

## Trabajo Fin de Grado

### An Analysis of Poe's "Ligeia" as a Gothic Tale

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## **Abstract**

This essay offers an analysis of Poe's Gothic tale "Ligeia" (1838). The main aim is to study the different devices used by the author to explore a new kind of Gothic, which departs from classical conventions in order to create psychological terror. First of all, the paper includes a summary of the main features of Gothic fiction, paying attention to its origins, evolution, and especially, the concept of the uncanny. Furthermore, the essay highlights the specific characteristics of American Gothic, and, above all, Poe's original reinterpretation of the genre. The second part analyses "Ligeia" in the light of the Gothic characteristics discussed in the first, focusing on the tale's unity of effect, suggestiveness and final inconclusiveness.

## **Resumen**

Este trabajo ofrece un análisis del cuento gótico "Ligeia" (1838), de Edgar Allan Poe. El objetivo principal es estudiar los elementos que el autor utiliza para transformar las convenciones del género gótico y generar terror psicológico. En la primera parte, se analizan las características generales del Gótico, prestando atención a sus orígenes y evolución, y especialmente, al concepto de lo siniestro. Asimismo, se destacan los rasgos principales del Gótico norteamericano, y en particular, la original reinterpretación que Poe hace de este género. La segunda parte del ensayo se centra en el análisis de "Ligeia", tomando como referencia los elementos góticos destacados en la primera y poniendo de relieve su unidad de efecto, vaguedad y ambiguo desenlace.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

This essay analyses the tale “Ligeia”, first published in 1838. It was written by Edgar Allan Poe, a dark Romantic American writer, critic, poet and editor, and probably, the most emblematic author of Gothic fiction. My aim is to carry out the analysis reading “Ligeia” as a representative tale of Gothic literature.

First of all, I have analysed the formal and stylistic devices which are used in the tale. In order to do so, I have paid attention to the structure of the text, its narrative voice and the use of language, discussing the role that they play in the story. Moreover, I have tried to explain how Poe uses them to achieve a sinister and gloomy atmosphere typical of the Gothic. I analyse “Ligeia” in the light of the most relevant Gothic features, such as uncanniness, studying the sources which prompt the emergence of such a feeling highly characteristic of the tales of terror. Therefore, I put special emphasis on the figure of the double, a clear source of the uncanny. Finally, I have dedicated the last part of the essay to discuss the ending of the tale, which, far from answering the questions that arise during the reading of the story, maintains the mystery. Therefore, I include a summary of the possible interpretations associated with it.

In order to carry out the analysis, I have divided the essay into two main sections. The first one deals with the general characteristics of the Gothic. The second part is constituted by the analysis of “Ligeia”. In the first part, I discuss the most important features of the Gothic, (its meaning and origins), paying special attention to the distinctive elements of American Gothic. It must be pointed out that British and American Gothic share some qualities, but the latter has developed its own peculiar traits, due to a different setting, history and culture. Finally, I analyse the most important characteristics of Poe’s Gothic, following

the notions that he discussed in his essay, “The Philosophy of Composition”, and highlighting his use of psychological terror, opposed to the typical conventions of his time. The second part of the essay focuses on the analysis of “Ligeia” (Poe’s favourite tale), taking into account the contents of the first part. The second part is composed by three sections. The first one deals with style and the importance of unity of effect. The second explores the concept of the uncanny; and the last one focuses on the ending of the story, which remains a main source of debate.

## THE GOTHIC: MEANING AND ORIGINS

The Gothic novel appeared in England in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the publication of Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* subtitled “A Gothic Story” (1764). This literary genre was mainly composed by a mixture of tragedy and romance together with a touch of horror and a Gothic medieval setting. The Gothic emerged as a reaction against the emphasis on reason and scientific enquiry of the Enlightenment. As Maggie Kilgour explains, the Gothic tries to rescue an idealized past characterized by a barbaric creative liberty against the neoclassical aesthetic defined by the ideas of reason and progress (3). In this sense the Gothic novel finds a coincidence with Rousseau’s theory of primitivism in which the past was closer to nature. Primitivism advocates a return to the natural world connected with instincts and freedom and opposed to conventions and rationality. Thus, the present is understood as dissociated from nature due to the corruption of modern society (15).

David Punter explains how this term has experienced different changes from its origins until our days. Originally, “Gothic” finds its roots in relation with the Goths. These

people were a number of Germanic tribes which contributed significantly to the fall of the roman Empire (by means of the so called Gothic wars) as well as to the emergence of the Middle Ages. Gothic also refers to the language used by this west Germanic tribes which was part of the East Germanic branch of the Indo-European language family. Taking into account the association of this term with the Goths, the word Gothic became a synonym of “Teutonic” and “Germanic” and it conveys connotation of barbarity and violence (5). Fred Botting illustrates how the term was used as a derogatory designation for the Middle Ages. It was associated with unrestrained superstition and uncivilized people (22). Thus, the term Gothic was used in opposition to “the classical”, and represented fantasy and transgression as opposed to the educational values of the Age of Reason, in which literature was supposed to have an instructional function. The ideas of chaos, primitiveness as well as excess and exaggeration were automatically attributed to the Gothic in contrast with those of logic and order (Punter 5). The word Gothic is also used to refer to an architectural style which prevailed during the 12<sup>th</sup> century until the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The most representatives buildings are abbeys, basilicas, cathedrals, castles or churches. This architectural technique experienced a revival in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It served as the most suitable setting for the Gothic novels that were emerging at the time. These structures constituted a perfect scenario to build up a ghostly atmosphere of suspense and terror.

## MAIN GOTHIC TRAITS

Usually, the haunted buildings that act as a setting for the Gothic are characterized by a Gothic architectural style. The large wings, towers, dark corridors, crypts and dungeons consolidate these spaces as the most suitable to create a horror story. David Punter and Glenis

Byron argue that “the castle represents desubjectification: within its walls one may be ‘subjected’ to a force that is utterly resistant to the individual’s attempt to impose his or her own order.” (262). Moreover, the haunted house in many cases stands for the mind of its owner. So, the personality of the character is reflected on the building itself. This is the case for instance in “The Fall of the House of Usher”. In the tale the mental degeneration of Roderick is mirrored by the decay of his house.

These haunted houses are accompanied by an atmosphere of suspense and doom. This suspense is reached by means of different techniques. Botting explains that darkness increases mystery and is opposed to the light of reason; furthermore, gloom generates mysterious emotions (32). Besides, the Gothic is a very intertextual genre. We usually find frames and embedded stories inside the text which evoke the dark and winding corridors of the setting: all this constitutes “The Gothic Labyrinth”. Besides, the figure of the unreliable narrator is very prominent. Therefore, meaning is never clear and the reader is engaged trying to decode the mystery of the plot. Many plots revolve around aristocratic families. These dynasties are presented as relics of a past that keeps haunting the present. As a consequence, these families, although powerful in the past, are in decay because they do not fit in the modern world in which they now exist. The weather is a very important feature in Gothic stories due to the fact that it helps to create a impressive effect on the reader. The pathetic fallacy, coined by John Ruskin, is very frequently used. This is the reflection of the character’s feelings and emotions in the natural elements.

In addition to the barbarous and medieval the gothic usually incorporates the supernatural. This can be expressed by fantastic events and the presence of monstrous characters such as vampires or inexplicable occurrences. David Punter and Glenis Byron

explain that this non-human creatures stand for restrained inclinations (264). Some critics claim that an explanation for the existence of vampires was that they were a product of premature burial. In turn, this particular figure was also used as an explanation for the propagation of several diseases (268).

## THE UNCANNY

The uncanny constitutes one of the most outstanding characteristics of Gothic fiction. This phenomenon is described by Fred Botting as something which “disturbs the familiar, homely and secure sense of reality and normality” (11). David Punter discusses the different meanings that the *Oxford English Dictionary* provides for this word. The uncanny covers significances from “unreliable” to “mysterious”, “weird” or “unfamiliar”. Therefore, the term refers or can be applied to the field of the supernatural and the magical. It also alludes to the past, to events that took place and we cannot decode or totally grasp, as it is experienced with the phenomenon of *déjà vu*. The term was earlier defined by Sigmund Freud in his essay “The Uncanny” (1919). He describes this term as “that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar” (220). He explains the etymology of the term and also turns to other languages such as French in which uncanny is expressed as “inquiétant”, “sinistre”, or “lugubre” or Spanish in which the term is equated to words like “sinistro” or “de mal agüero”. Thus it can be said that the uncanny belongs to an obscure realm of feelings (419). Moreover, there is a connection between the uncanny and the sublime. This inundates us with feelings of terror and awe.

Focusing on the core meaning of the term uncanny, it is necessary to refer to its



ambivalence. Uncanny is *unheimlich* in German, that is, unhomely. Hence, “heimlich” stands as its opposite, meaning homely. Freud also explores the different usages of the term heimlich related to concepts such as intimacy or the feeling of comfort in the familiar sphere. It is also expressed as contrary to wild, it conveys a sense of security. However, if we go deeper into its layers of meaning we find usages which are deviated from the ones above. The word heimlich is also related to ideas such as secrecy, seclusion and surreptitiousness (419). David Punter discusses the same points and also emphasises that heimlich is also unhomely and secret to those who do not belong to that realm. Thus, Freud concludes that “heimlich is a word the meaning of which develops in the direction of ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*.” (421). It is the hesitation between knowing and not knowing, the mystery that produces the uncanny reaction. Consequently, this phenomenon provides such a powerful experience because of the uncertainty of not knowing what is faced. Furthermore, the uncanny is also associated with objects: in the case of dolls or automata the uncanny feeling is a consequence of the suspicion that the inanimate object is in fact animate.

If there is an element that provides an uncanny effect to the narrative, that is the figure of the double or the *doppelgänger* (423). It is used to reflect the ambiguity of a character’s self, a duality which often focuses on the opposition between good and evil. This is represented through the split of the characters into an alter ego which haunts the original subject, hence, the figure of the double merges as a representation of repressed feelings, emotions or intentions and it is the result of problematic issues such as identity and inherently good or bad nature. This is represented by the physical resemblance of the characters as well as by multiple coincidences such as similar circumstances or actions, and also by telepathy

(423). Both characters seem to share some kind of intimate connection. One of the most representative examples of this strategy is found in Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Doctor Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. There are other interpretations of this separation of the self such a reluctance to die. The double is seen as denial of the evanescence of the ego and as a resistance to death. A perfect example of this aspect of the double appears in Poe's tale, "William Wilson" in which the doppelgänger acts as the protagonist's consciousness.

Other prominent types of uncanniness is that of the fear of being buried alive, or the case of revenant people. They are familiar subjects, but as they have experienced death, they become unfamiliar and produce feelings of fear, attraction and repulsion. This is the case in some of Poe's tales such as "Berenice", "The Fall of the House of Usher", "The Black Cat" and "Ligeia". Since it evokes feelings of terror, uncertainty and suspense, the uncanny is one of the most recurrent elements in Gothic fiction, particularly if the author's intention is to disturb and confuse the reader's mind.

## AMERICAN GOTHIC: ORIGINS AND CHARACTERISTICS

Lloyd-Smith argues that American Gothic was originally regarded as a subordinate of the Gothic fiction written in England, taken just as a different version of the dominant culture. He points out that American writers were part of the British culture because they made use of the English language as a means of expression and they were exposed to the British models. However, there are significant differences in relation with English Gothic (3). Due to a different environment and culture, American Gothic was not an imitation of its models, but it flourished in other directions than the English Gothic novel and developed their own

identity. Important historical events that influenced and fostered Gothic literature in the U.S are the concept of the frontier, characterized by isolation and violence; The Puritan background, and the presence of decisive but marginalised and abused racial groups: Native Americans and African-Americans (4).

The issue of the frontier was particularly significant in the case of early Gothic writers such as Washington Irving and it also influenced authors like Herman Melville. In *Moby Dick* the frontier and its inherently fear of the unknown is embodied in the figure of the whale (80). Lloyd-Smith adds that the imagery of hell, predestination and sin was a very powerful contribution that is related to the Puritan influence (70). Both Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne were influenced by it although their fiction acquired different directions. Jerrold E. Holge elaborates on the idea that Hawthorne appropriates the Gothic in order to “politicise historiography” (180). Poe’s writings leave the historical and political issues beneath the surface whereas horror, death, madness or the supernatural are given prominence.

Rationalism and perversity are two themes that Lloyd-Smith highlight as characteristic of American Gothic literature (65). It seems that there is an inclination for perverseness and an inability to solve it by means of reason. For instance, we can find characters that have good intentions but eventually they are driven by their obscure desires. Far from being a bulwark, the crisis suffered by reason when attempting to explain the illogical events allows Poe to create his masterful detective stories (67). In his tale “The Black Cat” we can see a narrator theorizing about perverseness and concluding that there is no explanation for these evil instincts.

Abandoning classical Gothic settings such as castles, abbeys or churches (non-existent in the new continent), American Gothic privileged the domestic in the course of the

19th century. From the beginning, the haunted house becomes the most emblematic symbol of American. As Lloyd-Smith says: "The house, not the castle, becomes the site of trauma; its terror deriving from the familiar inmates instead of some external threat, and its terror therefore what Poe called a terror of the soul, and not of Germany" (75). Moreover, concerns such as the genetic inheritance or condemnable behaviours started to occupy a central position. If there was a latent tendency towards perversity and a turn towards our instincts, maybe it could be transmitted from one generation to the other (Lloyd-Smith 111).

In short, American Gothic emphasises the importance of physical and mental decadence, of miscegenation and racism, of madness and psychological terror, features which appear also in a variety of well-known US writers as diverse as Poe, Stephen King or William Faulkner. These characteristics give shape to American Gothic and refute the idea that its works were just imitating English models.

## GOTHIC CHARACTERISTICS IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S TALES

Edgar Allan Poe is regarded as a master of the literature of terror. In fact, David Punter discusses Poe's "ability to vest the most mundane of circumstances in a shroud of terror" (179). Thus, it is important to analyse the Gothic elements that he used to master this literary genre. As a writer of terror narratives, one of the main elements of his work is precisely terror. Ann Radcliffe clarifies that there is a distinction between horror and terror. On the one hand, she explains that the concept of horror is associated with the body, and terror, with the mind. Therefore, images of horror have to do with physical responses and also with disgust. Ann Radcliffe explains in "On the Supernatural in Poetry" that:

terror and horror are is far opposite, that the first expands the soul, and awakens the faculties to a high degree of life; the other contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them. I apprehend, that neither Shakespeare nor Milton by their fiction, nor Mr. Burke by his reasoning, anywhere looked to positive horror as a source of the sublime, though they all agree that terror is a very high one. But where lies the great difference between horror and terror but in the uncertainty and obscurity that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil? (150).

Thus, terror is associated with the mind, intense emotions and the sublime. This phenomenon looks for a more psychological kind of response. Similarly, Poe made a distinction between the terms grotesque and arabesque. The former implies distortion and violence together with a comic touch; and the latter focuses on abstraction, vagueness and the fears of the unconscious. In the preface of "Tales of Grotesque and Arabesque" the author manifests his desire to evoke a "terror of the soul" (Steven Frye 3).

Poe's main contribution to the Gothic is this turn inwards to the human psyche. In order to accomplish this task, the uncanny is very skilfully explored, especially in the form of the double. In "The Fall of the House of Usher", both the ambiguous relationship between Madeline and Roderick and her apparition at the end, after her premature burial provoke uncanniness. In "William Wilson" we can find another instance of the double. Here the behaviour of the main protagonist is questioned through his split personality or inner voice.

Although content always plays an important role, Punter argues that Poe's main

achievement is reached in terms of “structure and tone” (177). Therefore, the Gothic elements are valuable but above all, how they are used in order to produce the desired result. In “The Philosophy of Composition” Poe explains that “unity of effect” is the most important factor when writing a literary work. The text must be read at one sitting so as to avoid interruptions and produce a more intense effect. It is at the service of the same purpose that a hurried dénouement is created (Silverman 13). “Suggestiveness” is an essential factor because it does evoke, without clarifying: it helps to maintain suspense (129).

Poe also introduces the technique of *mise-en-abyme* or mirror text. These mirror texts are brief texts placed within the main narrative which briefly and partially reproduce the contents of the main plot. For instance, this is the case of “The Mad Trist”, which evokes the stages of Madeline’s return from the tomb, and the poem “The Haunted Palace” (also in “The Fall of the House of Usher”), which describes the physical and mental decay of a palace and its dweller.

Most critics argue that one of the best literary innovations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is concerned with Poe’s use of focalization and the narrative voice. Poe elaborates on cases of hallucination and is fond of presenting neurotic minds. A common characteristic that these storytellers share is their unreliability, which is highlighted by madness or drug addition (Bolton 55). Taking into account that these stories are told by a first-person narrator, the reader only has access to the events through the narrator’s point of view and subjectivity, which usually corresponds to a disturbed mind. For instance, in the case of “The Black Cat” the reader experiences the narrator’s evil and mental disintegration. Trapped in his subjectivity and unable to escape his senses and perceptions, the narrator insists on his mental sanity and tries to provide a rational justification for his behaviour (Mathew J. Bolton 59).

This persistence, far from being convincing, reaches the opposite effect and unchains the reader's suspicions. In addition, by insisting on their rationality and self-control, these narrators betray their mental instability (Matthew J. Bolton, 59).

In short, we can conclude that Poe's Gothic combines traditional Gothic characteristics (haunted settings, the supernatural, an atmosphere of suspense and doom) with innovative formal and textual devices (use of the narrative voice, suggestiveness, unity of effect, terror of the soul) which result in masterpieces of terror.

## 2 ANALYSIS OF LIGEIA

### SUMMARY OF THE TALE

The tale “Ligeia” is told by an unnamed, first-person narrator, married in the past to Lady Ligeia. She is already dead at the beginning of the story. In the first part of the tale the narrator describes her as a learned and beautiful woman, making special emphasis on her eyes. He remembers her constantly, pointing out how his happy marriage came to an end when Ligeia fell ill and died. After some time, the narrator decides to embark himself in a new marriage to Lady Rowena Trevanion de Tremaine, who will run the same fate as the first wife. After a night of strange events, perhaps motivated by the narrator’s consumption of opium, the body of Rowena, apparently dead, experiences a transformation and comes to life with the looks—the eyes— of Ligeia.

### LIGEIA: STYLE AND UNITY OF EFFECT

Edgar Allan Poe has been considered as the epitome of the tormented writer, a victim of alcohol, opium and drugs. However, he has also been described as a meticulous hard-working writer. In his essay “The Philosophy of Composition” he puts the emphasis on “unity of effect”: everything in the text must be carefully delineated to reach perfection. Moreover, he describes his own *modus operandi* when writing a literary piece. He explains that before starting the process of writing you must decide which is the desired effect you want to convey (114). Thus, the text must be at the service of that specific effect. In the case of “Ligeia”, a



gothic tale, the purpose is to arouse vagueness, uncertainty and psychological terror in the mind of the reader.

The narrator is one of the main elements to accomplish Poe's goal. In "Ligeia" there is a first person (internal) narrator. This specific narrator is chosen on purpose to bring the action closer to the reader and above all, to intensify uncertainty and subjectivity. Moreover, the narrator shows very important related characteristics: unreliability and poor memory. Right from the beginning he highlights this feature: "I CANNOT, for my soul, remember how, when, or even precisely where, I first became acquainted with the lady Ligeia" (155). The narrator has a delusive and selective memory: he neither remembers the circumstances in which he met his own wife nor her paternal name. This feature is presented through the text and diminishes the narrator's reliability. For instance: "in our endeavours to recall to memory something long forgotten" (162) or "yet I am sadly forgetful on topics of deep moment" (167). Another device used by Poe to emphasise the narrator's poor memory condition is the use of the multiple choice technique to make things more uncertain:

And now, while I write, a recollection flashes upon me that I have *never known* the paternal name of her who was my friend and my betrothed, and who became the partner of my studies, and finally the wife of my bosom. Was it a playful charge on the part of my Ligeia? or was it a test of my strength of affection, that I should institute no inquiries upon this point? or was it rather a caprice of my own — a wildly romantic offering on the shrine of the most passionate devotion? I but indistinctly recall the fact itself — what wonder that I have utterly forgotten the circumstances which originated or attended it? (159).

However, the narrator claims that his memory does not fail when it comes to talk about the

person of Ligeia: "There is one dear topic, however, on which my memory fails me not" (160). Far from relying on this statement, the reader wonders whether s/he can trust the narrator or not. The uncertainty increases when we discover that the narrator is an opium eater: "In beauty of face no maiden ever equalled her. It was the radiance of an opium dream" (160). Santiago Rodriguez Guerrero Strachan points out that the narrator focuses on his own dreamy reality and, therefore, the narration is based on what he says it happened and not on what really occurred (74). Moreover, there are certain occasions on which the narrator dismisses the power of words to express his experiences and thoughts: "words are impotent" (164) or "no utterance capable of expressing" (164). Nevertheless, language and narration are the only means by which he can provide his rendering of the facts.

Leaving apart the figure of the narrator, it is also important to focus on the language. In the first part of the tale the author makes use of alliterative devices, that is, he makes use of words which resemble similar sounds: "thrilling and enthralling" (159), "voluptuous slumber of the under" (161), "have I felt approaching the full knowledge of their expressions— felt it approaching" (162), "magical melody modulation" (163), "wild words which" (163) or "desire for life— for life— but for life" (164). The use of these words with a phonemic resemblance creates a sense of musicality. Furthermore, we can also see the repetition of the same or similar structures at the beginning of some sentences: "I have never known in woman", "I have never known her at fault" (163). "With how vast a triumph— with how vivid delight— with how much of all that is ethereal in hope" (163). In this first part of the text there is an abundance of long sentences contributing to musicality and providing fluidity to the tale: "I was never made aware of her entrance into my closed study save by the dear music of her low sweet voice, as she placed her marble hand upon my shoulder"(160)

or "That she loved me I should not have doubted; and I might have been easily aware that, in a bosom such as hers, love would have reigned no ordinary passion"(164).

In terms of rhythm, we can distinguish two parts in the text. The first one is characterized by melodious and long utterances. However, this vivid rhythm disappears in the middle of the narrative when Ligeia's life vanishes. The sentence "She died" establishes a barrier between both parts. Musicality decreases as well as the length of the clauses. The first part of the tale emphasises Ligeia's desire for life, particularly represented by the repetition of this sentence "desire for life— for life— but for life", which can be understood as a prolepsis of her final resurrection. Thus, when Ligeia's life ceases, what we find is a less vivid narrative as a symptom of her death.

Poe also enriches the narrative by using references to other texts, cultures or religions. For instance, when the narrator is immersed in Ligeia's description he says: "the beauty of the fabulous Houri of the Turk."(161). The Houri are virgins found in the Paradise of Islam. These women are described as women of black eyes like Ligeia's ones. He also mentions Azrael: "I saw that she must die — and I struggled desperately in spirit with the grim Azrael."(164). This figure can be found in Islam and Jewish traditions. It is an angel in charge of dividing the body and the soul. This allusion points to the inevitable death of Ligeia, but also may suggest the mysterious events at the end of the tale.

Another device used by the author is intertextuality. The tale starts with an epigraph attributed to Joseph Ganvill. He was a writer and philosopher that dealt with themes such as the supernatural or witchcraft. The following lines are repeated several times: "Who — who knoweth the mysteries of the will with its vigor? Man doth not yield him to the angels, *nor unto death utterly*, save only through the weakness of his feeble will." (159). The fragment

emphasizes the weakness of human beings but also their power of will. Similarly, the narrator emphasises Ligeia's strength and desperate desire of overtaking death and go on living. In fact, this is exactly what will occur at the end of the tale. Taking into account Ganvill's fields of investigation, it was a suitable writer to be quoted in a horror tale. Nonetheless, the lines cited had not been found in any of Ganvill's works, which means that Poe was the real author. This shows his degree of implication when writing a text: a clear example of his insistence on "unity of effect".

The tale includes a horror poem titled "The Conqueror Worm", written by Ligeia when she is terribly ill. It can be interpreted as an allegory of humankind. The poem describes a play in which humans are presented as puppets. They are the victims of the conqueror worm. Humans cannot escape the worm, which is the visible and disgusting representation of death and putrefaction. The poem deals with the inevitability of death, with the fact that human beings can not reach immortality. However, at the end of the story the reader witnesses Ligeia's resurrection. Therefore, the poem conveys the enigmas of the plot as well as an ironical intention, given its excessive nature.

Poe also pays special attention to the tone of the story. First of all he situates the action in a remote time and place, providing a solemn air to the tale: "Long years have since elapsed" (159). Besides, the action takes place in an "old, decaying city near the Rhine" (159). After Ligeia's demise, the author recreates a Gothic atmosphere in a different setting, an English medieval abbey. The action is concentrated in a more restricted place. Poe accentuates the importance of "a close circumscription of space" (The Philosophy of Composition, 126) when writing a text. The effect of this enclosure is an intensification of the action, as he explains in "The Philosophy of Composition". In "Ligeia", the setting is the bridal chamber

which has a pentagonal shape. If we interpret pentagrams inside the realm of the occult they are related to magical practices. Within the description of the chamber we also find adjectives such as "semi-Gothic" (167) or "semi-Druidical" (167) which contribute to evoke a gloomy and mysterious atmosphere. The bridal couch has a "pall-like canopy above" (168) and on each side of the room there is a "sarcophagus of black granite" (168). The fact that the chosen word is sarcophagus and not coffin brings Egyptian culture to mind and also the mummies that come to life in fiction.

The shrouded body of Rowena also contributes to this imagery. It could also be perceived as another hint of Ligeia's resurrection. If there is an element that intensifies a macabre environment, this is the tapestry. The chamber is decorated by huge tapestries with "arabesque figures". The adjective arabesque refers to an Islamic art to decorate walls, but also to the characteristics of his tales. Thus, Poe provides the word with a meaning of abstraction and vagueness. Moreover, it is important to remark that these figures change of shape depending on the perspective of the viewer, which intensifies subjectivity and undecidability. Hence, we could say that the tapestries are a metaphor for the story itself, which can be interpreted in different ways. All these characteristics create such an aura that the chamber, far from being suitable for a married couple, turns into the perfect place for terror and supernatural events. Therefore, it can be pointed out that by making use of different devices such as narrative voice, focalization, language, rhythm and tone, Poe exemplifies his notion of unity of effect, suggesting rather than telling what happens in the story. He provides the reader with an active role by involving us in the text decodification.

## THE UNCANNY IN "LIGEIA"

"Ligeia" is a brilliant example of Gothic fiction. As such it contains many characteristics that Gothic writings use in order to create terror. "Ligeia" includes a Gothic setting and a preference for a distant time and place. Moreover, another important element that the tale shows is uncanniness. This feature is mainly conveyed by the figure of Ligeia.

As I have explained, the uncanny is mainly characterized by the uncertainty that it creates. It alters feelings of tranquillity and security. Ligeia provokes these effects: her description creates many doubts about her true nature. First of all, both her beauty and her eyes are described as possessing "strangeness": "I perceived that her loveliness was indeed "exquisite" and felt that there was much of strangeness pervading it" (160), "The "strangeness" however, which I found in the eyes, was of a nature distinct from the formation"(161). Moreover, the narrator makes emphasis on Ligeia's voice in her description: "magical melody, modulation, distinctness and placidity of her very low voice" (163). Ligeia's name can be found in Greek mythology attributed to the figure of the siren. In mythology, sirens were creatures of extreme beauty who enchanted sailors by singing. In addition, her movement is compared to a shadow and her footfall is light as feathers. Besides, the narrator says that she has a marble hand. In fact, we could see her as a ghost or vampire figure. Vampires are mysterious and seductive creatures, who like Ligeia, walk with ethereal movement and have a cold skin. Neither vampires nor sirens belong to the human nature and as such they create insecurity and terror, conveying uncanniness.

Furthermore, Ligeia embodies the highest peak of uncanniness when she comes to life at the end of the story. As mentioned before, revenant people are one of the main sources of uncanny feelings. The fact that Ligeia has experienced death provokes both fascination

and aversion in the narrator and also in the reader. Her shocking looks at the end of the tale contribute to the intensification of terror: "I could at least doubt no longer, when, arising from the bed tottering, with feeble steps, with closed eyes, and with the manner of one bewildered in a dream, the thing that was enshrouded advanced bodily and palpably into the middle of the apartment" (172).

Uncanniness is also provided by the figure of the double, which applies to two pairs in the tale. The first is composed by the narrator and Ligeia, whereas the second is constituted by Ligeia and her reversed version, Rowena. The vagueness omnipresent in the tale ties in with the defective memory of the narrator. If the uncanny implies a tension between the known and the unknown, the story shows this dichotomy through several gaps in knowledge which are present mainly because of the narrator's incapacity of remembering. He is obsessed with the memory of Ligeia, mainly with her eyes, which can also be read as his I's. We could conclude that the narrator is not able to remember where he met his wife, to decipher the mystery of Ligeia's eyes or to provide a clear portrait of her, because Ligeia is an expression, a projection of himself. Thus, Ligeia can be seen as a return of the narrator's repressed, who by appropriating Rowena's body shows the true nature of the narrator as a madman or even a psychopath. He contemplates the "fall of some ruby-drops" into the glass of Rowena which provoke her death. Maybe Ligeia is the responsible for this fact, but the narrative remains unclear:

as Rowena was in the act of raising the wine to her lips, I saw, or may have dreamed

that I 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. If this I saw — not so Rowena. She swallowed the wine unhesitatingly, and I forbore to speak to her of a circumstance which must, after all, I considered, have been but the suggestion of a vivid imagination, rendered morbidly active by the terror of the lady, by the opium, and by the hour. (170)

Regarding Ligeia and Rowena, they act almost as opposites in the tale. On the one hand, Ligeia, although mainly depicted by the narrator, can express herself through her own words. Moreover, she is described as a very clever woman whose wisdom is much bigger than the one of the narrator. She is portrayed as superior to him in both physical and intellectual terms: "Without Ligeia I was but as a child groping benighted" (163). On the other hand, Rowena does not enjoy the possibility of expressing herself but only through the narrator's words. In Ligeia's description the narrator makes clear the profound love he feels towards his wife. Nonetheless, this is not the case with his second wife, Rowena: "I loathed her with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man" (169). She does not receive the same attention or affection on the part of the narrator. She is presented in just one sentence: "I led from the altar as my bride — as the successor of the unforgotten Ligeia — the fair-haired and blue-eyed Lady Rowena Trevanion, of Tremaine." (166). The narrator acknowledges that he marries her in "a moment of mental alienation" (166) to replace Ligeia, who has never been forgotten.

Moreover, their physical differences also establish them as the two sides of a coin. Ligeia's hair is "*blacker than the raven wings*" (161) as well as her eyes, whereas Rowena is



a "fair-haired and blue eyed lady" (166). Besides, Ligeia possesses an ethereal, mystical quality which contrasts with the earthly character of Rowena. The narrator cites Rowena's complete name, Lady Rowena Trevanion, of Tremaine, and her ancestry is also made clear. The reader is also aware of the fact that she has a family because the narrator, ironically, blames them for letting her daughter turn into the bride of a madman. We can say that, by comparing the ordinary figure of Rowena, the strange qualities of Ligeia are enhanced making more obvious the effect of the uncanny.

The dichotomy between Ligeia and Rowena can also be approached in terms of race. Once more the way in which Ligeia is depicted unchains a debate, in this case a racial one. In "Amorous Bondage: Poe, Ladies and Slaves", Joan Dayan argues that the physical traits that Poe highlights are the same that the taxonomist of colour studied: hair, eyes and skin. Moreover, Dayan remarks that the gap of information about Ligeia's family and the colour of her eyes relate her to the figure of the "tragic mulatta"(260). A good number of observers have described Creole's eyes as immense and revealing, like the ones of Ligeia: "They were, I must believe, far larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race". The following reference makes allusion to *The History of Nourjahad*, a story written by Frances Sheridan: "They were even fuller than the fullest of the gazelle eyes of the tribe of the valley of Nourjahad." (161). Poe uses this association because Nourjahad was supposed to be accompanied by one of the most appealing slave women (Dayan, 261). The blackness of the slaves provoked unfamiliarity and fear, turning them into mysterious, dangerous and uncanny subjects.

Furthermore, there are some qualities of Ligeia's personality that bring her closer to features related with the black race. Not only her eyes, but her thirst for life and her yearning

are also labelled as "wild". These properties depict Ligeia as a passionate woman. Only black women were supposed to show sexual desire. In fact, Long describes blacks as "libidinous and shameless as monkeys or baboons" (cited in Dayan, 249). Such qualities will never be found on a white woman who was supposed to be submissive and delicate as Rowena is described. In contrast, Ligeia presents a more commanding and distinguished attitude than the male of the tale. Moreover, she is said to possess a great wisdom. Intelligence was yet another quality that belonged only to the male realm. Hence, men could feel threatened by these women, as the narrator is.

#### LIGEIA'S ENDING: WHO IS THE MURDERER?

In "The Philosophy of Composition" Poe explains that "it is only with the denouement constantly in view that we can give a plot its indispensable air of consequence, or causation" (113). Besides, the denouement must be powerful and quick so that the desired effect acquires more power. Although "Ligeia" seems to possess a simple plot, the tale is open to a variety of interpretations. As a consequence, the ending can be contemplated in different lights.

If we approach the ending from a literal point of view, the first interpretation allows to see the tale as a vampire story. In fact, Tony Magistrale concludes that Ligeia comes to life "by vamping Rowena's body" (60). Regarding this version, Ligeia is the responsible for Rowena's death because she takes possession of her body to come back to life. She deposits the ruby-drops in the glass of Rowena. The first wife, Ligeia, moved by the fact that his husband has betrayed her by marrying another woman, is looking for revenge. In the first interpretation, Poe uses a typical characteristic of the Gothic as an explanation, the

supernatural. This feature is embodied by Ligeia who comes back from the tomb as a vampire in order to destroy her successor, Rowena. However, Rowena could have also been poisoned by the narrator. Taking into account that he had been married to the ideal woman, he could not be satisfied by the earthly Rowena. There are two main details that show the narrator's decision to kill his second wife. First of all, he confesses his negative feelings such as abhorrence and even hate towards her. Moreover, the narrator takes her to a ruinous abbey, leaving her isolated from her family; in addition, he turns the bridal room almost into a torture chamber, which acts as the narrator unconscious, and as such it reveals his fatal intentions.

Nonetheless, it is also possible to contemplate the ending as a hallucination of the deranged mind of the narrator. From the very beginning the narrator shows his poor memory, a fact which increases his unreliability. Moreover, he refers to the consumption of opium, which could have prompted the hallucination of his wife coming to life. There are some qualities such as Ligeia's musical voice, her eyes and extreme beauty and insubstantial way of walking, which allow us to see Ligeia, not as a real human being, but as an entity existing only in her husband's imagination. Thus, his obsession, enhanced by drugs, produces the illusory image of Ligeia. In fact, James W. Gargano describes Ligeia as a "romantic disease" (338).

One thing is certain. Whether they are loved or hated, the women of the tale are fated to die. Joan Dayan explains that for Poe "adoration is a deadly business" (245) which seems to be exactly the case in "Ligeia". However, we might also say that in the final outcome there are three victims: the narrator, who becomes the victim of his own creation and obsession; Rowena, who is either killed by the narrator or vampirized by Ligeia, is another victim. Besides, Ligeia also suffers a deadly fate, a premature death. However, both the narrator and Ligeia-

Rowena can be seen as victimisers: the former, as a sadistic abuser of Rowena; the latter, as an ambiguous agent of terror. The fear that the narrator feels when contemplating the body and shocking features of the apparition at the end of the story exemplifies this reversal:

I trembled not — I stirred not — for a crowd of unutterable fancies connected with the air, the stature, the demeanor of the figure, rushing hurriedly through my brain, had paralyzed — had chilled me into stone. I stirred not — but gazed upon the apparition. There was a mad disorder in my thoughts — a tumult unappeasable. Could it, indeed, be the living Rowena who confronted me? Could it indeed be Rowena *at all* — the fair-haired, the blue-eyed Lady Rowena Trevanion of Tremaine? Why, why should I doubt it? The bandage lay heavily about the mouth — but then might it not be the mouth of the breathing Lady of Tremaine? And the cheeks — there were the roses as in her noon of life — yes, these might indeed be the fair cheeks of the living Lady of Tremaine. And the chin, with its dimples, as in health, might it not be hers? — but *had she then grown taller since her malady?* What inexpressible madness seized me with that thought? One bound, and I had reached her feet! Shrinking from my touch, she let fall from her head, unloosened, the ghastly cerements which had confined it, and there streamed forth, into the rushing atmosphere of the chamber, huge masses of long and dishevelled hair; *it was blacker than the raven wings of the midnight!* And now slowly opened *the eyes* of the figure which stood before me. “Here then, at least,” I shrieked aloud, “can I never — can I never be mistaken — these are the full, and the black, and the wild eyes — of my lost love — of the lady — of the LADY LIGEIA.” (173)

In conclusion, nothing can be concluded. That is, Poe creates an abrupt and truncated ending

which does not clarify or cancel any of the readings mentioned above. We will never discover whether Rowena is killed by the narrator or by Ligeia, or if the first wife turns into a revenant or is only an ideal figure created by her husband. In addition, the resurrection of Ligeia occurs abruptly, which intensifies the feelings of shock and terror, both in the narrator and the reader. Moreover, the use of a first-person narrator whose mind is delusive, highlights the atmosphere of unreality and supernaturalism. Thus, suggestiveness is used as a tool to increase the reader's implication. The inconclusiveness which dominates the whole story, and more concretely the ending, leaves the question "who is a murderer?" totally unresolved. It is precisely this combination of elements that makes "Ligeia" a masterpiece of the Gothic literature and still, an issue of debate.

### 3 CONCLUSION

"Ligeia" constitutes a brilliant example of Poe's Gothic. It is also an instance of Poe's highest literary achievement. In fact, this story was his favourite tale. As has been pointed out before, Poe was the first writer determined to provoke psychological terror, "terror of the soul". This effect is reached by submerging the reader inside a deranged mind like the one of the sadistic, unnamed, unreliable narrator of the tale, our only focalizer and guide through the Gothic labyrinth. Ironically, an opium eater whose memory fails when trying to remember his wife's family name and other important details about her beloved, is in charge of guiding the reader through the mysteries of the plot. This recurrent uncertainty, associated with a complex narrative technique, results in an increasing feeling of confusion which accompanies the reader during the development of the tale.

Moreover, by means of an evocative, lugubrious, but also excessive and inflated language, Poe constructs the ideal scenario to depict the supernatural. It is within this remote and gloomy atmosphere that the reader tries to decipher what is happening in the tale. Thus, we will soon find ourselves fascinated by the mystery of the strange nature of Ligeia, and by the uncanniness provided by the figure of the double, which in this tale involves three characters, rather than two.

Finally, when we approach the ending, expecting that the mystery will be finally solved, we, like the protagonists of the story, are caught in the haunted chamber of the isolated setting, the "close circumscription of space" (126), characteristic of Poe's Gothic. At the very end, a rapid and uncertain dénouement leaves the reader with a feeling of dislocation, looking for an ultimate answer that cannot be achieved.

To conclude: “Ligeia” exemplifies Poe’s original adaptation and recreation of the classical Gothic conventions, and highlights the elements that he discussed in “The Philosophy of Composition”: death of beautiful women, unity of effect, appropriate language and tone, melancholy, remote and circumscribed “*locale*” (126), originality, brevity, intensity, complexity and suggestiveness, which at the end of the essay is described as “some under-current, however indefinite of meaning” (129). In fact, this indefiniteness, which the dénouement intensifies, has been suggested since the beginning of the narrative by the mysterious figure of Ligeia and the enigmatic expression of her eyes.

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