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The Treachery of the Persistence of Memory: An Analysis of the Manipulative Narrator of Edgar

Allan Poe's "Ligeia"

Memory is the essential motif with which to analyze Edgar Allan Poe's macabre tale "Ligeia." However, the critical discussion of this motif fails to interpret the depth to which memory influences the narrative and the narrator. Grace McEntee recognizes the importance of memory in "Remembering Ligeia," but she interprets the various instances of memory, or lack thereof, merely as the narrator trying to assert dominance over his artistic muse. In "Unburying the Wife: A Reflection on the Female Uncanny in Poe's Ligeia," Elisabete Lopes focuses on memory only so far as it is influenced by the "uncanny." While both pieces acknowledge memory, they lack an emphasis on memory's pervading influence and do not explain the narrator's orchestration and distortion of memory in order to serve his selfish desires. Additionally, this scholarly discussion does not reconcile the role of memory as it relates to the enigmatic Glanvill epigraph which frames the entire story around the concept of the power of "the will" (Poe 310).

The motif of memory utilizes the ability of recollection to exist in a nebulous region that both represents and transcends reality. Memories are shadows of reality in that they both are and are not the subjects they represent. Therefore, "Ligeia" is not a tale of resurrection, it is a tale of memory in which the resuscitated Ligeia does not exist outside of the narrator's memory. The narrator uses his will to manipulate his memories to impose his vision on reality. As McEntee

states, “this tale has its origins in old memories that the narrator decides to resurrect” (75). The narrator is in complete control as he immerses the reader in the realm of his memories while filtering the events of the story. The narrator’s selective memory informs his descriptions of Ligeia, demonstrating his obsession with an idealized construct of her character. I argue that the perversity with which he clings to this constructed memory poisons his second marriage to Lady Rowena and leads the narrator to sacrifice her as a vessel for his memory of Ligeia. The final moments of the tale depict the narrator’s desperate struggle to project his memory of Ligeia into reality. Therefore, the mysterious and pervading “will” that dominates the Glanvill epigraph belongs to the narrator and his memories.

Knowing that the narrator’s memory filters the events in the narrative, the lack of information regarding Ligeia’s past indicates the narrator’s possessive nature. The story opens with the narrator professing, “I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia” (310). Considering his devotion to Ligeia, this lapse in memory is certainly strategic, particularly when contrasted with the general acuity of his memory throughout the narrative. The narrator omits any information regarding Ligeia’s past, even their meeting, which would necessitate a depiction of a Ligeia that lies beyond his memory. Later, the narrator realizes that he has “never known the paternal name of [Ligeia]” effectively wiping away Ligeia’s history (311). This selective presentation of information displays a view where the narrator’s presence completely dictates Ligeia’s identity; in essence, she does not exist outside of the conceptions of the narrator. In *Edgar Allan Poe: A Study of the Short Fiction*, Charles E. May is correct in his assertion that “Ligeia seems to have no source in the real world” (62), because the narrator obscures all of her real world attributes in order to take possession of her identity. The reason the narrator gives for never learning Ligeia’s surname

reveals a fundamental facet of his character: “Was it rather a caprice of my own – a wildly romantic offering on the shrine of the most passionate devotion” (311); it shows the narrator’s recognition of his propensity to idolize Ligeia. Enforcing this further, the narrator refers to Ligeia as “my Ligeia” (311), denoting his conceptualization of her while creating a distinction between reality and the creature of his possession. At this point, his lack of memory serves to dehumanize Ligeia and propagates the idea that the narrator is not concerned with the real Ligeia but more with the figure of Ligeia he has created in his memory. Therefore, this constructed version of Ligeia becomes the object of the narrator’s obsession and the subject of the final revivification.

The narrator’s ideal description of Ligeia supports her position as a construct of his deformed memories. He begins by stating, “There is one dear topic, on which my memory fails me not. It is the person of Ligeia” (311). Emphasis is put on her outward, material characteristics which he describes with idealistic fervor. The narrator describes a “faultless” and “divine” figure, with “the beauty of beings either above or apart from earth” (312-313). This depiction serves to deify Ligeia and accentuates the narrator’s preoccupation with the idol of Ligeia and not her humanity. The narrator also imbues Ligeia with an unrealistic aura, “In beauty of face no maiden ever equalled her. It was the radiance of an opium dream” (311). This description reveals the narrator’s desire to separate Ligeia from a tangible comparison; it once again connects Ligeia to a state beyond reality. In D. H. Lawrence’s famous criticism on Poe from his work, *Studies in Classic American Literature*, he states that “love can be terribly obscene,” later describing “Ligeia” as “a tale of love pushed over a verge” (69). As the narrator’s love for Ligeia falls into this obscenity, he recollects her with such idealism that he effectively erases her true existence, thus perverting his love into idolatry. He then takes this idol and lets it fester in his mind to the

point of obsession. In remembering Ligeia, the narrator fixates on the perfected figure he has formed for his own personal worship, instead of the complex, human Ligeia.

After her death, the narrator clings to this phantasmagoric vision of Ligeia, even creating the bridal chamber as a shrine to offer devotion to this idol. The narrator claims that he “could no longer endure the lonely desolation of [his] dwelling” (320). Yet, he moves to a decrepit abbey in the “wildest and least frequented portions of fair England” (320). This shows a perversity in the character of the narrator and suggests that he does not desire to move on from Ligeia’s death. The narrator is not restricted by means nor connections, yet he chooses to remain in solitude to indulge his grotesque fantasies. Dorothea E. Von Mücke supports this perverse reading of the narrator when she states in her book, *The Seduction of the Occult and the Rise of the Fantastic Tale*, that “the story commences with an elegiac tone, with the narrator’s narcissistic enjoyment of his lament” (181). He would rather remain in a state where he can maintain his melancholic memories, in a type of masochistic show of devotion to his departed idol. The narrator chooses an isolated location to facilitate his lamentations and then he creates the bridal chamber as an altar for his Ligeia-dominated psyche.

In the narrator’s recollection of the bridal chamber, the feebleness of memory that characterized Ligeia’s description is conspicuously absent. The narrator even goes so far as to state: “There is no individual portion of the architecture and decoration of that bridal chamber which is not now visibly before me” (321). The narrator does not need to modify his memories of the chamber, because it is already his own creation and serves as a construct of and vessel for the outpourings of his troubled mind. The narrator creates a pentagonal room filled with spirit bearing images, such as the sarcophagi and the “pall-like” canopy of the bed, the arabesque drapery then covers the entire bedchamber like a shroud (322). These vessel-like images betray

the narrator's desire to capture, contain, and resurrect his memories of Ligeia. In his analysis of the bridal chamber, D. H. Lawrence comments there is "never anything open and real" (74). The stylistic nature of the bridal chamber mirrors the narrator's stylization of Ligeia's character. The avoidance of "the real" in the bridal chamber also denotes the narrator's desire to escape from reality into the world of his memories. Von Mücke further highlights the connection between the bridal chamber and the narrator's psyche when she notes, "the narrator associates this interior space with an entire list of mental abnormalities: a childhood perversity, institutionalized madness, melancholia with a vague hope of overcoming the grief, and finally the dreams of an opium addict" (188). This description shows how, instead of creating a healing space, the narrator produces an environment filled with his mental unrest. The narrator creates his own world in order to accommodate his constructed memories of Ligeia. Lady Rowena's fate is to reside with the narrator in this vessel of psychic perversity.

The memory of Ligeia to which the narrator willfully clings negatively influences his marriage with Lady Rowena and ultimately leads to her death. The narrator first introduces Lady Rowena as "the successor of the unforgotten Ligeia" (321). "Unforgotten," the memory of Ligeia rules over and dictates this second marriage. Being described as a "successor" deprives Lady Rowena of her own identity; she becomes a character whose sole purpose is to maintain the space left vacant by Ligeia. Instead of focusing on his current marriage, the narrator remains absorbed with the memory of Ligeia. Even when faced with the unhappiness in his second marriage, he retreats with tenacity into his memories of Ligeia: "My memory flew back...to Ligeia, the beloved, the august, the beautiful, the entombed" (323). The narrator's fixation consumes him and slowly begins to consume Lady Rowena. As D. H. Lawrence states, "the love which had been a wild craving for identification with Ligeia, a love inevitably deadly and

consuming, now in the man has become definitely destructive, devouring, subtly murderous. He will slowly and subtly consume the life of the fated Rowena” (96-97). The memory of Ligeia destroys their relationship by limiting Lady Rowena and captivating the narrator in a fantasy that drives him to sacrifice Rowena in order to create a vessel for his memories of Ligeia. Jack L. Davis makes a similar argument in, “The Ethereal Ligeia.” He claims that the narrator’s delusions cause him to murder Rowena. She dies under the oppression of the illusory Ligeia and it is the narrator’s projection of Ligeia that consumes her identity., “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” (175). However, Rowena serves as more than a mere body, despite what Davis suggests. The narrator views her as a sacrifice to the idol of Ligeia and her body is a template onto which he can project his memories of Ligeia. The narrator erases the real Ligeia in his pursuit of the ideal, and it is this exact ideal that motivates him to destroy Lady Rowena.

Even before Rowena’s death, however, the damaging effects of Ligeia’s memory manifest in the bridal chamber. The narrator describes an unseen presence that administers a mysterious red liquid to Lady Rowena. A clear correlation between this red liquid and the death of the Lady reveals itself when the narrator remarks, “Immediately subsequent to the fall of the ruby-drops, a rapid change for the worse took place in the disorder of my wife” (326). D. H. Lawrence argues “It is Ligeia whose presence hangs destructive over [Rowena]; it is the ghostly Ligeia who pours poison into Rowena’s cup” (97). While Lawrence correctly recognizes the presence of Ligeia, he fails to credit the narrator’s involvement in this scene. Earlier in the story the narrator confesses, “I would call aloud upon her name... as if, through the wild eagerness, the solemn passion, the consuming ardor of my longing for the departed, I could restore her”

(323). The quote effectively connects the narrator with the idea of restoration. Throughout the narrative Ligeia displays a desire to conquer death, to avoid the actual act of dying, but she never mentions the idea of resurrection; the narrator is the only character who displays such a direct desire. Also, the strong diction in the passage indicates his investment in the situation and denotes his willingness to go to extremes to achieve this goal. Since the narrator is the only one who sees the anomalies in the bridal chamber, his presence must be essential for their existence. The narrator describes the shadow that poisons the Lady as “the shadow of a shade,” correlating to an earlier description of Ligeia that states, “She came and departed as a shadow” (325, 311). The appearance of the shadow in the bridal chamber hearkens back to this image of Ligeia and elicits a sense of her presence. Yet, it is merely a shadow, a vacant imitation of her form, representing her figure, but failing to encompass the reality of her identity; this shadow thereby exhibits many of the same properties of the narrator’s contrived memories. The shadow is, in actuality, the narrator’s first attempt to project his memory of Ligeia into reality. However, the projection is weak and is lacking a vessel, so it only materializes as a shadow. The presence is still strong enough, however, to poison Lady Rowena and ultimately lead to her death. The narrator recognizes the deficiency in the presence and therefore uses the shadow to prepare a vessel for his next attempt at projection.

The role of the projected memory in Rowena’s death culminates in the final scene of revivification. While the narrator gazes upon the corpse of Lady Rowena he recalls that, “Then rushed upon me a thousand memories of Ligeia” (326). The actions of the corpse disturb the narrator as he ensconces himself in his own memories. His “sense of duty” pulls him out of his reveries and causes him to attend to the Lady Rowena, but she immediately falls back into the throes of death. Afterward, the narrator reverts to “passionate waking visions of Ligeia” (327).

After he relapses into his memories a certain commotion makes him aware of the revival of the corpse, but as soon as he abandons his visions to attend to reality, the renewal immediately ceases. The connection between his remembrances and the revival appears in the passage, “And again I sunk into visions – and again ... *again* there reached my ears a low sob from the region of the ebony bed” (328). The use of “again” creates parallelism that connects his visions with the body on the bed. Additionally, as McEntee cleverly points out, it is the remembering that helps the “re-membering” of the corpse before the narrator (80). Understanding this connection portrays the whole process of restoration as a depiction of the narrator’s attempt to project his memories of Ligeia into reality. When he remembers Ligeia, the creature stirs; when he focuses on Rowena, the body becomes rigid once again. Unlike the shadow it occupied before, the memory now has a body to flow into, and as such, when the narrator broods over Ligeia while staring at the body, the memories are able to amass and eventually materialize. As Roy P. Basler notes in his book *Sex, Symbolism and Psychology in Literature*, the corpse changes gradually after each cycle of revivification “until finally his obsessed brain and senses perceive their desire-wish accomplished” (155). It is the gradual nature of the change that reveals the intention of the narrator. The way the narrator meticulously pieces this Ligeia together mirrors the process the narrator took to selectively construct the Ligeia in his memories. He uses selective memory to create the idolized version of Ligeia in his mind, while he uses selective projection to create the idol of Ligeia out of Rowena’s corpse. When the creature presents itself “tottering, with feeble steps,” instead of recoiling in fear, the narrator scrutinizes the individual features of the apparition as if affirming his accomplishment (329). In the final lines, the narrator shrieks in triumph as he surveys his masterpiece of constructed memory: “Can I never be mistaken – these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes – of my lost love... of the Lady Ligeia!” (330).

The narrator manipulates his memories in order to impose his ideals on reality. In the hands of the narrator, memory becomes a powerful tool used to recreate the world in his own image. David Shields, in his article entitled “Memory,” highlights the basic creative powers of memory. To begin, Shields brings up the fact that “in Greek mythology, Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, is also the mother of the nine muses” (32). This correlation between memory and muse reveals how memory is the source from which all creativity flows. In “Ligeia” the narrator uses memory not only to construct his idealized vision of Ligeia, but the entire story as well. Throughout the narrative, the narrator often comes into conflict with reality, but he manipulates his memories to subject the world to his own perceptions. It is just as Shields states, “Human memory, driven by emotional self-interest, goes to extraordinary lengths to provide evidence to back up whatever understanding of the world we have our hearts set on – however removed that may be from reality” (32). Despite the demands of reality, the narrator powerfully uses his memories to assert his control over the narrative in an impressive display of his will.

The Glanvill epigraph that Poe specifically composed to precede “Ligeia” revolves around the nature and the power of the will, asking, “Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigor?” (310). Though many scholars attribute this power to Ligeia, an examination of the narrator’s manipulations shows that it is his will that drives the story. The beginning of the epigraph states, “And the will therein lieth, which dieth not” and then ends with, “Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will” (310). This is the first clue that suggests that the epigraph does not refer to Ligeia, but rather to the narrator. For Ligeia, despite the “intensity of her wild desire for life,” she still dies (317). Juxtaposing her death with the final lines of the epigraph highlights her complete and utter failure; immediately after the Glanvill quote, the text bluntly states, in two perfunctory words:

“She died” (320). The narrator, on the other hand, is the only character in the story who does not yield himself to death. The epigraph also equates the power of will to the power of God: “For God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness” (310). The narrator, for all intents and purposes, is the God of this story. Since he is relating the events from his memory, he is in complete control of the narrative. He then manipulates his memories to display his powers of creation. By constructing the idealized Ligeia and the horrifying bridal chamber, he displays his role as the creator of the universe of the story. The way he murders Rowena to revive Ligeia correlates to his God-complex and his desire to assert his powers over life and death. The story is the narrator’s creation, and he depicts himself with Godly attributes that connect him to the God in the Glanvill epigraph. The narrator’s will pervades the story as he uses his memories to create his idealized reality. Therefore, the epigraph refers to the narrator and the power of his memories.

The narrator’s memory of Ligeia supersedes her own existence. The narrator never presents the reader with the real Ligeia, but instead perpetuates his perfected vision of her through his recollections. The narrator employs his selective memory to possess an idealized version of Ligeia and cleaves to this idol figure to the point that he poisons his second wife, Lady Rowena. In his second wife’s destruction, the narrator finds a vessel into which he pours forth the longing of his soul, filling her corpse with the visions of his fantasy in his desperation to merge his memories with reality. This reading challenges the preconceived notions surrounding the role of memory in “Ligeia” by revealing how the narrator manipulates his memories to become the god of his own narrative. Therefore, memory becomes the catalyst, not just a symptom, of the story. The narrator’s memory filters everything and motivates all of the actions in the tale. Critics who downplay the motif of memory miss its pervasive influence on the

characters, especially as it establishes the presence of the dark and oppressive will of narrator. In the end, the reader is left with nothing, only a memory.

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