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*Journal of Artistic  
Creation & Literary  
Research*

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**Volume 7 Issue 1 (June 2019) Article 10**

**Lucía Zárate**

"On Death: A Comparison between E. A. Poe's 'The Premature Burial' and Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*"

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**Recommended Citation**

Zárate, Lucía. "On Death: A Comparison between E. A. Poe's 'The Premature Burial' and Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*" *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research* 7.1 (2019): 103-108.

<<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>>

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**Abstract:** This articles studies "The Premature Burial" (1844) by Edgar Allan Poe and *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) by Henry James with the intention of illustrating their similar approaches and representation of the subject of death. In spite of their geographical and chronological separation, these texts exemplify the obsession over death that saturates the lives of people with such intensity that they become unable to distinguish between what is real and what is a fabrication of their mind, a distorted perception of reality that leads them to make doubtful decisions and, in the case of James' story, to a tragic denouement. The relationship between death and illness is also a paramount factor in both cases.

**Keywords:** Poe, Henry James, death, gothic fiction, paranoia, neurosis.

**Lucía ZÁRATE**

**On Death: A Comparison between E. A. Poe's 'The Premature Burial' and Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw***

## **0. Introduction**

It would be an understatement to affirm that death was an important motif and subject in art and literature during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The subject was ubiquitous, and one of the most important concerns in everyday life. Even though great improvements in the infrastructure of the cities led to better hygienic and living conditions, and the medical advances allowed physicians to treat maladies that were previously fatal, diseases such as tuberculosis were

still common. However, illnesses were not the only causes of mortality. A huge interest on more unnatural deaths, such as those that were the product of a murder, arose, fed by the journalists and their coverage of such cases. Mortality rates varied throughout the decades but the certainty about the frailty of life was a constant presence in the collective mind. There were rituals that determined the way that the dead had to be treated and prepared for their eternal rest, and mourning became a public display of sorrow to maintain the appearances and be considered a decent member of society. This cult to death transformed into a neurosis that permeated every aspect of life and was key to understand the literature written in the epoch, as fiction tends to represent the fears of the society in which it is written.

From Romanticism to late Victorian literature, death was explored through many different points of view, going from a more pessimistic vision to one that could be considered more optimistic. In the latter, death was not the end but the necessary step into an afterlife of some sort. The nature of this afterlife was often determined by religion but was questioned relentlessly in an attempt to understand the meaning of life and lose the crippling fear to what would come next. In order to deal with this fear of the unknown and the sorrow of losing a loved one, it became necessary to believe in the existence of eternal life after death. Consequently, there emerged a growing enthusiasm towards ghost stories and supernatural beings who were able to transcend death, such as vampires and other undead creatures. Gothic literature played an essential role in the development of this phenomenon. With its portrayal of death in gruesome ways mostly related to the supernatural, writers of gothic fiction concocted a perfect blend of the physical and spiritual elements that surrounded it. According to Elisabeth Bronfen, the need for writing and reading about death emerges from the fact that fiction allows the reader to confront the idea of mortality and, at the same time, remain distant from it (x). Thus, death occurs to someone else in a clearly fictional world (Bronfen x).

This paper will focus on two works of gothic fiction: "The Premature Burial" by Edgar Allan Poe, published in 1844; and *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James, published in 1898. In spite of the half a century span between their publication, and of having been published in different countries, both stories deal with the idea of death in a similar manner. They are clear examples of the obsession over death that saturates the lives of people with such intensity that they become unable to distinguish between what is real and what is a fabrication of their mind. The relationship between death and illness is also a paramount factor in both cases. While in Poe's short tale physical sickness is made explicit and the mental disorder or obsession is acknowledged and overcome, in James' novella the link is less straightforward but equally meaningful. The characters of both texts live under a distorted perception of reality that leads them to make doubtful decisions and, in the case of James' story, to a tragic denouement.

### **1. Death, anxiety and paranoia**

As previously mentioned, Edgar Allan Poe published "The Premature Burial" in 1844. The first-person unnamed narrator tries to justify his most prominent fear, that of being buried alive by mistake. This concern derives from his suffering from catalepsy, a physical illness by

which he randomly falls into dead-like states. His vital signs are reduced to such extent that people who are unaware of his condition may think him truly dead and, consequently, bury him. He fears that he would eventually wake up from the episode unable to ask for help or escape his coffin, finally dying a horrible death.

The fear of being buried alive, also known as taphophobia (from the Greek "fear of graves") was quite common during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, both in the United Kingdom and the United States, due to the lack of medical knowledge before the arrival of modern medicine. The narrator of the story proceeds to recount several instances of premature interments, some of which end with the victim suffering a true death. Poe's protagonist is afraid that this is bound to be his destiny. His physical condition allows him to experience a false death, a state of void, of absolute lack of perception in which he does not suffer at all. Yet, sooner or later the state comes to an end, and the chance of waking up inside of a tomb hunts the man inexorably. Therefore, he is not afraid of death itself, for he has already experienced what he thinks it must feel like to be deceased. His anxiety stems from the thought of dying by mistake, alone, unheard and afraid.

This is clearly seen in one of his dreams, in which a ghost presents itself to him and shows him the graves of all mankind. He notices that some of them had most certainly changed their positions from those in which they had been originally buried, thus proving to having been alive when entombed. For the narrator, this is "a very pitiful sight" (Poe 265), something that will haunt him afterwards, even while he is awake.

After the nightmare, this distorted perception becomes his reality. His fear transforms into an obsession as he begins to make arrangements in order to avoid this fate. He spends large quantities of money on devices designed to prevent premature burials, such as a casket with a bell that he can ring in case he wakes up, or a remodelling of his family's vault to make it easy to open from the inside. He even abstains from the company of anybody who is not aware of his condition. But all these precautions are not enough to soothe him. This nonsense comes to an end after he wakes up disoriented inside of what he thinks is a tomb unable to move or remember how he had ended up in that situation. Terrified, he begins screaming, only to find out that he had been sleeping voluntarily in a ship's berth. This confrontation of his fear shocks him in such a way that allows him to overcome it.

In the case of Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, this neurotic fixation with death is not as explicit, but the reader is able to discern it from the way in which the main protagonist and narrator behaves. The novella is often considered a first step into what would be called Modernism but contains elements, such as the house and the ghosts, that qualify it as a piece of gothic fiction. The unreliability of the narrator is undeniable, and it is not easy to arrive to a definite conclusion on whether the story that she is telling is true or not. For the sake of this study, it will be assumed that the narrator is lying, either consciously or not, and the ghosts that are described by her throughout the novel are not real.

All this considered, the association between death and illness can be established, although in this occasion it is not a physical illness, but what appears to be a mental one. The governess seems to be a perfectly normal young woman at first but begins to show symptoms of delusion and paranoia as the story develops. For instance, she is the only one

who admits to having seen the ghosts of Mr. Quint and Miss Jessel and claims to be certain that the children are also capable of seeing the apparitions but are willingly hiding it from her. Her only support in the house is Mrs. Grose, a servant who knew Quint and Jessel and their supposedly improper relationship. Mrs. Grose tells the governess about them and listens to her theories, often trying to express her incredulity. This incredulity however, is interpreted as surprise or lack of wit by the governess, who frequently patronizes and interrupts her, finishing the maid's sentences with information that will back her own hypotheses. In this manner, she makes it impossible for the reader to know whether Mrs. Grose is confirming the existence of the ghosts or not.

The governess' strict Victorian education and lack of life experience are suddenly put to test when she accepts the job at Bly house, where she lacks any kind of supervision and has absolute responsibility over the two children. After having been repressed her whole life, she is abruptly living in a situation that grants her freedom of choice. This seems to break her mental stability. She describes herself at one point as being "rather easily carried away" (James 82), a personality trait that is proven as she begins to obsess over the idea of the ghosts influencing her pupils. Everything that Miles or Flora do or say becomes undeniable proof of their corruption and their alliance with the ghosts. The children turn into enemies, liars who are trying to deceive her, especially Miles, for whom she has a stronger fixation.

This obsession with death, or rather with the afterlife and supernatural element that surrounds it, seems to be an expression of her over-possessive character and fear of letting go. She is prone to falling in love very quickly, as proven by her absurd passion for her employer, whom she has only met twice, or her profound, almost motherly love for the children practically at first sight. She is afraid that the spirits will take the children away from her, making her useless. The fear of not being needed becomes real once she deems herself unable to teach anything else to Miles, contributing to her alienation. This dread of losing her beloved children feeds her folly. She gradually becomes more and more suspicious and even aggressive, as seen when little Flora flees the house to go play next to the nearby pond. The governess, convinced of the fact that Miles and his sister had planned to fool her with the help of the ghosts, runs accompanied by Mrs. Grose and finds the girl near the lake. Earlier in the novella, she had witnessed the apparition of Miss Jessel at that same spot, an apparition that is repeated now, triggering her violent reaction. She confronts the girl and asks her about the spirit, wanting her to admit that she can see the ghost too. However, neither Flora nor Mrs. Grose are able to see anything for everything is inside the woman's mind. Scared, they go back to the house, leaving the governess, who suffers a mental breakdown and passes out for a few hours.

After this episode, Mrs. Grose takes Flora and goes to London, leaving the protagonist with Miles. The governess accepts this, believing that having some time alone with the boy will allow her to get some answers from him. She tells Miles that Flora had fallen ill and that Mrs. Grose has taken her to be with their uncle in order to get some treatment. She then interrogates him about the reasons why he had been expelled from school at the beginning of the summer. She has no doubt that Miles' bad behaviour springs from the influence of the depraved relationship between Mr. Quint and Miss Jessel and is determined to extract a confession in order to save the child's soul from the possession of the evil spirit. Her

relationship with Miles is, as afore mentioned, slightly different than the one she has with Flora. She sees the child as if he were somewhat older than he actually is and falls into a kind of infatuation with the boy. This is key to understand her feeling of ownership over him, which is made explicit at the end of chapter seventeen, when she says that Miles' words "made me drop on my knees beside the bed and seize once more the chance of possessing him" (James 166). Therefore, it is not the ghosts who are possessing the children but rather the governess herself, unable to accept their independence from her.

At the very end of the novella, after an argument between the protagonist and the boy, Mr. Quint appears to her again. As she tries to protect Miles from the man, she holds the child, convinced that she has won over the ghost: "I have you [...] but he has lost you for ever" (James 200). Her happiness does not last for long, for she suddenly realises that the boy's heart has stopped. Miles' death is the fatal consequence of the governess' madness.

### 3. Conclusion

The obsession with death in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was, according to Bronfen, a symptom of failed repression (x). The acknowledgement of our own mortality and of the unknown was a threat to the ordered mentality of the epoch and was frequently treated as an uncomfortable topic. By representing death in fiction, people were able to confront it in a more convenient way, projecting all their fears and anxieties into the pages of short stories and novels, works of literature that were very clearly part of another domain, different than that of their own reality (Bronfen x). Gothic fiction dealt with death in an overt manner, combining both its physical and psychological aspects and focusing on the supernatural element that surrounds it, thus becoming a very popular genre at the time.

Although having been published in different countries, with a fifty-four-year span between one another, "The Premature Burial" and *The Turn of the Screw* share common denominators: they both tell stories of obsession over death, with characters whose realities become unquestionably distorted. In the case of Poe's protagonist, there is a moment of realisation of the disorder that allows him to overcome his fears and go back to a normal, healthy life. On the other side, James' governess is unable to stop herself from falling into madness and ends up being to blame for the death of young Miles. The relationship between death and illness, both mental and physical is essential to understand the stories. In the first one, a physical ailment, catalepsy, leads to a fixation on death that transforms into an obsession. In the second one, the woman's disturbed mind, made evident by her preoccupation with the dead, ends up taking the life of a child. Whether we like it or not, it is interesting to note that both stories are still avidly read by readers nowadays, as death continues to be a topic that captivates and draws our attention.

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**Bioprofile of the author**

Lucía Zárate holds a B.A. degree in English Studies from the Universidad Complutense of Madrid. She intends to begin a master's degree in Literary and Cultural Studies in Great Britain in 2019. Although having mostly been interested in the study of English Romanticism, more specifically in Romantic poetry, she has lately focused her investigation on contemporary fiction in both Great Britain and the United States.

Contact: < luzarate@ucm.es >