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The Male Gaze and Beyond: Edgar Allan Poe's Female Characters

Introduction

It goes without saying that one of the key motifs in Edgar Allan Poe's literature is the death of a woman. It is the female character who may be said to occupy the centre of Poe's fiction – even though the vast majority of his tales are told by male narrators. However, one may cast various judgments on the credibility of the male perspective, as in some cases their accounts appear to contradict themselves. The article attempts to provide possible ways of interpretation of the picture of women's role in selected stories by means of highlighting certain discrepancies that may be detected in the portrayal of women. For the most part, the discrepancies stem from the contradictory nature that characterizes the literal dimension of the narrators' accounts. On the one hand, female characters appear to be idealized and almost super-human in the male gaze. On the other hand, however, Poe's male characters seem to diminish their female partners, perhaps due to their own inability to comprehend women's nature. The contradictory quality which can be extracted from the male perspective of women in Poe's tales may be analyzed in terms of certain allusions and symbolic references which may guide the reader to the discovery of the true nature of Poe's female characters. The article provides the analysis of three cases: the case of Morella, the case of Berenice and the case of the unnamed woman in *The Oval Portrait*, as all three of the women may be said to share certain distinguishing features and they all perish. Even though *Ligeia* is perceived by many readers – and by Poe himself – as one of his best tales, featuring one of his most complex female characters, the authors of the article have decided not to include her case in the discussion due to their belief that the analysis of *Ligeia* deserves particular attention and an individual approach¹.

¹ The authors would like to indicate that the article is a report on research in progress and that the discussion of *Ligeia* exists as its separate section, and discussions of other tales and poems will follow.

The case of Morella

The portrayal of the female character featured in the short story *Morella* (1835) must be explored in the context of one of the recurring motifs in Poe's fiction; namely, death and resurrection. In this short story, which may be read as a prelude to *Ligeia*, life and death converge as Morella dies in childbirth. In spite of her physical demise, she appears to continue her life beyond the grave, as her terror-stricken husband notices an extraordinary resemblance of the daughter to her deceased mother. One may interpret the feminist reading of the reincarnation motif as one which draws a conflicting link between male authority and female resistance. In other words, one of the possible ways in which Morella's return after her death may be perceived is "the condemnation of misogyny from a feminist viewpoint, according to which Poe was supposedly giving women the chance of speaking"². This interpretation seems to be well-grounded in the portrayal of the reality as given in the story, especially when we examine the narrator's changing attitude towards his wife.

As the story develops in a number of Poe's women's tales, the eventual death of the female character is preceded by her sudden illness. In case of *Morella*, the deteriorating condition is particularly suggestive, since it is clearly linked with the narrator's growing negative feelings towards his wife. Admittedly, Morella's virtues are exposed, but her portrayal is not imbued with a depth of emotion, which the narrator communicates in an emotionless and straightforward manner: "fate bound us together at the altar, and I never spoke of passion nor thought of love"³. The more negative change in the narrator's perception of the woman is followed by the loss of her health and vitality: she "pined away daily"⁴. On her deathbed, Morella utters a statement that will later prove to be a prophecy: "I am dying, yet shall I live"⁵. This is reminiscent of *Ligeia*, where a deathbed scene demonstrated the struggle between the forces of life and death.

It is fairly obvious that the essence of the short story *Morella* encapsulates the self-evident truth that life and death are inextricably linked, as – in the case in hand – the woman's identity seems to live on and persist in the body of her daughter, born at the moment of Morella's death. In the course of time, the narrator develops strong feelings towards the child: "I loved her with a love more fervent than I had believed it possible to feel for any denizen of earth"⁶. At the same time, he begins to discover the striking resemblance between the growing daughter and the deceased mother. Since the child serves as a reminder of the woman he wanted to be dead, the realization of

² F.F. de Sousa Alves, *Poe's "Morella": A Case of Condemnation of Misogyny*, <http://periodicos.ufpb.br/ojs/index.php/artemis/article/view/2207/1946>, p.1.

³ E.A. Poe, *Morella*, [in:] *Complete Tales and Poems*, New Jersey 2009[1835], p. 587.

⁴ Poe, p. 588.

⁵ Poe, p. 588.

⁶ Poe, p. 589.

the similitude provokes negative feelings in the narrator, as he refers to it as “perplexing and hideously terrible”⁷. The young girl remains nameless for a prolonged period of time and this may be interpreted as an attempt to suppress Morella’s identity and a subconscious refusal to name the child, in the hope that “Morella’s name died with her at her death”⁸. However, it soon becomes evident that the resemblance of the daughter to her mother is not only of a physical nature, but it is also mirrored in the manner of speaking, the choice of words, and – most importantly – in the *identity* of the person he sees. Very much like in the case of *Ligeia*, the narrator is terrified at the very thought that despite the demise of Morella’s body, her existence still permeates his mind, as her selfhood survived in her daughter and haunts the man, who is enslaved by the memory of his wife. Morella’s daughter provides the means through which the woman makes an attempt to preserve her identity and restore the life that was taken away.

As for the interpretation of the female character in Poe’s *Morella*, it is worth pondering on her name, as it may be interpreted as representing a combination of two meanings, both having their roots in Latin. Speculative as it may sound, the root of the first part of the name may be related to the Latin noun *mors/mortis*, meaning ‘death’; while the second part may be etymologically linked with the Latinate feminine suffix *-ella*. The suggested connection becomes more grounded when we consider the topic of this and some other of Poe’s short stories, which all pertain to the death of a female human being. Also, our attempt to interpret meaningfully Morella’s name is supported by Poe’s own theory, according to which every single element of a short story should contribute to *the unity of effect*; therefore, every detail seems to be of some importance in the composition of this literary form. In this case, the meaning of the woman’s name corresponds to her portrayal, since her association with the concept of death may be understood in several respects: not only does she die, but also she causes death, which leads to a more metaphorical interpretation, namely MORELLA IS DEATH₁ and MORELLA CAUSES DEATH₂. The significance of the name is also suggested by the fact that the narrator refers to the very name of the woman, implying that there is a strong link between identity and the name. His unwillingness to give a name to the child may reflect his reluctance to give a specific ‘definition’ to the young girl and to perceive her as a fully fledged individual, whose identity – like her mother’s – may eventually pervade his mind and suppress his own identity, yet one more time. Even though he is hopeful that “Morella’s name died with her at her death”⁹, he ultimately chooses this name to refer to his daughter.

What is more, the unfavourable perception of Morella by her husband is repeated and strengthened through the use of certain allusions that may

⁷ Poe, p. 589.

⁸ Poe, p. 590.

⁹ Poe, p. 590.

be extracted from the text. The earlier established affinity of the woman with death is enhanced by the references to her voice, which once used to be described by the narrator in terms of serenity, as he used to “linger by her side, and dwell upon the music of her voice”¹⁰. In the course of time, however, the male perception of the woman’s voice changes drastically to denote a source of unspeakable terror: “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 Hinnon became GeHenna”¹¹. Thus, the narrator grows conscious of the contradictory nature that defines his female partner and seems to believe that there is danger in her beauty. These conflicting emotions, triggered by antagonistic female qualities, establish the link with the category FEMME FATALE¹². Moreover, the use of the word *Gehenna* seems to be a conscious choice rather than a random collocation, especially when used with reference to Morella’s affinity with darkness. In this respect, it should be noted that “the notion of the fiery hell, reeking of sulfur, is derived partly from Ge Hinnom (in Latin Gehenna, in Arabic Jehenna), a ravine outside Jerusalem used first for sacrifices”¹³. In this context, one is prompted to note that Morella’s husband appears to associate the woman with all types of demonic forces, which becomes especially evident in the account of the daughter’s baptism. Asked about the name of the child, the father utters “Morella”, which he believes is an involuntary act, caused by some sort of evil power. Further, he expresses his terror at the choice of the name by saying: “What demon urged me to breathe that sound, which in its very recollection was wont to make ebb the purple blood in torrents from the temples to the heart? What fiend spoke from the recesses of my soul, when amid those dim aisles, and in the silence of the night, I whispered within the ears of the holy man the syllables – Morella?”¹⁴.

Language-wise, the use of such nouns as “devil” and “fiend” has clear and strong connotations with death, evil, punishment, darkness, and the narrator is convinced that there exists a certain affinity between his deceased wife and evil forces. What is more, the very fact that he

¹⁰ Poe, p. 587.

¹¹ Poe, p. 587.

¹² The conceptual elements that are distinguished in this analysis are formalized by means of angle-bracket notation, the convention which originates from the semantic research projects proposed in Kleparski (1986, 1990). In these works the componential mode of feature notation served to formalize relevant elements of meaning content of lexical items from various spheres of lexical stock. Along similar lines, in the present analysis the method of componential analysis serves to encapsulate and formalize those contextual elements that stand out as relevant in the analysis of Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories.

¹³ H. Biedermann, *Dictionary of Symbolism, Cultural Items and the Meanings Behind Them*, New York 1992, p. 170.

¹⁴ Poe, p. 590.

finally decides to baptize his daughter may suggest the aforementioned connection. Obviously, the main purpose of baptism is to save the soul by purifying its evil influences – since the narrator links his dead wife with diabolic powers, he may expect that baptism will eradicate the inherent evil element that Morella passed on to the daughter. Likewise, the narrator is confident that the name exerts a destructive influence on his daughter: “What more than fiend convulsed the features of my child, and overspread them with hues of death”¹⁵. Hence, the reference to Gehenna as a place where sacrifices were made seems to be even more valid, especially when we take note of the fact that it was children who were sacrificed. In a sense, Morella’s daughter is also sacrificed, since she dies the moment her father utters the name “Morella”, thus evoking the identity of the mother whose body is no longer in the vault where it was buried. Therefore, the previous reference to Gehenna may be interpreted as foreshadowing of the woman’s *post-mortem* influence on the living and her supposedly demonic qualities.

Furthermore, the depiction of the daughter also supports our earlier assumption that Morella’s identity survived and the combination of beauty and danger was transferred to another body. The narrator’s attitude towards the girl is characterized by a mixture of fatherly affection and anxiety caused by her striking resemblance to her mother: “she grew strangely in stature and intellect, and was the perfect resemblance of her who had departed, and I loved her with a love more fervent than I had believed it possible to feel for any denizen of earth. But, ere long the heaven of this pure affection became darkened, and gloom, and horror, and grief swept over it in clouds. [...] Could it be otherwise, when I daily discovered in the conceptions of the child the adult powers and faculties of the woman?”¹⁶. The shift in the narrator’s perspective of the girl is caused by the discrepancy between her childlike innocence and the qualities he used to dread about her mother, mainly her intellectual strength.

The narrator’s anxiety at the development of female intellectual skills may imply a discrepancy in the portrayal of Morella and suggest a possibility of invalidating the husband’s perspective according to which the woman is associated with evil powers. Like in *Ligeia*, it is probable that the true nature of the female character is captured beyond the straightforward, literal description; therefore, it is necessary to investigate certain textual clues. It must be noted that the narrator seems to be self-absorbed and does not mention or attempt to comprehend the perspective of his female partner. He refers to Morella’s reclusive nature by stating that “she shunned society, and, attaching herself to me alone rendered me happy”¹⁷.

¹⁵ Poe, p. 590.

¹⁶ Poe, p. 589.

¹⁷ Poe, p. 587.

The narrator is convinced that the woman derives pleasure from her alienation, implying that the domestic sphere only is the source of her satisfaction. However, one may wonder whether this is something she truly wants or probably results from the ascribed gender role, thus adding to her depiction a feature which contradicts the previously mentioned demonic attributes, namely <submissive>. Furthermore, it is important to take note of the connection between Morella's studies concerning the nature of identity and the narrator's increasing resentment against his wife. These are closely linked, since the description of Morella's interests concerning "principium individuationis, the notion of that identity which at death is or is not lost for ever"¹⁸ is immediately followed by a sudden change in the husband's perspective: "the mystery of my wife's manner oppressed me as a spell. I could no longer bear the touch of her wan fingers, nor the low tone of her musical language, nor the lustre of her melancholy eyes"¹⁹. It may be said that Morella's intellect is seen by her husband as an extraordinary phenomenon, which – combined with the nature of her studies – adds to an aura of mystery in his perception of the woman. In a way, she poses a threat to her male partner, who is unable to comprehend her nature and no longer sees her as an embodiment of an ideal woman. It is true that "Morella's strength of character, her individuality and learning, seems to inspire the narrator's hatred"²⁰.

The case of Berenice

Although the female character of the short story *Berenice* (1835) can hardly be said to resurrect, at least not per se, she can not be ignored in the discussion of women in Poe's short stories, since she is "one of the many frail and dying Poe heroines who experience death in life"²¹. Like many of them, Berenice is affected by a sudden and mysterious illness, which causes her to fall into a death-like condition referred to as a "trance". Interestingly, Aegeus (the narrator and Berenice's cousin to whom she is betrothed) simultaneously experiences a deteriorating condition, which he calls *monomania* and explains it as "nervous intensity of interest and contemplation of even the most ordinary objects of the universe"²². As was the case in "Morella", the narrator's attitude towards his female partner changes in time. Due to Berenice's illness, her qualities which her male

¹⁸ Poe, p. 588.

¹⁹ Poe, p. 589.

²⁰ L.S. Person, *Poe and Nineteenth-Century Gender Constructions*, [in:] G.J. Kennedy, *A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe*, New York 2001, p.140.

²¹ D. Sova, *Critical Companion to Edgar Allan Poe. A Literary Reference to His Life and Work*, New York 2007, p. 32.

²² E. A. Poe, *Berenice*, [in:] *Complete Tales and Poems*, New Jersey 2009[1835], p. 584.

partner used to take pleasure in are now gone. In consequence, the woman appears to be a source of resentment in the perception of the narrator. At the same time, Aegeus develops somewhat disturbing feelings towards her as he becomes obsessed with the “white and ghastly spectrum of her teeth” – referring to this phenomenon as “a strange and irresistible influence”²³.

The very thought of Berenice's teeth pervades the narrator's mind with irresistible power. The teeth become the source of his confusion, since he is unable to define the emotions he is experiencing. It seems clear, though, that the image of the woman's teeth acts like an object with certain supernatural power, becoming the object of the narrator's addiction and releasing his passionate infatuation. As if Poe knew the routine path of the development of senses, he orchestrates the narrator's mind in such a way that Berenice's teeth are transformed into abstract concepts: “toutes ses dents étaient des idées”²⁴, which causes him to believe that he may regain his composure only through the *possession* of her teeth. Aegeus' obsession leads to a perverted act of violence as he intrudes into the grave of the supposedly deceased Berenice and extracts her teeth with the aim of retrieving them. As far as the linguistic aspect is concerned, the relation between “dents”, “idées”, and “identity” is worth mentioning. The word “idées” is connoted to the mind, and it is clearly stated that reason is the domain of Aegeus, who seeks his peace of mind in having control over Berenice' “dents”. In a way, he also attempts to recover his own “identity” which he believes was deluged by a surge of passion, so to speak. Dayan refers to an interesting theory of transference, which in this context means that the teeth “stand for or comprise his identity; Aegeus pursues his i/dents/ idées”²⁵. The final scene, in which the narrator realizes that he has ripped out Berenice's teeth and they are scattered on the floor, may represent the dispersed identity that he was unable to regain. Also, the scene may imply that Aegeus' pursuit of meaning in inanimate objects was pointless and therefore he searched for higher values embodied in “idées”. The futility (and absurdity) of his efforts is expressed in the fact that “the narrator is now unable to even name the objects he sees scattered on the floor. He sees only “small, white, ivory-looking substances”²⁶, which no longer represent any profound “idées” and which prove to be useless in the search for his identity.

In an attempt to interpret the meaning of Berenice's death or rather death-like condition, it is also vital to refer to symbolic representations of

²³ Poe, p. 584.

²⁴ Poe, p. 585.

²⁵ J. Dayan, *The Identity of Berenice, Poe's Idol of the Mind*, [in:] *Studies in Romanticism*, Vol.3, No.4, *Romantic Wholeness: William Wordsworth, & Women in Romantic Writing*, Boston 1984, p. 502.

²⁶ C. Koelb, *The Revivifying Word. Literature, Philosophy, and the Theory of Life in Europe's Romantic Age*, New York 2008, p. 169.

teeth. One of the most common interpretations links teeth with sexuality, which is also evident in the word “toothsome” which means “delicious, and, by extension, sexually attractive”²⁷. More importantly, the loss of teeth represents “fear of castration”²⁸, and the related metaphor “vagina dentata” denotes the castration complex²⁹ (Mercatante and Dow, 2009:991). This interpretation appears to be valid in the case of Berenice; the image of her teeth is perceived by the narrator not only in terms of attraction, but also in terms of menace. Also, the “vagina dentata” motif combines the pleasure associated with sexual intercourse with a feeling of fear. Likewise, Berenice’s teeth arouse contradictory emotions in Aegeus, as they seem to have a twofold nature: on the one hand, they are the source of male “phrenzied desire”; on the other hand, Aegeus refers to them as “ghastly”³⁰. More importantly, it must be noted that the narrator’s obsession with Berenice’s teeth erupts shortly before their wedding day. On the one hand, this may imply his fear of being suppressed in the marriage relationship that will soon begin. But on the other hand, in the shorter-term perspective, since the wedding day is near, Aegeus may simply feel fear in the face of close encounters with “vagina dentata”. Note that if we assume that he feels threatened by female sexuality, we may interpret the act of pulling the woman’s teeth out as an attempt to preserve his authority or physical integrity. Thus, the story of Berenice’s death becomes a story of male domination, in which the female character is demonized again in order to justify male desires and the destructive acts that follow an attempt to satisfy the desires.

Not surprisingly, the portrayal of Berenice as a female character is also plunged into contradiction, discrepancy and transformation, all of which are particularly evident as far as her relationship with Aegeus is concerned. Berenice is first described as a beautiful, vigorous person; she is the exact opposite of the introspective narrator who describes himself using such qualities as <“ill of health”> and <“buried in gloom”>. Contemplating her physical attractiveness, Aegeus refers to it as “gorgeous yet fantastic beauty”, which implies a certain non-human, or to put it more adequately, superhuman quality shared by Poe’s female heroines. Also, the narrator likens Berenice to mythological creatures, such as “sylph amid the shrubberies of Arnheim” and “Naiad among its fountains”³¹. The name of the place may be related to *The Domain of Arnheim*, one of Poe’s lesser-known short stories, in which the main character uses his fortune to create a sort

²⁷ H. Biedermann, *Dictionary of Symbolism, Cultural Items and the Meanings Behind Them*, New York 1992, p. 347.

²⁸ J. E. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols*, 2nd edition, London 2001, p. 332.

²⁹ A. Mercatante, J. Dow, *The Facts on File Encyclopedia of World Mythology and Legend*, 3rd edition, New York 2009, p. 991.

³⁰ Poe, p. 584.

³¹ Poe, p. 542.

of earthly paradise “which still is nature in the sense of the handiwork of the angels that hover between man and God”³². The narrator is captivated by the beauty of the “Paradise of Arnheim”, as well as its unearthly, ethereal quality and refers to it as “the phantom handiwork, conjointly, of the Sylphs, of the Fairies, of the Genii and of the Gnomes”³³. Similarly, Berenice appears to combine a number of contradictory qualities: she is human, but – on the other hand – her flawless beauty seems to distinguish her from other female human beings. Also, the reference to naiads may suggest a connection between nature and the female character, as she used to roam “carelessly through life, with no thought of the shadows in her path, or the silent flight of the raven-winged hours”³⁴, thus sharing with the semantic field NATURE such qualities as <serenity>, <joy>, <innocence>, <majesty>; but also, like nature, she might be difficult to control, which may contribute to the narrator’s growing sense of anxiety.

Moreover, the portrayal of nymphs in Greek mythology is worth pursuing, since the meaning of the word itself is “young unmarried woman”³⁵, which corresponds with Berenice’s non-advanced age. Although there is no straightforward information concerning her age, the parameter of YOUNG AGE is implied here by the presence of such attributive values: <agile>, <graceful>, <energetic>. Also, it must be noted that the semantic field NYMPH comprises conflicting qualities: <beautiful> and <dangerous>³⁶; likewise, Berenice inspires contradictory impulses in Aegeus, as he is both attracted to her and afraid of her. Additionally, the “vagina dentata” motif, as a source of pleasure and pain, evokes distinct and equally contradictory associations as the combination of vagina + dentata connotes such elements as <alluring> and <threatening>. Hence, the portrayal of Berenice corresponds with the depiction of other female characters of Poe’s fiction, since they are also associated with semantic fields that are characterized by discrepant concepts (NYMPH, FEMME FATALE, VAMPIRE).

A clear-cut conceptual shift in the portrayal of the female character occurs when Berenice becomes ill, because at this point, <angelic> turns into <demonic>. Berenice’s eyes inspire Aegeus’ terror, with such features as <lifeless>, <lustreless> and <glassy>, evoking clear connotations with death and establishing a conceptual resemblance with the concept of VAMPIRE. In the perception of the narrator, the woman’s transformation from harmless to potentially harmful is observed mainly in her physical appearance – as it deteriorates, his anxiety becomes stronger. He does not seem to recognize her anymore, as he states: “I knew her not –

³² Poe, p. 542.

³³ Poe, p. 546.

³⁴ Poe, p. 582.

³⁵ A. Mercatante, J. Dow, *The Facts on File Encyclopedia of World Mythology and Legend*, 3rd edition, New York 2009, p. 727.

³⁶ W. Kopaliński, *Słownik symboli*, Warszawa 1999, p. 1505.

or knew her no longer as Berenice”³⁷. The significance of her changed appearance is repeated as the male character reminisces about her lost beauty: “I had seen her—not as the living and breathing Berenice, but as the Berenice of a dream; not as a being of the earth, earthy, but as the abstraction of such a being; not as a thing to admire, but to analyze; not as an object of love, but as the theme of the most abstruse although desultory speculation”³⁸.

One may say that reducing the woman to physical attributes implies that in the mind of her male partner she functions as an abstract concept more than a real person; she is objectified and diminished even more when the disease affects her. The narrator does not even seem to notice her, as he says: “I sat, (and sat, as I thought, alone,) in the inner apartment of the library. But, uplifting my eyes, I saw that Berenice stood before me”³⁹. The scene resembles the portrayal of Ligeia, who “came and departed as a shadow”⁴⁰ – hence, <ephemeral> and <submissive> are repeated here as the attributes of Poe’s female characters. Additionally, Berenice’s perspective is not included in the events either, and she goes through the entire story without speaking.

The portrayal of the woman must also be analyzed in the context of what we know about her male partner. Aegeus seems to live in a self-contained world – he was born in a library and spends most of his time there. Also, it is a place where life and death are intertwined, since his mother died there when he was born – a fact that may foreshadow the death of another female character whose fate is tied to that of the man. The attachment to his own personal world and his consequent isolation causes Aegeus to become a self-absorbed person, able to focus solely on thought and reason; while unfamiliar with and incapable of comprehending the nature of passion. The mind – versus – heart struggle, indicated through male – versus – female characterization may make the readers reflect on the vampire motif present in the story. To the narrator’s mind, the female character embodies danger; it is more likely, however, that it is the narrator who is a more serious threat to Berenice. In this respect, the assumption that the story “may be told by the vampire himself”⁴¹ seems to be highly probable, as he is the one who drains the life out of the woman. Furthermore, the male character seems to derive some energy from his partner’s deteriorating condition: “as she weakens, he mysteriously gains strength, strength he uses not to pursue his normal activities, but rather in his own words, to follow his monomania”⁴².

³⁷ Poe, p. 584.

³⁸ Poe, p. 584.

³⁹ Poe, p. 584.

⁴⁰ E. A. Poe, *Ligeia*, [in:] *Complete Tales and Poems*, New Jersey 2009[1838], p. 569.

⁴¹ J. Twitchell, *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature*, Durham 1981, p. 59.

⁴² Twitchell, p. 60.

The case of the painter's wife

The death of the female character of Poe's very short story *Oval Portrait* (1842) deserves a place in the discussion, since it depicts the idea of "subjection of women to the objectifying, even murderous, powers of male gaze"⁴³. It seems that nowhere else in Poe's fiction is this motif portrayed so explicitly, since in the end, the female character is literally transformed into an object – the portrait of the woman – in contrast to Morella or Ligeia who are transformed into, or resurrect in, the form of another female human being. Yet another characteristic feature of her is that she does not even have a name. The unnamed narrator enters an abandoned chateau and discovers a painting of a beautiful lady. Fascinated by its extraordinary vividness, he searches for any information concerning the history behind the painting and learns it from one of the volumes he finds in the room. The tragic story of the woman and her death, like the stories of other female characters of Poe's fiction, can also be read in the context of male authority and female submissiveness. The painter, preoccupied with creating the portrait of his wife, does not notice that the more progress he makes with his creation, the more the wife's condition deteriorates and only when he places the tint on the portrait of the woman and finishes it, does he realize that his model is no longer among the living.

Here again, the death of the female character may be said to comprise two main ideas, namely creation and destruction. In a way, she is sacrificed only to be replaced by a perfect, immortal creation, which will never actually live. Even though the painter refers to the astounding quality of his creation by stating that *this is indeed Life itself* (Poe, 2009:249), it is not life as such, but only life-like. The husband's passion becomes life-consuming for the woman, but paradoxically, it also seems to preserve life, making it eternal. It seems that one can discern certain autobiographical traits in the story. Some critics have interpreted the story in relation to Poe's marriage to Virginia, claiming that the writer "explored the idea that Virginia's release from pain would ensure her immortality, through his own art"⁴⁴. Poe's wife was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1842, the same year that the short story was published. Its original title, *Life in Death*, suggests the theme by incorporating distinct realities and indicates that great creation does not come without a sacrifice. After all, Poe's theory according to which the death of a beautiful woman is one of the most poetically and emotionally powerful motifs, is echoed not only in this story, but also in other tales discussed herein. Obviously, the emotional impact of a literary work depends much on the choice of the theme, and the controversy regarding a perfect creation and the cost it entails

⁴³ Person, p. 141.

⁴⁴ J. M. Hutchisson, *Poe*, Jackson 2005, p. 136.

certainly contributes to the emotional overtone of the story. Unlike Poe's other vampire-like female characters, the wife of the painter in "The Oval Portrait" is not demonized by her male partner; in fact, we know very little about his perspective of the events, since everything we learn about them is filtered through the narrative of an unspecified writer.

The vampire motif may also be found in *The Oval Portrait*, where the painter's obsession with reconstructing life is fulfilled at the cost of the life of a real human being – his wife. The husband appears as a single-minded, self-absorbed artist, who gives all his attention to one goal: creating the portrait that would recapture life in its purest, most flawless form; notably, when his wife-model is young. He needs beauty and youth in order to feed his obsessive need to render the painting perfect. In this respect, he becomes a vampire who sucks the life out of the woman to have it reproduced within the canvas of her portrait. Unlike Ligeia, Morella, or Berenice, there is no indication that the woman is a vampire-inspired character. However, she corresponds with a typical characterization of Poe's women in that she is described as a beautiful and humble person, and she also dies. Additionally, the notion of change that characterizes other women in Poe's tales is present in her depiction, as she experiences a transformation, which may be described as a process of degradation or narrowing, in a sense, resulting in her demise. The female character is first depicted as a cheerful, good-natured person, who is affectionate to her husband. Her portrayal is pervaded by a sense of joy and optimism; also, the value of YOUNG AGE is implied by such features as <lovely>, <full of glee>, <frolicsome>, <loving>, <cherishing>.

However, in the course of time, the positive traits of her personality become subdued and backgrounded only to disappear completely when the painting is finished. Despite that, she does not seem to complain about her fate and is devoid of speech in accordance with the literary representation of Poe's women: "she was humble and obedient, and sat meekly for many weeks in the dark, high turret-chamber where the light dripped upon the pale canvas only from overhead"⁴⁵. Although being <submissive>, as one of the virtually universal features of Poe's female characters, pertains to her nature as well, she does not undergo a transformation into a demonic, life-consuming vampire. Instead, it is the wife who gives away her life to nourish the husband's passion, as the life of a human being, with all its beauty and energy, is transferred to a piece of art. The painter appears as the exact opposite of the woman, being characterized by such attributes as <passionate>, <studious>, <austere>. The painter's conduct seems to be located somewhere at the opposite end to that of the woman, who is characterized by such attributive values as <gentle>, <cheerful>.

⁴⁵ E. A. Poe, *The Oval Portrait*, [in:] *Complete Tales and Poems*, New Jersey 2009[1842], p. 248.

<considerate>. In fact, his obsession with art constrains the qualities associated with female beauty and youth and suppresses her true nature, so she becomes <dispirited> and <weak>. She becomes more and more invisible as a real person, whereas the expression of her partner's passion – his painting – gains more prominence.

Conclusions

In the light of the foregoing discussion, it appears that in order to discover the true nature of the female characters in Poe's short stories, the reader cannot rely solely on the literal layer of their texts. Instead, it seems much more plausible that the literal level is used in order to trigger interpretations which go far beyond the superficial meaning of words. The primary conclusion that may be drawn with reference to the portrayal of women in Poe's tales is that there is more than one dimension to them. This results from the underlying discrepancies that cannot be ignored in the exploration of Poe's female characters discussed herein. The conflicting qualities which substitute the essence of at least some of his female characters may be detected if the reader explores the truth that might lie beneath the surface of the literal description and go beyond the limits of male perspective as it is presented in the respective tales. In the case of Morella, the figuration of the woman as a person worthy of praise on the one hand, and exposing her affinity with evil on the other, creates an atmosphere of confusion and establishes a contradictory relationship between her and her husband, whose attitude towards the woman changes over time. It is the notion of change that links Morella with Berenice, as her portrayal is also imbued with certain inconsistency. The woman's originally positive qualities are displaced when her physical condition deteriorates, which coincides with the deterioration in the male-female relationship. Change and deterioration are also resonant in the case of the painter's wife in *The Oval Portrait*, as her youthful energy and beauty gradually evaporate and she sinks into oblivion, so to speak. Each story, much like each person's experiences, may be described in terms of the path from life towards death. In the case of Poe's women examined in the foregoing discussion, though, this movement can hardly be described as an entirely natural phenomenon. The deaths of Morella, Berenice and the painter's wife are closely connected with their male partners' shifting attitude towards the women. Morella's husband expresses concern about the nature of the woman's studies; Aegeus' fixation increases as Berenice suffers from a declining condition; the young woman in *The Oval Portrait* perishes as her husband's creative power reaches its full flourishing. In a sense, the death of these women is preceded by their

gradual disintegration by the male partner; they all become reduced and eventually vanish. In each woman, there exists a certain quality that is taken away from her: in the case of Morella, one of the elements that constitute her identity is her voice, as it appears to be associated by her husband with her most explicit features – beauty and danger. Berenice's partner seems to depreciate the woman by decomposing her physical unity and developing a morbid fascination with her teeth as the only constituent of her identity that he is able to notice. The painter's wife is disintegrated as her husband reproduces individual parts of her identity in the form of a painting, neglecting the integrity of the woman as a real female human being. The nature of the women's deaths, as well as the allusions and symbolic references found in their portrayals, may challenge the credibility of the male perspective and encourage readers to seek deeper meanings beyond the male gaze.

Dalej niż męskie spojrzenie. Kobiety w opowiadaniach Edgara Allana Poe

Streszczenie

Celem artykułu jest prześledzenie motywu śmierci w twórczości Edgara Allana Poe, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem trzech opowiadań: *Morella*, *Berenika* i *Portret owalny*. Opis postaci kobiecych ukazanych w poszczególnych opowiadaniach został poddany analizie z nawiązaniem do ich partnerów, którzy pełnią funkcję narratora (w przypadku dwóch pierwszych tekstów) lub którzy zdają się odgrywać czynną rolę w stosunku do swojej partnerki (jak w *Portrecie owalnym*). Analiza przytaczanych z męskiej perspektywy obszernych opisów postaci kobiecych rodzi pytanie o ich trafność i wiarygodność. Jest ono szczególnie istotne z uwagi na pewne nieścisłości, które dają się zauważyć w doniesieniach narratorów, co skłania czytelnika do zastanowienia się nad możliwymi niedopowiedzeniami. Próba uchwycenia niejednoznaczności w tekstach zaburza spójność perspektywy przedstawionej przez męskiego narratora oraz prowadzi do sformułowania sprzecznych cech określających bohaterki opowiadań Poe. Dla przykładu, partner Morelli zdaje się być pełen podziwu dla jej cnót, jednak w jego przekazie pojawiają się aluzje i odniesienia symboliczne o wydźwięku negatywnym, przedstawiające jej postać w kategoriach niebezpieczeństwa. Niejednoznaczności te, w połączeniu z motywem przedwczesnej śmierci, skłaniają do rozpatrzenia różnych dróg postrzegania bohaterek oraz ich relacji z postaciami męskimi.

Słowa kluczowe

Edgar Allan Poe, literatura grozy, kobiety u Poego, *Berenice*, *Morella*, *Portret owalny*, motyw śmierci

Summary

The purpose of the article is to trace the motif of death in three short stories by Edgar Allan Poe: *Morella*, *Berenice* and *The Oval Portrait*. The portrayals of female characters are interpreted in relation to their male partners, who either narrate the stories (as in *Morella* and *Berenice*) or seem to be more active in comparison with the female character (as in *The*

Oval Portrait). Although the perspective of each of the male characters reveals much about the women (rendering the women silent), the question whether the reader can rely on their accounts persists. This is due to certain inconsistencies which are visible in the descriptions of female characters as they are provided by Poe's narrators. As a result, the reader is inclined to investigate both the spoken and unspoken content, as the latter may offer a space in which the female voice is heard. The double layer of meaning (created by allusions and symbolic references) causes one to question the credibility of male characters and disturbs their integrity, thus exposing conflicting qualities which define Morella, Berenice and the painter's wife in *The Oval Portrait*. Morella's husband, for instance, admires his wife's virtues, but also describes her using words which have overtly negative connotations, rendering her increasingly dangerous. All of the three female characters eventually die, which in combination with the ambiguous male-constructed descriptions of their lives and deaths encourages readers to explore other possibilities in the understanding of Poe's women and their relation to the male characters.

Key words

Edgar Allan Poe, Gothic fiction, *Berenice*, *Morella*, *The Oval Portrait*, death