POE'S ETHEREAL LIGEIA

JACK L. DAVIS AND JUNE H. DAVIS

Although numerous literary critics have examined Poe's "Ligeia," some at considerable lengths, no single scholar has yet presented an interpretation which does justice to its complexity of technique and meaning. Poe himself once observed in a letter to Griswold that "Ligeia" was the "loftiest" of his tales, requiring for its composition the "highest imagination." Criticism of "Ligeia" can be roughly grouped into two categories: the traditional view which interprets the story as a literal tale of the supernatural, and the psychological view which interprets the story as happening on both the literal and psychological level. D. H. Lawrence, for example, took "Ligeia" to be a presentation of Ligeia's reincarnation in Rowena, whose body she obtains by supernatural murder.2

Of the more recent critics, James Schroeter perhaps best represents those who continue to take the traditional literal view that "Ligeia" is intended to be no more than a simple tale of supernatural reincarnation.3 Schroeter remarks that if Poe had intended it to be something more, he would have presented a factual story simultaneously with the supernatural one. What Schroeter fails to understand is that Poe does precisely that. Apparently Schroeter has been misled by the deceptively simple surface of a highly structured story which functions on both an imagined and a factual level. Schroeter's misreading is understandable because in a number of other stories, for example, "The Sphinx" and "The Premature Burial", Poe directly demarcates the imaginary level from the real. But in "Ligeia" Poe's approach is sophisticated; he leaves the reader to differentiate between imagined and factual events on the basis of clues subtly disclosed throughout the story. In contrast, in stories of ratiocination such as "The Purloined Letter," Poe not only discloses the clues, he divulges their meaning. In "Ligeia," however, the reader is on his own. Since the clues in "Ligeia" are revealed unobtrusively, it is not surprising that many readers continue to interpret the story simply as a literal account of supernatural events; such a reading, however, is particularly difficult to justify because Poe has indicated in "The Philosophy of Composition" that he attempts to remain "within the limits of the accountable—of the real."4

On the other hand, some critics have perceived the multilevel structure

---

3James Schroeter, "A Misreading of Poe's 'Ligeia'," PMLA, LXXVI (September 1961), 397-406.
4See Poe's "Philosophy of Composition," Literary Criticism of Edgar Allan Poe (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1965), p. 31. We are indebted to Professor G. R. Thompson for calling our attention to this observation.
of "Ligeia," although few of them have offered systematic support for their readings. Of these critics, Roy P. Basler, although too often sidetracked on irrelevant psychological considerations, comes the closest to an adequate explanation.\(^5\) He argues that Poe constructed "Ligeia" in a Jamesian fashion as a two-level story composed of the invented account with which the narrator intends to deceive us and the actual story that he inadvertently reveals. Although Basler thus comes close to uncovering the real meaning of "Ligeia," he misses the crucial significance of Ligeia's dream-like character in the first half of the story, which concerns the narrator's hallucinated vision of his "life" with Ligeia. Basler, in interpreting the second half of the story, which treats the narrator's life with Rowena and Ligeia's apparent reincarnation in Rowena, does suggest correctly that the narrator unconsciously discloses his murder of Rowena.\(^6\) Basler recognizes that the narrator's account of Ligeia's reincarnation is actually a description of his own opium-induced hallucination. Thus, Basler rightly asserts that Poe intends us to understand that Ligeia's revivification exists only in the mind of the narrator. On the literal level, the story reveals the murder of Rowena by the deluded narrator in order to provide a body for his departed first wife. But because Basler has ignored the first half of "Ligeia," he fails to see that the narrator's earlier account of his experiences with Ligeia also functions on the imaginary level. In reality, there is no physical Ligeia: thus the horror of the narrator's murder of Rowena is intensified when the reader discovers that the deluded narrator has murdered her to bring back an entirely imaginary first wife. This recognition not only adds a new dimension to the story, but reveals how perceptively Poe succeeded in penetrating the complex workings of a deranged mind.\(^7\)

The story proliferates with hints that Ligeia is only a figment of the narrator's imagination (which no doubt explains why those who persist in interpreting "Ligeia" as a real character find it so difficult to give convincing logic and unity to their analyses). In the first paragraph the narrator reveals he cannot remember exactly how or where he first met Ligeia. Thus Poe early arouses his reader's suspicions of a narrator who seems to have unaccountably forgotten both how and where he first met his wife. A perceptive reader will later realize that such a lapse is entirely consistent in a narrator who knows Ligeia only through his opium hallucinations but who wants to present her as a real and credible person. The narrator cannot admit, of

---


\(^6\)Typical devices used in "Ligeia" and other Poe stories are murder and revivification. Murder is involved in "The Black Cat" and in "The Fall of the House of Usher." Revivification is a motif in "Morella," "Berenice," and "The Fall of the House of Usher."

\(^7\)James W. Gargano points out that Poe "is a serious artist who explores the neuroses of his characters with probing intelligence." See "The Question of Poe's Narrators," *College English*, XXV (December 1963), 177-181.
course, that Ligeia is a dream because she represents the only reality his psychotic vision apprehends.  

Poe provides another early clue to Ligeia’s visionary quality when the narrator discloses he also cannot remember her last name. Again, this is an extremely odd circumstance, unless the reader realizes the narrator is simply having difficulty in finding sufficient credible detail to describe a purely visionary figure. In the second paragraph, Poe gives the reader further intimations of Ligeia’s illusory nature. Here the narrator more overtly betrays the nature of his hallucination when he remarks that Ligeia’s face had the “radiance of an opium dream”—this is indeed no ordinary dream figure.

Throughout the tale, Poe continually intrudes clues to keep the story functioning on two levels. For example, the way Ligeia once entered the narrator’s study seems to represent the way she enters his mind each time he imaginatively sees her. It is revealing that she did not walk into the room like a real woman, but “came and departed as a shadow” (p. 654). For she is a shadow, literally an apparition. Even her voice is unreal, for the narrator describes it as “dear music,” “low” and “sweet” (p. 654).

The narrator further describes her beauty in such exaggerated terms that the reader should realize he is not expected to accept her as real; and it is at this point that Poe undercuts the credibility of the narrator by having him quote Bacon, “There is no exquisite beauty . . . without some strangeness in the proportion” (p. 655). Yet the narrator has just finished describing Ligeia as having absolutely no imperfection—except perhaps the implied imperfection of being unreal. Poe has the narrator himself concede that “in my heated fancy thus it [her beauty] appeared perhaps—the beauty of beings either above or apart from the earth” (p. 655). This suggests that Ligeia is certainly no mortal, but a creation of the “heated fancy” of an opium dream; and later, he remarks on her “ethereal” nature (p. 661). Placed within a catalog of conventional attributes, the adjective subtly iterates her unreality.

Poe’s purpose in all this would seem to be at least twofold. For one thing, as an imaginary creature Ligeia is a most suitable female for a narrator who is clearly psychotic, and her substitution for a real person well belies the sanity of the narrator. A second reason consistent with the deranged state of the narrator is that his creation of Ligeia gives him a chance to delve imaginatively into esoteric knowledge. The search for forbidden knowledge appears to be an obsession with the narrator and helps explain why he presents Ligeia as a hyper-intelligent woman.

---

8The narrator of “Berenice” makes a similar mistake: “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 materials of my everyday existence, but in very deed that existence utterly and solely in itself.” The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe (New York: Modern Library Edition, 1938), p. 643. Hereafter page numbers in the text will refer to this volume.
The narrator's account of Ligeia's staggering intelligence should be taken by the reader as yet another clue to her unreality. In fact, it is through the narrator's projection of his own psychological state upon Ligeia that his psychosis is fully revealed. For example, the narrator reports he is subject to alternating moods of great optimism and deep despair. The times he feels most optimistic appear to be when Ligeia is closest to him and he seems nearly able to grasp the wisdom he imagines she possesses. Conversely, his utmost despair comes when he finally perceives that she is dying and has not yet delivered up the knowledge he so frantically seeks. He must try another stratagem. Perhaps if Ligeia passes into death, she will attain a fuller knowledge of life and death. The only difficulty then will be in situating her so that she can transmit the knowledge back to him. It is probably at this point that the narrator conceives his mad scheme of procuring a body for the returning Ligeia to inhabit.

The theme of the search for forbidden knowledge appears elsewhere in Poe's work. As Clark Griffith points out, "Poe's tales of terror frequently picture the human mind in its gradual advance upon esoteric knowledge," and he cites "MS. Found in a Bottle" and "The Fall of the House of Usher" as stories where this quest takes place. In "Ligeia," Poe gives us some clues that the knowledge sought by the narrator involves the mystery of life and death. He prefaces "Ligeia" with a statement he attributes to Joseph Glanvill:

And the will therein lieth, which dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigor? For God is but a great will pervading 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. (p. 654)

This then is the mystery the narrator seeks: he desperately hopes to escape death. And it is logical that he would need to bring Ligeia to death in order to test the validity of Glanvill's proposition. Besides, the narrator has some evidence for feeling Ligeia may be able to conquer death since, in his mind, she is possessed of an extraordinary will to live. Thus, her encounter with death should verify whether she has sufficient will to conquer death and return with the forbidden knowledge.

To sustain the story on two levels, Poe uses numerous devices such as self-contradiction to keep the reader constantly aware of the narrator's distortion of reality. For example, when the distraught narrator receives the dying Ligeia's poem, "The Conqueror Worm," he professes not to understand its meaning, although the poem like its alleged creator is entirely a product of his overwrought imagination. However, the poem clearly contradicts the narrator's hope for immortality, asserting that man has no power to determine his destiny during either life or death. As such, the poem functions both as a symbol of the narrator's powerful but unconscious fear

---

of death and as antithesis to (and implied contradiction of) the introductory statement attributed to Glanvill.

Another persuasive clue that Ligeia is a hallucination occurs just before her death when, the narrator reports, she confessed what amounted to her idolatrous love for him. But he betrays himself by revealing that only after her death was he “fully impressed with the strength of her affection” (p. 658). And nowhere else in the story do we find any evidence that she cared at all about him. At this point, the reader begins to realize that these unbelievable love confessions are not Ligeia’s but are, in reality, further delusions of the narrator.

After the narrator has ushered his imaginary Ligeia into the mysteries of death, he needs to retrieve her with the newly obtained knowledge. To accomplish this, he decides to supply her with a body in which she can be reincarnated, although, of course, he cannot allow himself to recognize that he is thus intending murder. He finds what he is looking for in the fair Rowena (Ligeia’s polar opposite) whom he quickly marries. Poe gives the reader ample evidence that the narrator ultimately intends to murder her when he has the narrator reveal the terrifying details of the newlyweds’ home, a dilapidated abbey. The narrator discloses, while he is elaborately furnishing the bridal chamber, that he “gave way with a child-like perversity, and perchance a faint hope of alleviating [his] sorrows, to a display of more than regal magnificence within” (p. 660). Here the first clue to the narrator’s horrendous plans for his bride is the word perversity. A further clue is his statement that such perversity gives him hope. Apparently, he subconsciously believes that Rowena’s death will somehow prepare the way for Ligeia’s return. The narrator admits that “incipient madness” lay behind his choice of decor. He vividly remembers the details of the apartment’s furnishings, yet he cannot supply any reason for having decorated it as he did. Thus, Poe gives us yet another clue through direct contradiction, for the narrator has just told us that the scheme shows incipient madness. At this point the narrator also tells us that he had “become a bounden slave in the trammels of opium.” This statement should then make the reader wary about taking the next one at face value: “I minutely remember the details of the chamber—yet I am sadly forgetful on topics of deep moment; and there was no system, no keeping, in the fantastic display, to take hold upon the memory” (p. 660). This of course is a lie: the idea of death for Rowena lay behind all the hideously fantastic ornamentation. The entire decor of the bridal chamber is a projection of the murder wish in the narrator’s mind. This is the reality of the story.

Not only does Poe have the narrator furnish the chamber with images of the forthcoming murder (five black sarcophagi, a serpentine image dominating the censer, and the so-called bridal couch with its pall-like canopy resembling a coffin), but he gives us further evidence of the narrator’s subconsciously premeditated plans. The ghastly draperies, made more fearsome
by the narrator's introduction of an artificial wind current, the predominant black, and the pervasive gloominess of the whole chamber are all externalizations of the narrator's intentions of murder. Apparently, he hopes to frighten Rowena to death by creating an overwhelmingly oppressive environment. Outwardly, the narrator pretends to be appalled, not by the deadly chamber, but by Rowena's parents turning over a beloved daughter to a man who would bring her into such an environment. Therefore he projects the responsibility for Rowena's coming murder upon her parents, saying that their lust for gold has betrayed Rowena into the hands of a madman. By this rationalization the narrator absolves himself of blame for her death. In his delusion, he reasons that Rowena's parents could have prevented the marriage and thus saved their daughter; but since they chose not to, he had no alternative but to kill her.

To intensify the horror of Rowena's murder by the narrator, Poe lets the reader know Rowena's full name, where she came from, and who her parents were. Such detailed information, including the use of a real instead of an imaginary name such as Ligeia, helps establish her as a real person. What a contrast this is to the lack of similar information about Ligeia. Furthermore, the description of Rowena's reactions to the narrator and the bridal chamber adds to the reader's sense of her reality. We can be quite sure her fright is well founded. Poe's use of the menacing environment is paralleled elsewhere—most strikingly in "The Fall of the House of Usher" in which the gruesome old house, whose interior greatly resembles that of the abbey, was also instrumental in the death of the main characters.

We are given further clues for reading "Ligeia" on two levels when the narrator mentions his opium addiction several times. The most crucial event in the story, the apparent revivification of Ligeia who seemingly poisons Rowena and then takes over her body, occurs when the narrator is admittedly at the height of an opium hallucination. Poe has thus prepared the reader to disbelieve the narrator's account that the "gentle foot-fall" he hears during the poisoning scene belongs to the returning Ligeia. The reader should be even less inclined to accept the narrator's intimation that the "three or four large drops of a brilliant and ruby colored fluid" are poison from the hand of Ligeia. This last is obviously one more fiction by which the narrator hopes to evade responsibility for his own murderous act. The narrator's fictitious relation may be transposed into an account of how he has contrived to poison Rowena. There can be no reasonable doubt that the narrator has killed his real wife under the mad delusion that he is thereby providing a body for the imaginary Ligeia to inhabit. The reader can now fully appreciate the irony of this horrible murder. The narrator has destroyed his real wife in a psychotic attempt to realize a purely imaginary one. Thus, when the reincarnated Ligeia appears to rise from the deathbed, she does so only on the fictitious level. She has been recreated in the madness of the narrator's mind, but nowhere else. The story ends with the
narrator temporarily happy with his imaginary Ligeia. But the narrator's triumph must be short lived. There was and is no Ligeia. And neither is there a Rowena any more.

Mr. Davis (B.A., M.A., Washington State University; Ph.D., University of New Mexico) is Assistant Professor of English at the University of Idaho. His article "Roger Williams Among the Narragansett Indians" appears in the December 1970 issue of The New England Quarterly. He and his wife have recently collaborated on articles about T. S. Eliot and Flannery O'Connor. Mrs. Davis is working toward her Ph.D. in American Studies at Washington State University.