

Berenice in the Feminist Perspective

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Abstract

Berenice is a short horror tale by Edgar Allan Poe, a well-known 19th-century American writer. The story has been studied in terms of mirror theory, psychoanalysis, and so on, but rarely from the feminist perspective. This paper aims to interpret it from the feminist perspective, in the context of 19th-century American society, in an attempt to better understand the patriarchal society's attitudes towards women, as reflected in the story, and the author's personal view of women. The conclusion is that the patriarchal society adopts an objectifying and inhibiting attitude towards women; while the author, Edgar Allan Poe, being not able to ignore women, both fears and represses women in his particular way.

Keywords

Berenice; Edgar Allan Poe; Feminism; Patriarchal Society; Objectification; Inhibition.

1. Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe was among the leading writers of early American Romanticism. In addition to being a brilliant poet, short story writer and critic, Poe was also an experimental writer, producing the world's first speculative fiction. For poetry, Poe had a theory of literary creation of his own, widely known as the death of a beautiful woman, which was exemplified in his famous poem *Annabel Lee*. This 'poetic' idea is also addressed in a number of Poe's short stories, such as *Ligeia*, *Morena* and *Berenice*. The women in these works are all impressive, with their beautiful appearances and excellent qualities, such as Morena's extraordinary intellect, Ligeia's erudition, and Berenice's vivacity.

Berenice tells the story in which the hero, Egaeus, kills his cousin Berenice. It is full of the usual horror elements of Poe's stories: a grand but gloomy old mansion, a family with a genetic disease, a protagonist afflicted by mental illness and a beautiful woman who will eventually die a horrible death. The protagonist of this tale grows up in the study where his mother dies. His cousin, with whom he grows up, has a completely different experience: she is lively and cheerful, carefree, while the hero's life is more depressing and he spends his days only with books. Soon after, Berenice suffers from an illness that takes away her beauty, and Egaeus suffers from paranoia. After their betrothal, both of them become more and more ill. Finally, mistakenly believing his cousin to be dead, Egaeus buries her alive and knocks out all her teeth.

2. The Social Background

Since the US came onto the stage of history, it has been the scene of remarkable productions for centuries. Social upheavals like the War of Independence, the abolitionist movement and the Civil War had all influenced American history.

This short horror tale was created in the first half of the nineteenth century, where the social life seemed to be settling down, yet it lacked a general sense of direction, and anxiety and a desperate need for diversion ran rampant. Besides, the trend of American feminist movement naturally and unconsciously emerged in the nineteenth century, and the challenge it brought to

the patriarchal society had more or less influenced some works in this period. *Berenice* is an example.

3. The Role of Berenice: Object and the Other

Throughout the full text, Berenice is not so much a main character as an object observed by the hero. This short story is narrated by the male protagonist in the first person. Although the story is named after Berenice, she makes only a few appearances, and she never expresses her own opinion; all that is there at any one time is Egaeus's opinion and assessment of her. Most of the text is a monologue by the male protagonist: his own life, his being afflicted by a mental illness. The narrator describes and examines women from a male perspective; women are objects to be admired and evaluated, and the value of women, the meaning of their existence, is determined by men. This sets the tone for the whole text: women are a beautiful thing, a nebulous ghost, with no real sense of existence, and the image of women is an observation and extrapolation of the male narrator, rich in the subjective conjecture of the latter.

This narrative is partly a reflection of the lack of female voice and their position as the other in the patriarchal society: women's inner virtues are rarely valued by the society, their minds are not important, and their appearances are the focus of the society's attention. Like many of Poe's other fictional women, Berenice has a charming appearance. And when she gets ill, what Egaeus concerns is that her beauty is no longer there. As for their relationship, Egaeus also confesses that he never loves her as a concrete, living person, but rather studies her more as an abstract experimental object. This maps the position of "the other" of women in the patriarchal society, which assigns them the task of playing the role of a perfect and delicate object: even though Berenice's appearance is destroyed by the disease, she still has her flawless white teeth.

Besides, in the story, Egaeus mentions that he proposes to Berenice because the latter has long been in love with him. The oddity that such a vivacious and beautiful woman would fall in love with a gloomy, frail and sickly man can hardly be unrelated to the author's status as a man. In a society where the two genders are not equal, men dominate marriage and the family and women are "the other" to be chosen. Men, who have a vested interest in this, are indifferent to this and only reinforce this inequality in various ways, such as by creating literary works with this idea in mind, in order to strengthen their own dominant position.

4. The Revolt of Berenice: Symbol of Fear and Suppression

In the beginning, Berenice is not only beautiful, she is also quite healthy. While Egaeus spends his days in the study of the old mansion, Berenice strolls through nature. She is lively, carefree and transcendent, and presents a different image from the traditional women of her time: a new woman of strength, ahead of her time and somewhat free from old ideas. The portrayal of this new woman was influenced to some extent by the rise of the feminist movement in the American society at the time.

But Egaeus can't stand her excellence, "during the brightest days of her unparalleled beauty, mostly surely I had never loved her". He tries to deprive her of her vitality, treating her as an "abstraction" rather than a human being equal to himself. He has a derogatory attitude towards her existence and qualities. The objectification of women by men in the patriarchal society can be clearly seen here.

Berenice may have sensed this and rebels against Egaeus for his ignorance of her, even in the midst of her illness. She comes into the dimly-lit study on a winter afternoon and presses Egaeus with her emaciation. The disease has taken away her beauty, and she gives Egaeus a strange smile and shows a row of white teeth, which contrasts with her haggard appearance

and casts a horrible shadow on the hero's mind. This is the trigger for the paranoid Egaeus to kill Berenice and knock her teeth out.

This fear belongs not only to the narrator of the story, but also to the author Edgar Allan Poe. As to the woman who has the courage to fight back and to intimidate the man she loves, instead of giving her a positive denouement, Edgar Allan Poe adopts the usual inhibiting and oppressive attitude towards women in the patriarchal society. He destroys all the good he has given to her, and makes the protagonist kill her cruelly. He notices the uncontrollable power these women could bring, and out of fear, he brutally snuffs them out. This shows the fear and suppression that Edgar Allan Poe, a male writer, has of such a new woman.

5. The Death of Berenice: Sacrifice and Indictment

Like so many beautiful women in Poe's work, Berenice ends up dead. And it is not a natural death that she experiences, but one in which she is buried alive and has her teeth knocked out by the hero. Ostensibly, Berenice's teeth provoke an attack of paranoia in Egaeus, causing him to kill her, but in fact she dies because of the male's fear and suppression of the beautiful lady. Berenice is a victim of the traditional culture of male supremacy in the patriarchal society. Her knocked-out teeth are a symbolic trophy acquired by men. The white, hard teeth symbolize the power that women are revealing in the society, a power that causes men to become uneasy. Therefore, they try to take such power away. In the end, after his murder of Berenice, Egaeus hears "the shrill and piercing shriek of a female voice", a voice that is undoubtedly Berenice's last struggle. It is her accusation and protest against the injustice and oppression of the patriarchal society.

The ending of Berenice reflects the author's anxiety. Poe had a number of relationships with several learned and talented women which ended in failure. At the same time, there was a rising feminist movement in the society at the time, and such an emerging cause naturally confronted traditional social attitudes. The failed relationships, the challenge to traditional values and the old order, led Poe to reveal in his stories his fear of intellectual women and his depreciation of them. Yet Poe is inevitably attracted to these outstanding women, portraying some of them in his stories. At the beginning of this story, Berenice is healthy and happy, in contrast to the dour and frail hero; and she will take the initiative and intimidate the hero rather than just be judged. In this particular situation, Berenice is doomed to her failure and death.

6. Conclusion

To sum up, Berenice's fate embodies the attitude of the patriarchal society towards women: denying them the right of speech and objectifying them as delicate objects; when women with a defiant spirit emerge, the male chauvinists will unquestionably develop fear and worry, and then take derogatory and repressive measures against these women in an attempt to stifle their potential for revolt. As to Poe's attitude, it can be concluded that although he treats women negatively, while unable to ignore women's growth and power, he vividly creates some exceptional and impressive women in his stories.

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