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The Abject and the Death of the Females in Edgar Allan Poe's "Ligeia" and "Berenice"

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Abstract

The stories inscribed in the Gothic period have become a source for readers to have access to mysterious events and eerie circumstances that, through an intimate view into the relationship between the living and the dead/undead, reveal a deeper meaning of personal, social and cultural concerns. In the stories "Ligeia" (1838) and "Berenice" (1835), Edgar Allan Poe describes the agonizing death of young beautiful females, which stirs a morbid and romantic interest in readers. In these stories, the lover is an observer of the beloved's death who becomes aware of the presence of death in life. The woman who agonizes and dies turns into a disturbing force which threatens the man's understanding of life and death. This woman becomes an "abject" that disturbs the identity and construction of the subject; and removed from everything that makes sense, she is cast off as something the observer is not and, therefore, can not be signified into a mental concept that allows him to understand her passing. The encounter with the abject as a dead female causes a strong psychological impact in the lover because of the different levels of familiarity and unfamiliarity caused by her physical changes. I will discuss the presence of the abject in Poe's stories and how female death creates uncanniness and a sense of horror. These considerations will allow to support the idea that female characters from Gothic literature can be analysed to understand death through the complex response they generate in their lovers.

Introduction

Death is literally the end of life, which is why the idea of death is of such a disturbing nature. It is the most human and universal feature because it is prevalent and pervasive to everything and everyone. Human death is complex since it involves both a physical and a psychological dissolution; our emotions and perception of reality are greatly affected by death. The question of death drives society to try and understand the meaning of the end of life and its implications. In that search for meaning, writing helps rationalize death. Through the exercise of writing, the author communicates necessary perspectives of death and offers a viewpoint on the circumstances surrounding the end of life. Fictional stories which deal with death are valuable resources that enlighten our knowledge on such an obscure subject matter. Learning about death is essential to the human condition because it better prepares us for the inevitable.

In literature, the Romantic movement and the Gothic specifically within it, are greatly concerned with death. The interests in the Romantic¹ lie in an appreciation of beauty and the prevalence of emotion over reason, as well as in the mysterious, the strange, and the monstrous. In a later phase of the Romantic period, towards the 1820s, there is also an interest in communicating the struggles of the individual in dark, gloomy circumstances and horrific situations. The Romantic movement is intimately related to the Gothic movement in literature because Gothic fiction offers a romantic approach to death and the horror it entails. That approach to death had a

¹ Britannica.com defines *Romanticism* as a reaction against precepts such as order, calm and balance from Classicism and late 18th century Neoclassicism; a revolt against *Enlightenment* and 18th century rationalism and physical materialism.

tremendous impact in the society of the period, for instance in the way women were depicted in works of literature. When Romanticism in literature spread from Europe to America, it reached popularity with authors such as Edgar Allan Poe, who became representative of the Gothic for his literary production with female death as a prevalent topic.

In the 18th and 19th century, Gothic aesthetics became popular with the rise of the idea of the consumptive woman. The overall look of the emaciated body and the pale, gaunt countenance became fashionable and desirable. In art, women were depicted as sensual figures in paintings, where their bodies laid lifeless and exposed in their deathbeds or similar circumstances. In literature, women became inevitably associated with death in the Gothic because their presence in fiction signified opposition and contrasting ideas. They were portrayed as attractive and dangerous, beautiful but decayed, and half-alive and half-dead. The feminine element in Gothic fiction is key to understanding the ambivalent nature of the period and provides a resource for analysis of the complexities of the human condition.

Female death is a very conflicting subject matter that is frequently addressed in Gothic fiction. It is a recurrent topic for analysis and discussion because of its many implications, especially from a psychological perspective. In this work I will analyse two of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, "Ligeia" (1838) and "Berenice" (1835) which narrate a lover's experience with the death of his beloved. Both stories are inscribed in the Gothic and are highly representative of the relationship between women and death. I am particularly interested in the female characters and their

deaths; and on how the experience of the death of the beloved makes the lovers confront their psychological construction.

This work is divided into a first part that provides a theoretical framework with references to Gothic literature, a second part that contains the analysis of the stories, and a conclusion. The first part provides the context to the stories I intend to examine, to my main category of analysis -the abject- and its relation to uncanniness. In this part I explain how Poe's work is inscribed in the Gothic period, and I refer to the stories I will work with. Then, I attempt to define the abject from a psychological perspective and I describe its manifestation in the corpse. After this, I explore Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and its implication for the female characters. To explain the relationship between abjection and uncanniness and how it affects the observer, I turn to Masahiro Mori's theory of "the uncanny valley". In the second part of this work I attempt to analyse the construction of the female abjects and their uncanniness in the stories "Ligeia" and "Berenice" and I will look at how the female characters turn into abjects that affect the psychology of their lovers through their deaths. I will focus on the feature of strangeness of the female characters, the changes Ligeia and Berenice suffer when they become corpses, and on how the uncanniness of the process of decay and dying create a disruption in the conceptualization of death. I will also explain the association of the conceptualization of death and beauty and how these two ideas are expressed through the female characters in the stories. In the final part of this work I offer my view on the importance of death and its necessary relation to works of literature. In this respect, I will provide an account of the association of women, death and

signification from my findings in the stories, and I will conclude with my perception on the significance of the stories analysed.

The Gothic: characteristics of Gothic fiction

...the longevity and power of Gothic fiction unquestionably stem from the way it helps us address and disguise some of the most important desires, quandaries, and sources of anxiety, from the most internal and mental to the widely social and cultural, throughout the history of the western culture since the eighteenth century. (Hogle, 4)

Gothic is a far reaching term that applied to fiction refers to literary works created roughly between the 18th and 19th century in England. Gothic writers who looked back at the Romantic period revived many of the oppositions to ideals and conventions from the Enlightenment period. The genre itself is quite broad and it extends to the Victorian novel, poetry, plays, and short stories. It has become so long lasting and persistent that its literary products can be analysed and studied from different perspectives, such as the psychological. In America, Gothic fiction manifested itself as a movement characterized by the depiction of non-humans and monstrous creatures, references to the irrational and mysterious, and depiction of fearful instances; among other topics. The gothic literary production in that country has been marked by paradoxes. According to Eric Savoy in the chapter "The Rise of American Gothic" from *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, America "...has produced a strain of literature that is haunted by an insistent, undead past and fascinated by the strange beauty of sorrow" (167).

In many of the literary works of the Gothic we can identify a network of contradictions that affect both the characters in the stories and the readers, as they are confronted with what is buried in the unconscious. In the chapter "The Gothic in Western Culture" from *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Jerrold Hogle refers to the genre as a continuum where, on the one hand, works from the "terror Gothic" leave readers and characters in "anxious suspense" about a threat to life,

and an undead past or a hidden truth; and on the other hand, the “horror gothic” which:

...confronts the principal characters with the gross violence of physical or psychological dissolution, explicitly shattering the assumed norms (including the repressions) of everyday life with wildly shocking, and even revolting, consequences. (3)

The “horror” of the characters’ confrontation with death, in particular, leads them to question their modes of cognition and signification. In the Gothic, many characters embody the contradictions that help readers define the psychological impulses and social concerns that are basic to human behaviour. The power of the Gothic lies in the fact that it allows readers to address their intimate and internal conflicts with topics such as death and characters to become social and cultural vehicles of communication and means of representation of complex concepts and ideas.

In the Gothic, Edgar Allan Poe has created perhaps some of the most representative works of the period and has worked especially with the psychological aspects in the “horror Gothic”, which address the shattering of the subject’s beliefs and emotional makeup. Poe’s gothic stories address the sinister and the grotesque with an emphasis on mental issues and obsession. He was considered a man ahead of his time because of his interest in the narratives of the unconscious mind and his ability to communicate about the “dark” aspects of the human condition, the melancholy of death, and the mystery of events at the border of reality. One of the main topics underlying his literary production is death. Several of his poems and short stories deal with the death of women; and it is believed that his work was

influenced by the untimely death of his cousin-turned wife, Virginia, and other women in his life.

Among his well-known literary production, "Ligeia" and "Berenice" are examples of stories where a beautiful young woman suffers an agonizing death, affecting her lover's state of mind. The psychology of the characters' behaviour allows readers to "experience" the horrors of real life, such as violent death and mental suffering, in a way that engages them in the story but also leaves them with some kind of learning towards the end. Eric Savoy argues that Poe strategically takes the reader along a process characterized by "the progressive narrowing of the safe ground between fascination and fear" where at its peak the reader experiences a mixture of feelings, contradiction and uncertainty and is crushed "between conflicting responses that ultimately collapse into each other in a moment of horrific recognition" (181).

Through his gothic literary production, Poe offers an intimate view into mundane "horrors" the characters go through on the stories, which allow for catharsis by showing readers how complex human beings can be. The strange and monstrous characters in eerie circumstances offer an account of the potential "darkness" of reality. Reading about dark fictional situations works in a psychological level as a release of fear and tension and it allows readers to develop empathy for the characters a sense of closure at the end of the story. By providing detailed images and descriptions of experiences related to death and the horror it entails, Poe was able to clearly convey utterly human emotions and reactions in the face of death. The issues that are the hardest to communicate are those that seem

abnormal, strange and morbid, which is why they arouse fascination and intrigue. It can be recognised that Poe succeeded in producing a comprehensive body of work which has endured time and is still a source of knowledge about the darkest issues of human condition.

The Object

The object is a phenomenon that disturbs the subject by creating repulsion to something unsettling that is perceived, seen or experienced in reality. When the subject is faced with a situation or an event that can not be understood through logical reasoning, he/she is thrown away² from signification; that is to say, the subject is not able to process the meaning of the object because it does not correlate to anything that subject knows in reality. The object is not only disturbing at an emotional and psychological level, but its presence also affects the subject's cognitive and semantic processes. The shattering and convulsion is such that the subject experiences a process of detachment from logical reasoning and understanding. Although the object is manifested through events or situations in reality, it is outside the conscious comprehension of the subject because it works on the unconscious mind.

The object causes the unconscious mind to release the repressed drives and desires that are otherwise buried and not addressed. It emerges out of what is

² According to Merriam-Webster, the word *object* comes from "abjectus", past participle of the verb "abicerere" which means to *cast off*. The original meaning in English is an adjective synonym of *rejected* and usually paired with *degradation* and *debasement*.

uncanny to the observer; something that was familiar in a the past but which, at present, because of terrifying and abnormal circumstances, has become distant and strange. The strangeness of decayed human bodies generates in the observer a disturbance in his/her sense of familiarity with what that body used to be; it becomes a kind of “horror”. A horror is a sense of terror that disassembles the subject; it is a conjunction of basic, primal fears which provoke or determine a blurring of boundaries in the subject’s identity since there is a disturbance of the constructs that rule socialization and behaviour.

In the field of psychology, the primal experience of abjection is the child’s separation from the mother when the child enters the symbolic order. In *The Function and Field of Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis* (1953), Jacques Lacan refers to the symbolic order as the acceptance of the law, (known as the law of the father), ideological conventions, intersubjective relationships and linguistic communication. The process of acceptance occurs in an unconscious level, so the subject is not aware of such acceptance and the incorporation of the rules and boundaries. Once the child incorporates these rules unconsciously, he/she is able to deal with others. The imposition of boundaries allow to control desire and the acceptance of the rules allow the symbolic order to establish a sense of community with the other/others.

In the symbolic order, the separation from the mother occurs when the mother can not be the child’s desired object any longer, since there is an authority -the father- whose purpose is to enable the mother-child dyad into the triad. Through the gradual acquisition of different rituals (such as toilet training and eating

habits) the subject remains within the symbolic, that is to say, the subject is under socializing practices that enforce codes of behaviour and processes of cognition and signification which prevent the development of pathologies. However, there is always the latent tension between the symbolic and the Real. In the Real, there is nothing but need. It is a primal state prior to language and socialization where humans are fragile and in a raw state of nature. When the Real erupts into the symbolic, humans are made aware of the materiality of their existence, an acknowledgment which seems traumatic and for which the linguistic structures and strategies for signification fail.

In *Powers of Horror* (1982), Kristeva explores the concept of the abject to address the repressed horrors which cause a breakdown or collapse in meaning in the subject's mind and the consequent reactions to it. According to Kristeva, the abject is different from the subject because it is opposed to it, and it is not an object because it does not have a mutual or corresponding relationship to the subject. The abject can not be assigned a name or imagined, it erupts into reality and can not be thoroughly defined. As it is outside the symbolic order, it holds to nothing human, civilized or cultural.

Those reasons account for the need to find the meaning of the abject, to try and understand how it operates. The abject is captivating because it attracts attention; it is apprehensive and tempting but also violent and repulsive. However, its destabilising power lies in the fact that it disrupts the construction of the self. Kristeva states that: "...it is ...what disturbs identity, system order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite"

(4). The abject is ambivalent because it creates an imbalance in the subject's limits defined by rules and restrictions. For example, the abject may be between life and death or between reality and imagination. It can be the unexplainable and the impossible phenomena which escapes the subject's ability to signify, to find meaning.

As a result, the subject is led towards a primal state of being, characterised by need and search for meaning. Jerrold Hogle associates the ambivalent characteristics of the Gothic with the psychological implications of the creation of characters and contexts that explore the conflicting nature of the period. He specially refers to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection and the role of the abject in the strange unfamiliar situations depicted in the Gothic. The function of the abject is to face the subject with his/her own psychological construction, in situations that are strange and uncertain. In that confrontation, the subject undergoes a mixture of fascination and fear because he/she is both captivated by the need for understanding and threatened by the potential danger of the unknown:

Whatever threatens us with anything like this betwixt-and-between, even dead-and-alive, condition, Kristeva concludes, is what we throw off or "abject" into defamiliarized manifestations, which we henceforth fear and desire because they both threaten to reengulf us and promise to return us to our primal origins. (7)

The abject can be found in the stories "Ligeia" and "Berenice" where the beloved women go through agonizing death and involve the male lover in an emotionally destabilising experience in the beholding of the process of dying. The lover finds himself at the border of his human condition because of the conflicting nature of the experience; according to Kristeva: "The reality experienced from the

outside is in conflict with the turmoil inside. In that clash, boundaries are blurred, erased, and perhaps even lost” (3). The reality outside the subject and his unconscious fight for meaning battle within himself. The encounter with the abject turns the lover into an observer and participant of the process of abjection, where he suffers from the nervous excitement and emotional distress of the experience with horror. The abject manifests itself in the bodies of the beloved in the stories when their condition turns terminal and they are close to death. The lovers experience both an overall unpleasant and severe sensation of hopelessness and a morbid admiration of their lovers’ dead bodies as they try to make sense of what they are experiencing.

The corpse

The corpse is the prime symbol of death. Its silence and decay both enshrine the radical changes of mortality and challenge the living to respond. (Davies, 24)

The corpse is one of the universal forms of the abject because it represents death and it forces human beings to face it. Death is generally something humans wish to avoid and find difficulty in understanding. Nonetheless, in every living being resides a potential corpse. The refusal to accept this natural law reminds the living of their essence; acknowledging this law implies recognising their finite existence.

Regarding the corpse, Elisabeth Bronfen states that:

The corpse is neither the living person nor someone else, is neither present nor absent, is ‘nowhere’. At the site/sight of the corpse, the real destabilises and ruptures accepted cultural forms of symbolic codes. The strangeness of

the corpse's presence, which promises to further an insight into that not yet known, however, quickly becomes a form of resemblance. (231)

The dead body triggers contradictory responses in a destabilizing fashion since it provides a sudden awareness of the presence of death in life, and at the same time, becomes a "mirror" for the observer to recognise his/her demise. In "Ligeia" and "Berenice" the female abject is represented in the corpse which operates as a trigger of horrors. According to Kristeva:

The corpse, (...) is the utmost form of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. (4)

When the abject is manifested in the corpse, it can be perceived in reality; it forces the observer to face death. Meanwhile, in the observer's mind, the abject in the dead body sparks a sense of uncanniness and questionable familiarity. The abject presents itself violently, as an abrupt coming to senses with the abnormal circumstances of the tragic moment of death. Abjection and uncanniness are intimately related but different concepts. According to Kristeva: "Essentially different from "uncanniness", more violent too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin, nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory." (5). In the essay *Das Unheimliche* (1919), Sigmund Freud refers to the notion of "the uncanny"³ to express that something is both strange and familiar at the same time. This may be a repressed memory, a confrontation with death or an instance of *déjà vu*, for example. The uncanny generates a response to what is strangely familiar. The reaction to death and bodily decay, in particular, may be of rejection and

³ According to the German-English Cambridge Dictionary Online, the word "unheimliche" is a noun that means "weirdness". Its opposite, "heimlich" means "secret". Many authors believe that Freud may have used this word to refer to the notion that what is socially taboo, generates feelings such as disgust and horror. The word "uncanny" is a non-literal translation of the German word "unheimlich".

repugnance to detach the observer from the reality of death and the undeniable truth of his/her demise.

The Uncanny Valley

In the article “The Uncanny Valley” (1970), Masahiro Mori's proposes theory of the "uncanny valley" to explain a human being's reaction to robots and prosthetics which display different levels of human likeness in movement and appearance. He took the term “uncanny” from the field of psychology to describe different levels of familiarity and strangeness in objects that create feelings of pleasure or displeasure in various degrees, when a human being comes into contact with them. Though this theory emerged from the field of robotics, it has been applied to other areas of knowledge because of its social and psychological implications.

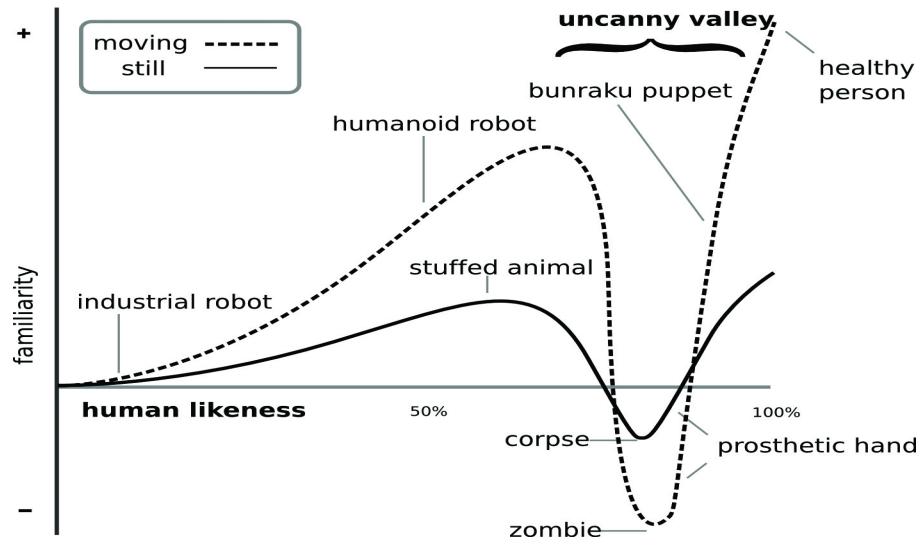
Mori intended to understand how humans reacted to robots in general, and how they would react to more “human” prototypes. He embarked on a study that gathered the responses from subjects who had been exposed to or had interacted with different human/non-human elements. This was represented in a line chart which shows the variables “familiarity” and “human likeness” expressed through mathematical functions that demonstrate the relationship between humans and non-humans (healthy person, corpse, zombie) or elements (such as robot, puppet, stuffed animal, prosthetics). In the line chart, the level of familiarity increases or decreases in relation to the level of human likeness of the humans/non-humans and

elements. Additionally, the movement factor, expressed through the features “moving” and “still”, shows how it affects the human response. Since movement is a sign of life, the response will affect the sense of familiarity; something familiar that moves will be more uncanny. If that is a corpse, the uncanniness is higher. When this happens, the sense of strangeness is bigger and as a result, there is a negative familiarity.

There are descending peaks in the graph caused by the downwards curvature of the movement factor, expressed in a straight line for “still” and a dotted line for “moving”. The human and non-human elements considered have different locations in the figure created by the lines of movement, according to different percentages of human likeness -expressed with 0%, 50% and 100%- and positive familiarity (towards the top) and negative familiarity (towards the bottom). The “uncanny valley” appears in the figure as the lowest descending peak pointing in the direction of negative familiarity, towards the highest percentage of human likeness.

In this section of the figure, the lowest peaks in negative familiarity are expressed by the corpse, a zombie and a prosthetic hand. These three elements in the line chart, have a different familiarity according to their movement or stillness. In the case of the corpse, its stillness and high human likeness create a low familiarity. The corpse is one of the elements that causes the observer to fall into the “uncanny valley”. In the figure ⁴ the uncanny valley is signalled in bold with braces at the top:

⁴ This figure is a simplified version of the graph that appears in the original article from *Energy* magazine. This line chart is taken from IEEE Spectrum blog.



The corpse creates abjection through uncanniness. In the abject, there are aspects of it that were once recognisable and familiar but that since the moment of death and through the process of decay, have become strange and are now rejected. An encounter with a dead body generates a feeling of strangeness, since there are human qualities the observer can recognise but there are also factors such as cold temperature, pale colouring and lack of movement that accelerate the sense of the uncanny into a negative familiarity, creating revulsion and fear as a response. Mori attributed these feelings to a sense of self-preservation:

The sense of eeriness is probably a form of instinct that protects us from proximal, rather than distal, sources of danger. Proximal sources of danger are corpses, members of different species, and other entities we can closely approach. (35)

The primal responses of fear and repulsion when facing a corpse in reality protect the observer from the imminent danger of death. The eerie sensation that allows humans to identify danger is an automatic, natural response to whatever threatens existence. The abject particularly threatens the existence of the subject because it signifies death through the corpse. In general, there are circumstances or situations that create an encounter with a corpse through which the subject

descends into the “uncanny valley”. This process occurs unconsciously, so the primal responses of fear and repulsion are basic to all human condition. The descent into the “uncanny valley” causes in the observer a sense of unfamiliarity because of the strange quality of the dead body. In other words, the strangeness of the corpse causes the observer to fail in recognising what he/she is seeing in reality, which makes the corpse the utmost representation of abjection because it is outside the system of signification. When this happens, the corpse is “removed” from meaning, and it can not be understood by the subject. The theory of “uncanny valley”, as well as the theory of abjection, reveal instances the human experience with death, and indicate death is an intrinsic aspect of the human condition, affecting our perception of emotions and behaviour.

The horror of death, and more specifically the death of the beloved, is represented in many of Poe's stories. Death is depicted as a fundamental aspect of humanity which entails the recognition of the absence of life in a disturbing and challenging confrontation for the observer. Understanding death is a very demanding process for the observer, since in the presence of the corpse there is both attraction to the beautiful features of the the dead body and repulsion to its physical decay. The corpse is the visual conceptualization of death that encroaches the subject's reality; it advances beyond the limits of comprehension. The dying woman in particular is confusing and disconcerting because in agony, she remains appealing, maintaining her attractive female features. When she is agonizing, her skin turns pale and her hands look and feel like marble. In this state, she resembles a goddess or a statue carved to the detail because her eyes, temples, cheekbones, nose and mouth become more prominent, as if they were chiseled. Furthermore, her dead body is characterised by a consumed frame which emphasizes the outline of her delicate figure and her bone structure.

The body of the dead female is materialized into the personification of death and, in this process, the beloved inadvertently invites the lover to admire her fading beauty. It seems as if she is even more desirable at the moment of her death. As she dies, she becomes unattainable because her physical body is in decay and, as she vanishes, she turns into a powerful presence that stands between the realm of the living and the dead. The impermanence of the beloved renders her corpse within the boundaries of beautiful femininity and the fragility and futility of existence. However, her corpse has the power of signification. When the female character is alive in the story, her beauty allows for the signification of life; but when she is dying,

her agony and subsequent physical decay control her lover's representation of reality because her dead body becomes a visual signifier, the physical form of death.

Female characters such as Ligeia and Berenice in Poe's stories are portrayed as future corpses; they are the doomed beloved who suffer agonizing deaths which eventually unravel a series of uncanny events. From the beginning of the stories, the females are rather enigmatic, and they are characterised by a certain strangeness in their beauty and personality; described by their lovers as observers. That sense of eeriness their lovers feel intensifies when the females become physically absent through their deaths. Conversely, the dead females become increasingly present in their lovers' minds, both as a representation of ethereal beauty and of impending death.

If we consider that abjection can be understood in terms of uncanniness, we can say that the dead females in the stories "Ligeia" and "Berenice" are objects because they are uncanny. Apart from dealing with the horror of death in general terms, these stories deal with the horror of the encounter with a corpse. As corpses, Ligeia and Berenice are objects because they forcefully expose their lovers to the idea of death. This is possible because of the undeniable association between abjection and dead women. According to S.D. Chrostowska: "Abjection...relates most strongly to the physical presence and proximity of death ...as this is more likely to convey death viscerally, rather than intellectually" (61). The dying beautiful female, through her corpse, has the power to unravel emotional

conflicts that destabilize the observer and threaten to disrupt the meaning of life and death.

A woman conventionally embodies concepts like birth, family and love, all that is joyous and beautiful. However, in gothic stories such as “Ligeia” and “Berenice”, the women suffer the stigma of femininity; in a way, they are disgraced because of their female qualities. Even though they are young, loving, beautiful and intelligent, they turn into abject terror through their physical decay and absence. In these stories, the doomed female works as a corrupted muse. Instead of inspiring the poet to create, she takes him to destruction through the shattering of his cognitive ability to make sense out reality. This inversion of the typical female role is also evident when she is in a state of abject terror and her body is no longer inscribed with life because she has turned into the vivid representation of death.

The stories of Ligeia and Berenice are inscribed from the beginning, with instances of strangeness, which later on develop into uncanniness. Both females come to their lovers' mind through their memories and are thoroughly described in terms of their physical traits and demeanour until the moment of their deaths, and the experiences are recounted from the lovers' perspective. The story of Ligeia is a longer narration than the story of Berenice because in that story there are actually two women involved with the experience of death; but Ligeia is the focus of the lover's attention and remembrance.

“Ligeia” starts with an epigraph from Joseph Glanville, a writer and philosopher, who states that a man yields to death only through the weakness of his will. There are many references to the “weakness” of the lover in the midst of the melancholy death of Ligeia. At the beginning of the story, he has trouble remembering her because of the pain of her departure and because he recognises that she became her lover almost unnoticeably. The lover seems to be very distressed by the memory of Ligeia and the power she has over his mind. Ligeia does not have a family name, since her paternal name is unknown; something which makes her rather enigmatic. Added to her enigmatic character are the ethereal features of her *person*; she is tall, slender, majestic and her footsteps barely make a sound; as they are of an “incomprehensible lightness”. Her presence in the house is rarely noticeable, as if she were a spirit or a ghost; “She came and departed as a shadow” (156). Her marble hands are the only physical element that makes the lover aware of her company and her irregular features characterise her beauty in a way that raises his awareness towards her person. The distinctiveness of the beauty of Ligeia lies her strangeness; and the features of her strange beauty are similar to those of a fresh corpse: she is a woman of a “singular yet placid cast of beauty” (155); she has a flawless forehead, ivory coloured skin and “raven-black” (157) hair. The lover also describes other salient features in detail such as her nose, mouth, teeth, chin, and the general contour of her face. When he focuses on her eyes, he once again makes reference to the strangeness of their expression. The mystery of Ligeia is evident in the characterisation of her eyes. Though they are scrutinized, the meaning behind their expression cannot be defined, which creates a feeling of hopelessness and impotence in the lover’s search for understanding the

beauty of his beloved. He ponders on the beauty of Ligeia quite often, as it is so puzzling it affects his understanding of his feelings for her too. Since the lover finds it hard to define what he feels for Ligeia, he turns to observable facts he relies on, like the sound of music, the stars in the sky and the content in his books, to account for his feelings. Nonetheless, something he is sure about is her academic skills. Ligeia is learned, studious and of an immense knowledge of languages, science and philosophy, among other topics. Her intelligence is almost out of this world.

It seems as if the strangeness of Ligeia's beauty, her remarkable intelligence and her mysterious character make her faultless. However, she becomes physically ill and with her demise, everything she stands for -love, life, beauty- gets destroyed. Ligeia becomes emaciated and corpse-like, she is no longer able to inspire her lover with her academic skills, and she is turning into a shell of her former self. As she dies, she utters her last words (the quotation at the beginning of the story) to remind the lover that a man gives way to death when his will is weak. Her bereaved lover then decides to move to an abbey and remarry. His second wife, Lady Rowena of Tremaine, is Ligeia's successor and a sort of "replacement" wife.

The relationship between the lover and Lady Rowena is one of unrequited love; he hates her and she despises his moodiness. The lover is more focused on the appreciation of the architecture and decoration of the chambers of his new dwellings than on his new beloved. His memory is plagued by visions of Ligeia "the beautiful, the entombed" (164), sometimes as a product of drug-induced dreams. He wishes to bring her back and, while expressing regret for his current situation, he longs for her presence. But unfortunately for the lover, Lady Rowena also grows ill,

like Ligeia. She suffers from fever and delirium and goes back and forth between states of relative health and near death. Her illness is rare and undiagnosed and, as a result of her strange disorder, her behaviour turns irritable, unstable and physically emaciated. Her corpse-like features invade her living frame provoking a certain uneasiness and curiosity for her ghastly, vanishing presence. As Rowena is fading away and blood transfusions are proving to be futile, the lover can clearly see how she is dying: “But a deadly pallor, overspreading her face, had proved to me that my exertions to reassure her would be fruitless” (165).

When the lover is faced with the death of Rowena there is a sense of uncanniness in his mind. He starts noticing how the familiar strangeness of the dead of his second wife affects his impressions of the process of dying. He is overcome by fear and distress, and he feels as if death is coming to fetch him too; something which Elisabeth Bronfen calls “death by proxy”: “I had felt that some palpable although invisible object had passed lightly by my person ... — a faint, indefinite shadow of angelic aspect” (165). The impact of seeing death unravel before his very eyes again, makes him feel it is possible for him to die as well. As he is facing this kind of horror, the idea that the corpse of Rowena may be moving creates a further eerie sensation that is enhanced by the overstimulation of his senses in the confrontation with the corpse:

I strained my vision to detect any motion in the corpse — but there was not the slightest perceptible. Yet I could not have been deceived. I *had* heard the noise, however faint, and my soul was awakened within me. I resolutely and perseveringly kept my attention riveted upon the body. (166)

While the lover is confronted with the dead body of Rowena in her deathbed and he sees her “pallid, rigid figure upon the bed” (166), he has fleeting memories

of Ligeia; and he even imagines her enshrouded in the place of Rowena. This delusion shows that the lover is at the border of reality. The violence of the presence of the abject represented in the dead body of Rowena with visions of Ligeia makes the lover lose composure. The horror of death is affecting his emotions and behaviour: "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" (167). In the face of death, the lover is petrified with fear while trying to make sense of reality. His learned modes of cognition and signification are not able to offer expressions he can use to explain what he is experiencing. The abject destabilizes his ability for linguistic communication, since his language does not suffice to illustrate what death means. In order to gain perspective in this situation he turns to observing the body of Rowena once again, but he is still having visions of Ligeia. After he hears a sound coming from the body, in utter terror, he approaches his dead wife and notices her dead body shows features that would normally be associated with a living person: there is a glow on her face, a warmth that emanates from her whole body, and a faint pulse. This half- alive, half- dead state does not last long though, as immediately Rowena dies. Although his second wife is now dead, the lover still has lively visions of Ligeia. While he contemplates the corpse of Rowena he senses the dead body is moving in what seems to be more delusion, making him prone to "a whirl of violent emotions" (168). This experience conditions him to the possibility of being in the presence of an apparition of the transformed Lady Rowena:

I might have dreamed that Rowena had indeed shaken off, utterly, the fetters of Death (...) I stirred not -but gazed upon the apparition. There was a mad disorder in my thoughts- a tumult unappeasable. Could it, indeed be the living

Rowena who confronted me? (...) What inexpressible madness seized me with that thought? . (168-169)

After Rowena dies, the lover perceives a repetition of his experience with death, when the death of his second wife makes him relive the death of his first wife. This repetition is materialized in the doubling of the dead wives. That is to say, the dead Rowena turns into the dead Ligeia. At this point, the lover's behaviour is unstable and erratic, and his emotions grow more and more conflicting in the face of horror. The doubling achieves its utmost expression when the corpse of Rowena is transfigured into the dead body of Ligeia:

...and the chin, with its dimples, as in health, might it not be hers? (...) and there streamed forth, into the rushing atmosphere of the chamber, huge masses of long and dishevelled hair; *it was blacker than the raven wings of the midnight!* And now slowly opened *the eyes* of the figure which stood before me. (...) the wild eyes — of my lost love — of the lady — of the LADY LIGEIA." (169)

At the end of the story, the lover seems defeated. Like Ligeia's last words predicted, his will has finally become weakened. He can not resist being apprehended by death and he is seized by the horror of death presented by the abject in the corpse of Ligeia. His perception of reality is tainted with the mixture of excitement and terror which causes him to have visions of the reborn Lady Ligeia. Throughout the story, the lover turns to the recollection of the persona of Ligeia and the repetition of her name to create an image of her he can bring into reality at his will. As a representation, Ligeia becomes real everytime she is mentioned. Her lover's desire for her to be alive again is so strong that she is even resurrected over his second wife's dead body.

There is a doubling of female death when Ligeia's corpse returns to the lover through his second wife's death. In this respect, Elisabeth Bronfen sustains that:

“Making the dead Ligeia present by virtue of a continual invocation of her name seems to drain the living Rowena, until an exchange occurs in which the latter becomes ever more like the invoked first wife, herself losing bodily substance” (333). Her presence is so strong that she becomes a dominant representation, overshadowing the death of Lady Rowena. The repetition of Ligeia’s name leads to the final invocation of her “physical” presence and as a result, she “returns” in the dead body of Rowena.

Rowena's body serves as a vessel for Ligeia to come back and reveal the horror of death. In life, the lover’s recollection of Ligeia is inscribed with features of her persona and her physical appearance. He describes her personality in terms of her beauty and he expresses how this perception of her impacts his understanding of her character. When Ligeia becomes ill, the lover’s idea of the meaning of life collapses. She turns into a corpse in his eyes, which implies that, as her features change because of emaciation, her beauty vanishes and her whole person disappears, too; not without a fight though, thus revealing her strength of character: “...the fierceness of resistance with which she wrestled with the Shadow” (160). She resists to disappearing as if she were fighting to stay and give meaning to life. However, her function as a female abject, together with Rowena, is to give meaning to death by visually representing the concept through her dead body.

Like “Ligeia”, the story of Berenice also deals with a rather strange woman whose fleeting presence in life and absence in death greatly affect her lover. The focus of the story of Berenice is different from the story of Ligeia in the sense that the lover starts describing his life first, and then how it was transformed by Berenice. This story also, starts with a quotation. The words from the poet Ebn Zaiat refer to visiting a grave as a way to alleviate worries. Right from the beginning, there is a sense of gloominess that emanates from the story. This feeling anticipates the idea of darkness, expressed through death. The story begins with a very personal account of the lover’s life before Berenice. In the first person, Egaeus, tells about his early life and his family, and his unavoidable sense of sorrow and anguish. Like the lover in Ligeia, Egaeus’s house is tainted by death because his mother died there so that he could be born. As a result of his sorrow and gloominess he is greatly affected by the stimuli of outside world and relies on his own visions of reality. After this biographical reference, Berenice appears in the story.

She is Egaeus’s cousin-turned-wife, opposite to him in many ways: she is young, “agile, graceful and overflowing with energy” (176), and he is older, affected by illness and miserable. As he chooses to stay in meditation and study, she roams freely through life. Since this story is told in retrospect, as in “Ligeia”, the lover also recalls his beloved and calls her name repeatedly to create an image of her in his reality. Like Ligeia, the life of Berenice is shrouded in “mystery and terror” (176) especially because she is ravaged by a strange disease. She suffers from epilepsy that turns fatal in the end. Her epilepsy is an interesting factor in her characterization since the cause of this neurological disorder is unknown and it makes her suffer seizures that remove her temporarily from reality. As a result, she

is left between the living and the dead. When the lover becomes aware of the physical changes to her frame because of her disease, he realises her character and “the identity of her person” (176) are transformed, too.

At this point in the story, she is a victim of impending death, and therefore, he does not recognise her; for him she is no longer Berenice. Her epilepsy causes her to be in a sort of trance which affects her whole physical and spiritual being. This state of trance implies she is disappearing from his life, since, in his words, the state resembles a dissolution of her person. In the narration, Berenice is fading as a character. Like Ligeia, the concepts of life and beauty that anchor her to life, are vanishing with her as she disappears. While Berenice “dissolves” Egaeus’s monomania intensifies. He suffers from a “nervous intensity of interest” (177) because he becomes obsessed with certain elements (like typography, a shadow, a flame, the perfume of a flower, etc) he contemplates. Berenice’s condition causes him pain, and though he recognises the effects of her illness in the *moral* aspect of her being, he focuses on the alterations to her physical frame; the changes that disturb her identity because the lover relies on observable features that allow him to understand death.

Like Ligeia, Berenice is described as a ghost-like figure and a rather ethereal presence; a dream figure, who comes and goes fleetingly from her lover’s life. The lover himself says that she is an abstraction of her being, something he could ponder on and analyse. His mind wanders and allows for the compulsive observation of her countenance and frame. Her physical body is also equalled to her identity and when her physical countenance becomes affected, her whole

person disappears too. She is also a woman of unique beauty, but unlike Ligeia, Berenice's lover is attracted to her through his mind. After he decides to marry her, he notices she has become very emaciated and that she is now "not a vestige of the former being" (179). Her body incised by the early signs of death becomes a site of collapse where beauty and death battle in the lover's articulation of meaning. In her agony there is a fragmented appreciation of her ravaged body.

The proximal death of Berenice sparks a sense of unfamiliarity and the loss of the sense of familiarity brings about the uncanny. When the lover notices how her body is affected with consumption, he falls into the "uncanny valley" in his mind; there is an extreme feeling of strangeness derived from the sudden awareness of her decay: "She spoke no word (...) a sense of insufferable anxiety oppressed me; a consuming curiosity pervaded my soul". (179). However, he is attracted by her corpse and he tries to achieve "the strictest communion with the deceased" (178) -a very basic human need present since the early moments of human existence- when she is lying in her deathbed. Nonetheless, as Ligeia's lover, he also becomes petrified with fear in the presence of death: "But I had no longer the power to move ... and I remained rooted to the spot, and gazing upon thethe rigid body as it lay outstretched in the dark coffin..." (181). While he is with her body he is consumed by fear: "I sprang convulsively from the bed, and, uttering no word, rushed forth a maniac from that apartment of triple horror, and mystery, and death" (181).

The lover starts losing his sense of familiarity when he contemplates Berenice because she is becoming strange as her face turns pale and placid, her temples hollow and her hair frail and yellow. Her eyes seem lifeless and show a

ghastly stare and her lips look shrunken and thin. As the lips part, they allow him to see her eerie smile. Since her decaying beauty is described in terms of parts or sections, her teeth become the center of this description. After this moment, he becomes automatically fixated on her teeth because of their striking features (they are long, narrow, white and bright), and because of his monomania: “They--they alone were present to the mental eye, and they, in their sole individuality, became the essence of my mental life” (180).

Berenice’s decay causes terror in his lover, and as a result, he responds with a consequent terrific action. His fixation with the fetching denture causes him to become obsessed with that fetishized object and to worry about getting it. Berenice’s teeth are a reminder of her human nature and he has the strong desire to have them. They are irresistible because they are the only tangible object that can restore his mental faculties in this disturbing situation. In the horror of her death, there is a need to hold on to something that allows him to conceptualize her death because he refuses to understand her demise. The thought of her teeth affects his dreams with horror until he realises she is no longer alive. Towards the end of her dying process, he has no recollection of her last moments or comprehension of her death. The confusion of the process that has kept the beloved between the world of the living and the world of the dead causes in the lover a further sense of horror because of the uncertainty of his current reality: “...horror more horrible from being vague...”(181).

The horrific reality the lover is going through, finds its utmost expression when the proposal from the beginning of the story in the quotation occurs in reality.

He reads those words from a book and has a spine chilling realisation: he visited Berenice's grave so he could alleviate his soul. However, he discovers in a horrific awareness that, in order to achieve peace, he has desecrated her grave and finally removed the teeth from her body. The lover's actions are carried out by an unconscious impulse to satisfy his desire for maintaining a connection to life and meaning.

"Berenice" is perhaps the most haunting story of the two, since Berenice's lover violates her grave and her corpse in order to retrieve her teeth. For the lovers in both stories, the encounter with the corpse of the beloved causes them to be outside the symbolic register, that is to say, he can not account for her death. As the lovers in these stories fall into "the uncanny valley" they find reality ambiguous and incomprehensible. The lover from "Ligeia" is able to see the reborn Ligeia in the dead body of Rowena, and the lover from "Berenice" becomes so obsessed with a part of her that he destroys her grave and her body to remove her teeth. The lovers in these stories seem confused because of the memories that connect them to a not so distant familiar past, and the turmoil of emotions and odd reactions that tie them to their new abnormal reality. Because of their sudden awareness of death, they have to deal with contradictory feelings. S.D. Chrostowska states that:

Encounters with bodily death - particularly human death and first encounters- are characterized by an unnerving mixture of attraction and repulsion. The experience (...) is oscillating between identification with and estrangement from (...) the corpse... (61).

In these stories, both Ligeia and Berenice become objects when they are between life and death. This in-betweenness gives the dead females the ability to

blur their lovers' boundaries in their identities because their psychological constructs about life and death become destabilized. The women in "Ligeia" and "Berenice" are turned into objects when the represented image of the dead beloved in the corpse becomes a powerful horror that forces the lover into self-recognition in order to face death. The ambivalent nature of the dead females as objects in the stories is a trait reminiscent of the qualities of the presence of the female in the Gothic. They are trapped in contradiction and caught between the worlds of the living and the dead. In the story, the female is "alive" in the lover's' reality because of his propensity to life, and his insistent recollection of her image; at the same time, she is also dead with the real qualities of the corpse. The presence of corpse prompts the lover to dejection and to a confusion between the real and unreal, into the questioning of the principles that govern his life. When the boundaries are blurred, there are terrifying consequences which only respond to a primal desire for understanding the complexity of death.

Death is difficult to address because if we acknowledge its presence in life, death becomes an inevitable part of our reality. The most captivating facet of death is how we deal with it. Experiences with death and dying challenge our humanity and dignity and lead us to question our comprehension and our capacity to live through it. Writing about death confronts the author with the understanding of the meaning of death through the description of the physical disappearance of a person, and the dematerialization of all the aspects that shape that person into existence. It is a grueling task to articulate a concept that grows from disruption; especially when it implies pain, suffering and decay. Perhaps the most prominent and essential element associated with death is the dead body. A human corpse is a source of disruption in the conceptualization process because it represents both life and death at the same time. It is a visual representation of what a person *has been* and what the person *is* no longer.

The dead body forces us to face death and accept the precarious and fleeting nature of life. Because we appreciate life, it is our desire to associate death with peace and closure; which is why the *dark side* of death seems so disconnected from our reality. Stories such as “Ligeia” and “Berenice” are necessary because they offer an intimate, horrifying characterization of death. Specifically, stories about the death of women fascinate readers because they offer the possibility of communicating about such a complex issue. Those stories spark interest because they make us identify the ambivalent connection between females and death and encourage us to try and decipher what it is about. *In The Philosophy of*

Composition, Poe states that death is the most melancholy topic of all, specially in its connection to beautiful women.

The impact of death forces us to try and understand it intellectually, in a logical manner. In this sense, death implies physical decay, a change in countenance and movement, and the objectification of the body; that is to say, the dead body becomes the concrete expression of the abstract concept of death. Poe's association of death and beautiful women in his stories allowed for the identification of women with death in Gothic literature. Unexplainable and abstract, death found its significant in beautiful women. The concept of beauty is highly representative in the stories because when beauty fades, life vanishes; when a live woman turns into an eerie, cadaveric version of her former self, she changes into a horrifying concept. This ambivalence enables women in literature to be mysterious are analogous with death. They are constructed from the darkness of the unknown. As horrifying concepts, they destabilise their lovers into psychological dissolution because their desirability renders them unattainable. In the same way, the undeniable quality of death disturbs the subject into questioning signification because it cannot be decoded into meaning; it can not be understood. This ambivalence is also present in Poe's romantic disposition inscribed in the tales from the "horror Gothic" that creates sympathy for monstrous characters and causes displeasure for the macabre events they are involved in.

The ample psychology of the characters and the vivid narration invite the readers into an active, intense involvement in the story. Poe's characters, Ligeia and Berenice, offer through their stories a primal return to self-recognition; and they

entitle the reader to achieve a sense of closure, or “denouement”. The death of the female in the story gives a kind of conclusion to the terrorising process of death in the narration. At the same time, the dead female character also offers closure to the process of awareness of death in the reader. The females in these stories are an everlasting cause for desire for comprehension because they are inexhaustible referents for opposition. This complexity gives them the opportunity to be the sites of creation and destruction of the notions of life and death, the images of femininity and beauty, and the impressions of the unconscious and reality. Even though the women in “Ligeia” and “Berenice” are doomed to suffer their own obliteration because of their condition as female objects, they are also destined to become perpetual vehicles of communication about the horrors of death and dying. They have been constructed in a way in which they are able to convey an idea of what death means, how it impacts humanity and the ultimate outcome of its management.

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