



6-20-2021

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Nielson, Emery (2021) "Morphing Identities: The Muse, the Art, and the Artist in “Ligeia” and “The Oval Portrait”," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol14/iss1/6>

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Morphing Identities

The Muse, the Art, and the Artist in "Ligeia"
and "The Oval Portrait"

Emery Nielson

Edgar Allan Poe claims in "The Philosophy of Composition" that "the death . . . of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world" (165), a concept which, as explained by Elizabeth Bronfen, elicits some contradictions. Bronfen addresses the apparent incompatibility in "the combination of 'beautiful,' 'poetical' and 'death', since death is a decomposition of forms, the breaking of aesthetic unity" (60). Many of Poe's works exemplify the concept of the feminine aesthetic, with numerous instances of the destruction of the beautiful feminine form (see Berenice's stolen teeth, the axe in the skull of the wife in "The Black Cat," and even subtler examples of decay like the entombed Annabel Lee). These depictions of temporary beauty fulfill Poe's "poetical" aesthetic, but when we look at "Ligeia" and "The Oval Portrait," we find demonstrations of permanent beauty (or endeavors to achieve it). These stories of portrayed beauty and metempsychosis exemplify a "cultural convention, namely the confusion of woman and art" (Bronfen 112). In their efforts to immortalize beauty, the artists in "Ligeia" and "The Oval Portrait" fuse their muses with

their art and, subsequently, ruin them both. The destruction of the muses adds a layer of complexity to these stories when we consider parallels of loss in Poe's own life, just as the attempts of the artists to immortalize their muses mirror Poe's own processes of grieving and artistry.

For the purposes of this discussion, the role of the muse is based on the following definition: "a person (often a female lover) or thing regarded as the source of an artist's inspiration; the presiding spirit or force behind any person or creative act" (OED, "muse," n., 2c). Several scholars have already made the claim that Ligeia acts as the narrator's muse. Grace McEntee states that "if the narrator is an artist, then Ligeia was surely his muse, a muse who initially led the narrator along transcendental ways" (75). Catherine Carter simply states, "She is the embodiment of the narrator's muse" (46). The narrator admires Ligeia's beauty and intelligence, looking to her for guidance and inspiration in the realm of intellectual exploration. This admiration extends to Ligeia's strength of will as she lies on her deathbed and says, "Man doth not yield him to the angels, *nor unto death utterly*, save only through the weakness of his feeble will" (Poe, "Ligeia" 319). Carter claims that "most authors imply that the muses' place is to *inspire* . . . authors in order that they might do or sing something, rather than to act for themselves" (51). Ligeia's statement regarding the power of the human will inspires the narrator: rather than acting for herself and being the cause of her own reincarnation, Ligeia is inspiring the narrator through her own example to strengthen his will so he can resurrect his wife. As a result, while the narrator works to provide an environment for his wife to return, he seeks inspiration and looks for guidance from a source beyond the grave. This looking toward a dead muse for inspiration brings darkness to the narrator's art and ultimately results in horror.

With his will aligned with Ligeia's, the narrator wants nothing more than to create an opportunity for her to return: "His response to the physical loss of his beloved is to endow his surroundings imaginatively with her ubiquitous presence and resurrect her in his poetic utterance" (Bronfen 367). There is evidence of this in his treatment of his new wife, Lady Rowena, whom he "loathe[s] with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man" (Poe, "Ligeia" 323). This intense hatred, in combination with his strong lingering feelings for his first wife, makes it clear that the narrator did not remarry for love or companionship. We must thus assume an ulterior motive; the presence of Rowena could be explained by the narrator's desire for access to her finances,

but I argue that the narrator's purpose in marrying her was to achieve an ideal physical vessel for the reincarnation of his first wife. The narrator's loathing of Rowena allows him to overcome any potential guilt or hesitancy in sacrificing her. The location of the abbey "in one of the wildest and least frequented portions" of England, as well as the location of the bridal chamber in a turret "altogether apart from the portion of the abbey tenanted by the servants" (Poe, "Ligeia" 320) demonstrate the narrator's efforts to isolate Rowena from anyone who might help her, befriend her, provide any sort of enjoyment for her, or miss her when she is gone (327). The bridal chamber itself is "pentagonal in shape," supporting the narrator's involvement with dark magic, and the decorations and draperies around the room create a "phantasmagoric effect" (321) that elicits "a hideous and uneasy animation to the whole" (322). Rowena has confided in the narrator that she despises the decor, yet he does not remove or alter the room to her taste. If the narrator is not acting for the purpose of reanimating Ligeia, we would have to assume his harshness towards Rowena stems from her not being his first wife. However, considering the tactics the narrator is willing to employ to make Rowena miserable, it is of little question that his actions imply once again a motive singular to his own interest: reanimating Ligeia.

When Rowena falls ill, the narrator describes her condition as follows: "Lady Rowena was attacked with sudden illness" (Poe, "Ligeia" 323). He uses passive voice here, giving power to the illness and making Rowena simply a force acted upon. He also uses a significantly powerful word—"attacked"—to describe the illness's action. The language here suggests more intention behind Rowena's sickness than an implied coincidence between her falling ill and Ligeia requiring a vessel. The "sudden" quality of the illness as well as the narrator's admittance that Rowena was, in some form, "attacked," suggests the narrator's implicit and purposeful involvement in her weakened condition.

Throughout the story, while Rowena is sick and flickering between life and death, the narrator's mind is constantly fixed upon his muse. She is "the presiding spirit" behind his actions as he calls upon the dark knowledge she taught him. The function of the muse becomes complicated when we recognize that the identity of the narrator's muse, the deceased Ligeia, coincides with his end goal and his final product of art: Ligeia reborn. With Ligeia acting as both the muse and the art, the end result of the narrator's sorcery is something which he neglects to recognize as his first wife, let

alone human. The narrator tells us this story through his memories, and so when he says, "The thing that was enshrouded advanced bodily and palpably into the middle of the apartment," we know he does not associate the reincarnated Ligeia with his beloved wife, going so far as to call the spectral being a "thing" (Poe, "Ligeia" 329). When the image of Ligeia is once again before him, the narrator does not identify the being as Ligeia, merely drawing attention to physical features like "the black, and the wild eyes . . . of the LADY LIGEIA" (334). While the "thing" may possess Ligeia's eyes and hair, the narrator's horror confirms that the being before him is not Ligeia herself. He also acknowledges that "it is by that sweet word alone—by Ligeia—that I bring before mine eyes in fancy the image of her who is no more," further testifying that his attempts to reanimate his wife failed and that he can only see a representative image of her in his memory: the true Ligeia "is no more" (310–11). The art the narrator attempts to create, when it is fused with the identity of his dead muse, is far from his goal of resurrecting his wife. Because of the deceased nature of the muse, the art could not be completed in its proper and beautiful form; the death of the beautiful woman altered the narrator's muse and art into something of "horrors" (328). The narrator's attempt to find life in death proves fruitless as his efforts are only rewarded with the dark and the unnatural.

While the roles of artist and muse in "Ligeia" appear more symbolic, "The Oval Portrait" provides a more obvious depiction of the muse, with the artist's wife serving as his visual inspiration. The artist's efforts to create a likeness of his wife place her in the position of his muse as she is the aesthetic inspiration for the image he is painting. Though his wife is his original muse, the artist becomes increasingly less focused on his wife as he becomes more fixated on the painting itself. The story tells us that prior to his marriage, the artist already possessed "a bride in his Art," and this relationship between the artist and his art causes his wife to dread the "instruments which deprived her of the countenance of her lover" (Poe, "Life in Death" 665). Here we are already presented with a conflict regarding the identity of the muse. The artist has given his art not only human characteristics, but romantic ones as well. Because he considers art his first wife, and he continues to turn toward his art for inspiration for the duration of this story, we see the art begin to function as a muse. Catherine Carter suggests that "muses in general are, as their gender suggests, objects rather than subjects" (51). The artist works "day and night to depict her who so loved him," neglecting his wife's humanity and

treating her as if she has no mortal needs, thus ignoring the ever-weakening condition of her health (Poe, "Life in Death" 665). The objectification of the artist's wife, as well as the attribution of human characteristics to the art, blur the lines between art and muse and facilitate a fusion between them.

When the artist finishes his painting and finally looks away, we recognize that the wife has died, and the "*life-likeness*" of the painting suggests a transfer of life from the wife to the art (Poe, "Life in Death" 664). Bronfen suggests that "the conflict between his two brides provokes in the painter a desire to merge the two, to transfer his living wife into the wife he already had" (111). It is through successfully merging his two wives that the artist combines the identities of his living muse with his art. Not only has the muse's identity been fused with the art, but her living essence has been trapped inside it as well. The artist has captured the image of his wife "just ripening into womanhood" (Poe, "Life in Death" 663), an image which naturally evokes symbols of life and fertility. He paints her at a state in which she is symbolically blooming, and in doing so, he "creates a fictional idol/idealization that, while living on, replaces the wife's corporeal existence" (Webb 216). The artist has to kill the muse in order to fuse her essence with the art, thus making her immortal.

Robert M. Mollinger addresses a romantic cliché regarding this story that "life is destroyed by art which, at the same time, preserves life forever" (150). While this move may appear cliché, when we consider the role of the muse as a source of inspiration, her death and simultaneous fusion with the art adds layers of complexity to what Mollinger sees as formulaic. Life is not simply destroyed by art, but the muse, the source of inspiration, becomes fused with the art when the wife's living essence is transferred to the painting. Fusing art with inspiration creates a paradox that suggests an end to the muse but, simultaneously, an infinite loop of inspiration and art.

By killing the muse, the artist has created the most lifelike portrait imaginable: "as a thing of art nothing could be more admirable than the painting itself" (Poe, "Life in Death" 664). Yet the truth behind the painting's creation alters the association of life and liveliness and instead attributes a heavy context of death. While the portrait possesses "*life-likeness*," and immortalizes its subject in its portrayal of her, it depicts a representation of ultimate mortality. The art was meant to be an image of life, and it is initially, but because of its fusion with the muse, the art's essence has been altered forever. In killing his muse, the artist has forfeited all access he had

to his living source of inspiration. His living wife gone, her essence having transferred into his art, the artist will now have to seek inspiration from this unnatural fusion of life, death, and art. Without access to a living muse, the artist will be forced to rely on a living dead muse for inspiration, forever altering the nature of his art and bringing darkness to his future creations.

In addition to claiming that “the death . . . of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world,” Poe says that “equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover” (Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition” 165). While this rule is not explicitly followed in “The Oval Portrait,” “Ligeia” is told from the lover’s perspective, as are many of Poe’s tales regarding dead or dying women. In “The Oval Portrait” and “Ligeia,” the male lover is synonymous with the identity of the artist. While viewing Poe himself as an artist, we can find instances of his acting as a bereaved lover for the death of beautiful women in his own life.

Because of Poe’s role as an artist, we must question the sources of his inspiration. Who were Poe’s muses and what do they inform us about these pieces? Carter connects Poe to the narrator in “Ligeia” as she says, “inspiration is traditionally feminine, beautiful, mysterious, stronger than death (as the art remains to confer immortality on the artist), and *dedicated to giving aid to men*—in this case aid in writing” (Carter 49). The question of the identity of Poe’s muse or muses then remains. I propose that Poe’s muses for “Ligeia” and “The Oval Portrait,” are his dead mother, Eliza, and his dying wife, Virginia, respectively.

Eliza passed away on December 10, 1811, when Poe was just shy of three years old (Bradford 20). At such a young age, Poe was unlikely to retain any solid memories of his mother, and it is this lack of memory that we see mirrored in “Ligeia.” The narrator is unable to recall where, when, or how he met his wife, nor can he remember anything about her family or her life outside of their marriage. All of his memories of her seem to be broad ideas: her singing, her shadow-like presence, her beauty, her intellect. Not only does he struggle to remember her, but he remembers her as an almost inhuman ideal with “an airy and spirit-lifting vision more widely divine than the phantasies which hovered about the slumbering souls of the daughters of Delos” (Poe, “Ligeia” 311). This idealization of Ligeia suggests an inability to remember her for who she truly was as the narrator fills in the gaps with characteristics stemming from feelings of love and loss.

In his biography of Poe, Kenneth Silverman addresses the death of Ligeia, saying that “one reason the narrator finds the loss irremediable is that, although an adult, he depends on Ligeia as if he were a child” (139). This parent-child relationship is supported by the text, as the narrator compares himself to a child several times throughout the story: “I was sufficiently aware of her infinite supremacy to resign myself, with child-like confidence, to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation at which I was most busily occupied during the earlier years of our marriage” (Poe, “Ligeia” 316). The narrator admits that he looks up to Ligeia as a mentor, but here we see that he is so enraptured by her vast knowledge that he views himself as childlike. While considering the failing health of his wife, the narrator remarks, “Without Ligeia I was but as a child groping benighted” (316). Without his muse, the narrator feels as helpless as an unenlightened child, creating implications of their relationship that feel less romantic and more maternal. This desire for Ligeia to teach and lead him mirrors Poe’s own desires for a relationship with his mother.

We see further connections between Ligeia and Eliza when we consider the circumstances of their deaths. Similar to Ligeia’s illness, Poe’s mother died “most likely of tuberculosis” (Bradford 20). While Ligeia is far from being the only woman Poe has killed with a sudden illness, considering the similarities between Poe and the narrator, there is a clear relationship between “Ligeia” and Poe’s feelings of loss regarding his mother. “Ligeia” was first published in 1838 when Poe was twenty-five years old, and it illustrates his sorrow for growing into adulthood without a relationship with his mother. Unfortunately for Poe, his loss did not end with his mother’s death. It was many years later when he found another muse of a more conventional model: his wife Virginia. It is in the tragedy of Virginia’s dying that we can find clear inspiration for “The Oval Portrait.”

Virginia Eliza Clemm Poe loved to sing, and, not knowing that Virginia’s singing would eventually result in her death, Poe supported his wife in her passion (Silverman). In 1842, Virginia was practicing when she “began to bleed from her mouth . . . she was hemorrhaging from her lungs” (179). The result of the hemorrhage brought Virginia into an early stage of tuberculosis, which at the time was commonly referred to as “death-in-life” due to the seemingly hopeless fatality of the illness (179). Much like Virginia’s illness was often called “death-in-life,” the original title of “The Oval Portrait” was “Life in Death,” due to the lifelike nature of the portrait of the deceased

wife. Virginia underwent “death-in-life” for several years, living but growing increasingly weaker as her expectant death drew nearer. Not only did Virginia die young, but the nature of her death becomes particularly intriguing when we recognize what killed her: singing. Just as the wife in “The Oval Portrait” is consumed and destroyed by art, the art of singing eventually killed Virginia.

On June 12, 1846, Poe wrote what remains today the only known letter addressed to his wife. In it he addresses Virginia as “My Dear Heart” and tells her, “You are my greatest and only stimulus now, to battle with this uncongenial, unsatisfactory, and ungrateful life” (Harrison 232). He later claimed he loved her “as no man ever loved before” (287). Poe’s love for Virginia is evident in his letters, as is his suffering in watching her illness progress: “This ‘evil’ was the greatest which can befall a man” (287). Rather than focusing on Virginia’s loss of liveliness, Poe wrote a piece that immortalizes a woman at her most lively state. Because the story was published the same year Virginia fell ill, other scholars have made the clear connection between the dying Virginia and the wife in “The Oval Portrait.” Silverman describes the text as a tale concerning an artist “and his . . . Virginia-like bride . . . The painter will not or cannot accept his bride is dying” (180). This inability of the artist to acknowledge his wife’s failing health mirrors Poe’s own experience as he watched Virginia grow weaker and weaker. Poe wrote that “at each accession of the disorder [he] loved her more dearly and clung to her life with more desperate pertinacity” (Harrison 287). The artist “cannot accept his bride is dying,” just as Poe struggles to accept the mortality of his own wife.

Though Virginia was not yet dead when Poe published this piece, he was brutally aware of her worsening condition. His drinking habits increased as Virginia’s condition worsened, and he writes that he “became insane, with long intervals of horrible sanity” (Harrison 287). The pain of watching his wife die was so unbearable that Poe indulged in alcohol to occupy his conscious mind. As an artist in his own craft, he was faced with the reality of a potential world without his muse, a world without the “only stimulus” in his “ungrateful life.” By placing the artist in “The Oval Portrait” in a position that forces him to use a dead muse for inspiration, Poe recognizes the very real possibility of his own condition in the future. In her dying, “Virginia Clemm unwittingly served as the muse who gave birth to Edgar Allan Poe’s creative powers,” most specifically those regarding themes of death, loss,

and other forms of the macabre (Bronfen 366). Seeking inspiration from a dead or dying muse is not unlike finding inspiration in death itself, and it is this fixation on death that permeates so many of Poe's works.

Just as the artists in "Ligeia" and "The Oval Portrait" acquire inspiration from dead and dying muses, Poe wrote these stories with the invocation of his own dead and dying muses. The doubling of the dead/dying muse further justifies the dark plots of these texts: the artists create art that is dark and close to death just as Poe has created these stories, his art, with themes of darkness and death. His "need to keep writing versions of the revenant plot indicates clearly enough his own difficulty in putting the past to rest" and his inability in finding living forms of inspiration rather than relying on his dead muses (Silverman 140).

By identifying Poe's sources of inspiration for these two stories, we can further identify his processes of mourning with each respective loss. Bronfen says, "The doubling of one wife by another [in "Ligeia"], by virtue of metempsychosis, is meant to prove a continued existence of the 'soul' after bodily decay and serves to soothe the mourner about his own fear of mortality" (334). We can connect this idea to "The Oval Portrait" as well, considering the function of the painting as an immortalizing of the wife's image and essence. Considering these stories to be representations of the women in Poe's life, Poe is mirroring the artists in these stories by creating doubles of his mother and wife in order to soothe his own fears. Bronfen continues, regarding the final death of Ligeia, "this second death also marks a closure of the protagonist's uncanny exchange with the dead, usher[ing] in a new phase in his mourning. Realising that the lost object can be retrieved in the form of a mental image confirms his belief in the omnipotence of his thoughts" (335). Again, we see Poe's characters acting as representations of his own life, as he uses his stories to remember his muses and gain some control over the reality of their deaths through his mental powers.

At the close of "Ligeia" and "The Oval Portrait," both artists make similar exclamations regarding the completion of their art. However, it is through the artists' individual reactions that we can draw conclusions regarding Poe's state of mourning for his dead and dying muses. "Ligeia" concludes as the narrator "shriek[s]," "these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes—of my lost love—of the lady—of the LADY LIGEIA!" (Poe, "Ligeia" 330). The narrator recognizes a resemblance to his wife, but we know through his narration that his attempts to resurrect Ligeia ultimately fail. He questions,

"But why shall I minutely detail the unspeakable horrors of that night," suggesting that Ligeia does not return to life in the form he desires (328). The narrator's recognition of the "horrors" of his art illustrates an ultimate acceptance that Ligeia is gone, despite his best efforts. He still longs for the woman he remembers, but having experienced such dark terrors, the narrator is able to acknowledge the permanence of Ligeia's passing. He doubtless still remembers her through a perfect lens, but after his failed attempt to reunite with his wife, he is able to accept that Ligeia is gone. When he published this story, Poe had been without his mother for many years. Though he never truly knew his mother, Poe's longing to be close to her is apparent in this story, just as "Ligeia's ultimate rebirth only dramatizes more horrifyingly how those most deeply beloved live on within oneself, never dead and ever ready to return" (Silverman 140). Unable to remember her for who she truly was, his memories likely idealized her to be a perfect representation of what a mother can be, just as the narrator idealizes his memories of Ligeia. Since Eliza had been absent from Poe's life for so long, he was able to accept the fact of her passing, and, like the narrator comes to acknowledge Ligeia's death, Poe recognized that he would never see his mother again.

Before discovering his wife is dead at the conclusion of "The Oval Portrait," the artist finishes his painting and declares, "This is indeed *Life* itself!" (Poe, "Life in Death" 666). We do not have the perspective of the artist to conclude how he feels about the nature of his finished art like we do the narrator of "Ligeia," but we can judge his acknowledgement of his wife's death through his actions. The artist "*would* not see that the light which fell so ghastly in that lone turret withered the health and the spirits of his bride, who pined visibly to all but him" (665). Poe's choice of the conditional text suggests a willing ignorance (or even purposeful neglect) in the artist to disregard the condition of his wife. We also know from this quote that the wife's failing health was clearly visible and should have been recognizable to the man who was painting her. As the artist finishes the painting, he "comes face to face with his bride's death but still cannot or will not recognize it" (Silverman 180). The artist's negligence toward his wife suggests a feeling of guilt within Poe for Virginia's condition as well as his use of her for inspiration.

The wife in "The Oval Portrait" "is gentle and forbearing, and quietly sacrifices her life on the altar of her husband's passionately blind pursuit of an ideal," whether that ideal be the immortal youth and beauty of woman or the

most perfect, lifelike art (Gross 18). By attributing these characteristics to the wife and aligning himself with the artist, Poe identifies himself as at fault for Virginia's illness. The wife's death due to the artist's actions illustrates Poe's fear of a worsening in Virginia's condition due to unintentional neglect on his part. While Poe was diligent in caring for his wife, doing all he could to improve her health, the emotional strain of seeing her improve and decline, of finding hope and losing it over and over, weighed on him. Poe admitted after Virginia's death that he had "nearly abandoned all hope of a permanent cure, when [he] found one in the *death* of [his] wife" (Harrison 287). Poe felt extreme loss at Virginia's death, but he also experienced an end to unbearable torment. The artist's inability to recognize his wife's weakened state in "The Oval Portrait" communicates the complexity that Poe experienced when living with his ill wife: distracting his mind with alcohol would allow him to forget her pain and retain a perfect and healthy image of her, but failing to accept and address her situation would result in her death. Poe fought to keep Virginia alive, but in doing so he suffered great emotional stress. This is the struggle that Poe illustrates in "The Oval Portrait": that the obligation of caring for his wife forced him to become familiar with her increasing weakness.

While the relationships of the artists and muses in these stories differ from Poe's life, we can see clear connections between his personal muses and the muses in "Ligeia" and "The Oval Portrait." Rather than using his art to distance himself from his pain and loss, Poe infuses his grief into his writing. "Ligeia" and "The Oval Portrait" illustrate Poe's inability to find inspiration among the living. Trapped in memories of the past, Poe is left in a position to call upon dead and dying muses for inspiration, resulting in art that is laced with death and darkness.

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