

ANALYSIS

“Ligeia” (1838)

Edgar Allan Poe

(1809-1849)

“With her name drawn equally out of *Ivanhoe* and “Christabel,’ Rowena we may fairly assume, is the living incarnation of English Romanticism...or English Transcendental thought cloaked in allegorical trappings. Yet in the narrator’s view, the lady of Tremaine was as destitute of Ligeia’s miraculous insights as of her stupendous learning and oracular gibberish. Conventional and dull, the blonde was simply another of those golden objects overcast by the leaden-grey window. Only in a moment ‘of his mental alienation’ did she seem to the narrator to be a fit ‘successor of the unforgotten Ligeia’; soon he came to loathe her ‘with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man.’ Rowena, in short, symbolizes an impoverished English Romanticism, as yet ‘unspiritualized’ by German cant. Consequently, she represents but a shallow pretense of Romanticism; and—on this point the text is admirably plain—it is a part of Poe’s joke to make her Romantic in nothing save her borrowed name.”

Clark Griffith

“Poe’s ‘Ligeia’ and the English Romantics”
University of Toronto Quarterly 24 (1954)

An introductory quotation asserts, contrary to Christianity, that God is “but a great will pervading all things” and that Man can resist death if his will is strong enough. Poe emphasizes this theme by repeating it twice in the story. A narrator not differentiated from Poe meets Ligeia in Germany, where gothic romanticism appealing to Poe’s sensibility was popular. He compares her to a “shadow.” Like other writers, Poe discovered through metaphor the psychological concept defined later by Carl Jung: the shadow represents the repressed self. What he desires is seen by his Victorian society as improper, immoral, even evil—as he suggests by a reference to opium in a sexual context. In Jungian terms, Ligeia is both the narrator’s shadow and his ideal female, or anima, representing the undeveloped aspect of his psyche: “In beauty of face no maiden ever equaled her. It was the radiance of an opium-dream--an airy and spirit-lifting vision more wildly divine.”

Ligeia is numinous, idealized and to some extent a projection. She embodies archetypal characteristics of the transcendental mode of consciousness explained in “Model of Metaphors.” Ligeia is Poe’s rebuttal to Victorian values represented by the conventional Fair Lady, Rowena. His ideal woman has an “ethereal nature” like the Victorian ideal, but she also has a body. She is passionate. She is emphatically dark, with hair “raven-black.” The tradition of the Fair Lady, an icon of prevailing virtues and values, the “angel in the house,” versus the Dark Lady, an icon of contrary values and sin--especially sexual--was centuries old in western literature when Poe used it here to express his iconoclasm. Contrary to Victorian gender typing, Ligeia has an impressive head: “I examined the contour of the lofty and pale forehead--it was faultless.” According to 19th century pop psychology, a high forehead was a sign of intellectual superiority and lofty idealism. Hawthorne used the convention in his first romance *Fanshawe* (1828) and Frank Norris used it in *The Octopus* as late as 1901.

Ligeia is outside the dominant culture, with characteristics of Hebrews, Greeks and Turks. Her eyes are “far larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race.” Implicitly, she sees more. She also knows more, as she is a “free spirit.” And “voluptuous.” Victorian censorship forced Poe to sublimate erotic content in florid rhetoric. In the following passage, more than her eyes are opening wide:

An *intensity* in thought, *action*, or speech, was possibly, *in her*, a result, or at least an index, of that *gigantic volition* which, during our *long intercourse*... Of all the women whom I have ever known, she, the outwardly calm, the ever-placid Ligeia, was the most *violently* a prey to the *tumultuous* vultures of stern *passion*. And of such *passion* I could form no estimate, save by the miraculous expansion of those

eyes which at once so *delighted* and appalled me...and by the fierce energy (rendered *doubly effective* by contrast with her manner of utterance) of the *wild* words which she habitually uttered.

The first italics are Poe's, the rest have been added to elucidate his innuendo. His many short phrases and commas sustain a breathless tumultuous rhythm that mimics their "long intercourse." Victorian ladies were not even supposed to enjoy sex. Ligeia is a "prey," as if possessed, as if, just as he could not escape his conscience ("William Wilson" and "Amontillado"), Poe could not escape his Victorian conditioning about sex. He feels both "delighted" and "appalled." Ligeia is stern and violent. Perhaps she also wears black leather and chains and cracks a whip. Sex before intellect, that is the order in Poe's narrative. As if to compensate for his horny priorities, he deifies Ligeia as his Athena, his goddess of learning and wisdom, more than the equal of any man—"the acquisitions of Ligeia were gigantic, were astounding; yet I was sufficiently aware of her infinite supremacy to resign myself." She becomes his spiritual guide to a "vividly luminous" transcendental consciousness, a gothic one very different from New England Transcendentalism.

The archetypal individuation process is expressed here not by the usual journey into the wilderness, but by "long intercourse" and "wild words." Poe is an urbanite fixed in a vertical mode of consciousness. He has no pastoral phase, except his love of Ligeia, who takes him down. The absence of Sky imagery is further evidence of verticality and Poe's belief that ultimate Truth lies downward, the direction of Pym's quest to the South Pole and of the body to the grave. Individuation, or what Poe dramatizes as the quest for wisdom and metaphysical Truth, by Ligeia and by Roderick Usher, ultimately requires a vertical plunge into the depths--in this case into Ligeia.

As with Roderick, the eventual price of the authentic dedicated quest for Truth is debilitation and death: "The wild eyes blazed with a too--too glorious effulgence... I saw that she must die." Ligeia represents both his Truth and the price he pays for it. She is supremely the femme fatale. She "wrestled with the Shadow" of death, as did the narrator with her--his shadow. Dying, she recites to him a deterministic poem depicting humans as mere puppets chasing phantoms, with "Horror the soul of the plot": Life ends in extinction, a tragedy to the wise, completely gothic otherwise, "its hero the Conqueror Worm."

After denying immortality, she cries out "O God! O Divine Father! shall these things be undeviatingly so?--shall this Conqueror be not once conquered?" If she were a Christian she would not have written her gothic poem and would not be asking whether death can ever be conquered. Poe includes the conventional appeal to God the Divine Father to appear Christian enough to avoid outraging his Victorian readers. As she dies, Ligeia repeats again the quotation opening the story, indicating that she intends to try to survive death by asserting her strong will.

The narrator returns from dark romantic Germany to conventional "fair" England, though he chooses to live in an abbey in "one of the wildest" regions, with "verdant decay hanging about it" comparable to the house of Usher. Without Ligeia, he has become addicted to opium, at the time a drug commonly used as a medicine by the public and as an experimental stimulant by Romantics such as Coleridge and DeQuincey. "In a moment of mental alienation," he marries Lady Rowena, the iconic Fair Lady representing conventional Victorian values, wealth and privilege: "I loathed her with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man."

When she falls ill, he feels a spirit pass lightly by and sees "a shadow of angelic aspect--such as might be fancied for the shadow of a shade. But I was wild with the excitement of an immoderate dose of opium." Poe offers a possible explanation of subsequent developments in "materialistic" terms, implying that the ghost of Ligeia drops chemicals into Rowena's wine goblet. However, since the narrator is having "wild visions, opium-engendered," his testimony is unreliable. Poe subverts his credibility so much he confirms the vision of Ligeia's pessimistic gothic poem. The apparent metempsychosis, the transmigration of souls, must be taken as hallucinatory, though a true portrait of the sexually repressed narrator having a wish-fulfillment dream. Poe is a genteel pornographer here, speaking for all the men in his culture who wished their Victorian wives would turn into Ligeias--at least in bed.

Michael Hollister (2014)

