

Irony in the “Death of a Beautiful Woman”: Text’s Rebellion in Edgar Allan Poe’s *Tales*

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Abstract

This article offers a Deleuzo-Guattarian interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories, arguing that his pursuit of a “unity of effect” arises not from narrative coherence but from a dismantling of linear structure and the emergence of discrete elements that Deleuze and Guattari describe as “partial objects.” These fragments form dynamic, nonhierarchical connections that enable a free flow of desire, challenging the authority of a centralized plot. Through this lens, the article reconceptualizes Poe’s Dark Romanticism as a space where identity is not fixed but dispersed, and meaning is not imposed but generated through affective and narrative intensities. This reading foregrounds the ongoing tension in Poe’s work between the drive for formal unity and the inevitable fragmentation that characterizes both identity and narrative production.

Keywords: Deleuze and Guattari; dark romanticism; death; Edgar Allan Poe; identity

Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe’s 1833 short story, “MS. Found in a Bottle,” finds the readers in the precarious situation of disbelief in the nightmarish adventure that the narrator describes, but true terror lies in the “irrationality of the whole experience, which becomes a metaphor for the act of dying” because “it is death that the narrator, and Poe, ultimately fear and ultimately yearn to explain” (Unrue 115). In “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846), Poe popularly lands on the topic of death again. He proceeds to describe it as “the most melancholy of topics” and then finds beauty in this death, especially in the “death of a beautiful woman,” which he sees as the “most poetical in the world” (6).

In this fascination with and romanticization of death, Poe constructs his own Romantic irony that he labels “Grotesque” and “Arabesque” in the “Preface” to his 1840 *Tales of the Grotesque and the Arabesque* (McGann 399). In this marked step away from New England Transcendentalism, Poe’s Dark Romanticism evidentially garners critical attention for his fixation on the theme of death. Although this theme has been widely critiqued, especially by

Freudian critics who analyze it as an Oedipal desire to connect with the deceased maternal figures,¹ an aspect that remains overlooked is the writer's employment of the motif of death to disrupt the fixation on coherent Victorian identity and the teleological force of the plot.

Writing in a newly industrialized society where the need for constant labor led to a fixation of the laborer's identity in service of the capital, Poe subtly resists this paradigm. His tales often destabilize the centrality of a single organ—the eye, the heart, or the teeth—in generating meaning. The article argues how Poe romanticizes death to disperse significance across the narrative field, engaging every element in the text to produce what he termed a "unity of effect" ("Philosophy" 3). Read through the lens of Deleuze and Guattari, this dispersion can be understood as an assemblage of "partial objects" (5) in which each fragment functions as a desiring machine. What emerges is not a fixed moral or identity but a rhizomatic field of desire, wherein Poe's prose achieves intensity through the free flow of connections among narrative elements.

Poe: A Romantic

Edgar Allan Poe began his career as a writer toward the close of the Romantic era, and this aspect is apparent in his appreciation of feminine beauty, especially in tales narrated from the perspective of male lovers obsessed with their beloveds. In stories such as "Berenice" (1835), "Ligeia" (1838), or "Morella" (1835), Poe's narrators have been effusive about the beauty of these women in almost mythic terms, likening them to sylphs and naiads, and praising their beauty with words such as "gorgeous," "fantastic" (Poe, *The Complete* 643) "thrilling," "enthraling," and "divine" (654). These lyrical descriptions recall the poetic exaltations of Byron or Keats, giving Poe's prose a heightened, near-poetic quality.

Yet Poe was a product of a time when nineteenth-century medical discourse and literature often "exalted the materiality of the consuming female body by transforming suffering into something beautiful, pure and spiritual, or even sexual" (Stephanou 38). This cultural sentiment informs Poe's portrayals of dying women, but his narrators take it a step further by transmuting romantic affection into a fascination with bodily decay. In "Berenice," Egaeus finds himself drawn to Berenice and speaks to "her of marriage" only after the onset of disease (*The Complete* 645). The narrator of "Ligeia" realizes the "strength of her [Ligeia] affection" only after her death (658). In a similar vein, the speaker in "Morella" grows "furious through delay," cursing "the days and the hours and the bitter moments" as Morella's life lingers (668). In each case, Poe mirrors his era's idealization of the dying woman while subtly distorting it and shifting attention away from the soul's transcendence and toward the disintegration of bodily and personal identity.

Later critics have read this representation of and fascination with death as "more than a romantic effusion" by suggesting that "it expresses his inmost self and bears the imprint of his earliest memories" (Bonaparte 22). Poe's contemporaries, though, found it morbid and unsettling (White 387). Notwithstanding, what distinguishes the writer's fascination with a dying or entombed female body is not merely the romanticization of decay but his obsessive focus on the distortion of identity that accompanies it. Poe referred to this thematic concern the "doctrines of Identity" (*The Complete* 668). Even when his narrators appear to mourn the physical and mental decline of their beloveds, the narrative emphasis remains fixed on how the female's "pathetic fallacy" (Hayes 1) is affecting her sense of identity. In "Berenice," Egaeus

laments that he "knew her no longer as Berenice" (*The Complete* 643), yet his obsession reveals "in the singular and most appalling distortion of her personal identity" (645). Poe's Romantic irony lies in this tension,² where what appears as a narrative of love is transformed into a gross romanticization of the beloved's death by creating an unsettling fixation on transformation and dissolution.

Yet, contrary to what was in vogue during the Victorian era (Mulhall), this romanticization is not an eroticization of the female body because Poe's irony does not merely sensationalize the suffering woman; instead, it dissects the fragility of identity itself. Living in Jacksonian America (Faherty 14), Poe saw identity not as something given but as something precariously self-fashioned. He felt that the emerging modern subject was becoming increasingly unmoored since he was being "offered no anchor for identity formation" (5); thus, each individual was left to construct a personal identity to distinguish oneself from "other beings that think" (*The Complete* 668).

This sense of rootlessness, "of having no place in the world," became "an ever-present danger" (Faherty 5) for Poe. His stories do not simply romanticize death; they use death as a threshold where identity is either irretrievably lost or strangely transformed. As Poe himself reflected, he was interested in "the notion of that identity which at death is or is not lost forever" (*The Complete* 668). In this context, his narrators' desire for the death of their beloveds becomes not just a narrative of longing but a meditation on the unraveling of the self.

The Eye, the Teeth, and the Formation of Identity

Poe's tales frequently feature characters whose compulsions oppose social and moral norms. Yet, even when these perverse tendencies are foregrounded, Poe remains curiously committed to circumscribing them. He famously advocates for the importance of perverseness in human beings in "The Imp of the Perverse" (1845), where he criticizes the "intellectual or logical man" (*The Complete* 280) and argues against rationalist accounts of behavior, declaring perverseness an "innate and primitive principle of human action, a paradoxical something," one that compels us to act "for the reason that we should not" (281). He rejects the idea that human actions must align with divine logic or teleology, asserting instead that perversity is "a motive not motivirt" (281)³: a pure internal drive. In this rejection of design, Poe attempts to return autonomy to the human subject by liberating action from divine causality.

However, in "Philosophy," Poe reveals himself as the architect of meticulously structured tales. He gives the example of "The Raven" (1845) to emphasize the necessity of "circumscription" and spatial "framing" (9) for the "unity of effect," describing how every narrative element must be preordained to maximize emotional impact. Ironically, even as he celebrates the principle of irrational human impulse, Poe assumes the very position of the "Creator" he critiques by managing and binding the perverse tendencies of his characters through precise authorial control. The perverseness he advocates becomes both a thematic concern and an aesthetic device, which is contained, shaped, and framed to serve the tale's overall effect.

This paradox extends into his treatment of bodily organs—particularly the eye and the teeth—which emerge as partial objects around which identity and obsession crystallize. Though Poe critiques phrenology's deterministic mapping of organs (*The Complete* 280), he nevertheless renders organs as sites of intense psychological fixation by making them central to the formation and deformation of subjectivity. Marie Bonaparte, in her psychoanalytic study of Poe, identifies

him as a "fetishist of eyes" (130), linking his fascination with eyes to the memory of lost women: his mother, Elizabeth Arnold; his wife, Virginia; and Mrs. Osgood (148). In his fiction, this fetish is transferred to the narrators, particularly in tales like "Ligeia," "Morella," and "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843).

In "Ligeia," the narrator is mesmerized by the "strangeness" of Ligeia's eyes, which come to dominate his perception and mental life (*The Complete* 655). Morella's narrator is similarly affected by "the lustre of her melancholy eyes," which become the focal point of his desire and dread (668). This fixation culminates in "The Tell-Tale Heart," where the narrator is driven to murder not out of hatred for the old man but from an irrational compulsion to destroy his "vulture eye." As the narrator declares, "I made up my mind to take the life of the old man, and thus rid myself of the eye forever" (303). Here, the organs become Lacan's *objet petit a*—the unattainable object of desire—that either drives the subject's madness or "compensate for the loss of the primordial object of desire" (Jung 229). The old man's death becomes not the endpoint but the displacement of an irreconcilable lack.

A similar obsession animates "Berenice," where the narrator, Egaeus, becomes consumed by Berenice's teeth, which provoke both "frenzied desire" (*The Complete* 646) and revulsion. He recounts with horror: "The teeth! - the teeth! -they were here, and there, and everywhere" (646). This obsession escalates to violence, and the tale ends with the narrator awakening beside thirty-two scattered teeth and surgical instruments (648) as evidence of an unconscious crime driven by monomania (643). As Bonaparte notes, Poe's narrators often transform their desire for the beloved into a fixation on one body part, simultaneously objectifying and disfiguring her.

In all these tales, the eye or the teeth operate as partial objects—intensely charged, fragmentary entities that organize the narrators' desires and eventually define their madness. According to Basler, Poe uses these *idée fixes* or pathological obsessions as "the psychological key to the plot" (364). Through this mechanism, desire is no longer free-flowing; instead, it is captured, rerouted, and bounded by lack. The narrator's need to possess the beloved, which is symbolized through a specific organ, turns into a violent reterritorialization of identity, both his and hers. These bodily fragments become the means by which Poe stages the breakdown of coherent subjectivity and the emergence of identity as something grotesquely constructed out of obsession, repetition, and loss.

Death of the Object and a Free Flow

The madness and obsession surrounding Poe's "object of desire," often symbolized by an organ like the eye or the teeth, become so consuming that these objects dominate the narrative. They transform into what trauma theorists call "the enigmatic core of trauma, the locus of referentiality that remains inaccessible and eludes representation" (Nadal 183). These organs do not merely serve as narrative features or poetic symbols; instead, they become central points around which both the characters and readers organize meaning. Ironically, their overwhelming presence threatens the very "unity of effect" that Poe meticulously outlines in "Philosophy"—specifically, the melancholic impression generated by the death of a beautiful woman.

Despite Poe's insistence that every element in a tale should contribute toward a predetermined emotional outcome, the narrator's obsessive attention to a specific object often overrides the effect of melancholy. Instead of mourning the beloved's death, the narrator fixates on the

"strangeness" of the eye or the teeth, shifting the reader's focus away from the emotional resolution of the plot. This displacement disrupts Poe's model of authorial control, where "every component within the text" must serve the final "incident or tone" and "produce a single effect" ("Importance" 1). The object of obsession becomes a transcendental signifier, the gravitational center from which meaning flows, compelling Poe to intervene and reassert control through the very mechanism he famously wields: death.

What follows is a fascinating paradox. Poe initially exploits the narrator's obsession with a partial object to construct his identity and intensify his relation to the beloved. However, as the object gains narrative dominance, Poe must eliminate it to reclaim narrative authority. The progression is clear: in "Ligeia" and "Morella," the eye first emerges as a site of fascination, charged with questions of identity. But in "The Tell-Tale Heart," the eye becomes the object of violence, the thing that must be destroyed and rid of "forever" (*The Complete* 303). As obsession deepens, so too does the need for narrative erasure. Death becomes not only a thematic constant but a structural necessity: a way of severing the despotism of the object.

In killing or burying the object of desire—what Lacan calls "objet a"—Poe does not simply resolve narrative tension. Instead, he opens the tale to a phase of semiotic disintegration. With the removal of the central signifier, the text enters a state of flux, and meaning begins to proliferate through what Deleuze and Guattari term partial objects, which are the "basic units" (39) of a body or desiring machine. No longer defined by lack, these objects enter new connections, producing meaning through a rhizomatic assemblage rather than a linear progression. Once meticulously orchestrated, the text rebels against its creator, and a free flow of desire overtakes authorial intent.

This schizoanalytic rupture is clearly visible in the second half of "Ligeia." Following the titular character's death, the narrator turns his attention to the room where she once lived, now described with obsessive detail: a "huge window," "ottomans," "golden candelabra," an "Indian bridal couch," and a "gigantic sarcophagus" (*The Complete* 660-661). While Poe claims that such decor was chosen "in mere pursuance of the ideas . . . of Beauty" ("Philosophy" 9), these items no longer serve the tale's aesthetic cohesion; instead, they revolt. No longer accessories to beauty, they become monstrous and "ghastly forms" (*The Complete* 661), being pulled from superstition and delirium.

The assemblage of partial objects begins to direct the narrative. The narrator's mood darkens; his "fierce moodiness" corresponds with the presence of these objects in the "bridal chamber" (661). Lady Rowena, too, becomes attuned to their disturbances, reporting "sounds, and motions" that the narrator attributes to the "phantasmagoric influences of the chamber itself" (662). These elements, which were once subordinated to a romantic theme, now function autonomously, forming a meshwork that affects character, tone, and meaning.

As Deleuze and Guattari argue, such objects are "detachable" (60), allowing the text to become an assemblage that can fluctuate between identities (Parr 27). With the death of Ligeia's eye—the former transcendental signifier—the liberated objects become the conduits through which the narrative flows. The tale becomes fluid, multidirectional, and unstable. Faced with this textual anarchy, Poe is compelled to intervene again with the need to restore structure by reinstating the signifier he once removed. This restoration takes shape through what Deleuze and Guattari call the "despotic signifier" (206): the master sign from which all meaning flows. Poe reasserts narrative control by reintroducing the very object he eliminated.

Hence, despite the author's attempt to decenter a single object, "one will never prevent the signifier from reintroducing its transcendence" (Deleuze and Guattari 207). The reanimated object—voice, teeth, or eye—now functions as "the detached object on which the whole of the chain depends" (207), thus restoring linearity (206) and subordinating the text's previously chaotic flows of desire. This reinstallation of the despotic signifier does not merely stabilize the narrative; it reimposes a structure that allows Poe to reclaim the unity of effect. And yet, this very act reveals the crux of Poe's Romantic irony: just as the narrative appears to escape authorial control through obsession and fragmentation, it is pulled back into coherence through the return of the object, which is now charged with spectral force.

Poe's irony lies in the illusion of chaos, madness, and uncontrollable desire, only to reaffirm that what seems unbound was always under orchestration. The beloved's return—Ligeia by possessing Rowena, Morella by being reborn in her daughter, Berenice by being resurrected through her teeth—is not simply a Gothic shock; it is the aesthetic sleight of hand masquerading as the uncanny through which Poe reasserts mastery. Thus, the return of the despotic signifier is not merely a reintroduction of order but the final twist of Romantic irony where Poe ultimately tightens his grip, ensuring that the tale's disorder resolves into the very effect he intended from the start.

Tale's Rebellion

Yet, Poe's conundrum remains because even when the beloved returns, the effect of melancholy that Poe so meticulously seeks, never fully materializes. The object is restored, but the effect dissolves. Despite Poe's attempts to reassert control through romantic irony and narrative framing, "he cannot prevent himself from tracing flows and causing them to circulate, flows that split asunder the . . . despotic signifier in his work" (Deleuze and Guattari 133). The text resists closure. What unfolds is a perpetual tension between the author's desire to bind meaning and the narrative's own impulse to proliferate—to forge connections that defy containment, to generate what Deleuze and Guattari call a "production for production's sake" (224).

This conflict creates a "literary machine, a montage of desiring machines, a schizoid exercise" (Deleuze and Guattari 106) that resolves into a singularity. Even when Poe employs death in his romantic irony to reterritorialize the tale, it rebels, moves, flows, and finally explodes since the assemblage of partial objects fractures the frame, making meaning fugitive, unstable, and recursive. Poe's fictions thus become experiments in narrative contradiction: structured but subversively so; melancholic, yet teeming with unruly desire. What emerges is not a unity of effect but the failure of effect as unity. For, as Deleuze and Guattari insist, "literature is like schizophrenia: a process and not a goal, a production and not an expression" (133). Poe's stories do not merely depict madness; they enact it by exceeding their own author, their own intent, and their own melancholic horizon.

Endnotes

¹Critics, like Marie Bonaparte, exhibit a tendency to connect the death of women in Poe's tales as reenactments of the losses he suffered through the deaths of his biological mother, Eliza Poe, and his foster mother, Frances Allan. According to them, the writer's relationship with these maternal figures that was cut short due to the onset of illness and death is mirrored in his

narrator's relationship with his beloved.

²Poe's defense of "Berenice" against "Editorial Remarks" by Thomas White, 'published in the March 1835 issue,' is in the spirit of Jena Circle's pursuit of the radical Romantic Irony they labeled "grotesque and arabesque" (McGann 400). Poe created his Romantic Irony that chose to question the sense of personal identity mandated by the Jacksonian society.

³Poe made an error with the German word "motiviert," which means "motivated," and spelled it motivirt. He wanted to make this distinction between motive and motivirt clear since humans, in his view, act without a motive/ incentive in mind but that does not mean that they are not motivated; all human action is motivated by perverseness.

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