Poe's "Ligeia": Dream and Destruction
Author(s): James W. Gargano
Reviewed work(s):
Source: College English, Vol. 23, No. 5 (Feb., 1962), pp. 337-342
Published by: National Council of Teachers of English
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/373801
Accessed: 12/04/2012 20:08

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

National Council of Teachers of English is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to College English.
professors of English. I have been appealing not to you but to them, not to you who are present and already concerned but to them who are absent and unconcerned. But I appeal to them through you, because you can reach them. Each of you knows a fellow-teacher, a colleague, whose professional life can be quickened by this appeal, whose professional concern can be roused to action. Even if you are alone in your faculty or in your school in your live awareness of the deep breadth of our profession and of its need for teachers not afraid to share the responsibilities of that profession, even if you are thus unique in your isolation, you can reach them.

A philosopher has said, "A dedicated person is a majority." May your experiences at this convention, as you hear the messages of C. P. Snow tonight and other speakers in the next two days, and as you participate in the program—may these experiences so strengthen your present resolution that upon your return to your schools and colleges you can move the indifferent and win the contemptuous to active participation in the profession, to membership in the Council. Only through you and other members of the Council, present and future, can the cause of better English teaching be advanced. Yours, ours, is the responsibility to push on, together and united, earnestly and joyfully. Ours is a dedication of the spirit as we fling our souls high. Ours is keen awareness of the practical tasks that are needed as we ride the world below. This must be our new endeavor.

Poe’s “Ligeia”:
Dream and Destruction

JAMES W. GARGANO

D. H. Lawrence's subjective criticism of Edgar Allan Poe's "Ligeia" as a "tale of love pushed over a verge" is almost as sensational as Poe's story. Lawrence labels the narrator a "spiritual vampire" who obscenely commits with Ligeia a "sin against the Holy Ghost"; refusing to accept the individual isolation dictated by their separate identities, the lovers hysterically stimulate in each other the delusion of spiritual union. Moreover, Lawrence accuses the sinners of carrying on their sublime eroticism for the purpose of achieving "more consciousness, more beastly KNOWING." Even Ligeia's death, says Lawrence, does not put an end to the couple's prurience, for "the spirit of Ligeia, leagued with the spirit of her husband ... now lusts in the slow destruction of Rowena." And as a final refinement, Ligeia's "reappearance" is interpreted by Lawrence as symbolizing her insatiable desire "to have more love and knowledge, the final gratification which is never final, with her husband."

Of course, Lawrence's psychological assault upon "Ligeia" does not invite acceptance by conservative critics. Yet, their own interpretations almost always evaporate into textual summaries or obiter dicta which resemble previous obiter dicta. Lawrence, I believe, is right in treating "Ligeia" as a suggestive and symbolic complex; to take it "literally," as so many critics do, is perforce to

James W. Gargano, an associate professor at Washington and Jefferson College, has published many articles, especially on the works of Henry James.
maintain a straight face in the presence of an admittedly puerile and shabby Gothicism. Fortunately, it is becoming more embarrassing to account for Poe merely as a master of eerie effects, suspense, and mindless extravagances of thought. Still, Lawrence seems perverse in converting “Ligeia” into a transparent case history of Poe’s marriage to Virginia Clemm. (“Ligeia,” of course, was published before Virginia’s death and thus cannot possibly deal with Poe’s emotions upon his bereavement.) What finally emerges from the famous essay on Poe in Studies in American Literature is a work in which the typically Laurentian story of “obscene” spiritual love engulfs the critical analysis of Poe.

I believe that “Ligeia” can best be understood as the tale of a man (the narrator and not Poe) who, having once inhabited the realm of the Ideal, seeks even unto madness to recreate his lost ecstasy. Poe’s story dramatizes the romantic’s disenchantment with a world drained of its power to arouse joy and a sense of elevated being. His theme, typically romantic, has its affinities with Wordsworth’s loss of the “visionary gleam,” Coleridge’s “dejection,” and Shelley’s sharp outbursts of disillusionment. The narrator “Ligeia” resembles many other romantic heroes (and some romantic poets) in his agonized search for an ideal fulfillment once mystically achieved or fitfully envisioned. However, Poe differs from most of the early English romanticists in his dramatic and thus relatively objective exploration of his literary problem; his stories, at their best, are not mere lyrical releases, but psychological investigations pursued through vicarious dramas or exciting daydreams. It is as if in his works he experimentally empowers a facet of the self, often imagined as the total self, to seek its full development or to discover its own destiny. Of course, Poe’s narrative thus becomes “personal” because there are real issues at stake in all daydreams; nevertheless, the author retains a measure of impersonality because, for all its intensity, his vicarious drama is not ineluctably “real.” In “Ligeia,” then, the narrator must not be considered as a mere autobiographical disguise or mask; he is for Poe a remarkably interesting subject, a man who mistakes his journey into madness for the culminating achievement of a spiritual quest.

In his protagonist, Poe explores the consequences of man’s uncontrolled surrender to his dreams. First of all, his “hero” escapes into an Ideality which provides such an encompassing satisfaction that the real world forever becomes a dismal, minatory abyss. After the eclipse of his vision, the narrator enters a second stage: he now attempts to compensate for his loss by artificially inducing ecstasy through wild fantasies calculated to distract him from his grief. In the third distinct phase of his history, he descends into the real world by marrying Rowena “in a moment of mental alienation.” Finally, considering his alliance with reality a profanation of his earlier “marriage” to the Ideal, he insanely “triumphs” over the actual world by resurrecting Ligeia and re-establishing as a permanent condition the reign of the spirit she represents.

Ligeia symbolizes the narrator’s dream and the cause of his destruction, the height and color of his aspiration and the symptom of his romantic disease. Her rare and garish poetic qualities transform her into what might be regarded as an adolescent’s personification of imaginative and exalted being. Appropriately, she is compounded of vagueness, mystery, strange beauty, and wild passion. Obviously an apotheosis of the poetic vision, she lacks a local habitation and a name; the narrator cannot recall when or where he first met her and, though she becomes his wife, he confesses that he never knew her “paternal name.” The spirit of “Romance” presided, we are
Poe's "Ligeia": Dream and Destruction

Of course, the intensity of the mystical vision cannot be long sustained. Indeed, in "The Poetic Principle" Poe himself declares, in arguing that a moving poem must be short, that "all excitements are, through a psychical necessity, transient." The narrator, then, cannot continue to possess his Ligeia any more than Poe's other protagonists can preserve their Lenores, Irenes, or Ulalumes from the grave. Disenchantment is the guerdon of thrilling fantasy; the knight in Keats's poem must wake up from his dream to find himself on "the cold hillside." The romantic ecstasy is also transient because through it he has trespassed into eternal or forbidden realms which he may glimpse but not long inhabit. The brief bliss of Keats's heroes with Lamia or La Belle Dame Sans Merci has about it a frenzy which suggests the illicit and the sinful. Well might Poe's hero fear that his love for Ligeia makes available to him "a wisdom too divinely precious not to be forbidden!"

Yet, though the narrator of Ligeia cannot be forever "married" to the Ideal, he will be forever haunted by it. His life will be a continuous quest for it, a dream or nightmare of it; for he cannot finally admit to himself that "the transcendentalism in which [he and Ligeia] were immersed" is irrecoverable. His wife, then, will not yield herself "unto death utterly," in spite of her own poetic admission "That the play is the tragedy, 'Man,'/And its hero the Conqueror Worm." Poe's narrator is caught in the dilemma of the romanticist compelled to descend from the peaks where eternal values immutably reign into a world that is fragmented, dreary, and mutable. Incapable of making any real commitment to an invidiously, lower plane of existence, he must remain the victim-lover of obsession and dream.

The loss of his "vision" drives the narrator into an "utter abandonment" which he describes as "incipient madness." Although he presumably attempts
to alleviate his grief, he actually seems, in this second stage of his life, to plunge into substitute and counterfeit and equally "forbidden" excitements. Certainly, his retreat into a gloomy English abbey is a fascinated discovery and exploration of macabre and wild sensations. He becomes "a bounden slave in the trammels of opium" and seeks incessant psychic agitation from the "creations" of a perverted and ingenious imagination. The tufted gold carpets of "Bedlam patterns" and the "gorgeous and fantastic draperies" are merely details in the total hallucination into which he wishes to escape. Certainly, he regards immersion in the grotesque and phantasmagoric as preferable to a fall into the slough of ordinary life. The "leaden-hued" Venetian glass, the Saracenic censer, the "sarcophagus of black granite," and the "strong continual current of wind behind the draperies," all make the "bridal chamber" emblematic of mental and emotional disorder, but they also suggest the exquisite pleasure which man can derive from the staging and intensification of his own suffering. His conscious participation in his unique doom (and most of Poe's characters consider themselves victims of fate) is jealously cherished as conferring extraordinary distinction upon him. Indeed, one sometimes wonders whether the bereft romantic is not more happy with his heightened anguish than he was with his original vision.

There is no doubt, however, of the dreary insufficiency of the "real" world for Poe's narrator. Following both his abandonment to Ligeia and his abandonment to sensuous excesses, his marriage to Rowena demonstrates that he cannot content himself with "ordinary" life. He confesses that he married her "in a moment of alienation" from Ligeia and he describes his first month with her as made up of "unhallowed hours." Clearly, he considers his second marriage an act of infidelity to his first wife, a momentary repudiation of his once ideal existence. By bringing Rowena into his chamber of horrors, he refuses to subscribe to the values or accept the responsibilities which govern common humanity. There is not even a hint that he entertains a single gentle or chivalric feeling for his new wife. He loathes the reality she represents, and while he delights in the pain he inflicts upon her he "revelled in recollections of [Ligeia's] purity, of her wisdom, of her lofty, her ethereal nature, of her passionate, her idolatrous love."

At this crucial point in his life, the narrator has moved beyond the stage of "incipient madness." Now, he attempts through sheer will and desire to impose his ideal vision of things upon an intractable reality. He is aided in his attempt by his unnatural seclusion, by his addiction to opium, and by the wholesome stimulation induced by the lurid, Gothic furniture and devices that clutter his "bridal chamber." Certainly, he goads himself into the insanity through which he will realize his passionate hopes:

In the excitement of my opium dreams (for I was habitually fettered in the shackles of the drug) I would call aloud upon her name, during the silence of the night, or among the sheltered recesses of the glens by day, as if, through the wild eagerness, the solemn passion, the consuming ardor of my longing for the departed, I could restore her to the pathways she had abandoned—oh, could it be forever?—upon the earth

The hysterical appeals for the return of Ligeia have of course a causal connection with the illness of Rowena. Symbolically, the former must rescue him from what the narrator of The Fall of the House of Usher calls the "bitter lapse into every-day life—the hideous dropping off of the veil."

The last act of the narrator's drama begins with the fading away of the real world and the gradual reemergence of the poetic or ideal world. Little by little,
he endows Ligeia with increasing vitality; in other words, he wills more and more life into his returning vision. Expectedly, she first appears like a "shadow of a shade," but she soon becomes emboldened to act as an instrument of death by pouring "three or four drops of a brilliant and ruddy colored fluid" into Rowena's wine. In reporting these supernatural occurrences, the narrator declares that his imagination had been "rendered morbidly active" by terror, opium, and the darkness. Yet, though he may not accurately account for what happened outside of himself, he faithfully explains his internal drama. Obviously, he madly "destroys" the world of objective fact and remakes it nearer to the heart's desire; Ligeia, as surrogate, merely performs deeds for which, refusing to accept responsibility, he must invent a fantastic agency.

The end of the story presents the absorbing psychological spectacle of the narrator's complete withdrawal into an all-absorbing private fantasy. This withdrawal, which reaches a pathological climax in the resurrection of Ligeia, is realized in distinct stages of passionate willing. Materializing at the bedside of the supposedly dead Rowena, each stage is preceded by the narrator's almost violent concentration on the image of Ligeia. First of all, his revery is interrupted by a "low, gentle" sob from the deathbed; though he deceives himself into thinking that the sound came from Rowena, he does admit that "my soul was awakened within me." When the momentary burst of life fades from the corpse, he again gives himself up "to passionate waking visions of Ligeia." As expected, new life is suffused into Ligeia now struggling to be embodied in Rowena; in this second stage there appears a "partial glow upon the forehead and upon the cheek and throat." A greater vitality than before now animates the body on the bed, only to be followed by more complete evidences of death.

For the third time, the narrator sinks "into visions of Ligeia" that recall "life" to the lady beside him. This pattern of alternating life and death is reënacted through the night: the "hideous drama of revivification" goes on like a preposterous melodrama; yet, symbolically, each wild meditation on Ligeia is an assertion of the narrator's desire and will. Finally, the lover annihilates death and reality by the leap into insanity which converts life into what he wishes it to be. He has regained, at the cost of his reason, the revelation of spiritual beauty and perfection represented by Ligeia: "'Here, then, at last,' I shrieked aloud, 'can I never be mistaken—these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes—of my lost love—of the Lady—of the LADY LIGEIA.'"

Significantly, despite his occasionally uncanny acumen, the narrator has so thoroughly duped or bewitched himself that he does not understand what is happening to him. His conscious self almost willfully blinds itself to the frantic activity of the subconscious self. In a sense, indeed, the whole story may be taken as an account of the disintegration of responsible and rational consciousness. Even when the narrator resurrects Ligeia from the grave he confronts the miracle he has performed with dismay and wonder. In the actualizing presence of his new creation, he does not know what he is creating; until almost the last moment, when he acknowledges Ligeia's identity, he forces himself into believing that Rowena and not her predecessor is returning to life. At the end of the story, then, the narrator has escaped his inhibitory reason, weakened by drugs, abandonment to fantasy, grotesque environment, and maddening seclusion. He does not know that his recovery of his Ideal world is the delusion of a lunatic.

On the basis of this reading of "Ligeia," it seems to me uncritical to identify Poe with his narrator. Even if
Poe underwent in real life most of his protagonist's experiences, it must be remembered that he returned to reality to write his tale. Moreover, as artist he clearly understood what his hero or alter ego did not, for at the critical point where his character fiercely possesses his dream, Poe displays a completely realistic grasp of the situation. He knows only too well that the wages of protracted romantic self-indulgence are self-deception and ultimate madness.

Hawthorne's Choice:
The Veil or the Jaundiced Eye

ROBERT W. COCHRAN

In his stories "Young Goodman Brown" and "The Minister's Black Veil," Hawthorne presents the opposite extremes of reaction to mankind within a single alternative view of man's nature. Both young Goodman Brown and the Reverend Mr. Hooper view men as sinners. Yet Brown ends his life in darkness, disillusionment, and despair; whereas Mr. Hooper achieves a steady acceptance of life through relative enlightenment, a total recognition of sin and sorrow, and a firm belief in a traditional afterlife.

Such an interpretation of "The Minister's Black Veil" is at sharp variance with the consensus view that Hooper, like Brown, lives out his days and enters the grave the victim of a dark obsession. In his admirably balanced reading of "The Minister's Black Veil," R. H. Fogle interprets the tale as mirroring the ambiguity of life in a parallel ambiguity of meaning. But the veil can be more definitely identified, without the oversimplification of which Mr. Hooper's parishioners are guilty and without arriving at what Fogle terms "a single dogmatic conclusion."

The Reverend Mr. Hooper is regularly said to indulge in a special form of self-pity, masochistic at base: Hooper is characterized by Fogle as having an "infatuated love of mystification." The best that may be said of Hooper, in keeping with the generally accepted interpretation of his actions, is to be found in a question Fogle raises:

... is it possible that we can go further afield and determine that the message of the veil is representative and universal: that the failure to recognize it is simply the last and most chilling proof of man's imprisonment within himself?

Considering the implications of his question with respect to Hawthorne's problem of achieving artistic unity, Fogle concludes:

... in order to present forcibly the tragic isolation of one man, Hawthorne is obliged to consider society as a solid group arrayed against his hero, ignoring for the time being the fact that this hero is Everyman.

But, to pursue the direction of Fogle's question yet a step further, Hawthorne's hero is not Everyman: Hooper's experi-

---


*The author, an assistant professor at the University of Vermont, received his degree from Indiana and Michigan. He is a member of the School and College Liaison Committee of the New England Association of Teachers of English.*