

## Edgar Allan Poe's "Ligeia": An Object-Relational Interpretation

CARRIE ZLOTNICK-WOLDENBERG, M.A.\*

*This paper argues that Poe's short story "Ligeia," in which the narrator experiences the death of his adored first wife (Ligeia), a second marriage to the despised Rowena, and ultimately the death of Rowena and the revivification of Ligeia, is not a supernatural tale, but rather a psychological one. According to this reading, the poisoning of Rowena and the revivification of Ligeia are hallucinated by the narrator in the course of an opium-induced psychotic break. The antecedents to this break are explored in light of object relations theory, with particular emphasis placed on the way in which the two women function as part objects. Ligeia represents the narrator's romantic and spiritual side and is associated with the good mother, while Rowena, who represents his more mundane and materialistic side, is associated with the rejecting mother. It is argued that the narrator, functioning primarily in the schizoid position and employing such defense mechanisms as splitting and projection—which already require a high degree of fantasy—is not an unlikely candidate for such a break.*

Poe's short story "Ligeia" (1) is narrated by a widower who has suffered the loss of his beloved and idealized wife, Ligeia. Shortly thereafter, he enters into an unhappy marriage with the Lady Rowena. The tale concludes with Rowena's death and what appears to be the revivification of Ligeia. It has traditionally been read as a supernatural tale in which the will of the dead woman is strong enough to overcome death, an idea alluded to in the story's epigraph<sup>1</sup> which is attributed to Joseph Glanvill, and referred to several times subsequently. It may, however, also be read as a story in which the narrator, displaying poor reality testing and loose boundaries and functioning primarily in the schizoid position—as evidenced by his use of such defense mechanisms as splitting, projection, idealization, denial, and omnipotent thinking—hallucinates that Ligeia kills Rowena and herself returns

\*Doctoral Candidate in Clinical Psychology, Ferkauf Graduate School of Psychology, Yeshiva University. **Mailing address:** 235 West 102<sup>nd</sup> Street, Apt. 14H, New York, NY 10025.

<sup>1</sup>The epigraph reads as follows: "And the will therein lieth, which dieth not. Who knoweth the mysteries of the will, with its vigor? For God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness. Man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor onto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will."

from the dead. In this interpretation, it is the will of the narrator—expressed through his fantasy, which is enhanced by the use of opium—rather than the will of Ligeia that brings her back to life. Indeed, although the story is entitled “Ligeia” and appears at first to be about the power of *her* will, its primary focus is really on the narrator, and it is *his* psychological functioning—or malfunctioning—that is at the heart of the story.

#### **SPLITTING AND PROJECTION: THE QUESTION OF AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ANTECEDENTS**

It is important to mention at the outset that, while not identifying Poe with his narrator, the reader cannot discount certain autobiographical facts that may contribute to an understanding of the story's dynamics insofar as Poe may be projecting not only his conflicts but also his internal objects onto his characters. Poe was a romantic who sought to escape the harsh realities of his life through art and drugs. He experienced poverty and sickness, was abandoned by his father during his infancy, and his mother died soon thereafter. His insecure attachment to parental figures might have been exacerbated by the fact that the family that raised him never adopted him.

It is reasonable to assume that the narrator's splitting behavior, which involves “separating loving and hating facets of oneself from loving and hating facets of the object. . . [so that] the individual [can] safely love the object, in a state of uncontaminated security, and safely hate without the fear of damaging the loved object” (2, p.19), might have been projected onto him by Poe. Its most likely origin was the early loss of the author's mother. Such a loss might be perceived by the infant as due to his destructiveness and/or needy love, and subsequently defended against by splitting. Klein might argue that because of the death of his mother at an early age, Poe himself never had the opportunity to make reparation, which is crucial for a child if he is to relinquish his attachments to internal part objects and move on to more mature and healthy relationships with whole others.

Klein depicts relationships that dominate the paranoid-schizoid position, which predominates in the first three or four months of life and may later emerge again, as the “predetermined result of the nature of the drives, particularly of constitutional aggression” (3, p. 146). She believes that it is the child's aggression and destructive impulses that are projected onto the parents and that “perceptions of real others are merely a scaffolding for projections of the child's innate object images” (3, p. 131). Her position differs from that of Fairbairn, who argues that it is not innate aggression

but "parental deprivation [that is] the exclusive cause of pathology" (4, p.75). Yet, Klein would concede that "[g]ood experiences with the parents transform these bad objects into more benign, whole objects"; clearly, a prerequisite for that rectification is that the parents survive long enough so that "[t]heir perpetual reappearance, despite the child's murderous phantasies, strengthens the child's belief in his own restorative capacities and aids in the development of reality testing" (3, p.146). It would be reasonable to argue that Poe, not having had the chance to "repair" his original love object and not having had enough good experiences with her over time to allow him to introject more of the good mother, was condemned to a life dominated by attachment to internal part objects. It was these internal objects that ultimately got projected onto his literary characters, the idealized Ligeia and the demonized Rowena, for example, permitting him to protect the image of the good mother.

It is not necessary, however, to impose Poe's history onto the narrator in order to build the case for the narrator's undescribed but obviously poor developmental history. His pathological attachments to internal objects, which he projects onto the external world, are in and of themselves evidence that he never successfully negotiated the schizoid position. As Fairbairn explains, "A nonpathological relationship with a real person. . . does not require internalization because the interpersonal interaction is inherently satisfying. . . . Indeed, the more unsatisfying an object (e.g., mother, father) has been in actual reality, the more a child is compelled to internalize it". (5, p.5)

Whatever the narrator's history may be, Fairbairn would argue that he has not been able to renounce compulsive attachments to internal part objects, as evidenced by his projection and splitting. When there are such intense attachments to internal objects, "[t]he present is merely a reenactment of the past, using external objects as props for the re-creation of a timeless internal drama" (2, p. 85). Thus, it is not important for us to know the details of the narrator's history because they can be intuited from his present behavior, which is characterized by his inability to accept ambivalence in either himself or others and his use of splitting as a primary defense mechanism both intrapsychically and in relation to others.

The intrapsychic split in Poe's narrator is between his artistic, romantic self, associated with creativity, passion, and intellectual fervor, which he venerates and loves, and his more mundane and practical self, which he despises. In his interpersonal relationships, he also tends toward polarization, demonizing or idealizing those who represent those sides of himself, but not relating to them as integrated whole subjects. In short, the narrator

does not experience ambivalence interpersonally or intrapsychically, and as Ogden (6) might explain, in place of temporal contiguity there is a constant creation and recreation of reality, largely through the use of fantasy, as reflected not only in his use of splitting as a defense mechanism, but also through projection, denial, and magical reparation.

### LIGEIA AND ROWENA AS PART OBJECTS

The narrator's intrapsychic split is projected onto the two women in the story, Ligeia, who inspires his artistic and intellectual development, and not surprisingly is associated with the nurturing mother, and the more mundane Rowena, who is likened to the withholding, rejecting mother. Neither of them is a subject, i.e., an integrated whole person. The narrator knows little (and cares little) about them as individuals. He does not, for example, even know Ligeia's paternal name or the circumstances under which he met her.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, she lacks substance, having been described as coming and departing "as a shadow." This impression is further developed when the narrator describes "the incomprehensible lightness and elasticity of her footfall," likens her beauty to "an airy and spirit-lifting vision," refers to her "marble hand," and on more than one occasion speaks of her low (or very low) voice (1, p.111). All in all, Ligeia sounds more like a figment of the narrator's imagination than an actual woman. As for Rowena, there is so little that is distinctive about her that she could have been any available woman. The fact is that for the narrator, "external objects are so thoroughly eclipsed by transference projections of his internal object world that the qualities of the external objects are barely discernible" (2, p.85). As objects of the narrator's projection of his internal split, the two women cannot co-exist. They exist sequentially: first Ligeia, then Rowena, and then Ligeia once again.

The split between the two women is clear from the outset from their physical descriptions. Ligeia is dark-haired and dark-eyed, while Rowena is fair-haired and light-eyed. More to the point, the narrator rhapsodizes for several pages about Ligeia's physical and intellectual endowments, for example, devoting a long paragraph to the description of her eyes, which he calls "divine orbs" (1, p.112), while he provides scarcely a sentence of description of Rowena, describing instead, and at great length, their bizarre and melancholy bridal chamber (a projection of the narrator's despair and

<sup>2</sup>That the author is interested in Ligeia only insofar as she is a reflection of himself is evidence of his narcissism. This is not surprising, given that it has been argued that Fairbairn was "applying the term 'schizoid' to a range of symptomatic and characterologic disturbances that later clinicians would classify within the borderline-narcissistic spectrum" (7, p. 283).

depression over the loss of his idealized love object). Most importantly, one woman is loved while the other is detested; one reciprocates that love, while the other shuns her husband and loves him little; one is idealized and the other demonized.

Adjectives like "rare," "singular," and "enthraling" (1, p.110) are used to depict Ligeia, and her description contains many analogies to mythological figures. Ligeia is never depicted as ordinary or human. She is the very embodiment of romance and is always described in superlatives. The narrator tells us that "in beauty of face no maiden ever equaled her" (1, p.111), that hers was the "most exultingly radiant of all smiles," that her eyes were "far larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race" (1, p.112). We are also told that her acquisitions were "gigantic" and "astounding" and her learning "immense—such as I have never known in woman" (1, p.114).<sup>3</sup> She is, moreover, described as spiritual and mysterious, with the narrator likening himself to an astronomer who studies Ligeia's eyes as the "devoutest of astrologers" studies the stars (1, p.112) and, more than once, to a child, who has placed himself under the tutelage of a vastly superior being. Clearly, there is no equality in the relationship, and the narrator feels that Ligeia's love for him is "all unmerited, all unworthily bestowed". (1, p.116)

The references to his childlike inferiority and his dependence on Ligeia suggest that on some level Ligeia is perceived as the good mother. She loves her child /husband passionately, even if such love is undeserved; pouring out before him "the overflowing of . . . [her] heart" (1, p.115), she teaches him and serves as a source of his inspiration. In fact, at times the highly spiritual Ligeia seems to be associated with the Virgin Mary, the quintessential good mother. There are references to her "majesty so divine" and to the "holy light" falling upon her teeth. (1, p.112)

Greed, an important concept in object relations theory, is apparent in the narrator's relationship with Ligeia. Just as the "infant wants to have *all* the contents of the good breast for himself" (3, p.129), without the awareness that he might deplete or destroy it, the narrator seeks to milk Ligeia dry.

<sup>3</sup>Given the narrator's inordinate degree of identification with Ligeia, his veneration of her intellect can be seen as a reflection of the pride he takes in his own intellectual superiority, which is consistent with Fairbairn's description of the schizoid's "over-valuation of intellectual pursuits as an expression of detachment and a displacement from repressed internal object relations to the intellectual sphere" (8, p. 47). Reminiscent of the narcissistic inflation of the ego, the schizoid tendency toward such superiority is explained by Fairbairn as the result of "secret possession of, and considerable identification with, internalized libidinal objects (9, p. 290).

In hyperbolic fashion, D.H. Lawrence (10), writing about "Ligeia," states that it is easy to see why each man kills the thing he loves:

To *know* a living thing is to kill it. You have to kill a thing to know it satisfactorily. One should be sufficiently intelligent and interested to know a great deal *about* any person one comes into close contact with. *About* her. Or *about* him. But to try to *know* any living being is to try to suck the life out of that being. (p.76)

Lawrence likens the narrator to a vampire, surely a wild exaggeration, but the fact remains that the narrator simply cannot let Ligeia alone. He wants her to be his teacher and his spiritual guide, to know everything about her, and to penetrate all of her mysteries. He scrutinizes all of her features, trying in vain to understand his perception of their strangeness, but is most obsessed with understanding the expression in her eyes:

The expression of the eyes of Ligeia! How for long hours I have pondered upon it! How have I, through the whole of a midsummer night, struggled to fathom it! What was it. . . which lay far within the pupils of my beloved? What *was* it? I was possessed with a passion to discover." (1, p.112)<sup>4</sup>

What is most evident in the relationship between the narrator and Ligeia is that the two are not on equal footing and are not engaged in a reciprocal relationship. Not only does the narrator take from Ligeia, but he also seeks to go beyond the natural boundaries that exist between all individuals—even lovers—and to merge with her. In a telling passage, he describes the letters on a page of text, which, "wanting the radiant lustre of her eyes grew duller than Saturnian lead," the implication being that the narrator, so overly identified with Ligeia, has lost his own powers of perception and sees the external world only through her eyes. Even more revealing evidence of the merging that has taken place is seen in the following sentence: "I saw that she must die – and *I* [*italics mine*] struggled desperately in spirit with the grim Azrael [the Angel of Death]" (1, p.115).

It is clear that the narrator has not been able to move from what Fairbairn calls the stage of infantile dependence through the transitional stage to finally achieve "mature dependence," in which he renounces "compulsive attachments to objects based on primary identification and merger in favor of relationships based on differentiation and exchange" (3, p. 161). Fairbairn might argue further that, as is characteristic of schizoid

<sup>4</sup>While this passage seems to be evidence of the narrator's idealization of Ligeia, Fairbairn would likely view it as evidence that Ligeia is an exciting object, promising, but never yielding, the meaning so desperately sought by the narrator. He might go on to argue that this representation of Ligeia as an ungratifying object, along with his representation of her as a rejecting object (when she dies), is repressed, allowing the narrator to relate to her as an idealized object.

individuals, the narrator continues to "unconsciously struggle against a true investment of others," remaining "fixated at an essentially receptive, demanding stage of object relations in which. . . [he experiences himself] as only on the taking side. . ." (8, p.47)

Although unintended, the consequence of greed is often destruction (11, p.40), and it is not surprising that Ligeia, sucked dry by her obsessive husband, dies in the story. Nor is it surprising that her husband, functioning primarily in the schizoid position, does not experience guilt over what is clear to the reader is his role in depleting her.<sup>5</sup> The heretofore omnipotent Ligeia has proven herself mortal—not having had the "will" to conquer death—and, moreover, she has abandoned the narrator.

Rather than acknowledge his sense of abandonment and anger, which would entail the recognition that his mother/wife was an ordinary woman, the narrator projects these feelings onto Rowena, creating a "bad" mother/wife and allowing him to continue to idealize Ligeia. Although the narrator provides the reader with few details about Rowena, it is clear that she is the antithesis of Ligeia. Whereas Ligeia is the embodiment of the romantic spirit, her successor is associated with the mundane and the material through a reference to her "haughty family. . . [who] through thirst of gold" permitted her to marry the narrator, who "had no lack of what the world would call wealth" (1, p.118). Their first month of marriage, in marked contrast to his sanctified relationship with Ligeia, is referred to as "unhallowed"; the narrator takes pleasure in the fact that Rowena shuns him and demonstrates little love for him, and, most significantly, he "despised her [Rowena] with a hatred belonging more to demon than to man" (1, p.120).

Although the narrator seeks to use Rowena as a "container" for his anger, she does not perform this function well. His "fierce moodiness" makes her shun him and withdraw her love from him, something that gives him "pleasure" (1, p.120). This "pleasure" could better be described as relief. What is actually occurring is projective identification, i.e., the projection of unwanted parts of the self, in this case, anger, onto an object, who presumably can more safely manage the anger than the projector. This relief, however, is short-lived since Rowena fails in both containing and transforming that anger into more tolerable affect.

<sup>5</sup>As Ogden (2) explains, "In the paranoid-schizoid mode, what might become a feeling of guilt, is dissipated through, for example, the use of omnipotent reparative phantasies. The injury to the object is denied through the use of a magical remedy that is intended to expunge from history the harm that one has done" (pp. 23-24). The narrator's reparative phantasy involves the revivification of Ligeia, a topic that will be discussed later in this essay.

## THE REVIVIFICATION OF LIGEIA: A DESCENT INTO MADNESS

The narrator's hatred of Rowena is perhaps best demonstrated by his hallucination that someone—obviously Ligeia, whose spirit seems to make its appearance prior to what he perceives as her actual revivification—has murdered her, a clear projection of his own wishes. “. . . [W]ild with the excitement of an immoderate dose of opium,” he sees (or rather imagines that he sees) “a faint shadow of angelic aspect—such as might be fancied for the shadow of a shade” and hears (or rather imagines that he hears) “a gentle foot-fall upon the carpet” (1, p.122). Even before her name is mentioned, these images, previously used to describe Ligeia (1, p.111), suggest to the reader that she is perceived by the narrator as the unidentified presence. Then the narrator sees, or “may have dreamed. . . that. . . [he] saw, fall within the goblet. . . three or four large drops of a brilliant and ruby-colored fluid”. (1, p.122)

The tentativeness of the language, allowing for a reading of the story that is psychological rather than supernatural, continues in the following sentence: “If this I saw—not so Rowena.” The narrator refrains from telling her what has taken place, which, after all, he concludes must have been “but the suggestion of a vivid imagination, rendered morbidly active” (1, p.122) by the opium and by other circumstances. Clearly, at this point the narrator does not know the difference between events occurring in the external world (reality) and those occurring in his own imagination (fantasy).

Three days later, Rowena is dead. Gazing at the body of his unloved and unmourned wife, the narrator experiences “wild visions,” which he describes as being “opium-engendered” (1, p.122). He thinks only of Ligeia and with a flood of emotion remembers the “unutterable woe” with which he had “regarded *her* thus enshrouded” (1, p.123). Given the narrator's intense preoccupation with Ligeia, the repeated references to his “visions” of her as he watches over Rowena's body, “the phantasmagoric influence of the chamber itself” (1, p.121), a reflection of the narrator's morbid and deranged state of mind, and an earlier reference to his calling out Ligeia's name “as if, through the wild eagerness” he “could restore her” to life (1, p.120), it is not surprising that he hallucinates the revivification of Ligeia.

There are three defense mechanisms characteristic of the schizoid position being employed here: projection, omnipotence, and magical reparation. First, it is the narrator's will to rid himself of Rowena and be reunited with Ligeia that is expressed in the hallucination of Ligeia's coming back to life, as was the case with the poisoning of Rowena, but he



attributes the will and the supernatural power to the idealized and omnipotent Ligeia through projection. The hallucination itself is an instance of magical reparation: Ligeia is magically restored, which serves to relieve the unbearable grief he has suffered due to the (temporary) loss of his idealized object.<sup>6</sup>

That the narrator has had a drug-induced psychotic break is evident. Recalling the experience, he mentions the "mad disorder in. . .[his] thoughts—a tumult unappeasable" and the "crowd of unutterable fancies" that beset him (1, p.125). He also says, "my reason wondered" (1, p.124). This is not surprising, given that his reality testing has already been compromised, as evidenced by his chronic splitting and projection. It is noteworthy that Fairbairn's understanding of schizoid phenomena "led to the definition of. . .borderline personality disorder" (5, p.11), which is often an antecedent to a psychotic break. Even more relevant to the discussion at hand is Klein's view that "most of the phenomena observed during the paranoid-schizoid position can be found later in schizophrenia," with the future psychotic removing "one part of his personality, to split it into small pieces and to expel these fragments outside himself" (12, p.120). The association between chronic splitting as employed in the paranoid-schizoid position and psychosis is strengthened by Bion's conceptualization of psychosis, which he describes as "attacks on linking". (12, p.135)

It is noteworthy that in this case "content" and "process" are intertwined, with the chronic splitting and the subsequent psychotic break both involving fantasy to a great extent, and the idealized Ligeia herself representing the romantic principle and thus the antithesis of reality. Given the splitting that the narrator is prone to, it is not surprising that one woman must die for the other to live in his hallucination at the end. Projected aspects of the narrator's own intrapsychic split, the two cannot exist simultaneously. Up until this point, the split has allowed him to function, albeit poorly, and has served as a defense to some extent. At the end though, rid of the mundane and ordinary Rowena, and reunited with Ligeia, representing his romantic self, the narrator has indeed lost touch with reality. What seems to him a triumph over death is actually a psychotic break.

<sup>6</sup>Although the narrator functions primarily in the schizoid position, at times he functions in the depressive position as well, e.g., when he grieves over the loss of Ligeia. This fluctuation between positions is not inconsistent with object relations theory. Klein used the term "position" to underscore her belief that "the individual at all times may oscillate between the two [depressive and schizoid positions]" and stated that "...defences against the depressive conflict bring about regression to paranoid-schizoid phenomena. . ." (10, p. ix).

## REFERENCES

1. Poe EA (1838) *Ligeia*. In D Galloway (Ed.), *The fall of the house of Usher and other writings*. New York: Penguin Books, pp. 110-126, (1986).
2. Ogden, T (1989) *The primitive edge of experience*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
3. Greenberg J & Mitchell S (1983) *Object relations in psychoanalytic theory*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
4. Mitchell S (1994) The origin and nature of the "object" in the theories of Klein and Fairbairn. In J Grostein & D Rinsley (Eds.), *Fairbairn and the origin of object relations*. London: Free Associations Books, pp. 66-87.
5. Grostein J & Rinsley D (1994) Editor's introduction. In J Grostein, & D Rinsley (Eds.), *Fairbairn and the origins of object relations*. London: Free Associations Books, pp. 3-16.
6. Ogden T (1986) The matrix of the mind: Object relations and the psychoanalytic dialogue. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
7. Rinsley D (1994) A reconsideration of Fairbairn's "original object" and "original ego" in relation to borderline and other self disorders. In J Grostein & D Rinsley (Eds.), *Fairbairn and the origin of object relations*. London: Free Associations Books.
8. Kernberg O (1994) Fairbairn's theory and challenge. In J Grostein & D Rinsley (Eds.), *Fairbairn and the origins of object relations*. London: Free Associations Books.
9. Padel J (1994) 'Narcissism' in Fairbairn's theory of personality structure. In J Grostein & D Rinsley (Eds.), *Fairbairn and the origins of object relations*. London: Free Associations Books, pp. 289-301.
10. Lawrence DH (1977) *Studies in classic American literature*. New York: Penguin Books.
11. Segal H (1964) *Introduction to the work of Melanie Klein*, 2nd ed. New York: Basic Books.
12. Bleanodonu G (1994) *Wilfred Bion: His life and works*. Claire Pajaczkowska (Trans.) New York: The Guilford Press.