

---

## MADELINE USHER AS A DARK LADY OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

GRK PRASAD, M. NARENDRA

---

**Abstract:** This paper illustrates how Madeline Usher is The Dark Lady of Edgar Allan Poe. Edgar Allan Poe is a writer who is most well-known for his theory that “the death, then, of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world”. Consequently, in his tales women seem to be attractive, but passive victims who are murdered at the start or during the tale. They are most widely read and are thus the most popular ones. However, Poe’s oeuvre offers more variation on the representation of women than “the beautiful, dead woman”. Unfortunately, these variations where women are in fact smart and play an active role go mostly unnoticed. Therefore, it is worth to have a look at the variety of women that Poe really presents to us, especially in his prose works. Moreover, it is also interesting to investigate the representation of this beautiful, dead woman, seeing that she might not be so passive and victimized as she may seem at first sight. Poe’s “Dark Ladies” are probably the most famous and most written about women of his entire oeuvre.

**Key words:** Dark ladies, Poesque women, Poe’s oeuvre, personality of Lady Madeline

---

**Introduction:** Poe’s so-called “Dark Ladies” are probably the most famous and most written about women of his entire oeuvre. They have been so frequently investigated that they often represent the epitomes of “Poe’s women”. The reader forms an image of the typical Poesque woman in relation to these Dark Ladies.

The tales that are commonly considered tales of the Dark Ladies are “Morella”, “Berenice”, “Ligeia” and “The Fall of the House of Usher”. The Dark Ladies themselves thus are respectively Morella, Berenice, Ligeia and Madeline Usher. All four tales are named after their principal ladies and are therefore often referred to with the more general term “Poe’s women’s tales”. It can be proved that the image that is formed of these women during a first reading needs to be deepened and placed into perspective relating to Poe’s other tales. These women in fact play a more powerful and independent role than appears at first sight and that they might even occupy the superior position in relation to the narrator.

**Madeline Usher:** “The Fall of the House of Usher” is perhaps the odd one out of the Dark Ladies stories. Madeline Usher is the only Dark Lady who does not have a tale named after her specifically. She has to share the title and the spotlight with her brother, Roderick Usher. Another difference with the previous Dark Ladies tales is that the narrator is not the husband nor the lover, but an outsider. Throughout the tale, it seems that Madeline only plays a secondary role. She herself is not seen or heard very often, it is only towards the end that her character

gains importance. In the rest of the tale, the emphasis is rather on the narrator’s experiences in the house and with Roderick. But Spitzer says that “the fact that she is on stage only for a short time and has no lines to speak [...] should not lead us to underrate her importance, given her impact in the story and the interest which is aroused precisely by her mysterious appearances” (352).

No physical description of Madeline is available, such as is the case with Berenice, Morella or Ligeia. However, Roderick, her brother, is described in full detail – a description that bears an uncanny resemblance to the physical portrayal of Ligeia, as D.H. Lawrence already recognized (qtd. in Jordan 9). Some of the same features as Ligeia are “eye large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison”, “a nose of a delicate Hebrew model”, a “finely molded chin” (Poe 302) etc. But given that Poe claims that there is a “striking similitude between the brother and sister” (Poe 309). Just as Berenice, Madeline is not given a voice in this tale. In other words, the textual evidence “troubles the woman’s existence as a fully separate character” (Keetley, 8) and diminishes Madeline’s own personal identity – as it is seen happening in the other Dark Ladies tales as well. In addition, a side note should be made regarding Madeline and Roderick being twins. Poe does not explicitly mention that they are indeed identical. In fact, identical.

To continue the analysis of Madeline’s role in “The Fall of the House of Usher”, it is important to note that even though we only find meagre references to the appearance and personality of Lady Madeline,

there are a lot of things we can derive regarding the power relationship in this story. According to Carlson (“Tales of Psychical Conflict: ‘William Wilson’ and ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’” 191), D.H. Lawrence probably was one of the first to see this incestuous relationship and to speculate on the consequences it had on both Roderick and Madeline. It is she who controls her brother’s thoughts while in the coffin, it is she who returns from being entombed and it is she who in the end falls upon her brother, pinning him to the floor and killing him, playing an active role. Thereby, she is also the only Dark Lady who actually avenges the other by taking his life. It can be concluded that Madeline, even though not appearing very often in the story, in fact has the more active role. She opposes her passive brother and dominates him physically in the end, successfully counterfeiting his attempt to entomb her forever.

It is also possible to link the inset story from the *Mad Trist* to Madeline to find additional evidence towards her superiority. Spitzer even calls Madeline the “female Ethelred” and “the true male and last hero of the House of Usher” (353). To conclude the link between the Usher story and the *Mad Trist*, it is also interesting to note the assonance between Madeline (when it is pronounced as mad Lynn) and the *Mad Trist*.

Another connection inside the story can be made with the inset poem “The Haunted Palace”. Perhaps the link to the Usher House (both the genealogic and the estate meaning) is the most obvious and of course a strong case can be made to connect it to Roderick Usher, who would then be the king mentioned in the poem. However, it can also be interesting to connect this poem to Madeline Usher, especially when we consider the power relationship previously mentioned. Consider for example the “banners yellow, glorious, golden” that floated on the roof (Poe 306). According to Robinson, “the yellow banners on the roof correspond to Usher’s uncut ‘silken hair’” (72) but since Madeline looks strikingly like Roderick, I believe this statement applies to Madeline as well. The “two luminous windows” can refer to Madeline’s eyes, just as the “pearl and ruby” of the palace door then refer to her red lips and white teeth (Poe 306). The choice of words is very remarkable here, since Madeline indeed assails Roderick in the end and thereby undermines his “high estate”.

One more theory that some researchers like Kendall Jr., Robinson and Lawrence (qtd., in Robinson) apply

to “The Fall of the House of Usher” is vampirism, even though they do not all agree as to who exactly is the vampire in the story. According to D.H. Lawrence Roderick is the vampire, as he explains that “Madeline’s brother is ‘sucking her life like a vampire in his anguish of extreme love’ and she is ‘asking to be sucked’” (qtd. in Robinson 76). Kendall Jr., conversely, sees Madeline as the vampire and vampirism as “the hereditary Usher curse” (450). According to Kendall Jr., there are various textual references that support his thesis, such as the “sensation of stupor” that oppresses the narrator when he sees Madeline, which is “a characteristic reaction to the succubus” (451).

To conclude this part about Madeline Usher, it is believed that although Madeline at first sight may not seem the main character in the story, her role is actually a lot more important than is initially generally believed. She is the powerful one in the story and various points of textual evidence that have been provided support this.

Although the women of the Dark Ladies tales may at first sight seem to be Poe’s typical beautiful, but dying women, it is now clear that there is more to them than meets the eye. In fact, they prove to be more powerful than one would have thought in a first reading of the tales. Even though there is a certain consistency in characteristics between the Dark Ladies, it is also important to see that each one is powerful and unique in her own way. As Miquel-Baldellou states, the women’s “ethereal appearance betrays a decidedly, and repulsive, strong will” (180). The narrator may try to silence them, as Jordan saw, by for example “the forcible removal of Berenice’s teeth by her professed ‘lover’; the premature shroud that ‘lay heavily about the mouth’ of Ligeia – and of Madeline Usher” (2), but in the end, it is usually the women who claim their power and vindicate by returning from the dead (Ligeia, Morella) or even by killing the lover (Madeline Usher).

An interesting argument to make is that Ligeia and Morella are indeed represented as New Women and consequently prove to be “better” representatives of feminism than Berenice and Madeline. The latter are not represented as intellectual women and do not even receive a speaking role in the story. Furthermore, since Ligeia and Morella both show an immense willpower to survive – not being afraid to use another woman’s body for this end – it can thus be concluded that in relation to each other, Ligeia

and Morella are seemingly the most powerful of the Dark Ladies. Whereas Berenice and Madeline manifest their power as well, Ligeia and Morella do this in a more noticeable and spectacular way and are therefore perhaps better representatives of Poe's powerful woman.

To claim that there are diverse opinions about Poe's women is an understatement. Some see his fictional women as "excuses for this continued fascination with himself" (Dayan "Poe's Women" 2), others then again link them to his biographical women (as Sova notes as well in her *A to Z* reference book) or only include the more popular and better-known women in the definition of "Poe's women" (Kot, Miquel-Baldellou). Dayan additionally asks herself quite eloquently

But what are we to do with Poe's bleeding, raped, decapitated, dead, and resurrected women, brutalized, buried, cemented in cellars, and stuffed up chimneys? ("Poe's Women" 10).

Poe offers us a variety of female characters throughout his short stories. The most famous are, of course, the Dark Ladies, terrifying creatures who return from the dead to haunt past lovers or to suppress the female rival. As Paula Kot and other critics argue, "Poe's preoccupation with the death of a beautiful woman in his poems and tales concerning women actually reflects his interest in recovering women's stories" (400). The male characters might seem to be the protagonists in these tales, seeing that they are the narrators and the view on the female characters is mediated through them. They might seem the more powerful ones, for the most part surviving while the female characters die or appear to

die. Yet it is in fact the women in these tales who occupy the superior position

It is important to consider these Dark Women as well when discussing the representation of women in the works of Edgar Allan Poe. Poe's more comical tales are not always seen as very good ones but they still deserve to be analyzed for their positive image of women. Especially because these intelligent women seem to be rather rare in Poe's works, we have to pay attention to them. They may be lesser known but they are definitely not less important.

**Conclusion:** The Dark Ladies offer a positive alternative to the image of the helpless maiden that is typical for the genre of Gothic fiction and for Poe's detective stories. Whereas the Dark Ladies may seem to belong to the Gothic genre, they do not correspond to the figure of the helpless maiden. In this respect, Poe offers variation where he does not offer variation on other levels. His rare female narrator is a true disappointment. She is likened to a stereotype of the gossiping, vain, naive and unintelligent nineteenth-century middle class woman. Regarding the combination of the helpless maiden and the unintelligent female narrator, it is all the more important to place the intelligent women in the spotlight and to demonstrate that the Dark Ladies are imperative in terms of superiority as well. Poe's women can no longer be reduced to that one stereotype of the beautiful, dead maiden. Instead, there is a whole variety of women and each of them deserves to be acknowledged – especially since this brings up a more positive image of the Poesque woman.

## References:

1. Carlson, Eric W. "Tales of Psychical Conflict: "William Wilson" and "The Fall of the House of Usher"." *A Companion to Poe Studies*. Ed. Carlson, Eric W. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996. 188-208. Print.
2. Dayan, Joan. "Poe's Women: A Feminist Poe?" *Poe Studies / Dark Romanticism* 24.1-2 (1991): 1-12. Print.
3. Jordan, Cynthia S. "Poe's Re-Vision: The Recovery of the Second Story." *American Literature* 59.1 (1987): 1-19. Print.
4. Keetley, Dawn. "Pregnant Women and Envious Men in "Morella," "Berenice," "Ligeia," and "The Fall of the House of Usher"." *Poe Studies / Dark Romanticism* 38.1-2 (2005): 1-16. Print.
5. Lyle H. Kendall, Jr. "The Vampire Motif in "The Fall of the House of Usher"." *College English* 24.6 (1963): 450-53. Print.
6. Kot, Paula. "Feminist "Re-Visioning" of the Tales of Women." *A Companion to Poe Studies*. Ed. Carlson, Eric W. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1996. 388-402. Print.

7. Miquel-Baldellou, Marta. "Demonising the Victorian Heroine's Coming-of-Age in Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Lucretia* and Edgar Allan Poe's *Women's Tales*." *Odisea*.9 (2008): 179-89. Print.
8. Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. Barnes & Noble Leather bound Classics. New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 2010. Print.
9. Robinson, E. Arthur. "Order and Sentience in "The Fall of the House of Usher"." *PMLA* 76.1 (1961): 68-81. Print.
10. Spitzer, Leo. "A Reinterpretation of "The Fall of the House of Usher"." *Comparative Literature* 4.4 (1952): 351-63. Print.

\*\*\*

G.R.K.Prasad/S.V.University/Tirupati/prasadgrk4@gmail.com  
Prof. M. Narendra/S.V. University/Tirupati