as building blocks, while our preconscious and unconscious thoughts provide the schematics, or as Bonaparte calls it, the capital (Muller & Richardson 1998:127). This can only be read as Bonaparte’s focus lying not in the actual story, but in the untold, underlying story, unbound by reason and logic but instead subject to other laws (Muller & Richardson 1998:116). Bonaparte gives an example of this when she claims that the “building blocks” for tales like Ligeia and Berenice stem from Poe being around his young cousin Virginia, but the capital of these stories can only originate from “(...) Poe’s rich store of buried sadistic, necrophilist, infantile memories which, with his mother’s corpse, lurked deep in his unconscious” (Muller & Richardson 1998:128).

2.1.3 Her Reading of Poe

As we have already established, Marie Bonaparte’s reading of Poe relies heavily on his childhood, and more specifically his mother and father, with whom he constitutes the Oedipal trio. To summarize Bonaparte’s diagnosis of Poe, he was an impotent incestuous sadonecrophilist and drug addict with an unresolved Oedipal Complex which defined his writing significantly. Bonaparte claims that neither Poe nor the literary world had any idea of these complexes and their apparent effect on Poe’s writing, again using the simple displacement of Poe’s mother Elizabeth as Berenice and Ligeia as an example - suggesting that, at best, people might have suspected that Poe chose Virginia as his wife as a surrogate of his mother (Muller & Richardson 1998:105).

She reads Poe’s own split ego in many of his stories, and takes Dupin as an example. Instead of attributing the sublime analytical mind of Poe’s detective to Poe himself, she claims that Dupin’s deductions are an image of Poe’s own struggles in solving his infantile sexual explorations -
Dupin’s victories are therefore Poe’s compensation for his own sexual failures (Muller & Richardson 1998:121f).

Poe is, in summary, a slave to his unconscious thoughts, as “(...) our conscious ego is never but the more or less watchful spectator of ourselves” (Muller & Richardson 1998:104).

2.2 Shoshana Felman and Lacanian Reading

The thrust of Shoshana Felman’s book *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight - Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture* (1987) seems to be to account not only for Jacques Lacan’s studies, but for his impact on her own. A literary scholar, Felman explains her first encounter with Lacan’s theory and the growing insight it left in its wake. Lacan embodies, to Felman, “(...) a revolutionary interpretive stance [and] (...) a revolutionary theory of reading (...)” (Felman 1987:9) which he himself has never formulated systematically (ibid). Contrary to what one might expect from a book on Lacan’s theory, Felman does not undertake the task of systematically explaining Lacan either, which leads one’s thoughts towards the idea that Lacan’s theory itself isn’t as schematic as Freud’s psychoanalysis. However, Freud’s theory still serves as the basis for Lacan’s analysis, insofar as Lacan attempts to further develop and widen the scope of applied psychoanalysis while still preserving key elements of Freud’s theory. As a consequence of this, the usage of many of the analytical terms pertaining to psychoanalysis is carried on, and Lacan employs many of Freud’s existing terms such as displacement, condensation and the unconscious.

2.2.1 Differences from Freud

Shoshana Felman emphasizes a noteworthy difference between Freud’s psychoanalysis and her own in the beginning of her book:

(...) one can use theories only as enabling metaphorical devices, not as extrapolated, preconceived items of knowledge. In much the same way that one cannot simply ’apply’ Freud’s concepts to a patient, one cannot apply Freud (or Lacan) to a literary text (Felman 1987:11).

The Lacanian reading entails an attention to detail in regard to what is being said, so that the analyst can observe the displacements by the analysand. The post-structuralism in Lacan’s
approach is evident in his focus on language, on what is being said, on what isn’t being said, and on what is being said in excess of what can be expected (Felman 1987:21). Thus Lacan operates on the same level as Freud in claiming that there may very well be a hidden meaning underneath the layer of what is actually happening: “What is at stake in analytic discourse is always this - to what is uttered as a signifier (by the patient), you (analysts) give another reading than what it means” (Lacan in Felman 1987:21). However, as a loosely structured theory, Lacanian reading does not latch on to predefined categories such as “mother” or “father” in the same degree as Freudian analysis, it attempts, instead, to find discrepancies in the language of the analysand - places where the subject’s discourse appears in “(...) disagreement with, or difference from, itself” (Felman 1987:21).

Another shared term between Freud and Lacan is the unconscious, however, they attribute different qualities towards the unconscious. Lacan underlines a reciprocity in the unconscious previously unemphasized by Freud - to Lacan, the unconscious is not simply that which must be read, but most importantly that which reads (Felman 1987:21). This entails a more nuanced role in the tradition psychoanalysis, as the analyst no longer only reads the analysand, but also himself. This was the case for Freud, states Felman, when he observed an emotional attachment towards the hysterics he analyzed - Freud read, in addition to the unconscious of the hysterics, his own unconscious, displayed by a sudden affect for his analysands (Felman 1987:23). Thus our unconscious is not only read in our own actions, but also in the way which we ourselves read others - we read them through The Other.

“The unconscious is the discourse of The Other” (Felman 1987:122) is a famous Lacan quote, and can lead to the conclusion that Lacan’s definition of the unconscious equates that it, in continuation of the reciprocity of the psychoanalytical reading, is itself a language. This language travels through The Other, which can best be described as the third in the traditionally binary discourse, and in its journey becomes “inmixed” with The Other, and thus returns in a somewhat altered state (Felman 1987:61f). That is how we can observe our own unconscious, as Freud did when he attempted to analyze his hysterical women and finding his language returning in an altered state.

Not only does Lacan differ from Freud in classifying the unconscious as a language, he also claims that the unconscious is “(...) not simply a forgotten or rejected bag of instincts” (Felman 1987:123), but instead the rejection of symbols or signifiers, whose original libidinal meaning is displaced onto other signifiers (ibid). It is through the repetition of displaced symbolic media that we find unconscious desire manifested, governing the subject’s life without him being aware of the meaning or pattern they structure (Felman 1987:43), and the unconscious itself is thus a “(...)
radical castration of the mastery of consciousness, which turns out to be forever incomplete, illusory and self-deceptive” (Felman 1987:57).

The unconscious as a language of signifiers differs from Freud’s definition of the unconscious as the creative force behind our dreams, and Lacan quite explicitly states that he does not consider the unconscious a “(...) romantic unconscious of imaginative creation. It is not the locus of the divinities of the night” (Lacan in Felman 1987:58). This, in turn, proves to be a major point in the differences between Felman and Bonaparte, as Bonaparte treats Poe's stories as a direct consequence of his supposed mental illness, while Felman opposes this method of reading.

2.2.2 Important Terms

When speaking of the signifier in Lacanian reading it is important to note that the signifier itself is merely a reference to something else, either a displacement or a signifier of the absence of another object. The signified, however, is the meaning of what is being referred to, and a signifier in itself carries only enough meaning to provide a link to either a signified, or another signifier, which would result in a signifying chain. Lacan states that, while the signified and the signifier are very different from one another, they are not entirely distinct, and they can be symbolized by two gravitational pulls pulling in opposite directions, but whose source or center is indistinguishable (Felman 1987:65).

However, it is not entirely simple knowing when something is a signifier or a signified. For example, you can look up the word “bottle” in a dictionary and find the word “container” as an explanation - but what have you found? Surely not the sole meaning of the word “bottle”, as container can also be looked up in the same dictionary, providing new words which can, again, be looked up. Thus, a dictionary contains signifiers leading to an endless signifying chain. However, while each of these signifiers leads to other signifiers, they may also be of help in determining the meaning or the signified, although never through direct means. A signifier does not lead directly to a signified, but it can aid you in discovering the signified (Felman 1987). Lacan has been quoted saying: “The signifier does not designate what is not there, it engenders it”

Lacan designated two realms of the human psyche, namely The Symbolic and The Imaginary. One of the many Freudian terms to undergo redefinition in Lacan's work is the Oedipal Complex, and Lacan uses it as an example to explain his two realms.

The mother is the first object of the child’s narcissistic attachment, the first object in which the child mirrors itself, the first object for the child’s self-love (Felman 1987:104). This relationship is dualistic in its essence, and can be comprehended as a sort of exchangeability of the self and the other. This is the dualistic realm of The Imaginary, allowing for projection of images from the “inside” to the “outside”, which Lacan calls the dual order of The Imaginary (Felman 1987:111). British psychoanalyst Melanie Klein described projection as “(...) the equation between bad objects and their substitutes” (Felman 1987:115), which is what Lacan thinks constitutes The Imaginary.

The Symbolic is described in the Oedipal regard as the first authoritative “no” coming from the father, the “no” of incest prohibition, the denial of the child’s love towards the mother. The Symbolic is the introduction of a third, a castration of the child’s original desire towards the mother and an introduction to the Symbolic Order, in which the renunciation of drives and the repression and substitution of objects of desire takes place (Felman 1987:104). The Symbolic is triangular where the Imaginary is dualistic in the sense that the subject now takes the position of a third;

(...) it is at once the place from which a dual relation is apprehended, the place through which it is articulated, and that which makes the subject (as, precisely, this symbolic, third place) into a linguistic signifier in a system, which thereby permits him to relate symbolically to other signifiers, that is, at once to relate to other humans and to articulate his own desire, his own unconscious, unawares (Felman’s emphasis, Felman 1987:115).

Therefore, The Symbolic is, as the comprehension of the relation between symbolic objects, also the realm in which introjection occurs, which, contrary to the dualistic projection, is triangular (Felman 1987:111). Introjection is not simply the displacement from “outside” to “inside” since it puts the subject in the third position, forming a triangular perspective of “inside, outside, myself” - thus it is not a direct absorption of an signifier, but an introjection of a linguistic relation, a mapping of the relationships between signifiers. It is “(...) the assumption by the ego of a relation between a named object and a system of named objects” (Felman’s emphasis, Felman 1987:115).

2.2.3 Felman on Bonaparte

Shoshana Felman offers a critique on Marie Bonaparte’s lengthy psychoanalysis of Edgar Allan Poe, and I find some of her points quite valid in proving the narrow scope and one-sidedness of Bonaparte’s analysis. Felman’s main point of critique lies with the Freudian axiom of the dominion of the unconscious over creative writing. As I have stated in chapter 2.1, Bonaparte considers the creation of a literary
work of fiction much akin to the creation of dreams in the night, which, to her, is the realm where the unconscious reigns supreme. Felman feels otherwise, and problematizes the claim of Poe's works being a direct extension of himself (Felman 1987:35). Bonaparte sees Poe's oeuvres as the recreations of his neuroses, and explains their grasp on their reader through a means of recognition of his pathological tendencies, tendencies which "normal" people have repressed successfully. Poe's works are, to Bonaparte, embodiments of pathology and exaggerated versions of drives and instincts in all human beings, and that explains their popularity. Bonaparte sees Poe's works as "because Poe". Felman problematizes this claim by pointing out that Bonaparte remains blind to the true object of her research, namely the poetry itself (ibid). However, it is important to note that Felman isn't an advocate of declaring Poe 100% sane or neurotic, as she remarks that the counter-critique of Poe is often just as one-sided as Bonaparte, declaring him fully in control of his writing and perfectly sane (Felman 1987:36f). Felman raises the question of why it must be either unconscious or fully conscious, instead focusing on the poetry itself and its effect on the reader.

Felman boils down the argument to this: If the main argument behind applied textual psychoanalysis is to find the very source of, and explanation for, the particular artist's poetic genius, why do people with the same neuroses as Poe not produce equally genius poetry?

Bonaparte reads much into repetition in Poe, and while it is undeniable that certain themes return in many of Poe's stories, Bonaparte and Felman disagree on the reason behind this. Bonaparte sees Poe's repetition of themes as a compulsive reproduction of the same unconscious fantasy, namely that of his desire for his dead mother. Felman inversely claims that the repetition, exemplified by the construction of Poe's The Purloined Letter, proposes a solution to a problem rather than the repetition compulsion of a neurotic (Felman 1987:44). Repetition, to Felman, serves as an insistence of difference.

Returning briefly to the nature of the signifier and the signified, Felman emphasizes another difference in Bonaparte and Lacan's reading. Lacan, in continuation of his theoretical development on Freud, focuses on analyzing the signifier, whereas Bonaparte analyzes the signified. This can, put in layman's terms, be described as Bonaparte constantly searching for the meaning behind the words, while Lacan analyzes the words themselves, not necessarily as a symbol of something else, but as a signifier: "(...) the lack of meaning (...) can and should be interpreted as such, without necessarily being transformed into meaning" (Felman 1987:45).
2.2.4 Felman’s suggestion

If we follow the thrust of Felman’s work, then the poet itself cannot serve as an object of our analysis. What, then, can we analyze, if not the poet?

Felman suggests two ways of answering this question:

Firstly, in a direct reading of the poetic text, locating signifiers of poeticity itself. A textual analysis focusing on the poetry and its effects and how its signifiers work, not in their meaning, but as signifiers of the unconscious. Secondly, to study literary history itself as an effect of Poe’s signifier. The vast amounts of contradictions in the analyses of Poe are themselves symptomatic of what Felman calls the “Poe-etic effect”, painting a picture of a specificity in Poe’s works as the locus of much literary disagreement and stating that this disagreement, and thus literary history itself, is a worthy subject of analysis (Felman 1987:50).

2.3 Derrida and Deconstruction

While Felman encourages literary history as a point of analysis, Jacques Derrida seeks to problematize the entire concept of Western Metaphysics - much in harmony with his own position as a philosopher and not a psychologist.

Jacques Derrida was a fervent critic of Lacan’s theory and especially his reading of Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Purloined Letter*. Derrida published several seminars in which he argued against Lacan’s readings, and although Lacan never officially submitted a public rebuttal to Derrida’s attacks, he did subtly refer to the critique, distancing himself from it by apparently not deeming it worthy of a reply (Muller & Richardson 1998).

The thrust of Derrida’s critique shall be covered in this chapter, but first, a few words on why Derrida’s presence in this project is warranted.

Jacques Derrida did not, unlike Bonaparte and Lacan, apply a specific theory to the material of Poe, which seems ambiguous since his deconstruction is often described as a theory (Muller & Richardson 1998:159). Derrida repeatedly stresses this fact in his writings, often as directly as: “Deconstruction is not a method and cannot be transformed into one” (Royle 2000:4). This obviously leads to the follow-up question: “What is it then?”
I shall attempt to answer said question in this chapter, but the ambiguity of trying to describe the “essence” of deconstruction will prevent me from providing a “how-to deconstruct” section, as schematizing deconstruction and applying it is what deconstruction itself tries to undo (Culler 1983:93). Derrida wants to avoid the term “method”, as it implies a predetermined specific approach and a procedural form of judgment. Someone trapped within the restrictions of a method will not be able to focus on the subject at hand - they will always adhere to the criteria of the method they are applying, unable to escape it (Royle 2000:4). Deconstruction is not a theory, instead it can be described as a point of view, a standpoint from which one observes and deconstructs the violent hierarchy of conceptual oppositions in Western Metaphysics - hierarchies such as speech over writing, male over female, presence over absence etc. (Royle 2000:5). “Deconstruction involves an overturning of this hierarchy and a reinscription or transformation of the basis on which the opposition functioned in the first place” (ibid).

Before we get ahead of ourselves (a phrase Derrida commonly used in his seminars), let us first examine Jacques Derrida’s critique of his namesake, Jacques Lacan.

**2.3.1 Derrida on Lacan**

Derrida and Lacan’s debate often hinged itself on Poe’s *The Purloined Letter*, but seeing as I am not analyzing this particular story in my project, I shall leave out the particulars of their textual disagreement and instead focus on the greater scheme of their disagreements.

Derrida’s first point of order is criticizing Lacan’s lack of intertextuality, as *The Purloined Letter* is a part of Poe’s Dupin trilogy, but Lacan treats it as a completely independent text, and his analysis omits any inconsistency which the other two texts could cause. Derrida, however, does the same, which does not necessarily render his critique invalid, but it makes him equally guilty of this omission (Muller & Richardson 1998). Neither Lacan nor Derrida acknowledge any kind of intertextuality in their analyses, which stands in stark contrast to Marie Bonaparte’s comprehensive work. Much like Lacan, Derrida deems the psychoanalytic reading invalid, as it overlooks the verbal surface, ignores what is *actually* happening in the story while trying to expose the underlying themes encrypted in the depths of the text. However, Derrida also accuses Lacan of the same mistake when he attempts to arrange the characters in *The Purloined Letter* in an Oedipal triangular scheme, but in doing so overlooking the actual narrator in the story, which would turn the triangle into a quadrangle, and thus incompatible with the standard Oedipus Complex (Royle
2000:214). In this pursuit of “psychoanalytic truth”, Lacan, according to Derrida, overlooks the actual literary properties of the text in order to extract a message and boil it down to a single meaning. This, however, is exactly what Derrida, in turn, is criticized of doing by other critics (Royle 2000:223), and thus escaping the urge to produce “meaning” from a text seems difficult - even in Derrida’s deconstructionist approach.

Lacan’s critique of Bonaparte’s predominant focus on the signified in the story is recognizable in Derrida’s critique of Lacan, only inverted. Derrida states that Lacan's insistence on the importance of the signifier and its primacy in literary analysis is an act of evasion (Muller & Richardson 1998:170) and yet another dualism in western metaphysics - the very object of Derrida’s deconstruction.

As I mentioned earlier, Derrida is very direct in his criticism of Lacan's analysis, but this does not mean that he renders it completely invalid. They both agree that the letter itself in The Purloined Letter is an allegory of the signifier (Muller & Richardson 1998:217), but it is in the way which the signifier is weighted in the hierarchy of metaphysics they disagree.

In summary, the error which Bonaparte in particular, and Lacan to a lesser degree, both commit, is the hierarchization of certain elements in their analysis:

“(...) the fallacy of psychobiography, as he [Derrida] perceives it, is to subordinate the writing to the writer, to treat ‘the work’ as merely the representation of ‘the life’. The very concept of representation relies on the ‘violent hierarchies’ that structure logocentric thought, privileging origin over derivative, signified over signifier, presence over re-presentation” (Royle 2000:228)

This, again, stresses the violent hierarchical train of thought in western metaphysics, and before we can attempt deconstructing deconstruction in order to provide an understanding of its particular point of view, we must first identify the target of its critique.

2.3.2 A Note on Metaphysics

“The finite system that organizes all interpretation, understanding, and analysis in the West is what Derrida, following Heidegger, calls ‘metaphysics’” (Muller & Richardson 1998:253).
Derrida spent much of his time trying to counter phonocentrism, the hierarchy deeming the spoken word superior to the written word in its very essence, its argument being that the written word’s sole purpose is to represent speech, thus constituting the hierarchy of speech/writing. Western metaphysics is permeated by these hierarchical dualisms, and western philosophy has traditionally claimed its statements to be structured by logic, truth and reason, and not merely bound by the language in which it is written. Thus philosophy claims a position of superiority towards writing, leaving the written word on the bottom of the hierarchy, making it the nontranscendental and physical bastard child of the spoken word (Culler 1983:85). Another aspect of phonocentrism is to put speech in a direct and natural relationship with meaning, thus claiming its superiority in rejecting the signifier, simultaneously relegating it to the realm of the written word (Culler 1983:95). The rejection of the written word traces back to Plato, claiming that writing is liable to give rise to misunderstandings because the writer is not there to explain his intentions (Royle 2000:211). This structures the hierarchy of presence/absence, or presence/re-presentation, the very essence of presence being the idea of a center, a core, an essential meaning that constitutes the word - hence the term logocentrism.

Logocentrism is an orientation in western metaphysics which emphasizes an order of meaning that exists in itself, the ideals of thought, truth, reason, logic, and “the Word” serving as its foundation and as entities which in themselves carry meaning (Culler 1983:92). Logos, Greek for word and rationality, also shares a stem with lexis in the word legō, which can mean speak, which once again serves to signify the superiority of the spoken word. Logocentrism thus entails a centering of the word, a self-sufficient ground upon which the hierarchies of western metaphysics stand, legitimizing them outside the play of the text and establishing an ultimate referent - that is, something which in all cases retains an essence and a truth. (Abrams 2009:70).

Logocentrism thus entails a favoring of meanings of words, which, in turn, enforces a hierarchy of meanings, since a word carrying one superior meaning must result in the word not meaning many other things. Derrida explains: “In a traditional philosophical opposition we have not a peaceful coexistence of facing terms but a violent hierarchy. One of the terms dominates the other (axiologically, logically, etc), occupies the commanding position” (Culler 1983:85). One such opposition would be the speech/writing hierarchy in phonocentrism, and the center of the word, or the truthful meaning of the word, is placed on top in the hierarchy. Logocentrism assumes the priority of the first word, and its supremacy is marked by the sense of the second word as a negation, disruption or complication of the first (Culler 1983:93). Derrida expresses his discontent with the speech/writing hierarchy in deeming it “the founding subterfuge of metaphysics” (Royle 2000:211), and he proposes a counter-argument stating that an analysis of a literary text is never
as simple as the hierarchy of metaphysics indicates. There is, Derrida claims, never one single meaning of a word, a word cannot exist solely on its own, and a word cannot have the superior presence logocentrism attributes to it, simply because of the unending signifying chain and its reference to and interdependence of other signifiers (Culler 1983:99).

The comprehensive nature of logocentrism in western metaphysics is perhaps difficult to appreciate fully, since it is the very basic train of thought of many great thinkers throughout history - its pervasiveness and powerful presence is described expertly in this lengthy quote from Jonathan Culler:

The enterprise of returning 'strategically,' in idealization, to an origin or to a 'priority' seen as simple, intact, normal, pure, standard, self-identical, in order then to conceive of derivation, complication, deterioration, accident, etc. All metaphysicians have proceeded thus, from Plato to Rousseau, from Descartes to Husserl: good before evil, the positive before the negative, the pure before the impure, the simple before the complex, the essential before the accidental, the imitated before the imitation, etc. This is not just one metaphysical gesture among others; it is the metaphysical exigency, the most constant, profound, and potent procedure (Culler 1983:93).

I have allowed this quote to be presented in its full length because I find it to be an accurate description of the ubiquity of logocentrism. The oppositions such as pure/impure and good/evil listed in the quote are very recognizable in the western train of thought, and the difficulty in attempting to imagine a world without these oppositions is itself a testament to the pervasive and powerful metaphysics of presence, which Derrida seeks to deconstruct.

2.3.3 Différance and Trace

I would like to provide an explanation of the word différance before we deal with deconstruction itself. Derrida coined the term to illustrate the multitude of meanings and the importance of difference in deconstruction. Différance is itself a play on words, as the ending -ance displays a double meaning, as the difference between the word "difference" meaning difference, and différance meaning to defer and to differ, is completely inaudible in speech and thus only shows itself in writing. Not only is that a jab at the speech/writing hierarchy, but it also serves to construct a new meaning of the word différance as "Difference-differing-deferring" (Culler 1983:97). Différance exemplifies the fact that no term can have one singular unequivocal meaning, as there
will always be differences and traces of differences in a literary analysis. Indeed, the word *différance* itself is a pun, and the play on words is itself a result of the play of words, indicating that there is an endless play of significances generated from the word itself (Lodge 1988:269). Jonathan Culler, characterizing the logocentric thought, explains the pun as “a sin against reason itself” (Culler 1983:91), and that is most likely exactly what Derrida intends to produce with his *différance*, a play on words that inverts the speech/writing hierarchy and challenges logocentrism by not adhering to the terra firma of the reason/irrationality hierarchy.

*Trace* is also an important term in Derrida’s analysis, since the presence/absence hierarchy in logocentrism (the presence of a narrator in speech vs. the absence of a narrator in writing) is questioned and reversed, leaving the *trace* of an object, the notable absence of an object, as a worthy point of analysis. The trace is “(...) not a presence, though it functions as a kind of ‘simulacrum’ of a signified presence” (Lodge 1988:269), which means that it can be analyzed only as an indicator, or a signifier, of something which is absent. This, in turn, will lead to more traces, and thus the journey of the infinite signifying chain begins, as the analysis of a trace will lead to a “substitution” of what the trace signifies, which once again will be replaced by another trace. This endless substitution of signs is an exercise in pursuing the elusive “signified”, the *meaning*, the ever-dominant *presence* which the absence could represent. This is an example of *différance*, as the “difference-differing-deferring” of the signifiers is exactly what is important in the analysis - as opposed to the search for the glorious and unequivocal *meaning*, which, Derrida concludes, is a doomed effort, as no sign or signifying chain can have a determinate meaning (ibid).

### 2.3.4 Deconstruction

“(…) Deconstruction is something that simply ‘happens’ in a critical reading” (Abrams 2009:72).

As I have stated throughout this chapter, Derrida did not consider deconstruction a theory or a method - and he emphasized that any such attempt to transform deconstruction into such would be its undoing. It is possible, then, that Derrida would cringe at the sight of Irene Harvey’s attempt to do just so (Muller 1988), although she admits that deconstruction is slightly different every time Derrida performs it - but the urge of attempting such a feat is hard to resist. Derrida would argue that any attempt to systematically outline the procedure of deconstruction is a symptom of the western metaphysics that permeate most writing, and attribute it to the logocentrism of finding a *truth* - the deconstructional truth - which he would likely consider an oxymoron. As the quote from Abrams’ *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (2009) states, deconstruction just “happens".
So how do we end this chapter on Derrida and his deconstruction?
I shall attempt to illustrate what deconstruction can do without insisting upon a singular method or application. I will describe some features of deconstruction without providing a step-by-step Deconstruction 101.

Derrida himself proposes a “double reading” of the given text (Muller 1988:254), and this reading takes place on two levels of the text: the declared level and the described level.
The declared level is where the author’s intentions are brought to light. According to Derrida, “(...) the writer writes in a language and in a logic whose proper system, laws, and life his discourse by definition cannot dominate absolutely” (ibid), and the declared level belongs to the laws and language that the author does control. However, in discovering what the author does control, what he does not control is made clear, and that is what belongs to the described level - what is uncontrolled by the author and what reveals the logic, systems, and laws to which he unknowingly subscribes. The reading of a text must make clear the relationship and the space between the levels of the text, and this relationship is “(...) a signifying structure that critical reading should produce” (ibid).

In this double reading of the text, one must also perform a “double writing” - and it is during this double writing that the hierarchical oppositions in western metaphysics are dealt with. As I have explained earlier, deconstruction is the antithesis of logocentrism, and double writing is the step needed to overcome this pervasive system of thought. In double writing, one must first overturn the hierarchy of the oppositions found (such as presence/absence) to be a part of the author’s writing and what he commands or does not command (Culler 1983:85). This reverses the hierarchy of western metaphysics and provides a new structure in which the cause/effect train of thought in logocentrism is also inverted, which provides a new form of analysis:

(…) deconstruction reverses the hierarchical opposition of the causal scheme. The distinction between cause and effect makes the cause an origin, logically and temporally prior. (…) the deconstruction upsets the hierarchy by producing an exchange of properties. If the effect is what causes the cause to become a cause, then the effect, not the cause, should be treated as an origin (Culler 1983:88).

However, reversing the hierarchy of the logocentric oppositions is but one step of the process in which Derrida insists that the next step is to displace the system in its entirety (Culler 1983:85). In
the inversion of the hierarchy, a new interval is exposed in the “in-between” of the inversion - the exact moment of where high is made low thus produces a new ground upon which an analysis must be undertaken (Muller 1988:168) - the ground upon which the contradictions in the text are made visible. It is in this endeavor that we can locate the incongruences that occur in the stories despite the author’s best intentions, and it is by playing on the polarity of these contradictions and the things which the writer does not control that we find room to explore the irruptive emergence of new concepts - our analysis (Muller 1988:169).

The self-negating subtext which can be found through deconstruction thus offers us an insight into that which the author does not control such as the laws he unintentionally abides by. This is, however, not the same as the Freudian school of psychoanalysis claims to find “hidden” in the text. We are not reading Poe’s neuroses in deconstruction, we are analyzing metaphysical laws and logocentric thoughts which tell us about the text. It is through these numerous measures that deconstruction can be helpful in literary analysis by providing the analyst with the means of intervening in the vast system of metaphysics. It is through these steps that we can observe how a text contradicts itself, and how these contradictions hold meaning. It is through this contradiction that a text is said to “deconstruct itself”, thus giving us a better understanding of how Abrams can say that deconstruction simply happens (Abrams 2009:72).

On a final note, I will admit to having described deconstruction in a “stereotypical” fashion, describing the common traits and features of this point of view that is not a theory. This approach is not optimal for showing the complexity and diversity of the approaches deconstruction offers, but it is necessary for a project such as this to provide a basic understanding of deconstruction - just as Irene Harvey, whom I mentioned earlier, did.
Chapter 3: Poe and The 1800s

This chapter will provide a brief biography of Edgar Allan Poe. This will serve to provide an understanding of the Freudian analysis by Marie Bonaparte, which I have described in chapter 2.1. As Bonaparte treats Poe’s works as an extension of his unconscious, it is important to understand which events in his life could have led to such emotional trauma which she attributes to him.

In the second part of this chapter, I shall account for the literary movements in America during Poe’s life.

This chapter will not concern itself with the gender roles of the 1800s, as Chapter 4 is dedicated specifically to that topic. If this chapter seems to ignore or omit any explanations on gender roles in Poe’s time, it is because I am saving them for their own chapter.

3.1 The Life and Death of Edgar Allan Poe

Edgar Allan Poe was born on the 19th of January 1809 to actors David Poe Jr. and Elizabeth Arnold Hopkins Poe. David Poe had tendencies towards an obsessive abuse of alcohol, much like Edgar Poe would succumb to later on in his life. David Poe left the family right after Edgar Poe’s sister, Rosalie, was born. Marie Bonaparte raises doubt about the true paternity of Rosalie, claiming that Edgar Allan Poe’s infantile memories of another man conquering his mother influenced his writing. Her father or not, David Poe died of consumption a year later. This left Elizabeth Poe alone in supporting three children, however, Poe’s older brother Henry was sent to a relative, leaving Edgar and Rosalie with the struggling actress Elizabeth, whose health was failing already. She faced the same fate as David Poe, dying from consumption one month before Edgar’s third birthday.

Edgar Poe was taken in by the childless Allan family in Richmond, Virginia, he was, however, never officially adopted. John Allan was the head of the family, and his wife, Frances Allan, quickly became the object of Edgar Poe’s affections. Apart from being an orphan like Poe, she also physically resembled Poe’s mother in her slender, delicate build and her proneness to sickness. The Allan family travelled to England in 1815 on a business venture, and Edgar Poe attended different boarding schools during their visit. They returned to Virginia five years later following the failure of John Allan’s business in England.
Poe’s relationship with John Allan quickly turned sour, and their disagreements and angry letters to each other would persist for many years to come. John Allan would complain that Poe felt “not a Spark or affection for us nor a particle of gratitude” (Kennedy 2001:22).

The young Edgar Allan Poe would write many poems to the local Richmond girls, but his feelings were especially strong towards Jane Stanard, the mother of one of his friends. This would, to Marie Bonaparte, probably be an indication of Poe already trying to fulfill his desire for his dead mother. However, Jane Stanard died suddenly in 1824, which grieved Poe deeply.

John Allan inherited a significant fortune and several tobacco plantations, slaves included, from a deceased uncle, enabling him to purchase a mansion and perhaps sparking Poe’s interest in becoming a part of the Southern Gentry. John Allan was, however, loath to share his new-found fortune with Poe, and their financial issues were a returning theme in their disagreements. The first of such examples is John Allan refusing to subsidize Poe’s education at the University of Virginia where he was enrolled, and Poe was forced to quit the university after he had accumulated a vast debt from drinking and gambling, which John Allan refused to pay. Poe was then forced to work for John Allan, but the relationship between them soon made it unbearable, and Poe resolved to leave Richmond behind, scolding Allan for his mistreatment of him and lack of affection. Poe did, in spite of his rebukes toward John Allan, try to loan some money for his trip to Boston, which Allan declined.

Poe moved to Boston, where he went under different pseudonyms to avoid his university creditors, and he enlisted in the army as Edgar A. Perry. While in the army, Poe continued to write letters to John Allan, and even though Poe received commendations for his performance in the army, he sought John Allan’s help to get an early discharge.

After a long illness, Frances Allan (fragile and sylph-like just like Poe’s biological mother) died on February 28, 1829. This was Poe’s third loss of a mother-like figure that he loved deeply, and her death left Poe stricken with grief. Poe subsequently got a discharge from the army and traveled around America trying to get his poems published. His homecoming for Frances’ funeral seemingly mended the broken bond with John Allan, who, however, refused Poe’s request of covering any would-be losses from Poe’s publishing endeavors.

Poe entered the Army Academy at West Point and quickly reached a reputation of a first-class satirist among the cadets. However, John Allan refused to pay for Poe’s schooling, and Poe soon
found himself indebted once again. Forced to leave the army on a dishonorable discharge, Poe traveled to New York to find a publisher, since his relation to John Allan had once again turned bitter. John Allan had now remarried, and the possibility of a legitimate heir threatened Poe’s outlook of a large inheritance. Poe continued to beg for money, and Allan continued to reject him. Poe then traveled to Baltimore, where he resided with his aunt Marie Poe Clemm and her daughter Virginia. Poe was reunited with his brother, who unfortunately was wracked by alcoholism and consumption. The two brothers apparently shared a strong connection (like the siblings in his tale *The Fall of the House of Usher*) despite their separation from infancy. However, consumption claimed another of Poe’s relatives, as Henry Poe died soon after their reunion. Poe’s poverty and wretchedness lead to him sending many apologetic letters to John Allan, but to no avail. Poe got a few of his early works published, but the income from these publishings were very meager. While Poe did win a competition in the *Saturday Visiter* for best tale of fiction, he managed to insult the editor, thus derailing the would-be publishing of many of his short stories.

John Allan died in 1834, omitting Poe completely from his will. Poe continued to get stories published, and in March 1835 he published *Berenice*, which supposedly left many readers shocked, forcing Poe to promise that he would “not sin quite so egregiously again” (Kennedy 2001:34). Poe moved back to Richmond, Virginia in 1836, and Marie and Virginia Clemm moved with him after a while. Poe then proceeded to marry his young cousin Virginia, who was only 13 years old by the time. Poe became employed by the Richmond-based *Messenger*, where his tales and sharp editorial notes earned him some fame in the literary world.

The couple, Virginia and Edgar Allan Poe, maintained a chaste relationship for some years, according to J. Gerald Kennedy’s biography of Poe. However, Bonaparte claims in her comprehensive analysis of Poe that impotence was the reason. Meanwhile, as Poe continued to work for the *Messenger*, his alcoholism increased and that caused his editor to consider firing him, which did happen eventually. This caused the Poe family to move to New York in search of new working opportunities. They subsequently moved to Philadelphia, and Poe got his only novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, published in 1838. In September 1839, *Ligeia* was published in the journal *American Museum*. Poe became co-editor of the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, where he continued his savage reviewing style. He also got his first collection of tales published. After being fired from the *Gentleman’s Magazine*, Poe contemplated starting his own publication, the *Penn Magazine*, a dream which remained unfulfilled due to illness and poverty. In 1841, he published his first tale of ratiocination, *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, thus inventing the detective story.
Virginia fell seriously ill in 1842, which left Poe grief-stricken and resorting to alcohol. His tale “The Gold-Bug” won a 100$ prize, which also lead to a theatrical performance of the tale. Poe was, however, still on the verge of poverty, and Virginia’s health was continually on the decline. They continued to move around America, and Poe got his much acclaimed poem The Raven published in 1845. Both Poe and Virginia were afflicted with consumption, and Virginia died in 1847, the fourth woman in Poe’s life to be stolen from him by death. Poe resorted to more drinking in the wake of her death, which coincided with a literary standstill apart from his poem Ulalume, which was likely about his visits to Virginia’s tomb (Kennedy 2001: 55). He continued to move around, conflicted with his mourning of Virginia and drunken debaucheries as well as a flirtation with Sarah Helen Whitman, another poet, which lead him to propose marriage to her. She did not accept, however, as rumors of Poe’s drunkenness made her think twice. Things did improve drastically for Poe as the wealthy Mrs. Shelton accepted his marriage proposal, providing him with the time and finances to finally establish his own periodical magazine. Alas, this was not to be, and while the mysterious circumstances of his death in 1849 are not entirely certain, he was found drunk in the street, succumbing four days later in the hospital on October 7th 1849.

3.2 Poe’s Contemporaries

Edgar Allan Poe lived and wrote in the very cradle of what would become the American literary canon. The numerous newspapers and magazines in which he invested so much time were all examples of the desire for something truly American, something which could liberate New England from the clutches of European influence (Ruland & Bradbury 1991:61f). One very significant influence on American writing was the European Romantic Period, of which America had its own, yet different version a generation later. The Romantic Period in America is often placed from 1830 until the eruption of the Civil War in 1861, but the first prominent piece of truly American Romantic literature came with Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Nature in 1836. Leading up to this period of independence and nationalism were many laments of the continuing sway held by European poets, Philip Freneau exemplifying it by enviously stating:

“Thrice happy Dryden, who could meet Some rival bard in every street!” (Ruland and Bradbury 1991:63)

Philip Freneau, who would often be referred to as “the Father of American Poetry” (Ruland & Bradbury 1991:70), apparently mourns the scarcity of poets in his country, grudgingly admitting to the vast cultural heritage in Europe. However, small steps towards an independent American style
of writing were seen in Freneau’s work, and following Freneau as a major American writer was William Cullen Bryant, who, somewhat in tradition with European Romanticism, claimed that poetry was a place in which nature’s meanings were very clear and unchanging, and that the poet himself remained invisible in his work:

“Poetry lifts us into a sphere where self-interest cannot exist, and where the prejudices that perplex our everyday life can hardly enter. It restores to us our unperverted feelings, and leaves us at liberty to compare the issues of life with our unsophisticated notions of good and evil” (Ruland and Bradbury 1991:75)

Bryant was a true romantic in his both vivid and concrete descriptions of nature, yet he had a penchant for establishing a moral universal in his poems, and thus his writing style is commonly attributed to pre-romance rather than the American Romantic proper (Ruland and Bradbury 1991:76). This did not, however, diminish his fame, neither in Europe nor in America, and Edgar Allan Poe claimed his poetical reputation to be greater than that of any American poet, “both at home and abroad” (Ruland & Bradbury 1991: 77).

It is from this budding romanticism that the American Literature divided into the darker romanticism of Edgar Allan Poe and the Transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Charles Brockden Brown began exploring a contemporary psychology that went beyond reason and embraced the strange, something which Edgar Allan Poe took to yet another level (Ruland & Bradbury 1991:89). Brown’s quarrel was not as much with the superiority of the English literary movement as his literary colleagues, but more so with the remnants of Puritanism in contemporary American literature (Ruland and Bradbury 1991:90).

James Fenimore Cooper was another predecessor to the period dubbed the American Renaissance, in the most literal sense of the word “rebirth”, but the major poets of the renaissance themselves were, amongst others, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman and Edgar Allan Poe. However, some argue that rebirth is an insufficient word, as it is a new beginning more in the sense of an actual birth, thus resulting in the American Naissance.

3.3 Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism, of which Emerson was the most famous advocate, sought an alternative to the reason-driven thought of the French Revolution. Insisting upon the divinity of the Soul or Spirit, the
transcendentalist movement valued the self and consciousness of the self, promoting inward spiritual promptings and a link from the self to the entire universe. Transcendentalism was inspired by the organicist thought of the English Romanticism, but it quickly separated itself from Romanticism in Emerson's book *Nature* (1836). God had, according to Emerson, made nature “(...) not as a mere commodity but as a hieroglyph of His spiritual world. Nature was not merely a challenge to man's powers of domination and exploitation; it spoke directly to the self, to the individual mind and soul” (Ruland and Bradbury 1991:119). The transcendentalist, Emerson explained, “believes in miracle, in the perpetual openness of the human mind to new influx of light and power; he believes in inspiration, and in ecstasy” (ibid).

Transcendentalism was, like the general train of thought in the American Romanticism, concerned with the independence from Europe, but Emerson’s road to sovereignty was a journey inwards. Emerson’s ideal self was ethically opposed to selfishness, and the inner quest for merging with what he called “the Over-Soul”, or the transcendent self, came from seeing through the familiar and ordinary which enabled reaching the redemptive reality which was to be found in transcending the logical and essentialist frames surrounding man (Ruland and Bradbury 1991:120,123). One would not search for the spirit itself in transcendentalism, because the Spirit already existed within the subject. One would instead search for the spiritual import in all things natural and good, for the value and beauty lay beyond the surface of the world surrounding man; America. How one would go about finding these things required musings and a searching of the soul, because the fixed sign, the true *signified*, did not exist in transcendentalism, and no one religious symbol could ever carry one specific meaning (Ruland and Bradbury 1991:123). Transcendentalism thus concerns itself with transcending the limited scope of reason, achieving a higher self and a bond with the cosmos and the universe:

(...) banks and tariffs, the newspaper and caucus, Methodism and Unitarianism, are flat and dull to dull people, but rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy and the temple of Delphi, and are as swiftly passing away (Ruland and Bradbury 1991:125).

In other words, if you know how to look, *oracles* are all around us.
Chapter 4: Gender

4.1 Gendered Ideals in the Nineteenth Century

Gender roles in the 1800s were obviously very different from the trends we see today. The public space and the environment of the home were two very different things, and one of the major flows in society incited a stark separation between the two. What became known as the public sphere and the domestic sphere were separated not only in physical space, but also in gender. The domestic sphere was the area in which the female, whether she was a daughter, wife or mother, was situated. The woman’s “job”, for this was often the only job she ought to have, was to ensure tranquility and well-being in the home. The woman was bound to the domestic sphere, but also possessed a role as a domesticator (Kennedy 2001:130). While the man had his affairs to deal with in the public sphere, his self-made mantle was supposed to be left at the doorstep upon returning to the home, for the “Angel in the House”, as the female ideal was dubbed, upheld certain morals and values which belonged to her sphere. These ideals were set forth by what was known as The Cult of True Womanhood (also known as The Cult of Domesticity), a movement insisting on the four cardinal virtues of the female: Piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. What is quite interesting is that the idea of separate spheres was an idea put forth by male writers as an “advice” in women’s magazines, obviously suggested for the purpose of catering to men’s needs (Kennedy 2001:139). Whether one looks at the idea of the domestic sphere as the domain of the female or the “voluntary” incarceration of a subdued gender, the fact remains that the public sphere was primarily the domain of the man.

The realm of the man consisted also of ideals, albeit not in the gospel-like shape of the four female cardinal virtues. The male ideals were those of monetary success and renown, and the public sphere was largely patriarchal in embodiment and representation, valuing such areas of expertise as law, politics, publishing, construction and work in general. “In the nineteenth century, middle-class men’s work was vital to their sense of who they were. (...) If a man was without ‘business’, he was less than a man” (Rotundo in Kennedy 2001:158). This attitude permeated the sense of masculinity in the 1800s, and Edgar Allan Poe had some trouble in fitting this description, although it was not for the lack of trying. His numerous attempts at founding his own literary magazine can be viewed as him wanting to become a respectable self-made man, who can return to the domestic sphere with a reputation and a fortune to show for it. Poe perhaps wanted to overcome his “father” by becoming self-made, since he in effect had no father to “make” him, and John Allan perpetually refused aiding him, just as Poe could not get other wealthy gentlemen to fund his businesses. Poe
wanted to be self-made, but he needed others to make him self-made, which would supposedly negate the “self-made” part of being a man, yet Poe never seemed to think (at least judging from his actions) that asking for help was a sign of weakness. His struggle for renown and wealth was very symptomatic for the male ideal in Poe’s time, yet Poe also seemed to share some resentment towards this archetypal male model, if his works of fiction can be interpreted as an indication of such an ideal. *The Man That Was Used Up* (1839) provided a critique of the army life and the model of manhood and prestige it presented. Also *The Business Man* (1840), which lashed out at the “self-made” man apparently not being self-made at all, but merely a fraud and a pestilence to others, never embarking in honest work (Kennedy 2001:158). It appears that Poe did not blindly admire these male ideals, but it did not keep him from trying to attain said ideals.

The question which we must always ask ourselves when presented with such a rigid framework of an entire epoch in American history is of course: were things truly this black and white? Apart from being a jab at the slavery still taking place in America at the time, this question also concerns the gender roles of society in the 1800s. The above outline presented to provide an idea of how society was divided is only true until the first exception is encountered; one such exception could very well be Margaret Fuller, whose *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845) could be considered the first American contribution to the feminist movement. It is impossible to claim that the entirety of society adhered to the bi-spherical division between men and women, and these ideals were surely only held in high regard by those who sought to (or encouraged to) follow them. Margaret Fuller’s book is a perfect example of different values and ideals in nineteenth-century America, and the vast amount of quality literature composed by women writers only serves to strengthen this point. Poe, in one of his savage reviews, criticized Margaret Fuller for using herself as the standard for the average American woman, whereas Poe estimated the total amount of women like Fuller to be one or two dozen in the entire world (Kennedy 2001:132). However, it was also entirely possible to be a female writer and still advocate the virtuous feminine ideals, as Frances Osgood, with whom Poe had a public flirtation in the periodicals, exemplified in her poem *The Triumph of the Spiritual over the Sensual* (1842), which is very much in tune with both transcendentalism and the classic virtues of the woman (Kennedy 2001:130f).

4.2 A Note on Modern Day Gender Roles

As I have already made clear in my delimitation (Chapter 1.5), I do not intend to clarify the complex history and evolution of gender roles and perspectives. The feminist movement has indeed had a revolutionizing impact on the way today’s modern view of gender has been shaped, and its roots
trace back to the likes of Margaret Fuller and the even earlier Mary Wollstonecraft, but the journey from domesticity to debate, while interesting and worthy of a great deal of attention, does not concern this project. While the initial motivation for this project was sparked by the thought of "why does this move me so, even though it seems so unequal gender-wise?", I do not mean to discuss the larger ramifications of a seemingly gendered approach. The impact of Poe's works is itself evident in the substantial amount of critique and discussion surrounding his works and his character(s), and I do not find it necessary for me to further explore how and where Poe is situated in the scheme of modern-day gender roles.

I shall attempt to stay clear of any theoretical entanglements regarding gender, and thus I will not include any theorists for specifically discussing gender roles, as I do not aim to include for example a post-structuralist, feminist or radical feminist theoretical perspective. This project is, first and foremost, about Edgar Allan Poe's stories, and their display on gender, and not on how modern-day gender theorists may or may not view his stories.

As chapter 4 has stated so far, western culture was indeed embodying and providing hierarchies of gender much like those deconstruction aims to deconstruct. Before we engage in the analysis of Poe's stories, I will include a section on gender in deconstruction, not to ally myself with modern-day theorists (which I have spent 4.2 arguing against), but to determine what gender, in literary analysis, means.

4.3 Deconstructing Gender

As stated numerous times in Chapter 2.3, deconstruction dismantles the logocentric hierarchies in western metaphysics by inverting and displacing them. The one hierarchy to rule them all in gender roles is the male/female hierarchy typical of patriarchal societies of which the west has traditionally consisted. What does it mean to deconstruct this hierarchy?

One could argue that the power structures and roles in the story which we analyze, for instance an Edgar Allan Poe story, must be inverted, as this would follow the thought of deconstruction in Derrida’s mode of analysis. However, I believe another inversion of hierarchies is in order, not necessarily because it holds primacy over the story-bound inversion, but because it is one which is often left out: the reader.
The American academic and feminist Carolyn Heilbrun explains Kate Millet’s approach towards deconstructing the gendered reader:

Her aim is to wrench the reader from the vantage point he has long occupied, and force him to look at life and letters from a new coign. (...) For the first time we have been asked to look at literature as women; we, men, women and Ph.D’s, have always read it as men. (...) We are rooted in our vantage point and require transplanting (Culler 1983:49).

Reading as a woman instead of reading as a man must, according to Millet, serve the purpose of uprooting us from a position which men and women have traditionally occupied, but the meaning of the phrase itself warrants discussion: how does one read as a female? What does it entail? Shoshana Felman poses similar questions: “Is it enough to be a woman in order to speak as a woman? Is ‘speaking as a woman’ determined by some biological condition or by a strategic, theoretical position, by anatomy or by culture?” (Culler 1983:49). These questions are relevant because what a woman is, and what it means to read like one, varies across time and culture. Reading as a woman today and as a woman in the 1800s surely must be different from one another, and the entire discussion of gender as a biological or sociological phenomenon is not one which I wish to undertake - I will, however, stress my belief that reading as a woman cannot be reduced to one particular way of reading. The fact that the hypothesis of reading as a woman as opposed to a man is supposed to be a different way of reading implies certain prejudice towards what it means to be a woman, and that it definitely cannot be the same as reading as a man. A reading with an inverted male/female hierarchy is therefore something else than a regular reading if we accept the notion that such a patriarchal hierarchy exists, which I think feminism has ultimately proven and subsequently tried to change.

Edgar Allan Poe’s dismissal of Margaret Fuller as an anomaly is quite typical for the patriarchal society and its norm of reading, as the woman is presented as the abnormal, the Other, the second sex, while the male sex holds primacy over them. Inverting the male/female hierarchy in western metaphysics shows what feminism is often perceived as: the retort of the Other. The female reading must thus be that which is not male, but this again depends on the flows and trends of society and the contextual factors that constitute the male and female ideals in society. Clearly Poe, in labeling Fuller an extraordinary case, embodies the male gaze as he essentially claims: Fuller is not a “normal” woman, because the “normal” woman does not possess her attributes. The normal woman is one who adheres to the norms of society, which, incidentally, were put forth by men.
This, I think, leads us to the crucial finding of the inverting of the male/female hierarchy; by inverting this hierarchy, we have found a discrepancy in the way we perceive male and female readings:

(...), what it does above all is to reverse the usual situation in which the perspective of a male critic is assumed to be sexually neutral, while a feminist reading is seen as a case of special pleading and an attempt to force the text into a predetermined mold (Culler 1983:55).

In inverting this hierarchy we have also found a means of analyzing important traits in a text simply by deciphering the gaze of the reader and the traditional points of view, which we must be aware of if we are to successfully displace this hierarchy.

The above is an example of how destruction can show hidden qualities in the author’s work, for example in showing the deconstruction of Poe’s brief criticism of Fuller to be a symptom of western metaphysics in saying: “Your status is invalid because you are not a man (or a male construct)”.
Chapter 5: Analysis

In this chapter, I provide a textual analysis of my two core texts *Ligeia* and *Berenice*. During my analysis I will draw upon the various theories and points of view that I have sketched in the previous chapters, but I will maintain my personal stance on Poe’s stories as well, letting the theories remain a supplement to my own analysis and not a step-by-step guide.

In *Berenice* and *Ligeia*, I will advocate for a reading which I find differs from anything that I have ever read about Edgar Allan Poe’s females in these stories, and this shall also be my interpretation of his feminine ideal for these two stories. As I have previously stated, I don’t believe it possible to construct an all-encompassing theory of Poe’s oeuvre, as it is as multifaceted as it is brilliant. My analysis shall underline the themes and differences which will provide material for the discussion (Chapter 6) later in the project.

For now, of my readings of *Ligeia* and *Berenice* I will, like I ended my chapter on transcendentalism (Chapter 3.3), say this: if you know how to look, oracles are all around us.

5.1 *Ligeia*

To start off this analysis, I will account for what is actually happening in the story, which I find to be the most prudent starting point for an analysis. This entails a summary of the story which also serves to highlight the various points I will elaborate upon afterwards.

The very beginning of *Ligeia* is allegedly a Joseph Glanvill quote, which reads:

> 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 (CTP:256).

The importance of this quote shall become clear later in the story, where I shall elaborate upon its meaning.

In *Ligeia*, we first meet the narrator pondering how, when, and where he met the lovely lady Ligeia who he explains came to be “(...) my friend and my betrothed, and who became the partner of my
studies, and finally the wife of my bosom” (CTP:256). The order of this enumeration indicates that the narrator and Ligeia came to know each other over a long period of time, and only finally did she become his wife.

As is quite typical for a Poe tale, we are regaled with a lengthy and detailed description of the case in point, in this instance, the lady Ligeia. She is described as “tall, somewhat slender and, in her latter days, even emaciated” (CTP:256). This emaciation, a feature of the disease of consumption which haunted Poe by claiming loved ones numerous times throughout his life, is a feature which Ligeia attains during her illness, which eventually claims her life. After we learn of her demise, the narrator minutely describes her facial features, using an interesting set of adjectives and comparisons in describing her, namely signs (or signifiers) of the divine: Her forehead of a “majesty so divine”, her mouth is “the triumph of all things heavenly”, her teeth glancing back “every ray of the holy light which fell upon them”, her chin has “the contour which the god Apollo revealed but in a dream” (all CTP:257). This must be conscious on Poe’s part, instilling within us so early in the story an image of Ligeia as something more than merely a human being. This is further enforced by the narrator’s description of her eyes, which were her most prominent feature: They were “far larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race” and “even fuller than the fullest of the gazelle eyes”, causing the narrator to burst out “Those eyes! those large, those shining, those divine orbs! they became to me twin stars of Leda, and I to them devoutest of astrologers” (All CTP:257f). Once more, her traces of divinity are emphasized in the text, leaving us with the impression of Ligeia as an almost supernatural being. But Ligeia is not only physically astonishing - her knowledge surpasses anyone, both man and woman, that the author has ever met: “I said her knowledge was such as I have never known in woman - but where breathes the man who has traversed, and successfully, all the wide areas of moral, physical and mathematical science?” (CTP:259) The narrator pledges himself to her teachings in their studies of “the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation” (CTP:259), and she bequeathes her knowledge to him. This relationship, and the phrasing used to describe it, is likely meant to astound the reader, since the superiority of her knowledge, even in comparison to that of men, is something otherworldly, much like her appearance. It is obvious, here, that a woman outsmarting a man is not something which is considered common, in fact, it is so rare that the narrator must explicitly convey it to the reader - a sign of the inequality of gender roles considered “normal” in Poe’s time.

Alas, Ligeia’s health is diminishing, and soon she is bedridden and obviously ill. Her eyes no longer observe and guide the narrator’s studies, and her fingers grow wan and transparent while blue veins swell on her forehead in addition to the emaciation I’ve mentioned earlier. Like all the
important loved one’s Poe lost in his life, Ligeia appears to suffer from consumption, and one can understand Marie Bonaparte’s idea that Poe is reconstructing the death of his mother, who must have looked much like Ligeia in her dying hours.

As the end of Ligeia’s life draws near, she asks the narrator to read a poem which she wrote not long ago. This poem is actually one of Edgar Allan Poe’s poems which he decided to include in the story, and its title is *The Conqueror Worm*. In the poem, we witness a scene of veiled and crying angels beholding a stage on which mimes are performing, seemingly controlled by vast formless things that control the scenery. The mimes engage in madness, sin and horror. All of a sudden, a writhing worm appears and eats all the mimes. The curtain comes down, and the angels confirm that this is the tragedy “Man” and its hero, the Conqueror Worm.

After this poem has been read to her, Ligeia shrieks at God and questions why it must be so, repeating the Joseph Glanvill quote: “Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will” (CTP:262). I shall return to the true meaning of the poem at a later time in this analysis.

The narrator, destroyed with grief after Ligeia’s death, roams the lands and eventually buys an abbey in England and decorates it elaborately from the inside, especially a pentagonal room in the spire. He becomes an addict of opium and says it affects his actions, immediately after which he reveals that he marries Lady Rowena Trevanion, of Tremaine, who, with her fair hair and blue eyes is quite the opposite of the unforgotten Ligeia. The marriage and their subsequent months of living take place in the pentagonal room in the abbey’s tower - a room which the narrator has decked out in a most gruesome way, almost like that of a tomb. There are even sarcophagi in each end of the room, yet still the narrator and Rowena never leave this place. Their marriage is a passionless one from the moment they are wed, the narrator sure both of his wife’s lack of affections towards him, and the fact that he “loathed her with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man” (CTP:264). Rowena’s health begins to deteriorate much like Ligeia’s did, and her transition from living to corpse commences, although it seemingly spans over a long period of time as she falls ill, convalesces, and then falls increasingly ill over and over.

Rowena’s illness comes to include what the narrator considers hallucinations, which leads her to claim that she sees movements and hears whispers in the eerie chamber. The narrator dismisses these as symptoms of her illness, yet, as he hastens across the room to fetch Rowena some wine, he, too, sees something inexplicable on the floor, “a faint, indefinite shadow of angelic aspect - such as might be fancied for the shadow of a shade” (CTP:265). He attributes this to the
immoderate dose of opium of which he was feeling the effects, and he continues to fetch Rowena her wine. However, after he has handed her the goblet of wine, he perceives some very gentle foot-fall on the carpet (a description which fits Ligeia’s aforementioned elastic and graceful footfall), after which four mysterious red drops of liquid are poured into Rowena’s cup. Oblivious to the unknown ingredient in her wine, Rowena eagerly empties the cup, and quickly becomes fatally ill, dying not long after.

The narrator is left alone with Rowena’s bandaged corpse, which, like many characters in Poe’s stories, just won’t stay dead. While the narrator is musing over his affection for Ligeia, he suddenly hears a sigh from Rowena’s body, and as he examines the corpse he finds a renewed flushing of her cheeks and the return of color to her skin. Instead of immediately calling for aid (as the servants are apparently out of earshot), he tends to her body himself, only to find life once again ebbing out from it. As Rowena once again appears to be dead, he returns to his opium dreams, only to be disrupted by another soft sob from Rowena, a slight revivification, and another death. This process repeats itself with growing intensity all through the night, during which the narrator abandons hope of aiding her and resorts to merely observing her many little deaths from afar. Her final revival, during which the dawn appears to break, leaves her with enough strength to walk and stagger to the middle of the room, where the narrator, frozen in terror, observes her features and stumbles upon many qualities of her face which aren’t quite akin to the deceased Rowena. As her hair emerges from beneath the bandages, it is raven-black instead of the blond hair of Rowena, and the eyes of the angelic Ligeia are looking back at the narrator!

5.1.1 Sexuality in Ligeia

With the eyes of Ligeia once again emphasized, this time as the very finale of the story, I find it worthwhile to look at the way Poe uses Ligeia’s eyes in the story. The narrator has an interesting way of phrasing whenever he is describing Ligeia’s eyes, describing the distinctness of her large eyes “at intervals - in moments of intense excitement”, “at such moments was her beauty - in my heated fancy thus it appeared perhaps” (CTP:257). Continuing his description, she “was the most violently a prey to the tumultuous vultures of stern passion”, which was when the narrator truly experienced “the miraculous expansion of those eyes which at once so delighted and appalled me (...) and by the fierce energy (...) of the wild words which she habitually uttered” (both CTP:259). All of these description hint at a passion which could just as easily take place during a sexual act, and I find the narrator’s discourse to continually hint at the sexual undertones in his and Ligeia’s relationship. This, by itself, is not extraordinary, since they are a married couple and thus sex shouldn’t be off the table. However, the way in which the narrator constantly avoids mentioning the
sexual act explicitly is something which I recognize in Marie Bonaparte’s analysis of Poe - the repressed sexuality and the distancing from sex. According to Bonaparte, Poe’s veiling of sexuality is because of an unresolved Oedipal complex and his mother’s early death, which lead him to desire his mother sexually, thus distorting his sexual drives into an incestuous longing for his mother. This repressed sexual drive could, if one accepts the premises for Bonaparte’s analysis, be the reason why Poe almost never includes sex between the characters in his stories, even though they often have a romantic relationship. Bonaparte goes as far as claiming that the alleged sexual impotence of the author is obvious in his stories, and the indications towards sexual acts are thus always distanced from the narrator (whom she often equates with Poe) because of Poe’s own impotence. Thus sexual acts are displaced as intense scrutiny of Ligeia’s eyes in the narrator’s heated fancy, and her beauty in the wild words she would utter, presumably during intercourse. The narrator even uses “our long intercourse” (CTP:259) as a description of their relationship, and the sexual undercurrent remains strong throughout the story. Even Rowena’s many little deaths and revivifications appear with sobs, sighs and flushing of cheeks, enabling the reading of her little deaths as little orgasms as well. This connection is also made by Bent Sørensen in his book Passion Spent (2008) in which he analyzes, among other Poe stories, Ligeia in great depth, also taking note of the “gentle probings into the realm of Eros in Poe” (Sørensen 2008:129). Where Bonaparte finds her point of analysis in Poe’s psyche, Sørensen lists a number of axioms which constitute the structure of Poe’s love stories, a category in which I would also place Ligeia.

Continuing with Bonaparte’s train of thought, the way which the narrator expresses both being delighted and appalled by Ligeia’s passionate love can also be interpreted as a reluctance towards her sexuality, a conflict in Poe’s mind which snuck its way into the story, thus causing the narrator to display the same neuroses that lurk in Poe’s unconscious. The equation between Ligeia and Poe’s mother Elizabeth on Bonaparte’s part is not entirely far-fetched, as both were slender ladies with raven-black hair, just as they were both to suffer the same fate in death by consumption. As Ligeia is apparently brought back to life by her sheer force of will, the Freudian analysis would explain this as a displacement of Poe’s wish for his dead mothers return/resurrection, and the biographical approach of Bonaparte finds many examples of surrogate mothers in Poe, as well as his wife Virginia, who apparently resembled Poe’s mother physically, thus serving as a double for Poe’s own mother and as an attempt of fulfilling his incestuous drives.

As I have stated earlier in this project, I find this type of analysis to ignore the volition and creativity of the author himself, but it does serve to point out an obvious pattern of repetition both in Poe’s life and in his stories.
5.1.2 The Conqueror Worm

While Ligeia lies on her deathbed, she bids the narrator read aloud a poem which she wrote not long ago, and I believe this poem carries significant meaning and that an analysis of this is of great import. The poem consists of five stanzas, each containing eight lines and a somewhat irregular rhyme scheme using end rhymes sometimes as ABABCBCB (stanzas 1, 2 & 3) and sometimes ABABCDCD (stanzas 4 & 5), while the meter remains quite inconsistent throughout the poem.

The first stanza describes a gala night in the lonesome latter years, which I understand as the latter years of Ligeia’s existence, as she is aware of her impending death. A throng of angels gather “In veils, and drowned in tears” (CTP:260) to watch a play of hopes and fears. The musical accompaniment is “the music of the spheres” (CTP:260), in this case I believe it to be a double reference, as the spheres in this case appear to be the stars. However, the narrator of Ligeia has compared Ligeia’s eyes to the twin stars of Leda, a stellar constellation, of which he became the devoutest of astrologers. This is in effect a trace of Ligeia, and the music indicates her ethereal presence in the poem.

In the second stanza we are introduced to the actors of the play, “Mimes, in the form of God on high” (CTP:261), a reference to the book of Genesis where we learn that God created mankind in his image. So these mimes are in fact mankind, and they mutter and mumble (which admittedly is quite atypical for mimes) and move hither and thither, however, they do none of this of their own free will, but instead “At bidding of vast formless things” (CTP:261). Unlike in the Glanvill quote, it appears mankind cannot will anything, and that they are but slaves to the will of more powerful things.

The third stanza again mentions the shapeless thing which controls mankind, but with the addition that mankind are vainly chasing it, here referred to as a Phantom, “Through a circle that ever returneth in/to the self-same spot” (CTP:261).

When the rhyme scheme changes in the fourth stanza, so does the cast of the play, for a new shape intrudes upon the stage: a great, blood-red, toothed worm. Writhing with “mortal pangs” (CTP:261), the worm eats the mimes, to the great sorrow of the angels watching the play: “And the seraphs sob at vermin fangs/In human gore imbued” (CTP:261).

This gruesome scene concludes the play, and the fifth stanza brings down the curtain “over each quivering form” (CTP:261), referring to the dead or dying mimes on the stage. The angels, “all pallid and wan” (CTP:261) confirm “That the play is the tragedy, “man,”/And its hero, the Conqueror Worm” (CTP:261).
What Ligeia thus conveys to the narrator in making him read the poem is a story of the frailty and downfall of man, which contrasts with the Glanvill quote that also becomes her dying words. I would like to apply a Lacanian perspective for explaining the structure of the poem and its hidden meaning, after which I shall elaborate on the reason behind the poem in chapter 5.1.3.

Jacques Lacan provided a revolutionary reading of Poe’s *The Purloined Letter*, which I have briefly touched upon in chapter 2.2 - It is the process in which he turns Poe’s classic detective story into an impressive signifier for the process of psychoanalysis. I have found a similar application in *Ligeia*, but instead of alluding to the process of psychoanalysis, I will make an argument for a reenactment of the Oedipal complex which Bonaparte treats as the locus of Poe’s alleged neuroses.

While the Oedipal complex has three actors and thus takes on a triangular schematic form, I would like to start with a duality, which in Lacanian terms takes place in the realm of the Imaginary, which is where projection occurs. Projection, or the equation between objects and their substitutes, is taking place when Ligeia is substituted for Rowena, and in turn brought back. This substitution is a signifying chain relying on a trace, as Rowena becomes the trace of Ligeia by being exactly what Ligeia is not, in other words, Rowena signifies a lack which in turn signifies Ligeia, thus making the substitution a reverse mirroring of identities. Where Ligeia is high, Rowena is low, where Ligeia is lovely, Rowena is unlovable, *where the angels are veiled, the mimes are exposed*. As Ligeia and Rowena serve as contrasts to one another, so does the narrator and Ligeia/Rowena, maintaining a dualistic relationship of either “narrator’s love=Ligeia‖ or “narrators hatred=Rowena‖. While they are two distinctly different couplings, they remain in the Imaginary nonetheless as projections of the narrator’s affects from the inside to the outside.

I think the introduction of *the Conqueror Worm* is what takes the story from the Imaginary to the Symbolic, as Ligeia’s parting words also introduce a third to the dualistic relationship between the narrator and her. It is through the poem that I can analyze their relation through the Oedipal model, and the roster of the play reads thus:

- The Angels watching the play: Ligeia/the mother
- The mimes on stage: The narrator/Oedipus
- The Conqueror Worm: The father/the authoritative no

The duo of the narrator and Ligeia is now a trio, and the Conqueror Worm takes the place of “the authoritative no” which is dominant in the realm of the Symbolic. The narrator’s longing for Ligeia
becomes the mimes' circular chase of the strings that bind them, and the authoritative no, or the incest prohibition from the father to the son, becomes the Conqueror Worm in all its phallic glory devouring mankind.

This opens up for the possibility of introjection instead of projection, that is, the absorption of a relationship between the narrator and Ligeia, and between Ligeia and death, which the Conqueror Worm also embodies. The Conqueror Worm is therefore an introduction to the Symbolic Order, in which the repression of drives and desires take place. So what does the Conqueror Worm truly convey to the narrator? The terrible truth of the authoritative no, the rejection from the father of the child's desire for its mother, or simply the Conqueror Worm - Death in the shape of a penis - denying the outlook of eternal love and possession of Ligeia.

And, as if on cue, lady Ligeia dies after laying this harsh truth on the poor narrator. This leaves the narrator like a child who has been introduced to the Symbolic Order quite bluntly, suddenly having to realize that the possession of the mother is no longer possible.

However, my analysis of Ligeia does not end here, as I find the Conqueror Worm as a means to an end to convey the true role of Ligeia in the story, not only as an obvious displacement of Edgar Allan Poe's mother, nor as an indication of the author's neuroses, but as the purveyor of truth embodied - the oracle Ligeia.

5.1.3 Veils and Oracles

As an introduction to my reading of Ligeia as an oracular story, I will return to the narrator's musings on the effect of his lover's gaze:

"And thus how frequently, in my intense scrutiny of Ligeia's eyes, have I felt approaching the full knowledge of their expression - felt it approaching - yet not quite be mine - and so at length entirely depart! (...) subsequently to the period when Ligeia's beauty passed into my spirit, there dwelling as in a shrine, I derived, from many existences in the material world, a sentiment such as I felt always aroused within me by her large and luminous orbs" (CTP:258)

This is essentially the narrator stating that Ligeia has conveyed some sort of knowledge to him, which indeed is something she explicitly does multiple times in the story, but this knowledge is a particular kind of truth, one which follows him wherever he goes and pervades everything he experiences. If we are to further apply the reading of the Oedipal Complex in Ligeia, we can take
note of the similarity in the journeys of Oedipus and our narrator. They are both told a prophecy by an oracle, Oedipus is told that he shall slay his sire and bed his mother, and our narrator is told that he cannot possess Ligeia, who serves the dual role as mother and oracle. Both our narrator and Oedipus struggle in accepting the prophecy, but it comes to pass nonetheless. Oedipus in the end comes to terms with his sins, and meets his death honorably by blessing his burial place - just like our narrator accepts that he cannot possess Ligeia after her revivification, which obviously does not end happily as the story is told in retrospect.

Even though I find the reading of *The Conqueror Worm* to strengthen my analysis of Ligeia as an oracle, my reading does not rely on it to remain valid. One could, as I shall demonstrate, still argue for Ligeia’s abilities without the Lacanian reading of the poem - in fact, the poem was not included in *Ligeia* before 1945, six years after the original version of *Ligeia* was published. As I made obvious in the beginning of chapter 5.1, the narrator goes to great lengths in describing the divinity and supernatural beauty and knowledge of Ligeia. However, that is not the only characteristics Ligeia shares with oracles, for just as one cannot possess an oracle, the narrator cannot possess Ligeia, regardless of possible Oedipal undertones.

An oracle is ethereal and veiled, only allowing for glimpses into the realm of absolute truth, but their veil leaves them secretive and unobtainable, just like Ligeia. This story is ripe with veils and signifiers of veils, one of which I find to be Ligeia’s missing family name. Ligeia is shrouded in mystery right from the beginning of the story, and her lack of traceable origin and identity, apart from something utterly divine, is a signifier of the veil which keeps her mysteriousness intact. Rowena serves as an opposite, as both her full name and origins are made explicit as soon as she is introduced - leaving her completely demystified, unlike Ligeia.

In the pentagonal bridal chamber (which Sørensen labels as a “tomb cum torture chamber”) (Sørensen 2008:134) several veilings occur, for one the southern window of gigantic proportions is tinted with a “leaden hue, so that the rays of either the sun or moon, passing through it, fell with a ghastly luster on the objects within” (CTP:263). The pure light of the sun and moon are veiled, only entering the room in distorted form. However, the room itself appears as one massive veil with its tapestries that cover the walls from top to bottom, made of material akin to the carpeting and the curtains that cover the window. The gusts of the wind entering the chamber make the draperies flutter, producing a phantasmagoric effect which seemingly serves as the catalyst for Rowena’s hallucinations during her illness.

The veilings continue throughout the story, continually alluding to this oracular trait of an ethereal shrouded identity - also displayed in the *Conqueror Worm*, as the angels are veiled while watching
the play, and only in the end, when the curtain has fallen, do they unveil themselves to utter the truth of the play’s true character and name, which in my Lacanian analysis translates as Ligeia unveiling for a brief moment to relay this prophecy to our narrator, the prophecy of the Symbolic. The final case of veiling/unveiling I would like to emphasize also concludes the story, which is the only time we find Rowena to be behind a veil, which, upon its unveiling, however, proves to hide not Rowena but the lady Ligeia herself. I am referring to the bandages which cover Rowena’s face as she goes through her many little deaths, finally to stagger onto the floor, where the narrator almost anticipates Ligeia’s arrival by falling to his knees in front of her. As the narrator kneels in front of his oracle, she unveils herself to him one last time, transcending death by apparently willing herself back to life in the style of the Glanvill quote which has been repeated throughout the story.

5.2 Berenice

Berenice starts out with a quote just like Ligeia does, however, this time the quote is in Latin, and thus it doesn’t denote the same immediate theme as the Joseph Glanvill quote did in Ligeia, since no translation is provided. I have procured a translation, which I will introduce later in the analysis.

Berenice shares quite a few similarities with Ligeia, but not so many as to make them completely similar. The story once again has a first person narrator who relays the story of a dying woman to the reader, this time the woman is the narrator’s cousin named Berenice. However, much unlike the story of Ligeia, we do not encounter Berenice until after a lengthy introduction in which the narrator presents himself in a much more detailed degree than Ligeia’s narrator ever does.

We are introduced to the narrator, whose first name is Egæus, and whose last name he refuses to state. We never learn the reason behind this, but the narrator does go into detail when it comes to describing the wealth of his family, claiming that “there are no towers in the land more time-honored than my gloomy, gray, hereditary halls” (CTP 227). Within these halls dwells a line of visionaries, amongst which the narrator considers himself. He warrants the claim of their status as visionaries by listing their frescos, tapestries (which, in light of the analysis of Ligeia, should already ring a bell with the attentive reader), buttresses, antique paintings and above all, the peculiar nature of their library’s books. Yet, as proud as Egæus seems of his books, he will not permit us knowing the content of said books, but we do learn that his mother died giving birth to him in the very library which he seemingly spends all of his waking hours in.
Our narrator quickly displays some strange traits, he is, for example, completely certain that he has lived before his current life, yet he does not bother with trying to convince the reader of such. He does, however, state some sensory memories from this previous life:

There is, however, a remembrance of aerial forms - of spiritual and meaning eyes - of sounds, musical yet sad - a remembrance which will not be excluded; a memory like a shadow, vague, variable, indefinite, unsteady; and like a shadow, too, in the impossibility of my getting rid of it while the sunlight of my reason shall exist (CTP:227).

Egæus was, so to speak, born into the very plane of imagination, as his reality was the books around him, and throughout his boyhood, youth and even adult life, he surrounded himself with books and reveled such in their study that he rarely ventured outside of his hereditary halls. This is not without its complications, however, and what Egæus later puts into terms as a disease, is first hinted at as the complete reversal of reality and imagination in Egæus' mind: “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 everyday existence, but in very deed that existence utterly and solely in itself” (CTP 228). The dreamworld of his books thus becomes his existence, and the description of his family as a line of visionaries takes on a double meaning already - as visions suddenly lose their manifestation in truth because of Egæus’ description.

Now, finally, we are introduced to Berenice, through the fond memories of the narrator. She is described as the exact opposite of our narrator: agile, graceful and overflowing with energy, carelessly traversing the hill-sides, and of staggering beauty. Alas, disease strikes her (which has come to be a typical component in Poe’s stories) and leaves her forever changed, both in body and spirit. This first disease, which Egæus does not name, carries more maladies in its wake, and the most remarkable of all the sequelas to her original malady is an epileptic state of trance, from which her awakenings were startlingly abrupt.

As I have mentioned earlier, Berenice is not the only character suffering from disease, and Egæus permits us a closer look into his disease of the mind, which obviously effects the storytelling of the tale, since he appears quite aware of his disease, but not of the pervasiveness of its effects on his "lucid" moments:

My own disease - for I have been told that I should call it by no other appellation - my own disease, then, grew rapidly upon me, and assumed finally a monomaniac
character of a novel and extraordinary form - hourly and momently gaining vigor - and at length obtaining over me the most incomprehensible ascendancy (CTP:228).

So it seems Berenice is not the only one suffering from trance-like states, in fact, we do not experience a single one of her attacks of epilepsy first hand in the story, while Egæus constantly fades in and out of reality. Egæus’ attacks seem to include an intense scrutiny of some singular object which happens to spark his “monomania”, causing him “to become absorbed, for the better part of a summer’s day in a quaint shadow falling aslant upon the tapestry” (CTP:229). Continuing the signifying pattern which I have claimed to find in Ligeia, once again we encounter shrouds and veils in Berenice, albeit not in as great a magnitude. They are to be found, however, sometimes either obviously present, or remarkably absent, which I shall continue to elaborate upon throughout my analysis. It remains certain that Egæus uses the tapestry as an example for his monomania, although it is seemingly in no way exclusive to veiling/veiled entities. His disease is unlike that of the meditations on certain things which can lead to many different associations and deductions, in fact, he rarely ever deviates from the object that initially triggers his malady. In other words, he is focusing solely on the signifier without following the signifying chain or searching for a signified. Egæus sums it up thus: “the powers of mind more particularly exercised were, with me, as I have said before, the attentive, and are, with the day-dreamer, the speculative” (CTP:229)

The last, and I find, most revealing, attempt at addressing his disorder is the comparison to an ancient Greek tale of Ptolemy Hephestion in which an immovable rock by the ocean could be moved by no force of mankind nor of the winds or waves by the ocean, but only by the touch of the flower asphodel. I believe this to be a signifier for the very nature of his disorder, which is triggered by the asphodel, a commonly known symbol for death (Sørensen 2008:101) and thus a signifier of the underlying current of Egæus’ thoughts, and what he confesses to us here is that death is his catalyst.

Berenice’s disease takes her through both physical and mental changes, but the narrator remarks upon the curious fact that his monomania has never once been triggered by the alterations of her psyche, but instead by the physical deterioration of her body: “my disorder reveled in the less important but more startling changes wrought in the physical frame of Berenice - in the singular and most appalling distortion of her personal identity” (CTP:230). I find it worth noticing that Egæus equates Berenice’s physical frame with her personal identity, whereas one would normally connect this to the personal traits of the mind. Egæus seems to contradict himself multiple times in the story, which can either be a consequence of his monomania or because he is denying his personal drives and motivations for being interested in Berenice. Regardless of which one (if any) of these is
true, the case remains that Egæus is interested in the wasting away of Berenice’s body, which does seem to correlate with his fascination of death, since he gets to witness it closing in on Berenice.

“During the brightest days of her unparalleled beauty, most surely I had never loved her” (CTP 230). Egæus goes to great lengths in describing his feelings for Berenice were never out of love, nor from the heart, but instead his passions were, and had always been, of the mind. Even though Egæus repeatedly states that he does not love Berenice, he does ask her to marry him in what he refers to as an evil moment - which is explained to the reader immediately following this sentence: “I shuddered in her presence, and grew pale at her approach” (CTP 230). There is obviously some morbid fascination of Berenice in the narrator’s mind, which culminates when he, before their impending marriage, is sitting in his library and Berenice pays him a visit. Only, something is very different about the Berenice that appears before the narrator, as she appears to be vacillating and indistinct in outline, along with other ghostly features. Egæus, always seeking a rational solution, debates in his mind whether this could be caused by his excited imagination, the misty influence of the atmosphere, the twilight of the chamber, or the gray draperies which fall around her figure. These are essentially different veils which he observes and attributes to the character of Berenice. They do not speak, and the narrator sits back in his chair, frozen and breathless, gazing at her excessively emaciated frame. His attention is led to the face of Berenice, which he begins describing with great similarity to the description of Rowena in Ligeia. She is “very pale” and “singularly placid”, she has “hollow temples” and “[her] eyes were lifeless, and lusterless, and seemingly pupil-less”, and the narrator involuntarily shrinks from their glassy stare and beholds her lips, which are “thin and shrunken” (all CTP:231). All of these features speak of her impending doom, and quite interestingly her hair is described as a vivid yellow, even though it used to be black. When we examine all of these characteristics it becomes quite clear that Berenice’s transformation is remarkably similar to the substitution of Ligeia with Rowena - a dark-haired beauty with vivid eyes turns into a blonde woman whose features the narrator finds appalling. However, there is one feature, and the most important one, which I have yet to describe, and that is the teeth of Berenice, which she reveals “in a smile of peculiar meaning” (CTP:231). The shutting of a door distracts Egæus, and he finds that Berenice is no longer standing before him, but alas, her teeth roam freely in the distorted chamber of his brain. This sparks an uncontrollable desire in the narrator, and his monomania is unleashed in an intense scrutiny of Berenice’s teeth:

not a speck on their surface - not a shade on their enamel - not an indenture in their edges (...) I saw them now even more unequivocally than I beheld them then. The teeth! - the teeth - they were here, and there, and everywhere, and visibly and
palpably before me; long, narrow, and excessively white, with the pale lips writhing about them, as in the very moment of their first terrible development (CTP:231).

As he loses himself in his disease, his vivid detailing of the teeth continue since they are all his mental eye can see, and he even attributes them some strange sensitive and sentient power in their own right, without the lips to aid them. This leads him to conclude (a capability which he had previously denied his monomania) that “toutes ses dents etaient des idées” (CTP:232) - that all her teeth were ideas! Moreover, he believes that only the possession of these teeth could restore his sanity and give him back to reason.

Egæus continues his painful meditation for nearly two days, after which he is awakened by a scream of horror and dismay followed the sound of troubled voices and moanings of sorrow or pain. He gets up to open the doors to the library, where he is met by a servant maiden who tells him that Berenice has died. One of her epileptic attacks had claimed her life in the morning, and now, as it was evening, she was ready to be interred.

Some time passes, and Egæus finds himself sitting in the library once again, where he has awakened from an exciting dream. While he is certain of Berenice’s funeral having taken place, he has no memory of the time between the funeral and his current awakening, except for a pervasive feeling of horror and a shriek of a female human being ringing in his ears. “I had done a deed - what was it?” (CTP:232) he asks himself.

His gaze eventually falls upon a tiny box on his table, a box which belongs to the family physician, and he ponders the reason of its presence and shudders at the very sight of it. On the very same table is an open book with some underscored lines, which turn out to be the quotation in Latin from the beginning of the poem: “Dicebant mihi sodales si sepulchrum amicae visitarem, curas meas aliquantulum fore levatas” (CTP:233). I have found them to mean the following: “My companions told me I might find some little alleviation of my misery, in visiting the grave of my beloved”. Upon reading these lines, which he had likely underscored himself, the narrator’s blood freezes (figuratively) in his veins, and his hairs “erect themselves on end” (CTP:233). The narrator seems to be continuously stumbling upon clues from the deed he has done, yet his repression (or loss of memory, as he considers it) of the act leaves him only with sensations of ill foreboding and dread.

A light tapping at the door occurs, and Egæus finds a servant, as pale as the tenant of a tomb, coming in. He is terrified and speaks of a wild cry disturbing the silence of the night, of the household gathering, of the violation of a grave, and “of a disfigured body enshrouded, yet still

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2 [http://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/bernicee.htm](http://www.eapoe.org/works/tales/bernicee.htm) - while this website might not be a sufficient source of reference, I have found, with my basic Latin skills, this translation to be more or less accurate, and apparently one which Poe included in his first publication of the story.
breathing, still palpitating, still alive!" (CTP:233). It seems poor Berenice has either been buried alive or come back from the dead - both explanations which can be considered completely plausible, given the oeuvre of Poe. The manner of Berenice’s return notwithstanding, her grave has been defiled and her body disfigured, and whereas the attentive reader might have a suspect in mind, Egæus seems oblivious to the origin of this misdeed. “He [the servant] pointed to garments; - they were muddy and clotted with gore” (CTP:233), the narrator continues. Note the omission of the genitive form, a subtle way of avoiding claiming ownership of the clothes clearly worn by the uninvited visitor of Berenice’s tomb. The servant takes Egæus by the hand, which he notices is “indent ed by the impress of human nails” (CTP:233, my italics), a clever case of différence on Poe’s part, alluding to the French word for teeth, dents, which Egæus used earlier when discovering Berenice’s teeth were ideas. The servant leads Egæus to an object placed against the wall of the library - a spade - and the penny finally drops for the narrator, which causes him to shriek and bound to the table (much in the same way the narrator in Ligeia bounded to the resurrected Ligeia’s feet) and attempt to force open the box, eventually dropping it onto the floor where it shatters, exposing some instruments of dental surgery, along with “thirty-two small, white and ivory-looking substances that were scattered to and fro about the floor” (CTP:233) - Berenice’s teeth!

5.2.1 Death and Knowledge

It appears that Egæus has paid his would-be wife an unpleasant visit to remove her teeth - seemingly with the inspiration from the Ebn Zaiat quote suggesting a visit to his beloved’s tomb would alleviate the torment of his spirit. Beginning the story itself with this quote denotes a theme of death and grief, but we never find Egæus mourning Berenice’s death in the story, in fact, he seems completely indifferent to Berenice once she is dead, instead all his affects (which he claims were few to begin with) are transferred to her teeth, which seems to happen during her phantasmagoric appearance prior to her death. It is peculiar that the narrator’s interest in Berenice seems to originate from - and indeed increase with - the deterioration of her health, culminating in his intense fascination of her teeth, which he ends up craving with an intense frenzy. That the Zaiat poem led to Egæus’ venture is hinted at by the underscoring of these very lines, as well as the book lying opened on his desk. In his monomaniac frenzy, he dug up her body only to find that she was still alive - which must be true, since the marks of fingernails on his arm must have come from Berenice struggling during her involuntary dental surgery - just as the shriek resounding in the narrator's head must be Berenice’s
screams of terror and pain, as she finds herself to be unearthed by her husband to be, only to have all of her teeth forcefully removed.

Egæus’ obsession with death can be extracted from multiple clues found in the story, but the very first one, that he has lived before and thus conquered death, warrants a closer look. “It is mere idleness to say that I had not lived before - that the soul has no previous existence” (CTP:227) Egæus explains, after which he immediately counters the reader’s apparent protest by declaring his own conviction: “Convinced myself, I seek not to convince” (CTP:227). He explains his former life in the remembrance of certain aerial forms, eyes, sounds etc. which he attributes to his former life - all this following his explanation of his mother’s death and his own birth in the library. These seem like early childhood memories, perhaps his mother did not, in fact, die when he was born, but during the early years of his childhood - just like Poe’s. While this is of course guesswork to some extent, I do find it peculiar due to the narrator’s phrasing: “Here [the library] died my mother. Herein was I born” (CTP:227). Again we find the narrator to omit key words denoting possession or, in this case, coherence.

Another sign of Egæus’ penchant for investigating death comes from his literature, which again catches the eye of the reader simply because of omission - the narrator refers to them multiple times, but each time withholding the nature of their contents. The only works we know of are the ones he admits to having an effect on his disease – and they all have to do with death and salvation, explicitly in the Tertullian quote, which speaks of the death and resurrection of Christ. He perused these volumes in “laborious and fruitless investigation” (CTP:230), indicating that he is searching for something specific - perhaps the truth of the finality of death? Death is thus irrevocably intertwined with knowledge, or the lack thereof, for he cannot find the ultimate truth of death, he lacks the secret of the asphodel used in the simile of Ptolemy Hephestion and the sundering effect of the flower growing in the death-realm of Hades in Greek mythology represents the secret of death. Death shakes the narrator precisely because he cannot find its truth, but who better to convey this knowledge than one already half in the clutches of death?

In this case, Berenice becomes an oracle of death - and so Egæus desires to possess her, but, just like in Ligeia, the veiled and ethereal nature of the oracle forbids such possession. In her wasting away, she comes closer to the truth the narrator so desperately seeks, the truth that can restore him to sanity.

As Berenice appears before him in her spectral and veiled form, her death imminent, it resembles the time of Ligeia’s prophecy to the narrator - but Berenice remains silent, her only expression is that of “a smile of peculiar meaning” (CTP:231). While Berenice’s intention remains unsure - one
could speculate upon the meaning of her smile as “accept death, I have” or something along those lines, but it would be mere guesswork - the fact remains that Egæus gets the idea of her teeth being the very knowledge he seeks - the truth of death. The Ebn Zaiat quote - perhaps now seen in a different light, knowing our narrator’s true intentions - leads him to her grave in order to take her ideas for his own. Just as Ligeia returned from the dead, so did Berenice apparently, as his grave robbery ended in blood and shrieks.

In summary, the narrator only covets Berenice in her diseased (or deceased?) state, but the oracle’s veil makes her unable to possess - which is why the teeth do not restore his sanity.

5.2.2 O Mother, Where Art Thou?

That Egæus’ mother has died is certain, but the circumstances are not. The veiled recollections of his “former life”, which I believe to be his early childhood, could just as easily have come from the intimacy a child shares with its mother - and her death could be what sparked his obsession with death in general. The many curious volumes of literature his family possesses are of a clandestine nature, and it is entirely possible that they are on necromancy and other ways of reviving the dead. If that is the case, then this once again fits Marie Bonaparte’s theory of Poe’s unconscious, if she indeed has analyzed his unconscious correctly, trying to recreate his dead mother. If, indeed, Berenice is a character double of Elizabeth Poe, just as Bonaparte suspects Ligeia (and even Poe’s cousin and wife, Virginia) of being, then that would make her sickness and emaciation another reproduction of his mother’s death. Another striking similarity to Poe’s life is Egæus’ wedding his cousin, which Poe did the very same year Berenice was published.

If the above paragraph strikes the reader as repeating itself, it is because it does. While I acknowledge that Marie Bonaparte’s reading of Edgar Allan Poe has a lot of possibilities and many points where his life and his literature intersect in a strikingly similar way - I find that the universal manner of doing this reading - fitting everything into one particular theory and answer - is its own undoing. I don’t think any one theory or reading can encompass the entire oeuvre of Edgar Allan Poe, because it is anything but uniform. If one decides only to observe a phenomenon solely through one particular scope, then the possibility of leaving something out increases drastically. Bonaparte has shown where Poe’s life and Poe’s stories coincide, but the need for validating her own theory overtakes the need of providing a reading of the poetry itself on its own terms, in its own right. Bonaparte believes that the female characters in Poe’s stories die because of Poe’s “incestuous sadonecrophilist” tendencies, as she blatantly accuses him of, but I believe the females go through death as a transcendence, because of their oracular powers which restrict
them in their doings on the earth, because they are not entirely earthly! This is indeed how Egæus views Berenice as well: “not as the living and breathing Berenice, but as the Berenice of a dream - not as a being of the earth, earthly, but as the abstraction of such a being” (CTP:230).

Some of the first questions that I asked myself when I read *Berenice* for the first time was “why the teeth? What do they signify? Why does Egæus think they are ideas?” I have found that his treatment of them as ideas and his following coveting of them has to do with Berenice’s oracular status and his belief that the teeth contain the knowledge which she possesses, and which he so desperately wants.

That leaves the prior question of what they signify. I believe I have an answer to that question as well. We have already established that Egæus’ interest in Berenice increases as her health deteriorates, and that his fascination of her physical condition far outweighs his indifference to her mental problems brought on by her disease. In her ghostly appearance in front of the narrator, he studies the physical changes wrought by her disease with discontent, but once she bares her teeth, he engages in a description only rivaled in intensity by the description of Ligeia’s eyes. Why? Because her teeth are not dying. They are not decaying because the dental features of dying people persist long after death. Egæus thus believes that her teeth are the key to conquering death, the truth that he believes Berenice holds. The teeth are thus signifiers of eternal life because of their resilience to physical decay - this is why the narrator is so astounded by their spotless and white surface.

Many other things that the narrator has scrutinized in his monomania are *passing* things, like a shadow on a tapestry, which will in time give way to light, or like the flame of a lamp or embers in a fireplace which will in time go out, or dreaming away entire days over the perfume of a flower that will wither in time. His quest for the truth of death is much like the search for a signified by following the signifier - something which Lacan seems to say is both possible and impossible. I think what Egæus has done in his monomania is study various signifiers, but never engaging in the *play* of the signifier, never following the signifying chain, thus upholding the hierarchy that Lacan proposes of the primacy of the signifier. However, as his desire for Berenice’s teeth is kindled, he no longer differentiates between the signifier and the signified, attributing the features of the signified, truth of death, to the signifier, the teeth, thus merging them into one central indivisible concept instead of the two gravitational pulls Felman discusses. These are not conscious thoughts of Poe’s, I believe, but the mixing of the signifier and the signified is essentially what causes Egæus to unearth his already “un-earthly” bride-to-be.
5.2.3 Eyes and Teeth

The eyes of Ligeia and the teeth of Berenice stand out in ways that make them appear of singular quality and of significant importance to the story.

Taking a closer look at Berenice’s teeth makes it evident that their function attributed to them by Egæus entails a metonymical identity which connects them with the very essence of ideas. Egæus claims that “toutes ses dents etaient des idées” (CTP:232) which is strikingly different from the normal metonymical application of teeth, which for example in psychoanalysis has been attributed to the toothed vagina, the estrangement felt by the child when the authoritative “no” distances the child from the mother. This could prove to be another introduction of the Symbolic realm of Lacan, just as the Conqueror Worm introduced it in Ligeia, and while fear of the maternal cloaca is certainly ripe for analysis in Bonaparte’s point of view, I shall take my analysis in a different direction. Upon claiming dents=idées, the narrator practically hands us the true meaning of Berenice’s teeth, as the sound of these two French words spoken in succession comes very close to identité, the French word for identity. This double meaning of the teeth as ideas and identity mark an intersection of metaphor and metonymy, as Berenice’s teeth are perhaps a metaphor for ideas, yet they metonymically “disclosed themselves slowly” (CTP:231) to the narrator, thus embodying the notion of an idea slowly appearing in the narrator’s mind while also disembodying them from Berenice, hinting at an identity and capability of the teeth which is unrelated to the rest of Berenice’s body. Berenice’s teeth therefore lead straight to the idea of identity, just as Ligeia’s eyes can be perceived as doing.

Ligeia’s eyes serve as a metonymy too, as they represent her identity and become the narrator’s obsession, albeit in a less aggressive way than in Berenice. Ligeia’s eyes are windows to her soul, yet they are also “the most brilliant of black” (CTP:257) which indicates a reflective character to her eyes, thus serving the double role of a window to her soul, and a means for the narrator to examine himself in a different light, the reflective oracular light of Ligeia’s eyes. This is coupled with Ligeia’s mysterious background, as the narrator cannot remember whence she comes or how he met her. Just like Berenice’s teeth are essences of identity, so are the eyes of Ligeia, and they serve the same oracular role of reflecting the narrator’s gaze unto himself in a different light, one of identity, ideas and introspection – all qualities of the oracular.
Chapter 6: Discussion

In the analysis, we have discovered a pattern which places the women in *Ligeia* and *Berenice* in a role much akin to that of the oracle - an entity which possesses a truth which is sought after by someone else, in the cases of these two stories, the narrators. This role as an oracle seems far from the misogynist picture of Poe that Bonaparte seems to paint, and his alleged neuroses are not, it seems, pervading his stories with their sadistic and necrophilist nature. In short, she derives something very different from the stories in comparison to what I do, but we must remember that her book on Poe is far more comprehensive than this project in terms of content and sheer page numbers - Bonaparte analyzes nearly *everything* Poe wrote in his literary career, and tries to provide an all-encompassing explanation for his entire oeuvre. While her work is impressive in its magnitude, I find it hard to believe that one can construct a valid theory which covers every single piece of work an author has ever done, and I will try to display this by broadening my scope in discussing a few of Poe’s other stories.

Before we engage in this discussion, however, we must finish our work on *Ligeia* and *Berenice*. So far, I have given my explanation of how I read the stories, just as I have demonstrated how Lacan and Bonaparte can be used in their own distinctive ways in a literary analysis. That leaves us with Derrida and his deconstruction, which I have saved for the discussion simply because it is not a tool for analysis in the same way as my other two theorists’ theories. As Derrida repeatedly stressed, deconstruction is not a theory - which is why I find it apt in beginning my discussion. Deconstruction is not applied, but in a higher degree *included*, which enables me to utilize its point of view in my discussion of gender roles in *Ligeia* and *Berenice* without having to adhere to a certain ideological standpoint.

6.1 What’s the différance?

One of the most pervasive and ubiquitous hierarchies of western metaphysics is life/death, which of course warrants a closer look because of its presence in Poe’s stories. This hierarchy is closely tied together with the presence/absence hierarchy, indicating that presence and life are the positive opposites of absence and death, grouping them together in two couplings indicating that what is alive is also present, and that absence is death or non-being. In *Ligeia* and *Berenice*, these couplings are both demonstrated yet somehow contradicted as well, as Berenice and Ligeia’s sense of presence is actually stronger when they are dead or dying than when they are alive - Berenice in her physical deterioration getting closer to death and thus getting
more interesting for Egæus, and Ligeia in her haunting omnipresence in the narrator’s mind after her death. Poe’s two stories therefore uphold the hierarchies while overturning them in a strange self-deconstruction, as death becomes the mediator between the narrator and truth, thus creating a presence from absence and to some degree deconstructing itself while still maintaining the metaphysical hierarchy. The reason I find the story to still maintain the hierarchy is because, while it is not traditional that a presence is created from an absence (Ligeia & Berenice becoming “greater” in death), the hierarchy goes through the process of “presence -> absence -> new presence” and ends up in a logocentric centrum of “presence”. Death, as we have observed in our two stories, is rarely the end of the road, and the hierarchy of life/death undergoes the same treatment as presence/absence in its “life -> death -> life” process in our stories. The couplings of life+presence and death+absence therefore follow each other through the story, and while the overturning of the hierarchies in the fashion of deconstruction actually takes place in Berenice and Ligeia, they are re-constructed to cohere with western metaphysics.

When we overturn these hierarchies, we thus find life+presence to be on the other side of the hierarchy, establishing death+absence as the central means of understanding our text. How does this affect our story? And where is the middle ground, where we appreciate the story on its own principles and not those of western metaphysics or its inversion?

As we have already established from the analysis of the two stories, death, while being the source of mourning in some cases, is also the bringer of new information, of new truth, from Ligeia’s prophecy in The Conqueror Worm to Berenice’s mystical smile. An action is performed which includes death but is also permitted by death - a strange duality of gain/loss which exists in both stories and upsets the hierarchy of cause/effect, as the deaths of our dark ladies bring both grief and gain.

What do we have, then, when we displace these hierarchies of life/death and presence/absence? In the very space between these hierarchies, if such a space exists and can be considered “neutral”, we find a story of a woman having an emotional impact on a man - the man achieving a new form of knowledge which she bequeathes to him. With life no longer reigning supreme over death, the stories’ true turning points are the emotional and intellectual impact the woman has on the man, how his love for - or fascination of - her changes how he views the world and leaves a lasting impression on him, regardless of presence or absence of life and death. Once again, even in a different scope from mine, we can observe a story where the female possesses oracular powers that change the life of a man. Such a story can easily be considered a story of love, and while Bent Sørensen (2008) and I use different measures to achieve such a conclusion, we agree on the outcome. I shall return to discuss Sørensen’s axiomatic approach to Poe’s stories in 6.2, but first we have another hierarchy to invert - one which also entails a perspective of examining not
only Poe’s embodiment of the hierarchical gaze, but our own - the hierarchy of male/female in the reading of the text.

As I described in chapter 4.3, inverting this hierarchy is not as simple as one might think, since the very idea of what constitutes the masculine and feminine is something which can be discussed endlessly. It seems that in a patriarchal society, the “normal” way of reading is reading as a man - so how do we read as a woman - by going against the norm?

One method which could possibly serve to function as such a reading is to look for what others haven’t discussed, since much of the literary history of works on Poe supposedly must adhere to the male/female hierarchy. One point which has always struck me as odd is that even though the stories are named after the women in the story, no one has ever disputed that the narrator is the protagonist. I think it is a very obvious symptom of the hierarchization of men over women that we never stop to think about who this story is actually about. Having a narrator which is not the protagonist is in no way out of the ordinary, in fact, we only have to look at Poe’s trilogy of detective stories, where no one would dispute that the detective Dupin is the protagonist, yet he is not the narrator. The narrator of The Murders in the Rue Morgue functions as someone who Dupin leaves an impression on, one who magnifies the accomplishments of Dupin by being left in awe and amazement by Dupin’s qualities of the mind. If this strikes the reader as somewhat familiar, it is because the stories of Ligeia and Berenice are essentially the same - we need a narrator to fully comprehend the gloriousness of the ones who provide the basis for the story - all of them possessing some knowledge which has a significant impact on the narrators. Is it possible that we do not question the role of the protagonist in Ligeia and Berenice simply because they are women? Or is it because they die in the story, a role which, given the pervasive nature of the life/death hierarchy, seems unfitting for a protagonist? What happens if we choose to look at our women as protagonists instead?

Berenice turns into a story about a woman who spends her youth in the beauty of nature and how a disease changes her life, while her loved one is suffering from a mental disorder which she, even in her dying hours, attempts to alleviate by comforting him with her smile of mysterious meaning. The ensuing horrors of resurrection and disembodiment are still veiled, as we simply do not know enough about them due to Egæus’ very selective memory.

Ligeia becomes a story of how a woman demonstrates such willpower that, once again in her dying moments, she comforts the worried man by her side, imparting some words of wisdom before death takes her. What is more interesting is, if we choose to accept my theory of her oracular power, Ligeia’s outcry of the frailty of man and his weak will could just as well be directed at the narrator, and not as a lament of her own impending death, since her status as an oracle bids her
depart after passing on her wisdom, which she does by slipping back behind her veil in death. She could be moaning the frailty of man in the light of her own divinity - even demonstrating such force of will that she can will herself back from the dead.

Suddenly, after a change of perspective and some displaced hierarchies, we find our stories to be about powerful women attempting to help their loved ones by sharing their wisdom, leaving Ligeia and Berenice in the same role as the powerful Dupin, and the narrators thus become the means to tell Ligeia and Berenice’s stories, as well as the objects of their love.

6.2 Poe and Gender

The overturning of the gendered hierarchies which I have displayed in 6.1 can probably be considered a feminist reading, which I agree with to the extent of it not being a “normal” reading. While my perspective of gender is obviously of a modern standard compared to Poe’s, I still find him to be a man out of his time, but at the same time carrying a wish to be the self-made man which the ideals of his time called for.

I do not think that Poe’s stories of love demonstrate men’s power over women, in fact I find the contrary to be the case. Whether or not this is a signifier of Poe’s own relationship to women I will leave to the likes of Bonaparte, but I do find that the nineteenth-century idea of separate spheres takes on a double entendre in many of Poe’s stories. While the idea of separate spheres is somehow present in Poe’s stories, as they often take place in the home of the protagonist which is where you would expect to find women, these women are not modeled entirely after the doctrines of the Cult of True Womanhood; piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. The passion and will of Ligeia stands in opposition to the piety and submissiveness, as she will not even submit to death itself, which also counts for Berenice if she was truly dead when she was first buried. The purity, however, is something which both women seem to possess, in the angelic and divine descriptions of Ligeia and Berenice in her youth, and even in death her teeth are as bright and spotless as any saint had ever been. The other understanding of separate spheres, which I find to be quite consistent in Poe’s oeuvre, is life and death as the spheres which separate men and women, from the women in his own life to the women in his stories. The qualities that Poe’s ladies possess are, I think, signifiers of Poe’s feminine ideal in his love stories, one which we have found not to match the Cult of Domesticity’s doctrines of ideal feminine behavior.

Before I go on further discussing Poe’s feminine ideal, I must stress the division that I make between Poe the person and Poe the poet. When I am discussing Poe’s feminine ideal, I am not discussing his personal preference in women, but his presentation of women in the stories I find
Ligeia and Berenice to be a representative of, namely Poe’s love stories. These two ideals, while they may coincide at some points, are not the same - since I am neither qualified nor interested in making grand claims regarding the former, I shall, as I have been doing all along, only theorize on the latter. In doing that, I am not alone, and while many theorists feel the understandable urge to chart the interdependence of Poe’s living women and his literary women, some have also made the same distinction I claim to make, and one of those is Bent Sørensen. He lists a number of axioms for the structure and plot of Poe’s love stories, many of which describe the way Poe’s women are portrayed in his stories.

Sørensen states in his axiom/P5 that the male lovers in Poe’s love stories desire a Platonic ideal rather than a corporeal woman (Sørensen 2008:69), thus seeking beauty as an idea and transcending any longing for beauty of flesh or mind. This quest for beauty everlasting can be traced to Ligeia’s supernatural beauty and Egæus’ craving of Berenice’s teeth because they are ideas, which is the highest form of the Platonic ladder of beauty that one can aspire to, and the simple and everlasting ethereal form of beauty. Sørensen follows this axiom with another, axiom/P6: “The female lover must therefore undergo disembodiment, but seeks re-embodiment” (Sørensen 2008:69), and I find the coupling that axioms P5 and P6 make to be quite interesting, since it implies a sense of cause and effect in its use of the word “therefore”, creating the sense that the females must die because of the male’s desire. I would like to return to deconstruction, as I think we have stumbled upon another hierarchy which begs inversion; the hierarchy of cause/effect. Culler explains the following:

(...) deconstruction reverses the hierarchical opposition of the causal scheme. The distinction between cause and effect makes the cause an origin, logically and temporally prior. (...) the deconstruction upsets the hierarchy by producing an exchange of properties. If the effect is what causes the cause to become a cause, then the effect, not the cause, should be treated as an origin (Culler 1983:88).

If this is the case, then the females of Poe’s love stories do not perish as a consequence of the male lover’s desire for her ethereal and ideal form - instead it kindles this very desire, thus making the desire for the female in her ethereal form a consequence of her death. We must remember that all of Poe’s stories are told in retrospect by the narrator, and therefore the temporal scheme of cause and effect is, in fact, already up to the whims of the narrator, who, in their often less-than-rational state of mind, might not have the order of things completely under control. Making the death of the females the origin of the male’s desire further emphasizes the impact on the narrators’ lives that our dark ladies have, causing a longing for their veiled identity to manifest in various acts
of indifference or cruelty, exemplified by the narrator’s hatred for Rowena or Egæus’ theft of Berenice’s teeth. Instead of making men’s desire the cause, and the women’s death the effect, I think, from a deconstructive point of view, that we find yet another sign of Poe’s beloved ladies taking the role of an oracle - making their veiled identity temporally prior to the acts of passion, desire and insanity of their loved ones because of the character of Ligeia and Berenice’s veilings and their prophetical effect. Much like Oedipus’ life is changed forever by an oracle, so are the lives of Egæus and the narrator of Ligeia.

While I have stressed this fact before, I feel I must repeat myself to ensure absolute clarity on this point: While my own reading of Edgar Allan Poe’s love stories can possibly be considered a feminist reading, at the very least one trying to display Poe’s stories in a different light from what has been done in the past, I do not think that Poe was a feminist. I am not equating my reading of Poe’s love stories with Poe’s personal stance on gender roles, about which we cannot know much for certain. His entries in the various periodicals portrayed a gentlemanly person, who, on the other hand, never failed to portray how a female writer’s accomplishments were remarkable in light of her gender, which is a typical patriarchal discourse as women always will have to try to be as good as men, to reach the “normal” level of skill and knowledge which has sadly belonged to men throughout history.

When I mentioned earlier that I found Poe to be a man slightly out of his time, I feel like this statement describes both the gender roles in his stories, but also how Poe is situated in the contemporary literary movements of his time. While his contemporaries turned away from the structure of reason to find truth in their natural surroundings, Poe took a different route by not following the transcendental train of thought. However, I think that Poe was a transcendentalist in his own right, inasmuch as he sought fulfillment and elevation of the soul just the same as Emerson and his fellow transcendentalists, but instead of turning to nature as the key to transcending mortal bounds and achieving cosmic unity, Poe sought the same results through the women of his stories.

When we look at the ideal woman in Poe’s love stories, we find a woman who can change a man’s life by showing him the divinity and truth which he seeks, leading to a change in his very essence which we have seen both Egæus and the narrator of Ligeia undergo. By displaying the divinity of the femininity in his stories, Poe invites us on a journey which takes us both through ourselves and through the woman who leads us by the hand, incidentally showing the narrator and the reader something about themselves. As such, Poe’s love stories are a journey inwards just like the trends of transcendentalism dictated, but instead of nature, women are the catalyst.
6.3 Reading the Reader - the Poe-etic Effect

When I say that Poe also takes the reader on a journey, I am referring to the many different readings of Poe and the colossal variety of the “diagnoses” people have given Poe. From Bonaparte’s incestuous sado-necrophilic judgments to my own love-transcendentalist reading, many theorists have places themselves in between these two readings. Shoshana Felman is one of these, and she also finds it interesting that the wide range of analyses of Poe includes so many different readings, and she calls this the Poe-etic effect. The strength of Poe’s literature can be observed in the way which it drives the reader to a reading act, as each reader gains something different from reading Poe. I attribute this to the fact that each reader brings something different in their reading of Poe, and just as Lacan demonstrated that we psychoanalyze through the Other, I also believe we read through ourselves - we are all, in a way, signifiers of Poe’s vast oeuvre, and we become so by continually re-reading and analyzing it. Felman writes: “The physicist is himself part of the data, the experimenter part of the laboratory. The observer is a fundamental structural, desiring, formative part of the observed” (Felman 1987:63). Just as this is true in psychoanalysis, I find it true in literary analysis as well, especially since it explains the cornucopia of analyses to which I have now added my own.

Marie Bonaparte reads Poe through the scope of classic psychoanalysis, and she reads both Poe the human and Poe the author and treats them as one and the same being, leaving very little space for Poe’s own artistry to be appreciated in its own right. Instead, the unconscious is perceived as the all-pervasive and inescapable force of creativity which permeates everything, leaving Poe as much in control of his writing as the average person is of their dreams. I find this approach to reduce the literary genius of Poe to a mere by-product of an otherwise neurotic personality - something which can in no way account for the genius of his poetry. Bonaparte attributes the Poe-etic effect as a recognition of the neuroses which other people have successfully repressed, and she claims that the ideal of creative writing is to instill the unconscious of the author in the unconscious of the reader, making them vibrate as one (Muller & Richardson 1998:124). I believe that this is another hierarchy that needs overturning, as I think the true Poe-etic effect is to make the reader read his or her own unconscious in the stories, which I believe Poe has accomplished, the diverse catalogue of literature on Poe serving as my proof. This would also be the case for Bonaparte, as not only her rather inflexible theoretical scope but also her own childhood could be read as a signifier of her reading of Poe, since Bonaparte’s mother died at an early age, just like Poe’s did. If the Poe-etic effect truly is that we read ourselves in Poe, then
Bonaparte must have done so too, perhaps even employing her psychoanalytical theory to read herself in Poe’s stories?

This must mean that I, too, read myself in Poe’s stories, which I believe to be true. Just as the many places where Poe’s literature can resemble events from his life, I believe we use our own experiences in consciously crafting different things, whether it is literature, analyses, paintings, music or acting. Just as we read through ourselves, so must we construct through ourselves, and the many traces of Poe’s life in his stories need not be his sneaky neuroses infiltrating his work. It can just as well be his source of inspiration which he consciously taps into in the making of his stories, just as I now tap into my experience in writing discussions as well as my personal stance on gender. My focal point in Poe, the way he portrays gender roles, obviously comes from my previous engagement in gender studies, which has caused me to see the world in a different light that now affects the way I see all things in society, from literature to modern-day gender roles and the very way we generate and reproduce the power structures dictating what gender is. Just as Lacan reads Poe through his own stance, which is just as much reading a reading of Freud as it is a reading of Poe, Derrida reads Lacan through his own point of view in the same way that I read all of these through my accumulated experience and knowledge. The same could be said about Poe, who sought truth like his contemporary transcendentalists, yet found it in his own way, and passed it on to us in a way so strikingly apt that we cannot help reading ourselves in Poe - and that is the Poe-etic effect.

6.4 Oracles and Mutes

I have deliberately concerned myself with quite a small part of Edgar Allan Poe’s collected works, which obviously narrows the perspective of my project, but this is entirely intended as I do not believe it is possible to analyze the entire collected works of an author within the limits of this project, just as I believe that any one analysis cannot possibly encompass all the varieties of Poe’s literary career. I had originally planned to include more of Poe’s works in this project to add depth to my analysis, but I instead found them to belong to an entirely different project. One of these stories were *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (*Rue Morgue*), Poe’s first detective story and the first in his Dupin trilogy. While it carries some of Poe’s characteristic traits, I also found it to function on completely different ideals, creating a distinct difference between his love stories and his detective stories. This is the same discovery which Bent Sørensen examines in his division of Poe’s tales into arabesques and grotesques, and his book serves as another proof of Poe’s literary signifier which can never just mean one thing. Just as one can rarely label a musician as one particular
genre of music, or describe the entire career of a painter as belonging to one single category, Poe’s vast oeuvre cannot be described as one coherent entity, and neither can his feminine ideal.

Stories and poems like Morella, Eleonora and Ulalume can all be placed within the same framework of analysis which I have demonstrated in this project. Morella and Eleonora much resemble Berenice and Ligeia in their structure and their feminine ideal, and also in their titles, as Morella and Eleonora are both the female protagonists in the stories. In the poem of Ulalume a man is walking side by side with his feminine soul, Psyche. Their stroll through the woods leads them to the tomb of the narrator’s deceased lover, which causes an influx of feelings and sensations like those in the works I have analyzed - and this poem is also named after the deceased loved one.

While Berenice and Ligeia both share many characteristics with each other, they share absolutely none with the two murdered women in Rue Morgue, in fact, they stand in stark contrast both in their roles in the story as well as the traits which they personify. The gruesome scene of the murder in Rue Morgue shows the women either decapitated or strangled, thus effectively nullifying their possibility of conveying any prophetic truths. The very way in which their organs of speech are disabled through an assault on the throat, which contains the necessary means of uttering speech, serves as a castration of their oracular abilities. The gruesome way which the perpetrator, a remarkably large and sinister orangutan, brutally wields a razorblade to assault their vocal chords is ripe for psychoanalytic analysis, which Marie Bonaparte, in her one-sided but nonetheless impressively comprehensive study, undertakes in labeling the orangutan the slayer-father that uses its phallus (the razorblade) to symbolically castrate the older of the two murdered women, whom Bonaparte considers a displacement of Poe’s mother (Muller & Richardson 1998:106f). The younger of the women is strangled, once again displaying a direct attack on her instruments of speech, after which she is thrust into a chimney, which Bonaparte analyzes as a displacement for a vagina.

While some characters can easily be considered oracles, as I have demonstrated in this project, other of Poe’s female characters can be considered the direct opposite, mutes with no prophetic power and seemingly no cohesion with the divine women of Poe’s love stories. This does obviously not fit my analysis as an oracular love story, which I do not consider a sign of weakness in my analysis, but instead contributing to the sense of specificity with which my analysis operates. As I have stated multiple times, it is neither possible nor worthy of pursuance to label the Poe story, because it does not exist. Nor is it feasible to perform a posthumous psychoanalysis of Poe, as his literary genius is already apparent to readers - and so the necessity of either labeling
Poe completely sane or insane should not be a prerequisite of understanding his poetry. The unique and manifold characteristics that strike the reader as strange or out of the ordinary are, after all, what continually makes Poe the target of literary analyses such as mine, and it is also what makes his oeuvre so beautiful.

After all, as the narrator in *Ligeia* quotes Lord Verulam:

“There is no exquisite beauty (...) without some *strangeness* in the proportion” (CTP:257)
Chapter 7: Conclusion

In this project I have striven to produce a literary analysis that takes multiple theories into perspective while still maintaining my own reading and its integrity in its own right. The theories and standpoints of Bonaparte, Lacan, Felman and Derrida have provided different ways of viewing and analyzing Poe’s stories, and they have also served as the target of analysis themselves.

My research question is one that probes the very nature of Poe’s love stories and delves into the realms of death and beauty that have kept scholars trying to analyze what is really going on in Poe. It reads thus:

*Based upon an analysis of “Ligeia” and “Berenice”, what is Edgar Allan Poe’s feminine ideal and why is it achieved through death?*

To understand what Edgar Allan Poe’s feminine ideal is, it is first necessary to analyze his stories in depth to understand the underlying recurrent themes which constitute Poe’s stories. The very specific scope of this project only entails two analyses, which, in return, scrutinize the many different facets of Poe’s stories in great depth. These analyses both rely on my personal reading of the texts as well as the theories of Bonaparte, Lacan and Derrida. In using these theories against my own approach I demonstrate the multiplicity of outcomes a literary analysis can have, depending on the theories used and the way in which the analysand uses them.

Marie Bonaparte’s comprehensive study is an example of a theoretical gaze which becomes stuck in the rigidity of its own framework, thus forcing everything to fit the theory and leaving out important points which contradict the theoretical standpoint.

Lacan, while not as dedicated a Poe scholar as Bonaparte, provided a remarkable reading of Poe’s *The Purloined Letter*, which demonstrated the inclusion of the Other in the traditional psychoanalytic process. The point of reading a patient, or in my case, a text, has become important in understanding the *effect* of Poe’s stories on the reader, which I consider to be exactly what Lacan discovered in his analysis of Poe: that we read through the Other, and in doing so we read ourselves in the patient or the text.

Derrida has provided a unique way of analyzing a text from his perspective of deconstruction - and I find the overturning of hierarchies useful in observing how gender is displayed in Poe, and how some of the metaphysical hierarchies in Poe’s stories actually deconstruct themselves.
*Ligeia* and *Berenice* both include a powerful female character after whom the stories are named, and I have found their characters to resemble that of the oracle - they both impart some knowledge onto the male narrators in the stories, and like in the case of Oedipus, this prophecy alters their lives. The divinity of the language Poe uses to describe these women contributes to my analysis of them as oracles, including the elaborate veilings in the stories. While Poe’s contemporary transcendentalists sought truth through nature, Poe sought truth in the oracular women of his love stories.

His feminine ideal in *Ligeia* and *Berenice* can therefore be described as powerful women who embody truth in their oracular characters, but just as an oracle must slip back behind her veil after delivering a prophecy, so must Poe’s women succumb to the veil that is death to retain their divine character and the ethereal nature of the oracle.

While this feminine ideal is recognizable in many of Poe’s other tales, one will find that it is equally inapplicable in many of his other works. This is due to the fact that one cannot cover Poe’s entire oeuvre in one grand all-encompassing analysis - Poe was a pioneer of many different literary styles, each with their own ideas, themes and structures, and trying to fit them all into one category does not do them justice.

I thus claim that the oracles I have found in Poe constitute his feminine ideal in his stories of love, and their death is a consequence of their very nature as oracles.
8.0 Resume

This project is focused on the love stories of Edgar Allan Poe, particularly the stories *Ligeia* and *Berenice*. Edgar Allan Poe was a diverse writer and a pioneer of many literary styles, yet I have not chosen to concern myself with his detective stories but instead his mixture of gothic horror and love stories, resulting in the death-defying dark ladies Ligeia and Berenice.

But why do so many of Edgar Allan Poe’s stories include dying female characters? Is it because of a lurking misogyny in his mind, using every opportunity to torture and murder women? Or is it because the women have a role in his stories which necessitates death to reach completion? Could it be because of his traumatic childhood that many of these dying females share multiple traits with his dead mother, Elizabeth?

It is not even certain that these questions can be answered with one singular answer, and I have narrowed all my considerations down to the following research question:

*Based upon an analysis of “Ligeia” and “Berenice”, what is Edgar Allan Poe’s feminine ideal and why is it achieved through death?*

Edgar Allan Poe’s works have left a gargantuan debate in their wake, and many different theorists and literary scholars have attempted to answer the hows and whys of Poe’s oeuvre. I seek to analyze a particular section of Poe’s stories, namely his love stories, but other authors have attempted to create an all-encompassing theory covering not only Poe’s works, but also his psyche. One of these theorists is Marie Bonaparte, and I provide a critical reading of her theory on Poe, which uses the classical Freudian perspective on psychoanalysis as its framework. While Bonaparte’s work on Poe is immense in its detail, I find the approach flawed as it seems to bend the facts to suit the theory of psychoanalysis. There are many instances where Poe’s life and his literature coincide, but Bonaparte goes as far as attributing Poe’s entire oeuvre to an unconscious neurosis in Poe’s mind – one which stems from his early loss of his mother, which in turn resulted in a sexual desire for his mother. This reading of Poe’s psyche permeates her analysis, and while I will not debunk her entire theory on Poe, I find it much too generalizing.

Nonetheless, I use Bonaparte to discuss my own reading of Poe’s stories, just as I use her theoretical framework where I find it applicable. Much like my analysis of Bonaparte, I also cover Jacques Lacan’s post-structuralist psychoanalytical perspective, as well as Jacques Derrida’s point of view, deconstruction. All of these theoreticians have in some way dealt with Poe, and their intertextuality serves to strengthen my own reading and perspective.
I also cover the main literary movements and gender roles in Poe’s time, as I do not wish to decontextualize Poe further than other theorists already have.

The thrust of my main argument in my analysis and discussion is that Poe’s women serve an oracular role in his stories – one connected with truth, veilings and all the secrecy one would normally attribute to the oracular. I find that Poe’s women are divine entities, ethereal and angelic in their features and in their character, and my detailed analysis of Poe’s linguistic instruments and his many allusions, metaphors, metonymies and intertextual measures strengthens this theory throughout the project. I employ the various theories described in my theoretical sections where I find them useful in my analysis and discussion, yet I never fully subscribe to any one of them, as my analysis of the oracular in Poe’s love stories is my very own, and as such not one I wish to “limit” by adhering solely to one particular theory.

In conclusion to my research question, Poe’s feminine ideal in his love stories is one where the woman has oracular capabilities that enable her to provide a prophetical message in the story, which has a major impact on the male narrator of these stories. I reach this conclusion after a thorough analysis and discussion of the characters and stories, with particular focus on the divine and oracular in the stories, including Ligeia’s luminous eyes and Berenice’s haunting teeth.

Oracles are all around us in Poe’s love stories, and while his contemporary writers turned to nature for their transcendental unity and truth, Poe turned to women instead, and thus he, in his own right, is a gender-transcendentalist of love.
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