

**John Doe**  
**English 201**  
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### **Edgar Alien Poe and Death**

Many of Edgar Alien Poe's stories center around death, and in Judith Pike's article, "Poe and the revenge of the exquisite corpse," she author delves into the cultural aspects of death that influenced Poe. Around 1840 preservation of the dead, through both photography and a mortician's craft, was creating a sense of life beyond death. Morticians even held competitions to see who could give a cadaver the most life after it had been dead for sixty days. When discussing "The Oval Portrait," Pike notes that it is, "the painter's desire to animate the inanimate and to create his own fetish of the exquisite corpse through art has gone awry." The dead cannot be too lifelike.

Premature burial was a constant fear in the people's minds at this time, and in Poe's works, the undead are usually representatives of those who have been buried in such a fashion. She notes that male and female ghosts are represented in different ways and possess different designs and intentions for their return. The male is typically treated in a more humorous way as in "Loss of Breath" and "Some Words with a Mummy," and male-centered stories do not leave the reader with a fear of death. In the former, Mr. Lackobreath was buried alive while he had "lost his breath and speech," and the story continues to follow his comical adventure back to the

realm of the living. The name of the main character is humorous in itself and serves to lighten the mood of what could be a haunting story.

In contrast, "Poe's heroines do not escape from their encryption quite so unscathed as do the heroes... [they] persist beyond the grave with an unconditional and impossible demand..." The drive that Poe's females possess is seen as terrifying, and they are portrayed as corpses haunting the living as in "Berenice." The teeth of this woman become the fixation of Egaeus; he finds this to be the most attractive aspect of Berenice because they were the one part of the corpse that was alive. By the end of the story, Egaeus is terrified of the teeth because he now sees them as the "specter of the living dead." The presence of the females in Poe's stories are much more frightening because their demands remain unknown whereas the demands of males are clearly voiced. This fear on behalf of the living translated into a more respectful treatment of mourning.

I found this article to be rather difficult to read and hard to get through, but much of the content within its pages was interesting. Pike's analysis of the female characters in Poe's works, such as Berenice and Madeleine Usher, were good examples of describing the terrifying undead. I liked how she began and ended with a historical context that portrayed the real world view of death and mourning, but I wish she had gone more into why people had this fear to begin with. There were some redeeming qualities to this article, but it would have been much better if Pike had restricted

some of her long explanations to a simple paragraph. Finally, the analysis of the undead female versus male depictions in Poe's stories makes this article interesting and worth reading.

Pike, Judith E. "Poe and the Revenge of the Exquisite Corpse." *Studies in American Fiction* (Autumn 1998): 171(1)