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Female Resurrection in Poe's Tales

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ENG 331 A

Dr. Magee

Female Resurrection in Poe's Tales

The female characters that populate the stories of Edgar Allan Poe are often ethereal creatures of great beauty, ghost-like figures that exist on the fringes of the narrative, very rarely taking part in the action of the plot. This, for the most part, is the case with regard to the female characters featured in Poe's "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher". Both the eponymous Ligeia and Madeline Usher exist as virtual non-presences for the vast majority of these stories – at least until the point of their mysterious deaths. After these women pass away due to strange, unnamable illnesses, they suddenly become vibrantly present in the stories that heretofore they had been absent from. Each is "resurrected", and finds power through this return from the grave. Rather than simply existing as things of beauty for their male counterparts to speak of and muse upon with objectifying language, Ligeia and Madeline become figures of awe and terror – individuals to fear and respect.

In Poe's "Ligeia", the titular female that is the object of the narrator's obsession seems to be devoid of a presence for the vast majority of the story. Such an omission makes sense when considering the plot – the narrative is structured as a recollection on part of the narrator of his life with Ligeia and her subsequent

passing. However, when describing his beloved, the narrator makes no effort to form the reader's impressions of Ligeia as anything besides a strikingly beautiful woman who happens to have the "curious" capacity for intellectual thought. He describes her presence as that of a "shadow". What the reader knows of Ligeia is based on her appearance alone, through a description that further serves to objectify her by comparing and reducing her to the cold, marble statues found in ancient Greece: "...her marble hand...", "...skin rivaling the purest ivory" (Poe 226). Nothing is known of Ligeia's personality or her life outside of her relationship with the narrator, and the narrator seems incapable of providing such information. It is as though these details of Ligeia's personhood were irrelevant to him, and were therefore unremembered – a fact that he mentions when discussing how he cannot seem to recall how he met his wife, or even the name of her family: "I cannot, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia...Of her family – I have surely heard her speak" (Poe 225). Even something as important and unique to her character as her intelligence is reduced and nullified in value. When the narrator speaks of Ligeia's considerable academic prowess, he discusses this not with a sense of respect, but with an air of curiosity akin to one studying an unusual specimen: "...the learning of Ligeia...was immense – such as I have never known in a woman" (Poe 229). In this manner, Ligeia – for the vast majority of the story – "exists" in the loosest possible terms, a shadowy and almost inhuman figure within the memories of her husband.

In "The Fall of the House of Usher", the female figure who passes through the majority of the narrative as an ethereal non-presence is Madeline Usher, the twin

sister of the mentally disturbed Roderick. Her brother and the narrator of the tale note her existence, but she has no bearing on any of the plot's action until her untimely death. Instead, she seems to float about the halls as an apparition, a beautiful specter in human form, but no more: "...the lady Madeline...passed slowly through a remote portion of the apartment, and...disappeared" (Poe 213). Much like Ligeia, it is only her physical appearance that is described, and in a way that serves to minimize her as a unique person. She is described only in relation to her brother, as if this were the only way that her life held any sort of meaning or significance – she needed to share a familial connection with him in order to have any presence in the eyes of others. This concept is heightened through the notion that the pair are twins: Madeline is not gifted with an appearance or identity that are truly unique and her own: "A striking similitude between the brother and sister now ... arrested my attention ... sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them" (Poe 219). In addition, it would seem that Madeline has no control of her actions or destiny, as they are shaped by the thoughts and demands of her brother. Madeline's very movements within the Usher estate are predicated upon the ideas and wishes of her brother: "Roderick's speaking of his sister seems to evoke a vision of Madeline...the speaking calls her forth" (Bieganowski 182). This further serves to emphasize Madeline's status as a non-presence, nothing more than a vision conjured into being by her brother. Because of this, Madeline, for the better part of the narrative, only exists as a shadowy, unnatural figure on the fringes of story.

Through her passing, Ligeia becomes something of greater importance not only to the story, but to the narrator as well. The death of Ligeia has taken place before the tale's start, and without this as a catalyst, the narrator of said story would not have been thrown into the deepest possible depths of depression and despondency – a fact that leads to his move to a disused abbey in England and remarriage to the Lady Rowena. It is through Ligeia's demise that the action of the story is set in motion. Her death spurs the narrator in a manner that her life had been unable to as well – a fact that seems to have wounded him deeply. Though his descriptions of her are objectifying at best, there is a sense of regret that runs through his recollections of his beloved, a sense that he wishes he had taken the time to learn more about her and appreciate her, as when he remembers her intellectual ability: "How singularly – how thrillingly, this one point in the nature of my wife has forced itself, at this late period only, upon my attention!" (Poe 229). The narrator's overly-wrought descriptions of Ligeia's physical beauty and her academic pursuits seem to hint that this is truly all he can remember of her, a compensation for his lack of knowledge through passionate and verbose imagery - a fact he seems to recognize with great pain. The narrator comes to realize that this language is incapable of expressing the deep love that he felt for her, despite his lack of knowledge of her: "...language is sadly lacking in its capacity to capture meaning. It cannot serve him adequately in his struggle to understand the past" (Shi 487). Only by dying does Ligeia seem to elicit the sort of attention and thoughts from her husband that should have been at least moderately present in life. So much so does Ligeia's death haunt and disturb the narrator that he comes to despise his new wife,

hoping for the “impossible” return of his former love – perhaps believing that he would have the opportunity to correct his past errors if given a second chance: “My memory flew back, (oh, with what intensity of regret!) to Ligeia, the beloved, the august, the beautiful, the entombed” (Poe 234). In this way, it is through her death that Ligeia begins her transformation from a mere object of desire and beauty to a person of greater significance.

The mysterious disease and untimely demise of Madeline Usher bring her to the fore of her brother’s mind, as well as introduce an important aspect to the plot of the narrative. Though he seems to not have noticed or viewed her as anything of significance, the thought of Madeline’s passing seems to fill Roderick with a pronounced sense of dread that translates to an all-consuming despondency: “...much of the peculiar gloom which thus afflicted him could be traced to...the severe and long-continued illness...of a tenderly beloved sister” (Poe 213). Recognizing that, through her death, Roderick will be utterly alone, his depression and mental state seem to teeter on the brink of madness. After her eventual decease, Roderick treats the corpse of his sister in a strange way, refusing to bury it immediately – “...he stated his intention of preserving her corpse for a fortnight” (Poe 218) - almost as though he carried the “false” hope that she could return from her eternal slumber. This seems to suggest that he felt a sense of regret, though perhaps more for himself and his loneliness than for his sibling. Roderick’s developing psychosis around the event is an essential part of the narrative, only made possible through the death of his sister. Madeline’s passing and the air of fear

and uncertainty that surrounds it set up the potential for her resurrection, and development of a sort of authority and power over her brother.

Ligeia's resurrection is not a swift and sudden occurrence, but rather a gradual change that works to bring her back into life in the fullest way possible. When his new wife takes ill (in a way that seems to mirror the sickness of Ligeia), the narrator attempts to care for his bride, despite his loathing of her. As he soothes her and tries to bring her back to health, the pair sees strange visions and hears bizarre noises that would seem to suggest that they are not entirely alone. No human form is glimpsed, no voice is heard, but there is the suggestion that a spectral figure is haunting the room where the narrator's wife lies stricken: "She spoke again...of the sounds – of the slight sounds – and of the unusual motions among the tapestries" (Poe 235). This "ghost-like" presence can be viewed as that of the Lady Ligeia. As Rowena grows closer to death, the form of Ligeia grows stronger, developing into a more physical presence, culminating in her triumphal return from the grave at story's end – almost as though she were transferring Rowena's life and personhood into herself: "...a rapid change for the worse took place in the disorder of my wife" (Poe 236). The fact that Ligeia is resurrected through the form of Rowena further suggests how she has transformed from a mere object of beauty to a more fully formed person – the narrator seems to have recognized his "mistakes" with his relationship with Ligeia, and makes an effort to give Rowena a distinct presence in his own thoughts as well as the story: her family name is remembered (Trevanion), and her personality is touched upon more than her beauty. In this way, she is more "human" than the ethereal Ligeia - it is as though the narrator's

recognition of Rowena's humanity could be transferred back to Ligeia. Ligeia's return to the world of the living has a more sinister agenda than simply forcing the narrator to reconsider her humanity. Ligeia as a sinister siren, bent on the destruction of her husband: "...her return to life must represent a second chance to seduce and destroy the narrator" (Jones 36). This darker reading of the text could also serve to suggest that through her revivification, Ligeia has gained control of her own existence in a manner that she had not been able to previously. Ligeia is resurrected, brought back from death and transformed from a spectral non-presence in the mind of her husband into a source of power and awe, an individual with a strong, physical authority that is to be feared and respected.

The resurrection of Madeline Usher does not seem to have the same obvious supernatural energy behind it as that of Ligeia, but there does seem to be an unnatural force at play (in the form of the incredible strength needed to wrench her from the tomb, as well as the eerie coupling of noises to passages in a tome read by the narrator), allowing her to return from the grave. Madeline's return to the world of the living has a slow build, suggesting itself and eating away at her brother's psyche: "...there came a strong shudder over his whole person; a sickly smile quivered about his lips; and I saw that he spoke in a low, hurried, and gibbering murmur, as if unconscious of my presence" (Poe 223). As Roderick's mind collapses and crumbles, Madeline's physical existence strengthens and grows, present and distinct in a manner that it had never been previously. Despite her resurrected form's transience, she uses the opportunity to hold power over her brother by bringing him into death with her, and hold power over the home that they shared,

causing its collapse. It is this sense that she has obtained a sort of power through her resurrection that truly frightens Roderick, and gives Madeline ultimate control over him. Roderick's fears of his sister are tangible and strong, stemming from the possibility (and eventuality) that Madeline could assert total power over him:

"Roderick feels himself to be in a struggle for survival and fears ... Madeline ... Roderick is finally overcome by the ... world with which Madeline has been aligned" (Voloshin 14). Through her death and subsequent resurrection, Madeline transforms from an ethereal non-presence to a source of awe, power, and authority.

In Edgar Allan Poe's "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher", the female characters that exist within these works only have almost no presence, existing (at least in the minds of their male counterparts in these stories) as objects of ethereal beauty, creatures to be looked upon and admired but not seen as fully human. They stand on the edges of the narrative, the object of discussion and scrutiny, but never seem to have the chance to have their voices heard or their presence truly known. It is not until each has passed away that they become truly noticed, with each finding through resurrection the chance to gain control and a strong position within the narrative. It is when Ligeia and Madeline find life for a second time that their stories truly fall to these characters – the narratives become their own, as they shape not only their own destinies, but also the destinies of the male figures that exerted control and authority over them for so long.

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