

Psychological Aberration, Obsession, and Horror in Edgar Allan Poe's Selected Works

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Abstract

At the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century, horror writings were the only candid alternative to psychology. They served as the only method to reach and understand those unknown territories where penetration of knowledge was restricted or late. Based on the examination or experience of the darker side of human self, this study explores how horror and mystery stories by American dark romantics like Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) deeply engage with psychological issues. These texts explore how life's dilemmas and past traumas lead to psychological conditions such as obsessive-compulsive disorder, monomania, schizophrenia, and psychosis. The study uses an interdisciplinary framework that draws on both literary scholarship and *the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5 2022) in order to explore the representation of psychic issues in Poe's selected writings. The study concludes that Poe's characters represent a range of medical conditions and psychological abnormalities through a constellation of concrete symptoms that was unprecedented in his time.

Keywords: Horror, Monomania, Obsession, Paranormal Psychology, Poe

Introduction

Men have called me mad; but the question is not yet settled, whether madness is or is not the

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loftiest intelligence—whether much that is glorious—whether all that is profound—does not spring from disease of thought—from moods of mind exalted at the expense of the general intellect. ([Poe 446](#)).

Heightened creativity has a touch of madness. It may be due to this ultra-rich creativity that beliefs and emotions, in contrast to facts and logic, are central to Romantics. The individual is the center of concern for Romantics ([David, 2009](#)). Moreover, Romantics are optimists whereas the American movement of Dark Romanticism is an offshoot of the nineteenth-century Transcendental Movement, with its focus on human frailty and sin. Prominent writers associated with Dark Romanticism are Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, Emily Dickinson, and Herman Melville. Dark Romanticism focuses on the mind's obsession with the dark and the grotesque ([David 2009](#)). Dark Romanticism accentuates the vulnerabilities intrinsic to nature and the mind's fascination and obsession with an object. It also addresses supernatural aspects and themes like sin, madness, guilt, and evil. They take nature as a spiritual force reflective of both the sinister and the melancholic, for nature has the power to expose skeptical truths of humankind. Similarly, fear for them is an innate emotion with the strongest pain of the unknown, providing a gateway to imagination.

Furthermore, delving into the history of Romanticism, it has been noted that it reached America from Europe at the beginning of the nineteenth century and fascinated them as it laid emphasis on an individual's inner world and their connection with God, differing from the stern philosophy of Calvinism. There were no traditional constraints as individual decision-making was more significant. This new genre brought out strong private and personal sentiments, which represented sensitivity, while Dark Romanticism emerged as an offshoot of the transcendentalist movement, which was started

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as a demonstration against society, the principles of the Unitarian church, and the dominant culture. Dark Romantics were impressed by transcendentalists yet not ready to implement their thoughts. They were pessimistic, and considered man as fallen, and more inclined towards sin and destruction. American Dark Romantics adapted images of evil in the form of vampires, Satan, ghosts, and the devil. Furthermore, for them, the natural world was more mysterious, destructive, and dark ([David 2009](#)). In short, they showed compatibility with the British Gothic writers.

Edgar Ellen Poe is among the Dark Romantics whose work continues to fascinate us today. He has already been admired for representing the psychological world of his characters and, thus, often seems to be what Zimmerman calls, “a clairvoyant” ([Zimmerman 2009, 10](#)). Cleanth Brooks writes that “splendidly gloomy interiors provide appropriate habitat for Poe’s heroes (melancholy or mad) and the proper setting for the return from the tomb of his Ligeias, and Berenices” ([Brooks 1968, 40](#)). This equivalence of setting and characters in Poe’s writings has been discussed vigorously. However, an attempt has not been made to examine the detailed psychiatric crisis in Poe’s characters in settings with enclosures. In doing the latter, this study argues that Poe’s characters represent a range of medical conditions and psychological abnormalities through a constellation of concrete symptoms that was unprecedented in his time.

Theoretical Framework

Considering Poe’s lifelong struggle with persistent dysthymic depression and a consistent delineation of psychological troubles in the lives of his characters, *the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2022) is an apt framework for the analysis of Poe’s works. The model has not been used before to analyze his works. Besides, the interdisciplinary approach that

draws on both literature and DSM-5 gives this study a unique perspective.

The study has opted for five applicable measures from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-5* (DSM, 2022). These measures are a suitable lens for studying Poe's writing that engage with fear, anxiety, panic attacks, prolonged grief, and other psychological conditions. The first measure is unrelenting fear which is unreasonable, and extreme in kind. This fear is prompted by the existence of a particular situation or object. The second measure is the phobic stimulus that provokes an anxiety response in the subject which is liable to bring panic attacks and prolonged grief disorder. The third measure is the character's realization that fear is excessive. Finally, the fourth measure is that the phobic condition is balanced or avoided while bringing anxiety and pain to the character. These elements of avoidance interfere with the characters' normal life, academic or occupational work, or social relationships with phobia as a mark of their personality. These symptoms bring in characters a condition that again triggers the phobia which is called Catalepsy leading to another disease called Paranoia (DSM, 2022). At last, the moment of Catastrophe comes, and the sufferer is forced to face horror; however, this episode has a liberating effect. After this cathartic practice, the character learns to recount the moment of his catalepsy and neurotic action. This is exactly what happens with Poe's characters if analyzed from the perspective of modern psychology.

Death, Horror, and Madness in Poe's Writings

American Romantic writers used a variety of techniques to represent terror, fear, and hate. These techniques were directly influenced by imagination, experiences, observations, and the socio-political context in which they were being written. They

psychologized ethical obligations and manifested schizophrenic psychotic issues along with obsessive-compulsive disorders. For example, Poe manifests the accomplishment of his obligations first in “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843) in which he introduces what DSM-5 highlights as paranoid schizophrenic disorder, for the narrator of this story betrays a cluster of warning signs indicating that illness.

Similarly, the premature interment brings monomania to his character in “The Premature Burial” (1844). The fear of being buried alive with the leading fear that his body might be dug up by medical students for dissection brings catalepsy that we see in the protagonist of “The Premature Burial”. Poe’s characters’ symptoms like exaggerated lethargic condition, senseless and motionless body, faintly perceptible pulse, torpid or vacillating performance of the lungs, and a period of trance for weeks or even months represent what in modern psychology is called catatonic disorder or Schizophrenia. As Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-5) has highlighted, the phobic incident brings anxiety leading to panic attacks. Similarly, when Poe’s character thinks that he is being buried alive, he shows the symptoms of a panic attack such as palpitation, dizziness, sweating, and shortness of breath ([DSM 2022, 410](#)). The narrator speaks about his lungs gasping along with the heart ([Collected Works 1969-1978, 966](#)) which DSM-5 labels as a “situationally bound attack or trigger” ([DSM 2022, 402](#)), associated with some context. It makes the narrator what modern psychology calls a monomaniac, paranoid, or schizophrenic. Hence, most of Poe’s characters experience the same symptoms as DSM-5 delineates.

Death in Poe’s writings is another factor that brings a stark deterioration in the characters. Human beings remember grief and the danger of death more vibrantly than moments of pleasure. It is also common that human feelings towards the mysterious and the unknown are captured by traditional religious practices. This

tendency is further supported by the fact that danger and uncertainty are allied, which makes an unknown world a world of dangerous and wicked prospects. This is what we see in the writings of Poe as well. Poe observed catastrophe throughout his life and, thus, writing came to be a creative outlet for him. Though several writers worked in the dark domain without knowing the psychological occupations of the horror, they ended up with some hollow literary conventions such as virtue rewarded or some didactic purpose. Poe, alternatively, believed in the theory of impersonality and, thus, knew that creative works interpret events as they are imagined in the human mind or in history. However, Sinclair observed that Poe was fearful of dying, and through this fear, he attempted to comprehend the affiliation between death and love, a drive he pursued in most of his writings mercilessly ([Sinclair 1977, 55](#)).

However, contrary to the British Romantics who celebrated the phase of childhood, Poe believed that all phases of life can be the subject matter for a writer. Strangeness and gloomy surroundings shaped his temperament, and he chose to interpret all those feelings which attended agony rather than pleasure, decline instead of growth, and fear instead of serenity. Thus, he established a novel standard of realism in the history of literary Gothicism, and a true basis of horror and terror ([Basler 2010](#)). However, in Allan Tate's remarks, Poe's aesthetic studies show psychic collapse ([Tate 1952](#)).

In Poe's short story "The Black Cat" (1845), the narrator endeavors to shoot the cat, but his wife interferes. In dire anger, he buries the axe in her wife's brain, and she dies immediately. Without any hue and cry, this repulsive act of murder is completed. The narrator says: "I set myself forthwith, and with entire deliberation, to the task of concealing the body" ([Poe 1845, 987](#)). He sleeps comfortably that night. The narrator also shares the false

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motives of his demeaning conduct of homicide. He explains his misconduct irrationally:

One morning, in cool blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree; -- hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart; -- hung it because I knew that it had loved me, and because I felt it had given me no reason of offence; -- hung it because I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin -- a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it -- if such a thing were possible -- even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God. ([Poe 1843, 899](#))

In this case, a gigantic cat with a strong rope around its neck, which he saw on a wall of the burned house, is part of his delirium/delusion. In so doing, he satisfies his motive but does not get peace of mind. The half emotion that appeared was not repentance but headed him to search for an alternative to focus his attention on. Then delirium about that cat and drinking directed him to anger which caused the killing of his wife. The mental picture of the narrator shows that he has established a connection between his wife and the cat. She was humane, compassionate, and uncomplaining like the peculiarity of affection in the animals which annoyed him, and he hated her.

Thus, the reader can understand that the narrator calmly accepts this death not because his habit of alcoholism has left him cold-hearted and inhumane ([Stark 2004](#)), but because he sees a link between his wife and the cat. In another sense, it is the darkest passion of a psychopath or paranoid schizophrenic which leads to this smoldering murder. There are several symptoms that might happen in the patient's psychology. DSM-5 lays down these

symptoms as paranoid delusion, catatonic behavior, and auditory hallucination. The presence of these symptoms in the character leads to tragedy.

Monomania, Paranormal Psychology, and Supernatural Horror

In his biography of Poe, David Sinclair calls him a complicated literary personality ([Sinclair 1977](#)). Poe is often taken as the mastermind of paranormal psychology and supernatural horror due to his horrendous writings. Influenced by Hoffman, his stories deal with spiritual horror, ratiocination, the unknown, and the grotesque. Moreover, they include monomania, paranormal psychology, and supernatural horror to put him as a mastermind of modern diabolic narratives with a high degree of fear and terror in the same way as the scholarship from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (2022) shows.

“Berenice” (1835) is a short story by Poe that was first published in the *Southern Literary Messenger*. The story revolves around the narrator, Egaeus and his cousin Berenice. In his letter to Thomas W. White, Poe described the technique used in this story as such: “the ridiculous exaggerated into the grotesque: the fearful was painted into horrible: the witty heightened into burlesque: the single into the mystical and strange” (Poe 1835, 789).

Having a great deal of autobiographical elements, this throbbing narrative furnishes the readers with the past of Egaeus who is going to marry his graceful and agile cousin Berenice; however a fatal disease had transformed Berenice in such a way that the narrator is unable to recognize her as “her trance looked like the death” ([Poe 1835, 867](#)). Egaeus obsesses over her teeth that he notices when she smiles, and even after she dies, he desecrates her dead body to remove her teeth. His obsession leads to psychosis as

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he continues to act like an infuriated person. He notes: “My companions said, ‘I might discover some little mitigation of my depression by visiting the grave of my beloved’” (Poe 1835, 877). His beloved is gone, but the narrator’s hallucinations show his beloved here and there, and he is not only disturbed but goes into fits of madness (Sova 2007).

Berenice’s disease has made Egaeus what DSM-5 terms a monomaniac. Monomania is a pathological obsession with one thought. Egaeus hallucinates several times within the narrative, which shows that the character is suffering from monomania. When he sees Berenice, he says that the pungent and weird smell of the coffin makes him sick, and he imagines a lethal odor coming out of his body already (Poe 1835, 145). This olfactory perception is due to hallucination since the reader gets to know at the end of the tale that Berenice is alive. Furthermore, Berenice’s teeth also haunt him when he sits in his room in seclusion. He says: “the phantasma of the teeth upheld its awful dominance as, with the most intense and ugly vividness, it floated about amid the changing lights and shadows of the chamber” (Poe 1835, 147). This visual perception of the character indicates, as shown in DSM-5, his obsession, monomania, and paranoia, however, in modern psychology, it is also called the catatonic schizoid situation caused by a long-lasting obsession (Johnston 2003).

Another short story by Poe that shows paranormal psychology and supernatural horror is "Metzengerstein: A Tale in Imitation of the German" (1832) that was first published in Philadelphia's *Saturday Courier* magazine. The story revolves around Frederick, a young man who is the last of the Metzengerstein family. Frederick is engaged in a long-standing feud with the Berlifitzing family. The story haunts its readers with a description of evil metempsychosis—where a mad nobleman burns the tapestry of his old enemy, and a horse is coming out of the vehement building with the owner

already dead. The tapestry further shows the paintings of a gigantic horse used in the crusades, and the one madman who rode extensively despite the fear and hatred of that horse. The narrative is marked by fear or phobia that reflects a constrained approach to life ([DSM 2022, 444](#)). That is why the characters of the short story under discussion are busy in absurd fights. The quarrel between the two houses and the prophecies finally burns the madman's house and results in the death of the owner. The flames and the smoke coming out of the house take the shape of a big horse. Metzengerstein rides the horse and becomes isolated by lowering his interest in public affairs. His seclusion shows him as either mad or conceited. Once at night, Frederick rides the horse to go to the forest, and meanwhile, his castle burns to ashes. A crowd watches the horse in flames carrying a chaotic rider, with no control over the horse and hence killing the last of the Metzengerstein clan ([Rea 2013](#)). The fire fades away leaving one cloud of smoke on the castle in the shape of a horse as a painting. Thus, massive killings and burning of the castles and animals are what make the reading grotesque and a case of paranormal psychology.

Psychic Predicaments, Depression, and Madness

“The Fall of the House of Usher” was first published in Burton's Gentleman's Magazine in 1839. The unnamed narrator of the story arrives at the house of Roderick Usher who is his friend. The visit is being made in response to Usher's letter to the narrator about his illness and request for help. The story then revolves around Usher's unstable state of mind. In his wish to understand that terror that has taken over the soul of his character, the narrator himself is disturbed. Over the course of the narrative, he becomes obsessed with Usher's mental instability, thus continuing his visits to his house. The narrator has read the story of “Haunted Palace,” therefore, his visits are inspired by

that reading. He provides an explicit description of the palace, which shows the building is going to collapse soon; minute fungi have eaten the walls; and the stones are all in frail condition. This inconsistency in the stones of the mansion makes it a haphazard and disordered structure, with diagonal cracks, which shows that there is a threat of collapse, yet the palace still functions. After his successive visits, when the narrator comes to know the cause of Usher's mental disorder, his mania halts for the moment and he tries to find the solution to cope with his madness. The oppressed narrator's final confrontation with his state of mind echoes Poe's confrontation with his fear of losing his own wife amid disease, thus leaving the narrator with obsessive-compulsive disorder due to the loss.

The narrator reveals some facts about Roderick Usher's family who are also suffering from mental disorders. Usher's condition makes the narrator more frightened, as James Gargano notes that Poe generates narrators who are quite ignorant of the cause of their sorrows and agonies, but they fight against it to find the cause and hence expose the reality to their readers ([Gargano 1963](#)). The narrator's description of a dark, dull, and silent day in autumn, when clouds are near the earth as the condition of Usher's house even before he enters the house shows his inner darkness and loneliness. First-person narration further shows the chaotic condition, obsession, and ultimate fear. His physical but more probably mental disorder has made him isolated and depressed. Usher's faculty of perception, though sensitive, conveys to him the bond between his palace and his incipient mental illness. This is mounting gradually as it happens in schizophrenia. In Usher's decline of this ability, the narrator adds that he never enjoys full consciousness, and due to this reason, he is never impressed by any event. The description again renders the narrator psychotic as per DSM-5 given his prolonged grief and incessant obsession with the loss.

Yet, this mansion's atmosphere troubles the narrator as well. The presence of a lake in the house where the narrator used to see his own reflection as well as that of the house shows the working of the narrator's mind towards creativity because it sets the significance of the environmental conditions, which are supposed or real. The narrator needs systematic desensitization in which he is exposed to the object of fear gradually until he can bear the situation. Terrified by Usher's symptoms, the narrator comes to know about his anxiety when he meets him. The house's ruin in the lake at the end of the story indicates that the narrator's fear can also come to an end if he has a cathartic experience ([Poe 1839, 309](#)).

Furthermore, Usher's hearing of the voices coming from the grave of his sister, whom he has buried in the story, and who suffered from catalepsies, again indicate his psychotic condition and his obsession with the dead and the prematurely buried. Madeline's death has been caused by the wasting away of the body slowly and steadily. As a cataleptic, her body is disorganized leading ultimately to a state of death where the soul dwells in the body but without the faculties of sensory perceptions. Gruesser's comments that Roderick Usher is mad, and whatever he says is madness, also correspond to the given symptoms laid down in DSM-5 ([Gruesser 2002, 84](#)). Usher's sister, Madeline awakes in her grave and escapes to find her brother, who, upon watching her sister alive, collapses with terror. The narrator accepts Roderick's claim, which is made in his condition of instability, and ultimately shows that both are suffering from the same delirium.

The only difference between the narrator and Usher's condition is that he can compose a poem reflecting his own life, and therefore, he has a kind of mental clarity. But despite this clarity, the narrator's mind is heading towards a decline in mental

strength. Indeed, the relationship between the narrator and Usher is unhealthy as Roche David has noted: “as a relationship wherein one person or thing negatively impacts the other person’s physical, mental or emotional health is unhealthy” ([David 2009, 75](#)), and Usher is continuously harming the narrator’s psychic health, leaving him obsessed and incapable to confront his anxiety and panic attacks. Roderick was aware of his psychic condition throughout the story, and he forces the narrator to accept the fear of being mad. Meanwhile, he is attacked by the ghost of Madeline to death. The narrator escapes from the mansion while watching the only fissure of the castle through the tarn:

This fissure rapidly widened—there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind—the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight—my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rush asunder—there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters—and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the House of Usher. ([David 2009, 67](#))

These recurrent thoughts and obsessions with some incidents lead the characters to delusional psychotic disorders and become a source of trauma, fear, and sadness for the readers as well.

Psychological Aberration and Fear

Psychological disorders represented in an atmosphere of gloominess, mystery, fear, terror, and horror characterize both Poe’s poems and short stories. This section will look at one short story and one poem in this regard. “Ligeia,” a short story published in 1838 revolves around the unnamed narrator and his wife Ligeia. The narrator is obsessed with his beautiful wife; however, she dies,

leaving him dejected. The narrator then marries Lady Rowena, who also dies eventually; however, the story shows her returning to life in the form of Ligeia.

The narrator's delirium and hallucinations can be understood in the context of his opium addiction. The opium causes the narrator to have delusions irrespective of his emotional condition, but his fascination with Ligeia and powerlessness to cope with the situation of agony and grief start unusual kinds of hallucinations. This narrator is not destroyed in the end, but rather, his condition leads him toward severe mental abnormality. Although the narrative was written before Poe's wife's diagnosis and death, yet the addition of "The Conqueror Worm" or death as the ultimate destiny or conqueror of all humankind, manifests in Poe's thought process. The traces of all such things are reflected in techniques like the innate sense of the supernatural, the gloomy, and the horrific as shown in the story ([Sova 2007](#)). The narrator's initial claim is:

I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia ... my memory is feeble through much suffering. ([Sova 2007, 90](#))

The narrator could not recall Ligeia's family or the name of her parents. However, he recalled her equable beauty and her exciting, eloquent but soft musical language. Poe was also separated from his mother who died of tuberculosis, and the narrative makes references to this loss as well. The narrator's frequent attempts to find her lover, represents Poe's efforts to find his mother. He learnt from others that his mother was beautiful and talented, which Marita Nadal explains as such: "if the trauma of Poe's losing his mother at a young age impacted his

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stories, then his conception of her as a beautiful and talented woman impacted his stories as well” (Sova 2007, 87). The poem also reveals that the narrator makes many attempts to save her beloved but remains unsuccessful. He feels helpless, which then leads to depression and anxiety. He had a pessimistic, grief-stricken, and negative view of his forthcoming times, resultantly becoming an opium addict (Simpson 2015). As DSM-5 also mentions that incessant grief leads to obsession, which in turn leads to madness as in the case of the story.

Poe’s last poem, “Annabel Lee” (1849) is also about the death of a woman. The poem revolves around the narrator’s immense love for Annabel Lee, which lasts even after her death. From the perspective of DSM-5, this love qualifies as a kind of mania focused on his beloved. The narrator’s description of Annabel Lee’s beauty after her death can be understood as recurrent and repetitive intrusive thoughts as per DSM-5 that contribute to depression and paraphilic disorder. It seems that his life is valuable only in the presence of his beloved, because, in her absence, he cannot overcome the agony, and he is feeble and sick. He consistently shows depressive disorder, and his repetitive behavior exposes a schizophrenic spectrum of psychotic disorders. The narrator’s insistence, unlike other poems, that he will be reunited with his beloved through a union of souls further reflects his psychological aberration.

The above analysis shows that Edgar Allan Poe’s short stories as well as poems reflect a wide range of psychological conditions such as monomania, depression, schizophrenia, obsessive compulsive disorder etc. in the context of death, supernatural horror, madness, and paranormal psychology. DSM-5 (2022) has been used as a framework to show how these psychological abnormalities and psychiatric conditions are reflected in Poe’s characters thus making his writings a suitable subject of studies based in psychological investigations. While DSM-5 and other

tools are a source of scientific knowledge about mental illnesses, literary studies provide the manifestation of these disorders in the lives of characters, which enriches our understanding of them. This interdisciplinary approach to understanding modern psychological illnesses is useful for both psychology and literary studies.

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