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ENG 355: Ghost Stories

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The Chilling Not-Dead in Edgar Allen Poe

Edgar Allen Poe succeeds in scaring the pants off his readers, even almost 200 years after they were written, which is a skill that not many authors possess. One particularly chilling aspect to his writing is his constant presence of the not-dead. I do not mean to define the “not-dead” as the undead, today’s definition of zombies similar to AMC’s “The Walking Dead” but rather being in a state between life and death, a state of non-existence but yet existence nonetheless. It seems to be a fear that plagued Poe himself, a recurring presence within his own life, stemming from, perhaps, the prolonged and painful deaths of both his mother and his wife. Two stories in particular have a heavy presence of the not-dead: “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “Ligeia.” In both short stories, the main characters, both men, are tortured by the seemingly never-ending sicknesses of beloved women: a twin sister in “The Fall of the House of Usher” and a wife in “Ligeia.”

These losses haunt the main characters; neither can cope with the survivor’s guilt that follows the deaths. However, both characters are less than reliable story tellers. For example, Usher, in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” seems to be going through a mental breakdown over the loss of his twin sister and the nameless narrator in “Ligeia” is addicted to Opium and suffers from Opium-tainted dreams. Both of these themes seem to be reflections of Poe’s own life. After the death of his mother when Poe was just two

years old, he felt completely alone, even when another couple, which wasn't particularly loving or supportive, adopted him. This led Poe to turn to alcoholism. The tragic and premature death of his wife haunted him for many years as well.

In "Ligeia" which, it can be argued, is Poe's most personal and emotionally charged story, the narrator vividly and lovingly describes Ligeia's impact on his life: "...in truth, the character of my beloved, her rare learning, her singular yet placid cast of beauty, and the thrilling and enthralling eloquence of her low musical language, made their way into my heart by paces so steadily and stealthily progressive that they have been unnoticed and unknown," (1). Juxtaposed with all of the beautiful and affectionate memories of Ligeia, the narrator grotesquely describes Ligeia's anguishing spiral into the inevitable depths of death. "The wild eyes blazed with a...too glorious effulgence; the pale fingers became of the transparent waxen hue of the grave, and the blue veins upon the lofty forehead swelled and sank impetuously with the tides of the most gentle emotion" (5). Adding to the trauma of his narrator's tragic loss, he writes, "I saw that she must die" (5), which is one of the most terrifying realizations one could come to about one's lover. Acceptance of this is even harder, which Poe's narrator has a terribly difficult time doing.

One understanding of "Ligeia" is that the narrator hallucinates the whole experience, which supports the narrator's unreliability. "But I was wild with the excitement of an immoderate dose of opium and heeded these things but little..." (10). This sentence alone establishes that the events that followed cannot necessarily be believed because the narrator admitted to be intoxicated. So when he described that his not-dead wife Rowena rose from her bed and floated into the middle of the room, the

reader must determine whether or not it actually happened. "... 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 disheveled hair... And now slowly opened the eyes of the figure which stood before me," (13). This ghastly description of Rowena literally shedding her skin and turning into the narrator's beloved Ligeia leaves the reader terrified and also unsure of what to believe, especially because this is where Poe ends his story: right in the middle of the good part. Is Ligeia really alive? Did she really possess Rowena's body for the purpose of returning to her husband? These unanswered questions are some of the scariest aspects of the story, leaving the reader with the terrifying idea of the not-dead.

The same terrifying concept is prevalent in "The Fall of the House of Usher." The house literally reflects the description of Usher: wild hair, breaking down, and going crazy. Although, the narrator has a bit more reliability because he is a witness to these scary events, rather than being the only one present during them. Usher's twin sister, Madeline, also undergoes a disease that "had long baffled the skill of her physicians" (19) and she, too, wanes away slowly and painfully. Usher, similarly to the narrator in "Ligeia," has a strong emotional bond to his sister, insisting, "sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature had always existed between them," (24). As her health deteriorates, so too does Usher's sanity.

It is upon Madeline's death that the story really takes a turn for the worse. Usher enlists the narrator's help to entomb Madeline's body within the vault of the castle. Poe takes a moment to note how securely the coffin is closed, which adds to the terror of what occurs next. The narrator is unable to sleep and there is a terrible storm raging outside:

two telltale signs of bad news. Usher joins his friend in “restrained hysteria” and rambles on about burying his sister alive and the guilt he feels about doing so. The narrator tries to justify Usher’s hysteria by insisting, “these appearances, which bewilder you, are merely electrical phenomena not uncommon” (25). But mere moments later, the doors to the apartment fly open and “there DID stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher,” (28) with blood on her white robes. Here she is, dead but not-dead. There is evidence of life through her “low moaning cry” before she falls “in her violent and now final death-agonies” on top of her brother.

These terrifying events, witnessed by the narrator, leave the reader thinking that maybe they actually did occur, that Usher perhaps was haunted by his not-dead twin sister in some sort of twin telepathy. This theme of the not-dead, to Poe, probably helped him to cope with the tragedies of his own life. Witnessing two important women in his life deteriorate haunted him, which became great material for scary ghost stories, whether he was conscious of it or not. They play on a very basic human fear, something that all people can relate to. This material is what made his stories stand the test of time and why they are still scary to readers today.