How do we know that something is real? Do we know something is real because we can see, hear, feel, or taste it? Do we know something is real because other people say it is real? From his poems to his short stories, Edgar Allan Poe has challenged the perception of reality. Most people have encountered “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Masque of the Red Death,” which clearly deal with an altered state of reality. However, few readers have discovered “Ligeia,” which more delicately questions reality. While there are two interpretations of the short story (literal and psychological), today most scholars agree that not all in “Ligeia” should be taken as the stone-cold truth. On the surface, it is a story of a man who loses his first wife and remarryes only to have his second wife die as well. Then, his first wife’s spirit takes over the body of the second wife. However, this is not the whole story. Most scholars view Ligeia, the first wife, as a figment of the narrator’s, the husband’s, imagination and conclude that he kills Rowena, his second wife, in “a psychotic attempt” to give Ligeia a new body (Davis and Davis 175). However, Rowena is never killed or even dead; she suffers a worse fate, the death of her personality. “Ligeia” is a retelling of a certain time in the narrator’s life—the time he is married to his first and second wives (Shi 487). The narrator has known Ligeia for a long time before he marries her. When he does marry her, he develops a fanatical love for her, dwelling incessantly on her appearance and intelligence (Poe 1-2). However, Ligeia becomes ill and dies. This crushes the narrator, and he can no longer stay in his home of the Rhine, so he buys a dilapidated abbey in England and takes a new bride, Rowena, in a moment of weakness (Poe 5-6). He has no love for Rowena and wishes for Ligeia to live again. Soon Rowena becomes ill, and she starts seeing images in her bridal chamber (Poe 7). After a particularly traumatic episode, the narrator offers Rowena wine, but before she drinks it, three or four drops of a red liquid fall into her glass; four days later, Rowena has apparently died. As the narrator watches the body, he longs for Ligeia to return to him. The body goes through a succession of episodes where it appears as though Rowena is still alive, and then, the body sinks into an even more pronounced state of death. Finally, the body looks so alive that the narrator believes she must no longer be dead (Poe 8-9). Confirming his suspicions, the body gets up and takes off its bandages, but it is Ligeia and not Rowena, who has returned to life, apparently stealing Rowena’s body (Poe 10). While “Ligeia” might sound like a straight-forward story, there has been a great deal of disagreement among the scholars as to how “Ligeia” should be
interpreted. D. Ramakrishna explains that, “the reader is left in an uneasy state of indecision whether to react to the conclusion as that of a horror tale or as a final culminating vision of delightful fantasy” (qtd. in Shi 494). This explains why there are two main categories that most arguments fall under—literal and psychological. The literal perspective views the story as a “tale of the supernatural,” while the psychological interpretation views the story as taking place on two levels—in reality and in the narrator’s mind (Davis & Davis 170).

The psychological approach is the viewpoint supported by most scholars today. However, this viewpoint is simply an umbrella under which most arguments happen to fall because there are many significant differences among the scholars’ arguments. Perhaps, the most historically significant viewpoint is that of Roy P. Basler because his was one of the first arguments that viewed “Ligeia” as more than literal. He focused on the narrator’s obsession with Ligeia and sought to prove that Ligeia exists only in the narrator’s mind (Basler 364). He was so successful at proving his point that many scholars have branched out from his argument to dissect every aspect of the story as fantasy.

According to most of today’s scholars, Poe left clues within the text to help his readers understand that “Ligeia” is more than a scary story. The clues fall under three main categories: Ligeia’s missing background information, Ligeia’s unreal beauty, and Ligeia’s inconsistent love. These clues all help prove that Ligeia is a figment of the narrator’s imagination.

The narrator has several lapses about his love’s background. He cannot remember “how, when, or even precisely where” he met Ligeia (Poe 1). He also states, “I have never known the paternal name of [Ligeia]” (Poe 1). It is an important clue that he cannot remember her last name because “for a German aristocrat, the paternal name would also connote a certain social status” (Shi 488). According to Davis and Davis, these lapses would make it probable that Ligeia is a hallucination that the narrator is trying to make into a realistic person (171).

The narrator has many gaps about Ligeia’s origin, yet he can intimately describe all of Ligeia’s features. In fact, several paragraphs are spent detailing the wonderful beauty of Ligeia, breaking down her features lovingly. He describes her raven-black hair, delicate nose, and brilliantly white teeth as well as other features. As the narrator continues describing Ligeia, he uses more and more fantastic language, such as when he describes her eyes as “larger than ordinary,” then “gazelle eyes,” then “divine orbs” (Poe 2), making it seem like she cannot possibly exist because nowhere in reality is there such wonderful beauty (Davis and Davis 171). The narrator also explains how she moves, saying that she “came and departed as a shadow,” and that he cannot hear her when she enters his study until she speaks (Poe 1). Davis and Davis
think that she moves like a shadow because she does not exist (171). When she enters his study, she is actually entering the narrator’s mind instead, so of course, she would not make noise.

Ligeia’s missing background information as well as her beauty and movement are certainly enough to convince most that she is an aberration, but the final persuading clue is her inconsistent love. Just before Ligeia dies, she spends her time confessing how much love she has for the narrator. However, nowhere else does the narrator state that Ligeia has ever had any good feelings for him at all. Also, the narrator says that it was not until after Ligeia dies that he knows she loves him, yet he has already listened for hours to how much she cares for him (Poe 4). Therefore, the reader can understand that “[t]hese unbelievable love confessions are not Ligeia’s but are, in reality, further delusions of the narrator” (Davis & Davis 174).

These clues are more than enough proof that Ligeia is indeed the narrator’s hallucination, and since Ligeia is proven to be a fantasy, her death is merely the inability of the narrator to sustain his hallucination (Gargano 339). Nevertheless, the narrator is crushed by his loss; he leaves his home in the Rhine to look for a body for Ligeia to inhabit because he truly believes that Ligeia is real, has died, and can be reincarnated. He marries a real person, Rowena, and moves into a rundown abbey in his mad attempt to allow Ligeia to take over Rowena’s body (Davis & Davis 174 and Poe 5-6).

The narrator takes Rowena as a wife to supply a body for Ligeia to return to him. His plan is to weaken Rowena to the point of sickness, so that his mind will accept the ‘death’ of Rowena and the return of Ligeia, while he will consciously be none the wiser that he is the mastermind. To weaken Rowena, the narrator mentally tortures her with both his treatment of her and the decorations of the bridal chamber.

The narrator treats his new wife like a prisoner, with no affection and little attention. In describing his treatment of her, he says, “That my wife dreaded the fierce moodiness of my temper—that she shunned me and loved me but little—I could not help perceiving; but it gave me rather pleasure than otherwise. I loathed her with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man” (Poe 7). Because of this horrible treatment, Rowena is broken to the point that she avoids her husband and most likely all human contact, making her mind susceptible to the torture of the bridal chamber.

The bridal chamber is described by James Gargano as a true “chamber of horrors” that the narrator takes particular care in decorating (340). It is in a tower of the abbey and has only one dark-tinted window that casts a strange color over the rest of the room. There are five “gigantic sarcophagus of black granite” in the chamber (Poe 6). Perhaps the crowning glory of the narrator’s
decorations is the curtains. The curtains have grotesque figures that will produce optical illusions when the wind moves them (Basler 369 and Poe 6). This room’s decorations would certainly be enough to frighten any young bride, so Rowena’s exposure to the room, after being treated so dreadfully, would have a pronounced negative effect on her psyche.

After only a short time, the narrator’s horrible treatment and the bridal chamber wear Rowena down, and she becomes ill (Poe 7). She recovers, but shortly thereafter she becomes even more violently ill than before. During this time, she starts seeing movement in the curtains and hearing strange sounds. When she tells the narrator, he dismisses it but does not tell her that it is just the way the curtains were made and that he intended this to happen. This would, obviously, ruin the destructive effect that the curtains are having on Rowena (Basler 369 and Poe 7).

Even though the narrator knows that he is the one playing with Rowena’s mind, the fact that someone else is seeing aberrations can allow the narrator to start to see images as well and slowly bring Ligeia back to ‘life’. He can allow himself to believe that he sees a shadow in the middle of the floor and the drops of liquid fall into Rowena’s goblet (Poe 7). He can then imagine that this kills Rowena. However, it never says that Rowena has died, though clearly stating earlier that Ligeia has died, so on the fourth night of her illness when the narrator is sitting with Rowena’s body, she must simply be sleeping because of her stress-induced illness (Poe 5).

At this point, the narrator can bring to fruition his plan to bring back Ligeia. In order for him to believe that Ligeia has come back, his mind has to go to war against itself. The rational side wants its master to realize that Rowena is still alive, while the controlling force desperately desires for Ligeia to ‘live’ once more. While sitting by the ‘body’, the narrator hears a sob and sees life in Rowena. He tries to revive Rowena, but she sinks further into death. “This hideous drama of revivifications [is] repeated … each terrific relapse was only into a sterner and apparently more irredeemable death” (Poe 9). Every time the narrator dwells on Ligeia and bringing her back, the body appears to be alive again (Poe 9). This process is clearly a battle within the mind of the narrator. Whenever he dwells on Ligeia’s memory and tries to revive her, he keeps realizing that Rowena is alive, but then, when he tries to awaken Rowena, his mind allows him to see death in her once more. With every cycle, Rowena dies more and more in the narrator’s mind.

During the final cycle, the ‘body’ appears to be unequivocally alive. Rowena has apparently awoken, and she gets up. The narrator should be forced to realize that it is Rowena, not Ligeia, who is alive. However, his unconscious mind plays a helpful trick on him: when he looks at Rowena, he
does not see Rowena. He sees Ligeia (Poe 9-10). His mind has allowed him to project Ligeia onto Rowena, making Ligeia’s revivification complete. “The narrator has destroyed his real wife in a psychotic attempt to realize a purely imaginary one” (Davis & Davis 175). The narrator, though he never lays hands on Rowena, has effectively killed her. The narrator will never again ‘see’ Rowena. When he looks at her, all he will see is Ligeia. Therefore, because the narrator is her main source of human contact in the remote location of the abbey, Rowena is the same as dead because she cannot express herself.

“Ligeia” is one of the most intriguing interpretive challenges in Poe’s collection of work because Poe does not clearly state what is real and what is fantasy. Instead, “[h]e leaves the reader to differentiate between imagined and factual events on the basis of clues subtly disclosed throughout the story” (Davis & Davis 170). In analyzing this story, there have arisen two camps of interpretation: literal and psychological. After Roy P. Basler’s famous psychological interpretation was published, most scholars have taken the position that “Ligeia” is a story about the hallucinations of a man and how he destroys a real woman’s life in search of the return of his fantasy. In their arguments, Rowena is most often viewed as having been killed by the narrator. However, Rowena is actually never killed; she has the narrator’s fantasy, Ligeia, projected onto her, effectively killing her personality, a far worse fate than true death.

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Works Cited


