



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 24 | Spring 2017

Title	Bodies Out of Place: Poe, Premature Burial, and The Uncanny
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Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	24
Issue Date	Spring 2017
Publication Date	29/05/2017
Editors	Anahit Behrooz and Vicki Madden

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Bodies Out of Place: Poe, Premature Burial, and the Uncanny

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“Bodies Out of Place” discusses some of the ways Edgar Allan Poe confronted the taboos or boundaries associated with dying bodies. In tales such as “The Premature Burial,” “Ligeia,” and “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar,” Poe blurred the boundaries between life and death not only to show how strange they are but also to suggest how little human beings understand about the problem of death. Poe complicates this matter by suggesting that, even though some bodies may show all appearances of death, they remain very much alive. Even more frightening, Poe also suggests that some dead bodies may even somehow force their way back to life. Ultimately, Poe’s bodies resist easy classification because they are neither completely alive nor completely dead.

Authors should never agree to write about taboos; either they will protest too much against them or they will all too zealously proclaim in their favor. We should all know by now that some taboos are fixed, others flexible, and still others observed only in the breach. Even though every taboo has been violated throughout the millennia, most human beings nevertheless consider that prohibitions against incest, cannibalism, and murder should remain strictly observed. My purpose is not to challenge those taboos, nor to suggest which other taboos belong to what categories; the other authors in this issue will address those problems in more detail. Instead, I wish to provide a brief thematic discussion of the ways Edgar Allan Poe explored taboos related to death and the body by repeatedly blurring the boundaries between life and death either in tales involving premature burial or, similarly, in tales where the (seemingly) dead return or the (seemingly) living claim to be dead. Although my comments will be brief and preliminary, my overall design is to suggest that narratives like Poe’s explore not only the fraught boundaries between life and death, but also shed light on the strange and uncanny nature of such boundaries generally.

Taboos imply permanent boundaries—thus far and no further. And yet, as Mary Douglas points out, concepts of system, order and stability (including taboos), vary widely across cultures. In her words, “there is no such thing as absolute dirt: it exists in the eye of the beholder” (2). Dirt, or any kind of uncleanness, is simply “matter out of place,” something in need of organization and purpose (50). Cultures create order, purpose, and stability; they classify and arrange; they also forbid, punish, and destroy. But not everything falls neatly into place. Some boundaries fall; some shift; and some blur or flicker, becoming uncanny. When order and stability appear to rest on fragile and unsteady foundations, uncanniness prevails. As Nicholas Royle puts it, “the uncanny has to do with a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality” (2). Such strangeness is the essence of the uncanny. It is not that everything is illusory or artificial, just that one experiences a sense that things are not always what they seem, that there is “a peculiar commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar” (1). Because boundaries may become uncanny, so can the taboos they govern.

Premature burial is uncanny because it violates normative boundaries between life and death; it treats living persons as corpses, subjecting them to the procedures and practices accompanying burial. It also raises significant questions about how human beings perceive experience and how they make sense of their fears and fantasies. Freud suggested, “the idea of being buried alive by mistake is the most uncanny thing of all. And yet psychoanalysis has taught us that this terrifying phantasy is only a transformation of another phantasy which had originally nothing terrifying about it at all, but was qualified by a certain lasciviousness—the phantasy of intra-uterine existence” (220). In this sense, premature burial is uncanny because it transforms human longings for safety and warmth of life into its mirror image—a trap from which there is no obvious means of escape. According to Nicholas Royle, Freud’s commentary suggests a reversal of the way things are, as though life can move “from Z to A, from death to birth, from the imminence of death to the timeless pleasure of womb-life, from terror to lasciviousness, from death to the mother” (142). Premature burial, in Freud’s interpretation, is uncanny precisely because it evokes safety at the point of biggest danger. In that sense, it also evokes the repression of death by reassuring victims that mother is there the whole time. But coffins do not reassure and death cannot be denied. According to Ernest Becker, “The irony of man’s condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive” (66). Premature burial plays to different aspects of this irony both by blurring the lines between life and death and by reinforcing the fear of dying alone and helpless, trapped in a coffin.

Of all the canonical authors, Edgar Allan Poe is probably the best known for his tales that explore variations on premature burial and its potential consequences on the human psyche. Part of Poe’s genius was to amplify human fears of premature burial and to make them seem more plausible than they really are. This ability allowed Poe not only to challenge conventions but also to explore the human psyche in ways that remain powerful. As Kenneth Silverman writes, “Poe did not merely imitate the popular Gothic or ‘German’ tales. He enriched their texture, managing to preserve the narrative drive of some central action while embroidering the whole with philosophical speculation and lore that deepen the mood of dire awe, and with sense details that lend the improbably events a feeling of reality” (112-113). Rather than simply playing to readers’ phobias, Poe asked them to consider not only what it would be like to be trapped in a morgue or a crypt—helpless, alone, and afraid—but also what really lies beneath those fears of confinement, claustrophobia, and death. .

In “The Premature Burial,” for example, Poe reflects explicitly on the problem through a series of specific case studies tied up within an overarching narrative. In one instance, the narrator describes an unfortunate woman who appeared to be dead by all accounts: “No one suspected, indeed, or had reason to suspect, that she was not actually dead. She presented all the ordinary appearances of death” (357). To some observers, the woman even showed some signs of decomposition. After a rushed funeral, the woman was placed in the family vault, there to rest in peace. But she was not really dead. When she awoke, she attempted to escape but died before she could succeed, possibly through the “sheer terror” of her circumstances (358). The mistake was discovered years later, much to everyone’s shock.

After sharing other accounts of the problem, Poe's narrator reflects on his own fears, noting that he also suffers from catalepsy and that he periodically falls into an unconscious state that, not surprisingly, may easily be mistaken for death. Terrified that he might experience premature burial, he does everything he can to prevent this from happening. Despite his careful planning, he wakes up one night trapped in a small—and strange—space and assumes that he has been buried alive. As he begins to panic, he realizes that he is not in the ground but that he is in the berth of a sloop, having fallen asleep while waiting out a storm. Relieved that he was not buried alive, the narrator claims that he no longer experienced the same fears and that he had no more interest in morbid or frightening tales. He also claims that he “became a new man, and lived a man's life” from that moment forward by travelling, exercising vigorously, and experiencing new ideas (367). Although his newfound optimism is heartening, it also skirts over the problem by suggesting that death itself is no longer a concern. Instead of really addressing his fears of death, the narrator has simply replaced them with the fantasy that “a man's life” will somehow make it go away (367).

In “Ligeia,” Poe explores similar questions, only this time he discards the fear of premature burial in favor of a philosophical optimism that death may be overcome with the right blend of intensity, desire, and will. And yet, this story of a man whose first wife comes back from the dead through the corpse of his second wife is a psychologically complex and frightening meditation on the boundary between life and death and how human beings yearn to break it down. Poe opens “Ligeia” with an epigraph purported to be from Joseph Glanvill that suggests “God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness” and that human beings are kept from such power only because their wills are not strong enough (159). Influenced by that passage, Ligeia hopes to exercise her will in such a way that she can return from the dead. The unnamed narrator explains that Ligeia was so determined to overcome death that “words are impotent to convey any just idea of the fierceness of resistance with which she wrestled with the Shadow” (164). Ligeia's wrestle was not an ordinary human fear; instead, it was a literal struggle, one she believed she could overcome with enough strength, intelligence, and power of will. In the narrator's words, Ligeia exhibits great “*intensity* in thought, action, or speech” (163). Could such intensity break the bands of death?

Not surprisingly, Ligeia dies and the narrator eventually marries the Lady Rowena. Unhappy with his new bride, the narrator begins dwelling obsessively on memories of Ligeia, sometimes while lost in an opium-induced reverie. When Rowena surprisingly gets “attacked with a sudden illness,” she dies and the narrator keeps a vigil by her body, partly because he begins to experience uncanny noises and the faintest sense of life from the corpse. In a series of striking passages, Poe describes a “hideous drama of revivication,” one that cycles between moments of life and moments of death, as if the corpse were hanging on to death while also betraying signs of life. As the fight goes on, the corpse shows greater signs of life until Rowena, apparently, returns to life. In the narrator's words: “The corpse, I repeat, stirred, and now more vigorously than before. The hues of life flushed up with unwonted energy into the countenance—the limbs relaxed—and, save that the eyelids were yet pressed heavily together, and that the bandages and draperies of the grave still imparted their charnel character to the figure, I might have dreamed that Rowena had indeed shaken off, utterly, the fetters of Death” (172). Though shocked by this turn of events, things only get worse as the narrator realizes that the body no longer resembles

Rowena but is much more suggestive of Ligeia herself. The story ends with the narrator's frightened and stuttering recognition that Ligeia, impossibly, has returned through Rowena's body: "Here then, at least,...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!" (173). With those words, the story ends, leaving readers wondering what really happened. Did Ligeia actually return from the dead—and through the body of another woman? Or was the narrator lost in an opium-induced fantasy? Poe never answers those questions—and rightly so. Like "The Premature Burial," "Ligeia" plays along the border of death in ways that are fascinating, impossible, and uncanny.

When Poe isn't bringing bodies back from death, he traps them in makeshift tombs as in "The Fall of the House of Usher" or "The Cask of the Amontillado." In "The Tell-Tale Heart," Poe gives the theme a wicked twist by granting a dismembered corpse a relentlessly beating heart. But one of his most surprising and uncanny crosses between life and death occurs in "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," a story that not only played on general fears of death but also blurred the lines between fact and fiction in ways that fooled some readers into believing it was a transcript of real events. In the story, M. Valdemar agrees to undergo mesmerism just at the point of death, thereby allowing researchers to study the experience as directly as possible. As these men interact with Valdemar's body—he is able to answer basic questions through vibrating his tongue—his strange and uncanny voice eventually utters an impossible and chilling sentence: "*I am dead*" (413). Although no human being can utter those words sincerely without being false, Poe's Valdemar goes on to shout "dead! dead!" all while rotting away into "a mass of loathsome—of detestable putrescence" (414). If Valdemar is truly dead, what does it mean for him to announce himself as such—and through the medium of a rapidly decaying body?

Bodies, especially liminal ones, may elicit anxiety, fear, and disgust even though they belong to human experience and typically receive some form of specific, culturally recognized, treatment—whether burial, cremation, or donation for scientific research study. When distanced from such culturally accepted practices, however, corpses may become abject, cast off from human experience. Corpses lose meaning when they fall outside of cultural norms, thereby reminding people just how fragile things are, how quickly they fade. Julia Kristeva suggests, "the corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection" (4). Abjection, like the uncanny, blurs cultural boundaries but it goes further by highlighting what we resist in order to create culture. The abject refers to what we cast off, things that "cannot be assimilated" but that are nevertheless real (1). Put another way, the abject shares with the uncanny a sense that experience is haunted by what we put aside, repress, or deny. To our minds, the abject must be cast off in order for culture to exist. In Kristeva's words, "abject and abjection are my safeguards. The primers of my culture" (2). Human beings recoil from corpses hoping to draw such strict boundaries: they are dead; we are alive. For Kristeva, this shunning is central to asserting one's life: "My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border" (3).

Poe understood the power of that border but he also knew that his readers wondered what would happen if it was deliberately crossed. If corpses behave strangely in his tales, it is partly because they are responding to the fears, anxieties, and repressions the living have about them. If corpses could speak, what would they say? If they could reanimate, what would they do? Poe answers those questions,

in part, by suggesting that dead bodies defy easy understanding, that they simultaneously represent death and our desire to repress it. When Valdemar—miraculously, mysteriously—speaks, he only declares the obvious point that he is dead. And yet his impossible sentence deepens the mystery. Is he really dead? If so, what does that mean? Likewise, when Ligeia wills herself back from the dead, the story ends before we learn what happens next. Is she really alive? If so, what does that mean? Poe explores the boundaries between life and death only to discover that death never reveals its mystery. Perhaps that is why, of all the taboos associated with bodies, those connected to the dead are the hardest to address. Few people want to confront their impending demise and the dead are always silent, offering neither comfort nor counsel. Poe's tales exacerbate these problems, not only by troubling these seemingly fixed boundaries, but also by extending their complexities. Ultimately, Poe's uncanny bodies resist classification, they are neither completely alive nor completely dead. They are, following Mary Douglas, "matter out of place," violations of human patterns that expose even more layers to our taboos concerning the dead (50).

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