



Egaeus Diagnosed

by Lori Beth Griffin

Thy soul shall find itself alone
Mid dark thoughts of the gray tomb-stone—
Not one, of all the crowd, to pry
Into thine hour of secrecy
Edgar Allan Poe from “Spirits of the Dead”

There are many aspects of Edgar Allan Poe’s work that often leave the reader feeling disturbed. These works often focus on themes of insanity and other mental disorders today, diagnosable and usually treatable. However, in Poe’s time mental illnesses were not so understood and much stigma and superstition surrounded those afflicted with such disorders. Schizophrenia, one such disorder, is displayed by many of his characters in his short stories. Poe’s Egaeus in “Berenice” displays every sign of schizophrenia and therefore is proof of Poe’s particular insight into this realm of psychology.

Schizophrenia is not a “split personality” disorder, as many believe. Rather, this disorder has several severe symptoms which, according to the World Health Organization’s website, include “delusions, hallucinations (visual or auditory), disorganized speech (derailment of speech or incoherence), disorganized or catatonic behavior, or negative symptoms such as flattening of affect or lack of motivation.” In order to be diagnosed with Schizophrenia, one must display two of the five symptoms listed above for an extended period of time, usually about 5 months (Johnston 300). The disorder is named “schizo,” Greek for split, and “phrenum,” Greek for mind, and is therefore often confused with split personality disorder (Johnston 299). These two disorders differ greatly, but mostly because schizophrenia has “impaired reality testing,” which means that “the person is unable to tell the difference between fact . . . and fantasy,” (Johnston 298). Those affected by split personality, in comparison, are perfectly aware of the surrounding reality but have two or more distinct personalities perceiving and reacting to the reality (Johnston 298-99).

Poe writes Egaeus in “Berenice” as exhibiting behavior consistent with the diagnosis of

schizophrenia, including delusions in his reasoning. Delusions are, according to Schizophrenia.com, “firmly held erroneous beliefs due to distortions or exaggerations of reasoning and/or misinterpretations of perceptions or experience.” Poe juxtaposes Egaeus with Berenice in look, health, and the way in which each of them carries themselves. Egaeus says: “How is it that from beauty I have derived a type of unloveliness” (Poe 141). He is already setting up a binary between good and himself. He goes on to say that “evil is a consequence of good” (Poe 141). It is because of his later comparison between himself and Berenice that it comes to light that he is meant to represent the bad that has sprung from Berenice’s good. In this way, he justifies his brutal behavior toward Berenice’s supposed corpse, a justification which is delusional because he is using his flawed reasoning. One cannot have a one-sided binary, so he justifies his “evil” as being a “consequence of [her] good.”

Poe shows Egaeus hallucinating several times within the narrative, which further supports the analysis of his having schizophrenia. When Egaeus views Berenice he says: “the peculiar smell of the coffin sickened me; and I fancied a deleterious odor was already exhaling from the body” (Poe 146). This olfactory insight is a hallucination because we find out later in the tale that Berenice is not dead and therefore could emit no “deleterious odor.” In addition, he is haunted by the teeth of Berenice while sitting in his solitary room. He says: “the phantasma of the teeth maintained its terrible ascendancy as, with the most vivid and hideous distinctness, it floated about amid the changing lights and shadows of the chamber” (Poe 146). The visual hallucination of the teeth stems from his obsession. This particular hallucination underlines his self-professed monomania and gives him motivation for his final act. He also has an auditory illusion, which the W.H.O.’s website says is the most common form of hallucination in schizoids. The remnant of his victim stays with him and haunts him “like the spirit of a departed sound, the shrill and piercing shriek of a female voice seemed to be ringing” (Poe 147). It is evident that his shriek is being disclosed to the reader in the aftermath, rather than when the extraction of the teeth took place and is therefore an aberration of the character’s mind.

The one time that Egaeus passes off an event as an hallucination or delusion is when he sees Berenice’s body in the coffin. He discounts the movement of her

finger and jaw:

Is it my brain that reeled—or was it indeed the finger of the enshrouded dead that stirred in the white cerement that bound it . . . There had been a band around the jaws, but, I know not how, it was broken asunder. The livid lips were wreathed in a species of smile. (Poe 146)

and considers them figments of his imagination rather than being able to distinguish reality from the happenings of his mind and thus realize that his betrothed is not dead. Egaeus' condition is underscored by his hallucinations and his inability to differentiate between reality and imagination (Johnston 300).

His behavior also includes negative symptoms. Negative symptoms in schizophrenia include low energy, lack of interest in life, and social isolation according to W.H.O. Egaeus says, "I loitered away my boyhood in books...as years rolled away, and the noon of manhood found me still in the mansions of my fathers- it is wonderful what stagnation there fell upon the springs of my life" (Poe 141), describing depression and negative behavior. Egaeus isolates himself from the world and closes himself up within the confines of his family home. He neither participates in social relationships nor feels that he is missing out, which outlines his lack of interest. The very fact that he remains within his parents' home is evidence of his reclusive attitude and lack of interest in both the outside world and in meaningful human relationships.

Egaeus begins to show signs of another symptom: the negative symptom of alogia, "poverty of speech, is the lessening of speech fluency and productivity, thought to reflect slowing or blocked thoughts, and often manifested as short, empty replies to questions" (Schizophrenia.com). Egaeus is approached by a "tenant of the tomb" (Poe 147) who told of Berenice's "violated grave— a disfigured body enshrouded, yet still breathing, still palpitation, still alive" (Poe 147). When presented with this information Egaeus says "I spoke not, and he took me by the hand gently" (Poe, 147), which is an example of alogia. Rather than shouting in disbelief or horror, he remains silent. His preceding and subsequent narrations reflect his "blocked thoughts" as he slowly realizes that he has "done a deed" (Poe 147); his words are disjointed and reflect excitement uncharacteristic to his previous narrations. Finally, the only thing he uttered was "a shriek [as he] bounded to the table" (Poe 147) which displays a poverty of speech, not in the shriek alone, but in the fact that it is the only thing he can verbally express.

Poe exhibits evidence of Egaeus having memory deficiencies, specifically episodic ones, which is consistent with negative symptoms. Episodic memory is "memory for episodes in your own life" according to Princeton's website. Schizophrenia.com cites memory problems as one of the major symptoms that lead people to be diagnosed with schizophrenia. Poe exposes Egaeus' memory problems by writing him as being unable to recall the event of pulling out Berenice's teeth. He becomes confused about the box which we find out contains her teeth, why would it make "the hairs of [his] head erect themselves on end, and the blood of [his] body become congealed within [his] veins" (Poe 147). He also cannot remember what it is he has done, though he realizes that he has done something, saying, "I asked myself the question aloud, and the whispering echoes of my chamber answered me, 'what was it'" (Poe 147). In testing done recently on schizophrenics, "episodic memory impairment was found to be prevalent, and in some cases, severe" as suggested by National Library of Medicine website. This would explain why Egaeus could not remember what he had done to Berenice.

Our protagonist admits to, and displays symptoms of, a disorder that plagues him, but he identifies it with a dated term: monomania, "a pathological obsession with one idea; a fixed idea associated with paranoia" (Poe 142). It is an eighteenth century term with striking parallels to the modern diagnosis of catatonic schizophrenia. Catatonic schizophrenia is "a form of schizophrenia characterized by a tendency to remain in a fixed stuporous state for long periods; the catatonia may give way to short periods of extreme excitement" suggests the Princeton University website. This behavior can be seen in Egaeus' description of his monomania:

to become absorbed for the better part of a summer's day in a quaint shadow falling aslant upon the tapestry, or upon the floor; to lose myself for an entire night in watching the steady flame of a lamp or the ember of a fire. (Poe 142-143)

The idleness of these actions is indicative of someone without goals and implies that Egaeus was in a "stuporous state." Egaeus also says that one of his symptoms is "los[ing] all sense of motion or physical existence" (Poe 143). This directly coincides with one symptom of catatonic schizophrenics which is "characterized by a tendency to remain in a fixed stuporous state for long periods" as Princeton University's website suggested. The main character exhibits catatonic schizophrenia, rather than only having monomania, as suggested by Princeton

University's website, which identifies a patient as sometimes "giv[ing in] to short periods of extreme excitement." This, in and of itself, seems harmless enough, but when coupled with the description of those affected by the disease possibly "hurt[ing] themselves, attempt[ing] suicide, or becom[ing] violent toward others" (Komaroff 410), it becomes evident that the final outcome of Berenice is directly linked to Egaeus' mental state. While Poe does say that monomania is "a pathological obsession with one idea" (Poe 142), no part of the definition Poe provides of monomania accounts for the protagonist's final perverse behavior toward the teeth of the presumed deceased.

Egaeus also shows the onset of schizophrenia at the right age. Egaeus says that he spent his boyhood brooding and that as he became a man, he had become the person he is today. That being said, it can be assumed that at about the age of 17 or 18 he was showing all the symptoms of schizophrenia. According to Naqvi et al schizophrenia "can begin at any age but commonly manifest itself in late teens through early to mid 20s." With this fact, it can be assumed that Egaeus was a textbook case of schizophrenia. Not only does he show all the symptoms of the disorder, but his age was also quite unremarkable at the onset of this disorder.

In addition to the obvious diagnosis of schizophrenia, Egaeus was also afflicted with depression. Depression is an underlying theme, and therefore a symptom, of the main character. Egaeus contrasts himself, of "ill health and buried in gloom" (Poe 141), against his "agile, graceful, and [energetic]" (Poe 141) cousin, bringing out the differences between the two, and by connotation, leaving him with being gloomy, unenergetic, and of ill health. The rhetoric in his description of his family home as being "gloomy [and] gray" further calls forth the feelings of depression and denotes unhappiness. He says that "evil is a consequence of good, so, in fact, out of joy is sorrow born" (Poe 141). It is this attitude which reflects the morbid and desolate ideals Egaeus holds about life.

Egaeus shows every sign of schizophrenia known today in the medical world. However, the term "schizophrenia" was not coined until 1887 by Dr. Emile Kraepelin as Schizophrenia.com noted. Poe has masterfully created a character who has every symptom of schizophrenia as doctors diagnose it today. The unusual thing about this is that "No single characteristic is present in all types of schizophrenia" (Kalyanam). This means that Poe put together all the symptoms of an illness into one man, when in actuality no one person shows all these signs. Poe's remarkable insight into psychology shows through in his schizophrenic creation—Egaeus.

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