

University of Iceland
School of Humanities
Department of English

**Obsession in Edgar Allan Poe's *Berenice*
and *Ligeia***

B.A. Essay

Sunna Guðný pálmadóttir

Kt.: 120175-3009

Supervisor: Guðrún Björk Guðsteinsdóttir

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Abstract

This essay gives some insight into a world of psychological problems and the effects that they have upon the two narrators and the women in their life in two short stories written by Edgar Allan Poe. He leaves his readers feeling rather disturbed at times. Poe himself said that “Ligeia” is his best work and critics seem to agree with him. “Berenice” is on the other hand considered to be Poe’s most gruesome tale and he himself said that it was almost too horrible – on the verge of bad taste. The two narrators, an unnamed narrator in “Ligeia,” and Egaeus in “Berenice” – one of the few to whom Poe gives a name – suffer from psychological complications that leaves them unable to care for the women in their life. Egaeus admits to suffering monomania, meaning that he obsesses with one particular thing. The narrator of “Ligeia” does not confess to any mental problems other than those caused by too much opium, which makes him hallucinate.

The narrators suffer from memory loss, hallucinations and obsession. The obsession is all consuming and the narrators lose all touch with reality. One little smile from Berenice turns Egaeus’s world upside down for he becomes obsessed with her teeth. Ligeia’s death does not stop the narrator from loving her; he becomes obsessed with her. His obsession with Ligeia makes it impossible for him to love Rowena, the woman he remarries; he hates her. When these women fall ill it is the aforementioned obsession that determines what happens to them. The narrator of “Ligeia” is so consumed with thoughts of Ligeia that he can do nothing to help Rowena and so she withers away and dies. Conversely, Egaeus’s obsession saves Berenice’s life

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Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe was born on 19 January, 1809, in Boston, Massachusetts. He was a writer, critic and editor who remains primarily famous for his tales and poems of horror and mystery. He is believed to have initiated the modern detective story, and the atmosphere in his tales of horror is unrivaled in American fiction. He became a literary sensation in 1845 with the publication of the poem “The Raven” (Doyle).

It always seemed easy for Poe to shift from genre to genre, according to Clark Griffith:

There simply were no well-defined stages in Poe’s writing, no set periods during which he concentrated exclusively on some particular aspect of his prose material. At a later stage in his career his interests included satire, philosophy and ratiocinative themes, he proved capable of composing, all within a few months, a characteristic horror story, a burlesque, an analytical tale, and a metaphysical dialogue. (Griffith 8)

In a study that includes early assessments of Poe’s short story “Ligeia,” James Schroeter notes that Poe himself expressed the conviction that “Ligeia” was the best of his stories. Poe wrote to the publisher Edward Duyckinck, “‘Ligeia’ is undoubtedly the best story I have written,” and to writer Philip Pendleton Cooke he wrote that “the loftiest kind [of tale] is that of the highest imagination – and for this reason only ‘Ligeia’ may be called my best tale” (Schroeter 397). It seems that Poe’s critics agreed with him. One of Poe’s earliest critics, George E. Woodberry says that “Ligeia”

is one of Poe's richest works of imagination, marking "the highest reach of the romantic element in his genius" (quoted in Schroeter 397). Arthur H. Quinn classified it as one of Poe's "masterpieces," and D.H. Lawrence said it was Poe's "chief" story (Schroeter). In an introduction to "Berenice" Andrew Barger writes that the story "is considered to be one of Poe's most gruesome tales and Poe himself agreed, when he confessed: 'The subject is far too horrible...it approaches the very verge of bad taste.'" Andrew goes on to say that "at the time of its publication, rumors were circulating in Baltimore that teeth snatchers were robbing graves to supply dentists with false teeth and Poe, as he was so adept at doing, seized upon the public's fear" (Barger 51).

Lori Beth Griffin notes in her essay "Egeus Diagnosed" that Poe's works often focus on themes of insanity and mental disorders and that his readers often feel uneasy. These disorders are treatable today but in Poe's time they were not understood and people were afraid of those suffering from mental disorders. Schizophrenia is one such disorder and many of Poe's characters seem to suffer from it which supports the claim that Poe seems to have a good knowledge of the human mind (Griffin 1).

Schizophrenia has several severe symptoms which include delusions, hallucinations (visual, auditory or olfactory), or negative symptoms such as memory loss. In order to be diagnosed with Schizophrenia, one must display two of the symptoms listed above for a significant period of time, usually about one month ("Diagnosis of Schizophrenia").

In this essay I will examine how severe psychological problems affect the male narrator who is also the protagonist in two of Poe's short stories, "Ligeia" and "Berenice." I shall demonstrate that because of these psychological problems Rowena's life withers away while Berenice's life is spared.

Ligeia and The Lady Rowena of Tremaine

There are two women in the life of “Ligeia’s” narrator. He dearly loves one of them but he hates the other. These two women, Ligeia, his first wife, and Rowena, his second wife, are as different as day and night. We are not told whether Rowena is beautiful – only that she is fair-haired and blue-eyed. Ligeia has black hair and dark eyes and she is the most beautiful woman ever created, according to the bereaved husband. The narrator could be considered a schizophrenic as he shows three of the symptoms in the list for diagnoses on *schizophrenia.com*. He suffers from memory loss, hallucinations and he obsesses about his late wife. However, his symptoms are the result of his smoking opium, which resemble schizophrenia in significant ways. As the story unfolds we can see how the narrator’s obsession takes hold of his life, producing hallucinations, which then lead to Rowena’s life withering away.

Ligeia and the Will to Live

At the very beginning of the story the narrator is writing down his memories of his first wife, Ligeia, and their life together and the first signs of mental confusion are evident in a strange mixture of his loss of memory and highly intense memories. He tries to remember but cannot, no matter how hard he tries, and he does try hard. He can describe her looks and all her qualities in minute detail but he cannot remember a single thing about her, her family or where she came from, and it is only when he is writing his recollections that he realizes that he does not even remember her

maiden name: “I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia” (Poe 1938, 654). He wonders whether this is a strange lapse and believes he met her in some old decaying city near the Rhine. He is quite certain he heard her speak of her family, but that is about all he remembers. Despite the fact that he remembers almost nothing about her background, they got married.

Thus the narrator realizes as he is writing that he never really knew Ligeia and yet she was his friend, his lover and his wife. In his recollections it seems that she snuck up on him, like a thief in the night, and stole his heart and perhaps she stole his mind as well. He remembers thinking that their marriage was doomed, but he has forgotten why he thought so in the first place. He is really struggling with his memory, except: “There is one dear topic, however, on which my memory fails me not. It is the person of Ligeia” (Poe 1938, 654). He goes on to describe her appearance in detail:

In stature she was tall, somewhat slender, and, in her latter days, even emaciated. I would in vain attempt to portray the majesty, the quiet ease, of her demeanor, or the incomprehensible lightness and elasticity of her footfall. She came and departed as a shadow. (Poe 1938, 654)

But Ligeia’s features were not what most people thought was beautiful. The narrator quotes Sir Francis Bacon when he says: “There is no exquisite beauty without some strangeness in the proportion.” This quote fits the narrator’s description of Ligeia because there was something strange about her.

The narrator remembers his deceased wife in superlatives. Her forehead was lofty and pale, faultless, yet the narrator felt that the word “faultless” did not do her justice. Her skin was as beautiful as the purest ivory. She had beautiful and naturally curled raven-black hair. Her nose was perfect: it was smooth and her nostrils were harmoniously curved and spoke of the free spirit. Her mouth was “the triumph of all things heavenly – the magnificent turn of the short upper lip – the soft, voluptuous slumber of the under” (Poe 1938, 655). She had dimples and her teeth sparkled brilliantly when the sun’s rays shone on them and she had the most radiant smiles of all.

And then there were Ligeia’s eyes: Her eyes were much larger than the ordinary eyes. They were black as night and her lashes were long. The eyebrows were of the same color. There was something strange about her eyes and it was not the color; it was their expression (Poe 1938, 655-56). Her eyes did something to him. It is as if he loses his senses recalling them and he compares her eyes to a star, Vega, which is one of the brightest stars in the sky (Howell). He always got a strange feeling looking in her eyes and it often made him think of a quote by Joseph Glanvill:

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 him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will. (Poe 1938, 655-56)

Her thoughts, her actions and speech were intense and he had never known a woman who could be so passionate yet so outwardly calm. She would speak in a low voice, he recalls, but there was compelling intensity in her eyes as she spoke, and she always used such wild words; at times he was appalled by her eyes. There was indeed something strange about Ligeia.

Ligeia's learning was also immense. Her bereaved husband has never known a woman so learned: "In the classical tongues was she deeply proficient, and as far as my own acquaintance extended in regard to the modern dialects of Europe, I have never known her at fault" (Poe 1938, 657). It did not matter what the subject was – moral, physical, or mathematical science – he did not know a breathing soul who knew as much as Ligeia. When Ligeia suddenly grew ill, the narrator was overtaken by darkness and grief. He does not know how to exist without her. Ligeia's wild eyes shone less and her appearance changed. Her soft voice grew more gentle and low and she still whispered wild words. But Ligeia's desire for life was intense.

Up to this point in the story we have only heard the narrator describe Ligeia's beauty and intelligence. It is only when they realize that Ligeia is dying that we get to know exactly how much she loves him: she idolizes him. He tells us that he knows that she loved him but he did not realize just how much. He is wondering why he was blessed with her love and at the same time why she was being taken from him – whether he was being punished. He can barely think about it. With her wild desire for life she begs him to come to her bedside to recite a poem she had written just days before, called "The Conqueror Worm."

“The Conqueror Worm” tells the history of mankind. Angels are watching a play where Death, in the form of a worm, is killing mankind. The angels can do nothing but sit and watch, and cry. After the narrator recites the poem, Ligeia jumps out of bed raising her hands to the sky and cries out: “O God! O Divine Father! – shall these things be undeviatingly so? – Shall this Conqueror be not once conquered?” (Poe 1938, 659). She desperately wants to live, but this is her death-bed and she breathes her last words, the words of Glanvill: “Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will” (Poe 1938, 659). The obsessed husband has remembered for years Ligeia’s assertion that by will people can overcome the Conqueror Worm of death although he cannot remember much of her life.

Lady Rowena in the Shadow of an Angel

The narrator moves to England but there he closes himself off. Leonard W. Engel says in his article “Obsession, Madness, and Enclosure in Poe’s ‘Ligeia’ and ‘Morella’” that “the narrator is crushed with sorrow and he can no longer endure the lonely desolation of [his] dwelling in the dim and decaying city by the Rhine.” For the inheritance of Ligeia’s immense wealth, her widower purchases an abbey “in one of the wildest and least frequented portions of fair England.” Yet he cannot stop thinking about his dearly beloved Ligeia because he is still in love with her. He thinks of her beauty and wisdom and her passionate love for him. He even screams her name during the night. He is by this time addicted to opium and his dreams are wild – so wild that he dreams that Ligeia is back – that she is alive.

He eventually remarries, seemingly in an attempt to forget Ligeia, and “brings the fair-haired, blue-eyed, Lady Rowena Tremaine of Trephine to the abbey” (141). It appears that he wants to “will” Rowena *out of existence* after having married her, as much as he wants to “will” Ligeia *into existence*. His abbey is in a remote section of the country, and his consciousness focuses on one particular room: the bridal chamber, which he describes in minute detail, revealing how utterly inappropriate it is as the living quarters for a bride. Rowena’s chamber is in one of the abbey’s towers. It is very big and pentagonal in shape. On one side of the tower there is an immense window and the rays of the sun and the moon cast a “ghastly lustre” on the furniture in the chamber. In each corner of the room there is a “gigantic sarcophagus” made of granite. Four coffins seem overly ominous in a bridal chamber but the most awful thing in the room is the tapestry that hangs from “summit to foot.” There are grotesque looking figures on it. When one enters the room these figures look like monsters. Moreover, when one looks closer and moves around in the chamber these monsters seem to come to life. What makes this worse is the wind blowing from the window, making the tapestries move, and the whole experience nightmarish and threatening (Poe 1938, 600-01).

As Roy Basler points out, the bridal chamber is more fitting as a burial chamber, which is apparently what the narrator wishes it to be (368). The Lady Rowena of Tremaine is afraid of her husband; he is bad tempered and moody. She does not really love him, and he likes the fact that she is afraid of him because he hates her. His hatred is so great that one might think it belonged to the devil himself.

Two months into their marriage, the Lady Rowena becomes ill and her recovery is slow. She runs a high fever, which makes her drift in and out of consciousness. It also makes her nights uneasy. She speaks of sounds and motions in and about the bridal chamber. The narrator dismisses her impressions and asserts that she is making this up, or that her fever is causing her to hallucinate. The Lady Rowena gets her health back but it is not long before she gets ill again and this time she never really recovers. No one knows what is wrong with her; even the doctors do not know what to do. Her character changes; she always seems afraid and nervous. She talks more and more about sounds and motions about, being convinced that there is something in the room. One night she awakes from an uneasy sleep and she is more than usually distressed and talks about this even more. The narrator watches her in horror because she is mere skin and bones. She half-rises from her bed and whispers about sounds she says she has heard, and motions she has seen, but the narrator has not seen anything.

The narrator knows, as the wind is blowing behind the tapestries, that the figures on the wall look as if they are moving, but he does not tell her that. It is as if he wants to literally scare her to death. Rowena appears to be fainting and there is no one around to help him. He decides to give her a little wine, as he remembers the doctors had ordered her to be given a glass of wine in case she got worse. He walks across the room but as he steps beneath the light of a censer he is startled. He feels something – something that he believes is invisible – passing him and he sees a shadow on the carpet, an angelic shadow. This is something that he feels might be the shadow of a shadow, almost invisible. He admits to being high on opium and he is not certain whether he believes his own eyes so he does not

mention this to the Lady Rowena. He finds the wine and pours into a glass and holds it to her lips. The Lady Rowena has somewhat recovered and takes the glass herself.

From this significant point, the narrator now starts to refer to the Lady Rowena as “lady.” It is as if he wants to distance himself from her by not calling her by her name. He now believes that he hears a gentle footfall on the carpet and he watches her drink the wine. As she puts the glass to her lips he sees, or believes he may have seen, three or four large drops of a ruby colored fluid fall into the glass. She does not appear to notice and swallows the wine. He decides not to mention any of this to her because he is not even certain if he believes what he saw or heard.

The narrator is however certain that immediately after Rowena drank the wine, she got much worse; he now refers to her as “his wife” but still not mentioning her name. On the third night after drinking the wine, the servants prepare Rowena for the grave and on the fourth night the narrator sits alone with her shrouded body. He has wild visions and sees shadows move across the room. He remembers the visions he had when he was getting the wine, looks at the carpet, but the angelic shadow is there no more, and he is a bit relieved. Suddenly it is as if he is attacked with memories of Ligeia and the sorrow pours into his heart. He sits in the night, thinking of Ligeia, looking at the body of Rowena. At this point he starts mentioning Rowena’s name again. Perhaps because she is dead, she no longer upsets his life and he feels free from her.

The narrator loses track of time until he hears a low sob and he is certain it has come from Rowena’s deathbed. He is terrified but he does not hear the sound again. He stares at the body trying to detect motion but

he sees nothing. But he is certain he hears something and now his senses are awake. He sits still and keeps staring at the body and he notices that color has come to her cheeks. He has no words for his horror. “Through a species of unutterable horror and awe, for which the language of mortality has no sufficiently energetic expression, I felt my heart cease to beat, my limbs grow rigid where I sat” (Poe 1938, 664). He must regain his composure and he is now certain that Rowena lives and that they have been precipitate in preparing her for the grave. Although he hates her, he is desperate to get help but the bridal chamber is far away from where the servants live in the abbey so no one can hear him and he does not want to leave Rowena alone. However, soon thereafter, the color disappears from her cheeks and she looks even worse than she did before. He sits back down and “again gave [him]self up to passionate waking visions of Ligeia” (Poe 1938, 664). An hour passes, he believes, and this happens again. But now color comes to her forehead, cheeks and throat. Her lips tremble and he can see her pearly teeth. He starts bathing her temples and hands but suddenly the color disappears and she again looks even worse. He again stops mentioning her name; he now refers to her as a “tenant of the tomb.”

All through the night “this hideous drama of revivification was repeated” (Poe 1938, 665). Each time she comes more alive only to look even worse. It is almost morning and he now refers to her as “she who had been dead.” She stirs once again but he has stopped reacting to “this hideous drama of revivification” so he sits still. He is terrified but now, more than anything, he is exhausted. The body now seems full of life, apart from the eyes being closed, and the narrator is not certain if he is dreaming, but it seems that Rowena has shaken off the fetters of Death. He

mentions her name again. Whether or not he is dreaming, there is no doubt that Rowena gets up from the bed and walks to the middle of the room.

The narrator is paralyzed with fear and cannot move. Wild thoughts are rushing through his mind. “Could it, indeed, be the living Rowena who confronted me? Could it indeed be Rowena at all – the fair-haired, the blue-eyed Lady Rowena Trevanion of Tremaine? Why, why should I doubt it?” (Poe 1938, 665). He now mentions her full name. He sees that she looks different, as if she has grown taller. The cerements which had covered her, now fall from her head and her hair comes down: “it was blacker than the raven wings of the midnight!” (Poe 1938, 665). She slowly opens her eyes, and her eyes are “the full, and the black, and the wild eyes – of [his] lost love – of the lady – of the LADY LIGEIA” (Poe 1938, 666).

The narrator refuses to accept his wife’s death and believes that if he only wants her badly enough he can will her back to life. Yet he remembers nothing about her after she dies other than being madly in love with her beauty and intelligence; at the same time he hates the woman he has married. Leonard W. Engel points out in “Obsession, Madness and Enclosure in Poe’s ‘Ligeia’ and ‘Morella,’” “Lady Ligeia serves as the object of his love, becoming the focus of his obsession, while Lady Rowena is hated and rejected, and finally dies like a plant withering from lack of nourishment” (Engel 140). Rowena’s only “fault” is that she is not Ligeia yet her husband makes it his mission to make her miserable and to either cause her death by the drops of poison in her cup or by literally scaring her to death.

Berenice

Egaeus is the narrator in Poe's "Berenice," and he is one of a few of his "disturbed" narrators whom he has given a name. Egaeus will not, however, give up his last name but tells us that he comes from wealth. Everything about Egaeus and his family is gloomy and grey and from birth he has been suffering. He was born in the family's library and his mother died from childbirth. He talks about his birth as an awakening into a world of imagination, "into the wild dominions of monastic thought.... [I]t is not singular that I gazed around me with a startled and ardent eye" (Poe 1938, 642). He spends his childhood buried in books and daydreaming.

But it is singular that as the years rolled away, and the noon of manhood found me still in the mansions of my father's it is wonderful what stagnation there fell upon the springs of my life – wonderful how total an inversion took place in the character of my commonest thoughts. (Poe 1938, 643)

He starts to see reality as visions and his wild ideas and visions become his reality. Egaeus displays many signs of schizophrenia, such as lack of interest in life, memory loss, hallucination and obsession although he himself defines his condition as "monomania." As this story continues, similar to "Ligeia," we can see how Egaeus's obsession gets the better of him. But unlike the narrator in "Ligeia," who directly or indirectly causes Rowena's death, it is Egaeus's obsession that saves Berenice's life.

The only family member we are introduced to is his cousin Berenice. She and Egaeus grow up together and they are complete opposites. Egaeus says: "Yet differently we grew. I ill of health and buried in gloom – she

agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy. Hers the ramble on the hillside – mine the studies of the cloister” (Poe 1938, 643). She roamed carelessly through life, not thinking anything could happen to her. But he closed himself off from the world, and buried himself in gloom.

Like the narrator of *Ligeia*, Egaeus is reminiscing as he tells his story, recalling how suddenly Berenice, the “gorgeous yet fantastic beauty,” (Poe 1938, 643) falls ill. This disease takes away everything that had been Berenice; Egaeus does not recognize her any longer. Berenice suffers from epilepsy, “not unfrequently terminating in trance itself – trance very nearly resembling positive dissolution” (Poe 1938, 643). Every seizure Berenice has leaves her looking as if she were dead, but every time she recovers very quickly, startlingly so. At the same time Egaeus’s own disease, monomania, as he hesitatingly calls it, gets worse. As he was born in a library and he is well read he fears that the general reader may not understand what ails him. He feels that he cannot explain. He would obsess over the most mundane things.

He could muse for long unwearied hours with [his] attention riveted to some frivolous device upon the margin, or in the typography of a book – to become absorbed for the better part of a summer’s day in a quaint shadow falling aslant upon the tapestry, or upon the floor – to lose [himself] for an entire night in watching the steady flame of a lamp. (Poe 1938, 644)

He could repeat monotonously a word so often that in the end it had lost its meaning. He could also sit absolutely motionless for a whole day. These are a few of his most common symptoms. He tries, however, to distance himself from this condition as he describes these symptoms, talking only

about “the dreamer” or the “enthusiast.” And often he forgets why he was interested in something in the first place. However, the reader finds out that this monomania – this obsession – is very intense.

Egeus reveals that even when she looked the most beautiful he never loved her. For him feelings are of the mind, not the heart. He has always seen her as a thing to analyze, not as someone to admire. Surely he had seen her, but as something not of this earth, more as a dream. Once her disease has deprived her of her looks, he “shudder[s] in her presence,” but he knows that she has loved him for a long time and so he feels sorry for her and proposes to her. Egeus describes himself as “a careless thinker” and suggests that he might be interested in examining Berenice and her awful condition. But he does think hard about the malady and “the changes wrought in the physical frame of Berenice, and in the singular and most appalling distortion of her personal identity” (Poe 1938, 645).

Time goes by and their wedding is near. Egeus is sitting in the library, alone, or so he thinks. But when he looks up Berenice is standing there. He is not sure whether it is his own wild imagination or the atmosphere or the room itself that causes her to look so unnatural. She does not speak and he cannot utter a word. A chill runs down his spine but at the same time he is curious about her. He sits motionless with his eyes fixed on her. She is mere skin and bones and not a trace of her former beauty is to be seen. His burning stare turns to her face. Her forehead is high and her face is pale and tranquil. Her once golden hair is now black as night and it falls over her hollow temples. Her eyes are lifeless and she looks sad, her lips shrunken. He cannot bear to look at her (Poe 1938, 646).

Like the narrator in “Ligeia,” Egaeus stops calling Berenice by her name; as if putting a distance between them, he refers to “the eyes” and “the forehead” and not “her eyes” and “her forehead.” “She opens her mouth with a peculiar smile and he sees her teeth” (Poe 1938, 646). Later he wishes he had never seen her teeth!

Egaeus says early on in the tale: “How is it that from Beauty I have derived a type of unloveliness? – from the covenant of Peace a simile of sorrow? But thus is it. And as, in ethics, Evil is a consequence of Good, so, in fact, out of Joy is sorrow born” (Poe 1938, 642). His joy is to contemplate Berenice’s teeth and his sorrow the horror that followed after he first saw her teeth. Egaeus becomes obsessed with her teeth, to him they are perfect. “Not a speck upon their surface – not a shade on their enamel – not a line in their configuration – not an indenture in their edges” (Poe 1938, 646). Berenice’s little smile changes everything for Egaeus. Everything he obsessed about before is now forgotten. “The teeth! – the teeth! – they were here, and there, and everywhere” (Poe 1938, 646). He even fantasizes about holding them in his hands and examining them up close.

He sits for days in his room, motionless, obsessing about her teeth. Wild cries and troubled voices sneak into his thoughts and he is awoken and someone opens the door to his room. A maiden tells him, in tears, that Berenice is dead. She has been seized with an epileptic fit early that morning and now her grave is ready. Everything has been prepared. Egaeus has no knowledge of any of this for he is too obsessed with the teeth.

Egaeus is grief-stricken and with a heavy heart he makes his way to see “the departed,” not mentioning her name. In the coffin, he is told, “was all that remained of Berenice.” He hears someone asking him if he will not look at “the corpse:” “I had seen the lips of no one move, yet the question had been demanded” (Poe 1835, 335). He is certain that he heard a voice. He reluctantly goes to see where she is. Death fills the air. “The peculiar smell of the coffin sickened me; and I fancied a deleterious odor was already exhaling from the body” (Poe 1835, 335). He is desperate to get out of there but he cannot move and his knees give in. He stands there staring at the rigid body in the coffin.

Suddenly he believes he sees a finger of “the enshrouded dead” move, but it cannot be, he believes it must be his brain playing tricks on him. He looks at her face and notices that the band that had been placed around her jaws was broken asunder, and that there is a peculiar smile on the face. There they are and “once again there glared upon me in too palpable reality, the white and glistening, and ghastly teeth of Berenice” (Poe 1835, 335). He rushes out of the room in a panic, not uttering a word.

Like “Ligeia’s” twice bereaved narrator, Egeus suffers serious problems with his memory. After rushing from the tomb, he finds himself sitting in the library, confused. “I had done a deed – what was it?” he asks himself (Poe 1938, 647). He knows that Berenice has been buried or at least he seems to be sure of that. He remembers something but he is not sure if it is something from a dream or something that really happened. What he remembers is something very horrible, “horror more horrible from being vague, and terror more terrible from ambiguity” (Poe 1938, 647). He has done something but cannot remember what. He notices a little box on his desk and he knows this box as he has seen it many times before; it

belonged to the family physician. But he does not remember how it got on to his desk. He feels uneasy simply by looking at it. He also notices a book on his desk in which a single sentence has been underlined, the words singular but simple: “Dicebant mihi sodales si sepulchrum amicae visitarem curas meas aliquantulum fore levatas” (Poe 1938, 648), which may be translated as, “my companions said to me that my troubles would in some measure be relieved if I would visit the tomb of my sweetheart” (Beard 611). He reads the words and the blood congeals within his veins, but the question is why? Has he done something terrible? He is interrupted by a knock on the door. It is one of the servants who is as pale as death and can hardly speak; he is terrified. He tells Egaeus that the servants heard a wild cry in the night and that they went and searched in the direction of the sound. They had found Berenice’s grave violated. She was alive and breathing. The servant then points to Egaeus’s clothes, which are covered with blood and dirt. He then directs Egaeus’s attention to a shovel by the wall. In horror Egaeus looks at it and then grabs the ebony box. He cannot open it as his hands are shaking and so the box falls on to the floor. When the box hits the floor it opens and all of Berenice’s teeth fall out along with some instruments of dental surgery.

Egaeus had become obsessed with Berenice’s teeth. After seeing their perfection in her wasted face, nothing else matters to him. Before seeing her teeth he obsesses about the most mundane things, and spends an entire day thinking about one particular thing until he forgets why he is even interested in that one particular thing. After she allegedly dies he believes he smells death in the room. This is an olfactory hallucination because the reader finds out that Berenice did not die, and therefore she could emit no “deleterious odor.”

Lori Beth Griffin says in her article “Egeus Diagnosed” that Egeus’s visual hallucinations of the teeth stem from his obsession. This hallucination feeds his monomania, and gives him the incentive for his final act (Griffin 13). The remains of Berenice stay with him and haunt him: “like the spirit of a departed sound, the shrill and piercing shriek of a female voice seemed to be ringing.” It is clear that Egeus becomes aware of Berenice’s screams after the fact, not when the teeth are extracted so the sound “is therefore an aberration of the character’s mind” (Griffin 13).

Egeus suffers similar mental disturbances as the narrator of “Ligeia,” except that Egeus is incapable of showing any emotions at all while the other either burns with love or hate. He cannot help Berenice when she falls ill, due to his psychological problems. However, had he not suffered them, Berenice would have died enshrouded in her tomb with her jaws bound up and unable to scream for help. Egeus’s obsession with her teeth is the reason why he violated her grave – and, ironically, saves her life in the process.

Conclusion

The two narrators of “Ligeia” and “Berenice,” respectively, suffer severe psychological problems, even though the causes for their problems are different. Egeus’s hallucinations are the result of his obsession but the narrator in “Ligeia” has hallucinations because he smokes too much opium. Their mental problems determine how they treat the women in their life. They are incapable of caring for them or taking care of them. As the women fall ill and their looks fade the narrators stop mentioning their names, which might be an attempt to objectify them – treat them as if they are not human beings that they need to care for and care about. This is also what Egeus does when describing his condition, his monomania: he only talks about himself as “the dreamer” or “the enthusiast,” putting distance between himself and his condition.

In both stories these psychological disturbances take over the life of the protagonists, who show similar symptoms. They both have memory problems and suffer hallucinations but it is their obsession that is all consuming. “Ligeia’s” narrator does not remember anything about his beloved Ligeia’s past and Egeus also suffers from memory problems after having violated Berenice’s grave. He is aware of having done something horrible but he cannot put his finger on it. While the narrator in “Ligeia” suffers from visual and auditory hallucinations, Egeus also suffers from olfactory hallucinations because he believes he smells death in the air.

The obsession that consumes Ligeia’s narrator sets in after he loses Ligeia. He cannot exist without her. He remarries in an attempt to heal his broken heart. Because of his obsession he can neither love nor care for

Rowena but seems instead to “will” her into death and “will” or hallucinate Ligeia come alive in Rowena’s dead body.

It is only when Egaeus sees Berenice’s teeth that things start to go seriously wrong for him because he was quite happy on his own, obsessing over the most mundane things. He does not think about Berenice when he is told that she has died. He is thinking about her teeth, and apparently he cannot bear the thought of them being buried with her. When his obsession takes over and he violates Berenice’s grave and pulls out all of her teeth he actually saves her life because she was not dead and her screaming led to people going to her grave. That is what he means when he says that good things can result from something bad. She lives because of his obsession.

Edgar Allan Poe manages to create a world in which severe psychological problems affect how the two narrators treat the women in their life. Poe does shock his readers and he leaves them wondering to what extent Rowena’s husband was responsible for her death. “Berenice” is even more grotesque than “Ligeia” yet the story has a darkly ironic twist in its gory but fortunate outcome.

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