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Developing a Feminist Pedagogy

A Look at Intersectionality Theory and
Poe's Women

Riley Haacke

The discussion of pedagogy has recently been at the forefront of Poe criticism, raising the question: how should we teach Poe? In the face of such a question, another begs to be asked in return: why should we teach Poe? American author, feminist, and social activist bell hooks said that students of literature often suffer “from a crisis of meaning, unsure about what has value in life” (qtd. in Bracher 76). Similarly, literary critic Mark Bracher stated that “[Students] come with implicit (and sometimes explicit) questions such as: . . . how can I as an individual, or we as a group reduce our suffering and destructiveness?” (128). In response to such existential inquiry, literary pedagogies are seeking to address the social issues that plague our society today in an attempt to help formulate a value-based education.

In the words of Jacqueline Glasgow: “How are we to nurture the prized differences in race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and language? We must create for students democratic and critical spaces that foster meaningful and transformative learning” (54). Within the classroom, literature provides the opportunity and the context for exploring today’s critical issues. There are copious literary discourses

concerning Poe and his representations of race, mental health, and philosophy (Magistrale and Weinstock). However, despite the recent surge of popularity regarding feminist criticism, there has been little to no discussion on how to teach Poe's female characters. Considering Poe's pervasiveness on a global scale, the way we teach Poe can have a profound impact on how we talk about gender.

An intersectional look at Poe's representations of women and femininity lays a solid foundation for a feminist pedagogy. By providing a more holistic understanding of gender and victimization, our literary studies are more apt to address the social questions of who, why, and how women are treated and victimized. The influence of Edgar Allan Poe and his literary works permeates many diverse facets of our society, and Poe maintains a global presence in popular culture and literary studies today. Therefore, by developing a feminist pedagogy on Poe that emphasizes the diversity and individuality of women and their oppression, we can begin to cultivate a society that deviates from an inquiry fixating solely on the *what* and begins to explicate the *why*.

Intersectionality theory, the idea that social identities overlap and intersect with one another to form systems of oppression, discrimination, and domination, first emerged in the 1980s with the intention of combating gendered and racial discrimination as well as other forms of social oppression. Since its origin, it has been acknowledged as a "leading feminist paradigm" (Nash 3). The theory seeks to address the variation and diversity of victims and resists the reading of a universal victim or, in this instance, a universal woman. Instead, "the intersectional project centers the experiences of subjects whose voices have been ignored" (2). Intersectionality highlights the individual and his or her unique circumstances as opposed to asserting a representational and faceless victim of hegemonic patriarchy or monoculture. Although the theory does not propose a specific way of approaching an intersectional interpretation, the basic premise holds that critics cannot rely on assumptions or blanket interpretations. Instead, critics need to actively acknowledge the reality of intersecting social identities and their relationship to oppression, which requires assessing individual cases of oppression and discrimination.

Poe studies, in all its gendered complexity, offers a prime opportunity for establishing an intersectional feminist pedagogy. Historically, feminist criticism on Poe is riddled with contradictions. However, these contradictions and varying perspectives illuminate the complexity and diversity of Poe's women, complementing an intersectional look at primary Poe sources. The rich diversity in and out of Poe's literary works provides a more holistic understanding of women's issues in Poe's era and highlights how we understand those same issues today. Nevertheless, while there has been a plethora of feminist scholarship on Poe, critics have focused their attention on explicating Poe's attitude towards women. Instead of trying to understand the role of women within the text, critics have been overly concerned with unraveling the mystery of Poe himself and his relationship to women. Scholars have linked his tumultuous history with the women in his life to the dead women in his texts and labeled him a misogynist. However, in recent years scholars have argued that such a reading has undergone a "political revolution." In essence, after decades of critics viewing Poe as a misogynist, Poe has joined "the vanguard of male feminists" (qtd. in Kot 388). Scholars claim that the characters of Morella, Ligeia, and Madeline Usher exemplify feminine strength and prowess in the face of the patriarchy. However, it may be more beneficial simply to look at Poe feminist criticism as a whole instead of trying to identify a single argument as either true or false. The contradicting schools of criticism reflect the complexity of the characters themselves and can therefore serve as a springboard for a feminist pedagogy: because Poe is seen as both a feminist and a misogynist, the two schools of thought allow for ample opportunity to engage in a values-based discussion concerning how we view victimization and how we perpetuate it in our society.

Historical feminist criticism lacks an expansive look on Poe's treatment of women beyond labeling them as dead and beautiful victims. Rather, it has been overshadowed by Poe's own assertions made in "The Philosophy of Composition": that the most poetic topic in the world is the death of a beautiful woman. The criticism, in general, maintains this broad explanation regardless of the extensive variation of Poe's female characters. "Poe the feminist" and "Poe the misogynist" are both worthwhile arguments, and just as scholarship has seen the revolution of Poe from misogynist to feminist, it may yet expand its open-mindedness

further to embrace the intersectionality of Poe. This perspective resists a single reading or truth, but rather explores the complexity and diversity of each text. An intersectional perspective on Poe's women can fill the gap within feminist criticism and can potentially help cultivate a needed pedagogy that focuses on why women are treated as they are in the texts as opposed to merely what is harming them.

There is a great deal of diversity in Poe's female figures—characters which typically fall under the general title of “the dead beautiful woman.” However, accepting such a broad interpretation hinders our conversations about gender and gender relations. In congruence with identifying heuristic elements in Poe's writings, a look at Poe's intersectionality reveals the various driving influences behind institutionalized sexism. While “women often experience horrible deaths in Edgar Allan Poe's tales” from “premature burial, mutilation, poisoning, [and] psychic cannibalization,” critics rarely look for an explanation beyond Poe's need for melancholic effect (Kot 388). Nevertheless, the range of attitudes expressed by the male protagonist to the woman is much more varied. For example, Morella is despised for her mind, Ligeia for her power. The wife in “The Oval Portrait” is killed for her beauty, Marie in “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” for getting pregnant, Bernice and Madeline Usher for their weakness and frailty. In “The Black Cat,” the wife is seen as mere collateral. By lumping all the distinct female characters into the categories of “woman” and “victim,” we lose the opportunity to engage in a discussion of gender relations. There is an apparent richness and diversity in the interactions between the masculine and the feminine characters which has been largely ignored throughout Poe studies. A pedagogy that emphasizes the various circumstances Poe's women face can influence the way we teach gender by changing the conversations we have about victims and their struggle with silence and oppression.

While there are many examples of female oppression throughout Poe's tales, “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” is particularly interesting in terms of developing a feminist pedagogy. Because the tale mirrors the true story of Mary Rogers, a woman who died from a botched abortion, it testifies to the applicability of value-based literary studies. The ill-performed abortion in “Marie Rogêt” reflects society's disdain for female promiscuity; Miss Rogêt feels compelled to risk her life getting an abortion as opposed to bearing the child along with the associated social

consequences. This particular tale is useful to a conversation centered on pedagogy because it accurately mirrors reality, both then and now. Today, 60,000 women die from unsafe abortions each year (Haddad 1). Dialogue about sexual abuse and rape continually places women at blame for sexual violence through phrases such as “she was asking for it,” “she looked older,” and “she shouldn’t have been wearing that,” which have become commonplace in our vernacular. Like Marie Rogêt, the women of today face the brunt of societal attitudes about sexual promiscuity through misplaced judgement and blame. The attitudes that drove women in the 1800s toward abortion, the shame and fear of being ostracized and alienated from their communities, reflect similar oppressive attitudes that plague women today. When asked why they chose abortion over having a baby, many women felt that having children would bar them from participating in the workforce or school. Perhaps more poignantly, younger women felt pressured by their parents to have an abortion or feared that someone would discover that they had sex (Torres 169). Despite the time difference between Poe and the present, there are similar social pressures that drive the forms of oppression females experience today.

Other Poe stories that are not based on true accounts have the same capacity for modern-day application. Stigma, stereotypes, power, and objectification are common factors behind the deaths of certain women. While the actual violence occurs because they are women, how each woman is treated depends on other social conditions and circumstances. Madeline Usher and Berenice both experience premature burial after being ostracized by a family member due to their failing health. Egaeus becomes fixated on Berenice’s decaying teeth, designating them “the teeth” and not “her teeth,” thus objectifying Berenice as an illness and stripping away her humanity. Similarly, Roderick Usher is filled with dread when Madeline comes near him. Any feeling of remorse or sympathy for his sister is now overshadowed by a fear of contamination and disease. Madeline and Berenice are thus defined by their illnesses. They are represented as objects to be acted upon rather than people who act. Nevertheless, their deaths contrast with the death of Morella and the wife in “The Black Cat” whose relationships with their husbands reveal more about their deaths than their physical health does. In “Morella” the narrator remarks, “Indeed the time had arrived when my wife’s society oppressed me like a spell...shall I then say that I longed with an earnest

and consuming desire for the moment of Morella's decease?" (Poe 2:227). In "The Black Cat" the narrator has a greater regard for the cat, Pluto, than for his wife: "I suffered myself to use intemperate language to my wife. At length, I even offered her personal violence...for Pluto, however, I still retained sufficient regard to restrain me from maltreating him" (Poe 1:851). And although, as readers, we know that he eventually kills Pluto, we also know that he murders his wife during his second attempt on Pluto's life and considers his wife a mere "interference" (1:856).

However, Poe's women are not victims of violence only. While themes of violence do permeate many of Poe's works in regard to women, women also experience social and psychological harm. "Morella," "Ligeia," and "The Royal Lady" exemplify the inequality of power dynamics between men and women. Poe's character Trippetta, from "Hop-Frog," faces discrimination that goes beyond sex as Poe critiques caste distinctions as well. Similarly, Poe's poems "Annabel Lee" and "The Raven" as well as his poetic defense "The Philosophy of Composition" do not harm women within the texts themselves but reflect the unattainable standard imposed on women by the narrator's fixating on the dead object of their affection. The men in these poems place the feminine ideal on a pedestal, resulting in obsession and infatuation. The women present across Poe's literary works represent a fall from the male gaze pedestal; women who experience sickness, ambition, pregnancy, or beauty are routinely killed for not living up to the ideal, and the reasons for that violence are just as telling as the violence itself. A study on the intersecting social identities of female characters would reveal the intricacy of male-on-female oppression which extends past physical harm, an area that has routinely been eclipsed by the presence of fatal violence.

A comparative analysis of the individual representations of Poe's feminine characters reveals the depth of sexism that moves beyond biology. Cynthia S. Jordan argues that throughout Poe's career he sought to recover the "second story;" she "pinpoints three phases of Poe's career ranging from the tales that 'bear women's names' to the later tales of detection through which Poe worked toward a fictional form that would allow him to 'reject one-sided male-authored fictions'" (qtd in Kot 394). Poe critics thus recognize an evolution in Poe's stories from objectifying women to empowering them. However, it is this very breadth of representation that inspires an intersectional feminist pedagogy. A feminist study of Poe can

inspire conversation about gender relations and teach students about the various forms of female oppression as well as female strength. In Poe studies, the female characters do not have to be reduced to Poe's own limiting interpretation of the dead and the beautiful, but rather they can be used to understand and explicate the female's role in the past, the present, and the future.

While there is an obvious historical divide between the context of Poe's stories and the present, women's issues continue to be prevalent and the influences that perpetuate violence against women remain today. Although Poe's stories are a reflection of his time, they also serve as a history of the present. During the years of 2001 and 2012, an estimated 11,766 American women were killed by a domestic partner—twice the number of American war casualties during the same period (Vagianos). An estimated 20 million American women suffer from eating disorders because of body dysmorphia and unrealistic standards of beauty—standards which are commonly represented in art (ANAD). Women continue to be vastly underrepresented in state governments—to date, there have only been fifty female heads of state. Women die in childbirth while others risk their lives aborting their babies. In essence, the conversations we can have about Poe and women can influence the conversations we need to have about women, a discourse that attempts to explicate the various forms of victimization instead of grouping them under a single generic title. Therefore, Poe studies can start to address values that are critical to our social conversations today. Concerning a value-based education model, R.S. Peters stated:

Education implies that something worthwhile has been intentionally transmitted in a morally acceptable manner. It would be a logical contradiction to say that a man had been educated but that he had in no way changed for the better, or that in educating his son a man was attempting nothing that was worthwhile. (qtd. in Carbone 25)

Establishing a value-based education is oft considered a controversial subject, threatening the balance between neutrality and ethics. Nevertheless, a feminist pedagogy that teaches an intersectional perspective of Poe's women and the criticism of these women would not

attempt to assert truth but rather to extend the conversation beyond the broad generic answers. It would cultivate critical thinking about an issue that remains just as prevalent a social issue now as it was in Poe's day.

A feminist pedagogy has the potential to transcend not only time, but geographical distance as well. A study conducted by Margaret Lee Zoreda in Mexico found that when non-English majors were surveyed, Edgar Allan Poe was the 3rd most popular author to be read among that demographic. In "Teaching Poe as Popular Culture in Mexico," Zoreda explains how she used the popularity of Poe to her benefit to teach a literary course centered on values. Edgar Allan Poe has further demonstrated a global influence—Akutagawa, Baudelaire, and Machado de Assis are foreign examples of how Poe and his treatment of women have influenced various literary traditions beyond America. Poe's global popularity presents the need for establishing a feminist pedagogy because it requires an alteration of an already accepted literary discipline. People around the world are already reading Poe. And although Zoreda's course was designed to teach English language skills, it utilized Poe's pre-existing popularity in Mexico to benefit the students beyond the intent of the text. Therefore, by appropriating a literary tradition that already has the influence and the popularity that Poe does, we can establish a value-based pedagogy that has the potential to make a difference. By finally giving a voice to Poe's women, we can be prepared to provide students with a critical opportunity to talk about why gender issues matter.

Women do not hold a monopoly on oppression, but men do exemplify a monopoly on voice—"males in these tales apply their own experiences to explain the crimes against women" (Kot 395). The women throughout the tales are denied a voice as the men claim each female voice in addition to their own. By respecting each woman in Poe's tales as autonomous and unique—by respecting the intersectionality of Poe's female characters—conversations about Poe's women can shift from being about *what* women are to *why* they are treated as they are. Therefore, developing a feminist pedagogy for Poe studies could be instrumental in addressing present-day inequality and discrimination. By tapping into Poe's universal popularity and his breadth of diverse female characters, we can begin to alter the conversations we have about the literature we read as well as the critical conversations we have about our own realities.

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