Poe’s Gothic Protagonist
Isolation and melancholy in four of Poe’s works

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Introduction

The way out of the prison of melancholy coincides with the actual creative process; the creation of the work of art becomes synonymous with the (re-)creation of the self after the encounter with the innermost chaos of the soul (Espen Hammer).

In this study, I will analyse the male characters in four important works by Edgar Allan Poe. Poe is considered the inventor of the detective, science fiction and Gothic horror genres in English (Magistrale and Poger 1). However, this study will exclusively deal with the latter. The works I have selected are one poem, “The Raven”, and three short stories, “The Fall of the House of Usher”, “Ligeia” and “Berenice”. These texts were chosen because they are some of Poe’s most famous works and they are all tales of Gothic horror. Furthermore, they feature the motifs of isolation and melancholy which are frequent in most of Poe’s fiction. The primary objective with this study is to compare how the protagonists of the chosen literature relate to these motifs.

Edgar Allan Poe (1809 – 1849) was an American author of Gothic Romances. During his lifetime, Poe published 50 poems and over 60 short stories and he is now one of the most famous authors in the American history of literature (Magistrale and Poger 1). Poe was an alcoholic ever since he was an adolescent and studied at the University of Virginia (Reidhead 694). Since his poems gave no profit, he turned in 1933 to writing novellas. By copying the styles of the popular tastes at the time, Poe learned how to write, and eventually how to improve the Gothic short story, giving it his own style (Davidson 136-37).

“Berenice” is one of Poe’s most violent short stories and it was first published in 1835. It was also featured in the collection “Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque”, published in 1840. In 1838, shortly after having moved to Philadelphia with his wife, Poe wrote the novella “Ligeia”. His first steady job was as a co-editor at Burton’s Gentleman’s Magazine where he published the short story “The Fall of the House of Usher” (1839). In his life, Poe never achieved full recognition as a writer, but “The Raven” (1845) was the poem which established his literary career in New York. The success of the poem also contributed to his job as a chief reviewer for the Broadway Journal. In spite of this, although Poe worked 14-hour days in that year of 1845, he still struggled to make a living (Reidhead 695). Edgar Allan Poe died four years later on October

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1 This is my translation. The original in Swedish reads: “Vägen ut ur melankolins fängelse sammanfaller med själva skapelsesprocessen; skapandet av verket blir synonymt med (åter-)skapandet av självet efter mötet med själens yttersta kaos”
the 7th, 1849. It has been speculated that he died from alcohol poisoning, diabetes or rabies (Magistrale and Poger i), and the possibility that he died of “congestion of the brain” has also been suggested (Reidhead 695).

This paper will argue that there are similarities between “The Raven”, “The Fall of the House of Usher”, “Ligeia” and “Berenice” in their treatment of the common motifs of isolation and melancholy, and, furthermore, that their protagonists are similar due to their relation to these two motifs. The paper will also argue that the usage of the motif of isolation is a strategic way for the author to emphasise the Gothic horror. In order to support my argument, I will, firstly, provide an outline of how melancholy, isolation and the Gothic were understood in the nineteenth century. Secondly, I will demonstrate ways in which the works are similar. By comparing the characters’ personalities and behaviour to each other, I will illustrate how melancholy and isolation are represented in similar ways in the works of this study. Thirdly, I will show how the motif of isolation reinforces the Gothic.
Background

This chapter will deal with the motifs of isolation, melancholy and Poe’s reinvention of the Gothic. It will also shed light on some of Poe’s ideas and how he composed his tales.

Poe’s narrative style

Although Edgar Allan Poe did not invent the Gothic Romance he did, however, make significant contributions to the genre, thereby enhancing its development. He believed that a good narrative needs a dénouement – a point where the story climaxes and some form of conclusion is reached through a revelation of a crucial component of the tale. In “The Philosophy of Composition”, Poe argues that with the dénouement in mind, the incidents of a narrative can be structured to unfold in a way which will keep the reader in constant suspense (Reidhead 749). Moreover, Poe was convinced that “psychological truth” could be found through phantasmagoria, or specifically, the ever-changing illusions and deceptive apparitions within dreams (Magistrale and Poger 12). In his fiction, the boundaries between the dream and the real are blurred. That is to say, there is an uncertainty in every event as to whether or not it is actually happening. According to Davidson, “we can see the split in Poe’s imaginative world: there [are] elements of reality, and there [are] faculties of the mind or imagination. Between them there ought to be a union or a point of coherence” (92). Thus, the symbols within Poe’s fiction could be what unify the two extremes: the bird in “The Raven”, the castle in “The Fall of the House of Usher”, the teeth in “Berenice”, and the chamber with its phantasmagorical elements in “Ligeia” (92).

Poe was convinced that “beauty” is the essence of poetry. In The Philosophy of Composition he states that in a poem, no topic should surpass beauty (Reidhead 751). Nevertheless, melancholy can be the most beneficial topic when it has to do with the infinite sorrow of lost beauty. The development within Poe’s fiction surrounds the characters’ troubled minds and their motivations. Hence, the action within Poe’s tales transpires more on the psychological level than on the physical level (Magistrale and Poger 14). As they write:

When we turn to Poe’s fiction, … it is not merely the sadness of lost love or the abrupt transition from or to a visionary landscape that inspires [Poe’s] deepest contemplation, but the complex spectrum of aberrant psychological motivation—ranging from sadomasochistic representations and object fixations to delusions of grandeur and the perversity of self-loathing. (12)
Generally, in Poe’s fiction, there is a troubled male protagonist with a devious plan. The main character is either a recluse or in some way trapped within a confined space. For instance, in “The Raven” and “Ligeia” the protagonists dwell inside chambers isolated from reality and normal social interaction, mourning the women they have lost. As Magistrale and Frank explain, “[Poe’s] characters develop peculiar missions or secret schemes to escape the imprisoning realities of time and space” (3). They strive to take revenge on or to escape a person or an object, and when the revenge or the escape has been fulfilled they imagine that they will acquire redemption which will free them from the real or imagined isolation (Magistrale and Poger 15-16). Incidentally, most horror events in Poe’s fiction take place at midnight which is a fixed moment in time when it is neither still yesterday nor yet tomorrow (Magistrale and Poger 16). Specifically, “most acts of criminality in Poe’s microcosm occur precisely at midnight. [Poe’s protagonists] are momentarily free to indulge their basest instincts, to act as though they were agents ungoverned by forces outside themselves – society, ethics, even time itself” (ibid.). However, in almost every case the protagonist is not actually liberated by his actions. On the contrary, he gets caught, passes away or has a full schizophrenic breakdown (ibid.). For example, in “Berenice” the protagonist is presumably apprehended and in “The Fall of the House of Usher” the protagonist dies when the house collapses on him and his twin sister.

**Melancholy**

Melancholy is the classical term, used by Poe and his contemporaries, for what is now understood as various forms of clinical depression. It is important to realize that the term melancholy had no scientifically founded description and was not a clearly defined diagnosis before psychoanalysis which was introduced in the 1900s (Hammer 37). The word melancholy is made up of two parts, *melas* (black) and *kholé* (bile). According to the Greek physician, Hippocrates, the body contained four types of fluids: blood, phlegm, black and yellow bile. An imbalance in any of these substances would lead to changes in a person’s temper or even to illness. Melancholy was believed to occur when the spleen malfunctioned and produced an excess of black bile. By this token, black was believed to be the colour of danger, madness and the uncontrollable; the black bile would render its victim senseless and ill (Hammer 38-40).

According to Hammer, melancholy was believed to be a disease of the intelligent. For instance, many superior ancient philosophers are described as having been melancholic – the
ailment was seen as bringing out exceptional sides in them (43). Having said that, not all melancholic people were actually superior, but geniuses were often described as melancholic.

In the nineteenth century, people who were suffering from melancholy were doomed to living in despair and anxiety for a very long time – even for their entire lives (Hammer 42). A melancholic person experiences a world with dull colours and lack of motivation and strength. To him or her, everything has lost its meaning and, usually, a victim of melancholy has no way of explaining why s/he is morose (ibid.). Melancholy is just something the victim endures without any particular aggravation towards it; due to this, melancholy is often considered as a state of mind or a mood (ibid.). By association, the word melancholic can also be used to describe physical as well as abstract objects, for instance: a work of art, a house, a tree and a piece of music, et cetera (ibid.).

In addition to the nineteenth psychological explanations for melancholy, other reasons may be too much contemplation, sloth and rest. According to Hammer, “Nothing causes melancholy quicker, increases it and represses it more than passiveness”\(^2\) (53). But as Hammer argues, it seems more plausible that passive behaviour was seen as a symptom of melancholy rather than a cause for it (54). There were many other characteristics regarded as symptoms of the melancholic person including egocentricity, paranoia, cruelty and bitterness (Hammer 49). Yet another symptom, which could have been mistaken for a cause, was that a victim of melancholy tended to become obsessed with something s/he had lost (Hammer 54). The melancholic person was unable to let go and would therefore become immersed in something which may happened long ago (ibid.).

**Melancholy and Romanticism**

Romanticism is quite intricate and difficult to define. It has evolved with the Gothic revolution from the middle of the 1700s (Magistrale and Poger 11). At the end of the 1700s, it was not the intellect but the emotions of the human being which were seen as essential (Hammer 65). The romantics, especially in Germany, were concerned with loneliness, suffering, sorrow, desperation and sensitivity (ibid.). Furthermore, the style of literature was concerned with the finding of the truth and beauty of the soul. Magistrale and Poger explain that romantic poetry “was an art of inner feeling, leading in turn to a yearning for the infinite [and] it was attracted to subjectivity

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\(^2\) This is my translation. The original in Swedish reads: “Inget väcker melankolin snabbare, ökar den och förträngern den mer, än sysslolöshet”
and the unconscious, mystery, and the imagination” (11). The melancholic poet could bring out beauty in that which was dreary and sad (Hammer 65). Consequently, a poet, or an artist, was engaged in the most melancholy of activities because artistic creation required them to deal with overwhelming emotions (Hammer 65-66).

Romanticism also tried to understand the contradictions of human nature and wanted to unite the normal with the abnormal, the real with the unreal, the ugly with the beautiful and so forth (Magistrale and Poger 11). According to Magistrale and Poger, due to these dualisms the fiction contained elements of tranquillity and wonder as well as agitation and horror (11). In addition, Romanticism dealt with the search for inner peace and the sorrow over lost beauty (Magistrale and Poger 12).

**Isolation**

In *The Philosophy of Composition*, Poe writes about “the close circumscription of space” for example the state of being trapped within a confined space (Reinhead 754). Poe was convinced that isolation was necessary in a Gothic tale. Therefore, the protagonists in Poe’s fiction “cannot and do not subsist outside the physical spheres in which they dwell” (Magistrale and Poger 15). Consequently, the plot of Poe’s fiction usually only takes place within designated locations, for instance a house, a chamber, a library or any enclosed space. However, the protagonists are not merely physically restricted to a confined space, but are also socially and psychologically detached from reality (Hammer 23). Poe believed, in terms of symbolism, that settings which isolated the main character “intensified the Gothic’s configuration that linked personality and place, supplying examples of confined and subterraneous imagery with a psychodynamic correspondence to his male characters” (Magistrale and Poger 15). That is to say, the protagonists’ thoughts as well as his actions are represented as enclosed in his immediate environment.

**The Reinvention of the Gothic**

Before Poe’s time, the Gothic horror genre (henceforth referred to only as “the Gothic”) was approximately half a century old; basically, it had almost been rendered obsolete and was scorned (Magistrale and Poger 13). But, as Magistrale and Poger point out, “[one of] the most distinguishing features of the Gothic has always been its resiliency” (13). In the Gothic tradition, there was often an invitation to psychological fear. As Magistrale and Poger describe it,
The Gothic has always inspired fear and desire at the same time: fear of and a desire for Otherness, fear of and a desire for that which we find most repulsive, fear of and a desire for the latent perversity that lurks within us all. (34)

That is to say, the tales were created not only to scare, but also to make the readers afraid of themselves (Voller 341).

When Poe reinvented the Gothic in the nineteenth century, he made use of the traditional themes and features but added a more profound psychological perspective to the genre (Magistrale and Poger 13). By incorporating this new approach, the characters in his fiction show tendencies towards sadomasochism, obsession, delusion and self-loathing. Actually, Poe called it “the perverse”, that is “the human propensity for self-destruction, [and] for doing those things which are neither healthy nor socially acceptable” (Magistrale and Poger 2). Interestingly, in Poe’s Gothic tales, the reader can detect that the protagonist’s lunacy supersedes his affinity for sin, and that the crimes committed are merely ways for the protagonist to rid himself of the obsession. Before an act of perversity (in Poe’s sense of the word), the protagonist reflects upon his action and there is a balance of restraint and self-indulgence (Magistrale and Poger 19). In the Gothic tradition, these contradictions of schizophrenic minds are typical. In Poe’s fiction, the deliberation that takes place within the protagonist’s split mind is ever-present. Thus, Poe increased the intensity of horror in his narratives, and caused the genre to progress (ibid.). Poe also made use of other Gothic paraphernalia such as haunted mansions, apparitions and the living dead (Magistrale and Poger 13). A significant characteristic of the Gothic tradition was the male antagonist. The antagonists were usually asocial and sexist men with split personalities. However, as Poe shifted the narrative’s perspective to the first person, a strange intimacy was developed between character and the reader (Magistrale and Poger 14-58): “Poe was the first writer to press the relationship between monster or criminal and the reader to the point where it came simultaneously unbearable and pleasurable” (Magistrale and Poger 14).
The Analysis of the four works

In this section, the works “The Raven”, “The Fall of the House of Usher”, “Ligeia” and “Berenice” will be analysed and discussed under separate headings. The focus will be on isolation and melancholy; however, each work will be introduced with a few notes on the aspects of Poe’s writing that are most applicable to the respective tale.

“The Raven”

According to Poe, while passion and truth are more suitable topics in prose, beauty is the most beneficial one in poetry (Reidhead 751). Of course, both passion and truth may be used to aid the plot, but their involvement should not surpass beauty, as it is the essence of the poem (ibid.). Beauty is “the excitement, or pleasurable elevation, of the soul” (ibid.). Being a true Romantic author, Poe also knew that beauty was closely linked with eternal sorrow (Magistrale and Poger 12). Thus, melancholy can be the most poetical topic if it has to do with the death of a beautiful woman as in “The Raven” (ibid.). To accentuate the tone of beauty in the poem, the protagonist’s room is decorated as from the 1840s, with lustrous curtains and elegant cushions (Davidson 86). The white sculpture above the chamber door portrays Athena (the goddess of wisdom). The narrator of “The Raven” is actually the protagonist himself. The first-person narrative derives from the Gothic tradition and is very common in Poe’s fiction (Magistrale and Poger 14). The plot of the poem takes place at midnight.

The protagonist (a young student) has resorted to isolation after the death of his lover, Lenore. Evidently, he has not yet been able to recuperate from the shock of her demise. The student has to endure the grief in his chamber which is filled with memories of her. The setting for “The Raven” is intentional as Poe thought confinement was necessary to focus a Gothic horror story. Hence, the protagonist in “The Raven” is secluded with no connection to the outside world or any human interaction. Throughout the poem, he never once tries to leave the room; instead the protagonist is trying to escape his psychological imprisonment (Magistrale and Poger 15).

In the beginning of the poem, it becomes clear that the protagonist is tired after having pondered the contents of his book and he is drifting in and out of sleep. Thus, the potential for phantasmagoria is imminent. Also, he dwells upon the thought of his lost lover which has died some unknown time ago. According to Hammer, the behaviour of contemplating and resting are signs of melancholy (53). Melancholy tended to make the victim unable to sustain the conception
of time. Specifically, the victim does not care – or does not know – what day or year it is. The yearning is constant and the victim cannot let go of the grief for what s/he has lost. In one passage of the poem, the protagonist wants to try and forget with a drug, called “Nepenthe”, that causes oblivion:

   Respite—respite and Nepenthe from thy memories of Lenore!
   Let me quaff this kind Nepenthe and forget this lost Lenore!
   (“The Raven” 700)

In the poem, the student is suddenly aware of rapping noises coming from the door and later the window pane. As the student explores the rapping sounds, he is once again reminded of his lover as the quote suggests:

   But the silence was unbroken, and the darkness gave no token,
   And the only word there spoken was the whispered word, “Lenore!”
   (“The Raven” 698)

As Hammer argues, a melancholic person becomes egocentric and obsessed with the past as the protagonist in this poem (54). At first, when the raven enters from the window and perches upon the sculpture above his chamber door, he believes the bird to be his lover’s embodied spirit. However, he quickly dismisses it for the notion that the raven might be an omen sent from an underworld called “Plutonian”, and he wants to know its name (Davidson 87). Davidson argues that, at this time, the protagonist has difficulty in distinguishing the real from the unreal because he fails to exercise precaution (ibid.). At first he was extremely frightened, but now he finds the raven amusing:

   Then this ebony bird beguiling my sad fancy into smiling,
   By the grave and stern decorum of the countenance it wore,
   “Though thy crest be shorn and shaven, thou,” I said, “art sure no craven,
   Ghastly grim and ancient raven wandering from the Nightly shore—
   Tell me what thy lordly name is on the Night’s Plutonian shore!”
   Quoth the raven “Nevermore” (“The Raven” 699)

The stanza marks the end of the first half of the poem. Subsequently, the protagonist seems to get more disoriented and his obsession grows even stronger. According to Davidson, the raven’s
constant reply of the word “nevermore” will eventually draw him further away from reality and the melancholy will suppress his common sense:

The questions which the student asks and the one-word answer he receives are not “real” at all, that is, they are not voiced; they are elements in an interior psychic debate going forward in the young man’s mind. What the Raven replies is merely what the student himself wants to hear, must hear as more and more he enters the dark, subliminal regions of his melancholy. (88)

In effect, the protagonist is letting the melancholy take over his mind. The student thinks he is asking the raven if there is a cure for his agony and if there is life after death, but he is actually speaking to himself (ibid.). In nineteenth century beliefs, melancholy often lead to despair and misery; and in Poe’s fiction, there is a constant balancing of restraint and self-indulgence within the protagonist’s psyche (Hammer 42; Magistrale and Poger 19). Consequently, the lack of restraint has led the protagonist down the path of insanity (Davidson 88). He has lost the conception of reality and the more he asks the more distant he gets. According to Hammer, in the mind of a melancholic time has been forever fixed on the event or person (54). In the end of “The Raven”, there is a moment in the last stanza when the student’s madness is inevitable and when he realizes that he will never be rid of his obsession (Davidson 89):

And the raven, never flitting, still is sitting, still is sitting
On the pallid bust of Pallas just above my chamber door;
And his eyes have the seeming of a demon that is dreaming,
And the lamp-light o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor;
And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor
Shall be lifted—nevermore! (“The Raven” 700)

“The Fall of the House of Usher”
A significant issue of romantic symbolism is: “what is the relation between reality and the mind’s ideas about reality?” (Davidson 90). In the nineteenth century, this was a central question. Nature and mind may interact but they may also be separated (ibid.). There is a difference between consciously trying to understand the world, and using the imagination to see it (ibid.).
So long as the response between reality and imagination, on the one hand, and that between the mind and imagination, on the other, could be maintained, the romantic artist found expressive means of rendering ideas and experience in vivid, determinable ways. (ibid.)

In the novella “The Fall of the House of Usher”, there is a passage where the narrator believes the house and its immediate vicinity are separated from the rest of the world because of its frightening appearance. At this point, it should be emphasised that the word “house” can also denote “family”, thus suggesting from the outset a connection between the decaying building and the degenerate family. The narrator says, “shaking off from my spirit what must have been a dream, I scanned more narrowly the real aspect of the building” (“House of Usher” 715). Overgrown with minute fungi, the ancient, decaying house of Gothic architecture represents the state in which its proprietor, Roderick Usher, himself is in. “[His] psychological deterioration, as well as the dissolution of the Usher lineage is mirrored in the decaying physical structure of the house” (Magistrale and Poger 15).

As the antagonists of the Gothic tradition, Poe’s characters are asocial human beings and isolated from the outside world. The Gothic tale often takes place within the confines of an abbey, a chamber, a turret or suchlike. Nonetheless, isolation does not only imply the state of being trapped in a confined space, but to be socially and psychologically detached as well (Hammer 23). Roderick is a recluse who has become very agitated and morose and he has secluded himself in his mansion. He and his twin sister, Madeline, are the last two heirs to the Usher’s lineage. Although Roderick is surrounded by people (the narrator, his sister, a doctor and servants) he is still socially disconnected. Roderick never tries to break free of his isolation, instead he becomes more and more detached from reality.

The term melancholy can be associated with a person’s psyche and with an object or a place. Romantic authors were aware of the paradoxical nature of dualism, for instance the beautiful can only be beautiful because there is ugliness, the good is defined by which is not, and within the beautiful there is a fragment of the ugly. The romantics, and especially Poe, were convinced that what is ugly and sad can be beautiful as well (Magistrale and Poger).

The novella begins when the anonymous narrator approaches the house on horseback, and he is struck by despair at the sight of the melancholy scenery:

I looked … upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain—upon the bleak walls—upon the vacant eye-like windows—upon a few rank sedges—and upon
a few white trunks of decayed trees— with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium—the bitter lapse into common life—the hideous dropping off of the veil. (“House of Usher” 714)

A person cannot word why s/he is melancholic because it is a psychological state in which the victim is rendered miserable for no apparent medical reason. There are no specific features which can define melancholia; therefore each case is unique. As the family physician’s diagnosis of Madeline: “a settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptical character” (“House of Usher” 718). However, there is often something in the victim’s past which will crop up in melancholy. In Roderick’s own case, he is deeply concerned with the disease of his sister, and that is also why the narrator is summoned to the house. In the short story, the protagonist (Roderick Usher) is sometimes referred to as “hypochondriac” by the narrator although he can see a drastic change in his old friend’s face. According to himself, Roderick is ill but he cannot explain why. He is very superstitious and agitated, and he first foretells his inevitable death and, shortly after Madeline dies, her oncoming resurrection. To lift Roderick’s spirits, the narrator and he paint and read together, but Roderick’s melancholy prevents him from living a normal life:

[Roderick] suffered much from a morbid acuteness of the senses; the most insipid food was alone endurable; he could wear only garments of certain texture; the odors of all flowers were oppressive; his eyes were tortured by even a faint light; and there were but peculiar sounds, and these from stringed instruments, which did not inspire him with horror. (“House of Usher” 717)

When Roderick’s sister eventually dies he persists they keep her in a tomb in the house’s vault. A few days after the temporary entombment, they both are aware of noises coming from the tomb and the narrator is struck with fear. Roderick calls him “madman” although his own illness has taken a turn for the worse. Earlier, the narrator had observed a change in Roderick’s behaviour. Evidently, the fear caused by his melancholy has poisoned his mind and his detachment from reality is expanding: “His ordinary occupations were neglected or forgotten. He roamed from chamber to chamber with hurried, unequal and objectless step” (“House of Usher” 723). Roderick and his sister are the last two in the Usher’s lineage, thus, at the dénouement when Madeline falls upon Roderick, the house seems to collapse with them since the bloodline is forever broken.
Three main questions are left unanswered in “The Fall of the House of Usher”. First of all, the “cruel” secret between Roderick and Madeline is never revealed: “There were times, indeed, when I thought his unceasingly agitated mind was labouring with some oppressive secret, to divulge which he struggled for the necessary courage” (“House of Usher” 723). Although the secret are never revealed it suggests that Roderick and Madeline had been intimate. There are sexual indications hidden within Poe’s Gothic fiction: “more often than not, Poe combines the sexual urge with violent energies, so that the two become almost indistinguishable” (Magistrale and Poger 60). Secondly, the reader can never actually be sure whether Madeline – when she is reanimated – is trying to save or kill Roderick (Magistrale and Poger 43). Finally, although the narrator is successful in his escape from the collapsing house, what is his fate? According to Magistrale and Poger, the overwhelming powers of the Gothic tales were either of a sexual or a psychopathic nature, but in Poe’s fiction these are interchangeable (13).

“Ligeia”

In many of Poe’s works, there are elements that can induce phantasmagoria. For instance, in this short story the protagonist is addicted to opium, a victim of melancholy and possessed by his lost wife, Ligeia (which also is the title of the tale). Also, there are physical elements in the turret’s chamber where the dénouement will take place: on the wall hangs a heavy tapestry, the ceiling of oak is arched and decorated with grotesque creatures of the semi-Gothic, and the window is partially covered by drapery of gold with strange figures. “These figures partook of the true character of the Arabesque only when regarded from a single point of view. … The phantasmagoric effect was vastly heightened by the … strong continual current of wind behind the draperies” (“Ligeia” 710). Poe knew that a certain aspect of truth lay within dreams; therefore many of his stories do not concern to separate what is real from what is not. Accordingly, in this short story, the protagonist has difficulty distinguishing between the real and the imagined since he is under the influence of opium and suffering from melancholy. Furthermore, the chamber with its furniture and decorations contribute to his delusion and fuels the imagination.

As in all of Poe’s Gothic tales, there are a certain state of isolation which forces the protagonist to face the horror and the psychological stress. However, in “Ligeia”, the actual state of isolation is introduced later into the tale when the protagonist has re-married and is living in a high turret of an abbey. His sense of abandonment made him resort to a remote part of England to live in this building which bleak and dismal condition is mirrored in his melancholy (“Ligeia”
According to Hammer, isolation can symbolize both the physical confinement and the social detachment of a person (23). Although the protagonist is living with his new wife and they have servants there is no – or very little – human interaction. Furthermore, there is a distance between the turret and the main part of the convent which also augment the sense of isolation. As the climax builds up near the end of the novella the protagonist becomes more and more isolated and socially detached:

>The turret was altogether apart from the portion of the Abbey tenanted by the servants—there were none within call, and I had no means of summoning them to my aid without leaving the room for many minutes—and this I could not venture to do. (“Ligeia” 712)

In the beginning of the short story, a considerable number of pages are dedicated to the unnamed narrator’s description of his dead wife. Apparently, the protagonist cannot recall exactly how or when they first met, but he remembers every little aspect of her beauty and intelligence. He mourns her as he illustrates her person with an extreme sense for detail. For instance, the protagonist states “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 phantasies which hovered about the slumbering souls of the daughters of Delos” (“Ligeia” 705). Interestingly, obsession for something which has been lost is not a cause of melancholy, but rather a symptom displayed by the melancholic person. In other words, a person would not necessary fall victim to melancholy because of his/her loss, but could begin developing an obsession after the melancholy has set in.

A victim of melancholy does not actually know s/he is melancholic, instead, the person lives in a bleak condition with low ambition, paranoia, egocentricity and cruelty. Magistrale and Poger argue that Poe’s characters often want to revenge or escape a person or an object (15). In this case, the protagonist actually hates his new wife as the quote clearly states “I loathed her with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man” (“Ligeia” 710). His new bride has done nothing wrong, but his illness is taking hold of him. Since he cannot deal with his melancholy it is allowed to manifest upon his mind. Immediately after his statement quoted above, the protagonist is struck with the remembrance of his beautiful dead woman, as he will be repeatedly throughout the novella. The protagonist’s mind is fixed upon Ligeia and the obsession grows stronger by the day.

In the tale, the protagonist’s new wife, lady Rowena Trevanian of Tremaine, is unhappy with her husband’s obsession and temper, and she does no longer love him as much as she did.
Eventually, she falls ill with an unknown affliction (similar to the one of Ligeia). Seemingly, the protagonist takes care of her and for some time she first recuperates, but then, when she is once again struck by the illness, it leads to her death. Obviously, the protagonist saw Rowena merely as an obstacle he had to deal with, and her death does not agonize him since “Poe’s compulsive lovers … always appear to embody sadomasochistic urges: they receive a particular admixture of terror and excitement from … the situation they have invariably helped to create (Magistrale and Poger 17). In the short story, the protagonist is suddenly aware of noises coming from Rowena’s death bed. There are minor signs of life on Rowena’s face, but they always vanish. In Poe’s fiction, the women resurrect to take revenge on a husband, a lover or a brother for their faults (ibid.). Accordingly, in “Ligeia”, the tale takes a turn when finally the protagonist is faced with what he believes is Rowena:

And now the eyes opened of the figure which stood before me. “Here then at least,” I shrieked aloud, “can I never—can I never be mistaken—these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes of the lady—of the lady Ligeia!” (“Ligeia” 714)

“Berenice”
Figuratively, as Poe “revived” the Gothic genre, he changed the narrative’s perspective to the first-person. In effect, he was able to force the reader to a more intimate contact with the psyche of the protagonist. In short stories such as this one, the main character acts as an “unintentional” antagonist. To clarify, Poe’s protagonists may be homicidal – hence villains – but their intention is to free themselves from the burden of monomania in any way possible (Magistrale and Poger 15). Moreover, in this Gothic short story, the self-destructive main character is unable to fully recollect his appalling actions. What is more, in accordance with dualism, the protagonists are not completely vicious; the balance between restraint and self-indulgence is constantly in play within their psyches. However, the protagonist in this tale differ from the ones in other works analysed in this study, in the one aspect that he is homicidal. Besides that, he is also an isolated, socially disturbed victim of melancholy which are the reasons for his pathological obsessiveness. Monomania is the obsession a melancholic person has for a single object. In this case, the protagonist is obsessing about his dead cousin’s perfect set of teeth.

As in Poe’s other tales, the motif of isolation is omnipresent. If not realized as physical seclusion, it is certainly always present in the psychological and social separation of the characters. The narrator (and protagonist) of this novella is named Egæus, and he is living in a dreary
mansion with his cousin Berenice (as the tale’s title). The perspective from which the tale is written, never allows the reader to lose the sense of isolation, although the protagonist actually leaves the confines of his home once. Poe believed that the motif of isolation was crucial to the Gothic tale to maintain suspense and, therefore, the protagonist does not actually want to leave his home, but does it unconsciously to violate his cousin’s grave. Ægeus was actually born in the library in which he has spent all of his time pondering, day-dreaming and reading obscure Latin works.

Melancholy is immensely diverse and difficult to define since there are no required factors which have to be present in a victim for the disease to be manifested. However, sloth, rest and too much contemplation were factors which would lead to melancholia. According to Hammer, symptoms of melancholia include idleness, lack of motivation and malice. In the tale, Ægeus explains that he is addicted to – what he calls – “the most intense and painful meditation” and his description suggests it is a multi-faceted effect of his illness (“Berenice” 146; Hammer):

[I would] muse for long unwearied hours, with my attention riveted to some frivolous device on the margin or in the typography of a book; to become absorbed, for the better part of a summer’s day, in a quaint shadow falling aslant upon the tapestry or upon the floor; to lose myself, for an entire night, in watching the steady flame of a lamp, … to dream away whole days over the perfume of a flower; to repeat, monotonously, some common word, until the sound, by dint of frequent repetition, ceased to convey any idea, … to lose all sense of motion or physical existence, by means of absolute bodily quiescence”. (“Berenice” 147)

Ægeus and Berenice grew up very differently but yet together in the mansion. He quickly became socially and emotionally detached and ill with an unknown disease, while she was “agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy, [and] roaming carelessly through life, with no thought of the shadows in her path or the silent flight of the raven-winged hours” (“Berenice” 146). Before her illness Berenice possessed a flawless beauty. Unfortunately, as the disease got worse her appearance deteriorated; her body and face became unhealthy, bleak and emaciated. Although Ægeus had never loved Berenice he asked her to marry him because she loved him.

A symptom of melancholia is monomania: the obsession over an object or person lost in time. In most of Poe’s Gothic tales, the protagonists believe that only when they are liberated of the obsession they will be blessed with redemption. Accordingly, Ægeus believes that the pos-
session of his cousin’s teeth will redeem him from his burden. One afternoon before the wedding, as Egæus is sitting in his library, an apparition of her appears before him in a reverie. When the reverie eventually dissipates, her teeth are still lingering in front of him and he realizes his obsession:

“The teeth!—the teeth!—they were here, and there, and everywhere, and visibly and palpably before me; long, narrow, and excessively white, with the pale lips writhing about them, as in the very moment of their first terrible development. Then came the full fury of my monomania, and I struggled in vain against its strange and irresistible influence. In the multiplied objects of the external world I had no thoughts but for the teeth. (“Berenice” 150)

At length, she dies of epilepsy and thus Egæus own disease takes a turn for the worse. A few days after her death, he is filled with horror and paranoia as he is struck with a faint memory of a woman’s scream. He turns his attention to the family physician’s box of instruments upon the table: he is uncertain how it got there, and as the tale progresses the dénouement is imminent. Egæus is told that there had been a disturbing cry from Berenice’s grave, when they arrived they had seen that it had been violated and that she was still alive.

In Poe’s Gothic tales there sometimes exists a subliminal sexual connotation. Poe found ways to disguise sexual urges with violence. Magistrale and Poger explain:

Obessed with Berenice’s mouth and teeth, the narrator’s erotic fascination increases in proportion to the pain the woman experiences as she is ravaged first by epilepsy and then the narrator’s rape of her mouth, pulling teeth from her jaw even as her screams protest against the thirty-two-step oral extraction”. (60)

According to Magistrale and Poger, the novella “Berenice” is considered one of Poe’s most horrible short stories with “shocking and repulsive descriptions of masculine aggressiveness” (60). Magistrale and Frank argue that the protagonist violent act may represent his inferiority towards Berenice (63). That is to say, threaten by her sexuality he felt forced to marry her and was compelled to punish her (ibid.). According to Magistrale and Frank, a Freudian interpretation would suggest that Berenice’s mouth symbolises her vagina, and consequently, breaking the teeth would represent the ravishing of her body: “the narrator’s assault [of] vaginal violation and
destruction of the mother [are] the narrator’s symbolic mutilation of the entrance to the womb” (63).

Egæus believed that if he possessed Berenice’s teeth it would bring him peace, “I felt that their possession could alone ever restore me to peace, in giving me back to reason” (“Berenice” 150). Whether or not this is actually true is never confirmed. However, the servant who informs Egæus of the violation of Berenice caught him with dirt upon his clothes and a spade by the wall. Furthermore, at the very climax, as Egæus’s hands tremble – shocked by his revelations – the physician’s box falls to the floor, opens up and the teeth are scattered all over.
Conclusion

At a glance, it might seem that the works which have been analysed in this study are indisputably similar. However, there are a few important differences.

First of all, the vicious protagonist in “Berenice” differs from the ones in “The Raven”, “Ligeia” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” since these three are but mournful, infatuated men. The protagonist in “Berenice” is – as I have shown above – acting as an antagonist. Nevertheless, in Poe’s fiction his antagonists are not in fact traditional villains. In the selected works, all of Poe’s protagonists are sensitive men with torn psyches on the verge of falling into deep melancholy. Moreover, at first the protagonists – including the one in “Berenice” – do not act in total madness with no disregard for moral values; instead, they always try to exercise a sort of self-control. As Magistrale and Poger explain “within the tormented psyches of Poe’s protagonists, the Gothic’s emphasis on a contradictory and divided self is omnipresent” (19).

Secondly, in “The Raven” and “Ligeia” the protagonists were obsessed with their departed lovers. In “The Fall of the House of Usher” the protagonist loses his twin sister whom – although this is not confirmed – he might have been intimate with. Furthermore, in “Berenice” the protagonist firmly states that he has never loved his cousin, but was about to marry her anyway since she loved him. It can be argued that the protagonist felt both intimidated by her sexuality and forced to marry her. Thus, as he was metaphorically raped, he returned the offence by pulling out the teeth from his cousin’s mouth which – in turn – he might perceive as her threatening vagina. Thirdly, “The Raven” and “Ligeia” concern the protagonists’ loss of their lovers while the women in “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “Berenice” are in the former, the protagonist’s twin sister, and in the latter, the cousin. Nevertheless, there are sexual tensions between them as in the tales of actual lovers. Fourthly, in all works except for in the poem “The Raven”, the women refuse to stay dead. For example, in “Ligeia” the corpse of the protagonist’s new wife is somehow replaced by Ligeia and seems to have resurrected to haunt him. As mentioned above, the women seem to come back to life to punish the men for their sins without any clear reason. Accordingly, in Poe’s tales while the men are sensitive and emasculated “[the women] by contrast, are the active agents who return to haunt or punish their conscience-stricken men” (ibid.). However, in “The Raven” the lover will never emerge except in the protagonist’s memory. In the beginning of the poem, the protagonists believes the bird to be his lover’s embodied spirit, but as the poem progresses he realized that this is not the case. Lastly, opposed to
the other tales, in “The Fall of the House of Usher” the unnamed narrator actually leaves the isolated mansion at the dénouement when Roderick’s sister appears.

Despite these differences, the tales are arguably similar if not thematically identical. There always seems to be a certain state of isolation in Poe’s tales. As illustrated throughout the study, the protagonists are recluses or in some way stuck in a confined space: a house, a chamber or a turret. For instance, in “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Raven” the protagonists are recluses. Poe used the isolation motif to intensify the horror and at the same time focus the story. If the protagonists left their confinement at the point of climax to run away or to seek help the tension he had built up would have been for nothing. Perhaps it is due to Poe’s excellent story-telling that as a reader, one does not want the protagonist to leave his confinement. For instance, in “Ligeia” when the protagonist detects signs of life on his dead wife’s face. He proclaims that the turret – in which they reside – is in a remote part of the abbey, and although the abbey has servants he cannot go there at this time. In “Berenice” the protagonist has spent almost his entire life in his library. Although he actually leaves it once to violate Berenice’s grave, the protagonist does not remember it. Furthermore, the isolation does not only concern physical restrictions of the protagonists, but the social and psychological as well.

Another similarity between the works is melancholy. All the protagonists suffer from melancholy to a certain degree. They are isolated, troubled and obsessed with something in the past. The protagonist in “The Fall of the House of Usher” has an unspoken affliction whilst the narrator in “Berenice” has a more explicit case of melancholy. Nevertheless, they are extremely fixated with their illnesses and are unable to function normally. In “The Raven” and “Ligeia” the protagonists’ monomania concerns their lost women. They are obsessing over their women’s beauty and want nothing more than have them back. What is more, the main characters do not seem to realise that their behaviour is strange. Instead, they proceed to daydream and are further consumed by the monomania.

Poe combines the motif of isolation with the Gothic horror genre and thus, he enhances the horror. Through the first-person narrative the reader is confronted with the innermost workings of the protagonists’ thoughts. The Gothic elements, which should be distinguished from the Gothic horror features, are an additional method to increase the horror. For instance, in “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “Ligeia” the Gothic elements include dreary, dark and frightening buildings, architecture and environments which in a state of phantasmagoria can seem to come alive. The house in “The Fall of the House of Usher”, the curtains in “The Raven” and the
tapestry in “Ligeia” are a few examples of physical details which influence the protagonists’ disoriented psyches.

Isolated both socially and mentally, the protagonists do not engage in much social interaction and they are – in a sense – trapped within their own minds. In their solitude, they plan to redeem themselves in any way possible. What is more, Poe’s Gothic protagonist “first look upon, idealize, and feel with the mind, hollowing out the beloved image, and then turn on the object of their affections, only to suffer retribution for their conversion” (Magistrale and Poger 17).
Works cited

Primary sources

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