

Berenice



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF EDGAR ALLAN POE

Edgar Allan Poe was born on January 19, 1809 in Boston, Massachusetts. He was the second child of David and Eliza Poe, both of whom were actors. Poe's father abandoned the family shortly after Poe was born, and Poe's mother died the next year. Poe was taken in by John and Frances Allan, who raised him and put him through secondary school and helped support him as a young adult. Poe and his foster father had a falling out over Poe's gambling debts and failed military career after Frances Allan died, and they became estranged from one another. Determined to become a writer, Poe initially found fame as a literary critic whose opinion was almost universally respected. His poems and short stories were also popular, but the Panic of 1837 meant he was not always paid for his work and he frequently found himself living in dire poverty. Poe famously married his first cousin, Virginia Clemm, when she was 13 and he was 26 in 1835, several years before Poe's only complete novel, *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*, was published. They remained married until Virginia's death in 1847, after which Poe never remarried. Poe's life was marred by an ongoing battle with alcoholism, which played a significant role in his inability to maintain a long-term job at literary magazines and newspapers and his subsequent struggle against poverty. In 1849 Poe arrived in Philadelphia sick and desperate for money to get a train ticket to Virginia. His friend George Lippard helped raise funds for his train ticket and food. A short time later, Poe was found delirious and seriously ill on the streets of Baltimore, but unable to explain why he was there or what had happened to him. He was taken to a hospital but died several days later on October 7, 1849.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The nineteenth century saw a huge rise in literacy rates in Western society. Because of this, more and more people were turning to poetry, short stories, essays, novels, newspapers, and periodicals as their primary form of entertainment. Furthermore, people turned to literary criticism to help them decide which works were meaningful and which were not, enabling writers like Poe to develop huge followings based off their success as literary critics and paving the way for them to become successful writers of fiction. The narrator of "Berenice" does not specify the date of the events in the story, but the story itself was written in the 1830s, just as the Transcendentalist movement in America was gaining momentum. Poe himself was no fan of the movement and occasionally used his position as a famous literary critic to

attack notable Transcendentalist figures like Margaret Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Bronson Alcott. Poe's works reflect the striking difference between his beliefs and those of Transcendentalist writers: while the works of writers like Emerson and Thoreau are largely optimistic and drawn to the light, Poe's are almost invariably dark and characterized by death, madness, and horror.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Resurrection and reincarnation are major themes in "Berenice," and they play an important role in some of Poe's other works as well. In his story "Ligeia," for example, the unnamed narrator marries Ligeia, a beautiful and astoundingly smart woman with an almost impossible knowledge of science and ancient languages. Unfortunately, she dies and the narrator remarries Lady Rowena. This second wife dies and the narrator stays by her side overnight as she comes back to life as Ligeia. Likewise, in the story "Morella," the narrator's wife dies and appears to be reborn in their daughter. Egaeus, the narrator of "Berenice," becomes obsessed with the idea of owning Berenice's teeth, which resembles the way gruesome crimes were linked to a character's mental illness in some early American works such as Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland*. In this novel, the title character, Wieland, believes he hears voices telling him to kill his whole family to achieve salvation, and he becomes obsessed with trying to fulfill this mission and return to heaven. Poe was writing at a time of optimism and renewal in America (an era that would later be called the American Renaissance by F. O. Matthiessen), but his stories and poems were frequently dark and centered around death rather than life. Like Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne's short stories and novels tended more towards the darker side of human nature, as can be seen in his novel [The Scarlet Letter](#) and stories like "The Birth-Mark" and "Young Goodman Brown." Although often overlooked as a fiction writer in America during his lifetime, Poe's works would inspire some of the biggest names in horror, mystery, and sci-fi in the generations to come, including H. P. Lovecraft, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Philip Roth.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "Berenice—A Tale"
- **When Written:** 1835
- **When Published:** March 1835
- **Literary Period:** American Romanticism
- **Genre:** Gothic short story
- **Setting:** Egaeus's ancestral home
- **Climax:** Berenice wakes up after being buried alive and

Egaeus discovers he has removed her teeth.

- **Antagonist:** Mental illness
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

Overseas Fame. Although Poe was American, he never enjoyed much fame for his fiction and poetry in America. It was actually overseas, primarily in France, that Poe achieved immense fame as a writer.

The Original Detective. While Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes is frequently given credit for being literature's first great detective, Doyle actually credits Poe's literary detective C. Auguste Dupin as the inspiration for Sherlock. Dupin, a reoccurring character in Poe's stories, makes his first appearance in "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" in 1841, about 46 years before Sherlock Holmes made his debut in [A Study in Scarlet](#).



PLOT SUMMARY

"Berenice" opens with the narrator, Egeus, discussing misery and its ability to manifest in a number of different forms. Egeus paves the way for the tragedy that will follow by asserting that "evil is a consequence of good." Although Egeus shares his "baptismal name" with the reader, he does not share his family name, but states that their ancestral home—in which he was born and presumably continues to live—is ancient and "gloomy." His family, Egeus continues, was considered "a race of visionaries" and this is reflected in the "peculiar nature" of the family's collection of books, frescos, tapestries, and old paintings.

The library is particularly meaningful to Egeus, who was born in it and whose mother died in it. Egeus introduces the reader to his belief in reincarnation, saying: "It is mere idleness to say that I had not lived before." Egeus believes his soul had inhabited another body and had another life, and the proof of this is in his dim memories of "sounds, musical yet sad" and "spiritual and meaningful eyes." Egeus goes on to describe how he spent his earliest years in the library studying its books and meditating. He believes that being born in the library is the reason he "loitered away" his childhood in study and contemplation rather than in activity. However, when he was still in "the noon of manhood," a "stagnation" settled over his life and significantly hindered his intellectual development.

Egeus then introduces his cousin, Berenice. They grew up together in Egeus's family home, but they were polar opposites: Egeus was quiet, gloomy, and studious while Berenice was active, happy, and cheerful. As he describes Berenice as a child, Egeus says that simply saying her name brings back a clear vision of her in her "gorgeous yet fantastic

beauty" before "the destroyer" came in the form of a fatal disease that warped her beauty, happiness, and character. Berenice's disease had a number of symptoms, but the most alarming was that it would send her in to a "trance very nearly resembling positive dissolution," from which she would abruptly wake up.

Coincidentally, as Berenice suffers more and more from her physical disease, Egeus's mental illness also intensifies. It takes a "monomaniac character" that causes him to spend hours and hours on "frivolous" objects such as "the typography of a book" or "a quaint shadow falling aslant upon the tapestry." Egeus emphasizes the fact that his hyper-fixation on these objects is nothing at all like what a typically imaginative person would experience, but rather has a truly negative impact on every aspect of his life. Among the other symptoms he experiences as a result of his mental illness is that he occasionally loses "all sense of motion or physical existence."

While Egeus's books provide him with ample details and ideas to fixate on, he tells the reader that he never did spend much time contemplating the changes Berenice's disease created in her character. Instead, as was typical of his illness, Egeus found himself focusing on the "less important" changes in Berenice: the changes in her "physical frame." Egeus asserts that not even in "the brightest days of her unparalleled beauty" had he been in love with her, but as her disease wastes away her beauty, he finds himself unaccountably drawn to her. In "an evil moment," Egeus proposes to Berenice and she agrees to marry him.

Shortly before their marriage, Egeus is sitting alone in his library when Berenice appears before him. She is emaciated, her black hair has turned yellow, and she seems taller than she used to be; Egeus studies her and notices all "its" changes. When he turns his attention to Berenice's lips, she smiles at him and he notices her **teeth**. Without warning and unable to stop himself, Egeus begins to obsess over Berenice's teeth: she is fundamentally changed, but her teeth remain as white, untarnished, and orderly as they had been before disease had deteriorated the rest of her beauty. Egeus imagines studying them in minute detail in "every light." He begins to believe that possession of the teeth will restore balance to the "disordered chamber" of his mind.

Egeus sits in the library thinking about Berenice's teeth for the rest of the night and the next day. The next night, however, a maid screams in the distance and causes him to get up and go find out what is wrong. She tells him that Berenice has had a fit and is now dead. Berenice is almost immediately buried, but Egeus has very little memory of the event. In fact, he struggles to understand the "horror" he feels about the period after she was buried. As he tries to understand his feelings, he feels he can hear "the spirit of a departed sound" of a "shrill and piercing shriek" that he believes came from a woman. Egeus senses that he "had done a deed," but fails to remember what it was.

Beside him on a table is a small box belonging to the family physician, a lamp, and a book open to a passage about returning to a loved one's grave. This line makes Egaeus's hair stand on end, but he is unsure why.

As he thinks, a servant comes into the room and, obviously terrified, tells Egaeus that the household servants had been disturbed by "a wild cry" in the night. Following the sound of it, they had arrived at Berenice's "violated grave" and discovered that she was still alive, although "enshrouded." The servant then points out to Egaeus that his clothes are bloody and covered in mud, there are human nail marks on his hand, and there is a spade inexplicably sitting in the corner of the room. Egaeus suddenly jumps at the box sitting on the table next to him and drops it. It "burst[s] into pieces" and they see that it is full of "thirty-two small, white and ivory-looking substances."



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Egaeus – Egaeus is the narrator and main character of this story. As a narrator, Egaeus is unreliable due to his self-professed mental illness. Egaeus does not share his family's last name with the audience, implying that because his family is so ancient and well-respected, sharing their last name might tarnish their reputation. Egaeus was born in his family **library** (this also where his mother died) and he believes that's why he was always so studious and introspective even as a small child. Egaeus also believes that he had a past life, the evidence of which is in the "remembrance of aerial forms—of spiritual and meaning eyes." Presumably the only child of his parents, Egaeus was raised alongside his beautiful cousin, Berenice. Although he claims he never loved her, he was always interested in her as an object of study because of their striking differences. This interest only intensifies as Berenice falls ill with "a species of epilepsy," and he becomes engaged to her to make her happy. Around the same time as Berenice becomes ill, Egaeus experiences a mental "stagnation" that grows into a mental illness of a "monomaniac character" that causes him to fixate on and obsess over minute details such as shadows or something in the margin of a book. One night, shortly before he is supposed to marry Berenice, he sees her smile at him and becomes obsessed with her **teeth**. As he fights the overwhelming desire to possess them, a maid finds Berenice unconscious and, believing her dead, tells Egaeus. Once Berenice is buried, Egaeus's desire for her teeth eclipses his reason, and he exhumes her body and removes all of her teeth. Shortly after that, Egaeus regains consciousness in the library, but doesn't remember what he did until the "menial" comes into the room and shows him.

Berenice – Berenice is Egaeus's cousin and was raised alongside Egaeus in his ancestral home. Nothing is said of

Berenice's parents or why she was raised with Egaeus. Unlike the sickly and gloomy Egaeus, Berenice is "agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy" and spends her time "roaming carelessly through life with no thought of the shadows in her path." Unfortunately, Berenice develops a "species of epilepsy" as a young woman. Among the symptoms of her disease, Berenice occasionally falls into a catatonic sleep that resembles death. As her illness eats away at her youth, beauty, and happiness, Egaeus, knowing she had "loved me long" and wanting to give her some happiness, offers to marry her. Shortly before their marriage, however, Berenice falls into another catatonic sleep, only this time it lasts so long and looks so much like death that they bury her. Egaeus, having become obsessed with **Berenice's teeth** when she smiled at him earlier in the story, exhumes her body and removes them. A short time after Egaeus returns to **the library**, Berenice is discovered alive in her tomb. Egaeus does not remember actually pulling her teeth out, but he has the vague recollection of the "shrill and piercing shriek of a female voice," which could indicate that Berenice woke up while Egaeus removed her teeth and, therefore, can remember what he did.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Menial – Described only as a "menial," this is the servant who enters **the library** to tell Egaeus that Berenice had been buried alive and helps Egaeus realize that he was the one to exhume her body and steal her **teeth**.

Maid The unnamed "servant maiden" is the one who finds Berenice in a catatonic state and tells Egaeus that she is dead, which leads to Berenice mistakenly being buried alive.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



MENTAL ILLNESS AND PHYSICAL DISEASE

Edgar Allan Poe's stories are well-known for their explorations of mental illness, disease, and death. In "Berenice," both mental illness and physical disease take over the lives of the characters, destroying their past identities and propelling them forward toward the story's horrifying conclusion. Egaeus, the story's unreliable narrator, develops a "monomaniac" mental illness that causes him to obsess over seemingly mundane objects. Berenice, Egaeus's cousin and fiancée, develops epilepsy which causes her to fall into a deep catatonic episode that resembles death, causing her to be

mistakenly buried alive. When Egaeus's "monomania" leads to an obsession with **Berenice's teeth**, he commits the horrifying crime of exhuming her body and removing her teeth, only to later find out that she was not really dead. The true horror of this story, however, is not Egaeus's crime, but Poe's illustration of human beings' capacity for inhumanity, particularly when illness strips them of their identity and their capacity for reason.

Egaeus is still a young man when he begins displaying symptoms of the serious mental illness that leads him to mutilate Berenice in an extremely uncharacteristic act of violence. Egaeus was born in his family's **library**, and he believes that this is why he was always an introspective child, but he was a young adult when a "stagnation" halted his development. While Egaeus thinks his childhood was normal, his description of being "addicted, body and soul, to the most intense and painful meditation" suggests that he was already showing signs of a developing mood disorder. Egaeus says his "disease" ultimately developed a "monomaniac character," causing him to spend hours studying "frivolous" things. What is most alarming, however, is that he says he sometimes loses "all sense of motion or physical existence," meaning there are periods when he not only loses control of his thoughts, but his actions and ability to account for them. Although Egaeus has his peculiarities, there is no indication that he is naturally violent. However, in his uncontrollable obsession with Berenice's teeth, Egaeus loses the morality that belongs to his lucid self, enabling him to pull out Berenice's teeth to appease his obsessive thoughts.

Berenice falls victim to what Egaeus describes as "a species of epilepsy" that frequently results in catatonia. According to Egaeus, Berenice's disease reduces her from a human being to an object. Egaeus describes Berenice before her illness as "agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy." Her disease, "the destroyer," strips her of these qualities. Aside from the physical changes, Berenice's disease impacts "her mind, her habits, and her character" so much that Egaeus "knew her no longer as Berenice." Already Egaeus has turned Berenice into someone else, someone he has no emotional connection with. However, she is lowered still further to the rank of object when Egaeus describes her not as a person, but as an "it." Not only has Berenice lost her own personal sense of identity to her illness, but now Egaeus no longer recognizes her as truly human.

The combination of Berenice's loss of what made her human through physical disease and Egaeus's loss of reason through mental illness becomes the perfect storm as Poe explores the extent of mental illness's power over human reason. Shortly before falling into a catatonic state, Berenice stands in the doorway of Egaeus's library and smiles at him, revealing her perfect teeth. Her appearance is entirely altered—her black hair has turned yellow, she appears taller, and she's emaciated—and this perhaps explains why Egaeus initially

believed her smile was "peculiar," but the "disordered chamber" of his mind goes further and believes it was actually "a smile of peculiar meaning." As he obsesses over Berenice's teeth, a French phrase—"que tous ses dents étaient des idées," which in English means "all her teeth were ideas"—runs through his mind. The "peculiar meaning" of her smile, then, is that her teeth are full of immaculate ideas, and the possession of them could restore his unbalanced mind to sanity. What's left of Egaeus's humanity fights against this obsession, but the burial of Berenice triggers a dissociative episode, during which he goes to her body and cuts her teeth out. In this way, Egaeus's mental illness becomes the antagonist of the story, making a victim of both Egaeus and Berenice and condemning them both to a life that is almost certain worse than death.

Having suffered severe depressive episodes himself and watched several family members die of lingering physical diseases, Poe had intimate knowledge of the power these things had to take away an individual's humanity and sense of personhood. In "Berenice," Poe explores the ways people are transformed by their illnesses—both physically and mentally—and, in the case of Egaeus, how easily one can lose themselves and their humanity completely.



DEATH AND RESURRECTION

Edgar Allan Poe's notorious preoccupation with death and the way his poetry and short stories reflect it usually involves the untimely demise of a young, loved, and impossibly beautiful woman. In "Berenice," however, no characters actually die, and the real tragedy is that Berenice *doesn't* die. From the outset, Poe establishes that in this story, death is not always the end. Egaeus, the narrator, believes that he lived another life in the past and was reincarnated. Berenice, his fiancée, develops a "species of epilepsy" that frequently causes her to fall into a catatonic state strongly resembling death. When Egaeus develops a mental illness with a "monomaniac character," he suffers a different form of death: the loss of his reason. One evening, Egaeus becomes convinced that he can resurrect his reason by the possession of **Berenice's teeth**. Through this story, Poe challenges his audience's beliefs about death by portraying it as fluid and impermanent.

In the opening paragraphs of the story, Egaeus describes being born in the family **library**—this is the same room his mother died in, further highlighting his belief that death, rather than being a fixed end, is the first step towards new life—and his early childhood. He also reveals that he believes he had a past life, and his birth was actually a rebirth. Egaeus specifically says that "it is mere idleness to say that I had not lived before—that the soul has no previous existence." His statement reveals that he doesn't just consider concepts like resurrection or reincarnation possibilities, but realities of which he is proof. Furthermore, he does not limit his opinion on reincarnation to

just himself, but specifically says “the soul” rather than using the possessive and saying “my soul.” This implies that *all* souls can come back, and death is therefore impermanent. Egaeus’s mental illness, however, takes a huge toll on his soul. His obsessive thoughts over “frivolous” objects eat away at him, leaving him desperate for a remedy so he can live up to his potential.

Poe further complicates conventional views of death as a permanent state with Berenice, who suffers from “some species of epilepsy.” Berenice’s epilepsy often sends her into what Egaeus calls a “trance very nearly resembling positive dissolution.” It can be assumed that there have been numerous times when Berenice was truly believed to be dead when she entered these “trances,” and her “startlingly abrupt” return to consciousness from them would have been equally alarming. Egaeus believes that the soul lives on after the body dies because he has a “memory like a shadow” of a past life, but Berenice’s situation involves her body seeming to die and then be resurrected. Over time, this diminishes her soul. As Egaeus notes, Berenice’s disease effects a “revolution of so horrible a kind in the moral [...] being of my cousin” and she loses her formerly cheerful and energetic disposition. However, despite physical and mental changes, Berenice’s teeth remain immaculate.

Egaeus suffers from a sort of mental death due to his mental illness, while Berenice suffers catatonic episodes that equate to numerous small deaths due to her epilepsy. When it seems like Berenice has truly died, Egaeus believes that he has a chance to resurrect his former mental equilibrium by possessing her teeth. One night, Berenice flashes Egaeus a toothy “smile of peculiar meaning,” and Egaeus quickly becomes obsessed with the idea that her teeth “could alone ever restore me to peace, in giving me back to reason.” Just as he believes the soul can be reincarnated in a new body, Egaeus believes he can resurrect his lost reason by possessing the one thing about Berenice that has not been corrupted by disease. Berenice once again falls into a catatonic sleep, but this time Egaeus, possibly subconsciously guided by his mental illness, actually has her buried. The obsessive thought that her teeth can resurrect his mental balance overcomes his reason and, in a dissociative episode, he exhumes her body and cuts out her teeth. However, after he becomes lucid again, his servant tells him that Berenice is alive but mutilated, and he discovers what he’s done. Once again, death defies conventional expectations in Berenice’s abrupt and tragic return to consciousness. On the other hand, death has also defied Egaeus’s expectations because he was unable to resurrect his mental stability as shown by his ultimate inability to identify her teeth by name—one of the symptoms of his mental illness is that, during an episode, he will repeat a word until it loses meaning—and instead calls them “small, white, ivory-looking substances.”

In “Berenice,” death is not always a permanent state, with

Berenice frequently appearing dead and then coming back to life and Egaeus’s adamant belief that when the body dies the soul is reborn in another. Ultimately, Poe suggests that death will always defy expectation, shown by Berenice’s return to consciousness after being horribly mutilated and Egaeus’s failure to successfully resurrect his sanity.



REPRESSED SEXUALITY

In “Berenice,” Poe creates two characters who could not be more different, even though they grew up together as cousins and become engaged as adults. While Berenice is guided by her heart and drawn to light and happiness, Egaeus prefers the gloom of his **library** and the comfort of books. Egaeus’s studies are religious in nature and, possibly because he was always “ill of health,” he seems to be drawn towards misery, turns inwards, and represses his emotions. His mental illness, however, brings closer to the surface his sexual desire for Berenice. In his portrayal of Egaeus and his crime against Berenice, Poe explores how repressing natural desires can lead to unnatural thoughts and acts of violence.

Egaeus was born in his family’s library, surrounded by some “very peculiar” books that he would spend his life studying. Because of this and his family’s long reputation as “visionaries,” Egaeus believes that it is natural that he spent the majority of his life engaging in “monastic thought” in his library. Egaeus uses religious terms to describe his early thoughts and studies, describing his thoughts as “monastic” and his studies as that “of the cloister.” This implies that he is a very religious person and has likely taken to heart warnings of the dangers of sexuality and praises of sexual purity. Egaeus also says that as a child he was “addicted, body and soul, to the most intense and painful meditation” while his beautiful cousin, Berenice, moved “carelessly through life” before her disease. Unlike Egaeus, Berenice embraced all of her emotions and sought happiness, allowing her to lead a happier life. Part of the reason Egaeus’s thoughts continue to bring him pain could be that he is torn between love and desire for his beautiful and adoring cousin, and the warnings his “monastic” books have given him about giving in to sexual desire.

Egaeus insists that he had never felt love for Berenice, but the passage of the book by Ebn Zaiat that sits open on his table suggests that he considered Berenice to be his “beloved,” something he may only have been ready to admit when he believed she was dead. Egaeus describes “living with in my own heart” as a child, meaning he did not readily express his feelings for other people no matter how close they were to him. Furthermore, he insists that he had never loved Berenice, even in “the brightest days of her unparalleled beauty.” He goes on to say, “feelings with me, *had never been* of the heart, and my passions *always were* of the mind.” As an unreliable narrator, Egaeus cannot always be taken entirely at his word, but his

statement could explain why he became absorbed in observing the changes Berenice's disease wrought on her body: she developed the added benefit of being an interesting object of study. Before Egaeus exhumed Berenice's body from her crypt, he had been reading a book by Zaiat and set his book open at a passage about returning to a loved one's grave to alleviate their concern. The implication is that this passage inspired Egaeus's compulsion to return to Berenice's grave, which could mean that he now considered Berenice his "beloved."

There is reason to believe that Egaeus's repression of his sexual desire contributed to the deterioration of his mental health, particularly after Berenice becomes ill herself. Egaeus is understandably horrified at the way Berenice's illness changes her body and her personality, but it is particularly telling that it was only after she developed the "fatal and primary" disease of epilepsy that his own mental illness "grew rapidly." This rapid mental deterioration is due in part of Egaeus confronting within himself the realization that he does, in fact, desire Berenice. Despite the negative impacts of her disease on her body, Berenice still maintains immaculately white **teeth**, which Egaeus becomes obsessed with when she smiles at him one night. White is often used to symbolize purity and virginity, and that is what Egaeus is actually becoming obsessed with possessing. During an obsessive episode, Egaeus develops the irrational thought that possessing Berenice's untarnished teeth will restore his own mind to its untarnished state. Stealing Berenice's teeth after he thinks she's dead becomes a form of bodily violation, as he rips her purity away from her to keep it in a box for himself.

Egaeus desires Berenice, but he is also repulsed by this desire. The internal conflict Egaeus experiences between these two things ultimately feed into the mental illness that drives him to mutilate Berenice's body. Denied the opportunity to possess Berenice by what appears to be her death, and unable to reconcile himself to it, Egaeus steals a tangible symbol of her purity: her immaculately white teeth. The true horror, however, is that Berenice does not die, and Egaeus will have to live with the guilt of knowing he gave in to his base desires and irreparably harmed Berenice.

he returns to consciousness—always in the library—after one of his dissociative episodes when he loses "all sense of motion or physical existence." A return to consciousness, then, is a return to the library. To Egaeus, the library is "a palace of imagination" and "the wild dominions of monastic thought" which, in time, bears a striking resemblance to the interior of his own mind: like the library, Egaeus's mind becomes solitary and peculiar, devoted to thought and barring him from experiencing certain kinds of emotion. Just as Egaeus is irresistibly drawn to the library, he is also irresistibly drawn into his own mind, and he explores the "peculiar" books in the library in the same way he obsessively explores "peculiar" details in the margins of books or the sound of a word as his "monomaniac" mental illness takes control of his life.



BERENICE'S TEETH

Berenice's teeth are a tangible representation of Egaeus's belief that "evil is a consequence of good, so, in fact, out of joy is sorrow born." Both Berenice and Egaeus are completely altered by their respective diseases, but Berenice's teeth remain fundamentally unchanged. They are a reminder of the "past bliss" they enjoyed when Berenice still had her beauty and her happiness, and Egaeus still had control over his mind and intellectual development. Berenice's smile (possibly out of "joy" for her impending marriage to Egaeus) plants a seed of "evil" in Egaeus's mind: if he possesses her "good" untarnished teeth, then they will restore his reason to him. Had Berenice never smiled at Egaeus and showed him her teeth, he would never have mutilated her body after she was mistakenly buried in a catatonic state. In this way her show of "joy" in smiling at him leads to the "sorrow" that occurs when he takes them from her. When the teeth are with Berenice, they represent all the happiness and the "good" that Berenice and Egaeus could have had, but once Egaeus digs up her body to take them out of her mouth, the teeth represent the "evil" that unchecked obsessive thoughts can lead to and the inevitable "sorrow" associated with the lives to which Egaeus and Berenice are now condemned.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE LIBRARY

The library in Egaeus's family home represents his own mind, which he frequently retreats into both before and after his mental illness takes hold. Egaeus was born in the library, and he describes being born as "awaking" and coming into consciousness which mirrors the numerous times



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Doubleday edition of *Complete Stories and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* published in 1966.

Berenice Quotes

☛ How is it that from beauty I have derived a type of unloveliness?—from the covenant of peace, a simile of sorrow? But, as in ethics, evil is a consequence of good, so, in fact, out of joy is sorrow born. Either the memory of past bliss is the anguish of to-day, or the agonies which *are*, have their origin in the ecstasies which *might have been*.

Related Characters: Egaeus (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

In the first paragraph of this story, the narrator, Egaeus (who will soon establish himself as unreliable due to his serious mental illness), sets the tone for the rest of the story. He tells his audience that *he* is the one who “derived a type of unloveliness” from beauty, immediately portraying himself as the villain of the story. He also describes the “agonies which *are*,” which further indicates that this story is being told well after the events that make up the plot.

The “agonies” that Egaeus is preparing to describe have a root in “the ecstasies which *might have been*,” which echoes what he says about “evil” being “a consequence of good” in the line before. This tells the audience that whatever “evil” doings he is about to describe were done in the pursuit of good. In other words, Egaeus himself never meant to do or be “evil,” but he nevertheless committed some horrible act as he tried to bring about some good. This adds a complexity to his character that makes it difficult to determine whether Egaeus is a villain or a sort of antihero.

☛ Here died my mother. Herein I was born. But it is mere idleness to say that I had not lived before—that the soul has no previous existence.

Related Characters: Egaeus (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

Immediately after introducing himself and giving some vague details of his family history, Egaeus introduces the

audience to his belief in reincarnation. More specifically, he asserts that he himself is living proof that reincarnation is real and undeniable. This establishes that, in this story, death is not a fixed, permanent thing that can easily be understood. Egaeus goes on to describe some dim memories he has of voices, forms, and eyes that he believes were left over from whatever life his soul had before it became his. His unconventional views of death seem to be at least partially fueled by the fact that his mother died in giving him life. This experience tells Egaeus that death frequently begets new life. That new life, furthermore, might be the new body that the soul inhabits after the death of the previous body, and therefore it seems that death is fluid rather than fixed.

It’s also significant that the room Egaeus was born in and which his mother died in is the family library. Egaeus’s family home is ancient and he describes it as “peculiar,” due in part to the contents of the library. Over the course of the story, it becomes clear that this library represents his own mind: both are full of unconventional ideas that have been passed down from generation to generation (Egeaus says that he and his ancestors have a reputation as “visionaries”) and he frequently retreats into them both to find answers and comfort.

☛ The realities of the world affected me as visions, and as visions only, while the wild ideas of the land of dreams became, in turn—not the material of my every-day existence—but in very deed that existence utterly and solely in itself.

Related Characters: Egaeus (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 171-172

Explanation and Analysis

Egaeus provides some important clues here about his mental illness, which he has already described as a sort of “stagnation” that cut down his intellectual development while he was still a young man. Egaeus was born in the family library and he prefers to spend his time in there rather than anywhere else, and it would seem, with this passage, that spending so much time around the intangible has made the tangible less real to him. That is, Egaeus cannot trust his judgment because, to him, “realities” seem more like “visions” and “dreams” become his reality. Not only can Egaeus not be sure of his reality, but also the reader

can't be sure whether he's describing real events or just "visions" that he believes to be real.

Perhaps more importantly, Egaeus lives within his ideas and "dreams." This indicates that he has isolated himself from all those around him who might have been able to help, if they only they understood him better. This isolation will, in turn, intensify his mental illness and make it harder and harder for him to differentiate between reality and "dreams," even during the periods when he is lucid and has a little more mental balance.

☞ I ill of health and buried in gloom—she agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy; hers the ramble on the hill-side—mine the studies of the cloister; I living within my own heart, and addicted body and soul to the most intense and painful meditation—she roaming carelessly through life, with no thought of the shadows in her path, or the silent flight of the raven-winged hours.

Related Characters: Egaeus (speaker), Berenice

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

Egaeus introduces his cousin, Berenice, to the story. They grew up together in Egaeus's family home, but it is not clear why Berenice is there or what happened to her parents. What is clear is that these two cousins could not be more different. Berenice is evidently the one ray of light in the dark and gloomy halls of Egaeus's family mansion, and although he doesn't say it explicitly, it's clear that he is drawn to her because of this difference and possibly even envious of her ability to find happiness despite the darkness surrounding them. Right away, it's clear that Berenice represents the heart (emotion, love, light, and joy) while Egaeus falls more in line with the head (intellectual, cold, unfeeling, and introspective).

This passage also provides yet another clue about Egaeus's mental illness, which he later states has a "monomaniac character." Although he claims it wasn't until he was a young man that he began to suffer from symptoms, in this passage he says that even as a child he was "addicted body and soul to the most intense and painful meditation." This would imply that, whether he recognized it or not, he was either already suffering from symptoms or was at least particularly vulnerable to developing them. This would also mean that

Egaeus might not understand the reality of his childhood as much as he thinks he does.

☞ Disease—a fatal disease—fell like the simoom upon her frame, and even while I gazed upon her, the spirit of change swept over her, pervading her mind, her habits, and her character, and, in a manner the most subtle and terrible, disturbing even the identity of her person! [...] I knew her not—or knew her no longer as Berenice!

Related Characters: Egaeus (speaker), Berenice

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

Egaeus had always been interested in his cousin as something to be observed and thought about, particularly because they were such different people. Knowing this, it's clear he couldn't fail to be interested in the way physical disease came to transform her body and dominate her mind. He says the disease "fell like a simoom" (a simoom is a very hot and intense wind that carries dust over the Sahara and countries like Syria and Jordan), which indicates that it advanced rapidly and completely distorted the landscape of her mind and body. Egaeus states that he "gazed upon her" and could see these changes taking place, but he was helpless to stop them or alleviate her suffering, and the stress of this situation serves to intensify his mental illness.

This disease not only wreaks havoc on Berenice, but it strips her of her identity, at least in Egaeus's eyes. She maintains her personhood, but Egaeus no longer truly sees her as a person he has a deep connection with because she is not "Berenice" anymore. This removal of emotional connection makes it easier for Egaeus to objectify her as he impassively studies what the disease does to her body.

☞ The undue, earnest, and morbid attention thus excited by objects in their own nature frivolous, must not be confounded in character with that ruminating propensity common to all mankind, and more especially indulged in by persons of ardent imagination.

Related Characters: Egaeus (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

Egeus has already described his mental illness as “monomaniac” and explained that, because of this, he spends an excessive amount of time studying “frivolous” details and ideas, such as the flame from a candle or the sound a word makes as he says it over and over again, “monotonously.” It is clear that Egeus is anxious to make his audience understand that his mind is not healthy and that his obsessive thoughts are not just an overactive imagination or a tendency to take daydreaming too far.

Egeus describes his fixations on “frivolous” objects as “morbid,” meaning it’s crossed the line into something unhealthy. Part of this is because these thoughts and obsessions do not yield positive results; instead, they warp his character. Perhaps more importantly, they are the reason his intellectual development has stagnated. Unable to control what his mind latches onto, Egeus deprived of his potential to become a truly great academic worthy of making a meaningful contribution to the family library. He is clearly highly intelligent, but instead of be able to create something with that intelligence, he is paying “undue” attention to shadows and the surface meanings of things. This has clearly led to a great deal of frustration with himself, which leads to desperation for a cure.

☛ True to its own character, my disorder reveled in the less important but more startling changes wrought in the *physical* frame of Berenice—in the singular and most appalling distortion of her personal identity.

Related Characters: Egeus (speaker), Berenice

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

Egeus has stated that Berenice’s disease had a profound effect on both her mental and physical being, and he acknowledges that one might think the changes to her mental being and personality would provide the most inspiration for his obsessive thoughts. However, Egeus is actually preoccupied with what is happening to her body rather than her mind. He obsesses over the way little changes intensify into major ones over time, even though he also recognizes that the changes to her mind are more

important, having experienced firsthand the devastating effects a deteriorating mind can have on one’s sense of self-worth.

Egeus also reiterates that Berenice’s “personal identity” is being so distorted that she no longer seems like herself. Once again, he has divorced Berenice the person from her body, enabling him to view his cousin as an object rather than a human being that he grew up with and still has a deep connection to. In his lucid moments, Egeus feels bad for what’s happening to Berenice internally, but he is unable to control his thoughts and therefore cannot prevent them from developing an unhealthy fixation and placing undue importance on how Berenice’s disease is changing her body.

☛ During the brightest days of her unparalleled beauty, most surely I had never loved her. In the strange anomaly of my existence, feelings with me, *had never been* of the heart, and my passions *always were* of the mind.

Related Characters: Egeus (speaker), Berenice

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

Egeus asserts that he had never loved Berenice, and in fact that he never felt strong emotion about anyone or anything. Because of his unreliability, however, there is reason to believe that he did have deep feelings for Berenice and was repressing his romantic or sexual desire for her because he believed it was wrong, an idea he would have gotten from the “monastic” studies of his childhood. Egeus no doubt sees himself as an impassive intellectual (this is confirmed by his statement that his “feelings” and “passions” were all of “the mind” rather than “the heart”), and his sexual desire for Berenice would not have been in keeping with his beliefs about himself and what he saw as his moral duty.

Berenice’s body, at this point, takes up quite a bit of space in Egeus’s mind. It has become endlessly interesting to him and has evidently become one of his “passions” because of the intellectual interest it inspires. In the “brightest days of her unparalleled beauty” Egeus refuses to admit that he had loved her (romantically and sexually, at least), but now that her body has become more interesting, he is confronted with feelings of love and desire for her. However, even from his present perspective Egeus does not explicitly admit that this was the case, indicating that

even now he feels shame over his desire for her.

●● I shuddered as I assigned to them in imagination a sensitive and sentient power, and even when unassisted by the lips, a capability of moral expression. [...] I felt that their possession alone could ever restore me to peace, in giving me back to reason.

Related Characters: Egaeus (speaker), Berenice

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

Shortly before their wedding, Berenice appears before Egaeus and smiles at him, revealing the one part of her body that has not been touched by her disease: her teeth. Egaeus develops an unhealthy obsession with them: they are perfectly arranged and immaculately white and completely untarnished. Egaeus “shuddered” as he thought about them, evidently realizing that his thoughts were going beyond the bounds of reason and probably even exceeding the usual limits of what he’s come to expect from his “monomaniac” thoughts. In Egaeus’s mind, Berenice’s teeth do not need “the lips” to be capable of “moral expression,” meaning that whatever “sentient power” they have belongs solely to them or, more importantly, to whoever possesses them.

By now, Egaeus has been forced to acknowledge that his reason is gone, preventing him from achieving his potential. However, he sees in Berenice’s teeth the opportunity to resurrect his intellectual powers. The concept of death in this story is far from conventional, and death itself is not always death of the body. Egaeus has had to cope with the death of his mental health just as Berenice is being confronted with the probably imminent death of her body. There is nothing Egaeus can do to save Berenice’s body, but he nonetheless believes this part of her body—her teeth—could serve to give new life to his mind, just as the death of his mother gave new life to his soul when he was born.

●● With a shriek I bounded to the table, and grasped the box that lay upon it. But I could not force it open; and in my tremor it slipped from my hands, and fell heavily, and burst into pieces; and from it, with a rattling sound, there rolled out some instruments of dental surgery, intermingled with thirty-two small, white, and ivory-looking substances that were scattered to and fro about the floor.

Related Characters: Egaeus (speaker), Berenice

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

Berenice is mistaken for dead and buried quickly, but Egaeus retains very little memory of this, and awakens into consciousness alone in his library with the dim sense that he has done something horrible that he can’t remember. As he tries to put the pieces together, a servant tells him that Berenice was found in her grave, alive but mutilated. Dissociative episodes, along with amnesia, are common symptoms of Egaeus’s mental illness, according to Egaeus himself. This would explain why he does not remember what he has done when he returns to lucidity. The “shriek” he lets out as he grabs the small box indicates that he is as surprised and disturbed by his actions as the servant is and the reader will be, but he still demands hard evidence of what he has done and he knows he’ll find it in the box.

One of the other symptoms of his mental illness that Egaeus describes is that he will fixate so hard on a word that it will eventually lose all meaning, so the fact that he calls what’s in the box “small, white, and ivory-looking substances” rather than just saying they’re teeth indicates that they have not helped him return to reason as he thought they would earlier. Separated from Berenice, her teeth become mere things once again, despite Egaeus’s belief that they could resurrect his reason. Furthermore, Egaeus will be forced to live with Berenice, both of them knowing that he was the one who violated Berenice’s body—and the last vestige of her former untarnished beauty and innocence—by pointlessly pulling out her teeth and putting them in a box to keep for himself.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

BERENICE

The narrator begins with the statement: “Misery is manifold.” He describes “misery” and “wretchedness” as capable of coming in a number of different forms and in a number of different “hues.” The narrator questions how he had managed to create “unloveliness” from something beautiful and, instead of bringing “peace,” brought “sorrow.” However, he asserts that “evil is a consequence of good” and that some of the worst emotional pain comes from the remembrance of better, happier times.

The narrator shares that his “baptismal name” is Egaeus, but he does not share his family name. Egaeus does note that his ancestral home is very old and “time-honored.” However, it is also “gloomy” and “gray.” His family has the reputation and long history of being “visionaries,” which is reflected in the “character of the family mansion,” which is full of antique books, paintings, and tapestries.

Egaeus describes the particular connection he has with his home’s **library**. It was the room in which he was born, and where his mother died. He spent a lot of his childhood reading the “peculiar” books the library held. Although he was born in the library, Egaeus notes that “it is mere idleness to say that [he] had not lived before,” and he describes vague memories of “aerial forms” that he associates with his past life.

Egaeus describes his birth as “awaking from the long night of what seemed, but was not.” By being born in the **library**, he entered a “palace of imagination,” and believes this is part of why he spent his childhood studying the library’s books. Egaeus then describes how, as he grew older, a “stagnation [...] fell upon the springs of [his] life” and made the real world seem like visions while his imagination seemed more like reality.

Egaeus’s opening statement prepares the reader for some kind of tragedy—specifically, a tragedy of which he is the author. It is, after all, Egaeus himself who creates “unloveliness” out of something beautiful. By portraying himself upfront as the villain of the story, Egaeus also suggests that he may be an unreliable narrator. It’s clear from the start that readers perhaps shouldn’t trust everything Egaeus says.



Egaeus’s refusal to share his family name further indicates his guilt in the story he’s about to tell; it seems as if he could do irrevocable harm to his family’s reputation if their name were connected with it. Egaeus mentions that his ancestors were known as “visionaries,” which is possibly a clue that they shared some of the same peculiarities of character as Egaeus—and that they may have suffered from some of the same symptoms of mental illness as Egaeus does.



Egaeus’s belief that he had “lived before” he was born immediately complicates the concept of death in this story. In Egaeus’s world, death is not the end of life but actually leads to a new one. Egaeus, after all, enters life in the same room where his mother’s life ends, presumably due to complications from childbirth. Egaeus believes that when a person dies their soul will find a new body to inhabit, and so Poe makes it clear that in this story, death of the body is not necessarily death of the individual.



Egaeus further shares his beliefs about reincarnation by describing being born as an “awaking,” as if he had just temporarily been asleep rather than having not existed at all before. Additionally, what Egaeus describes as a “stagnation” in his life is the first true indication that he suffers from a mental illness. “Stagnation” implies that it brought his mental development to a complete standstill, forcing his mind to turn in on itself and making his imagination seem more real than reality. From this point on, it’s hard to say for sure how accurate Egaeus’s descriptions of reality are.



Egeus introduces Berenice, a cousin whom he grew up with in his family home. While Egeus describes himself as “ill of health, and buried in gloom,” Berenice is “agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy.” Egeus buried himself in books, while Berenice explored the countryside and was always cheerful. Egeus says that just saying her name brings up memories of what she had been like in her childhood, but that “a fatal disease” took over her life and changed everything about her until Egeus no longer recognized her as his cousin.

Berenice suffers from a number of symptoms connected to one “primary” disease, but Egeus says the most worrisome one is that she sometimes falls into a “trance” that looks like death. From these trances, however, she abruptly awakes. Berenice’s primary disease not only takes a toll on her physical well-being, but her “moral” one, as well.

As Berenice’s disease worsens, Egeus says that his own disease (which he “shall call [...] by no other appellation”) also intensifies and develops a “monomaniac character” that takes over his life completely. Egeus doubts his ability to adequately convey to the reader how intensely his mind can focus on very ordinary things.

Egeus describes how his monomania forces him to “muse for long unwearied hours” on mundane objects like “a quaint shadow” or “the steady flame of a lamp.” Sometimes, however, Egeus focuses on a certain word or phrase, and he will “repeat [it] monotonously” until the words don’t mean anything anymore. Most alarmingly, Egeus will sometimes “lose all sense of motion or physical existence” while he is fixated on a certain idea, image, or word.

Egeus and Berenice are clearly very different. Egeus, with his cold intellectualism, represents the mind while Berenice, with her energy and love of life, represents the heart. Egeus, in his gloom, can’t help but be drawn to Berenice because of how different she is. Their lives are parallel, however: Egeus suffers from a mental illness that hinders his intellectual development, while Berenice suffers from a physical disease that destroys her beauty and happiness.



Egeus believes his soul has lived before and been reincarnated in another body, and Berenice seems to undergo a related form of resurrection here: her body appears to die and then comes back, and the more it does this, the heavier a toll it takes on her soul. It seems, then, that this kind of death does come at some cost, apparently to Berenice’s “moral” condition. In other words, Berenice’s disease is corroding her happiness, carefree attitude, and innocent exploration of life, even though her body continues to survive.



The stress of watching his beautiful cousin’s disease transform her has caused Egeus’s mental illness to gain strength until it completely dominates his life. Not only does Egeus watch Berenice’s disease slowly kill her, but he also senses the impending demise of his own mind as his mental illness takes over. As a result, his intellectual life becomes a kind of parody of the rigorous studies that once took up his time, as his mind forces him to spend undue time focusing on “ordinary objects” with no real purpose.



Egeus’s description of his disease highlights just how mundane the things are that he finds himself uncontrollably fixated on. More importantly, his statement about saying words over and over again “monotonously” until they cease to have any meaning foreshadows his loss of memory and inability to recognize teeth by their name in the end of the story.



Egeus differentiates between the “undue, earnest, and morbid attention” he pays to things that are “frivolous” from the common human tendency to dwell on meaningless thoughts. Egeus believes the primary difference between his “undue” interest and that of the casual thinker is that normal people will lose sight of what started their thoughts, as they develop new ideas or pictures in their minds that bring them joy. In contrast, Egeus will never create something substantial with his ruminations and they never brought him pleasure. Egeus also notes that his interest in certain lines from his books took up weeks of his time as he dwelt on certain passages or ideas.

Egeus notes that the reader must believe that, “shaken from its balance” and taken hold of by small details, his mind must have found ample material to dwell on in the changes to Berenice’s “moral” condition. However, according to Egeus, the reader would be wrong to think that. It was in “the lucid intervals” of his illness that Egeus really thought about Berenice’s condition. He felt bad for her and was interested in the personality changes her disease produced, but thoughts about Berenice’s character never took the monomaniacal turn that characterized his mental illness. Instead, his mind focused on the changes he could see happening to her physical being.

Egeus asserts that even when Berenice was young and extremely beautiful, he never loved her. He says this is because his “passions” were never rooted in his heart, but in his mind. He had always seen Berenice as an idea to be analyzed, not as a person to be loved. Now that she was ill and physically altered, however, Egeus shows signs of falling in love with her. Finally, in what he calls “an evil moment,” he proposes to her and they become engaged.

Shortly before their wedding date, Egeus describes sitting in his **library** when Berenice enters and stands in front of him. Her appearance has altered: her black hair has turned blond, she is emaciated, and she appears taller. The lighting in the room gives Berenice a dream-like appearance, which intensifies when she does not say anything to him. Egeus also says nothing, and he experiences an “insufferable anxiety” while she’s standing there. As he stares at her and notes that her eyes look “lifeless,” Berenice smiles at Egeus and exposes her **teeth**. Egeus wishes he “had never beheld them, or that, having done so, [he] had died!”

Egeus is anxious to make his audience understand that the intensity of his mind’s focus is not simply an overactive imagination or a propensity for daydreaming, but something very serious and harmful. Rather than deriving benefit from his fixations, he is left frustrated. This frustration renders him vulnerable to suggestion—particularly if it might provide a remedy for his illness—which is illustrated in the amount of time he says he spends focusing on passages from different books. By this point, Egeus seems completely helpless to control his fixations.



Just as he focuses on “frivolous” details and objects in other areas, Egeus focuses on the superficial aspects of the changes in Berenice. For Egeus, Berenice and the deterioration of her body seems to offer a physical manifestation of his mind’s deterioration. Like Berenice’s body, Egeus’s mind is wasting away, changing shape, and losing control of itself. Observing Berenice, then, is like observing his own mind and the condition it is in.



Due to the “monastic” nature of his childhood studies, Egeus has repressed some of his desires, particularly his romantic or sexual desire for Berenice and perhaps for other women as well. However, his fixation on her body and the changes being done to it by her disease reveals to him his desire to possess it, although he convinces himself his “passions” are only of the mind. However, he’s still repulsed by his own desire to possess Berenice’s body, as shown by his comment that their engagement was the result of an “evil moment.”



Egeus’s library represents his mind, so the fact that he is in his library when Berenice enters means he is likely already deep in thought—and, given the state of his mind, perhaps in some altered form of reality as well. Egeus focuses entirely on Berenice’s body—which, of course, he believes he will soon possess as their wedding day is not far off—and her smile takes on new meaning for him as he is confronted with the fact that he will shortly be able to act on his repressed desire for Berenice. Her teeth are perfectly white—a color typically associated with purity and innocence—and remind Egeus of what he has lost to mental illness and his obsessive thoughts about Berenice’s body. Meanwhile, it’s notable that her eyes appear “lifeless”; by this point, it’s clear that Egeus has lost all interest in Berenice’s personality and character.



The sound of the door shutting snaps Egaeus out of his thoughts and he notices that Berenice has left. However, in the “disordered chamber” of his mind, he develops an obsession with **Berenice’s teeth**. He imagines that he sees them almost everywhere and tries, in vain, to fight against the obsession. Egaeus imagines observing them in “every light” and taking note of every detail in them. His thoughts take an even stranger turn as he imagines they have a “sensitive and sentient power.” He comes to believe that if he could possess them, they could give him happiness by “giving [him] back to reason.”

Egaeus spends the rest of the night, the next day, and the beginning of the next night thinking about Berenice’s **teeth**. At some point, however, a maid screams and Egaeus goes to investigate. The maid tells him that Berenice became “seized with epilepsy” that morning and has just died. By the end of the night, Berenice is prepared for burial.

Egaeus says he “[finds] himself” sitting in the **library** alone, feeling as if he has just woken up from a dream. He knows Berenice was buried, but has no recollection of anything that has happened since then. He does, however, have a feeling of “horror” associated with the intervening time. He tries to piece together the “dim [...] recollections” that he does have, but cannot put them together. As he thinks, he believes he keeps hearing a “shrill and piercing shriek” in a woman’s voice. He knows that he did something, but cannot remember what.

Egaeus notes that, sitting next to him, there is a lamp and a small box. He knows that the box belongs to the family doctor, but has no idea why it is sitting on the table next to him. Also on the table is a book by Ebn Zaiat that is open to a passage that says: “Dicebant mihi sodales si sepulchrum amicae visitarem, curas meas aliquantulum fore levatas.” Although he does not know why, Egaeus says that this line makes his hair stand on end and his blood run cold.

Egaeus develops the idea that Berenice’s teeth “are full of ideas” that, like the teeth themselves, are not marred by disease or imperfections. Egaeus is desperate to regain control over his own mind—that is, to be able to create thoughts that are as perfect as Berenice’s teeth. His mental illness has turned his mind into a “disordered chamber,” and it can be assumed that, in his right mind, he would never have come to believe that Berenice’s teeth had magical healing qualities. But as it is, he obsesses over the idea that they are the key to resurrecting his lost mental health, again showing how Egaeus views Berenice’s body as a proxy for his own mind.



Between his belief in resurrection/reincarnation and his loss of reason, it’s possible that some part of Egaeus sees Berenice’s death coming at the exact moment he is hoping to resurrect his mental stability as more than a coincidence. Just as Egaeus’s mother’s death led to new life for Egaeus, so might Berenice’s death give new life to his reason.



Egaeus’s description of waking up in the library with no memory of where he has been or what he has done implies that he has suffered from a dissociative episode, which, as he noted earlier, is a typical symptom of his mental illness. Disoriented, Egaeus turns inward for clues about what happened rather than observing the space around him to try and find answers there. His imprisonment in his own mind seems to have become complete.



The Latin passage in the book on the table reads: “My companions told me I might find some little alleviation of my misery, in visiting the grave of my beloved.” The fact that the book is already open to this passage, along with Egaeus’s reaction to it, implies that he recognizes in the words the kind of idea that his mind might have become fixated on. Though Egaeus does not know why, this lines seems to provide a vital clue as to where he was during his dissociative episode.



A servant knocks on the door and comes in looking white as a ghost and very scared. Egaeus only hears him talk in “broken sentences” about someone hearing a scream at night and the household gathering together to find the source. The servant tells Egaeus that they followed the sound to Berenice’s grave and found that it had been “violated,” but that Berenice’s “disfigured body” was there and she was “still breathing, still palpitating, still *alive!*”

The servant then points out to Egaeus that his clothes are “muddy and clotted with gore,” that there are human nail marks on his hand, and that there is a spade in the corner of the room. Egaeus, “with a shriek,” goes to the table and grabs the box. He can’t open the box, but it falls out of his hands and breaks. Inside of it are some dental tools and “thirty-two small, white and ivory-looking substances” that scatter to the floor.

Once again, death defies expectations: Berenice was believed to be dead—was buried, in fact—but now she is found alive and “disfigured.” That Egaeus only hears the servant’s account of what happened in “broken sentences” indicates that his mind is already in a whirl, probably because of his earlier reaction to the book on the table and the dawning realization of what he has done.



Egaeus, it becomes clear has violated Berenice, ripping away the one untarnished, pure part of her otherwise diseased body: her teeth. Berenice’s teeth were the sole physical reminder of their happier days as children, calling to mind her past beauty and happiness and also giving Egaeus an image of the kind of sanity that his own mind has lost. But now, Egaeus has to confront the fact that he has failed to resurrect his reason, even though he has apparently gone through with his plan to take Berenice’s teeth for himself. His continuing mental illness is shown most vividly by the fact that he describes the objects that fall out of the box rather than just calling them by their name: teeth. This complete (and violent) breakdown between fantasy and reality is, it seems, the “unloveliness” that Egaeus said he created out of “beauty” in the opening lines of the story.





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