

Victimization and Female Agency in Poe's Dark Ladies

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I

The portrayal of the female figures in Edgar Allan Poe's short fiction has led to numerous debates in academic criticism in the past thirty years. The most disputed question concerns women's agency, as the interpretation of the limits and possibilities of these characters' ability to act considerably divides critics debating whether they are nothing more than victims of patriarchal oppression or revolting figures, who show signs of willful acts to comment on their own situation. It is very possible that this disagreement on the representation of women in Poe's Gothic short stories stems from the two formulae, Male and Female Gothic, since these, greatly determine how characters of both genders are delineated in the given works. On the surface Poe's dark tales qualify as classical texts of the Male Gothic formula since his female figures are oppressed, tormented, lack agency as well as voice, and all end up dead. Nevertheless, an exhaustive analysis of the female characters contradicts this pattern, as some of the female victims, especially the "Dark Ladies", show signs of empowerment and choose alternative strategies to revolt against their tragic fate.

Floyd Stovall calls these female characters Poe's "ideal and preternatural wom[en]" (198). The short stories featuring Ligeia, Morella, Berenice, and Madeline Usher depict the death of a beautiful woman and focus on the melancholy evoked in the male narrators, which is a significant trope in Poe's other works as well. I contend, however, that these characters are not passive objects, they exert power over men and are able to actively control the plot. This paper also argues that the ambiguity surrounding the depiction of female figures in the selected short stories sheds light on Poe's playful irony in subverting the narrative pattern and generic features of both the Male and Female Gothic.

In order to analyze the female characters in Poe's Gothic tales, I apply feminist literary criticism, psychoanalytic criticism, and cultural studies. The selected short stories studied in this paper are the Gothic tales featuring the Dark Ladies, "Berenice" (1835), "Morella" (1835), "Ligeia" (1838), and "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839).

II

The separation of male and female Gothic formulae originates from Ellen Moers, who in her writing, *Literary Women* (1976), introduced the term “Female Gothic” as the “work that women writers have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic” (90). She recognized the importance of gender in the Gothic and created the foundation for later feminist critics to divide the Gothic based on the male and female subject’s experiences (Williams 100).

According to Anne Williams, the Male Gothic “expresses the horrors inherent in the premises of Western patriarchy - that „the female” (the mother) is “other,” forbidden, and dreadfully, uncannily powerful, a monster that the nascent self must escape at the cost of whatever violence seems necessary” (135). To counterbalance the primitive anxiety caused by “the female”, the Male convention turns to the victimization of women, therefore, positioning female suffering at the center of the plot and narrative (Williams 104). The male characters deliberately set standards for women, which they cannot fulfill and for this reason they are punished (105). The formula of the Female Gothic concentrates on “the terror and rage that women experience within patriarchal social arrangements, especially marriage” (136). As Punter and Byron point out, the female protagonist is exposed to the powerful authority of the oppressing male, who imprisons her and puts her virtue or life in danger (279). Nevertheless, all the suffering is resolved with a happy ending, which includes the protagonist’s marriage, hence, her reintegration into society (Punter and Byron 279).

For Williams, the Male Gothic is unambiguously antifeminist since its plot revolves around the victimized and demonized “other”, the female (136). As opposed to this, the scholars differ in their views on the conventions of the Female Gothic. Critics such as Janice Radway and Maggie Kilgour, have refuted the claim that the Female Gothic is undoubtedly conservative, which legitimates the status quo and reestablishes the domestic life, therefore, accepts “the home as a prison in which the disempowered female is at the mercy of ‘ominous patriarchal authorities’” (Weinstock 121). Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock refers to Margaret Doody who “understands Gothic fiction by women as arising out of and responding to the historical disempowerment of women” (120). Numerous critics share this approach and claim the female formula to be a platform for protest against “the oppressiveness of patriarchal constraints” (Weinstock 121-122).

In the 1800s women were continuously discriminated against both socially and economically and this is what the Female Gothic mainly sheds light on. Susan M. Cruca justifies this fact by emphasizing some cultural codes that limited upper and

middle-class women's potential: they could either get married and become mothers or remain spinsters. Regardless of what they chose, all of these implied domestic dependencies. This was further reinforced by the discouragement of earning a wage because women with an income were considered to be 'unnatural' (187). Similarly, among working-class women, it was more favorable to be married than work for low wages in unhealthy conditions. However, without separate earnings, everybody was entirely dependent upon their husbands (Cruea 187).

Cruea claims that motherhood was regarded as one's most important and fulfilling role, a True Woman had to show her spouse's success and had to prepare her children to carry on the family's legacy (188-190). Leland S. Person quotes Kimmel who stated that "[w]omen were not only domestic, they were domesticators, expected to turn their sons into virtuous Christian gentlemen—dutiful, well-mannered, and feminized" (130). The first image promoted by society was the True Womanhood which was built on "four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity" (Welter 21). Cruea asserts that women were considered to be inherently more virtuous than men, therefore, their function was to be the "symbolic keeper of morality and decency within the home" (188). Due to this factor, a full-time occupation or other jobs away from the home were strongly discouraged especially physical work, as women were seen as fragile, delicate, and liable to illnesses (189-190). Moreover, cerebral pursuits were also disapproved of as it was seen unfeminine, since "the mind [was] associated with the masculine" (189).

It is important to show the ideals appearing in the middle of the nineteenth century after True Womanhood became obsolete since they represent certain characteristics of women's position in society, which were considered to be radical and were strongly discouraged in Poe's time, however, they are present in his works. Cruea introduces the new ideal, the Real Womanhood, which emerged in the middle of the 1800s which was the effect of the Civil War when the necessity arose and put women in positions where men worked before, such as teaching, government, and office work (191).

Cruea emphasizes the differences in the approaches towards the fields of "health, education, marriage, and, most importantly, employment" by True and Real Womanhood (Cruea 191). Primarily it is important to mention education which made it possible for women to perform their tasks, for example, keeping a house and raising children. Moreover, Cruea quotes Cogan who claims that education aids them to "attract the right kind of man and ... fulfill the duties of wife and companion" (qtd. in 192). Cruea states while marriage was still the most ideal opportunity for women, those who remained single now had alternatives and could be self-sufficient by earning wages (193).

While Real Womanhood only approved labor of domestic nature, later new occupations emerged for middle-class women, which were not connected to the house, laying the foundation for the ideal of Public Womanhood (193). Whereas this new model appeared and was acknowledged decades after Poe's death, women at his time already appeared in the cultural realm as writers. Because of their "increasing involvement in the moral and cultural welfare of their communities" women could enjoy more opportunities to claim public roles (193). Although they were mostly employed in fields related to the domestic sphere, such as childcare, teaching, and nursing, due to the increasing industrialization, a demand appeared for office workers for example typists and stenographers (195).

Through religious empowerment based on women's moral superiority, their activities in the public sphere were justified and it was also believed that they "combated social immoralities that threatened the sanctity of the home and family", which included the controlling of men's behavior at home (196). Since they were allowed to represent themselves in the cultural realm, they could aspire to become professional writers (196). The popularity of the novel gave women "a public forum through which they could share experiences in an effort to reveal common concerns which allowed women to explore solutions to the social problems that plagued nineteenth-century women" (197).

The ideas of domesticity did not remain unanswered. As it was previously mentioned the Female Gothic gave women a platform to reflect on their roles in society and to criticize the system. According to Ana Cristina Băniceru, while British Gothic fiction used 'exotic' settings such as ancient castles and monasteries, these were replaced by "bourgeois lodgings" (9). She states, that "[t]he Gothic was domesticated or better said the domestic was gothicised, especially in America", which lacked bygone buildings. As a result, writers imported Gothic into middle-class households, which proved to be perfect locations (10). The Gothic questioned the ideas of domesticity and claimed that dangers come from the private, which were thought to be safe and familiar (10). Băniceru asserts that one of the most common elements of the Gothic tradition is the presence of uncanny instances.

The concept of the 'uncanny' was described by Sigmund Freud and it was later explained in greater detail by Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle (Punter and Byron 283). David Punter and Glennis Byron quote their description of the 'uncanny', which is "making things *uncertain*: it has to do with the sense that things are not as they have come to appear through habit and familiarity, that they may challenge all rationality and logic" (qtd. 283). The name of the term is derived from the German *unheimlich* and shows the fear coming from domesticity: "unheimlich is related to the dangers lurking beneath the veneer of domesticity" (10).

Dennis R. Perry and Carl H. Sederholm analyze Charlotte Perkins Gilman's work, "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892) which they believe was inspired by Poe's short story, "The Fall of the House of Usher", and presents the story from Madeline Usher's point of view (20). Gilman in her writing focuses on the social system which "brings down both men and women" (32). Băniceru takes Poe's "The Black Cat" (1843) to introduce how domesticity affects both sexes. She quotes Cavallaro, who claims that domesticity is a cultural ideology that defines the feminized household as a refuge from the public sphere (11).

On the contrary, the same idea in Gothic has seemed as a repressing and confining place which infantilizes women (Băniceru 11). Person states that domesticity is damaging for everybody "the home [is] the nightmarish site of barely repressed hostility between men and women" (134), which is complemented by Băniceru's view that both sexes become victims of domesticity and its values (13). Despite this, female writers were more vocal to criticize the domestic ideal, especially in the Gothic tradition. Băniceru considers Poe to be the representative of the Male Gothic who expresses the disapproval of domesticity by "strick[ing] at the very heart of [it]" with the death of the 'angel in the house' (13) in his work.

This shows that both formulae of Gothic have similar attitudes toward the concept of domesticity, which is its explicit criticism (15). This approach can be seen in the short stories featuring the Dark Ladies, which are analyzed in the next subsections. The settings of these tales are homes, however, the traditional roles of men and women in the private sphere do not conform to the expectations of domesticity, what is more, the Dark Ladies seem to defy these.

Previously I mentioned women's treatment in the Male Gothic formula and the anxiety originating from the female 'other', which controls men to commit their crimes. These characteristics appear in Poe's four short stories featuring the Dark Ladies. According to Eliza Richards, Poe's male protagonists' violent revenge on the female characters is provoked by women's threatening power over them (10). Tracy Hayes also emphasizes this power and argues that the Dark Ladies are embodiments of the feminine monstrous which she defines as the masculine projection of women who cannot be repressed, what is more, they return in an unheimlich manner (1). She quotes Barbara Creed who believes the monstrous incarnates everything "what it is about woman that is shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject" (qtd. in Hayes 2).

The term, abjection, was coined by psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva and it refers to the violent exclusion, and rejection of something other than the self, however, it is never permanent, it stays to be both an unconscious and conscious threat (McAfee 46). The abjection of the mother is one of the most frequent signs defined by the

ambivalent feeling of the “longing to fall back into the maternal *chora* as well as a deep anxiety over the possibility of losing one’s subjectivity” (49). In the Gothic stories, the tension between desire and fear of the female other is often foregrounded as a result of which female characters tend to be objectified and abused because of their sexuality and their potential to be mothers. The agony that female figures evoke in male characters is exhibited in the power they exert on women, which is also viewed as a compensation for the fear and anxiety.

Furthermore, Debra Johanyak claims that while these female figures are feminist prototypes, the narrators display the antifeminist sentiments of the period and the fear of independent women (63). In the horror tales, all of the female characters share similar fates. They are carried away by a mysterious disease that distorts their beauty and eventually they die. Leland S. Person asserts that their illnesses “reflect [the narrators’] disease with their embodied beings” (139). The narrators of these stories try to oppress and abject women, however, their success in it is not permanent. The Dark Ladies “return to teach the oppressive idolater a lesson he will not forget” (Dayan 5).

Although critics generally believe Berenice’s agency is negligible compared to the other female figures, she undoubtedly has an influence on the male protagonist. Egaeus, her cousin and fiancé, states in the tale that his feelings “had never been of the heart, and [his] passion *always were* of the mind,” (Poe 101) but he admires her “gorgeous yet fantastic beauty,” (Poe 98) which starts to fade away caused by her fatal disease. Furthermore, Egaeus mentions that her “personal identity” also becomes distorted. As Berenice’s illness progresses the narrator’s dread from her, especially from her teeth, increasingly grows. It is stated that Egaeus is a monomaniac and by seeing the “white and ghastly spectrum of the teeth” he develops an obsession which makes him lose awareness during times he thinks about them (Poe 102).

After Berenice’s death and burial, her body is exhumed by the narrator to remove these menacing objects. Several scholars believe this organ represents female sexual desire and by discarding them Berenice can be desexualized. Moreover, Hayes argues that the teeth stand for the “vagina dentata, the threat of the feminine monstrous as castratrice, of emasculation” (3-4). Berenice’s smile is a central element in the short story. It is also suggested that it symbolizes the narrator’s similar fate. She greatly influences the narrator, who also starts to resemble a corpse, being “breathless and motionless” (Poe 102) by the mere sight of her. However, not just the sight but also her presence evokes “insufferable anxiety” in the narrator, as she intrudes the library (Poe 102). The library is obviously a sign of Berenice’s moral transgression since knowledge and culture belong to men. Therefore, the woman is seen as an invader, who needs to be banished.

Just like Berenice, Madeline Usher is also a voiceless character, despite this, many critics analyzed her character and many approaches have appeared considering her figure. While “The Fall of the House of Usher” focuses on the experiences and feelings of the two male protagonists, Madeline is constantly present in the story, and she actively controls the plot. According to Cynthia S. Jordan, the female character evokes fear and hatred in the narrator because she embodies female sexuality (8). Besides the ‘feminine’, Roderick and the narrator both try to repress “creativity in artistic and physical (reproductive) ventures” (Fisher 30). Diane Hoeveler also argues that Madeline is the projection of Roderick’s femininity which he objects from himself (391). The similarities between brother and sister are continuously emphasized in the short story, which can include not only physical qualities but personality traits too.

This might suggest that just like Roderick, his sister “ha[s] also been an active intellectual, reading, writing, painting, and playing an instrument” (Perry and Sederholm 32-33). Madeline like Berenice, appears on the border of men’s sphere, threatening male intellectual superiority. Moreover, it is reinforced by the fact that “the similarity of the characteristics of the sister and brother stresses the equality of the woman’s and man’s minds” (Li 22). To deprive Madeline of her power, both the narrator and Roderick try to oppress her. While she is still alive, they attempt to “exclude her from the text altogether” by ignoring her existence (Jordan 7). The narrator claims, that after his arrival “[Madeline’s] name was unmentioned by either Usher or [him]” as he was “busied in earnest endeavors to alleviate the melancholy of [his] friend”, which the sister evoked in Roderick (Poe 132).

This attention to Roderick and disregard for his sister suggests a complete unconcern toward the dying woman. Madeline is Roderick’s uncanny double and therefore foreshadows Roderick’s similar fate. Sigmund Freud argued in his essay “The Uncanny” that the double is one of the uncanny instances and signals a bad omen for the individual. Gothic fiction exploits the motif of the double to enhance the terror of the characters and foreshadow their tragic ending. The decaying body of Lady Madeline highlights Roderick’s anxiety over death and his own mortality, which he wants to rid himself of by burying his sister. Apart from the psychological torment triggered by the sight of the sickly woman, the burial scene, also reveals Roderick’s desire to (re-)unite with his sister, the symbolic mother, in an untimely womb where nothing can disturb their harmony. Freud associates live burials with a desire to return to the womb of the mother (14-15). Nonetheless, this desire for the mother (and the female body) as well as the anxiety that this irresistible longing creates is described and contained in the process of abjection. What is at stake here is control over one’s desires and one’s borders of identity threatened by these unconscious drives.

The female characters of “Morella” and “Ligeia” are analyzed together since they share many characteristics. Both unnamed narrators first express their adoration for their wives who possess great knowledge and beauty. Morella’s husband “abandoned [himself] implicitly to the guidance of [her]” and identifies himself as “her pupil” (Poe 105). Despite this, the feelings of the narrator change suddenly as his “joy suddenly faded into horror, and the most beautiful became the most hideous” (Poe 106). His feelings turn into a desire for Morella’s death, which after a long illness eventuates. The narrator experiences similar anxieties toward their daughter who “grew strangely in stature and intellect, and was the perfect resemblance of her who had departed”, and from fear, he does not even name the child (Poe 109).

Kennedy suggests, that by eventually naming his daughter Morella he seeks the same fate for her as for her mother (119). In the case of “Ligeia”, the narrator emphasizes both his wife’s beauty and “immense” learning and likewise acknowledges her “infinite supremacy” (Poe 115). He claims himself to be “a child groping benighted” without Ligeia, which suggests her role as a mother in this relationship (Poe 115). Her mysterious illness and death are mourned by the narrator, who later remarries Lady Rowena whom he loathes “with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man” (Poe 120). The new bride suffers the same fate as Ligeia, however, by her death, she completely loses her identity and receives no chance to return.

Hayes argues that “the unheimlich act of metempsychosis ushers in the return of the monstrous sexuality of Ligeia” as she consumes the body of the deceased Rowena (4). Johanyak sees them as ‘femmes fatale’, however, as not just their sexual power but their nonconformity to the domestic sphere and the traditional ideal of women make them fearsome (63). She believes Morella and Ligeia are considered to be dangerous because of the threat they pose to the male-dominated society.

I argue that although superficially the Dark Ladies are victims of men who try to repress them since they endanger the male characters and they cannot be regarded as passive. While these ladies suffer the same fate as Poe’s beautiful dead woman, they do not entirely fit the ideal. Their deaths do not mean their destruction as they resurrect. Person argues that “[t]he death of a beautiful woman, [...] is a logical outcome of woman’s separation and idealization. The Truest Woman, in effect, is a dead woman—an object, not a subject” (138).

As I previously mentioned in the first half of the nineteenth century, True Womanhood was the accepted ideal, and its pillars, the “four cardinal virtues—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity” served as the exemplary model for women (Welter 21). The Dark Ladies cannot correspond to these qualities. Person claims that the horror tales they appear in “might be read as a parody of

domestic values and the positive influences of separate spheres”, as these women do not meet the expectations of domesticity (135).

Of the four women, Berenice seems to be the most traditional one. Egaeus only accentuates her beauty and her “agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy” living (Poe 98). It can be said that Berenice is objectified in the tale. During her illness, Egaeus turns away from her since her decay “pervade[s] her mind, her habits, and her character” (Poe 98), instead he starts to concentrate on her only intact body part, her teeth. Although it is suggested that she revives from death, her body is violated and disfigured, moreover, it is not clarified what happens to her in the end. Nevertheless, it is not negligible how Berenice influences the narrator. Egaeus fears her smile, which, as I have argued before represents her sexuality, and dreads her mere presence. These confirm her power over the man.

Perry and Sederholm assert that “The Fall of the House of Usher” portrays how the “oppressive social system has split the genders in two in a way that signals the possibility of a new order for the new century” (35). Madeline is seemingly a passive character, whom both her brother and the narrator attempt to exclude from the text and destroy. According to Johanyak, despite this, the two women Madeline and Berenice “appear at dramatic moments, confronting their lovers at reading-room or library door, as though threatening entrance into a traditionally male sphere of intellectual advancement” (69).

Moreover, Madeline constantly affects men’s feelings and actions. She is seen as “the powerful, though silent and mostly absent, major agent of all action, thought, fear, and art in the story” (Perry and Sederholm 32). Perry and Sederholm believe that Madeline’s death is a willful act to escape (36). Death frees her from Roderick’s oppression, and she is given the agency to control him. Perry and Sederholm claim that the “suspiciously lingering smile upon [her] lip” (Poe 138) is the sign of the discovery and emergence of the self (36). Moreover, the narrator during their first encounter “regarded her with an utter astonishment not unmingled with dread” (Poe 132) and is constantly affected by her. She even influences Roderick who hears her struggle in the tomb for days but “dare[s] not to speak” (Poe 143). Finally, freeing herself from the vault she returns to avenge her repression by her brother and manages to force him down to the floor where they both die. Therefore, Madeline becomes an active character.

According to Johanyak Morella and Ligeia “acquire personal interests and aspirations having little to do with the domestic roles generally assigned to wives and mothers of this period” (63). They undeniably have a superior position in their relationships, which is acknowledged by the narrators. None of these characters

conform to the ideal of the True Woman, they seem to represent the prototype of the New Woman whose ideal emerged in the late nineteenth century (Martens 54). According to Person, Ligeia “reverses the conventional power imbalance between husband and wife” (135). Although Morella is a mother, she does not perform the roles of motherhood since her death allows her to escape from these responsibilities and child-rearing becomes the duty of the father.

The abilities of the child suggest that “each succeeding generation reinforces more strongly and demonstrates more clearly the evolution of women’s individuality and rights” (Johanyak 66). Both characters’ intellectual superiority over men is emphasized in the tales, as they are undeniably feminist characters ahead of their time who completely disobey the conventional roles of women and present a new ideal.

III

This paper argued that Edgar Allan Poe’s horror tales unambiguously employ the characteristics of the Male Gothic formula, however, instead of the definitive oppression and destruction of the female figures, his combination of gothic conventions with playful irony, gives women the opportunity to resist.

It has been discussed that the Female Gothic definitely aims to give an opportunity for writers to voice women’s silenced experiences, in contrast to the male formula, which exhibits the victimization and constant mistreatment of female characters. By analyzing the social context of the early nineteenth century it can be stated that the values of True Womanhood and the glorification of domesticity assisted women’s oppression. Nevertheless, a continuous change can be seen from the ideal of the True Woman to the Public Woman, which provided more favorable conditions for women, moreover the opportunity to speak up against the oppressive system.

The analysis of the selected works showed that the narratives are dominated by the male point of view. The Male Gothic formula is prevailing in these tales as they focus on the horror caused by the female other. However, men’s goal to contain and repress women cannot be achieved, since the female characters are able to reject the demands of the patriarchal society and resist their annihilation. The Dark Ladies of the Gothic short stories exercise their power over men by influencing their feelings and actions, invading the male sphere, moreover they return from death.

The findings of the paper suggest that while Poe mostly employed the Male Gothic formula in his horror tales, he also revised the misogynistic ideas of this tradition and innovated it to a genre, which is able to articulate women's previously suppressed experiences.

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