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# *"Pervasive Parable"*

## *Christ and Ligeia*

*Todd G. Workman*

Common readings of "Ligeia" involve the sinister and supernatural. For many critics, Ligeia is a witch by default, shrouded in sorcery and evil powers. Alan Brown uses this idea in his article "Edgar Allan Poe's Use of Gothic Conventions in 'Ligeia'" as he argues that this tale exemplifies the use of the Gothic (109). Certainly, the story contains undeniable Gothic aspects. Brown, though, focuses only on the narrow gothic scope and fails to explore any other interpretations. For Daryl E. Jones in "Poe's Siren: Character and Meaning in Ligeia," Ligeia is literally the siren from Greek myth and a resident of the Rhine city bent on destroying the narrator (33). This analysis takes for granted that Ligeia seeks personal gain, namely life, by destroying the narrator. Stephen Rowe, in "Poe's Use of Ritual Magic in His Tales of Metempsychosis," attributes the supernatural elements of the story to magic, portraying "Ligeia" as a tale of witchcraft. All of these, and many other analyses, portray Ligeia with evil powers and motives, bent on destruction or domination of some kind.

These readings ignore a distinct alternative, one that portrays Ligeia in a divine, rather than demonic, light. One critic, Michael L. Burdick, comes close to this idea, but still misses the potential of his own argument. In his article, "Usher's 'Forgotten Church': Edgar Allan Poe and Nineteenth-century American

Catholicism,” Burduck successfully demonstrates that Poe certainly knew a great deal about Catholicism and Christian ideals.<sup>1</sup> Burduck even references “Ligeia” as having some of these Catholic or Christian undertones. Unfortunately, in his article he fails to address the possible depth of that symbolism. In my argument, the supernatural remains inseparable from the story; the change lies in the source that exhibits the otherworldly powers.

These powers do not have demonic or wicked origins, but rather heavenly ones. The narrator's relationships with Rowena and Ligeia, along with the events surrounding Ligeia's revivification, reveal the opposite of the historical readings surrounding this story. Rowena acts as the personification of death, the narrator represents a Christian disciple, and, most importantly, Ligeia serves as a Christ figure and savior. While Ligeia is a Christ figure, she is not literally Christ, but rather portrays Christ-like qualities in her ability to meliorate the life of the narrator, as well as the narrator's dependence on her which results in his rapid decline after Ligeia's death, and in her ultimate resurrection in the overcoming of death represented by the takeover of Rowena's body. These qualities allow for an alternative and novel approach to the story of Ligeia as one of divinity and not devilish sorcery.

Many critics would scoff at the idea of Christian symbolism within a story crafted by Poe. As Burduck acknowledges, “...Poe attended church services no more than a handful of times” (3). Poe's apathy toward religious practices would seem to inhibit religious influences. However, Burduck gives substantial evidence that Poe actually held great knowledge about Christianity and doctrines of Catholicism, and he observes that Poe “usually adapted his sources very freely, often blending and modifying them in highly imaginative ways” (23), meaning that any symbol in the story is unlikely to be a perfect representation of Christian ideals. Rather, Poe likely mixed or hybridized his different sources and symbols, using representative shards and shadows of common Christian symbols.

Some readers and critics interpret the story with a sexual undercurrent to Ligeia's “magical” character. Brown cites the passage that describes Ligeia as “most violently a prey to the tumultuous vultures of stern passion” (Poe 259) and reasons this references her extreme sexual desire (Brown 112). This idea undercuts and contradicts the Christ-type thesis I offer. Ligeia and the narrator were married, and the narrator's descriptions could portray an element of sexuality and sensuality. The narrator also says “...love would have reigned no ordinary passion,” (Poe 260) seeming to indicate a connection between love and passion.

However, if readers closely consider these passages, they find that these passages actually *further* the Christ-type thesis. In modern vernacular “passion” does have a sexual undercurrent. However, the 1828 Webster’s Dictionary, a dictionary representative of the vernacular at the time, gives an entirely different definition of the word. The first two definitions of “passion” describe something suffered or received because of an external agent (Webster “Passion” 1–2). According to this definition, Ligeia suffers because of an external source. Even more interesting, the third definition of the word passion reads: “suffering; emphatically, *the last suffering of the Savior*” (Webster, “Passion” 3, italics added). Passion, in Poe’s time, had direct reference to the death of Christ. Ligeia experienced bouts of “stern [suffering],” Christ-like suffering. Therefore, “love would have reigned no ordinary passion,” or love would not rule, or be required for, ordinary suffering. This implies her love reigned over extraordinary suffering, a Christ-like suffering motivated by love. Finally, no definition of “passion” from the 1828 dictionary refers to sexuality, and only two of eight definitions mention the word “love” (Webster “Passion” 4–8). We cannot define Ligeia as a sexual character.

Another passage we read in a new light deals with the residence of Ligeia. According to Jones, the fact that the story takes place in the city on the Rhine indicates Ligeia is a siren incarnate, come to ensnare the narrator (34). However, this reading aligns with others that portray *Ligeia* as the resident. Critics often assume that because Ligeia meets the narrator in this city (notorious for witchcraft, or other supernatural evil) she must reside there. We can read to the inverse: the narrator resides in the city of the Rhine, a lost soul, and Ligeia comes to save him. Christ’s ministry involved going to perceived wicked places and trying to save the souls of the people. Ligeia does the same thing for the narrator. Like Christ, she first finds her disciple and then later becomes the teacher of salvation. Jones’ reading, as many others do, overlooks this possibility and assumes Ligeia must be evil because of her origins. On the contrary, the ambiguity of her origins helps to vindicate her as the savior of the narrator.

This idea of ambiguous origins would also explain the narrator’s choice in house decorations after Ligeia’s death. While he doesn’t stay in the city by the Rhine, he does appear to go back to old habits of magical roots: a pentagonal shaped room, decorated with ghoulish images, adorned with black sarcophagi, items which he purchased only after Ligeia’s death. Just as many fickle disciples in the Bible did, the narrator returned to his old ways. The narrator illustrates his devastation when he says “She died: and I crushed into the very dust with

sorrow...Ligeia had brought me far more [wealth], very far more than ordinarily falls to the lot of mortals” (Poe 262). The narrator shows that his life had been different— better even— with Ligeia and what she brought him. He even goes so far as to say his wealth was beyond the norm for mortals, implying a loss of something immortal or otherworldly when she died. This does not stop him from turning away from Ligeia’s legacy, though. With her death he loses his “child-like confidence” (259), his faith, and turns back to the familiar and magical. In this way, the narrator appears as Simon Peter and other disciples who went back to fishing after Christ’s death. Rather than continuing in the new way of life they had learned, these disciples went back to the familiar life of fishing, something that had been sufficient for them in the past but no longer could be. Their empty nets parallel the narrator’s empty life as he tries to fill it with new objects of his past life but fails to gain satisfaction from them. These house decorations are the narrator’s nets that he casts, trying to catch lost fulfillment.

The furnishings hold great magical symbolism. Readers may reasonably assume that Poe meant to include magical elements, which were inherent in many of Poe’s works, and commonplace in Romantic literature. Stephen Rowe (as mentioned above) successfully identifies these mystical accommodations as evidences of magic (47). However, even Rowe cannot attribute these symbols to Ligeia herself. We must note the important fact that the irrefutably “magical” items or symbols in the story directly link to the narrator, and not necessarily to Ligeia. She does not participate in his buying and decorating. The narrator does these things *after* Ligeia dies. So, while dark powers do appear, Ligeia remains disconnected from their source, contrary to what critics so often assert. In fact, evidence will further show the symbols or circumstances that may include ambiguous or Christian meaning and interpretation almost exclusively connect to Ligeia. Therefore, Ligeia does not even have an influence on the irrefutably magical, such as the pentagonal shaped room and sarcophagi. She does, though, interact with all symbols or occurrences that have Christian undertones, such as the red-drop goblet and resurrection from the dead. Ligeia is directly connected to all of the supernatural occurrences whose origins, be they magical or spiritual, are ambiguous and debatable. These occasions and symbols are the subjects of the following paragraphs.

Ligeia’s relationship with the narrator, namely her roles as teacher, mentor, and spouse, portray a Christ-disciple relationship that highlights Ligeia’s Christ-type persona. The narrator notes that Ligeia’s learning “was immense,” that no other person alive could have had as much knowledge as she (Poe

259). Furthermore, he talks of how he felt “child-like” in his dependence on learning from her, including learning things that were “divinely precious” to the point that he didn’t feel worthy of such tutelage or knowledge (259). All of these aspects point to a disciple-like learning experience. Followers see Christ as all knowing, with infinite knowledge and understanding. In the Bible, Christ spoke of coming to him and becoming like a little child. He taught ideas that purported divine consequences. Ligeia’s teachings have a similar effect and weight. She teaches of “transcendentalism” and “metaphysic[s],” subjects that go beyond mortal application, just as Christ’s teachings did. The narrator came to love and believe these teachings, though he felt unworthy of them, as some disciples did. Ligeia became the source of all of his happiness, just as Christ did for his followers. This references a name of Christ: the bridegroom, leader and head to those who espouse his teachings. Ligeia is the bride to her follower, the one she teaches and seeks to save, while he takes on her teachings for himself. In this way, the narrator not only represents discipleship, but also the individual, and the idea that Christ/Ligeia seeks out the lost individual.

This idea further reveals itself in the passage of Ligeia’s illness. Jones interprets Ligeia’s desire to live as a turning from her siren-like purpose to kill the narrator, a desire to live in order to remain with the narrator (36). The perspective of savior changes all of that. When Ligeia experiences her death-throes of sickness, they do not originate from lack of accomplishing a mission of death, but instead constitute a part of her mission of life. Her suffering corresponds with Christ’s in the garden of Gethsemane. Burduck cites Ligeia’s outburst following the poem’s reading and parallels it to Christ asking if the cup could be removed (26). Rather than cursing at God, Ligeia pleads to him in her role as savior. The narrator describes the “struggles of the passionate wife” as “energetic,” and more so than his own (Poe 260). Again we see the word “passionate” implying a Christ-like suffering inherent in Ligeia’s struggles. She does not struggle for her life, rather “*but for life*,” (261), or in other words, for life itself to conquer death, to have a way to overcome. Even Christ did not enjoy the suffering he had to endure, but he did so out of need. Ligeia, too, bemoans the physical toll on her but recognizes the essential nature of her sacrifice. Her struggles were not for herself but for the narrator. In her suffering and death comes the ability for her to then free the narrator from death. He can only overcome death if Ligeia does so first.

Thus, Rowena’s role is essential in representing the relationship between death and man. Her death symbolizes death becoming part of the narrator’s

life. With Rowena standing as an opposition to the Christ figure, she provides an embodiment of the force, death, to be overcome. She also is able to portray the interaction between man and death, the distinctly less intimate and nurturing relationship than that which exists between Ligeia and the narrator. Readers may question how Rowena can represent death when the narrator does not die. The answer lies in a Christian ideal: the existence of two types of death, physical and spiritual. Physical death occurs with the literal mortal death of the body. Spiritual death, on the other hand, comes when man removes himself from the presence of God by his actions, especially sins. With the loss of Ligeia, the narrator experiences a spiritual death as he abandons her teachings and re-embraces his old ways. His espousal of Rowena represents the idea that he has turned away from Ligeia. Like the disciples of Christ who thought the end of their new way of life and learning came with his death, the narrator too thought the end had come when his mistress died.

This idea also implies the narrator had a hand in Ligeia's death: his sins and mortality required her to die so that she could save him. Furthermore, his inability to completely live what Ligeia taught (the idea mentioned earlier to be the cause of her "passion," or suffering) depicts betrayal; a betrayal made complete with his return to magic after her death. In this way, the narrator becomes the betrayer-disciple, the Judas Iscariot of Ligeia. Further evidence of the narrator exhibiting Judas-like attributes lies in his description of his actions after Ligeia's death. He describes that Ligeia had brought him great wealth, and he soon set to spending it because of a "dotage of grief" and in the "faint hope of alleviating [his] sorrows" (260). This parallels Judas Iscariot receiving money for his betrayal, and then doing what he could to get rid of it as guilt tore him apart inside.

Because of his willing betrayal, the narrator knew Rowena brought his misery. Just as Judas Iscariot, the narrator *sought out* death, his guilt overcoming him because of his hand in Ligeia's death. The relationship between the narrator and Rowena portrays the inevitable and spiteful relationship between Death and mankind. Despite this relationship with Death/Rowena, the narrator instigates this situation: only he could invite death into his own life by his "feeble will." Rowena—Death—inhabits the narrator's life, embodying his turning away from Ligeia (spiritual death). The narrator describes that Rowena "shunned" him and "loved [him] but little" (264). The poem that the narrator reads expresses that Death loves no one and shuns everyone, in the sense of giving any kind of affection or intimacy; Death exists as an impartial agent that

takes all men (260–261). The narrator himself, expressing humankind’s general sentiment toward death, said “I loathed her with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man” (264), an interesting comparison since Christian tradition views the impenitent as hell-bound. The narrator chose death over life, spiritual suicide, just as Judas did through his betrayal or Peter through his denial and abandonment. Now trapped, the narrator can only wait in misery or gain freedom through a savior. As Ligeia represents Christ, the source of all life for the narrator, Rowena clearly stands as the opposite and must represent that death that comes without Christ.

The reader must note the important fact that man cannot overcome death alone. The narrator cannot free himself from Rowena’s influence or the spiritual death in which he finds himself. He requires a savior and liberator. This connects to the quote from Glanvill, specifically the line “Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will” (256). This reveals a key principle when applied to the idea of Rowena’s representation of two types of death. Indeed, man does not yield “*utterly*,” or in other words, yield to both deaths, except through lack of will because only *man* can choose spiritual death. Utter yielding to death requires both physical and spiritual death, and a man accomplishes the latter only when, as the narrator demonstrates, he turns from the source of spiritual life: Christ/Ligeia. Man’s will does not decide partial death: physical death comes to all, even Christ, even Ligeia. However, both deaths can be overcome through the Christ figure. Ligeia’s last words, then, become not a curse to God, but a plea to the narrator to remember and stay true to what he has learned – a plea he fails to follow. Her words become a promise that life remains possible through her, unless mankind yields their life up by choice. In other words, Ligeia’s final whispers reflect Christ’s plea to God to forgive men for not comprehending the severity of their actions. Ligeia pleads for God to not hold men accountable for not understanding fully that their will alone brings full death. She pleads for leniency for those who abandon truth and unknowingly choose death. Rowena’s death represents the death of death, the gift of resurrection. Ligeia, in overcoming death, rises to the status of deity and shows that her power equates with God’s by paralleling the only other person, according to Christian belief, who overcame death: Christ. While she is not literally Christ, within this story she takes on attributes of Christ as she does what Christian history credits only Christ with doing. Consequently, Ligeia must take on some kind of higher identity and possess higher power than mortality grants.

This triumph over death, then, becomes the focus of the resurrection scene in which Ligeia returns to life. The final scene displays the Christ-like triumph over all death as well as a disciple-like reception of the Christ figure. Rowena becomes ill, struck down with a mysterious sickness. Stephen Rowe points out the magical elements of the room seem to support the idea of a magical take over of Rowena's body (47). While this would seem to hinder the idea of a Christ-like resurrection, readers must recognize that the room does not ultimately kill Rowena. Evidence exists that the room *may* have had an effect on her health. The critical point comes, though, when the narrator sees "brilliant ruby colored fluid" falling into Rowena's cup of wine, which she then drinks (Poe 265). Once more, critics often rush to argue the role of witchcraft without considering other possibilities. In a reading with Ligeia as Christ, these "ruby" drops represent the blood of Christ. Only Christ's blood, or his sacrifice, can conquer both physical and spiritual death. Rowena, the representation of death, partakes of the blood of the savior, Ligeia. Only after this does Rowena die. In other words, the blood of Christ, not magic, defeats and overcomes Death.

Soon after the death of Rowena, Ligeia rises up in her place, symbolic of Christ rising up over death. The narrator even responds as disciples of Christ did, falling at Ligeia's feet. Interestingly, she "shrink[s]" from the narrator's touch (Poe 268), just as Christ did when first seen by Mary. The narrator recognizes his savior and rushes, freed from his bondage with Death, to the source of his new hope. In this scene he resembles the doubting Thomas of old, believing only *after* he saw that his savior would return. His dismal pessimism that Ligeia would never return portrays his doubting countenance. He continues in this specific disciple's role as he proclaims aloud "...can I never be mistaken...of the Lady Ligeia" (268). Just as Thomas proclaimed aloud his Lord's return, the narrator cries out in bittersweet recognition of his lady. Like the burial-shrouded Christ, Ligeia rises from death. Her life announces that all men can be free from death. Because *she* has overcome, so can her disciple. Jones reads this section of text as the siren returning to finally inflict death on her victim (36). However, this reading has a distinct hole: if Ligeia is a siren whose return hinges on killing the narrator, how can the narrator still live to give his tale? According to Jones' reading, the narrator should be dead. To the contrary, a previous argument for the Christ-type thesis accounts for this discrepancy. At the beginning of "Ligeia" the narrator describes his "long years" of "much suffering" (Poe 256). This can be attributed, once more, to the suffering of a fallen disciple, a Peter, Judas, or Thomas. While the narrator finds relief that Ligeia, his savior, lives and has

returned, he obviously continued to torture himself with his memory of denial, betrayal, and doubt. The idea of suffering could also be that suffering which the disciples endured in going forward and proclaiming the teachings of Christ. If the narrator followed this example, he would have been persecuted and suffered greatly for proclaiming the resurrection of his lady. This Christ-type reading actually accounts for the suffering of the narrator, but still gives reason for the resurrection of Ligeia and the significance of that event.

Readers might question why Poe would write a tale with magic and supernatural elements and still use Christian symbols within – especially ones so buried within the text. In a letter discussing “Ligeia,” Poe stated, “As for the mob—let them talk on. I should be grieved if they thought they comprehended me here” (Brown 110). In other words, Poe used the symbolism of Christ and the conquering of death through a savior in a way that required thought. He didn’t want the mob to understand. He wanted the thinker to discover the hidden meanings within his tale. What better way to accomplish this than to teach with a story, a parable, much like Christ himself did, to sift out those who remain incapable of looking past the surface meaning. A parable applies to the reader. By using these symbols, Poe shows the reader their own capacity for denial, betrayal, and doubt for those beliefs they hold dear. But, he also shows the hope that comes with holding to those beliefs. The readers see themselves in the story. If the mob sees naught but magic, demons, and witchcraft, we can know that such interpretations lack possible meanings of Poe’s “Ligeia.” Like Burduck, the reader should not deny the existence of dark elements, but should also recognize “that great literary works have many facets; like precious diamonds, they glitter in many different fashions” (26). Perhaps, though, Poe didn’t intentionally write a Christian allegory. Burduck even acknowledges, “Granted, Poe may not have consciously set out to do so” (23). Even if this were the case, that does not remove the Christian symbolism from the story. Poe’s direct references to God in all his works occur rarely, and so must be given “extra importance [for] even minor references” (12). Whether Poe intended it or not, Christian symbols and motifs do appear in this story. Ironically, supposing that such references and symbols were accidental in “Ligeia” would only further prove the very epigraph from Glanvill: God’s will or presence pervades everything, even Poe’s writing.

# Endnotes

- 1 In this article, Burduck discusses Poe's writing/professional associates, many of whom were Catholic or defended Catholicism, and who would have influenced and conversed with him about such things, as well as the religious prevalence of Poe's time. Burduck shows considerable evidence that Poe would have been familiar with the Catholic Bible (portrayed through his use of words and vocabulary) as well as the doctrines inherent to Christianity and Catholicism.

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