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 “phrenium,” 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
fnger and jaw:

Is it my brain that reeled—or was it indeed
the fnger 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 fves
were wreathed in a species of smile. (Poe 146)
and considers them fgments 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 fnuity 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 “losing 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 “giving 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 “hurting themselves, attempting suicide, or becoming 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.
WORKS CITED


