

Death and creation in poe's "ligeia"



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In his essay entitled "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe writes, "the death...of a beautiful woman is unquestionably the most poetical topic in the world, and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover." Here, Poe suggests that out of the death of something beautiful comes poetic inspiration. In a Poe story or poem, the death of a beautiful woman creates a "deficit" of beauty. In turn, Poe fills the void with his "beauty," manifested in the narrator's own words. Since the dead can no longer speak to affirm or dispute the truth, the bereaved lover is in a position of considerable power; he can relate the story of his lover's death in any manner he chooses. In "Ligeia," Poe explores the relationship between death and creation through the power of the narrator. Out of the death of Ligeia comes the birth of a new story, of which the narrator is master. Poe uses the analogy of Ligeia's revival to represent the idea of narrative creation coming out of death. In the beginning of the story, Poe's narrator increases his agency as the storyteller by erasing that of Ligeia. He accomplishes this by describing her as still, unmoving, and at times almost nonexistent. For example, he recalls how she placed her "marble hand" on his shoulder, and of her movement he says, "she came and departed as a shadow" (27). Furthermore, the narrator refers to her as the "outwardly calm...ever-placid Ligeia" and specifically to the "placidity" of her voice (29). In his Elizabethan-like cataloguing of her features, there is no evidence of movement or even life. The way in which the narrator isolates and meditates on each of her features achieves a chilling effect that suggests that he is describing her dead body. He tells of her forehead that is "lofty and pale," her skin that rivals "purest ivory," the "soft, voluptuous slumber" of her lip, and her "serene and placid" smile (27). The adjectives

pale, serene, and placid, as well as the nouns ivory and slumber suggest an absence of movement or life, and could easily be used to describe a corpse. The subtle way in which the narrator manipulates the reader by describing Ligeia as if she is dead is proof of his power to dictate what is told in the story. He calls the reader's attention to his power of shaping the narrative by making the story about himself. First, the story is entitled "Ligeia," but the reader never really knows much at all about her; the person about which the reader is given the most information is the narrator himself. This tactic appears in many of Poe's poems about dead women. The implication is that the narrators care more about themselves than they do about the women. Second, the story acts as a kind of confession - that is, an unburdening of his soul. There is very slight yet noticeable evidence of confession in the ambiguous deaths of Ligeia and Rowena. After he reads the poem that Ligeia has composed, she repeats the epigraph about the nature of the will, and dies, mysteriously. Since we are never told what brings about Ligeia's illness, the reader is left somewhat suspicious as to the exact cause of her death, and also, perhaps, suspicious of the narrator's agency in bringing it about. We are not given any direct clues as to the narrator's motivation for wanting to murder her, but he does say, "...in death only, was I fully impressed with the strength of her affection" (31). The effect of this statement is to arouse the slightest amount of suspicion in the reader that the narrator might have been unsatisfied with Ligeia's outward affection for him, and was moved to end her life. However, there is not nearly enough evidence to make the reader draw any hard and fast conclusions. In essence, the narrator exercises his power in constructing the narrative. He strings the reader along, including selective details and deliberately arousing the reader's

suspicions whenever he pleases. The cause of Rowena's death, too, is uncertain; we are only told that "she was attacked with a sudden illness" (35). Immediately prior to her death, the narrator says that he "saw, fall within the goblet, as if from some invisible spring in the atmosphere of the room, three or four large drops of a brilliant and ruby colored fluid," which causes a "rapid change for the worse" (36). This, too, arouses the reader's suspicion. The narrator would have the reader believe that he witnesses someone or something else drop the liquid into her goblet. However, the reader may suspect that in reality, the narrator placed some poisonous liquid in her goblet, and in his retroactive recollection of the incident, imagined that he witnessed it from an outside source. The only thing the reader knows for sure is that the narrator was "wild with the excitement of an immoderate dose of opium" (36). Consequently, the reader is left to exercise judgement in evaluating the narrator's story, which is exactly what Poe wants. The narrator calls attention to himself, arousing suspicion that he might have been responsible for the deaths of Ligeia and Rowena. However, this is done so in a careful way, and the story is at best a covert confession.

Nevertheless, the arousal of suspicion as to his guilt is evidence of the narrator's power in relating the story. He draws attention to himself - the storyteller - in order to call into question his own validity, and to draw a connection between death and creation. The other major instance in which the narrator calls attention to himself is in his description of Ligeia's eyes. Her magnificent "orbs," which are "far larger than the ordinary eyes of our race" (28), are the constant subjects of his musings. One might imagine that when he gazes into her large black eyes, he is able to see himself. In fact, this is not far from the truth; the narrator's obsession with her eyes is

analogous to his obsession with his self - literally, the I. The contemplation of certain objects arouses a strangeness felt in gazing in her eyes: " a moth, a butterfly, a chrysalis, a stream of running water" (29). He also mentions that that certain sentiment is aroused " not unfrequently by passages from books." Here, the narrator is drawing particular attention to himself by being self-referential. Passages from books - for example, the one he is writing - arouse the sentiment he feels in looking at Ligeia's eyes, which are mere analogies for himself. Once again, he calls attention to himself and his narrative agency. The most telling detail, however, is the passage supposedly by Joseph Glanvill, which, according to the narrator, " never failed to inspire [him] with the sentiment" (29). This particular quotation, which Ligeia utters before her death, and which appears as the epigraph to the story, is the key to understanding the narrator's power in drawing the connection between death and creation. The idea that " Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will" suggests that by harnessing the power of the will, man can accomplish a great deal, and even combat death itself. The quotation also mentions that God is " but a great will pervading all things," adding to the suggestion that the will is all-powerful. In the end of the story, the narrator - through his powers of narration - brings Ligeia back to life out of the body of Lady Rowena. The logic is as follows: Glanvill's quotation about the power of the will reminds the narrator of Ligeia's eyes, which (literally and metaphorically) reflect his self-obsession. By syllogism, then, Glanvill's quotation about the power of will reminds him of himself. What he does at the end of the story is indeed an ultimate act of the will. The narrator equates himself with God (who is " but a great will") who has the power to

manipulate life and death. Using his powers of narration, he enacts the process of "revivification" (38), literally bringing forth life from death. The account of the corpse returning to life parallels the narrator's bringing the "dead" story to life, and the narrator serves as a vehicle to bridge the gap between death and creation. Just as life emerges from the dead body of Lady Rowena, out of the deaths of the two beautiful women comes the creation of the narrator's story. In "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe also writes, "That pleasure which is at once the most intense, the most elevating, and the most pure is, I believe, found in the contemplation of the beautiful." In considering this statement, the reader must think like Poe, and consider the implications of writing about someone who is beautiful. If a woman, for example, whose beauty is the subject of one's writings, is alive, then the opportunity for disappointment is great, since the writing may not do justice to the woman's true beauty. If, however, that woman is dead, then the reader has no means for comparison, and the writer must be taken at his word. Furthermore, the narrator has the liberty to describe her any way he chooses, and create the context as well. The narrator uses the death of the beautiful Ligeia as poetic inspiration; in contemplating her death, he creates a new story. In the end, equating his power of will with that of God, he brings about a revivification, which serves as an analogy for the relationship between death and creation.