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## Discovering Ligeia: Immortality, Transcendentalism and the Search for the Unknown

Edgar Allan Poe's 'Ligeia' is one of the most simultaneously celebrated and contested of all his works. In scholarship, there is debate over many facets of the tale, including the sanity and reliability of the narrator, the cause of Rowena's death, the truth behind Ligeia's revival and the questionability of her existence. While a multitude of theories have been mounted in addressing these points, the results are frequently inconclusive, owing to the seemingly deliberate lack of evidence provided within the story sufficient for solving the mystery it presents. Rather than attempting to extract answers to the many unknowns, this essay will instead locate the larger questions surrounding immortality that the story imparts. First, a broad interpretation of the tale will be offered, followed and supported by an analysis of the passage in which Rowena meets her death.

Individual interpretations aside, there can be no debate that one of the story's most central questions pertains to the notion of human mortality. Evidence of this is provided in the opening epigraph attributed to Joseph Glanvill, which is repeated throughout the story. The epigraph claims, 'Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor to death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will.' Inextricably linked to the story's central concern (or indeed any consideration of mortality) are considerations of man, his origins, and his relationship to the universe. In Eden, it was Adam's desire for forbidden knowledge, prompted by Eve, that led to his separation from God. This separation involved confinement to: Earth, to the bounds of time, to an awareness of sexuality and drive towards carnal desires (Adam and Eve became aware of their nakedness) and, most importantly, to eventual death. What resulted from this event for the rest of mankind was an intertwined desire for the immortality that was thwarted, and the knowledge of how to achieve it.

It is this drive against death, occasioned by the fall of man, that motivates the central action of Poe's story. The narrator subscribes to the seemingly more hopeful view that Glanvill proposes, which contends that by strength of will, humans can evade death. By contrast, Ligeia subscribes to the more dismal, nihilistic view presented in her story 'The Conqueror Worm'. This story tells of a play in which a hapless crowd (representing mankind) repeatedly chase a 'Phantom' in vain, before eventually being consumed by the ruthless 'Conqueror Worm.' The story alludes to man's futile quest for the unknowable or unattainable (the 'Phantom') in life, and to the inevitable result of life itself – death.

For the narrator, Ligeia is the embodiment of the unattainable knowledge that is tied to the

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prospect of immortality. Utterly transfixed by her exotic, ethereal beauty, the 'magical melody of her voice', her 'stern passion', 'gigantic volition', and familiarity with 'divinely precious' transcendental doctrine, he detects in her some great sense of dynamic power, of the unknown, and of 'God's great will.' His feelings about Ligeia's mysterious power are perhaps most pronounced when he reflects on the mystery of her eyes. 'How frequently', he writes, 'in my intense scrutiny of Ligeia's eyes, have I felt approaching the full knowledge of their expression – felt it approaching - yet not quite be mine - and so at length entirely depart!' Ligeia is the symbol for the knowledge of the whole universe, which, in his subconscious desire for immortality, he desires to possess, but which he continually fails to obtain. He becomes obsessed with and destroyed by the overwhelming force that is Ligeia, the former evidenced in his rambling praise of her, the latter in his actions following her death. After her death, he retreats from life into a dark abbey in a desolate corner of England, he sabotages his relationship with the living Rowena through neglect, he becomes enslaved to opium, and he cannot rid his mind of thoughts about his beloved. His obsession culminates with Ligeia's possession of Rowena, yet it remains uncertain as to whether Ligeia's reincarnation was merely an opium-fuelled hallucination that reflected his unconscious desire to prove the possibility of human immortality, or a supernatural miracle resulting from sheer strength of will (either his, hers, or a combination of the two). Either way, Ligeia, (whatever she 'is' or represents, and whether or not she is real, or a creation of his mind), has essentially destroyed the narrator.

In their efforts at achieving and understanding immortality, both the narrator and Ligeia reach a dismal ending – the narrator has retreated from life, perhaps even from reality, while Ligeia has had to displace another life in order to continue her own in a parasitic, disturbing manner that perverts nature and seems to reflect the action of the worm in her story. The result of both their actions is death – for the narrator, a symbolic death, for Ligeia, the death of another. With his story, Poe suggests that attempts at achieving or studying immortality are futile, because death is the ultimate, unconquerable force of our universe. He shows that those who attempt to fight death are ultimately constrained to a life that is not worth living – especially the narrator, but even those like Ligeia, who in some sense succeed in their attempts. The tale has provided no concrete conclusions on the finer points (for example, is Ligeia even real? Which parts were imagined? Was it the narrator who killed Rowena? Is the narrator a victim or a villain?) but rather it has disconcerted the reader, embroiling him in a never-ending conundrum in which he grapples with questions about the smaller details of the story that he senses are unanswerable but which nevertheless, he feels compelled to pursue. The reader thus finds himself in a confronting position not unlike the narrator and the characters in 'The Conqueror Worm', each of whom have desperately searched for meaning 'in a circle, that ever returneth to the same self spot'. Terry Heller aptly describes this as 'that ironic level, at which the story mocks the reader.' Just as the narrator is tormented by Ligeia, and by the mysteries of the universe which she represents (whether or not she is even 'real'), so too is the reader tormented by the riddle

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of the tale.

By carefully studying Poe's language, his genius in achieving this effect on readers is made more clear. He ensures the enigmatic nature of the tale by imbuing it with a set of contradictions and ambiguities which result in a multitude of possible interpretations of the story's smaller details, none of which can be entirely proven or ruled out. The use of first person narration binds readers to the narrator and inclines them, at least initially, to trust him. The logical, clear and very detailed manner in which he relates even the most fantastical events further cements the reader's trust, leading one to believe the narrator is a sane and hapless 'victim' who has simply found himself in a very unusual circumstance. Such lucidity and specificity is evident in his description of the 'spirit' he senses at Rowena's deathbed. He describes, 'I saw that there lay upon the golden carpet, in the very middle of the rich lustre thrown from the censer, a shadow – a faint, indefinite shadow of angelic aspect, such as might be fancied the shadow of a shade.' The specificity of this description triggers the formation of an image in the reader's mind, which helps to render it more 'real.' The same goes for the description of the return of the dead Ligeia. Moreover, the narrator's constant questioning of his own perceptions (for example when he says of the shadow, '[it was] a circumstance which must have been the suggestion of a vivid imagination, rendered morbidly active by the terror of the lady, by the opium and by the hour') paradoxically increases one's belief that he is an honest witness, since he bothered to include these admissions at all.

Conversely, there are also elements of this passage which cause one to doubt the actuality of the story he recounts. For example, the supernatural nature of the events themselves and the thrice repeated comment that he was on opium during their occurrence. Perhaps most notably, the wild vision he sees at Rowena's deathbed as he gazes up at the terrifyingly decorated bridal chamber (perhaps a perverted homage to his deceased beloved) and the 'thousand memories of Ligeia' that rush upon him as he views the dead Rowena seem to suggest that the narrator plays a very active role in bringing Ligeia back, as though it is his frenzied and deliberate meditations which occasion her return. Ronald Beiganowksi convincingly argues that Ligeia's return, perhaps even her very existence, is a primarily linguistic act that relies on the narrator's 'utterances and remembrances as the resource for bringing her image before his fancy.' He drags her back from the world of the dead, Beiganowksi argues, through the sheer power of language and by the strength of his own will; by 'calling upon her name during the silence of the night...as if [he] could restore her to the pathway she had abandoned upon earth.'

In describing the events of his deathbed vigil, the narrator recounts a process starting with his intense longing, with the thought of Ligeia; he notes sounds ('inarticulate breathings of the wind'), passes 'some palpable though invisible object', hears 'a gentle foot fall' and sees 'four or five drops of a brilliant ruby coloured fluid' enter Rowena's glass. Finally, the image takes shape, reaching completeness in the final saying of her name, which is essentially where

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the story began. Beiganowksi believes the story, which continually calls attention to its own 'narrated' nature, causes the reader to undergo an experience which mirrors the narrator's in that Ligeia becomes a reality, albeit a confounding and mysterious one, which is brought before us through the combined power of words and imagination. Readers find themselves in a position whereby they are contemplating this seemingly 'real' Ligeia, and yet simultaneously attempting to decipher the legitimacy of her existence through examinations of the narrator who describes her. Poe thus forces the reader to confront the psychological, spiritual and 'unknowable' realms, a process that mirrors the process of the tale's protagonist, but also one which appears to have no possible or comfortable conclusion, and serves to disconcert.

Even after numerous readings and deep contemplations, readers cannot be sure whether the narrator is honest, insane, sane but deceptive, or merely the victim of an opium addiction that causes delusion. They cannot be sure whether Ligeia is real, imagined, supernaturally endowed or initially 'real' then, after her death – the product of the narrator's delusion. Moreover, they cannot be sure whether Rowena died of natural causes or from the 'ruby poison' – deposited either by an invisible spirit (Ligeia's), by a 'sane' protagonist who wished to conceal his act or by an insane one who deluded himself into believing he was not responsible. The sheer multitude of questions such as these which remain in the reader's mind, but which Poe refuses to answer, recall again the characters in 'The Conqueror Worm'. In trying to decipher the story, readers are locked 'in a circle, that ever returneth to the same self spot.'

Regardless of the answers to these questions, the one certainty of the entire tale is that the narrator has by no means had a positive experience. In trying to know the unknowable and more specifically, in subscribing to a view that suggests death can be evaded, the narrator has ended up alone, confused, and obsessed by a woman who may or may not have ever existed. He is not certain about what he has seen and experienced and still cannot fathom the secret of his beloved's eyes – the window to the enormous will he believes her to have possessed, and to the mystery of the whole universe. His thought travels in a circular motion that starts and ends with Ligeia, this supposed possessor of vast amounts of spiritual and transcendental knowledge, and yet he remains unable to make much sense of those topics in which he was her student. His confounding story reduces readers to ponderings as ungraspable as his contemplations of Ligeia's eyes, drawing them into his world of uncertain and almost obsessive reflection in which the only conclusion is an unnerving feeling of perplexity. Poe's intentions are not easily discernable, indeed many different interpretations have been offered in scholarship. But if any final observation can indeed be made about this almost satirical story, it seems irrefutable that Poe, a known sceptic of transcendentalist theory, strongly indicts the search for immortality and the 'spiritual journeys' that accompany it. Delving into transcendental explorations which attempt to secure immortality has the effect of ruining the minds that try, Poe posits, because we live in a world where death is the natural and inevitable conclusion. What happens to us when we read this story is a glimpse of what happens to the narrator, and

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anyone who dares to question his mortal state.

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