Erudition and Sickness in Edgar Allan Poe’s Gothic Stories

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Edgar Allan Poe’s gender representation is intricate because it revolves around the sickness and disease of both men and women. The illness and death of women have captured the attention of feminist scholars, but they have generally overlooked how in portraying his physically invalid and psychologically unstable narrators, Poe rejects the cultural norms of nineteenth-century masculinity that stressed the intellectual and physical supremacy of men. If Poe’s portrayal of women is a key to understanding his gender perceptions, it is equally imperative to critically analyze his representation of men and their diseased condition to understand his critical appraisal of the cultural discourses of male authority, and how he converts the patriarchal idea of male dominance and superiority into monomaniacal thinking. In this paper, I critically analyze Poe’s representation of men in “Morella,” “Berenice,” “Ligeia,” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” to understand his insight into antebellum gender discourses.

Through the complicated relationship of the characters in the stories, Poe subverts and at the same time reinforces many gender ideologies. The first cultural assumption Poe targets is the notion of mentally independent and intelligent masculinity. Poe’s women are intellectually independent and mentally strong, and his male narrators are mentally weak and are in awe of the erudite women. Poe further complicates his gender representation by making both men and women learned and creating a connection between their erudition and sickness. The women are better than men in handling the ideas of metaphysics. By making these moves, Poe undermines the dominant antebellum cultural ideology that men are intellectually superior. At the same time, the consequences of women’s actions suggest that in their portraiture, Poe reinforces the cultural notion that women should only study religious books, moral essays and sermons. To some extent, Poe follows the trope of
representing invalid women in his work, but ultimately rejects the cultural notion of sickness as being gender-bound.

To consider how Poe's stories interacted in their immediate cultural context, it is essential to historicize antebellum gender discourses. Without providing this background, it is difficult to surmise how Poe interacts with dominant cultural assumptions, and what new insights he provides. Analyzing printed sources is one of the best ways to understand social discourses in any given era because periodicals and newspapers serve as cultural templates. Keeping in view this idea, I interpret Poe's stories as being in connection with other pieces published in the Southern Literary Messenger, a periodical published in Richmond, Virginia, from August 1834 to June 1864. The publication included letters, poetry, fiction, nonfiction, reviews, and historical notes. Poe served as its editor from 1835 to 1837, and his tales "Morella," and "Berenice" were published in the periodical in 1835. Critically analyzing Poe's stories with the articles and essays of the SLM will give a better sense of how his work is consistent with and at the same time, in juxtaposition with the cultural notions reflected in other literary works.

Poe complicates his gender representation by making men and women intellectuals and creating a connection between their erudition and sickness. Mysterious sickness is one of the most conspicuous features of Poe's tales and serves as tool to weaken the gender binary. His women are sick, yet so are his men. His "erudite" women are strong individuals, well versed in ancient history and philosophy. In their portraiture, Poe reinforces the cultural notion that women should only study religious books, moral essays, and sermons because Morella and Ligeia's obsession with metaphysics results in "unnatural" consequences. Nevertheless, Poe's intelligent and imaginative women undermine the dominant antebellum cultural ideology that men are physically and intellectually superior. Poe's male characters, for instance, Egaeus and Roderick, are also well read in philosophy and mysticism, but their studies make them psychologically unstable and physically sick. However, Poe's women use their mental prowess to defeat death and his male narrators are ill and afraid of the erudite women. By making this move, Poe creates a form of masculinity in which the men are mentally unstable and fearful of the learned women. By linking erudition and disease in the stories, Poe demonstrates that if intellectual abilities and the studies of metaphysics are detrimental to women's health, they are equally harmful to men.

Historicizing the connection between erudition and sickness is essential because it is an element that has not been fully explored. This move will make it clear that Poe is incorporating the idea that excessive study of philosophy and metaphysics creates physical sickness and psychological instability in both men and women. The primary focus in interpreting the tales is on how Poe takes the link between the study of philosophy and sickness to the extreme to weaken the gender binary because women are better able to handle the notions of metaphysics than men. On the other hand, the male characters, who are interested in the studies of metaphysics and mysticism, lose their sanity. It will also be explored how Poe reinforces antebellum gender discourses on female education by showing the "unnatural" consequences of women's interest in ancient philosophy. The articles that appeared alongside Poe's stories in the Southern Literary Messenger stressed women should only study sermons, moral stories, and religious essays because these subjects would uplift their moral virtues and save them from sins such as vanity and arrogance. Notably, none of Poe's women is interested in these culturally prescribed subjects. The actions and the mental condition of the male narrators demonstrate that if the obsession with metaphysics is bad for women, it is equally or even more harmful to men. Furthermore, it will be explored in depth how Poe weakens the gender binary in two ways: first, by making his male narrators less capable of handling the ideas of metaphysics, and second, by making his men afraid of the erudite women.

Physicians have historically paid a lot of attention to female sickness and have sometimes neglected to examine in depth the instance of male nervous illness. In Hysteric Men: The Hidden History of Male Nervous Illness (2008), Mark S. Micale historicizes the connection between the study of philosophy and sickness. According to Micale, gender discourses of male superiority have always ruled medical science. In this book, he has tried to recover the history of male nervous invalidism through an analysis of personal letters and memoirs. Micale states that in the eighteenth century, physicians and scholars believed that excessive book reading was a cause of triggering male nervousness. He records the case of David Hume, a Scottish philosopher and essayist. During his early twenties, Hume aspired to have a career in philosophy. Yet, his "intense intellectual exertion" diminished his stamina (Micale 33). His concentration weakened, and he mentioned that he experienced "heart palpitations, skin ulcers, and stomach pain," and all these problems tormented him for at least five years. During this period of ailment, Hume wrote letters to his family and friends and discussed in detail the treatments he pursued to cure his malady. He frequently visited the family doctor, who gave him "Anti-Hysteric Pills" (Micale 33). Hume self-diagnosed his malady as the "disease of the learned." He ended his letter by asking "whether I can hope for a recovery?... whether my recovery will ever be perfect?" (quoted by Micale, 34). Apart from Hume, Micale has also recorded other instances of male nervous illness.1 Micale claims that ideas about male nervousness were explored in the early nineteenth century, but they never gained prominence.2 For instance, Edward Jenner, an eminent surgeon, famous for his discovery of the smallpox vaccine, recorded in his journal that he was afflicted with

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1 Another account was written by George Cheyne, a mathematician. He also declared that the main reason for nervous illness was "excessive luxury and too much book reading" (Micale 41). Cheyne also delineated his own nervous illness, when he was in his early twenties. He suffered from anxiety, and he outlined his symptoms as "fright, anxiety, dread, and terror" flooding his mind, and he remained bedridden for months (Micale 43).

2 From a journal written by Joseph Farington, he quotes the incident of a man undergoing nervous seizures. He notes that Farington was a socialite and a landscape painter and his journal brims "with references to doctors, health, and sickness." Farington labeled his disease as "anxiety of mind" (quoted by Micale, 32).
"a morbid sensitivity of sharp sound" (Micale 32). In a letter to his friend referring to his nervous state, Jenner wrote that "in a female, I should call it hysterical... but in myself, I know not what to call it, but the old sweeping term nervous" (quoted by Micale, 32). It is noteworthy that Jenner wanted to label his invalidism as hysteria, but the stigma attached to the term prevented him from doing so. Micale's findings suggest that in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, physicians regarded excessive intellectual activity, for instance book reading, as the main cause of male nervous illness. Additionally, Davis Hume's letters suggested that "philosophical readings" caused mental and physical sickness. Following the same idea, in "Morella," "Berenice," "The Fall of the House of Usher," and "Ligeia," Poe presents a world inhabited by invalid erudites.

Exploring the link between the mysterious diseases of Poe's characters and their excessive intellect will help show his gender representations in a new light. For instance, Poe creates a link between sickness and the studies of ancient philosophy and mysticism, and this connection is the most prominent feature of "Morella." The tale is in first-person narration, and we get all the details from the perspective of Morella's unnamed husband. Without giving any explicit detail of how the narrator met her, he simply mentions that he married Morella. He also stresses that he never loved her and throughout their married life remained confused about his feelings for her. Describing Morella's merits, he accenuates her "profound erudition," and her obsession with John Locke's idea of "Personal Identity." The narrator goes on to define the idea of identity transference, which becomes the sole obsession of Morella. According to the narrator, Locke put forth the theory that personal identity and consciousness are transferrable from one soul to another. He states that Morella always discussed Locke's notion "Identity which at death is, or is not lost forever" (italics in original, 449). The narrator notices that Morella's health is deteriorating. Her declining health can be interpreted as a result of her obsession with the idea of the continuation of identity after death. Gradually, the narrator starts avoiding her and develops a feeling of hatred for Morella. He does not give any reason for his loathing for her. However, the text implies that it is Morella's interest in the "mystical writings" that increased his loathing for her to such an extent that he wants her to die (448).

At the exact time of death, she gives birth to a daughter, who is Morella's rebirth or the continuation of her identity. When the child reaches her tenth birthday, the narrator names her Morella. The child dies instantly, and when he carries her to the tomb, he finds that the corpse of the old Morella is missing.

Obsessing over the "the studies of nature" and falling sick is also a prominent feature of "Ligeia." In the tale, Poe repeats the same pattern of an intellectual woman's interest in mystical studies making her sick, and her reincarnation in another woman's body. Ligeia's unnamed husband is the narrator of the tale. She is interested in the "studies of nature" and the idea to defeat death is her one and only obsession (163). Furthermore, like Morella, she is well versed in ancient philosophy. The narrator mentions that Ligeia's learning was "immense - such as I have never known in women" (163).

Immediately after mentioning her intellect, the narrator brings into the story the element of her mysterious disease. In this way, Poe makes a connection between her studies and malady. As Ligeia's studies of philosophy increase, her health deteriorates. The narrator mentions, "the pale fingers became of the transparent waxen hue of the grave, and the blue veins upon the lofty forehead swelled and sank impetuously with the tides of the most gente emotion" (164). The word "grave" indicates that the narrator thinks Ligeia will not survive. At the time of her death, she repeats "man doth not yield to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will" and dies (163). These lines suggest that she is a woman possessing immense willpower. She firmly believes death is defeatable because only the people having a weak will succumb to the angel of death. This idea is linked to Morella's obsession with the continuation of identity. The only difference is the end result because Morella is reborn as her daughter and Ligeia reincarnates in another woman's body. In both the cases, the women defeat death. After Ligeia's demise, the narrator develops an addiction to opium and marries another woman named Rowena. Rowena fits the model of the ideal womanhood; she is obedient, meek, and fearful of the narrator. He tortures her physically and psychologically. Eventually, she gets sick and dies. On the night of her death, Ligeia revives in Rowena's body.

By showing Morella and Ligeia's extremely high intellectual prowess, Poe subverts the antebellum idea of men's intellectual superiority. In the nineteenth century, the idea of the mental and physical strength of men was dominant. Many pieces in The Southern Literary Messenger reinforce this notion. For instance, "Dissertation on the Characteristic Differences Between the Sexes, and Woman's Position and Influence on Society, No. 1," and "Dissertation, No. 2" were published in the SLM in 1835. Poe's "Morella" and the first edition of "Berenice" were also published in the same year. Both "Dissertations" stressed the intellectual superiority of men. Roderick T. Dew, the author of both essays, argued that "the intellectual endowments and development of men are generally found superior to those of women at the age of maturity.... we find the intellectual powers of men everywhere and in every age superior to those of woman" (676). Contrary to the cultural assumptions mentioned in this essay, the narrators in both "Morella," and "Ligeia" regard themselves childlike in comparison with their wives' intellectual acquisitions. Ligeia's husband mentions that "I was sufficiently aware of her infinite supremacy to resign myself, with a childlike confidence, to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation" ("Ligeia" 163). Ligeia is interested in the notion of defeating death. Therefore, the main focus of her studies is metaphysics. The narrator also mentions that she was perfectly at ease in discussing and explaining "the most abstruse," abstract and complicated ideas of philosophy (163). The narrator acknowledges her supremacy in learning and accepts his ignorance in the matters of metaphysics. Her all-absorbing subject of interest was the "mysteries of transcendentalism" (164).

By making both Ligeia and Morella interested in studying mysticism and being sick at the same time, Poe's work supports the notion that women
must only read moral essays and sermons, avoiding ancient philosophy and metaphysics. The idea of a proper female education repeatedly appeared in the SLM publications. For instance, the “Advice from a Father to his Only Daughter,” published in the SLM in 1834, clearly sketched the guidelines for female education. The author addressing his daughter mentioned, “cultivate your mind by perusal of those books which instruct” (188). According to the letter, the most desired subjects that women should study were, “History, Geography, Poetry, Moral Essays, Biography, Travels, Sermons, and other well written religious productions” because these would exalt the virtue. Poe’s women are not interested in any of the subjects mentioned above. The texts also show that Morella and Ligeia’s obsession with ancient philosophy and mystical studies produce unnatural results because they succeed in conquering death. Although both these characters, by dint of their unwavering will, defeat death, the consequences are disastrous. Morella’s rebirth in the form of her daughter and Ligeia’s revivification in Rowena, indicate that female interest in metaphysics produces unnatural consequences. Poe further reinforces the connection between the study of metaphysics and sickness in depicting Morella’s declining health. For instance, Morella’s interest in the preservation or the continuation of identity after death starts agitating her. Her fingers become “wan,” and “melancholy” replaces the “luster” of her eyes (“Morella” 449). Morella’s husband mentions that her interest in metaphysics and philosophy is the reason behind her passion for taking “up from the ashes of some dead philosophy.” He also mentions that whenever Morella is busy in her studies, she often repeats “some low singular words with low meanings” (448). The word “low” implies that Morella’s husband regards the topics of her study as base or immoral because they are contrary to the subjects that are culturally appropriate for women.

Poe further weakens the gender binary by repeatedly including men as diseased intellectuals. The insanity and invalidism of Egaeus, the narrator of “Berenice,” suggest if the study of philosophy has sickened Ligeia and Morella, it has also unnatural consequences for men. Poe creates a link between disease and the intellectual abilities of these characters and by making this move, he demonstrates that if dwelling on “forbidden pages” has unlikely consequences for women they are equally harmful to men. “Berenice” was initially published in the SLM in 1835. In the same year, in another publication of the periodical, titled, “Dissertation, No. 1,” Dew stressed that women were physically weak, and their “inferior strength and sedentary habits confine her within the domestic circle; she is kept aloof from the bustle and storm of active life” (Dew 495). Besides giving all these weaknesses to Egaeus, Poe also confines him to his library. Egaeus’s excessive meditation, which he refers to as “most intense and painful,” is a reason for his physical and psychological deterioration (“Berenice” 141). A further brief summary: Egaeus does not give any details about his abode, except his library, in which he was born, and his mother died. He is suffering from “monomania” and his sole companion, his cousin Berenice, is a victim of “Disence,” a “species of epilepsy” (142). One of the most dominant characteristics of Egaeus’s “monomania” is his “nervous intensity of interest” (italics in original 142). Whenever an object captures his attention, he keeps on thinking about it for days. One day, Berenice visits him in the library; she smiles at him, and her spotless teeth arrest his attention. He starts thinking about them and sees them everywhere. He gets obsessed with the idea of possessing her teeth. Soon after the library incident, a servant tells him that Berenice has passed away. Egaeus does not give any detail of Berenice’s burial. He only mentions that he lost track of time and did not remember what happened. On the night of Berenice’s burial, a servant tells him that she is lying outside her grave and there are blood stains all over her ceremonies, and she is moaning. At that moment, Egaeus notices “impress of human nails” on his hand, and a box with the instruments of dental surgery and thirty-two teeth fall on the floor (Poe 147).

In Egaeus’s character, Poe introduces a version of masculinity which is weaker than women in handling the ideas of metaphysics and philosophy. Ligeia and Morella are successful in attaining rebirth by dint of their will, but Egaeus’s sole progression is towards his doom. At the beginning of “Berenice,” Egaeus introduces himself as a person belonging to a “race of visionaries” (141). He was born in the library full of the books of “peculiar nature” (141). He spent his early boyhood in reading books and mentions that being lost in “reveries” has always been his favorite indulgence (“Berenice” 141). He also mentions that he likes to ponder upon books and is always “buried in gloom” (141). Morella’s husband uses the term “imaginative Morella” to describe her peculiar mental state; Poe creates a parallel between Egaeus and Morella by giving them imagination. Egaeus elaborates that he has developed the habit of losing himself in reveries to the extent that the reality of the world loses its meaning to him. He states, “the realities of the world affected me as vision, and as visions only, while the wild ideas of the land of dreams became...in very deed that existence utterly and solely in itself” (141). As the story progresses, Egaeus’s physical and mental health deteriorates, and he develops “monomania.” His psychological deterioration serves as a contrast to the women, who do not lose their mental faculty and prove themselves to be psychologically stronger and stable.

Poe takes the connection between erudition and psychological instability to the extreme in the “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and suggests that men have many weaknesses but society does not want to acknowledge them. In the story, the “hypochondriac” and “invalid” protagonist, Roderick Usher, also has the habit of reading books on philosophy and mysticism. Like egaeus, he is also suffering from a “nervous intensity of emotion.” The narrator, while describing Roderick’s disease, mentions that he is paranoid and an unknown fear governs all his actions. Furthermore, he is nervous all the time and has developed an intolerance of light, noise, loud music, and even solid food. The narrator stresses that one of the reasons of his invalidism is the books he studies. He further elaborates that for many years, books have been the major part of Roderick’s existence. And the subjects of all the books are “in strict keeping with this character of phantasm” (“The Fall” 209). The word “phantasm” refers to mystical nature of his readings. The narrator also gives
a list of Roderick’s reading and particularly mentions his favorite as “an exceedingly rare and curious book... the manual of the forgotten church” (210). The subject of the book is the vigil of the dead. According to the narrator, Roderick would spend hours in contemplating on the passages of the book. Roderick has invited the narrator to give him company because he thinks that he will die soon. He is extremely pale and emaciated. The narrator repeatedly mentions that Roderick is constantly afraid. His sister Madeline is also suffering from “cataplexy” and occasionally undergoes seizures. In their conversation, Roderick particularly mentions that he is anticipating his sister’s death. One night, assuming that Madeline has died, they bury her alive in an underground vault. After her burial, Roderick starts hearing some noises from the crypt. Eventually, Madeline creeps out of her tomb, kills Roderick, and dies along with him. Roderick’s fixation with the book on the topics of the vigil of the dead is one of the major reasons of his bunting alive Madeline, irrational actions, and psychological instability.

Poe’s diseased men are completely at odds with the portraiture of robust and rational men of nineteenth century. Leland Person, in “The Feminization of a Masculine Poetics” (1988), elaborates that in the early nineteenth-century America, two dominant male ideologies prevailed: the “Jacksonian cult of manhood” and the “Christian gentleman.” The first one represented men as strong, aggressive and self-reliant; the second one stressed selflessness and self-denial. Both these ideas were conflicting because the Christian gentleman model was feminine according to the other. Moreover, in the Jacksonian standard, reading and writing were regarded as purely womanly activities. Person further states that in creating the male characters, Poe implicitly challenges these gender ideologies. Furthermore, Poe represents male as a passive rather than aggressive being. The problem in this proposition is that Poe’s men, though physically weak, are extremely aggressive and in their mania to overpower women, mock the antebellum discourses of sane and rational masculinity. The irrational actions of Poe’s men suggest that he not only challenges the two models of the nineteenth-century manhood, but also creates a third one. Therefore, his men are both passive and aggressive, selfless and selfish, and a combination of masculine and feminine. For example, in “Berenice,” the male narrator, Egaeus is sick. He is passive because his disease confines him to his library. At the same time, he is extremely aggressive because after burying Berenice alive, he extracts her teeth. Furthermore, Poe imbues his male characters with culturally ascribed female diseases such as hysteria, hypochondria, and melancholia to make the gender binary murky.

Poe subverts the notion of psychologically stable and strong men by making his male narrators afraid of the erudite women. For instance, Morella’s husband is afraid of her and tries to avoid her company. Some critics have interpreted the fear of the narrator as an indication of suffering from “infantile envy” for the women. For example, Dawn Keetley, in “Pregnant Women and Envious Men in ‘Morella,’ ‘Berenice,’ ‘Ligeia,’ and ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’” (2005), argues that these women are the “mother figures” and the male protagonists are harboring infantile envy for them because they want them to die (1). Keetley also diagnoses the disease of the women in all these stories as pregnancy. Applying Melanie Klein’s concept of envy, she analyzes the hostile attitude of the male narrators towards the women in the tales. Klein in her 1957 essay, “Envy and Gratitude,” defined envy as the infant’s urge to destroy the “primal object, the mother” (quoted by Keetley, 1). Keetley suggests that the narrator in “Morella” refrains from mentioning Morella’s pregnancy until the time of delivery arrives. She further elaborates that Morella’s pregnancy is a reason for her husband’s disgust with her and she is conscious of it. She states, “Morella sees what her husband cannot- that her pregnancy is the source of his otherwise inexplicable loathing” (5). Furthermore, the narrator’s passion for Morella is an infant’s love for his mother. She states, “their bond is exclusive but not defined by romantic love, appearing to partake instead of infant-mother relationship” (4). To support her argument, Keetley adds that at the very beginning of the story, the narrator makes it clear that he does not love Morella and it is difficult to define his passion and feelings for her.

Contrary to Keetley’s assumption, I would like to add that the narrator’s primary reason for being frightened of Morella is her profound erudition, not just her pregnancy or his “infantile envy” for her. At the beginning of her story, Morella’s husband is interested in her studies, but later on, when she dwells on philosophy, for instance, the idea of not losing identity with death, he becomes afraid of her. When she is reading some excerpt from Pythagoreans, Schelling, or Locke, he feels oppression. He explains, “linger by her side, and dwell upon the music of her thrilling voice, until at length its melody was tinged with terror and fell like a shadow upon my soul. And I grew pale and shuddered inwardly... the most beautiful became the most hideous” (“Morella” 448). Later on, he adds that a time approached when he could not bear “the touch of her wan fingers” (449). These lines indicate that it was the topic of Morella’s interest that scares the narrator because according to antebellum cultural norms women were expected to discuss fashion, dresses, and domestic issues. These ideas appeared again in “Dissertation, No. 1” published in the SLM in 1835, the same year “Morella” was published. The essay reinforced the thought that “women in all countries talk about their dresses and domestic matters: Men talk of war, politics, horse-racing, field sports, and the labor of the farm” (Dew 495). Neither Poe’s men nor women fit these social criteria.

Similarly, Ligeia’s husband is shocked to see her fierce struggle against death. Her strong resistance reveals her firm belief in the notion that man dies because of his feeble will. Eventually, her resilient will triumphs and she defeats death. The narrator describes her struggle to cling to life as, “Ligeia’s more than womanly abandonment to a love,” and it is her love for life (“Ligeia” 164). The use of the word “more than womanly” distinguishes Ligeia from the women of nineteenth century. Describing the criteria of womanhood in the nineteenth century, Person, in “Poe and Nineteenth-Century Gender Constructions” (2001), elaborates that women were supposed to fit the criteria of “True Womanhood.” It constituted of four cardinal virtues,
"piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity" (134). He further states that Poe’s women are in juxtaposition to these norms and domesticity is the only idea that connects them to their immediate cultural moment. Furthermore, in sketching the female characters, Poe has mocked the cultural ethos of female obedience and submission. It can be added here that Poe’s representation of women is much more intricate because he adds another layer of complexity by making them aggressive. Therefore, Poe rejects both the ideas of “true womanhood” as well as the women, who do not fit this criterion. For instance, Ligeia is entirely opposite to the idea of true womanhood because with her strong resolution to overpower death, she is reborn in Rowena’s body, who dies consequently. Through the character of Rowena, who is meek, obedient, and silently suffers at the hands of her psychologically deranged husband and dies, Poe refutes the notion of “true womanhood.” While discussing Poe’s gender constructions, scholars like Person have ignored the dominant element of the mysterious sickness of both men and women in his stories.

As Poe’s men do not fit the antebellum cultural criteria of masculinity, his women also stand apart from the idea of proper womanhood. In representing women, Poe creates a version of femininity that is entirely at odds with the gender assumptions of antebellum era. Although the women are strong, individual, and intellectual, still the text shows that being remarkably different from cultural ideologies is problematic. To clarify this idea, it is significant to historicize antebellum cultural expectations from women. A large number of publications in the SLM stressed that women should always think about their husbands first and it was their duty to sacrifice their feeling and happiness for the welfare of their home. For instance, the author of “Dissertation, No.1” stressed that women “after marriage look to esteem and approbation of him who has won her hand and heart, as jewel to greatest price. His opinion may become to her what that of the world was before” (Dew 501). The letter further continued that such an obedient woman would make the home “of her husband a paradise on earth” (501). The cultural ideology as exhibited in these lines emphasized women’s subordination. Furthermore, it also stressed their role as an emblem of sacrifice. Poe, in creating his female characters has subverted all these cultural notions. For example, for both Morella and Ligeia, their own goals are more important than their husbands’ happiness and domestic peace. Their attention is focused, and they possess immense self-control. The feelings, emotions, and happiness of their husbands are less important for them. By making his female characters distinctive, Poe demonstrates that gender differences are not inherent but are socially constructed.

To fully understand how Poe’s women stand apart from the nineteenth century standards of womanhood, it is also significant to critically analyze women’s feelings for the male narrators. This analysis will clarify how Poe rejects the notion of radical woman as well as the ideal woman. Because of the fact that women in Poe’s stories are constantly under the male gaze, scholars have elaborately discussed the male narrators’ objectifying tendencies. For example, Person tackles the issue of representation of women in the work of Poe, Melville, and Hawthorne. He argues that these authors used women as a medium to explore their creative ability and “experience of art” (“The Feminization” 2). He states that these authors often “characterize women through artistic imagery,” and compare women with work of art such as painting and sculptures and present the male characters as artists. Similarly, Keeley has discussed the narrator’s feelings of envy and aggression toward women in Poe’s stories. If Poe’s men objectify women, his women also exhibit an indifferent attitude for the male narrators and contrary to the cultural norms are not interested in making their home a “paradise” for their husbands. It is noteworthy that nowhere does the text indicate that Morella loves the narrator. The narrator describes her feelings as “attachment.” He mentions that the sole discussion he and Morella had was on the idea of identity transference (“Morella” 449). According to the text, the element that unites them is Morella’s habit of shunning society. Neither love nor passion are involved in this relationship. The significance of the pregnancy and the child is to show that Morella’s identity is transferred to her daughter. Similarly, Ligeia is devoted to the idea of defeating death; she is not afraid of losing her husband. As Ligeia moves closer to her demise, her “wild” desire for life increases. Initially, the narrator thinks and believes that Ligeia is in anguish because of her love for him. He even mentions that her devotion reached to the extent of “idolatry,” but later on, when the time of her death arrives, he realizes that the main reason of her struggle is the desire to overpower death. He states, “in Ligeia’s more than womanly abandonment to a love, alas! All unmerited, all unworthy bestowed, at length recognized the principle of her longing with so wildly earnest a desire for life which was now fleeting so rapidly away. It is this wild longing... but for life” (“Ligeia” 164). These lines suggest that the idea to defeat death governed Ligeia’s mind. The word “earnest” and “wild” imply that her prime object was to preserve her life. After her death, Ligeia revivifies in Rowena’s frame and who ever she is at that point, she dies again immediately. The result of the actions of extremely erudite women is problematic. The woman who fits the social criteria of obedience also suffers and dies. On the other hand, the intellectual women’s strength of will results in the death of Morella’s daughter and Rowena. Therefore, Poe’s gender representation is much more complex than it seems to be. His learned women are sick, his intellectual men are also invalid and hypochondriac. Neither Poe’s women nor men fit cultural criteria of ideal masculinity and femininity.

Analyzing Poe’s men and women in the light of the publications of the SLM demonstrates that antebellum cultural ideologies are much more complicated than we think. All these aspects make Poe’s gender representations intricate; he neither simply empowers men nor disempowers women. Merely declaring that he is a feminist or a misogynist does not do justice to his intricate portrayal of characters, and their relationship with each other, and antebellum culture discourses. The characters in Poe’s stories cannot be contained in types and cannot be explained by binary thinking.
"It's me, Ana": The Nature of Monstrosity in The Spirit of the Beehive

Micah Spiece

A young girl named Ana comes into contact with James Whale's 1931 Frankenstein, and it becomes a tangible part of her waking life, influencing her development in a complex and distinctly hostile world. The Spirit of the Beehive may be the only film in existence to both directly refer to and consider—rather than comment upon—the interpretive nature of Frankenstein, making it perhaps the most faithful adaptation of the novel yet on screen. Just as Mary Shelley's Frankenstein uses framing to highlight the performative aspect of monstrosity and its effect on impressionable minds, The Spirit of the Beehive frames the original film adaptation of that work to demonstrate the performativity of Gothicism in the real world and the reasons we return to experience it anew.

In his analysis of depictions of monstrosity in a variety of Frankenstein film adaptations, James A. W. Heffernan explores a dilemma: how to turn a literary monster into a visual one. It's a fascinating consideration for the often-adapted novel, especially since critics and audiences often view these films as inferior or unfaithful to Mary Shelley's vision. Heffernan concludes that this disconnect between media is due to the novel's insistence on the inner lives of the characters; indeed, a lengthy middle section features notably articulate narration (filtered through multiple frames) directly from the monster himself. Films, however, provide primarily visual means of carrying the story—Heffernan laments the silencing of the monsters in so many of the non-silent films—and therefore cannot adequately explore internal dynamics of characters. Critiquing the popular idea that cinematic adaptations of Frankenstein cannot be "anything more than vulgarizations or travesties of the original" (445), Heffernan argues that such films force us to consider something the novel scarcely considers: the monster's physical horror, its corporeal monstrosity.