

Bipolar disorder, childhood bereavement, and the return of the dead in Edgar Allan Poe's Works

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Abstract

'It [the wall] fell bodily. The corpse, already greatly decayed and clotted with gore, stood erect before the eyes of the spectators. Upon its head, with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder ...'

From 'The Black Cat', written c. age 35 (Poe 1975:230).

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Introduction

'It [the wall] fell bodily. The corpse, already greatly decayed and clotted with gore, stood erect before the eyes of the spectators. Upon its head, with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder ...'

From "The Black Cat", written c. age 35 (Poe 1975: 230).

In Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Black Cat', we see the arrogant narrator undone when the corpse of the wife he murdered resurfaces behind the brick wall that concealed it, a haunting image that remains in our minds long after we have finished the story. In fact, few in the literary canon have composed as many gothic tales as memorable as Poe's. How did Poe's mind conjure these dark, gruesome literary works of the returning dead in such detail? One theory is that this theme could be a result of the childhood bereavement at the loss of his mother, his foster mother, and a close female friend, early in Poe's life. This theory alone, however, does not account for why Poe felt inclined to write consistently about the returning dead, as opposed to composing stories about these relatives as if they were alive, or in some other fashion. A look at Poe's life through his letters and those who corresponded with him suggests Poe may have suffered from bipolar disorder – a mood disorder not diagnosed in his day – and this, along with his possible childhood bereavement, could account for the corpses that resurface in his tales and poetry. A study of Poe's life in light of his possible mood disorder will illustrate it was both a blessing and a curse to him – a blessing in that the disease may have made it possible for him to compose the tales with the 'life-in-death' themes that were most successful in his time and still top gothic literature today, and a curse in that the disease may have eventually led to his death, possibly a form of suicide, at the age of 40.

What could account for Poe's obsession with the dead who do not remain dead? Kenneth Silverman, professor emeritus at New York University and a Pulitzer-Prize winning biographer, maintains Poe's obsession with the returning dead is a result of Poe suffering the death of three women who were dear to him when he was a youth. In fact, remembering the dead was a favorite cultural pastime during Poe's lifetime, Silverman (1991) writes: 'American culture of the time fostered such a preoccupation, preaching from every quarter the duty of remembering the dead. This so-called cult of memory helped to allay anxieties about the continued vitality of Christian ideas of immortality, and concern that commercial and industrial values had begun to prevail in personal and domestic life' (Silverman 1991: 72). However, Silverman acknowledges that Poe takes this remembrance of the dead a step further than society dictated by his emphasis on the dead returning in his tales. He adds that this is because throughout his life Poe experienced a child-like bereavement for the women he lost during his youth: his mother, Elizabeth Poe; his close friend and confidante, Jane Stanard; and his adopted mother, Frances Allan.

Adults, according to Silverman, learn to cope with the death of a loved one by 'gradually and painfully withdrawing their deep investment of feeling in the person' (Silverman 1991:76). Children, however, invest more feeling in and magnify the lost parent's image, while they acknowledge the parent's death only superficially. Children cannot comprehend the finality of death, Silverman maintains, and quotes a boy who had lost his father as saying he understood his father was dead, but he did not understand why his father did not come to supper (Silverman 1991:76). Hence Poe, according to

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Silverman, is obsessed with the idea of the dead, especially the beautiful woman, returning to life, reappearing as a corpse, or appearing alive while dead, as we see in Poe's literary works.

Silverman's argument, however, does not paint a complete picture of why Poe seems obsessed with death in those works. Just because some children experience bereavement in this manner does not necessarily mean Poe did, and there is nothing in Poe's letters or the correspondence from his friends and acquaintances to suggest he did.² Also, Poe was only two when his mother died, and the next day he was adopted by John Allan, which should have minimized his mother's loss (Frances Allan, as Poe later writes, thought of him as her own child). In addition, Poe was about 15 when Jane Stanard died, and 20 when Frances Allan died; he was hardly a child. If we grant Silverman the benefit of the doubt, his theory alone still does not explain Poe's obsession with the returning dead: why would Poe not have constructed tales featuring those he lost as if they were whole, living human beings? Note the young boy Silverman uses as an example to support his theory simply does not understand why his father does not come to supper; the boy does not, as far as we know, envision his father as a corpse sitting at the dinner table. Something obviously had to direct Poe's thoughts toward death in the first place. When Silverman's argument is coupled with Poe's possible bipolar disorder, which some writers maintain leads to an obsession with death, we see a more complete picture of Poe's obsession with the return of the dead. Julian Lieb, a psychiatrist in private practice and former director of the Dana Psychiatric Clinic at Yale-New Haven Hospital, and D. Jablow Hershman, authors of *Bipolar disorder and Creativity*, maintain those with bipolar disorder often have thoughts of death:

Many depressives develop the delusion of being fatally ill. Even in their misery death may be terrifying; to others who passively accept its imminence, it is an appropriate punishment. Some depressives have a conviction, which they cannot explain, that death is near, though the belief vanishes as the mood improves (Hershman & Lieb 1985: 32).

In addition, according to the National Institute of Mental Health, bipolar disorder can result in damaged relationships, poor job performance, and thoughts of death and suicide (National Institute 2014). Those with bipolar disorder typically experience mood swings from mania to depression, or may even experience a 'mixed state' that includes elements of both, and we see evidence of these mood swings in Poe's diary entries as well as in some of his writings.

In addition, Poe's letters from later in his life show his obsession with death and evil stalking him, bringing us back to the idea of bipolar disorder. In a letter to his friend Sarah Helen Whitman, dated November 22, 1848, about a year before his death, Poe writes, 'The terrible excitement under which I suffered, has subsided, and I am as calm as I well could be, remembering what has past. Still the Shadow of Evil haunts me, and, although tranquil, I am unhappy. I dread the Future' (Poe 1948: 405). On November 14, 1848, just a few days before this previous letter and also to Whitman, Poe wrote: 'I am calm & tranquil & but for a strange shadow of coming evil which haunts me I should be happy. That I am not supremely happy, even when I feel your dear love at my heart, terrifies me. What can this mean?' (Poe 1948: 400). In fact, because Poe experienced such different mood states so quickly, he may have suffered from 'rapid-cycling bipolar disorder'.

Poe and bipolar disorder

From childhood's hour I have not been

As others were—I have not seen

As others saw—I could not bring

My passions from a common spring.

From the same source I have not taken

My sorrow; I could not awaken

My heart to joy at the same tone;

And all I lov'd, I lov'd alone.

– From "Alone," written c. age 17 (Poe 1976: 1026)

2. Krutch's book, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Study in Genius*, is a good source for basic facts regarding Poe, although the text is rather opinionated at times against Poe and sources inside the text are not documented well. This quote taken from Krutch's text is opposed in part to a letter Poe wrote to poet James Lowell dated July 2, 1844, in which Poe writes: "I am not ambitious—unless negatively. I, now and then feel stirred up to excel a fool, merely because I hate to let a fool imagine that he may excel me. Beyond this, I feel nothing of ambition" (Poe, *The Letters Vol. I.* 1948, p. 256). However, in his youth Poe writes in a letter dated December 1, 1828: "You will perceive that I speak confidently—but when did ever Ambition exist or Talent prosper without prior conviction of success?" (Poe, *The Letters Vol. I.* 1948, p. 10). Regarding the quote, I suspect it is from Rufus Wilmot Griswold, who succeeded Poe as editor of Graham's magazine. Poe named Griswold his literary executor, not knowing Griswold hated him (Hammond 1998, p. 81). Griswold worked diligently to completely ruin Poe's reputation and was somewhat successful for many years (p. 81).

An examination of Poe's life through his own letters and those of his associates reveals the periods of mania and depression so often associated with the temperament of the 'mad genius'. Kay Redfield Jamison, an American clinical psychologist and author of *Touched with Fire: Manic-Depressive Illness and the Artistic Temperament*, specifies symptoms of mania as: spending excessive amounts of money, extreme impatience, volatility, elevated mood, increased energy levels, rapid speech, fast thinking, inflated self-esteem, and grandiosity of ideas, among others (Jamison 1993: 13). Symptoms of depressive states include apathy, lethargy, hopelessness, sleep disturbance, slowed thinking, impaired memory and concentration, a loss of pleasure in normally pleasurable events, and an inability to make decisions, among others (Jamison 1993: 13). For artists, the manic phase is often characterized by increased productivity, while during the depressive state many artists have no mental energy to create at all. The National Institute of Mental Health maintains that people in the depressive mood stage often experience lethargy or inability to concentrate, while those in the manic mood stage often have an unrealistic belief in their abilities or have ideas that jump from one to the other (National Institute 2014).

Examples of correspondence from Poe and his friends and colleagues illustrate that Poe exhibited a number of these symptoms. Although most people have experienced these symptoms at one time or other, those with bipolar disorder experience them to an extreme, to the point where they can become debilitating. For example, Poe, in a letter to fellow poet James Russell Lowell written July 2, 1844, five years before Poe's death, examines his manic and depressive states:

I can feel for the 'constitutional indolence' of which you complain—for it is one of my own besetting sins. I am excessively slothful, and wonderfully industrious—by fits. There are epochs when any kind of mental exercise is torture, and when nothing yields me pleasure but solitary communion with the 'mountains & the woods'—the 'altars' of Byron. I have thus rambled and dreamed away whole months, and awake, at last, to a sort of mania of composition. Then I scribble all day, and read all night, so long as the disease endures (Poe 1948: 256).

To map the episodes of Poe's possible bipolar disorder symptoms, it is best to begin with an account of his life. Poe was born in Boston on January 19, 1809. His parents were actors, and his father, an alcoholic, deserted Poe's mother and his two siblings when Poe was an infant. Poe's mother died from tuberculosis when Poe was two, and John Allan, a merchant, and his wife, Frances, adopted Poe. When Poe was about five years old, John Allan experienced a sudden decline in his finances, so he and his family, including Poe, journeyed to England, where Poe spent the next five years of his life, not returning from England until he was about 11. Joseph H. Clarke, who ran a school Poe attended for those five years in England, describes Poe's creative abilities:

While the other boys wrote mere mechanical verses, Poe wrote genuine poetry: the boy was a born poet ... He was remarkable for self-respect, without haughtiness. His natural and predominant passion seemed to be an enthusiastic ardor in everything he undertook ... Even in those early years Edgar Poe displayed the germs of that wonderfully rich and splendid imagination which has placed him in the front rank of the purely imaginative poets of the world. His school-boy verses were written con amore, and not as mere tasks ... (Thomas 1987: 47).

Poe's friends, however, describe him as a 'quiet, peaceful youngster' who was not popular with his schoolmates because he was 'too retiring in disposition and singularly unsociable in manner' (Thomas 1987: 57). Unlike the other boys at primary schools in England and the United States, Poe never invited his classmates to spend the night with him, actually implying he may have been an introvert. Writers Thomas and Jackson in *The Poe Log* do not explain why, but it could be about this time that Poe began to bicker with his adoptive father, John Allan. Their relationship plagued Poe almost his entire life. At this time Allan's finances were failing, as was his wife's health; Poe, in a letter to Allan when Poe was in his twenties, writes how much he loved Frances Allan, but that he never felt love for John Allan (Thomas 1987: 112). Some time between Poe's youth and his education as a teenager at the University of Virginia, his relationship with John Allan began to decline. Poe's letters are filled with pleas to Allan for financial assistance, and range in mood from begging to blaming Allan for his financial destitution. Allan seldom replied to Poe's letters requesting funds, although on a few occasions he did send Poe money he needed.³ However, a letter from Allan to Poe's brother, Henry, expresses his dismay at what he perceives as a change in Poe's personality when Poe was about 15 years old:

3. Poe writes to John Allan on January 3, 1830: "Did I, when an infant, solicit [sic] your charity and protection, or was it of your own free will, that you volunteered your services in my behalf? It is well known to respectable individuals in Baltimore, and elsewhere, that my Grandfather (my natural protector at the time you interposed) was wealthy, and that I was his favorite grandchild—But the promises of adoption, and liberal education which you held forth to him in a letter which is now in possession of my family, induced him to resign all care of me into your hands. Under such circumstances, can it be said that I have no right to expect anything at your hands?" (Poe, *The Letters Vol. I* 1948, p. 39). Poe explains the reason he needed money was Allan did not give him enough to cover even the most basic expenses at the university.

He [Poe] has had little else to do for me he does nothing and seems quite miserable, sulky & ill-tempered to all the Family. How we have acted to produce this is beyond my conception—why I have put up so long with his conduct is less wonderful. The boy possesses not a Spark of affection for us not a particle of gratitude for all my care and kindness towards him. I have given him a much superior Education than I received myself ... I fear his associates have led him to adopt a line of thinking & acting very contrary to what he possessed when in England. (Thomas 1987: 61).

This change in personality is another symptom of bipolar disorder, which is believed to surface long before creative artists launch their careers, writes Arnold Ludwig (1995) in his text, *The Price of Greatness: Resolving the Creativity and Madness Controversy* (Ludwig 1995: 5). 'Not only do they display a greater family tendency for mental illness ... but they also already show more emotional problems during childhood and especially during adolescence than members of the nonartistic professions,' Ludwig writes (Ludwig 1995: 5). These ideas are confirmed by the National Institute of Mental Health, which maintains that bipolar disorder usually surfaces in the late teens or early adult years, and half of all diagnosed cases of bipolar disorder begin by age 25 (National Institute 2014).

Even in his youth and teenage years, Poe displayed the 'fiery' temperament Jamison associates with creative genius and bipolar disorder, as evidenced in part by letters by one of his University of Virginia classmates that describe Poe reading one of his works to his friends:

On one occasion Poe read a story of great length to some of his friends who, in a spirit of jest, spoke lightly of its merits, and jokingly told him that his hero's name, 'Gaffy,' occurred too often. His proud spirit would not stand such, as he thought, open rebuke; so in a fit of anger, before his friends could prevent him, he had flung every sheet in a blazing fire, and thus was lost a story of more than ordinary parts, and unlike most of his stories, was intensely amusing, entirely free from his usual somber coloring and sad conclusions merged in a mist of impenetrable gloom (Thomas 1987: 75).

Another classmate writes of Poe:

He was very excitable and restless, at times wayward, melancholic & morose, but again in his better moods frolicsome, full of fun & a most attractive & agreeable companion. To calm & quiet the excessive nervous excitability under which he labored, he would too often put himself under the influence of that 'Invisible Spirit of Wine'" (Thomas 1987: 69).

This thought regarding why Poe turned to alcohol is echoed by Daniel Nettle (2001), a professor of behavioral science at Newcastle University in the United Kingdom, in his text, *Strong Imagination*. He writes: 'Affective patients who use drugs are self-medicating to try to quell the storm within, so that they can get on with their work. That is to say, drugs are used to ease the worst discontents of the personality type, not because they aid creativity in any positive way' (Nettle 2001: 210). Although some writers maintain Poe's alcoholism led to his death, if alcoholism and drug abuse are symptoms of bipolar disorder, in effect the mental illness itself may have been responsible for his death.

After Poe completed one year of study at the University of Virginia, John Allan refused to send Poe back. According to correspondence, Poe had amassed many debts at the university, and many are attributed to gambling, also another symptom associated with bipolar disorder: 'Gambling, often an expression of bipolar disorder, sometimes brings a creative person into poverty. The Russian writer Dostoyevsky, in debt all his life, was a manic-compulsive gambler' (Hershman & Lieb 1998:188). After a brief stint in the military, Poe appealed to John Allan to send him to West Point, and after much begging on Poe's part, Allan agreed. Poe fell into financial difficulties again at West Point, and warned if John Allan would not agree to sign for his release from the academy, he would neglect his duties and receive a court martial. Poe lived up to his word.⁴ However, his time at West Point was not completely wasted – he solicited subscriptions from more than 100 of his fellow cadets to publish his first book of poetry, *Tamerlane and Other Poems*, in 1831 (Thomas 1987: 117).

Poe's later letters illustrate he exhibited classic signs of depression and mania associated with bipolar disorder, and they also allude to his fascination with death. One letter from his earlier life, which Poe wrote in his mid-twenties, sent to an acquaintance on Sept. 11, 1835, expresses his anguished spirit even then:

My feelings at this moment are pitiable indeed. I am suffering under a depression of spirits such as I have never felt before. I have struggled in vain against the influence of this melancholy—You will believe me when I say that I am still miserable in spite of the great improvement in my circumstances. I say you will believe me,

4. Because Allan had signed for Poe to enter West Point, Allan's approval was required for Poe to resign. Allan apparently refused, and Poe followed through with his threat. He writes in a letter to Allan dated January 3, 1830: "From the time of this writing I shall neglect my studies and duties at the institution—if I do not receive your answer in 10 days—I will leave the Point without—for otherwise I should subject myself to dismissal" (Poe, *The Letters Vol. 1*. 1948, p. 42). Poe was court martialed for neglect of duty and dismissed from West Point effective March 6, 1831.

and for this simple reason, that a man who is writing for effect does not write thus. My heart is open to you—if it be worth reading, read it. I am wretched and know not why. Console me—for you can. But let it be quickly—or it will be too late. Write me immediately. Convince me that it is worth one's while—that it is at all necessary to live, and you will prove yourself indeed my friend. Persuade me to do what is right. I do not mean this—I do not mean that you should consider what I now write you a jest—oh, pity me! For I feel that my words are incoherent—but I will recover myself. You will not fail to see that I am suffering under a depression of spirits which will ruin me should it be long continued (Poe 1948: 73).

Another Poe letter, to friend Annie Richmond, Nov. 16, 1848—just one year before his death—states:

You saw, you felt the agony of grief with which I bade you farewell—You remember my expressions of gloom—of a dreadful horrible foreboding of ill—Indeed—indeed it seemed to me that death approached me even then, & that I was involved in the shadow which went before him ... I remember nothing distinctly, from that moment until I found myself in Providence—I went to bed & wept through a long, long, hideous night of despair—When the day broke, I arose & endeavored to quiet my mind by a rapid walk in the cold, keen air—but all would not do—the demon tormented me still. Finally, I procured two ounces of laudanum ... I am so ill—so terribly, hopelessly, ill in body and mind, that I feel I cannot live ... until I subdue this fearful agitation, which if continued, will either destroy my life or, drive me hopelessly mad (Poe 1948: 401).

However, it was during Virginia Poe's slow death due to tuberculosis that Poe suffered perhaps his greatest depression. He writes to his acquaintance George Eleventh on January 4, 1848:

This 'evil' was the greatest which can befall a man. Six years ago, a wife, whom I loved as no man ever loved before, ruptured a blood vessel in singing. Her life was despaired of. I took leave of her forever and underwent all the agonies of her death. She recovered partially and I again hoped. At the end of the year the vessel broke again—I went through precisely the same scene. Again in about a year afterward. The again—again—again—and even once again at varying intervals. Each time I felt all the agonies of her death—and at each accession of the disorder I loved her more dearly & clung to her life with more desperate pertinacity. But I am constitutionally sensitive—nervous in a very unusual degree. I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity. During these fits of absolute unconsciousness I drank, God only knows how often or how much. As a matter of course my enemies referred the insanity to the drink rather than the drink to the insanity. I had indeed, nearly abandoned all hope of a permanent cure when I found one in the death of my wife. This I can and do endure as becomes a man—it was the horrible never-ending oscillation between hope & despair which I could not longer have endured without the total loss of reason. In the death of what was my life, then, I received a new but—oh God! how melancholy an existence (Poe 1948: 356).

Note Poe's reference to the 'death' of what was his life; in essence, he returns to the world a lesser version of his self, one might even posit a 'corpse', much like his characters in his most famous works. In essence, he himself had become the 'return of the living dead'.

In addition to depression, however, Poe's letters exhibit symptoms of grandiosity and mania associated with bipolar disorder. For example, after Poe composed 'Eureka', his treatise on the universe and human existence but certainly not his most popular work, he wrote to acquaintance George Eleventh: 'What I have propounded will (in good time) revolutionize the world of Physical and Metaphysical Science. I say this calmly—but I say it' (Poe 1948: 362). And in the introduction to Eureka, Poe writes: 'I design to speak of the Physical, Metaphysical and Mathematical—of the Material and the Spiritual Universe: – of its Essence, its Origin, its Creation, its Present Condition and its Destiny. I shall be so rash, moreover, as to challenge the conclusions, and thus, in effect, to question the sagacity, of many of the greatest and most justly revered of men' (Poe 1935: 437). Note here the National Institute of Mental Health's idea that those with bipolar disorder often 'have an unrealistic belief in their abilities' (National Institute 2014). In addition, Poe once told a friend, according to biographer Joseph Krutch:

I love fame—I dote on it—I idolize it—I would drink to the very dregs the glorious intoxication; I would have incense arise in my honor from every hill and hamlet, from every town and city on this earth; Fame! Glory!—they are life-giving breath, and living blood; no man lives unless he is famous; how bitterly I belied my nature and my aspirations, when I said that I did not desire fame and that I despised it! (Krutch 1965: 90).³

The return of the living dead in Poe's literary works

And I kept no reckoning of time or place, and the stars of my fate faded from heaven, and therefore the earth grew dark, and its figures passed by me, like flitting shadows, and among them all I beheld only—Morella ... But she died; and with my own hands I bore her to the tomb; and I laughed with a long and bitter laugh as I found no traces of the first, in the charnel where I laid the second, Morella.

– From “Morella,” written c. age 30 (Poe 1975: 671).

We have seen Poe himself as the embodiment of the ‘return of the living dead’ at times in his life, and we see this also evidenced in characters in his literary works. In fact, he is indeed the master of the tale of the return of the living dead. An examination of some of Poe’s tales shows the dead consistently returning to the world of the living, either through the re-animation of their corpses or through their corpses being discovered. First published in 1840, nine years before his death, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (first known as *Tales of the Folio Club*), a volume of 24 short stories, contains many works the literary canon has considered some of Poe’s best work, including ‘Ligeia’, which Poe himself considered his most imaginative and thus ‘best’ work (Hammond 1998: 32). *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* contains perfect illustrations of the ‘return of the living dead’, featuring stories such as ‘Berenice’, ‘Morella’, and ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’. Each of these stories carries a variation of plot with one central recurring element: a female who returns from the dead.

In ‘Morella’, the unnamed narrator, a trope in so many of Poe’s tales, marries Morella, who is obsessed with studying German philosophy. The narrator sees Morella’s physical state declining, and eventually she dies in childbirth after ‘I am dying. But within me is a pledge of that affection ... which thou didst feel for me, Morella. And when my spirit departs shall the child live’ (Poe 1975: 52). The daughter ages and the narrator realizes her striking resemblance to her mother. The narrator decides to have the child baptized to rid her of evil, but the opposite happens: at the ceremony, the priest asks the narrator the child’s name, and the narrator replies, ‘Morella,’ and the child screams, ‘I am here!’ and dies (Poe 1975: 55). Afterward, the narrator buries the child where her mother was buried, only to find no trace of the mother’s body.

Poe’s short story ‘Berenice’ also features the return of the living dead. The narrator Egaeus has periods where he focuses so intently upon things that he loses focus of the outside world. He marries his cousin Berenice, but cannot stop focusing upon her teeth. Egaeus watches as Berenice begins to waste away from an unknown disease; eventually she dies and he buries her. He awakens from an intense state of focus one day, and a servant tells him that Berenice is alive and her grave has been disturbed. Beside Egaeus are 32 blood-stained teeth.

However, perhaps no Poe short story illustrates the author’s fascination with the return of the living dead as well as ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’. Roderick Usher himself is the living dead; he cannot function in society because his senses are all acutely sensitive, even to the point where he can eat only the most tasteless gruels. Roderick Usher is not the only living dead in the House of Usher, however; his twin sister Madeleine suffers from catalepsy and often wanders the house as if dead. When Roderick believes she has died, he and his friend Jonathan bury the young woman in a tomb, and Roderick hears her trying to escape for several days before he admits he has buried her alive. She returns for him, and the story ends with the ‘living dead’ Usher twins being entombed in the House of Usher as the house collapses.

Roderick Usher buries his sister Madeleine alive, only to have her return to secure his demise in ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’. Ligeia, the main character in Poe’s short story of the same name, actually resurrects herself from the dead through her superhuman will:

And again I sunk into visions of Ligeia—and again, (what marvel that I shudder while I write?) again there reached my ears a low sob from the region of the ebony bed. But why shall I minutely detail the unspeakable horrors of that night? Why shall I pause to relate how, time after time, until near the period of the gray dawn, this hideous drama of revivification, more irredeemable death; how each agony wore the aspect of a struggle with some invisible foe; and how each struggle was succeeded by I know not what of wild change in the personal appearance of the corpse? ... And now slowly opened the eyes 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 my lost love—of the lady—of the Lady Ligeia.’ (Poe 1975: 108).

Other stories feature a male character returning from the dead, again ratifying the theory of Bipolar disorder as opposed to the theory that Poe’s focus on the living dead in his stories relates to his mourning the lost female figures in his own life. Poe’s ‘Metzengerstein’, also included in this volume, is the story of a old murdered count who is reborn into the figure of a horse on one of Baron Metzengerstein’s tapestries. In another short story, the Duke de L’Omelette escapes death when the Inspector of Cemeteries sends his corpse to Baal-Zebub, who resurrects him from a coffin to play cards.

In many of Poe’s other poems and tales, the dead come back to life to terrify the narrator, implying that Poe is obsessed with and frightened of death. Poe’s poem ‘Spirits of the Dead’ shows the strong will of the dead to revisit earth: ‘Be silent in that solitude, / Which is not loneliness—for then / The spirits of the dead, who stood / In life before thee, are again / In death around thee, and their will / Shall then o’ershadow thee ... (Poe 1975: 1016). The discovered corpse of the narrator’s wife in ‘The Black Cat’ leads to the narrator awaiting the hangman’s noose. In ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ the narrator hears the heart of his victim still beating, making the narrator betray himself. Poe’s vision of the returning dead is

not homage but terror. As Silverman (1991:75) writes, 'The dead are not simply alive but too alive; the problem is to keep them buried.'

Final death of a genius – bipolar disorder, alcohol, and suicide

Of all American writers' lives, his is the most fascinating. He was the great romantic, the man who burned himself out in a blaze of tragic glory. He paid dearly for immortality, gave his whole life to attain it.

But in his terms it was probably worth the cost.

– Philip Van Doren Stern (Hammond 1998: vii).@@@

There is little dispute that Poe's alcohol use is directly related to several failings during his lifetime and to his death. For example, his friend Thomas White, editor and owner of *The Southern Literary Messenger*, wrote to a friend that Poe had 'forfeited' conditions to which he had agreed to prevent White from asking for his resignation (Thomas 1987: 237), and according to the National Institute of Mental Health, people with bipolar disorder do indeed have difficulty performing job duties at times. R.M.T. Hunter, one of Poe's University of Virginia classmates, wrote another classmate in 1875 (35 years after Poe's death):

Here his (Poe's) habits were bad and as White did not appreciate his literary excellence I had hard work to save him from dismissal before it actually occurred. During a part of the time I was in Richmond, a member of the Legislature, and frequently volunteered to correct the press when pieces were being published with classical quotations. Poe was the only man on White's staff capable of doing this and when occasionally drinking (the habit was not constant) he was incapacitated for work ... He was reckless about money and subject to intoxication, but I was not aware of any other bad habit that he had (Thomas 1987: 237).

Poe's letters contain numerous references to his being sober, an indication he must have been often accused of drinking too much. Exactly how often Poe drank is not obvious from the correspondence. It could be he was a binge drinker, which would explain Poe's actions described by his classmate above. He was certainly engaged in a binge drinking, drug-taking episode right before he was found October 3, 1849, nearly unconscious in the barroom of a polling place (Thomas 1987: 845).

In his *Midnight Dreary: The Mysterious Death of Edgar Allan Poe*, writer John Walsh (1998) describes the circumstances leading to Poe's death. Poe was traveling alone from Richmond, Virginia, to New York City when, 'as if in a puff of smoke Poe disappeared from mortal view for nearly a week' (Walsh 1998: xi). A description of how he was when he was found follows:

His hat—or rather the hat of somebody else, for he had evidently been robbed of his clothing, or cheated in an exchange—was a cheap palm-leaf one, without a band, and soiled; his coat, of commonest alpaca, and evidently 'second-hand'; his pants of gray-mixed cassimere, dingy and badly fitting. He wore neither vest nor neckcloth, if I remember aright, while his shirt was badly crumpled and soiled. [His] face was haggard, not to say bloated, and unwashed, his hair unkempt, and his whole physique repulsive: The intellectual flash of his eye had vanished, or rather had been quenched in the bowl ... He was so utterly stupefied with liquor that I thought it best not to seek recognition or conversation ... So insensible was he that we had to carry him to the carriage as if a corpse (*Readings* 1998: 30).

Again, Poe became the quintessential 'return of the living dead'. After about four days of alternating between quiet periods and raving delirium, Poe died on October 8, 1849 at the age of 40.

Many writers have speculated about how Poe came to be in this condition, but most have deduced his death as the result of simply having drunk too much one last time. The immediate cause of his death was given as 'congestion of the brain' or 'inflammation of the brain' (Walsh 1998: xii). Walsh explains many other writers have fostered guesses about Poe's actual cause of death, ranging from rabies to meningitis, and Walsh claims the brothers of Elmira Shelton, to whom Poe was engaged, started Poe on his last drinking spree.

A look at Poe on his deathbed may aid our discussion. In a letter to Maria Clemm, Poe's mother-in-law, dated November 15, 1849, J.J. Moran, the doctor who attended Poe, writes:

When brought to the Hospital he was unconscious of his condition—who brought him or with whom he had been associating. He remained in this condition from 5 Ock [sic] in the afternoon—the hour of his admission—until 3 next morning. This was the 3rd Oct.

To this state succeeded tremor of of [sic] the limbs and at first a busy but not violent or active, delirium—constant talking—and vacant converse with spectral or imaginary objects on the walls. His face was pale and his whole person drenched in perspiration—We were unable to induce tranquility before the second day after his admission.

Having left orders with the nurses to that effect, I was summoned to his bedside so soon as conscious [sic] supervened, and questioned him in reference to his family—place of residence—relatives & c. But his answers were incoherent & unsatisfactory ... I told him I hoped, that in a few days he would be able to enjoy the society of his friends here ... At this he broke out with much energy, and said the best thing his best friend could do would be to blow out his brains with his pistol—that when he beheld his degradation he was ready to sink in the earth (Moran 1941: 33).

After this, Poe was wracked with violent convulsions and deliriums which continued almost two more days, after which he became quiet as if exhausted from the physical exertion, then he 'gently moved his head' and said, 'Lord help my poor Soul!' and died (Moran 1941:33).

Considered alone in light of Poe's drinking, it is easy to blame his death on his alcohol consumption. However, if we consider possible bipolar disorder and look at evidence from his own letters quoted earlier, we see he experienced periods of manic highs and lows, accompanied by periods of black depression. The words of one of his letters come back to haunt: 'But I am constitutionally sensitive—nervous in a very unusual degree. I became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity. During these fits of absolute unconsciousness I drank, God only knows how often or how much. As a matter of course my enemies referred the insanity to the drink rather than the drink to the insanity' (Poe 1948: 356). Here Poe discussed his dark depression during Virginia Poe's illness, before her death, and we see a pattern begin to develop. Throughout Poe's letters, we see a consistent effort to found his own literary magazine, a dream he was still striving for before he died (he had already lived through the death of this dream once with the folding of the *Broadway Journal*). In addition, apparently there was something amiss with his engagement to Elmira Shelton because some texts say their engagement was official, while others deny it. In a letter dated Sept. 18, 1849, Poe writes to Maria Clem, Virginia's mother: 'Elmira has just got home from the country. I spent last evening with her. I think she loves me more devotedly than any one I ever knew and I cannot help loving her in return. Nothing is as yet definitely settled—' (Poe 1941: 24).

The tremendous stress of securing financing for his own magazine, along with the insecurity of the relationship with the woman he loved, might well have been enough to send Poe into a black state of depression during which he sought alcohol to balance his mood. Jamison (1993) writes of bipolar disorder: 'The natural course of the disease, if left untreated, is to worsen over time (the attacks become more frequent and more severe),' and she specifically mentions Poe in this light (Jamison 1993: 250). Perhaps this last bit of depression was the darkest Poe had experienced.

In one of his earlier letters, Poe maintains his friends blamed his drinking for his illnesses rather than blaming his illness for his drinking. Jamison raises the same sort of question after examining the lives of many bipolar creative geniuses:

And yet all suffered from depressive or manic-depressive illness as well, raising complicated questions about whether the melancholic muse is also a 'thirsty muse'—that is, whether alcohol and other drugs are used by writers and artists to alleviate painful depressions and agitated manic states; whether they are responsible for changes in mood; whether they are used to provoke or recapture freer, less-inhibited states of mind and emotion; or whether some combination of all of these obtains. One Poe biographer wrote: 'We know now that what made Poe write was what made him drink: alcohol and literature were the two safety valves of a mind that eventually tore itself apart' (Jamison 1993: 36).

If Poe's mind indeed 'tore itself apart', this implies that Poe may have actually brought about his own demise, and his death becomes an act of suicide, another act often associated with bipolar creative artists, according to Jamison (Jamison 1993: 36) and the National Institute of Mental Health.

Conclusion: bipolar disorder as a blessing and a curse

The truth is, I am heartily sick of this life and of the nineteenth century in general. I am convinced that every thing is going wrong. Besides, I am anxious to know who will be President in 2045. As soon, therefore, as I shave and swallow a cup of coffee, I shall just step over to Ponnonner's and get embalmed for a couple of hundred years.

From 'Some Words With a Mummy', written c. age 36 (Poe 1975: 548).

If Poe's mood disorder led to his creation of tales featuring the 'return of the dead', there is little doubt this disorder also led to works of genius. Many successful Gothic writers, including Stephen King and Anne Rice, admit to the large influence Poe has had on their works. Jamison (1993) writes: 'Occasionally an exhilarating and powerfully creative force, more often a destructive one, manic-depressive illness gives a touch of fire to many of those who experience it' (Jamison 1993: 240). Poe's living dead, including his own self, continue to haunt us.

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