**John Doe**

**English 201**

**Dr. Bruce R. Magee**

**Edgar Alien Poe and Death**

Many of Edgar Alien Poe’s stories center around death, and in Iudith 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 avvry." 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 sen/es

to lighten the mood of what could be a haunting story.

ln contrast, "Poe‘s heroines do not escape from their encryptment 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 terrih/ing,

and they are portrayed as corpses haunting the living as in "Berenice." The teeth of

this vvoman 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 novv 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

are males are clearly voiced. This fear on behalf of the living translated into a more

respectful treatment of mourning.

l found this article to be rather difficult to read and hard to get through, but

much of the content vvithin 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 terrih/ing undead. l liked hovv she began and ended with a historical

context that portrayed the real vvorld vievv of death and mourning, but l vvish she had

gone more into vvhy people had this fear to begin vvith. 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, Iudith E. "Poe and the Revenge of the Exquisite Corpse." *Studies in American Fiction* (Autumn 1998): 171-181.