

Ligeia: The Feminist Perspective:
A Gender Studies Reading of “Ligeia” by Edgar Allan Poe

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“Ligeia” was published in 1838, and although the abolitionist movement (and the coinciding push for women’s rights) was not yet in full swing, the tensions that it would cause were already being felt. Change was coming, and America was feeling the birth pains. Women in the 19th century were pushing against the established order. Some left their places in the home and pursued education and work. It is no surprise that the male population was feeling slightly distressed as what was previously considered to be the gentler sex began to set itself for a revolution. The story of “Ligeia” illustrates the tension that resides between men and women as a result of woman pushing for independence in a male-dominated culture.

The first key to unlocking the meaning behind “Ligeia” is to realize the importance of the character of Ligeia. The title of the story itself heralds her importance. The title is hers although she spends the entirety of the story dead or giving the appearance of death. More important still, Ligeia dominates the story in spite of her death. Nearly half of the text consists of her description alone, and this description is fascinating. It quickly becomes clear that the author is describing someone far beyond the reaches of normal human achievement. Her voice is “musical,” her face is “exquisite” and unique at the same time, and her footfalls are “light” so that she “[comes] and depart[s] like a shadow” (Poe 222-23). Not only is she an example of physical perfection, but she also exhibits mental capabilities by overwhelming degrees. The narrator exclaims, “I said her knowledge was such as I had never known in woman. Where breathes the man who, like her, has traversed, and successfully, *all* the wide areas of moral, natural, and mathematical science?” (Poe 225). This report of Ligeia leaves the

impression that she is far more than a simple character. She exceeds the expectations for both men and women being the height of both physical and mental capabilities.

Ligeia, in all of her perfection, does not represent merely one woman, but stands in for the entirety of her sex, and more than this, she stands for women's potential both realized and unrealized. She exceeds the expectations for the woman of her time. Her "faultless" and "divine" physical appearance allows her to live up to being all that could be expected from the "fairer sex" (Poe 223). Her successes in the mental realms show her capable of defeating men in the area where they were previously thought to be superior. Not only this, but she overcomes the supposed emotional weakness that women are predisposed to without losing her ability for passionate interaction. The narrator comments on her "outward calm" on several occasions and is equally impressed by the "intensity of her affection" (Poe 225-26). Ligeia is the height of womanly perfection – what could be achieved by womankind if they were allowed to pursue their goal.

With the portrayal of the perfect woman, Poe has hit upon the underlying fears of patriarchal society. The assumption on which society is based hinges on the idea that women need to be taken care of – that they are inferior. The very action of women pushing against and even breaking through their restraints challenges this concept and opens a horrible possibility that perhaps they can operate as equals or the even more horrible possibility that without their bonds they might exceed the male population. Man's fear of his own destruction as a result of the perfect Ligeia is seen throughout the story. The narrator reflects on how he frequently met Ligeia "in some large, old, decaying city near the Rhine" (Poe 222). Both characters stand in the declining ruin of a patriarchy. The man wonders where this superior woman has come from, for although he never hears

her parental name he knows that they are “of a remotely ancient date” (Poe 222). Ligeia and all women throughout history give up their names to men, but this has not erased the long legacy of womanhood that exists stretching back through eternity.

The emergence of this more perfect idea of woman is distressing to man. The narrator, representing mankind, sees only one option. The narrator comments, “I saw that she must die” (Poe 225). On first reading, this appears to be merely a comment on Ligeia’s sudden illness, but the reader quickly realizes that the narrator is suggesting a more sinister alternative interpretation of the line. The suggestion that Ligeia *must* die and that the narrator accordingly *must* kill her is backed up throughout the tale. His second wife suffers a suspiciously similar death. The narrator tells of an “opium dream” of “drops of a brilliant and ruby colored fluid” falling into her cup (Poe 231). Although never directly confirmed by the narrator, the possibility that the narrator has poisoned both women becomes distinctly clear. On top of this, the narrator does not express his grief at the illness of his wife directly, but instead comments on how “poignant” it “must have been” (Poe 225). The narrator puts distance between himself and the death of Ligeia allowing himself to avoid the point that he is the reason for her death.

Once accepting that the narrator has killed Ligeia, the reader is free to ponder why. The answer is about fear. To a patriarchal society, female independence equally implies destruction as well as freedom. Old traditions and ways of life and ways of thinking become useless as a whole population comes into power. The human instinct is to suppress this change and to preserve the old and familiar way of life. Upon Ligeia’s death the narrator states, “The giant *will* succumbed to a power more stern” (Poe 226). Again, Poe takes advantage of double meaning in this sentence. It implies that Ligeia,

giant though she is, must also succumb to the “more stern” power of death. At the same time however, it also implies that women and the power they have obtained must succumb to the “more stern” power of men. There are, of course, several problems with this plan, the foremost being the narrator’s failure to truly kill Ligeia. She continues to appear to him in various forms after her death, including his confusion between her and Rowena. Ligeia lives on, not just in Rowena but in all women, and in spite of any attempt to contain one or all of them, the same light will live on in their eyes.

In spite of the negative implications of this story, Poe also implies the possibility of change and victory. He first seems to acknowledge that forcing women into submission does not make men stronger. The death of Ligeia only leaves the narrator alone in a city that continues to decay in spite of the absence of her supposedly destructive presence. The true light comes, however, from the repeated line “Man doth not yield him to the angels, *nor unto death utterly*, save only through the weakness of his feeble will” (Poe 227). The death of Ligeia is not the end. So long as women maintain the will for freedom, they need not fully yield to anything.

Works Cited

Poe, Edgar A. "Ligeia." *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. Barnes & Noble Books: New York. Print. Pages 222-233.