Ligeia Study Guide

Ligeia by Edgar Allan Poe

BOOKRAGS

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Ligeia

Ligeia Summary

The narrator does not know how or when he met the Lady Ligeia. He believes it may have been in some old and large city; at first he mentions that she *surely* must have mentioned her family, but that he can't remember ever even knowing her last name.

He does not, however, have a loss of memory when it comes to what he refers to as the *person* of Ligeia. She was tall and thin with a "quiet ease" (pg. 161). He is in awe of her dark beauty, going on about her eyes, her nose, her lips, and her skin. It is the *expression* in her eyes, however, that drew his passion. The intensity of Ligeia, he says, is somewhat captured in a quote by Joseph Glanvill:

"And the will lieth, which dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigor? For God is but a great will prevailing all things by nature of its intentness. Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will." (pg. 165)

Ligeia was also very educated, fluent in many languages, extremely knowledgeable of mathematics, and most especially, well-versed in metaphysical investigations - the area in which the narrator was most interested during the time of their marriage. Sadly, at some point, Ligeia became ill. As the sicknesses progresses, the narrator understands that she will die. Both husband and wife struggle vigorously with death, spending much of their remaining time declaring their love to each other. On her final day alive, Ligeia asks the narrator to read aloud a poem she had written about a "conqueror worm." She cries out to God, and then whispers her last words; again the quote from Glanvill.

Following Ligeia's death, the narrator wanders the world for several months, finally settling down and purchasing an old English abbey to live in. Its outward dreary appearance is a reflection of the narrator's empty spirit, and yet he attempts to cheer himself by furnishing the inside extravagantly.

It is also during this time that he marries the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Lady Rowena Trevanion of Tremaine. He goes into great detail about the bridal chamber and its décor, though he says he cannot remember any moments of importance in the actual marriage. The drapery material is the focal point of the room, as it covers not only the windows but the floor and the furniture, as well. It is a gold material, spotted with arabesque figures of jet black. The patterns are such that they appear to change depending on the angle from which they are viewed.

The narrator admits that his new wife grows to dread his temper, which actually pleases him as he hates her. He has sunken into an opium addiction and spends all of his time in melancholy remembrance of his dead wife. About two months into their marriage, Rowena becomes ill. In her feverish state, she tells the narrator of strange sights and

sounds she is experiencing but he dismisses her tales as part of her sickness. She finally recovers but promptly becomes even more ill, confined to bed with a malady no doctor can diagnose.

With this second bout of illness, Rowena's "imaginings" become more frequent and more frenzied, until the narrator almost begins to believe her. One night she becomes so distraught that he goes and fetches her some wine to keep her from fainting. The wine calms her, but the narrator, high on opium, imagines he sees a strange shadow on the floor. He then hears something that sounds like light footsteps on the carpet and sees what appears to be three or four drops of a red liquid drop into Rowena's wine glass. She does not notice and continues to drink.

The narrator believes the drops to be a result of his opium haze, but strangely, from then on Rowena becomes progressively worse; by the third night she is dead. Sitting alone with her shrouded corpse, the narrator keeps a vigil next to her bed, enduring wild opium-fueled visions much like those Rowena had spoken of. Eventually, as always, his thoughts turn back to Ligeia.

As the night wears on, he thinks he hears a sound from the body - then it seems as if there might be a slight color to her face. He immediately tries to rouse her, believing maybe she has been declared dead in haste, but she quickly suffers a relapse and is deader than before. He goes back to his thoughts of Ligeia, but again Rowena seems on the verge of life. The narrator again attempts to revive her but the results are the same. This goes on repeatedly all night, until finally, he gives up his efforts and simply watches from a chair. Finally, as the night begins to turn to early morning, the body is alive and mobile, and she is standing in the middle of the room - but though it was Rowena who had been wrapped in the shrouds of death, it is the Lady Ligeia who now stands before him.

Ligeia Analysis

Many critics have argued that the resurrection of Ligeia into the corpse of Rowena is not to be taken literally, that even in the fictional world of Poe this was merely another instance of an unreliable narrator, in this case suffering from an opium illusion. On one hand, it does not seem relevant whether Poe intended for Ligeia's rise from the grave to be real or not; either it is, or the narrator is so far gone that he believes it to be true - in either case, we see how overpowering his grief is. On the other hand, if we are to look at the story as a testament to the power of Ligeia, we must believe that she has not only willed herself back to life, she has willed her rival, Rowena, out of existence.

Poe also uses a contrast between light and dark throughout the story. Ligeia, in all her beauty and intelligence, is dark and mysterious, with no family - not even a last name - and no past. The fair-haired Lady Rowena, by comparison, is introduced as "Lady Rowena Trevanion of Tremaine" - no mystery there, except as to why the narrator married her at all, since within the first month he declares that he hates her. There is also the issue of the bridal chamber - though the material adorning everything is gold,

which, to most, would be considered a "light" or "bright" color, the arabesque figures that are so distressing to Rowena are jet black.

In some ways, *Ligeia*, like many of Poe's works, has some root in its author's biography. Poe's child bride/first cousin Virginia was, by all accounts, the love of his life. However, while in Richmond working with Thomas A. White for *The Southern Literary Messenger*, it is rumored that Poe, in despair at the thought that he might lose Virginia, became romantically involved with White's blonde-haired and blue-eyed daughter Eliza. Just as in the story, however, the reappearance of his true love vanquishes this light-haired fling.

Characters

Narrator: Ligeia

Another somewhat unreliable narrator, this time due to opium use. He is very much in love, obsessively so, with his beloved Ligeia. We see that he is prone to deep passion, and he himself admits to having a fiery temper.

Ligeia: Ligeia

The great love of the narrator's life. Ligeia is described as both strange and exquisite, and the narrator seems in awe of both her beauty and her intellect. It is her strong will, however, that causes her to fight with vigor as death approaches - and allows her to fight her way back from death and overtake the body of Rowena.

Lady Rowena Trevanion of Tremaine: Ligeia

The narrator's second wife. Rowena lives in dread of he narrator's temper, and he, in turn, despises her. Around the second month of their marriage, she becomes very ill, and after seeing many frightening visions and hearing unexplained sounds that are dismissed as a symptom of fever, she dies, only to live again as the Lady Ligeia.

Objects/Places

In *Ligeia*, the room in which the narrator stays with his second bride Rowena. The room is garishly decorated in gold with black designs, which causes much distress to Rowena during her illness until her death. It is in this room that she rises from the dead as Ligeia.

Social Sensitivity

Poe's characteristic topics of revived corpses and obsessive grief surely derive from his own psychology, but they also reflect anxieties of his own times. Many of his stories feature the presumptive but not quite dead body; Madeline Usher who rises from her coffin and claws at the doors of her tomb in "The Fall of the House of Usher" offers the most dramatic example. Rowena is another: Thought to be dead, she stirs three times and finally rises from her bed. She had "died" on the third day after the narrator saw the drops fall into her cup; on the fourth day, he still sits with body. He lingers perhaps in stasis from grief, perhaps to be assured that she is really dead.

Although exaggerated and filtered through his own unresolved emotions and thematic concerns, Poe's treatments of premature diagnoses of death gain immediacy if seen in their original social context. Kenneth V. Iserson, M.D., reports in Death to Dust: What Happens to Dead Bodies? (1994), "Premature burials continued into the eighteenth century, and at the beginning of the nineteenth century, a sensation-mongering press alleged that there were 'many ugly secrets locked up underground.' Between 1700 and 1900, several hundred articles, books, and essays described the fallibility of the diagnosis of death . . . There may have been some basis for these claims. Collapse and apparent death were not uncommon during epidemics of plague, cholera, and smallpox." By the late 1800s, Iserson notes, embalming had removed such ghastly fears (in part because the procedure itself would bring about death).

In the late twentieth century, Poe's portraits of husbands and lovers incapacitated by grief may seem overdone. Viewings and funerals have institutionalized mourning in contemporary times. However, the early to middle 1800s, in which people died and were prepared for burial at home, afford many examples of respectable men acting like Poe's characters. Rufus Griswold, Poe's unfortunate choice for his literary executor, mourned mightily when his young wife died shortly after giving birth. Griswold sat with her dead body for over twenty-four hours, often caressing her. He tarried long at the grave site after her entombment, and forty days later he returned to her burial chamber, opened her casket, and embraced her rotting corpse. No less a man than Ralph Waldo Emerson, the preeminent American thinker of the decades before the Civil War, desperately lamented his first wife, who died before she was age twenty—a situation seemingly straight from a Poe story. For over a year, he walked to her grave each morning regardless of weather. Months after her death, he wrote in his journal, "I visited Ellen's tomb & opened the coffin;" his biographers debate if the entry records an actual disinterment or a dream. Poe's era valued grief. The examples of Griswold and Emerson render Poe's characters, such as Ligeia's husband, less extreme than modern readers might judge them.

Lastly, although Poe was often critical of the Transcendentalists (Emerson being their chief exponent), "Ligeia" seems to.

use the movement's vocabulary. Two issues in the story relate to the movement. First,

the assertion that humans can aspire to partake of the powers of God is central to Transcendental thought. Second, the narrator's observation that the awe he feels toward Ligeia's eyes is like the awe he feels toward natural phenomena recalls the musings by Emerson and others that a single, aweinspiring force infuses the universe. Sensitive thinkers could experience this great force both in communion with nature and in the contemplation of human life.

The challenge for humans was to tap into these cosmic resources within themselves.

Ligeia's revival to life may be seen as a channeling of these cosmic resources.

Thus Poe's story and Emerson's essays stand as variations on the theme of human potential.

Techniques

Poe's descriptive language presents both a source of wonder and a stumbling block for readers. He employs baroque sentences, piled on phrases, prodigious vocabulary, obscure allusions. The challenge for readers is to determine what these descriptions convey beyond the impressive-sounding words. His lengthy celebration of her appearance places Ligeia in the context of antique beauty; by referring to myths and art works of the Greeks and Moslems, Poe seeks to link Ligeia to age-old definitions of perfection and thus to take her out of time.

She becomes an enduring emblem both of feminine beauty and human aspiration.

Her eyes inspire in the narrator an awe which he feels when observing a falling meteor or a lively vine or a catalog of scenes which reflect natural power. Ligeia is like, therefore, a force of nature. Timeless and powerful, Ligeia may be a human who could battle death and succeed.

Significantly Rowena, who appears in the story only so that she can die, receives only scant description.

The narrator's description of his turret room is another example of a passage whose significance may be buried in the weight of allusions and word choices. Yet attentive reading convinces that the room displays the specific facets of his twisted psychology. The speaker fills his room with artifacts that reflect his depressed retreat from mundane reality—carvings and frets whose designs are grotesque, some even of a design named "Bedlam" after London's infamous asylum; his obsession with death—the sarcophagi; and his unsteady perception—the imprecise figures on the cloths and the trembling of the draperies. He describes his own design selections as "hideous" and "phantasmagoric."

Much of the text consists of such highly wrought description. Poe tells readers that Ligeia is intelligent rather than showing that she is via a scene.

Other tales attest that Poe could write dramatic scenes, and an excuse for not offering more scenes here could be his choice of narrator. In his long, loving appreciation for his dead wife, the narrator feels no need to prove to himself nor anyone how wondrous was the dear Ligeia. He asserts her talents and considers doing so to be enough proof. Poe does provide three scenes in the story, all concerning the deathwatches of the narrator over his two wives. In a story about the longing for renewed life, Poe focuses on scenes of death, and providing other scenes might diminish the story's stress on the moments when the will to live succumbs (or does not succumb). The primary actions of the story are dying and rising.

Themes

Sanity and Insanity

Poe uses the theme of insanity vs. insanity, and all the nuances in between, in many of his short stories, often charging his insane narrators with the futile task of proving that they are not mad. Often, in stories such as *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Imp of the Perverse*, though the respective narrators of each claim they are of sound mind and seem completely unremorseful, they are driven to confess by a persistent reminder of their crime. In other tales, such as *The Cask of Amontillado*, the narrator is unquestionably insane, and yet there is no remorse *and* no confession, and though his *actions* are insane, he is very levelheaded when it comes to their execution. Crime is not the only indicator of insanity, however. In *Ligeia*, the narrator commits no crime that is spoken of, yet there is an air of instability to his narrative. He does admit to heavy opium use, but it is his overwhelming grief and obsessive love for Ligeia that cast a questioning light on his state of mind. All this mental instability leads to a stable of unreliable narrators; Poe was a master at creating believable, unreliable narrators, so much so that many historians have cast him as much less stable than he was, instead of recognizing his skill at crafting first-person narration.

Death and Mortality

In almost all of Poe's works, death is a central issue. Whether a tale of murder (*The Cask of Amontillado*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*), a tale of horror (*The Fall of the House of Usher*), a Gothic horror romance (*Ligeia*), or an allegory (*The Masque of the Red Death*), Poe's stories, by nature of his preferred genres, are full of death. Though many of his stories deal with either the murder of someone, the solving of a murder, or the supernatural resurrection of someone who has died, it is his allegorical look at mortality, *The Masque of the Red Death*, which most clearly sums up Poe's themes of death. Here, very simply, death is seen as inevitable, something that can be avoided by no one, no matter what precautions they take or how wealthy they are. Poe used death to terrify people, as he was a writer of horror stories and most people are afraid of death. Yet he seemed fascinated by it, and with his use of dark and Gothic elements seemed to embrace it.

Isolation and Confinement

Throughout many of Poe's short stories, characters are placed in stifling, claustrophobic settings that add to the overall feeling of panic and fear. In some, such as *Ligeia* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*, most of the action occurs in one room or one house, closing off the characters to any outside influence. *The Pit and the Pendulum* takes this idea a step further, imprisoning the narrator in a dungeon. Poe highlights this theme in *The Cask of Amontillado*, in which the murderous narrator literally encloses his victim in

a tomb. In *The Masque of the Red Death*, the castle is completely cut off from any means of entrance or exit. The most intense confinement, however, can be found in the minds of Poe's narrators. While we as readers experience physical isolation (i.e. one, room, one house, one walled-up vault), the intensity of the confinement is exacerbated by the point of view of the narrators. We see the world through one set of eyes, and the thoughts of these narrators, often thoughts that are unstable at best, imprison us in a non-physical "prison" of panic and fear.

Poe loads enough references to the will and to human striving to make "Ligeia" seem to be more than the record of an hallucination. At the least, the story dramatizes the human yearning for (if not the fulfillment of) power over life and death. Ligeia masters "moral, physical, and mathematical science," but cannot exert mastery over her own being. The story allows her and her husband to achieve this godlike mastery, perhaps only as a wish-fulfillment, or perhaps as a supreme triumph of human potential.

D. H. Lawrence, in his quirky and lively Studies in ClassicAmerican Literature (1923), writes that the dominating vision in Poe's work is scientific and that Poe reduces even love stories to quests for knowledge.

Of "Ligeia," Lawrence decides, "It is a ghastly story of the assertion of human will, the will-to-love and the will-to-consciousness, asserted against death itself.

The pride of human conceit in KNOWLEDGE." The telling irony, for Lawrence, is that in their drive to assert their own consciousness, Ligeia and her husband have killed Rowena, have murdered to achieve resurrection. Lawrence complains that the murder of Rowena to give life to Ligeia has no moral impact on the characters nor on Poe. David Halliburton, in less theatrical fashion than Lawrence, makes much the same point: "It ['Ligeia'] is the strongest testimonial he ever made, in story form, for the indestructibility of life. It is insistent, indeed, to the point of taking on a self-conscious and programmatic quality. But that is what the story is about: the fact that you have to bear down, if you want to survive, with all the vital and conscious force you have . . .

The story is indeed 'psychological,' but not in the sense that Ligeia is returning only in the narrator's mind. The things that are happening in the room are really happening: the psychological interest is in the narrator's attempts to come to terms with them."

Beyond these matters of human will and human perception, "Ligeia" portrays profound human grief. Despite what seem to be his efforts to escape—drugs, new home, new wife—the narrator's grief impinges every aspect of his life. Each effort to live without Ligeia brings her more fully to his mind. The haunting question is whether the narrator has come to enjoy his misery, if he subconsciously defeats every attempt to move beyond grief. He adopts the never-ending role of grieving widower.

Biographer Kenneth Silverman argues that Poe's obsession to portray obsessive grief springs from Poe's own unresolved bereavements. Poe never knew his father, lost his mother when he was still an infant, experienced as a youth the deaths of people close to him, and through his childhood found no loving substitutes for his parents. Lacking

new parental figures, such children nurture their love of the dead person. Modern psychology theorizes that such grieving children both understand yet deny their parents' deaths, and thus cling to affection for the lost parent as if she or he were still present.

Silverman writes, "Not only does the attachment to the dead refuse to be sundered or submerged, but death itself is treated as an illusion or mistake . . . Ligeia's ultimate rebirth only dramatizes more horrifyingly how those most deeply beloved live on within oneself, never dead and ever ready to return. And Poe's need to keep writing versions of the revenant plot [the return from the dead] indicates clearly enough his own difficulty in putting the past to rest." Referring to the many deaths of loved ones that punctuate Poe's biography, Daniel Hoffman writes, "But these hapless accidents of one miserable scrivener's biography are in 'Ligeia' successfully mythologized, universalized, raised to the level of archetype."

Style

Point of View

The narrator of *Ligeia* is not unreliable in the sense that he is criminally-minded or insane, but he is somewhat obsessed with his beloved Ligeia, which puts much of what he says into question. He also admits, after her death, that he was often high on opium, which also lends his voice an air of unreliability. Unlike in other tales, however, this narrator's reliability is not so much an issue as the tale that Poe is telling is more about the love between the narrator and Ligeia, and the effects of that love, than on the actual action.

Setting

When the narrator is married to Ligeia, they live "near the Rhine," indicating a residence in Germany. After her death, much of the action moves to England - specifically, to a bridal chamber in the narrator's new home, a chamber he shares with his second wife Rowena. By confining the couple to the garish bridal chamber, Poe again uses a closed in setting to elicit feelings of stifling claustrophobia, made even stronger by the couple's obvious loathing of each other.

Language and Meaning

Poe uses flowery, poetic language to describe his true love. Of her forehead: "it was faultless — how cold indeed that word when applied to a majesty so divine!" Of her skin: "skin rivaling the purest ivory"; her hair: "raven-black, the glossy, the luxuriant and naturally-curling tresses." These are words of a poet, and Poe uses them to show his narrator's awe and reverence toward the object of his affection.

Structure

As in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Poe uses his setting and structure in tandem, creating a masterfully cohesive work that builds to the same sort of climax. As in *Usher*, the action moves in to smaller and smaller spaces as the story progresses, and with the last scenes of the book, in the bridal chamber with the narrator and a half-alive corpse, Poe builds the suspense until the final revelation of the reappearance of Ligeia.

Quotes

These quotes are taken from the Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe.

"True! - nervous - very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad?" (*The Tell-Tale Heart*, pg. 13)

"'Villains!' I shrieked, 'dissemble no more! I admit the deed! - tear up the planks! - here, here! - it is the beating of his hideous heart!'" (*The Tell-Tale Heart*, pg. 21)

"As the strong man exults in his physical ability, delighting in such exercises as call his muscles into action, so glories the analyst in that moral activity which *disentangles.*" (*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, pg. 22)

"'The riddle, so far, was now unriddled.'"(*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, pg. 57)

"Of my country and of my family I have little to say. Ill usage and length of years have driven me from the one, and estranged me from the other." (*MS. Found in a Bottle*, pg, 77)

"When I look around me I feel ashamed of my former apprehensions." (*MS. Found in a Bottle*, pg, 92)

"The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could ; but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge." (*The Cask of Amontillado*, pg. 94*)*

"*For the love of God, Montressor!*" (*The Cask of Amontillado*, pg. 104)

"There was an iciness, a sinking, a sickening of the heart - an unredeemed dreariness of thought which no goading of the imagination could torture into aught of the sublime. What was it - I paused to think - what was it that so unnerved me in the contemplation of the House of Usher ?" (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 106)

"For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold - then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated." (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 133)

"While I gazed, this fissure rapidly widened - there came a fierce breath of the whirlwind - the entire orb of the satellite burst at once upon my sight - my brain reeled as I saw the mighty walls rushing asunder - there was a long tumultuous shouting sound like the voice of a thousand waters - and the deep and dank tarn at my feet closed sullenly and silently over the fragments of the *House of Usher*." (*The Fall of the House of Usher*, pg. 133)

"Arousing from the most profound of slumbers, we break the gossamer web of some dream. Yet in a second afterward, (so frail may that web have been) we remember not that we have dreamed." (*The Pit and the Pendulum*, pg. 156)

"Amid the thought of the fiery destruction that impended, the idea of the coolness of the well came over my soul like balm. I rushed to its deadly brink. I threw my straining vision below. The glare from the enkindled roof illumined its inmost recesses. Yet, for a wild moment, did my spirit refuse to comprehend the meaning of what I saw. At length it forced — it wrestled its way into my soul — it burned itself in upon my shuddering reason. — Oh! for a voice to speak! — oh! horror! — oh! any horror but this!" (*The Pit and the Pendulum*, pg. 136)

"The 'strangeness,' however, which I found in the eyes, was of a nature distinct from the formation, or the color, or the brilliancy of the features, and must, after all, be referred to the expression." (*Ligeia,* pg. 163)

"That she loved me I should not have doubted; and I might have been easily aware that, in a bosom such as hers, love would have reigned no ordinary passion. But in death only, was I fully impressed with the strength of her affection." (*Ligeia,* pg. 168)

"I trembled not — I stirred not — for a crowd of unutterable fancies connected with the air, the stature, the demeanor of the figure, rushing hurriedly through my brain, had paralyzed — had chilled me into stone." (*Ligeia,* pg. 182)

"The scarlet stains upon the body and especially upon the face of the victim, were the pest ban which shut him out from the aid and from the sympathy of his fellow-men." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 184)

"But the Prince Prospero was happy and dauntless and sagacious. When his dominions were half depopulated, he summoned to his presence a thousand hale and light-hearted friends from among the knights and dames of his court, and with these retired to the deep seclusion of one of his castellated abbeys." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 185)

"There are chords in the hearts of the most reckless which cannot be touched without emotion. Even with the utterly lost, to whom life and death are equally jests, there are matters of which no jest can be made." (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 191)

"And the flames of the tripods expired. And Darkness and Decay and the Red Death held illimitable dominion over all" (*The Masque of the Red Death*, pg. 193)

"The intellectual or logical man, rather than the understanding or observant man, set himself to imagine designs — to dictate purposes to God." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 195)

"Through its promptings we act without comprehensible object; or, if this shall be understood as a contradiction in terms, we may so far modify the proposition as to say,

that through its promptings we act, for the reason that we should not." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 196)

"They say that I spoke with a distinct enunciation, but with marked emphasis and passionate hurry, as if in dread of interruption before concluding the brief, but pregnant sentences that consigned me to the hangman and to hell." (*The Imp of the Perverse*, pg. 209)

Key Questions

Two good starting places for the discussion of "Ligeia" are the personality of the narrator and the explanation of what happened. Do readers feel that Ligeia came back to life? If so, by what agency, her own will or her husband's will? Or is the story a record of an opium dream?

Readers could fruitfully debate the evidences for both interpretations and maybe see how Poe writes the tale in a way that resists closure.

1. Is the story about a supernatural event or a psychological disturbance?

(This is another phrasing of the issue above.)

2. How would you describe the narrator? What are his specific traits? Too often readers may be satisfied at stamping the narrator as "crazy" and delve no further. What are the sources and manifestations of his mental problems? How does drug abuse factor into his character?

3. What do the narrator's descriptions—of Ligeia, of his turret room, of Rowena's death throes—reveal about his personality? This question encourages readers to work through the very packed paragraphs and extract resonant information. How are the features of that room more than simple details written to be descriptive?

4. Describe Ligeia. What power does she exert over husband? What makes her so memorable after her death?

5. How do you interpret the narrator's efforts to restart his life? Does he want to move on? How does he regard his grief?

Does he want his grief to end? Why would he marry Rowena? These questions relate to the Kenneth Silverman's psychological analysis (discussed above) of Poe's own unresolved bereavements.

6. What does Poe seem to want to gain by inserting the poem, which did not appear in the original published version?

Why does Poe insist on citing the Glanvill quotation, using it three times? How do the poem and the quotation gloss the events of the story?

7. Is the story optimistic? Regardless of the agency, is it good for Ligeia to rise from the dead? Does her resurrection following the death of Rowena have a moral dimension? As argued above, D. H. Lawrence thought not.

8. What is the story's definition of the human will?

9. What connections does this story have with Poe's tales of ratiocination, such as the mysteries solved by Dupin?

The question broaches a larger issue of how Poe viewed the power of the human mind. In what ways does Poe express his belief in humankind's ability to control his life?

Topics for Discussion

These topics concern the general works of Edgar Allan Poe.

Explain what is meant by the term "unreliable narrator." How does Poe use this technique in different ways with different stories?

Poe has been called "the father of the detective story" - but does he go too far out of the realm of possibility by making an orangutan the killer? Defend your answer.

Are the crewmen on the "Discovery" ghosts? Is there another explanation as to why they do not acknowledge the narrator?

How does Poe portray the doppelganger, or character double, in *The Fall of the House of Usher*?

How does Poe use a closed setting in *The Pit and the Pendulum*, *The Cask of Amontillado*, and *The Fall of the House of Usher*?

What is the role of history in *The Pit and the Pendulum*? How does the reality of the action contribute to the story's terror?

Compare and contrast the narrator of *The Imp of the Perverse* with the narrator of *The Tell-Tale Heart*.

Do you believe Poe meant for us to believe in the resurrection of Ligeia as a means of proving her strength of will and the great love between herself and the narrator, or as a sign of how far the narrator's mind has slipped?

Did Ligeia poison Rowena, or did the narrator?

Literary Precedents

Poe's art derives from the Gothic tradition, a genre popular in his own time. Critic Julian Symons notes, "The Gothic novelists wanted to arouse in their readers feelings of terror and delight at the horrific plight of the central character, and they used mysterious events to enhance these feelings." Gothic writing veered into violent crime literature and ghost stories, and employed creaky mansions, malevolent characters, and deadly secrets. Poe parodies the Gothic style in his "How to Write a Blackwood Article," named for the popular Scottish monthly Blackwood's Magazine. Poe depicts Mr. Blackwood himself explaining to a spellbound disciple how to write the type of story he publishes: "There was 'The Dead Alive,' a capital thing!—the record of a gentleman's sensations when entombed before the breath was out of his body—full of taste, terror, sentiment, metaphysics, and erudition. You would have sworn that the writer had been born and brought up in a coffin . . . Sensations are the great thing after all. Should you be drowned or hung, be sure and make a note of your sensations—they may be worth to you ten guineas a sheet.. . In a Blackwood article nothing makes so fine a show as your Greek. The very letters have an air of profundity about them."

Well, Poe appropriated nearly all of these traits, including metaphysical speculation, erudite language, even Greek references (if not Greek letters) in "Ligeia" and other stories, to the extent that his attack on Blackwood's approaches self-parody.

Poe surely respected many of the elements he burlesques in the piece. As he worked in the popular Gothic genre, he infused it with his own personality, ideas, and style, and he invoked, as we see in "Ligeia," a sense of internal irony. Poe's stories do more than terrify; they invite reactions to issues of will, grief, conscience, motivation, obsession, aspiration.

"Ligeia" in particular gains its haunting power because Poe does not bring it to closure, does not resolve the mystery of what happened in the turret room.

Related Titles

Poe wrote often of obsessive love that survives the loved one's death. His famous poem "The Raven" (1845) has as its speaker a man who pines over the lost Lenore so obsessively that he turns the chance visit of the raven into an exercise in grief. The bird "croaks" a noise that sounds like the word "nevermore." So the speaker asks the bird if his grief will abate and gets the predictable reply. The very questions he chooses show that he will not allow himself to end his sorrow.

In the story "The Oblong Box," the main character secretly transports his wife's coffin, with her corpse inside, in his room during a voyage. When the ship sinks, he lashes himself to the box and submerges with it rather than separate himself from his beloved. Poe presents grieving as a full time, debilitating, and dangerous occupation.

"Ligeia" is the finest of a quartet of stories, all named for their dead heroines, in which the speakers wrestle with how to be faithful to their dead loved ones. In "Eleonora" the speaker feels absolved of the need to mourn when he finally remarries. The speaker in "Berenice" seeks souvenirs of his beloved, so opens her coffin to extract her teeth. She is still alive, but he cuts out her teeth anyway, a horrible instance of the double nature of his grief: He mourns, but he still wants her to be dead. The eponymous character in "Morella" dies in childbirth, but her spirit so takes over her child's form that the husband names his daughter for his wife, and when the daughter dies, he discovers the tomb of his wife empty.

These four women, Ligeia included, possessed such forceful personalities that they exert tremendous influences on their men after death. And in each woman the life force is strong—even Eleonora visits her beloved as a spiritual presence—such that she nearly overcomes what others perceive as death. In each couple, the woman is the dominant partner in terms of personality and intellect, but physically she is sickly. These women are peculiar combinations of internal strength and external weakness. Poe is not a prefeminist, but his works suggest a view of women as powerful and talented beings that goes beyond the expected stereotypes of the 1800s.

Poe mentioned "Morella" and "Ligeia" as variations on a theme in an oft-cited letter to Philip P. Cooke, dated September 21, 1839: "Do you remember there the gradual conviction on the part of the parent that the spirit of the first Morella tenants the person of the second? It was necessary, since 'Morella' was written, to modify 'Ligeia.' I was forced to be content with a sudden half-consciousness, on the part of the narrator, that Ligeia stood before him. One point I have not fully carried out—I should have intimated that the will did not perfect its intention— there should have been a relapse—a final one—and Ligeia (who had only succeeded in so much as to convey an idea of truth to the narrator) should be at length entombed as Rowena—the bodily alterations having gradually faded away."

Sometimes used to prove that Poe's intention was that Ligeia did in fact rise from the dead in the story, the letter may artfully dodge the question of whether the story is about

resurrection or perception. "Morella" is definitely a story of the supernatural, as proven by the empty tomb; "Ligeia" elaborates the mental state of the narrator and so complicates the issue.

Poe likewise produced stories that laud the powers of human intelligence: for example, the three detective stories in which C. Auguste Dupin solves outre and baffling crimes, "A Descent into the Maelstrom" in which a sailor figures out how to survive when his vessel plunges into a vortex, and "Maelzel's Chess-Player" in which the narrator puts together clues to explain how a machine that seems to think really works via human agency.

These tales eschew the supernatural and even avoid matters of will; they dramatize effective thinking rather than the actualization of some nebulous idea of human will power. Yet these tales of ratiocination relate to "Ligeia" in their stress on human potential. As different as such stories may be—even different in genre— they reflect Poe's optimism in the capabilities of the human mind.

G. R. Thompson has found strong echoes of the first paragraph of "Ligeia" in the opening of Poe's political satire "The Man That Was Used Up." Thompson argues that as the narrator has recreated Ligeia through his drug-assisted imagination (Thompson adheres to the theory that the narrator hallucinates Ligeia's revival), so General Smith, who had been horribly disfigured by torture, has been recreated by technology. Both stories are about absurd wish-fulfillments: Ligeia is a "parody of the ideal woman as much as the artificial General is a comic parody of the ideal man". Thompson's observations provide a way to move from discussion of Poe's Gothic tales to his comic pieces.

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