

Southern Womanhood, the Racial Other,  
and Amalgamation:  
Death and Revivification of Two Beautiful  
Women in E. A. Poe's "Ligeia"

OHNO, Misa

The purpose of this paper is to find representations of race latent in E. A. Poe's "Ligeia" and to examine them making references to various racist discourses in the Antebellum America. I will compare the text with racial ideology of the South that we see in the cult of Southern white womanhood, aversion to inter-racial marriage, and predilection for polygenesis.

In his literary writings, Poe wrote almost nothing about slavery and race problems and hardly used the Southern scene. Even as a journalist, he often avoided taking a definite stance on political issues. However, when I think about his rearing environment, his experiences in the army, and the period when he engaged in creative activities, it seems impossible that he was indifferent to race problems. He was raised mostly in Richmond and educated at the University of Virginia. His early years spent in a conservative, slaveholding Southern community must have had a considerable influence on his way of thinking. His foster father, John Allan, owned slaves as house servants, and Poe spent a lot of time with some of

them.<sup>(1)</sup> While he was in Baltimore on a military mission in 1831, the Nat Turner Insurrection happened in Southampton. The news of the revolt spread immediately in Baltimore, houses of African-Americans were raided, and there were rumors that the leader of the rebellion had been arrested there.<sup>(2)</sup> His assignment as lieutenant of the Junior Morgan Rifleman in Richmond was suppression of servile revolts.<sup>(3)</sup> In immediate proximity to the office of the *Southern Literary Messenger* where he worked as an editor, there was a slave market.<sup>(4)</sup> He must have seen slave auctions every day on his way to work. He worked as an editor or as a literary person when slavery was the subject of fierce arguments all over the United States.

Poe has been considered at least as a person who never challenged the prevailing Southern attitude toward slavery and race. Some critics assert that he vehemently defended slavery and was a racist.<sup>(5)</sup> Many of these critics advance their discussion, based on an anonymous proslavery essay published in April 1836 in the *Southern Literary Messenger*.<sup>(6)</sup> Bernard Rosenthal proves that Poe sympathized with the institution of slavery without recourse to the proslavery essay.<sup>(7)</sup> However, when I examine the racial code hidden in the texts of Poe's literary works, it seems difficult to conclude that Poe is a

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(1) Richard Gray, "I am a Virginian': Edgar Allan Poe and the South," *Edgar Allan Poe: The Design of Order*, ed., Robert Lee (London: Vision and Barnes & Noble, 1987), p. 183. Joan Dayan "Amorous Bondage: Poe, Ladies, and Slaves," *American Literature* 66 (1994), p. 264.

(2) Louis D. Rubin, *The Edge of the Swamp: A Study in the Literature and Society of the Old South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), p. 163.

(3) Rubin, p. 174.

(4) Dayan, "Amorous Bondage," p. 264.

(5) For example, Rowe says that "Poe was a proslavery Southerner and should be reassessed as such in whatever approach we take to his life and writings." John Carlos Rowe, *At Emerson's Tomb: The Politics of Classic American Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), p. 42. Silverman thinks Poe opposed abolition and identified with the slaveholding interests in the South. Kenneth Silverman, *Edgar A. Poe: Mournful and Never-Ending Remembrance* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), p. 207.

proslavery Southerner.

Toni Morrison in *Playing in the Dark* denies the tacit agreement among literary persons that “traditional, canonical American literature is free of, uninformed, and unshaped by the four-hundred-year-old presence of, first, Africans and then African-Americans in the United States,” and insists that black presence is “central to any understanding of our national literature and should not be permitted to hover at the margins of the literary imagination.”<sup>(8)</sup> She claims that we can find a racial presence in American literary texts in which race is seemingly absent:

Explicit or implicit, the Africanist presence informs in compelling and inescapable ways the texture of American literature. It is a dark and abiding presence, there for the literary imagination as both a visible and an invisible mediating force. Even, and especially, when American texts are not “about” Africanist presences or characters or narrative or idiom, the shadow hovers in implication, in sign, in line of demarcation.<sup>(9)</sup>

Furthermore, Morrison emphasizes the importance of Poe in studying

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(6) This essay is a review of *Slavery in the United States* by James Kirke Paulding and of *The South Vindicated from the Treason and Fanaticism of the Northern Abolitionists*, an anonymous book generally attributed to William Drayton. After praising these two books, the essay focuses entirely on justifying slavery. The essay has been very controversial, and critics cannot agree even on who wrote it. Some insist that it was written by Poe and proves his racist attitude. Others believe that it was written by Beverley Tucker, a law professor at the College of William and Mary. As an example, Dayan attributes the essay to Poe. Joan Dayan, “Romance and Race,” *Columbia History of the American Novel*, ed., Emory Elliott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 89-109. Thompson denies Poe having written the essay. G. R. Thompson, “Poe and the Writers of the Old South,” *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, ed., Emory Elliott (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 262-77.

(7) Bernard Rosenthal, “Poe, Slavery, and the *Southern Literary Messenger*: A Reexamination,” *Poe Studies* 7 (1974): 29-38.

(8) Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Bintage Books, 1992), pp. 4-5.

(9) Morrison, pp. 46-47.

European-American imagination obsessed with an image of racialized blackness.<sup>(10)</sup>

In this paper, I focus on “Ligeia,” whose apparent plot is not related to race, and try to find out racial presences in the text. Referring to the nineteenth-century notions of racial hierarchy, I will reveal that Poe in “Ligeia” complicates Anglo-Saxon supremacy and blurs racial lines rather than reenacts and reinforces the racist stereotypes.

### 1. Rowena and the Ideal of Southern Womanhood

Rowena represents the ideal of Southern womanhood. Anne Goodwyn Jones says that Southern ladies were expected to be “physically pure, fragile, and beautiful, socially dignified, cultured, and gracious, within the family sacrificial and submissive.”<sup>(11)</sup> First, unlike Ligeia, Rowena is described as a woman devoid of sexuality. She is far from passionate. Because of family necessity, she is forced into marriage to the narrator she does not love at all, and accepts her fate without protest. The nineteenth-century Southern lady was purported not to have sexual interests. Praising and cherishing a pure white lady, white males made up for their sexual laxity when they treated black women as sex objects. Also, for continued existence of a species, genes of white women had to be pure white, and women’s chastity was honored.<sup>(12)</sup> Second, Rowena is fragile. Immediately after she gets married to the narrator, she feels tired of loveless married life and grows weak. Third, she belongs to a haughty family.

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(10) Poe has often been excluded from the list of canonical American authors. Matthiessen in *American Renaissance* refers to Poe only in notes to the text. It has been considered for a long time that his works lack American features such as interest in the frontier, Puritan past, the settlement of colonies, and democracy. See F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941).

(11) Anne Goodwyn Jones, *Tomorrow Is Another Day: The Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), p. xi.

(12) Jones, pp. 9-12.

In the story she is referred to as “Lady Rowena Trevanion, of Tremaine,”<sup>(13)</sup> which suggests her family belongs to the aristocracy. Rowena is also sacrificial and submissive. Interests of her father and husband decide her destiny. Her father’s economic circumstances influence the marriage decision, and her husband’s uncertainty of temper causes her to die. Southern ladies were expected to deny their selfhood and to defer to men’s opinions and authorities.<sup>(14)</sup> She always becomes an easy victim of others. She is also confined in an old abbey, her bridal chamber, and is satisfied with her doom.

Rowena stands for the realities which most of the Southern white ladies faced in the nineteenth century. As Jones argues, the ideal of Southern womanhood was the same as the ideal of true womanhood admired in the East except for one thing: the ideal of the South “did not serve only as a norm for individual behavior; it became also a central symbol in the South’s idea of itself.”<sup>(15)</sup> The Southern lady was at the core of the region’s self-definition and ideology, and inextricably linked to problems of race, class, and gender. She was the symbol of order and stability of the South, and guaranteed the hegemony of upper-middle-class white males. When Southerners explained human evolutionary progress from lower creatures to perfect human beings, they insisted that the white lady was antithetical to lower creation but subordinate to white males. If Southern women defied their subordinate position and set off a trend against the social order, the South was in danger of breakdown of established order, including the overthrow of slavery. Southern womanhood was an image that white males could revere and exploit. Adoration of a pure white lady mitigated brutality of slavery, while preserving

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(13) Edgar Allan Poe, “Ligeia,” *Poe: Poetry, Tales, and Selected Essays*, eds., Patrick F. Quinn, et al. (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 270. All subsequent quotations from “Ligeia,” identified by page number in the text, refer to this edition.

(14) Jones, p. xi.

(15) Jones, p. xii.

gender hierarchy and the system of slavery.<sup>(16)</sup> Joan Dayan says as follows:

[T]he Southern lady, pure, white, and on her pedestal, remained the basis out of which developed the proslavery philosophy. It was she, that amorphous yet powerfully contrived vessel of femininity, who represented the refined and artificial wants of civilized society. The patriarchal defense of the intimate relation between master and slave found itself coordinate with the insistence on the subordination of women.<sup>(17)</sup>

Rowena has an image of a woman confined in the Southern plantation system. Schueller says as follows:

The representation of the fair-haired, blue-eyed Rowena of aristocratic stock incarcerated in the harem/abbey points both to the ideologically confining nature of the image of Southern womanhood and to the actual incarceration of slave bodies within the Southern plantation system.<sup>(18)</sup>

The bridal chamber of Rowena and the narrator is gloomy and dreary, decorated gaudily with eccentric furnishings. As Dayan says, ghastly queerness of the chamber indicates “a land preoccupied with construing purity out of impurity.”<sup>(19)</sup>

## 2. Ligeia as an Amalgamated Figure

Rowena and Ligeia represent contrasting types of womanhood. Ligeia is very different from an ideal Southern lady. She is a passionate woman. The narrator emphasizes that they have loved each other deeply. Ligeia is anything but

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(16) Jones, pp. 4-12.

(17) Dayan, “Amorous Bondage,” p. 241.

(18) Malini Johar Schueller, “Subversive Orientalisms: Edgar Allan Poe, Harriet Prescott Spofford, and Herman Melville,” *U.S. Orientalisms: Race, Nation, and Gender in Literature, 1790-1890* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 121.

(19) Dayan, “Amorous Bondage,” p. 261.

fragile. She is a woman with a powerful will. She espouses the philosophy of the mystic theologian Joseph Glanvill as her cherished motto. She believes that the will for life can conquer time and disease. Her dying words suggest her motto: "Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will" (269). She struggles against death intensely. The intensity of her desire for life is so strong that she comes back to life by will power. Unlike Rowena, who suggests distinguished ancestry, Ligeia is unconnected with family lineage and tradition. The narrator has never known her paternal name. He cannot remember how, when, or where he first became acquainted with Ligeia. He remembers well her personal quality and the details of her appearance, though he knows nothing about her social background. She is not an ordinary, subordinate woman. She is highly intelligent, and for the narrator she is "the partner of my studies" (262). She has a profound understanding of many classical languages and metaphysical studies.

In the classical tongues was she deeply proficient, and as far as my own acquaintance extended in regard to the modern dialects of Europe, I have never known her at fault. Indeed upon any theme of the most admired, because simply the most abstruse of the boasted erudition of the academy, have I ever found Ligeia at fault? (266)

She knows about abstruse learning more than anyone the narrator has met: "I said her knowledge was such as I have never known in woman—but where breathes the man who has traversed, and successfully, all the wide areas of moral, physical, and mathematical science?" (266). The narrator trusts her completely and asks for her instructions: "I was sufficiently aware of her infinite supremacy to reign myself, with a child-like confidence, to her guidance through the chaotic world of metaphysical investigation at which I was most busily occupied during the early years of our marriage" (266). She upsets the gender hierarchy of the nineteenth-century South. On her deathbed, she tells

the narrator to recite the poem she has written and he immediately obeys: "At high noon of the night in which she departed, beckoning me, peremptorily, to her side, she bade me repeat certain verses composed by herself not many days before. I obeyed her" (268). She has her own voice. She subverts the traditional dichotomy between male and female. After she dies, the narrator feels completely at a loss: "Without Ligeia I was but as a child groping benighted" (266). She has complete mastery over their married life. She maintains a remarkable power over the narrator not only in life but also in death. He does not love his second wife and gives his heart to Ligeia even after her death.

Though Ligeia has "the skin rivalling the purest ivory" (263), her appearance suggests she has blood of non-whites in her veins. Her hair is "raven-black," "glossy," and "luxuriant" with "naturally-curling tresses" (263). Her eyeballs, eyelashes, and eyebrows are also intense black: "The hue of the orbs was the most brilliant of black, and, far over them, hung jetty lashes of great length. The brows, slightly irregular in outline, had the same tint" (264). She is a woman of mixed race. She is an amalgamated figure,<sup>(20)</sup> reminding us of both white and non-white ancestry. The narrator says that her eyes are "far larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race" (264). Contrary to Rowena, the lineage of Ligeia is unknown. She is connected to imaginary places such as Nourjahad, which suggests an exotic mood. There are quaintness and queerness associated with the beauty of Ligeia. The narrator says: "although I perceived that her loveliness was indeed 'exquisite,' and felt that there was much of

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(20) Around 1820, the term "amalgamation" was borrowed from metallurgy and first came into use as the word for the physical commixture of white people and black people. When the abolitionist movement was very active in 1830s, the term was used frequently. In 1864, the term "miscegenation" was coined from Latin to refer to reproduction across race lines. See Elise Lemire, *Miscegenation: Making Race in America* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002), p. 4. In this paper, I use "amalgamation" as the word which means interracial sex or marriage before the "miscegenation" began to be used.



'strangeness' pervading it, yet I have tried in vain to detect the irregularity and to trace home my own perception of 'the strange'" (263). The strangeness that the narrator sees in Ligeia indicates the embarrassment he faces in treating the racial other.

### 3. Breakdown of Racial Hierarchy and Amalgamation

The narrator does not worship the image of Southern white womanhood that Rowena represents. Since the beginning of married life, he can not love Rowena. Instead, he loathes her with "a hatred belonging more to demon than to man" (272). After Ligeia dies and the narrator gets remarried, he has abiding love for Ligeia: "My memory flew back . . . to Ligeia, the beloved, the august, the beautiful, the entombed. I revelled in recollections of her purity, of her wisdom, of her lofty, her ethereal nature, of her passionate, her idolatrous love" (272). As I have mentioned in the first part, Southern womanhood was the symbol of order and stability. The narrator's choice of Ligeia over Rowena means breakdown of social order of the South.

At the end of the story, when Rowena lingers between life and death and Ligeia revivifies, these two women amalgamate with each other. Rowena becomes Ligeia, and Ligeia becomes Rowena. As Leland Person says, the "three or four large drops of a brilliant and ruby colored fluid," (273) which has fallen in the cup of Rowena, is blood of Ligeia.<sup>(21)</sup> Racially impure blood of Ligeia runs into pure white Rowena. Soon after Rowena drinks the blood-like liquid, she becomes very ill and heads for death, and Ligeia revivifies on the body of Rowena. The amalgamated figure of Rowena and Ligeia in the last scene represents blackness. The hair of the figure is "blacker than the wings of the midnight," and the eyes are "full," "black," and "wild" (277). The

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(21) Leland S. Person, "Poe's Philosophy of Amalgamation: Reading Racism in the Tales," *Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 212-13.

bonding of the two women leads to the collapse of racial hierarchy.

After a report was published in Richmond in 1802 which disclosed the truth that Thomas Jefferson had had sexual relations with one of his slave women and had her give birth to his child, there were heated debates about interracial sex. As the debates about slavery got more violent in the 1830s, amalgamation came to be attacked mainly by anti-abolitionists. The description of the scenes, in which white people and black people interacted with each other, got married, and had babies, appeared in novels, short stories, journals, and political cartoons. In such descriptions, white people accompanied by black people were always abolitionists, and black people looked brutish like savage animals.<sup>(22)</sup> After Poe was fired by the *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1837, he looked for work for a while in New York, and early in 1838 went to Philadelphia. He wrote "Ligeia" there in 1838. At that time, in Philadelphia, the collision between abolitionists and anti-abolitionists was repeated. Anti-abolitionists used rhetoric of racist stereotype and reproached amalgamation.<sup>(23)</sup> Advocates for polygenesis also promoted people's fear of amalgamation. In the eighteenth century, monogenism was the dominant racial ideology. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the theory of polygenesis appeared and was accepted, as the pros and cons of slavery were called into question. Particularly, anti-abolitionists and many Southerners took advantage of polygenesis as evidence of the inferiority of black people. The debates about the origin of species led to the discussion about the possibility or impossibility of hybridity. Those who supported polygenesis claimed that the product of sexual intercourse between different species was infertile, though the growth of population of mixed race in the West Indies disproved that. They insisted that persons of mixed race had a high premature death rate and would decline through the generations. They emphasized that different races were wholly

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(22) Lemire, p. 1.

(23) Lemire, pp. 87-89.

different species and that amalgamation of different races was a biological catastrophe, and took advantage of the theory to justify the system of slavery.<sup>(24)</sup>

In "Ligeia," Poe describes the amalgamation not of radical white abolitionists and fierce-looking black people but of an ideal Southern lady and beautiful and intelligent black figure. He refuses to use anti-abolitionist rhetoric. He deconstructs racists' discourses.

Poe was brought up in the South and worked as an editor or a literary person both in the South and the North in the Antebellum era when there were growing debates about slavery all over the United States, but in his literary works, he does not deal directly with the issues of slavery and racial difference. Most of his works are set in exotic places which vaguely hint at Europe. He has been considered an apolitical writer for a long time. However, when I compare his texts with various racist discourses in the nineteenth-century South and examine racial presences which lurk in the texts, I can see close connections between racial issues and his texts.

In "Ligeia," in which race seems absent, Poe describes two contrasting types of beautiful women. Rowena stands for the ideal of womanhood in the nineteenth-century South. Ligeia is the complete opposite of an ideal Southern lady. She renounces everything the society imposed on white women at that time. She represents an amalgamated figure of whites and racial others.

The ideal of womanhood was the symbol of order and stability of the South, but the narrator prefers racially impure Ligeia to fair Rowena and feels animosity toward Rowena. At the end of the story, the amalgamation of these two women is described, and racially dubious blood of Ligeia is mingled with the blood of a woman of noble ancestry.

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(24) Robert Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 6-9. Teresa Goddu, *Gothic America: Narrative, History, and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 83-84.

Some critics regard Poe as a proslavery Southerner, but consideration of representations of race in "Ligeia" makes it difficult to conclude that he had the same opinion about racial issues as typical anti-abolitionists. He undermines the racist discourses as seen in racist ideologies such as cult of white womanhood, disgust for amalgamation of different races, and diffusion of polygenesis. Poe in "Ligeia" shows that racism and racial efforts to ascribe fixed racial identities are fruitless.