

The Return of the Real: A Lacanian Reading of Poe's Dying Woman Stories

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I

From the early Puritan poets to the recent post-modernist writers, death has been a persistent and preeminent topic in the history of American literature. In the nineteenth century, many writers reveled in exploring the enigmatic realm of death, and Poe among others relentlessly sought to investigate various aspects of death. For Poe, it was the locus of aesthetic fascination, sublime fear, and ultimate horror. In "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe makes the famous, though chilling statement that is central to his artistic creation: "the death [...] of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world."¹ This aesthetic principle clearly accounts for why Poe's young, attractive heroines have little chance of survival in his fictional world. The female characters often die of unknown fatal diseases or experience horrible deaths: mutilation, poisoning, strangulation, decapitation, suffocating premature burial, etc. It is thus not surprising that during the past three decades Poe's programmatic elimination of women in such tales as "Berenice," "Morella," "Ligeia," "The Black Cat," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and the Dupin tales has haunted feminist literary critics. For most feminist critics, Poe's attitude toward women is unquestionably misogynistic. In *Women*

1. Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition," in *Essays and Reviews*, ed. G. R. Thompson (New York: Library of America, 1984) 19.

and Death, Beth Ann Bassein provides a typically feminist perspective on Poe's problematic portrayal of women:

When looking at Poe's own immediate predecessors and contemporaries, it is obvious that he was not unique in his interest in dead females. Other writers with similar interests can be found [. . .]. What has escaped many is that his skills as a poet and fiction writer, his theories regarding art, beauty, and pain, and the enthusiasm of his audience have all helped perpetuate a view of woman that identifies her with the most passive state occurring, that of the dead, and thus creates negative conditioning for generation after generation of vulnerable readers.²

Although Bassein acknowledges that Poe's fascination with the disturbing conjunction of death and femininity is hardly unusual, she nevertheless urges that he be expelled from American literary tradition because he is the anti-feminist writer who most repeatedly exploits the death of females throughout his *oeuvre*. Therefore, Bassein insists, "all that Poe has done to relegate women to the world of the dead must be exorcised."³

Despite the dominant feminist view of Poe as a horrible, Gothic victimizer, several recent critics have claimed that the author's seemingly negative attitude toward women needs a more careful reconsideration and should not be simply dismissed as misogynist. Indeed, the adverse criticism concerning Poe needs to be reconsidered in relation to the textual fabric of his tales. As Jack G. Voller has pointed out, Poe was "never concerned to offer or even seek an answer"; his work is primarily concerned with "a world of uncertainty."⁴ Indeed, most of Poe's tales are written around an ultimate indeterminacy which blurs and breaks down all familiar boundaries between self and other, life and death, real and illusion, dream and reality, conscious and unconscious, natural and supernatural, masculine and feminine, etc. Many of Poe's protagonists ask themselves repeatedly, "What was it?" They are vainly struggling to name, define, and describe something that cannot be adequately represented. Poe's texts are not only concerned with the failure of representation, but also with the endless deferral of meaning. As Lacan might say,

2. Beth Ann Bassein, *Women and Death: Linkages in Western Thought and Literature* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1984) 44.

3. Bassein 55.

4. Jack G. Voller, *The Supernatural Sublime: The Metaphysics of Terror in Anglo-American Romanticism* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois UP, 1994) 224.

there is “an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier.”⁵ In this Poe-esque world, nothing is guaranteed and meaning is always indeterminate. Given Poe’s notorious textual indeterminacy, caution must be exercised when trying to determine whether Poe’s narrative reflects and valorizes the nineteenth-century repressive attitudes toward women or not. Does Poe simply reinscribe the stereotypical Victorian literary representation of woman as a selfless, passive object of art whose existence is tantamount to a death-in-life? In this paper, I intend to examine current revisionist attempts at establishing Poe as an early feminist and to recontextualize the unsettling and subversive resurgence of the dead or dying woman in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “Morella,” “Ligeia,” and “The Oval Portrait” in light of what I read as the traumatic return of the Lacanian Real in these texts.

II

Recently, such critics as Cynthia S. Jordan and Leland S. Person have questioned and challenged the traditional notion that Poe’s characterization of women tends to silence and suppress feminine experience. In *Second Stories*, Cynthia S. Jordan argues that Poe joins “his fellow American romancers” James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville in his portrayal of “how the language of male-dominant culture” promotes the repression of feminine otherness.⁶ Jordan sees Poe’s stories about women as texts which seek to dramatize the repressiveness of androcentric culture and give voice to the violently silenced “woman’s story,” or what she calls the “second story.” According to Jordan, Poe’s effort to recover the second story culminates in the emergence of the Dupin tales published between 1841 and 1845:

Here the investigation of overt and seemingly isolated crimes against women uncovers a network of covert gender-related crimes that pervades the entire social order, and the task of solving both the obvious and the hidden crimes calls for a detective with an awa-

5. Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1977)154.

6. Cynthia S. Jordan, *Second Stories: The Politics of Language, Form, and Gender in Early American Fictions* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1989) 134.

renewed that other men lack. In the androgynous Dupin, Poe created a new and unquestionably heroic caretaker of social and political order, and Dupin fulfills these responsibilities by going beyond the imaginative limits of the male storytellers around him and fully recovering the second story – the woman's story – that has previously gone untold.⁷

In Jordan's view, the Dupin tales mark Poe's developed awareness of the criminal nature of silencing female experience. Dupin reveals his androgynous nature when he speaks in dual modes in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and recreates the female victim's thought in the first person in "The Mystery of Marie Roget." While Judith Fetterley argues that it is Dupin's recognition of his own criminal nature ("the existence of the beast in and as himself"⁸) that enables him to solve violent crimes against women, Jordan contends that Dupin's androgynous nature allows him to uncover the stories of women victimized by patriarchal culture. In striking contrast to the established feminist studies, Jordan sees Poe as a prototypical feminist writer whose tales increasingly reflect his commitment to feminist ethics: "[Poe's] tales show an evolving feminist ethos, a growing awareness and renunciation of death-dealing, male-authored fictions [...]. I have to conclude that Poe's ability to tell both stories, or both halves of the human story, is, therefore, the sign of what we would today call feminist re-vision."⁹

In *Aesthetic Headaches*, Leland S. Person argues that "the predominant view of Poe as an idolater, even 'murderer,' of women offers only a partial portrait and does not explain the tendency in story after story, for example, of idealized women to metamorphose into their opposite – for the 'most beautiful' to become the 'most hideous,' or for dead women to come back to life."¹⁰ Person acknowledges that Poe has a problematic tendency towards the idealization of women and that dying women are integral to Poe's artistic vision. But, Person claims, Poe's texts nevertheless interrogate the male tendency to objectify women in order to demon-

7. Jordan 135.

8. Judith Fetterley, "Reading about Reading: 'A Jury of Her Peers,' 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' and 'The Yellow Wallpaper,'" in *Gender and Reading: Essays on Readers, Texts, and Contexts*, eds. Elizabeth A. Flynn and Patrocínio P. Schweickart (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1986) 147-64.

9. Jordan 150-51.

10. Leland S. Person, *Aesthetic Headaches: Women and a Masculine Poetics in Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988) 22.

strate its destructive effect for female and male characters alike. Poe's work exposes and criticizes this objectifying male desire, by creating powerful female characters who refuse to stay dead and who resist being transformed into aesthetic objects:

For Poe, the best woman may very well have been a dead woman, but [...] the process within the male mind by which an image of woman is deadened inevitably results in the woman's revitalization [...]. For nearly all of Poe's protagonists, in fact, the repression of all but the most benignly idealized image of woman consistently results in a violent shock to the creative imagination, as the woman in effect refuses to be repressed and so returns, often in a vengeful form, to assert her freedom from male domination and manipulation.¹¹

As several revisionist critics have pointed out, what should be noted is that Poe's tragic heroines refuse to be passively repressed and tenaciously come back from the tomb threatening to undermine the masculine authority founded upon the rigid, phallic order of the Symbolic. Poe's female characters are all suffering from a degree of exclusion – which runs from partial to total – from the realm of the Symbolic. But they return with a vengeance, violently breaking down the familiar boundaries based on the logic of binary oppositions. From a psychoanalytic perspective, Poe's uncanny heroines have close affinity with the Lacanian notion of the Real that subsists outside the subject, outside the system of signification. Although it is difficult to give the notion of the Real any consistency at all, it can be broadly defined as the domain that includes everything which cannot be mediated by language, that is, by the Symbolic. Since it is ineffable and inassimilable to symbolization, the order of the Real is generally identified as “the impossible,” and this “impossible” Real is in direct opposition to and defined by the “possible” Symbolic.¹² In the Lacanian scheme, what defines the Real is its strict opposition to the Symbolic: “In the subject's relation to the symbol there is the possibility of a primitive *Verwerfung*, that is, that something is not symbolized and is going to appear in the real. It is essential to introduce the category of the real [...]. I give it this name so as to define a field different from the symbolic. From there alone is it possible to throw light on the psychotic

11. Person 40.

12. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton, 1981) 167.

phenomenon and its evolution.”¹³ Thus, the Real has always been characterized in negative terms such as the “*impasse*,” the “*impossible*,” the “*ineffable*,” the “*inassimilable*,” the “*unknowable*,” the “*ungraspable*,” the “*unnameable*,” and the “*unrepresentable*.”

According to Lacan, everything that is refused in the Symbolic reappears in the Real, which is usually conceived as the stumbling block or the traumatic hard kernel resisting symbolization. Elisabeth Roudinesco has elaborated on the Lacanian concept of the Real: while Freud’s psychical reality presents “a coherence comparable with material reality,” Lacan’s Real takes on “an idea of morbidity, of *reste* (vestige), of *part maudite* (doomed or accursed part), borrowed without attribution from the heterological science of Bataille.”¹⁴ After defining the Lacanian Real as that which is “excluded from all symbolization and inaccessible to all subjective thought,” Roudinesco calls it a “ghost” or a “black shadow” existing beyond our cognitive perception.¹⁵ Like the Lacanian “haunting” Real, Poe’s dead woman returns in the form of a ghost-like figure or a hallucinatory phenomenon, fiercely disrupting the male subject’s Symbolically-structured reality.

To illustrate my theoretical point, I will begin with “The Fall of the House of Usher,” surely one of Poe’s most widely read and discussed tales. The narrator’s sojourn with the Ushers involves him in a series of bizarre and supernatural events for which he has no probable explanation. When one evening Usher suddenly informs his friend that Madeline, the twin sister who has been suffering from catalepsy, is dead and that he intends to preserve her corpse in an iron-doored vault in the basement, he and the unnamed narrator bury/repress the body of Madeline. The events which follow are too well known to require detailed rehearsing here. Briefly, at the height of a terrible tempest, Usher shouts that Madeline was still alive when they put her in her coffin and is now standing outside the door. The door swings open, and there stands the walking cadaver. Madeline’s horrible body falls upon her brother, and they fall dead to the floor simultaneously. As she falls atop her brother, the house itself begins

13. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses 1955-1956*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 1993) 82.

14. Elisabeth Roudinesco, *Jacques Lacan: European Perspectives*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Columbia UP, 1997) 217.

15. Roudinesco 217.

to crumble and collapse. In horror the narrator flees from the house of Usher before he too is consumed by the engulfing tarn. In this Gothic tale par excellence, Poe's heroine thus makes an apocalyptic return to retaliate for her premature burial and to interrupt the male-centered narrative of the tale itself.

Poe's "Morella" provides another good example which demonstrates the intricate connection between Poe's dead woman and the traumatic Real. In this tale the narrator/husband feels a deep ambivalence towards his intellectually active and remarkably well-educated wife. Morella has a quasi-phallic potency that disturbs and challenges her husband's masculine superiority and authority, bringing about a reversal of traditional gender roles. Morella devotes herself to her husband, but he finds himself unable to "bear the touch of her wan fingers, nor the low tone of her musical language, nor the lustre of her melancholy eyes."¹⁶ After she becomes ill, the narrator relates how he longed with "an earnest and consuming desire for the moment of Morella's decease" and how he "grew furious through delay, and, with the heart of a fiend, cursed the days, and the hours, and the bitter moments, which seemed to lengthen and lengthen as her gentle life declined – like shadows in the dying of the day" (232). One autumn evening, she calls him to her side and says: "I am dying, yet shall I live [...] her whom in life thou didst abhor, in death thou shalt adore" (232). At last the lady dies, but, as is always the case with Poe's tales of women, it is not the end of the story. A daughter is born at the very moment of Morella's death. While the narrator loves his female child dearly, he becomes disturbed and even terrified by the increasing resemblance between daughter and mother. For ten years she remains nameless, called "My child" and "My love" by her father. But at her baptism, the narrator impulsively names her "Morella" and suffers an immediate spasm of fear: "What fiend spoke from the recesses of my soul, when, amid those dim aisles, and in the silence of the night, I whispered within the ears of the holy man the syllables – Morella?" (235) Suddenly the child convulses and falls prostrate, saying "I am here!" When the narrator interts the dead child in the ancestral vault, he finds no

16. Edgar Allan Poe, , *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Thomas Olive Mabbot (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1978) 231. Further references to Poe's stories are to this edition and will appear within parenthesis in the text.

chanel traces at all in the empty tomb of his wife. The death of the first Morella is a necessary prelude for the unfolding of the grotesque climax – her vindictive and terrifying reincarnation in the body of another woman, in this case, her own daughter. Like Madeline in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Morella, the excluded Other from the Symbolic, comes back in the form of a traumatic Real.

The horrifying return of the dead woman in “Ligeia” can be understood in a similar vein. Indeed, both “Morella” and “Ligeia” feature three typical Poe themes: the death of an ethereal and idealized woman, the psychologically unreliable male narrator, and a cadaverous resurrection. In the entire Poe canon, “Ligeia” presents by far the most active woman in her sexual, artistic, and intellectual activity. In the story, Ligeia’s castrating and subversive power represented by her phallic eyes comes to pose a great threat to her husband’s masculine autonomy and patriarchal authority. The narrator effaces/objectifies Ligeia by dissecting her into numerous part object through the fetishistic male gaze. Whereas the living Ligeia appears to accept her status as victim without resistance, the dead Ligeia returns in the corpse of the dead Rowena to exact her revenge. Ligeia inhabits and gradually displaces Rowena’s body with her own. The narrator refers to the process of Ligeia’s reincarnation as a “hideous drama of revivification” (328). The narrator encounters the unspeakable horror of the traumatic Real when he recognizes Ligeia’s apparent possession of Rowena:

I trembled not – I stirred not – for a crowd of unutterable fancies connected with the air, the stature, the demeanor of the figure, rushing hurriedly through my brain, had paralyzed – had chilled me into stone [. . .]. Could it, indeed, be the living Rowena who confronted me? [. . .] And now slowly opened the eyes of the figure which stood before me. “Here then, at least,” I shrieked aloud, “can I never – can I never be mistaken – these are the full, and black, and the wild eyes – of my lost love – of the lady – of the LADY LIGEIA!” (321)

Is the rebirth of Ligeia an instance of genuine supernatural survival or the diseased hallucination of a psychotic narrator? The hideous climax offers no clear explanation for this occurrence. Poe’s bizarre tale comes to an abrupt ending immediately after the narrator names the apparition as Ligeia. Like the impossible Real that blocks the dialectical movement of symbolization, the dead woman’s traumatic return from the realm of the dead violently unsettles the stable procession of male narrative.

Like the previous Poe tales we have discussed, the male protagonist in "The Oval Portrait" also enters into problematic relations with a woman. In this story, the wounded narrator seeks refuge in a gloomy, abandoned chateau. The narrator convalesces in a small apartment where he is much taken by an enchanting portrait of "a young girl just ripening into womanhood". But the narrator tells us that he "glanced at the painting hurriedly and then closed [his] eyes" (663). There is something unusual and disturbing about the portrait that provokes the male narrator's defensive reaction. After the narrator reopens his eyes and looks more closely at the haunting portrait, it continues to confront him as the unfamiliar and inexplicable Real, producing a "deep agitation." The narrator finds in it an uncanny quality that, he says, "so suddenly and so vehemently moved me," and "at first startling, finally confounded, subdued and appalled me" (664). Feeling that something horrible must lurk in the portrait, the unnamed narrator takes up and reads a volume at his bedside that describes the paintings and their histories. The narrator learns that the beautiful woman in the provocative picture loved and married a passionate, wild, moody artist, who painted her portrait for many months. The woman slowly dies as her life is transferred into the cold canvas:

He would not see that the light which fell so ghastly in that lone turret withered the health and spirits of his bride, who pined visibly to all but him [. . .] the painter took a fervid and burning pleasure in his task, and wrought day and night to depict her who so loved him, yet who grew daily more dispirited and weak [. . .]. And he would not see that tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sat beside him. (665)

The artist/husband ignores his wife and pays attention only to his artistic work: he rarely turns his eyes from her painted image, "even to regard the countenance of his wife" (665). In the dark turret-chamber, he is preying on her like a vampire, killing her by degrees. When the portrait is finally finished, he calls it life itself and then turns to his wife only to realize in the same moment that she is dead. In this disturbing tale, Poe's subversive portrait of the male artist as vampire is deliberately employed to expose the dangers associated with masculine creation. The artist willingly sacrifices the female subject in his perverse pursuit of artistic perfection. It is interesting to note that the tale was first published under the title "Life in Death." In life, the heroine was uniformly passive and compliant, accepting the situation up to her death: "she was humble and obe-

dient, and sat meekly for many weeks [...]. Yet she smiled on and still on, uncomplainingly" (665). In death, however, she aggressively haunts the male unconscious, evoking castration anxiety. Like other Poe heroines, the unnamed woman in the portrait refuses to stay dead; she refuses to be passively captured in the two-dimensional oval portrait and to be the mere fetish object of male contemplation. The Medusa-like female gaze has an emasculating or castrating effect on the masculine onlookers. Poe's women who return (or seem to return) from death in "The Fall of the House of Usher," "Morella," "Ligeia," and "The Oval Portrait" perfectly represent the Lacanian Real that "turns our symbolic universe upside down" and "happens to us, surprises us, throws us out of joint, because it always inscribes itself in a given continuity as a rupture, a break or an interruption."¹⁷

III

Poe's aesthetic coupling of woman and death has long troubled feminist literary critics, then. Feminist studies of Poe's tales of women have concentrated negatively on Poe as allegedly patriarchal in his treatment of women characters. Poe's texts are criticized because they seem to valorize the typical nineteenth-century "aesthetic ideal through which [women] have been killed into art."¹⁸ As articulated by Joan Dayan, "what are we to do with Poe's bleeding, raped, decapitated, dead, and resurrected women, brutalized, buried, cemented in cellars, and stuffed up chimneys?"¹⁹ Contrary to widespread feminist assumption, however, recent critics' revisionist readings discuss Poe as a feminist writer who offers a deliberate, ironic critique of male attitudes toward women. In "Poesian Feminism: Triumph or Tragedy," Debra Johanyak observes:

Poe's females are generally viewed as femmes fatale proffering dangerous sexual charms. However, a closer analysis of the narrators reveal startling role exchanges that vindicate the dark heroine and convict her lover as destroyer or murderer, reflecting

17. Alenka Zupanicic, *Ethics of the Real* (London: Verso, 2000) 235.

18. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1976) 17.

19. Joan Dayan, "Poe's Women: A Feminist Poe?" *Poe Studies* 26 (1993): 10.

anti-feminist views of Poe's male contemporaries [. . .]. Poe's dark heroines function as feminist prototypes, while his narrators demonstrate and enact antifeminist sentiments.²⁰

As we have seen, Poe's female characters resist being repressed and they return triumphantly from the grave to haunt their male oppressors. The symptomatic return of Poe's threatening (un)dead heroines in the dying woman stories marks an irruption of the traumatic Real into the patriarchal realm of the Symbolic. Poe's uncanny, ghost-like heroine is the negative entity, "the impossible-to-symbolize," and this leads us back to the Lacanian definition of the Real as the "impossible." Since it is impossible to verbalize or symbolize, the Real often presents itself as horrifying and threatening. In his *Seminar II*, Lacan compares the frightening head of Medusa to the Real and then describes that order as the "object of anxiety par excellence"; it is "this something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail."²¹ The Real is what one stumbles over, and the contact with the Real usually provokes great anxiety and horror. In our daily lives we encounter the invisible face of the Real in the form of death, sudden catastrophe, traumatic event, and psychotic delirium. Here I have discussed the unearthly, threatening return of Poe's heroines in conjunction with the terrifying anxiety-provoking Real. Poe's dead woman rises up from the grave where she ought to have been kept concealed and operates from outside the Symbolic order. The uncanny Real existence of the dead heroine poses the ultimate threat to masculine subjectivity, utterly defying the sacred Law of the Father. The current debate over the puzzling question of Poesian feminism suggests that Poe's attitude toward gender issues is far more complicated than generally assumed by traditional literary critics and scholars. Whether he was the true vanguard of male feminists will long remain a matter of dispute among critics, but there can be no question that it is time to reapproach and reevaluate Poe, to see him as more than a tormented, misogynistic nineteenth-century American writer who is preoccupied with manipulating

20. Debra Johanyak, "Poesian Feminism: Triumph or Tragedy," *College Language Association* 39 (1995): 63.

21. Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. John Forrester (New York: Norton, 1988) 164.

the death of a beautiful woman. As my Lacanian reading of Poe demonstrates, his textual representations of female characters deconstruct nineteenth-century cultural constructions of gender and expose the mechanisms of fetishistic, perverse masculine desire which silences and objectifies the woman as Other.*

* This paper was supported by Konkuk University in 2005.