

How to Murder a Young and Beautiful Woman

Death in Edgar Allan Poe's Gothic Tales¹

João de Mancelos

(Universidade Católica Portuguesa)

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“We start dying from the moment we are born”, wrote Saint Augustine. Death is one of our biggest worries and simultaneously the main characteristic that distinguishes humans from gods. Numerous legends refer to an age when men and gods had not yet been separated and were all immortal. The allegory of Adam and Eve, the Eskimo cosmogony or some Greek and Latin myths have a common core: they argue that the loss of immortality was a result of our sins. One of the most interesting explanations is provided by the natives of Tuma: an old woman lived with her granddaughter in the village. One day they went to the river for a swim. The grandmother stepped aside and took off her skin becoming, therefore, a young girl. Unexpectedly, the currents took the skin down the river and it was caught by a tree branch. Upon her arrival, the granddaughter did not recognize her grandmother. Furious, the woman returned to the river, searched for her old skin and put it on. Complaining about her bad luck, she said: “I will never slip off this skin, we will *all* grow old, we will *all* die”.

Stories similar to this one are very frequent and they show how the human being rebels against the condition of being mortal; hence, the reason why so many religions promise an immortal life. Some of them, like Christianity or Islamism, express their belief in the resurrection of the dead. According to the Apocalypse, “there shall be no more pain, there shall be no more death”. Therefore, death is seen just as a temporary sleep. As a matter of fact, in Judaism as well as in the Greek mythology, the connection between death and sleep is a very ancient one: “Sleep is the brother of death”, says Homer; “Death is a sleep”, states a bushmen maxim.

Another transcultural way of defeating death is provided by the myth. It consists in believing that anyone can constantly return to the past. Several rites of passage involve a symbolic voyage to our childhood. There are many tribes in which a young person must pass a test to be accepted in the circle of the adults, e.g.: to cross a tunnel, a cave or a tree trunk. In

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the United Republic of Cameroon, for instance, young people have to walk through a frightening gallery where masks of their deceased ancestors are displayed. It is just as if the initiated had died and been reborn, afterwards. In fact, it is quite common to see childhood as a reflection of an Edenic age. When adolescence begins, the child will be expelled from that heaven of security and comfort.

Deep inside, every single human being believes in life after death. Even those who commit suicide usually choose a river or an ocean as a theatre for their final act. It is not a random choice, since water has been traditionally seen as a symbol of life and rebirth. One could mention the redemptive water of baptism, the purifying plunges into the Ganges, or the Greek and Egyptian legends in which the protagonist must cross a river to reach eternity. There is a reason for this relationship between water and life. On the one hand, our phylogenetic roots lay in the sea; on the other hand, ontogenically, the foetus is developed in an aqueous environment. There is a line by Walt Whitman which reflects this idea, as the poet calls the sea “fierce and old mother”.

Many authors have also linked two other concepts: land and mother. It is important to reflect upon the reasons of this, to understand the true dimension of a woman’s death in myth and in literature. The first mystical experience of mankind was a result of the contact with nature. Frightening, unpredictable in its storms, regular in its cycles, the survival of the tribe depended on the environment. Therefore, it was common to worship a tree, a stone or a river. Nowadays, when the Pope arrives at a foreign country and kisses the land, he is continuing a meaningful rite: the tribute to the land which is simultaneously a goddess and a mother. The connection between land and women may seem evident to the layman, since they both have the capability to procreate — a fertile analogy between children and fruit. However, there is a deeper connection. In Pre-History, it was commonly believed that mothers were just a passage, a means for a child to be born. In fact, what impregnated them was the land — fountains, rocks, trees. There lies the explanation that certain places were holy areas where the birth could occur.

Centuries later, the holiness of the land was passed on to the woman — and the female body became sacred. The most ancient works of art representing the human body are the ones which depict women — the well-known Venus from Western Europe, Greece and Britain. Most women were healers or sorceresses and they are frequently displayed in wall paintings wearing masks or skins of animals. The myth of the woman-mother-goddess subsisted. Between 1,500 and 1,000 BC, the Dravidians, who lived in Southern India, worshipped several goddesses. Amongst them there is Gramavedata and other women whose names bore the suffix “amma” or “ai” which meant “mother”: Ellamma, Mariamma, Mengai, Udulai, etc. Therefore, in terms of mythology, to murder a woman is a particularly terrible type of destruction. On the one hand,

it eliminates the hypothetical progeny; on the other hand, it stands for the sacrifice of the symbol of life.

Literature, as an important part of our intellectual and creative activity, displaying our anxiety, worries and subconscious fears, has always dealt with the theme of death of women. The list of victims is long and well-known, since some of them became part of the universal literature: Eurydice, Juliet, Inês, Daisy Miller, Ligeia, etc. In this conference, I intend only to analyse some of the stories written by Edgar Allan Poe in which a young and beautiful woman is killed, directly or indirectly, voluntarily or involuntarily, by a man.

In many of Poe's stories there is a morbid obsession with the death of women. It is easy to identify these narratives, since their title corresponds, invariably, to the names of the victims of the plot: "Berenice", "Ligeia", "Eleonora", "Annabel Lee", "To Helen", "Morella", etc. Uncommon names for stories where the macabre and the improbable play a leading role, and the relationship between the living and the dead is frequently an incestuous one. The author describes women as if they were already deceased, seraphic and quiet human beings, made from marble, similar to the academic sculptures of that age. There is a passage from "The Fall of the House of Usher" that is worth quoting, as an example of this characteristic of Poe's style: "there did stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated figure. For a moment, she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold — then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother."

The destruction of beauty produces a moving and appealing effect on the reader. "it is because everything dies that everything is so beautiful", states Charles Ramuz. Poe thought the death of a young and beautiful woman to be aesthetically valuable, and therefore he used it frequently in his writing. In his essay *Philosophy of Composition*, Poe himself explains: "The death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world — and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such a topic are those of a bereaved lover."

However, there might be a biographical reason for this strange taste for death. In 1836, Poe married Virginia Clemms, his thirteen-year-old cousin. Soon he discovered his wife's disease in which she frequently experienced a strange state of catalepsy, losing the voluntary motion of her limbs as if she were a corpse. This fact might have inspired the characters of Madeline in "The Fall of the House of Usher" or Berenice in the same-titled short-story. In the latter, Egaeus falls in love with his cousin Berenice, who suffers from epilepsy and is frequently found in a trance that is easily confused with death. According to Poe's morbid taste, Egaeus marries his cousin in a ceremony where the bride already appears to be shrunken and ill. The couple's

happiness was not meant to last as Berenice enters an apparent state of death. Convinced that he had lost his wife, Egaeus pulls out all her teeth, one by one. However, the conclusion of the story is as grotesque as unexpected, a true twist of fate: a servant enters the room and announces that Berenice has not been dead but in a trance.

Egaeus pulled out Berenice's teeth with two unconscious objectives: firstly, to have the feeling of still possessing her (in his classic novel *Dune*, Frank Herbert argues that one only owns what one can destroy); secondly, to have a souvenir of her. In fact, in this tale, teeth have the same role of strands of hair or cut nails in witchcraft: they are a part of the body which stands for the whole body and therefore allow the sorceress to control another person. This is a type of synecdoche, very common in the mythical context, in which, according to Ernst Cassirer, "each part represents the whole, each element of a certain species or class appears to stand for the whole species or class."

However, this violent masculine domination will not be left unpunished. The fact that Berenice is alive becomes already a cruel penalty for Egaeus, who would feel at ease with his wife dead. It is interesting to notice that, in Poe's stories, women always appear to reach a surprising and exquisite vengeance upon the men who contributed largely to their suffering.

A good example of this punishment is the tale "Morella". Morella and her husband are a happy couple, until the moment she gets ill. From then on, her husband loses all his interest in her — which only causes her health to decline. One can argue that he was, metaphorically, killing Morella due to his cold indifference and lack of affection. Even though she seems resigned with her agony, she informs her husband that: "her whom in life thou didst abhor, in death shall thou adore". These words sound like a malediction. Soon, Morella dies while giving birth to a baby girl who, physically, resembles her mother — which bothers but also fascinates her father. While baptizing his daughter, at the age of fourteen, the father hesitates: what should he name her? Unconsciously, he whispers: "Morella". And the young lady falls dead, shouting "I am here!".

In this story, there is a macabre link between mother and daughter to the point of the descendant identifying with the progenitor. On the one hand, this echoes the magical reincarnation of women in the Celtic mythology; on the other hand, it evokes the ancient goddesses, who commanded life as well as death. Archaeology has long provided evidence that, in pre-historical times, it was common to bury the deceased in foetal position, creating an analogy between birth and death. To be buried was, as Jung states: "to enter the mother's uterus, so that he or she would be reborn, that is, would reach immortality." Maybe this explains why there are so many similarities between the rites of fertility and the ceremonies of burial. Two examples are: first, the Hindu remembrance of the dead occurred simultaneously with the harvest feast; second, Saint Michael's day was for a long time dedicated to the deceased, but it

was also the celebration of the crops.

The last short-story I would like to mention is “Ligeia”, a true classic. There are several resemblances between this text and the ones I have analysed previously. An aristocrat young man falls in love with the beautiful Ligeia, who is described in these words: “In beauty of face no maiden ever equalled her. It was the radiance of an opium dream — an airy and spirit lifting vision more wildly divine than the fantasies which hovered about the slumbering souls of the daughters of Delos.”

Like one of those angelic women, cut from the romantic poems, Ligeia is the epitome of physical beauty and cunning intelligence. A true *femme fatale* whom Poe mystifies. However, she is also a bizarre character since the narrator does not seem to be able to recall the circumstances in which he met her. However, suffering from a wasting illness — just like Madeline or Morella —, Ligeia dies. For some time, her husband, whose name is never revealed, aches with melancholy, like Roderick in “The House of Usher”.

Despite the pain, he draws his sorrows in a more practical way: he moves to an old English abbey — a remote and indefinite place, as usual in Poe’s literary production. There, he surrenders to the pleasures of opium and marries Lady Rowena of Tremaine, who is physically the antithesis of Ligeia: blonde, blue-eyed, unsophisticated, down to earth. However, Lady Rowena, very predictably, also passes away. Around midnight, the husband sees the body of Rowena suffer a series of strange convulsions and metamorphosis — until she becomes the living body of Ligeia. Her strong will to live caused her return from the world of the dead.

Similarly to “Morella”, “Ligeia” also suggests a vindictive reincarnation. The whole story is an allegory: the vengeance of the former wife over the second one. An improbable and exquisite punishment (Poe would most certainly use the word “grotesque” or perhaps “gothic”) by which Ligeia enters and possesses Rowena’s body, to impose herself on her husband. Or maybe this is not the way the story goes. In Poe’s “oeuvre”, reality is frequently not real — if I may use the oxymoron —, but metaphorical. One of Poe’s strategies was to leave the reader in the shadow of a doubt in order to create suspense. Is Ligeia’s resurrection a hallucination of her husband? Or is it a real return? In any case, a heavy conscience appears to be the punishment he was charged with.

All beauty must die. In Edgar Allan Poe, the relationship between beauty and death echoes another duality: love and death. Thanatos and Eros cannot be dissociated one from the other and constitute the two hemispheres of the human existence. Life, passion and death are reflected in Poe’s stories. The writer does it in a symbolic manner, which constitutes no surprise, since the human being uses language, myth and religion to filter the deepest aspects of reality. Taking this into account, Poe’s women are symbols: Madeline stands for the sister who has been

incestuously loved; Berenice, the mere object of possession; Morella, the despised one; Ligeia, the feminine jealousy. In any case, they have all been rendered to an inferior and humiliating status by men, and they all had their vengeance upon them.

Several conclusions may be withdrawn from examining Poe's stories:

a) There is an unequivocal belief in life after death. Poe resurrects his female doubles and, therefore, proves he hopes to be eternal. This strategy can also function as an aptronym: Poe's attempt to drive away death from his wife, Virginia Clemms;

b) The vision of a young and beautiful woman is a romantic theme, produces an aesthetic effect and moves the reader;

c) The negative stereotypes of a physically and mentally idealized woman can also be found here. The novelty resides in transforming the alleged female frailty, topped with sickness and agony, in supernatural strength;

d) The repeated pattern in the tale may suggest an obsession, or maybe a literary commonplace that was known to work.

I believe that the theme has not been rendered exhausted by this short essay, and I am positive that women studies will certainly analyse the place of women in the fictional works produced by men, bringing some innovative ideas to this issue.

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