Just Dark Enough: A Conservative Writer’s Walk on the Dark Side with Poe

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Edgar Allen Poe spins a dark tale of opium dreams, ghostly visits from a dead wife, and hidden taboo topics. Is this short story really something just anyone should jump into? Chris Wolfe shows us why even the most conservative of readers should take the journey of “Ligeia”.

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I have to admit that I am the everyman when it comes to anything Edgar Allen Poe. By that I mean that I only read Poe’s works originally because it was assigned to me in my junior year at Sullivan East High School for a project I have no memorable details of now. Poe was never originally my favorite author. The dark and disturbing tales that Poe concocts were always just a bit too much for me to handle. I consider myself a fairly conservative writer when it comes to the things I put down on paper. Topics like drug induced states of mind, murder, and supernatural horror all seem too
much for my writing inspiration. However, with time and influence from other novels I’ve read that use Poe’s works as inspiration, I learned to enjoy Poe and his works for the same reason I’d once kept him at arm’s reach. In fact, the uneasy feelings I got from reading Poe helped break me out of that shell and opened up my writing style.

“Ligeia” may be one of the least known of Poe’s more popular works, if only for the fact that you and I were probably never assigned this short story in high school English class. For good reason, if I were perfectly honest. Ligeia may be the best example of Poe’s demented literary ways, but there’s so much to ‘Ligeia’ from its drug-induced point of view to its subtle taboos, that any English teacher short of a college level professor would be wise to keep these influences from the impressionable minds of younger students.

That isn’t to say that ‘Ligeia’ is somehow a bad short story; quite the opposite in fact. ‘Ligeia’ is every bit worth the read, no matter your literary tastes or influences. Fans of horror or literary dementia would flock to this, if you haven’t already, and even the most conservative of readers should read this just once. Coming in at just over 6,000 words, there’s no reason even the slowest of readers can’t find time to read this story.

‘Ligeia’ starts off like any good story but the real disturbing stuff starts happening when we arrive midway through the story, in an old English abbey that was bought and refurbished to be dark and sinister enough that the mind’s eye should already be imagining up something that disturbs it. The narrator is an unnamed pale and frail man, old and rich with even older money. He has recently lost his wife and greatest love, our title character Ligeia, whose beauty was unmatched in the eyes of our narrator. In the first half of the story we see her fall mysterious ill and soon pass away. In this restored
abbey, he’s moved in with a new wife, Rowena, who for much of the story lies in the bridal chamber, mysteriously ill, which the room itself with its pentagonal shape and gothic design should throw red flags to any reader. The narrator spends much of his time on a drug trip, a self-induced opium dream… or is it?

And that’s the beauty of Poe and what he does in *Ligeia*. Poe has a way of always leaving you guessing about the reality of the events. Our first indication that the narrator is somehow unreliable comes early on in the story:

There is one dear topic, however, on which my memory fails me not. It is the person of Ligeia. In stature she was tall, somewhat slender, and, in her latter days, even emaciated. I would in vain attempt to portray the majesty, the quiet ease, of her demeanor, or the incomprehensible lightness and elasticity of her footfall.

The narrator is already slipping into some sort of confused and weird state. He says his memory is failing when he tries to remember how he ever met her, but is perfect when it comes to describing his dear Ligeia. In the same breath he claims he could never really describe the things that make her so beautiful and perfect. He even says later on that he can’t seem to remember her maiden name. How could he not remember his beloved’s name, or how he met her? She was, by the narrator’s own admission, a dark, slender woman of unusual beauty.

If you want out, now’s a good time to start making that jump, because this is where things start to get disturbing. Rowena, the new wife, lies in the bridal chamber. She’s every bit opposite of the late Ligeia. The narrator doesn’t even love her, Rowena
is mysteriously ill, and he recounts when Ligeia became ill and slipped into death.

Amongst all these opium dreams and memories, he starts seeing things. Are they real?

At one point while he thinks the ghost of his former beloved has visited him, Rowena seems to get a little better before mysteriously dying:

She had now partially recovered... 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.

Is the ghost of Ligeia present? The dark red liquid, is it blood, or even poison?

Has he poisoned Rowena? Did he poison Ligeia? He never says he did. Yet I was left to wonder what was really going on between these two deaths and how similar they felt.

Well, if you're still with me, you're a better reader than I ever was because by now, I've had all sorts of questions about this story. First few times I picked up this story, I was completely out by this point. I'm not usually one for drug trips and pentagonal bridal chambers with corpses or possessions. Did I leave that part out?

Because things get super weird when Rowena, after being dead for days, can be heard moaning in the bridal chamber, and when he finally checks the body of the dead Rowena again:

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.
It seems the spirit of Ligeia comes back and possesses Rowena and forces her presence and beauty on her, transforming the dead Rowena into the undead form of Ligeia.

Yeah. Poe does it again in his classic Poe way. If you don’t put down this short story and say to yourself, ‘What the hell just happened?’, whether you gave up half way through or finished the entire story, then I want to know what it was that left you feeling somewhat normal.

As dark and disturbing as the story can be, *Ligeia* really is a safe bet for getting yourself acquainted with Poe if horror isn’t really for you. If not for anything else, read this short story as the purest example of Edgar Allen Poe and the dark Romantic style of writing. *Ligeia* is the textbook example and is guaranteed to get you started down a path of crazier and darker subject matter. Even if you never read Poe again, you’ll come away a little better educated and you’re going to open your boundaries to more writing styles and genres, which is never going to be a bad thing.