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## Psychiatrists in 19th-century fiction

### *The System of Dr Tarr and Professor Fether* (1845), Edgar Allan Poe

Fiona Subotsky

Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) was a popular American writer who specialised in poems and tales of gloom and horror. In England he was considered to be an example of degeneracy by Henry Maudsley in 1860, who, while appreciating Poe's melancholy genius, remarked about him: 'of all men who have walked upon the earth, it is scarcely possible to point to one whose history discloses more of folly and more of wretchedness . . . '.

In the story 'The System of Dr Tarr and Professor Fether' there is a classic 'gothic' description of a first approach to the threatening castle, mansion or, in this case, lunatic asylum:

'Through this dank and gloomy wood we rode . . . when the Maison de Santé came in view. It was a fantastic château, much dilapidated, and indeed scarcely tenable through age and neglect. Its aspect inspired me with absolute dread . . . '.

Curiously, this tone is very similar to that of the reforming medico-psychologist John Connolly, Maudsley's father-in-law, who remarked of private asylums in 1856 that they were 'generally distinguishable from all the houses in the neighbourhood by their dismal appearance: their exterior was as gloomy as their interior was dirty'.

However, once inside, there is a change of mood. The narrator is made welcome and is entertained at a bizarrely jolly banquet, where the tunes are strangely discordant and the guests decoratively but somewhat oddly dressed. Several blackened figures then burst in. It turns out that, taking advantage of the new 'soothing' system the lunatics had taken over the asylum, under the leadership of the superintendent who had become insane; the keepers were locked up . . . after having been tarred and feathered. The scene reminds one of the asylum balls which were recorded and depicted at the time, and while the effect is on the whole humorous, there are reminders of the macabre similar to Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' and 'The Dance of the Red Death'.

The narrator remarks that despite searching he could find no trace of the works of Professor Fether or Dr Tarr.

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