

# Death of Women in Edgar Allan Poe's Selected Stories

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Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskoga jezika i  
književnosti i filozofije

Ružica Vrbat

**Smrt ženskih likova u odabranim pričama Edgara Allana Poea**

Završni rad

doc. dr. sc. Ljubica Matek

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Bachelor's Thesis

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## *Abstract*

This paper deals with the topic of female characters in three of Edgar Allan Poe's selected stories: "Ligeia", "Morella" and "Berenice". The three characters on which the paper focuses are Ligeia, Morella and Berenice, and it attempts to show that Poe did not write about dying women because he was obsessively influenced by his own experiences, but because he tried to portray a new, "Modern" woman, one whose manifestation of power could best be achieved through death. The paper brings into connection the author's crucial life experiences, and gender roles in the nineteenth century, with the analyses of the three selected stories, in order to show how they are connected. The women in the stories all have different lives and roles in the story, but are bound together with the idea of death and life after death, as they all die an unexpected death, then come back to life at the end of each story. The paper points to the conclusion that their deaths and rebirths signify the power they have over the men in their lives: Ligeia proves dominion over the narrator's sanity as well as love interest, Morella proves her intellectual dominion over the narrator once again even after she dies, and Berenice proves dominion over the narrator's mind. In all of the stories the protagonist's triumph over death represents the "Modern" woman's victory over the old, Victorian woman.

Keywords: women, Edgar Allan Poe, death, power.

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## Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe is a nineteenth century American writer who is well-known for his grotesque, twisted, shocking tales, detective stories and the idea that “the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” (Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition” 165). Having received posthumous recognition, his writing style has influenced many authors.

“Why is it that Edgar Allan Poe’s literary works can still excite, thrill and divide readers across cultures and lifespans?” (Bundgard 3). Although it can be said that his works were shocking at the time when he wrote them, which contributed to their great impact, the fact is that his works are still relevant even in the era when vampires, werewolves and mythical creatures that appear in literature and other media are not shocking and unusual at all. Perhaps it is his choice of topics that makes them immune to the passage of time; love and death and their tight connection are undeniably such topics.

His legacy is also carried on “by the ongoing debate and analysis of his works. Seldom has one man, a writer, a poet, and a literary critic, been the topic of such disagreement between scholars and debaters” (Bundgard 3) who describe his works as either genius and ahead of his time or as misogynist. The fact is that his most important and popular stories are about a beautiful, young, dead woman. His entire gender philosophy is mostly criticized based on these few similar stories, many discussions pointing to the connection of his life and his literary works, and the fact the inspiration to write about dying women comes from his own personal traumas; death of both his mother(s) and wife.

The thesis of this paper is that Poe’s point of view wasn’t misogynist nor was Poe obsessively influenced by his own experiences but rather was ahead of his time and tried to portray a new, “Modern” woman, one whose manifestation of power could best be achieved through death. This thesis will be backed up by the analysis of three of Poe’s short stories, that is the main female protagonists of “Ligeia”, “Morella” and “Berenice”. The first chapter of this paper will deal with statistics on Poe’s women in life and works, psychoanalytical readings on Poe and examples of these, including Shoshana Felman’s Lacanian approach and Marie Bonaparte’s Freudian approach, in order to show why “we should not link the poet to his poems in such a biographical manner” (Phillips 103). It will also be dedicated to nineteenth century gender roles to illustrate how and why Poe was ahead of his time regarding this issue.



The second chapter will deal with the characterization and in-depth analysis of the “Dark Ladies” from his stories “Ligeia”, “Morella” and “Berenice” in order to show that they aren’t so victimized and passive as they initially appear to be. The third chapter will deal with the idea of death, primarily with why Poe is so keen on making his protagonists die in these stories. In the conclusion, the paper will show that the stories’ eponymous protagonists represent powerful women who refuse to stay repressed, and overcome anything (even death) by the power of their will. Their triumph over death represents the “Modern” woman’s victory over the old, Victorian woman. All three of them prove dominion over the narrators: Ligeia proves dominion over the narrator’s sanity and love interest, Morella over the narrator’s intellect and Berenice over the narrator’s mind. Furthermore, the paper shows that we cannot judge a writer based on stereotypical misconceptions about him, especially after considering he wrote in different styles, genres, about different people and themes.

## 1. Poe's women, psyche and gender roles in the nineteenth century

For the sake of better understanding the alleged fact that a beautiful woman dies frequently in Poe's stories, it is necessary to look at the facts regarding Poe's women, both in his personal life and his stories, as well as different psychological theories which try to explain where Poe's inspiration is coming from, emphasizing the connection between his life and works. The paper will later partially refute those theories.

### 1.1. Women

In Poe's entire oeuvre, out of all of his works, "around 54%, deals in some way with women, however small a mention it may be, a significant 46% does not deal with women at all" (Martens 8). This shows that, instead of suggesting a fixation on women or death of women in his works, Poe dedicates roughly a half of his works to women, and a half to men. It is undeniable that Poe's personal life experiences and relationships with women could have affected the way he portrays women in his stories, as well as their roles.

There are two main types of women in his works that may be said to have come from his personal life, the mother figure and the virginal maiden, both of which are closely connected to death. The first type, the mother figure, is represented in Poe's life by his aunt and his mother-in-law because his real mother, Elizabeth Poe, died when he was only a child, a circumstance which forced Poe to find a replacement first in his stepmother, followed by his mother-in-law. Poe also had strong feelings towards Jane Stanard, the mother of one of his friends, who died, too, which left Poe grieving again. Later in his life he has gone through the death of his stepmother (Kennedy 22). The second type, the virginal maiden, is represented in Poe's life by Virginia Clemm, his first cousin and wife. The virginal maiden is undoubtedly the type which appears most often in Poe's works, both in his poetry and prose, "According to some researchers, his well-known poem *Annabel Lee* is based on a real-life character, namely Virginia Clemm" (Sova 12). His wife also died when she was young, which can be said to have further traumatized Poe.

### 1.2. Methodology and psychology

Many theorists have analyzed Poe's oeuvre based on his life, and one of them was Marie Bonaparte who provided "a clear-cut Freudian analysis of Poe's life and its representation in his stories"

according to which “our childhood has a significant impact on the rest of our lives” (Bundgard 10). Bonaparte, following in Freud’s footsteps, ties Poe’s stories to his personal life elaborating Poe’s childhood trauma of losing not only his mother to death, but also his father to abandonment, into grounds for applying the Oedipal complex to Poe’s case. Bonaparte summarizes her analyses of Poe to a conclusion that he was “an impotent incestuous sadonecrophilist and drug addict with an unresolved Oedipal Complex which defined his writing significantly” (Bundgard 15).

Conversely, Shoshana Felman expresses her criticism of Bonaparte’s one-sidedness of her analysis. She stresses that psychoanalysis cannot be done without subjecting Poe himself to the analysis, but does not completely disagree with Bonaparte/Freud. “Felman’s main point of critique lies with the Freudian axiom of the dominion of the unconscious over creative writing” (Bundgard 19). Felman summarizes by explaining that Poe is a slave to his unconscious mind, “as —(...) our conscious ego is never but the more or less watchful spectator of ourselves” (Muller and Richardson 104).

### 1.3. Gender roles in the nineteenth century

Given that the first influential American literary contribution to the feminist movement was Margaret Fuller’s *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* which was published in 1845 (not long before Poe’s death and after most of Poe’s most influential stories had already been published), it is safe to say Poe was not influenced by the feminist movements while he was writing his stories.

In the nineteenth century, men and women had separate roles in society – man’s role being focused on the public sphere, while woman’s on the domestic sphere. These distinctively segregated roles created a stigma of both feminine and masculine ideals that each gender was unconsciously succumbed to. It was expected of a man to be successful and of a woman to ensure tranquility and well-being in the home (Bundgard 35). “In the nineteenth century, middleclass men’s work was vital to their sense of who they were. (...) If a man was without ‘business’, he was less than a man” (Kennedy 158). Furthermore, female ideals were “set forth by what was known as The Cult of True Womanhood (also known as The Cult of Domesticity), a movement insisting on the four cardinal virtues of the female: piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity” (Kennedy 139). It is important for the paper to explain gender roles in the nineteenth century in order to show that Poe

is not 'killing' women in his stories because of his alleged misogyny, but because he wanted to free women of their role (at least in his stories) and show what they are capable of.

In order to better understand the importance of the motif of death of a woman and to show that Poe wanted to portray a new, "Modern" woman who best expressed her power through death, the paper will focus on detailed analysis of the three stories. The analysis will include the stories' plots, protagonists and the significance of their deaths as well as resurrection.

## 2. Analyses

### 2.1. Ligeia

#### 2.1.1. Story plot

The story begins with the narrator telling the readers what he does (or does not) know about Ligeia; he cannot recall when they have met, where she was from nor what her last name was. In spite of the lack of background information about her, it is clear that she is far from forgotten: the narrator goes on about the subtle strangeness of her beauty focusing mostly on her eyes. Although he dedicates almost an entire page to her physical description, the narrator is not astonished by her looks only; he then describes her as intense, passionate, intelligent and inspirational. Her spirit begins to deteriorate as she grows ill. At her deathbed, she asks him to read her a poem titled *The Conqueror Worm* which she had written a few days before. She then quotes Glanvill and dies. After Ligeia's death, devastated, the narrator leaves for England, where he marries a woman he does not love, Lady Rowena Trevanion of Tremaine, with whom he moves into a gothic bridal chamber, all the while being under the influence of opium and with Ligeia on his mind. Rowena also gets ill. One night, in hopes of trying to revive her, the narrator brings her a glass of red wine. Throughout the night he's possibly hallucinating sensations such as feeling an invisible figure pass by him, seeing a shadow on the carpet, hearing footsteps and seeing red liquid drops fall into Rowena's glass. Soon after having drunk the wine, she immediately feels worse and dies. After her death, he again hallucinates, this time seeing color coming back into Rowena's body and hearing a faint cry coming from her bed. The next morning, the narrator witnesses Rowena, still wrapped in her burial shroud, looking very much alive. As she rises from the bed and starts moving towards him, the bandage falls from her head and reveals dark hair; he recognizes the eyes of Ligeia (Poe 224-235).

#### 2.1.2. Ligeia's characterization

Unlike his other protagonists, Poe portrays Ligeia both physically and intellectually. When the narrator reminisces about Ligeia, he describes her physique as "tall, somewhat slender, and, in her latter days, even emaciated" (Poe, *The Complete Tales*, 224). She walked very incomprehensibly lightly, "came and departed as a shadow" (224), surprising the narrator every time she came and leaving him without him being aware of her departure. Her beauty was "strange" and her "features were not of that regular mould which we have been falsely taught to worship in the classical labors

of the heathen” (224). We learn of her “lofty and pale forehead”, skin that was “rivalling the purest ivory”, raven-black, “glossy” hair, perfectly “harmoniously curved nostrils”, “the magnificent turn of the short upper lip – the soft, voluptuous slumber of the under” and “the formation of the chin” (225). The narrator was mostly astonished by her eyes, which were “far larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race” and “the most brilliant of black” (225). But the “strangeness” which he “found in the eyes, was of a nature distinct from the formation, or the color, or the brilliancy of the features, and must, after all, be referred to the expression” (225). The narrator spent hours pondering upon “the expression of the eyes of Ligeia”, trying to fathom what exactly it was “which lay far within the pupils” of his beloved (224-225).

One of the reasons why the narrator was obsessed with her eyes was because they expressed what was going on internally: externally she was “calm” and “ever-placid”, but she “delighted and appalled” the narrator “by the almost magical melody, modulation, distinctness and placidity of her very low voice --- and by the fierce energy (rendered doubly effective by contrast with her manner of utterance) of the wild words which she habitually uttered” (226). She possessed knowledge such as he “has never known in a woman” (226). Even though he was a man “who has traversed, and successfully, all the wide areas of moral, physical, and mathematical science”, he was “sufficiently aware of her infinite supremacy” to resign himself “with a child-like confidence, to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation” (226).

### 2.1.3. “The Conqueror Worm” and Glanvill's quote

“The Conqueror Worm” is a poem about a play written by Ligeia. The narrator reads it to her at her deathbed. In the play, an audience of angels is observing the stage on which puppet-like mimes driven by invisible forces (who represent mankind) are flying around the stage. The mimes are chasing ‘The Phantom’, when ‘The Conqueror Worm’ comes and starts eating the mimes. The curtain then falls, and angels declare the play a tragedy called *Man* and the Conqueror Worm a hero. The whole point of the play is that mankind is weak, without free will, doomed to sadness, sin and chasing the unobtainable, and finally to be eaten by a worm. That dark approach to life is understandable given the poem was written by a dying woman a couple of days prior to her death. After having heard the poem one last time, Ligeia shrieks in horror and then silently murmurs a

part of Glanvill's passage and dies. Poe used the same passage as an epitaph for *Ligeia*; "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 himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will" (Poe 224). According to the passage, man is able to avoid death through will which is powerful, unknowable and undying. Ligeia's combining the poem and the passage together at the moment of her death seems paradoxical, but it makes sense later in the story when she ultimately comes back to life.

#### 2.1.4. What Ligeia's death represents

Although the narrator's obsession with Ligeia may be misinterpreted as caused by her looks, it is clear that he admired other Ligeia's virtues; she was passionate, wilful and intelligent. Considering she was the narrator's partner in his studies, he thought of her as his equal, even superior, as she would freely enter his study room and place "her marble hand" (Poe 224) upon his shoulder. Their relationship challenges the traditional gender roles dynamics of the time. She was in fact the one to make him rich, as she left him with "very far more than ordinarily falls to the lot of mortals" (Poe 229), and she had complete power over the narrator. Even at her deathbed, she ordered him to read her a poem, which he obeyed. Her ultimate victory was her return from the dead. Not only did she resurrect, but she did it by using another woman's dead body after she had accelerated Rowena's death to get what she wants. In the end, she in fact did overcome death solely by the power of her will, as Glanvill's passage predicted. Ligeia is the type of a woman to overcome anything by the power of her strong will, is capable of anything regardless of what society tells her to do, and alongside all that, even subdues beauty standards under her strange beauty. In a way, her rebirth symbolizes the "Modern" woman's victory over the old, Victorian woman.

## 2.2. Morella

### 2.2.1. Story plot

The narrator's soul burns "with fires it had never known before" (Poe 307) because he met a woman named Morella. He primarily desires her because of the intelligence she possesses. They marry and she introduces him to studying mystical writings whose meaning he tries to decipher himself, but fails which pushes him to submit to his wife's guidance. They discuss whether

personal identity and consciousness could survive death, inspired by the thinking of philosophers Pythagoras, Fichte and Schelling, all three of whom believed in some kind of rebirth of soul after death. Soon, “The most beautiful became the most hideous”; he starts hating Morella, and can “no longer bear the touch of her wan fingers”, “nor the low tone of her musical language, nor the lustre of her melancholy eyes” (308). Being aware that she did not have her husband’s attention anymore and that he despised her, Morella falls ill. The narrator is not unhappy about it, on the contrary, he yearns for her death, and is even enraged by her refusal to die, cursing time for lengthening her life. Lying in bed, dying, Morella calls for her husband. He kisses her forehead as she says: “I am dying, yet shall I live” (308). She also declares that regardless of him not being able to love her while she was alive, he will adore her when she is dead, and that within her “is a pledge of that affection” (308), a child which will live after her spirit departs. Morella was right: the child lived. As she grew bigger, the little girl bore an uncanny resemblance to Morella. Regardless of that, the narrator still loves the child, but suffers anxiety because of it. For ten years, he never told the girl of her mother, baptized her nor given her a name. He decides to baptize her, in hopes of driving Morella’s spirit out of the child. On the day of the ceremony, when the clergyman asks for the name of the child, something takes over him and in the moment when he lost control of himself, he utters: ‘Morella’. Hearing that name (apparently for the first time), the girl falls back on the ancestral vault and shrieks: “I am here!”. After the child’s death, he lays her in the same tomb as he did Morella, only to find she is no longer there (Poe 307-310).

### 2.2.2. Morella’s characterization

“Whereas Ligeia is extensively described in physical terms, Morella is rather defined by her character than by her appearance. She is described as intelligent; her ‘erudition was profound’ and ‘her powers of mind were gigantic’” (Martens 53). Her spirit was so strong that the narrator, apparently without reason but most likely out of jealousy, began to hate her:

And then, hour after hour, would I linger by her side, and dwell upon the music of her voice, until at length its melody was tainted with terror, and there fell a shadow upon my soul, and I grew pale, and shuddered inwardly at those too unearthly tones. And thus, joy



suddenly faded into horror, and the most beautiful became the most hideous, as Hinnom became Gehenna. (Poe 307)

The narrator was obviously threatened by her; he “is never able to stand up to her or challenge her on any level”. Even in the moments of her death, “she is the only one who speaks a considerable number of phrases; the narrator is only able to utter her name. Hence, Morella outwits the narrator every time, until her very last breath” (Martens 53).

### 2.2.3. Philosophers

In terms of Morella’s internal characterization, the subjects of her studies need to be analyzed as well. According to the story, she enjoys researching mystical writings the most. She occupies herself with “The wild Pantheism of Fichte; the modified Paliggenedia of the Pythagoreans; and, above all, the doctrines of Identity as urged by Schelling” which “were generally the points of discussion presenting the most of beauty to the imaginative Morella” (Poe 307). All three of these philosophies deal with the issue whether the self, the soul, “an intelligent essence having reason” (Poe 207-208), one’s personal identity, survives and stays preserved after one dies. Assuming “the narrator stands for ‘the harsh mathematical reason’, abstract knowledge or thinking, and the technical arts (technology)” (Carlson 174), Morella’s spiritual studies triumph over the narrator’s rational studies, the execution of which, once again confirms her intellectual dominion over him.

### 2.2.4. What Morella’s death represents

Morella undermines the narrator’s masculinity. She seems to pose an “intellectual threat to the narrator’s masculine superiority and leadership” (Miquel-Baldellou 184). As if her dominion over him was not mentally excruciating enough during her lifetime, she had to dominate over him even in her death, and long after it. Despite her death, she continues to live in the body of her daughter, which shows that Morella “presents a woman of emotional intensity and determined will who threatens the narrator with complexities which he cannot understand, let alone reciprocate” (Johanyak 64). Given that gender roles in the nineteenth century have been discussed previously,

it is known that it was not typical for a woman to be extremely intelligent. Victorian women were not meant to be educated and were supposed to be domestic and raise children. Not only was Morella overeducated, but she also was not available to raise her child, leaving that domestic role to be taken over by the narrator. Morella's death, or better, triumph over it, symbolizes her dominion over the narrator as well as the "Modern" woman's victory over the old, Victorian woman.

### 2.3. Berenice

#### 2.3.1. Plot summary

The narrator of the story is a wealthy man named Eagus. He is deeply connected to the family mansion he lives in because he was born in a library in which his mother died. He grew up with his cousin Berenice, whom he contrasts greatly in terms of life energy. They both fall ill. On the one hand, she is overtaken by a fatal disease which changes her, "disturbing even the identity of her person" (Poe 33). The disease manifests itself through epilepsy trances which only last a short while, but take a lot of time and effort to recover from. On the other hand, he is overtaken by a mental disease: it manifests through monomaniacal interest and obsession in "the contemplation of even the most ordinary objects of the universe" (33). He would spend hours focusing on one thing only such as losing himself "for an entire night, in watching the steady flame of a lamp, or the embers of a fire" or dreaming "away whole days over the perfume of a flower" (33). Regardless of her physical beauty, Eagus does not love Berenice. Her image invades his mind but he perceives her "not as the living and breathing Berenice, but as the Berenice of a dream", "not as a thing to admire, but to analyze" (35). He is annoyed by her sickly presence. Knowing she loves him, "in an evil moment" (35), he asks her to marry him. One afternoon before the wedding approaches, she enters and stands before Eagus in the library. As he looks up at her, he feels "an icy chill" and "a sense of insufferable anxiety" (35). She is too emaciated, pale and lifeless to even resemble her old self. What horrifies him the most are her long, narrow and incredibly white teeth, an image which sticks in his mind. He begins spending days and nights in the library, obsessing over Berenice's teeth. One night a maid tells Eagus that an epileptic fit had killed Berenice. After her burial, he is sitting alone in the library, thinking: "I had done a deed—what was it?" (36). At the table near him, is a box that belongs to the family doctor. Eagus does not know why its presence bothers him so much. Suddenly, some terrified menial tiptoes into the library and tells him of "a

wild cry disturbing the silence of the night” and of “a violated grave --- of a disfigured body enshrouded, yet still breathing --- still palpating --- *still alive!*” (37). Eagus suddenly rushes to the table, tries to open the box only to drop it and unwillingly crack open, when “thirty-two small, white and ivory-looking substances” (37) scatter around the floor.

### 2.3.2. Berenice’s characterization

Even though it seems that while he was writing the story, Poe spent more time describing the narrator than Berenice, after further analysis of the story, we can see that Berenice is portrayed two times. Firstly, we are introduced to her character through contrast to the narrator;

Yet differently we grew — I, ill of health, and buried in gloom — she, agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy; hers, the ramble on the hill-side—mine the studies of the cloister; I, living within my own heart, and addicted, body and soul, to the most intense and painful meditation—she, roaming carelessly through life, with no thought of the shadows in her path, or the silent flight of the raven-winged hours. (Poe 33)

When speaking of her physical characteristics, the narrator compares her “gorgeous yet fantastic beauty” (Poe 33) to a Naiad (“a type of nymph that lives near water”) or a sylph (“an invisible being of air”) (Martens 48). Secondly, she is portrayed when her health starts to deteriorate, and the disease began “pervading her mind, her habits, and her character, and, in a manner the most subtle and terrible, disturbing even the identity of her person!” (Poe 33). What is interesting is that Poe decided to display that change of her person by highlighting changes in her looks, rather her persona:

The forehead was high, and very pale, and singularly placid; and the once jetty hair fell partially over it, and overshadowed the hollow temples with innumerable ringlets, now of a vivid yellow, and jarring discordantly, in their fantastic character, with the reigning melancholy of the countenance. The eyes were lifeless, and lustreless, and seemingly pupilless, and I shrank involuntarily from their glassy stare to the contemplation of the thin and shrunken lips. (Poe 35)

### 2.3.3. The narrator’s relationship with Berenice

The narrator unwillingly, unconsciously has another approach to Berenice's portrayal through the way he perceived her. He heavily objectified her. Initially he thinks of her as of something beautiful to look at and interesting to analyze. He says that his feelings towards her "*had never been* of the heart" and that his "*passions always were* of the mind" (Poe 35). Furthermore, he continues to describe her only in regard to her physical appearance even after mentioning that her illness had changed who she was as a person. Whenever he speaks of her, he speaks of parts of her as if they weren't hers; "he speaks of 'the teeth', 'the eyes' and 'the forehead' instead of 'her teeth', 'her eyes' and 'her forehead'" (Doyle 14). "Berenice seems to just disappear into body parts, objectified, fragmented and with no personal identity or voice left" (Martens 51).

#### 2.3.4. What Berenice's death represents

Compared to Ligeia and Morella, Berenice appears to have the least amount of power. Considering the information on her the readers were presented with, it is easy to see she is "reduced to a haunting remnant" (Dayan 245). She represents "all the silenced, repressed, frustrated and domestically imprisoned women who were largely ignored or misused by fathers, husbands and brothers" (Johanyak 69). She has no voice in the story, nor was given any intellectual powers such as Ligeia and Morella, but she is still able to break the ground of her social and gender role. Her power was shown in death; whether she was buried alive or simply resurrected, by staying alive or coming back to life she refused to "remain repressed" (Person 29). Her teeth were objects which symbolize that refusal to stay repressed, as she had power in the fact the narrator obsessed over them: "Even though Berenice may seem static and passive at first sight, we can still find clues that underline her willpower and unconscious influence on the narrator by means of her teeth" (Martens 52). Her death symbolizes the "Modern" woman's victory over the old, Victorian woman.

#### 2.4. Similarities and differences between the three women

"Most of Poe's women, too, are very much alike in appearance and in character" (Stovall 197). Yet it is still possible to place them into categories, based on their role in the poems and tales. Given that Poe said that "The death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" (Poe, "The philosophy of composition" 5) it is easy to understand why many

critics accuse Poe of having a feminine ideal, one which is achieved through death. After analyzing the stories, it is clear that the stories do have distinct similarities, but their differences speak on the behalf of the paper's thesis, namely, that Poe represents strong, independent women.

Firstly, the stories themselves are similar. In all three of them, the narrator is male, but the protagonist is female. All three stories are titled with the protagonists' names because Poe tries to deny the "hierarchization of men over women" (Bundgard 62) and point at who the story really is about. The dying women are in fact the protagonists, "we need a narrator to fully comprehend the gloriousness of the ones who provide the basis for the story - all of them possessing some knowledge which has a significant impact on the narrators" (Bundgard 62). In all three of the stories, the protagonist unexpectedly dies of illness (each from a different one) and in some way comes back to life.

Secondly, the narrators were similar. In "Ligeia" and "Morella", the narrators' names were unknown. In both of these stories they were inferior to their wife's intellect. However, in "Berenice", the narrator's name and background is known, and he's the only one out of the three who is intellectually superior to his wife. In "Ligeia" and "Berenice" both narrators had some kind of mental instability; in "Ligeia" the narrator was a substance abuser, while in "Berenice" the narrator had a mental illness. However, all three of them shared an interest in some kind of metaphysical studies.

Thirdly, "traits of the women show remarkable consistency" (Webb 215), but also difference. Berenice was portrayed mainly based on physical appearance, Morella on her intellect, and Ligeia on both. Both Ligeia and Berenice are described "as having black curling tresses, profound, wild eyes, high pale foreheads (sic) etched blue veins, thin, pale hands, and an emaciated frame" (Webb 215). In both of their characterization, the narrators placed lot of focus in one physical trait only: in Ligeia on 'the' eyes, in Berenice on 'the' teeth. The difference is that "in 'Ligeia', the narrator uses the definite article to express a certain awe, which is underlined by his use of extremely positive adjectives", "opposed to the negative objectification in 'Berenice'" (Martens 58). Ligeia and Morella were both extremely intelligent, shared interest in metaphysical studies, had mental

powers and were in dominion over the narrator, whereas Berenice was the least powerful one and the most ignored one when it comes to intellect.

### 3. Death

In all three of the stories, death and rebirth of the woman symbolizes the same thing; the "Modern" woman's victory over the old, Victorian woman. However, to understand how their death affected each woman in each story, and their personal agendas, it is necessary to understand power relations that exist between the narrators and each woman.

Ligeia was intellectually perceived as an equal, even though in fact she was superior. She was referred to as a powerful, intelligent, wilful woman. After she died, the narrator started abusing opium to ease the pain, but she was still occupying his mind. If we bring Lady Rowena into the power relations, she still has power over whom he chooses to love (or not to love), given that Rowena is both physically and mentally the exact opposite of Ligeia. Her dominion over the narrator was confirmed when she used Lady Rowena's body to come back to life, whether it was to prove the narrator has lost his mind or to claim him for herself only. Her rebirth shows how exactly wilful she is – enough to overcome death by the power of her will.

Morella was perceived as intellectually superior; the narrator was fully aware of her dominion, stating he was her pupil, and she was his teacher. However, it was possibly her dominion that drove the narrator into hatred and jealousy towards Morella. He is even mad when she does not die soon enough: "Clearly, the narrator occupies the inferior position in the relationship not only between him and Morella, but also in the relationship with his child. Even though he tries to control the child by leaving her unnamed and never speaking of her mother, he is still powerless" (Martens 56). Through choosing life through her daughter, she gets revenge for his impatience and proves that she is the one to decide whether she is going to leave or not. She also shows that power when she kills herself/their daughter.

Berenice was perceived as inferior, a woman with no voice. The narrator did not even love her, only asked her to marry him in a moment of weakness. Her illness or the fact she might die did not concern him. He was disgusted by her teeth and appalled by her sickly figure. Even though her power was not obvious, she did have power over him; even though he did not love her and chose to objectify her, she forced herself onto his mind. She had power over him, and in the end, in the

act of him pulling her teeth out, she showed that dominion over his mind, one thing he totally deprived her of. By pulling her teeth out, he was trying to deprive her of identity, but achieved exactly the opposite; he proved his derangement and with that act, she took his sanity.

The power, which all of them had over each of the narrators, was best shown through death, for death is a phenomenon that occurs to every living being, and they were powerful enough to overcome even that. Their power has no limit. As Leland S. Person concludes, “Poe abruptly reverses the flow of power [...] as his male characters are reduced to conditions of passivity [...] in the presence of women who refuse to be repressed” (175).

### 3.1. But why did they *have* to die?

For philosophy students, death might be said to be an even more interesting phenomenon than for the average human being. It would not even be thought of if it was not for life, if it was not for anything that *is*. A philosophical study which explores the nature of being is ontology. Martin Heidegger, in his book *Introduction to Metaphysics* (which is one of the most important books for understanding the principles of ontology), makes a connection between life/being and nothing/not being. According to him, the question “Why are there beings at all instead of nothing?” is a question every person has thought of it at least once during their lifetime. Analyzing the formulation of that question, he ponders upon why does the part “instead of nothing” matter anyway? Why can't it just be “Why are there beings at all?” (Heidegger 1) Why is there life at all? Why do we live at all? He then concludes:

Thus it is already becoming clearer that this “instead of nothing?” is no superfluous addition to the real question. Instead, this turn of phrase is an essential component of the whole interrogative sentence, which as a whole expresses a completely different question from what is meant by the question: Why are there beings? With our question we establish ourselves among beings in such a way that they forfeit their self-evidence as beings. Insofar as beings come to waver within the broadest and harshest possibility of oscillation—the “either beings—or nothing”—the questioning itself loses every secure foothold. (Heidegger 33)



By asking 'instead of nothing', beings are not only given the possibility of being, but also the possibility of not being, making their existence more powerful right from the start. Beings can better understand their being in contrast to not being. In my opinion, same goes with why Ligeia, Morella and Berenice die. Whether they were powerful during their lifetime or not, it is assumed all their power is gone once they die, since they go from the state of being/presence to the state of not being/absence. Their power is reinstalled once they come back into the state of being/new presence. With it they prove that for them, death is not the end. The possibility of death is something they themselves control, if not in life, then in death. Life/being/presence becomes all the more significant, establishing death/not being/absence as the central means for understanding the core of the story.

## Conclusion

The aim of the paper was to show that rather than looking at a literary text through the lens of the author's personal life and experiences, as did Bonaparte and Felman, it is necessary to look at the literary text itself and the text's historical context. Based on the analyses of the characters of Ligeia, Morella and Berenice, the paper concludes that the stories' eponymous protagonists represent powerful women who refuse to stay repressed, and overcome anything by the power of their will. On the one hand, their death serves a purpose for each of them individually; Ligeia proves dominion over the narrator's sanity as well as love interest, Morella proves her intellectual dominion over the narrator once again even after she dies and Berenice proves dominion over the narrator's mind. On the other hand, in all of the stories the protagonist's triumph over death represents the "Modern" woman's victory over the old, Victorian woman.

After further analyses, it is clear that Poe cannot be judged based on superficial readings. The crucial themes of his stories are not a mirrored version of his life. His stories do not praise gender roles in the nineteenth century. If anything, they subtly express his disagreement, showing that Poe was not misogynist nor sexist, but rather ahead of his time. Death is not a common theme because of his obsession over it, alleged necrophilia or due to his personal traumas. It plays an important role because through it, the hidden power of women comes to light. Also, misconceptions about him are mostly based on physical similarities of the women in his stories and the fact all of them die, but it is clear now that Poe has a different approach to portraying women in his stories (speaking of physical characterization, internal characterization, role in the story, relationship with the narrator, and so on). Even these stories differ, which only shows that one cannot judge a writer based on stereotypical misconceptions about him, especially after considering he wrote in different styles, genres, about different people and themes. Putting them all into the same category is a disgrace to Poe as a writer. Finally, it seems that while Poe's life might have had an impact on his writing, his life does not tell us about Poe: it is the other way around. Through his stories, we are told more about who Poe is as a person.

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