

Female Figures in Edgar Allan Poe's Terror Narratives

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Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe's tales repeatedly return to a dying woman whose vitality seems to intensify as death approaches. Much scholarship has treated her as a symbol—of the narrator's unconscious, of male fear and domination, or of cultural decay—and in doing so has looked past the figure herself. This paper argues that Poe's dying women produce terror not by symbolizing anything, but by refusing to occupy any stable category. Through close reading of "Berenice," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "Morella," and "Ligeia," it traces three unsolvable oppositions in which each heroine is suspended. First, trance and catalepsy blur the boundary between life and death, so that neither the narrator nor the reader can tell whether she lives. Second, a wasting body coexists with an indomitable life force: the teeth survive the decaying frame, the buried body keeps breathing, and the will outlives the flesh. Third, she oscillates between presence and absence, appearing and vanishing at the whim of narrators who are diseased, superstitious, or opium-ridden, so that her existence cannot be verified. Because language and category cannot fix her, the reader can neither classify her nor locate her, and the tale sustains an unsettled terror that never resolves. The dying woman is terrifying, the paper concludes, precisely because she cannot be placed.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe; Gothic fiction; the dying woman; terror; unreliable narration

Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe was an American author who is best known for his tales of mystery and the macabre. One of the most captivating and frequently discussed figures in Poe's Gothic fiction is a recurring type of character: a woman who is dying, yet whose vitality paradoxically intensifies as death approaches. Existing scholarship has approached these figures primarily through the lens of symbolism. For instance, psychoanalytic readings see her as a projection of the narrator's unconscious, feminist readings as a figure of male fear and domination, and historicist readings as an emblem of death and decay in a particular cultural moment.

What these readings share is a movement away from the figure toward what it represents, but this paper examines the figure as a mode of existence and asks how this mode acts upon the reader. By analyzing Poe's depictions of these female characters in "Berenice," "The Fall of the House of Usher," "Morella," and "Ligeia," this paper argues that Poe's dying women produce terror by refusing to occupy any stable category. Each heroine is suspended between three unsolvable oppositions: life and death, a wasting body and an indomitable life force, and presence and absence. The three sections that follow examine the three oppositions in turn; the conclusion returns to the reader to show how this unresolved suspension produces terror.

Life and Death

These women inhabit a state suspended between life and death. This blurring of boundaries manifests differently across the four tales.

In "Berenice," the boundary dissolves through illness: Berenice's epilepsy terminates in "trance itself—trance very nearly resembling positive dissolution, and from which her manner of recovery was, in most instances, startlingly abrupt." A trance "very nearly resembling positive dissolution" is a state that imitates death:

As defined in Webster's 1913 Dictionary, a condition, often simulating death, in which there is a total suspension of the power of voluntary movement, with abolition of all evidences of mental activity and the reduction to a minimum of all the vital functions so that the patient lies still and apparently unconscious of surrounding objects, while the pulsation of the heart and the breathing, although still present, are almost or altogether imperceptible.

In such moments, life and death become indistinguishable. Her recoveries are equally unpredictable, leaving the narrator with no stable moment to determine whether she is alive or dead before her next awakening. The uncertainty is built into the narration itself. Egaeus learns of Berenice's fate not as a witness but through a servant's whispered report of "a violated grave—of a disfigured body enshrouded, yet still breathing—still palpitating—still alive!" His account is filtered through a mind he confesses to be diseased ("my own disease...assumed finally a monomaniac character") and his memory is broken: he "found himself sitting in the library, and again sitting there alone." The reader is therefore never given a reliable account of whether Berenice is alive or dead. The text withholds the answer, thus conveying a sense of terror.

In "The Fall of the House of Usher," this ambiguity deepens. Madeline's condition is described as: "A settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although

transient affections of a partially cataleptical character, were the unusual diagnosis."

Webster's 1913 Dictionary defines catalepsy as "a sudden suspension of sensation and volition, the body and limbs preserving the position that may be given them, while the action of the heart and lungs continues." It mimics death so convincingly that no one can tell where illness ends and death begins. At the entombment, as the narrator and Usher look upon her in the vault, the disease has left behind "the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is so terrible in death.

Blush and smile are signs of life, yet they appear on a body sealed inside a coffin. The words "mockery" and "suspiciously lingering" are crucial: "mockery" implies a terrifying intention—the disease mocks the observer, deliberately displaying life-signs that should not exist. "Suspiciously lingering" reinforces this terror: this smile is a trace that the life force refuses to fade, as if deliberately toying with the boundary between life and death. Unlike Berenice's oscillating trance, here death performs life—actively deceiving the observer through its imitation of a living body. The unreliable diagnosis intensifies the terror: the narrator learned it from Roderick, whose manner once struck the narrator with "an incoherence—an inconsistency," whose "leaden, self-balanced, and perfectly modulated guttural utterance, which may be observed in the lost drunkard, or the irreclaimable eater of opium, during the periods of his most intense excitement," and who confesses that he expects soon to "abandon life and reason together" in his struggle with fear. Therefore, the reader is offered no unmediated view of Madeline's state.

In "Morella," life and death become blurred through the transfer of identity. On one

autumnal evening, Morella calls the narrator to her bedside. She announces from her deathbed: "I am dying, yet shall I live." Her child "breathed not until the mother breathed no more." The words "until" and "no more" construct a precise, instantaneous connection—the mother's final breath and the daughter's first occur at the same moment. The narrator later discovers in the daughter an endless series of resemblances to the mother—her smile, her gaze, her way of speaking—all suggesting the continuity of the same soul. At this moment of the child's birth, death becomes a passage for life; she stands within that passage, as the death and birth of the same soul occur simultaneously in two different bodies. Thus an unanswerable question emerges: where exactly is Morella's soul? It has left Morella's body (so she is dead), but it has not yet fully entered the daughter's body—for the daughter has only just begun to breathe, and her growth toward "perfect resemblance" still requires time. She is neither within the dead Morella nor fully within the newborn daughter—she is suspended between the two, in the gap of bodily transition. Morella's body is dead, but her soul has not yet fully become another's soul. This suspension is an identity-transfer left unresolved—should her present state be defined as Morella's "state of death," or her daughter's "state of life"? The answer is indeterminate, because both occur simultaneously and are mutually conditional.

In "Ligeia," this blurring is presented in its most complete form—on the same body, life and death repeatedly pull against each other, alternating in succession. After the death of the narrator's second wife, Rowena, her body undergoes a series of violent oscillations between lifelessness and life: a flush of color appears on the cheeks—then vanishes, leaving "a

wanness even more than that of marble"; a sigh escapes the lips, a tremor passes over the mouth—then the body stiffens into the "ghastly expression of death." Each revival manifests as the return of "warmth, color, sound"—things belonging to the living; each relapse manifests as "stiffening, pallor, coldness"—things belonging to the dead. Life and death alternate on the same body, and each alternation makes the question "Is she alive or dead?" increasingly unanswerable. This continues through the night, each death deeper, each revival more desperate, until the boundary between life and death becomes a territory of perpetual flux.

Feeble Body and Indomitable Will

These women are not merely suspended between life and death. They also embody a contradiction that a feeble body and an indomitable life force coexist within the same figure, including physical life force reflected in Berenice and Madeline, and mental life force demonstrated in Morella and Ligeia. Berenice's teeth thrive in a decaying frame; Madeline's entombed body keeps smiling; Morella's "powers of mind" are "gigantic" and her spirit clings to its "tenement of clay"; Ligeia is driven by "that gigantic volition" and her "wild desire for life" even as her body fails.

In "Berenice," this contradiction appears in the contrast between teeth and body. After Berenice falls ill, the narrator observes that "its emaciation was excessive, and not one vestige of the former being lurked in any single line of the contour." "Emaciation" points to the disintegration of the physical body: every part is wasting away, the former contours erased. Her eyes "were lifeless, and lustreless, and seemingly pupil-less." Yet when she

smiles, the teeth revealed are "long, narrow, and excessively white." In contrast to the fading body, the teeth are marks that do not belong to it. When Berenice is buried alive and her teeth are extracted one by one, she is found still alive. Her feeble body is destroyed to the extreme, yet she stubbornly survives.

In "The Fall of the House of Usher," Madeline's contradiction lies between bodily helplessness and violent action. Her body is diagnosed with "a settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person"—apathy, emaciation, and no sign of active response. "Apathy" medically signifies "unresponsiveness" to stimulus—the body is incapable of responding to the external world. Nevertheless, when, as the narrator reports, Madeline breaks free from her coffin, the narrator sees "there was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame." Blood and the marks of struggle appear on "every portion" of her "emaciated" body. She has lain locked in her coffin for seven days, and "bitter struggle" suggests a prolonged, agonizing, and active resistance towards death.

In "Morella," this contradiction takes the form of a dying body confronting an indelible will. Morella's body is consumed by illness; the narrator records its deterioration: "the crimson spot settled steadily upon the cheek, and the blue veins upon the pale forehead became prominent." The crimson (blood) and blue (veins) become starkly visible against the pallid skin, evidence of being devoured by disease.

At the same time, Morella's mind expands in the opposite direction. The narrator notes that her "powers of mind were gigantic," and that she was absorbed in "the wild Pantheism of

Fichte; the modified Palingenesia of the Pythagoreans; and, above all, the doctrines of Identity as urged by Schelling" during her final days. A woman whose body is failing speaks of things death cannot end: identity, the persistence of the soul, and the question of whether personhood survives extinction. The body is dying, but the will defies this condition.

Morella's own body does not survive, but she leaves behind in her daughter "the perfect resemblance"—"her smile was like her mother's...her eyes were like Morella's...in the contour of the high forehead, and in the ringlets of the silken hair, and in the wan fingers...and in the sad musical tones of her speech, and above all, in the phrases and expressions of the dead on the lips of the loved and the living." The "wan fingers" directly echo the marks of decay in Morella's own body. The daughter's fingers are also pale, inheriting the "feeble body" from the mother. More significantly, the "phrases and expressions" of a dying woman appear on the lips of a living child. Morella's body is dead, but her language, thought, and her way of expressing continue in another body.

In "Ligeia," a dying body and an overwhelming will coexist, and after the body perishes, the will seizes another body and takes it over. The motto from Glanvill that opens "Ligeia" declares that "man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will." It is the feebleness of the will that lets death win. The narrator explicitly connects this passage to Ligeia, revealing her indomitable spiritual force: "Length of years, and subsequent reflection, have enabled me to trace...some remote connection between this passage in the English moralist and a portion of the character of Ligeia." Ligeia is described as "tall, somewhat slender, and, in her latter days, even

emaciated." "Emaciated" signals the consumption of the body. In her final moments, however, the narrator observes "the fierce energy ... of the wild words which she habitually uttered," and "the intensity of her wild desire for life,—for life—but for life." The triple repetition of "for life" creates an obsessive intensity. Her will is not merely wanting to live but ravenously consuming life. At the peak of physical weakness, she desires life with the greatest violence. The most fragile and the most violent exist in the same moment.

After Ligeia's death, her will appears in Rowena's body. Rowena is described as "the fair-haired, the blue-eyed Lady Rowena Trevanion," and Ligeia's hair is "raven-black." When Rowena's body finally rises, the narrator sees "huge masses of long and dishevelled hair; it was blacker than the raven wings of the midnight!" From "fair-haired" to "blacker than the raven wings" lies a replacement. Rowena's body remains, but its external marker (fair hair) has been overwritten by Ligeia's marker (black hair). Ligeia's will, returning through the re-emergence of her entire image, reappears in another body.

Yet the reader cannot verify any of this, because the narrator is an admitted addict: "I had become a bounden slave in the trammels of opium," and the final night is narrated as "wild visions, opium-engendered, flitted, shadow-like, before me." He can say only that "I saw, or may have dreamed that I saw". The resurrection of Ligeia is therefore observed through a mind that cannot be trusted. The reader can neither confirm her return nor dismiss it.

Presence and Absence

These women are not only suspended between states, but also oscillate between

presence and absence, like an apparition. The narration cannot determine whether they are present or only in the narrator's mind.

In "Berenice," Berenice's presence and absence are dependent on the narrator's (her cousin Egaeus's) perception. The way she appears is never seen or described. She is simply there: "Through the grey of the early morning—among the trellised shadows of the forest at noonday—and in the silence of my library at night—she had flitted by my eyes, and I had seen her—not as the living and breathing Berenice, but as the Berenice of a dream." "I sat (and sat, as I thought, alone) in the inner apartment of the library. But, uplifting my eyes, I saw that Berenice stood before me;" when a door shuts, he looks up and finds that "my cousin had departed from the chamber." Her arrivals and departures are never witnessed, and his memory of her is "a memory like a shadow—vague, variable, indefinite, unsteady," so that, in the narrator's mind, her presence and absence are hardly differentiable. He cannot tell whether what he sees is real: "Was it my own excited imagination—or the misty influence of the atmosphere—or the uncertain twilight of the chamber—or the grey draperies which fell around her figure—that caused in it so vacillating and indistinct an outline?" After the burial, her presence dissolves into pure mental obsession, and her teeth obsess him: "The teeth!—the teeth!—they were here, and there, and every where, and visibly and palpably before me." She is present everywhere because she can be located nowhere in the world. The description of Berenice's presence and absence is limited by the narrator's perspective, so the reader cannot decide whether she is ever really there, and this uncertainty creates terror.

In "The Fall of the House of Usher," Madeline is also on the borderline of presence and

absence. Soon after the narrator arrives at the House of Usher and enters Roderick's room, Madeline "passed slowly through a remote portion of the apartment, and, without having noticed my presence, disappeared." She does not even register the narrator. From then on she is ill, entombed, and for seven days absent. After the entombment, everything the reader learns about Madeline comes from her brother, Roderick, whose mind is collapsing. On a stormy night, the narrator bends over him and drinks in "the hideous import of his words." Roderick declares that "we [himself and the narrator] have put her living in the tomb!" and that he heard "her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin" days ago. Finally, he shrieks that "she now stands without [outside] the door!" Nothing he says can be verified. The claim that Madeline is present may be true, or it may be the delirium of a mind anticipating her return. The narrator cannot settle it either, for he admits that he feels creeping upon him "the wild influence of his own fantastic yet impressive superstitions." When the door finally bursts open and "the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher" appears, the reader still cannot tell whether she stands there in fact or only as the shared hallucination of two infected minds.

In "Morella," presence survives the decay of the body and becomes a part of the narrator's perception. After Morella's death the narrator tries to escape her, but her image is deeply rooted in his mind: "among them all I beheld only—Morella. The winds of the firmament breathed but one sound within my ears, and the ripples upon the sea murmured evermore—Morella." Her body is dead, so she is absent from the world, but she is present in everything the narrator perceives. The sentence begins with his perception, "I beheld," and

the name reaches him through his senses. The text then removes her corpse from its grave. When Morella's daughter dies in turn and is laid in the family vault, the narrator opens the tomb and finds "no traces of the first in the channel where I laid the second:" the mother's corpse has vanished. Finally, her presence and absence no longer oppose each other, for the very thought of her physical absence leads to her spiritual presence in the narrator's mind.

In "Ligeia," presence and absence are defined by the narrator's mind. Describing how Ligeia moved through his life, he admits he cannot even remember her clearly: "she came and departed as a shadow." In life, her presence was not solid, and after death her traits no longer cling to a body at all. The narrator has felt the quality of her gaze "in the ocean," "in the falling of a meteor," "in the glances of unusually aged people." Her presence is dispersed through the universe, diluted into everything and therefore located nowhere. When she finally returns, she does so in another woman's body (the transition already traced in the previous section) so that her presence reappears where her own body no longer exists. And the scene that grants this return is the one the narrator can least guarantee, for he is the man who, in "the excitement of my opium dreams," would "call aloud upon her name" until her image rose before him. The reader therefore cannot decide whether Ligeia has returned from death or only from the narrator's longing.

In each tale, then, the heroine's presence and absence are decided not by any observable fact but by the narrator's perception. Since every narrator is unreliable, the reader can never know whether she is here or only imagined.

Conclusion

Each heroine occupies both ends of every opposition at once—dead yet alive, wasting yet indomitable, present yet absent. A category holds only one state, and language names only one side at a time. Therefore, no category or name can fix her. The reader, who sees everything through unreliable narrators, can neither classify her nor locate her. This unresolved suspension is the terror: a question the text refuses to answer and an unease that lingers.

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