

The female figure in Edgar Allan Poe's tales: "Berenice" and "Ligeia"

A figura feminina nos contos de Edgar Allan Poe: "Berenice" e "Ligeia"

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ABSTRACT: This work aims to analyze the female figure in two tales written by the writer Edgar Allan Poe, entitled Berenice and Ligeia. These tales were chosen due to the presence of two very significant female characters, which have an impact and strangeness both on the other characters in the short story and on the readers themselves. Thus, this work presents as theoretical basis the life of the writer and the role of women in the nineteenth century, period of production and publication of the stories analyzed. This theoretical basis helps us understand the similar and contrastive aspects of the characters compared to the women represented in the nineteenth century, thus allowing us to perceive their real roles in the works. Thus, based on our analyzes we noticed that the female figures created in the tales represented an important motivation for the feelings of the male figures. Moreover, they are highly valued characters within the stories, allowing us, as readers, to understand them as different women from the century in which they were created.

Keywords: Female figure; Edgar Allan Poe; Berenice; Ligeia.

RESUMO: Este trabalho tem como objetivo analisar a figura da mulher em duas obras do escritor Edgar Allan Poe, intituladas Berenice e Ligeia. As obras foram escolhidas por terem presentes dois personagens femininos muito significativos e que causam um impacto e estranhamento tanto nos demais personagens da história como nos próprios leitores. Assim, este trabalho apresenta como base teórica a vida do escritor e o papel da mulher no século XIX, período de produção e publicação dos contos analisados. Essa base teórica nos ajuda a compreender os aspectos semelhantes e contrastivos das personagens se comparadas com as mulheres representadas no século XIX, permitindo assim, a possibilidade de perceber seus reais papéis nas obras. Assim, através das nossas análises, notamos que as figuras femininas criadas nas obras representavam uma motivação para os sentimentos das figuras masculinas. Além do mais, elas são personagens muito valorizados dentro das histórias, permitindo que os leitores compreendam elas como mulheres diferentes do século na qual foram criadas.

Palavras-chave: Figura feminina; Edgar Allan Poe; Berenice; Ligeia.

1 INTRODUCTION

Poe's works are marked by the constant presence of the figure of woman. Both in his tales and his poetry, women are usually sick and/or doomed to death. According to Jaqueline Piarezzo (2016), despite the similarity among women in Poe's works, they may be characterized as fair ladies and dark ladies. Briefly, these two terms are different to

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each other by virtue of some characteristic that we can notice in the works, such as, women's physical appearances, their personalities, the role they occupy in the poems or stories, and their relation to the poetic I or to the narrator.

The fair ladies are described by light hair and eyes and they represent the feminine ideal of the contemporary society in which Poe lived. In this sense, these women are delicate, passive, submissive maidens and, consequently, are dependent on the beloved man. They are Poe's poetic ideal and are usually found in his verses. On the other hand, the dark ladies are represented by dark hair and eyes as well as whitened skin and dark appearance.

They are related to an image of terror and mystery that cause in the narrator or the poetic I feelings of guilt or remorse. (PIAREZZO, 2016).

In light of these arguments, this work aims to analyze the female figure in two Edgar Allan Poe's tales, namely, "Berenice" and "Ligeia". These tales were chosen due to a strong presence of woman throughout the narratives as well as their influences on the other characters of the tales, both positive and negative.

To achieve the goal presented, this work is divided in four sections: a) introduction; b) literature review, which discusses Edgar Allan Poe's life and the woman in the 19th century; c) the analysis of two Poe's tales; and d) final conclusions.

2 THEORETICAL REVIEW

The bibliographic review of this paper is based on two topics. The first one makes some considerations about the life of the writer Edgar Allan Poe, who is author of the two works that will be analyzed according to the objective of this work. The second topic is about the role of women in the 19th century. This one is important because it can guide our analysis and help us understand how women were seen at that time.

2.1 Edgar Allan Poe's life

It is important to know about the life of Edgar Allan Poe if we want to understand the meaning of one of the most present symbols in his works, the female figure. In fact, many

researchers and critics argue that his personal experiences contributed directly to the production of his works, both verse and prose ones.

According to Kenneth Silverman (apud KEVIN HAYES, 1993, p.149), Poe:

Nourished himself on a young woman's death, in the sense that art was for him a form of mourning, a revisitation of his past and of what he had lost, as if trying to make them right. Since nothing could, he returned to the subject of 'the one and only supremely beloved' again and again.

Edgar Allan Poe was abandoned when he was less than three years old by his father David Poe who was a failed actor and alcoholic. His mother died shortly thereafter, a victim of tuberculosis. Then, a couple of merchants, John and Francis Allan, from Baltimore welcomed the little boy as theirs. Poe was always involved in confusion that displeased his adoptive father who never wanted to take the young man in a formal way. Poe's relationship with Francis Allan was affectionate. When he was twenty, his foster mother also died from the same illness as his biological mother Elizabeth Arnold.

In 1927, Poe published his first work after leaving college, that is, an anonymous collection of poems titled: *Tamerlane and Other Poems*. In 1929, Edgar Allan Poe started to gain his own money working as editor and critic without allowance and the support from John Allan. However, he was not known for subtlety in his criticisms, which yielded him many enemies.

Poe wrote many of his great works during this time, but this did not bring him improvements in his financial life. In 1845, Poe writes the poem "The Raven", one of the author's most famous works.

Poe lived a very troubled life. The fact that he had been abandoned by his biological father when he was a child and his conflicting relationship with his adoptive father, from whom he inherited the name Allan, meant that Edgar did not have many good male references. All the love he received came from his short relationship with his biological mother, the warmth with which he was welcomed by his foster mother and the dedication he found through his young wife. Unfortunately, the female figures he most loved were stolen from him. One after another, victims of the same evil that always haunted him, a disease that at the time was synonymous with the fatality we cannot avoid: death.

2.2 Women in the century 19th

For a long time, women were target of discrimination and oppression in a patriarchal society. Therefore, it is trivial to notice a panorama that approaches the male figure with a great emphasis and where women are shown in an inferior way.

Firstly, it is relevant to mention that when we talk about gender relations, we are talking about power. The existing relations between male and female are unequal, asymmetrical relations, in which women keep being subjugated by man and patriarchal territory (ANA COSTA, 2008). Along these lines, we can relevantly reflect about the term power that designates relations between partners (understood to be not a game system, but only a set of actions that induce and respond to each other). (MICHAEL FOUCAULT, 2010).

According to Kate Millet (1969), the patriarchal system can be comprehended as a social organization that is configured by the exaltation of the male power in relation to female one. That dominance occurs in many aspects such as in culture, economy, politics, community, and family in society.

In the same path, Tayza Rossini (2018) explains that women were traditionally considered inferior to males, not only in the cultural sphere, but also in social, historical, and political ones. That was the result of the patriarchalism, in which the emphasis was on questioning the intellectual capacity of woman, neutralizing their citizenships and rights to constitute themselves as people.

We can observe that over the years, women were in an inferior condition to men. Besides being submissive to the father, to the brother, to the husband, women were very submissive to the Church in culture, politics, economy, and to the social system, thus creating totally patriarchal societies. According to Jane Almeida (2007, p.105) "Women educated according to Catholic postulates would lead the Christian household to become truly faithful to the Church and spread their dogmas".

This shows a distinction between man and woman, reinforcing patterns of domination and fragility, which women took as a subordinate role. They were doomed to anonymity and without active voice, merely fulfilling their domestic works.

However, this mold of fragility of women changed a little bit throughout the course of history, mainly in the 19th century, although we can still notice strong features of the

patriarchal system today. To be more exact, over the 19th century, women were still considered physically inferior, but not intellectually. As Kathryn Hughes (2014) states:

Women were considered physically weaker yet morally superior to men, which meant that they were best suited to the domestic sphere. Not only was it their job to counterbalance the moral taint of the public sphere in which their husbands laboured all day, they were also preparing the next generation to carry on this way of life. The fact that women had such great influence at home was used as an argument against giving them the vote. (HUGHES, 2014, p. 1).

As we can see, women needed to take care of their house's duties and raise their children. Because they were considered physically weaker, men should leave home and work all day long. In this sense, women ended up being financially dependent on their husbands.

According to Susan Cruea (2015), women were victims of social and economic discrimination caused by men. The choices of the upper and middleclass women were limited to marriage and motherhood, or spirituality. Both choices resulted in domestic dependency. While woman could find jobs as shop girls or factory workers, they were discouraged from being wage earners by the belief that women who earned wages were "unnatural. Thus, women were forced, by a variety of reasons, to be dependent upon their husbands for financial support.

According to Hughes,

Girls usually married in their early to mid-20s. Typically, the groom would be five years older. Not only did this reinforce the 'natural' hierarchy between the sexes, but it also made sound financial sense. A young man needed to be able to show that he earned enough money to support a wife and any future children before the girl's father would give his permission. Some unfortunate couples were obliged to endure an engagement lasting decades before they could afford to marry. (HUGHES, 2014, p. 1).

Therefore, by virtue of this financial dependence on man, women sought marriage earlier and earlier. Allowing that the difference of age could be a factor of superiority of men and also women could be inferior and dependent of them.

3 POE'S FIGURING OF WOMEN TWO SHORT STORIES

In this topic, we will discuss two short stories written by Edgar Allan Poe entitled “Berenice” and “Ligeia”. These two stories were chosen because they have important female characters, allowing us to carry out a more precise analysis of the role of the female figure in the works of this writer.

3.1 Berenice

Berenice is a tale of the gothic horror. The Southern Literary Messenger³ first published it in March 1835. In 1840, it reappears in a collection of short stories: *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* by Edgar Allan Poe. The Broadway Journal also published Berenice in 1945. This time, four paragraphs needed to be edited. The content removed was criticized for being too repulsive.

The first four paragraphs of the tale introduce us to the narrator called Egaeus, some little information from his childhood, his library, and his books as his own parallel world. The narrator presents Berenice to us and he points out the differences that exist in relation of one to another. As we can see in the following declaration.

Berenice and I were cousins, and we grew up together in my paternal halls. Yet differently we grew – I ill of health and buried in gloom – she agile, graceful, and overflowing with energy – hers the ramble on the hill-side – mine the studies of the cloister – I living within my own heart, and addicted body and soul the most intense and painful meditation- she roaming carelessly through life with no thought of the shadows in her path, or the silent flight of the raven-winged hours. (POE, 2015, p. 228).

In this sense, Egaeus describes Berenice as nimble, graceful, and exuberant with energy. He sees his cousin as a woman who represents vivacity and excitement while he describes himself as a melancholy and reclusive man.

The narrator is attracted by joy and joviality of his cousin, more precisely, what these two feelings cause in him. Egaeus does not describe the physical appearance of

³ Magazine founded by Thomas Willis White and it became one of the most influential magazines in the southern of US.

Berenice besides her great beauty. He exalts how fantastic and dazzling her beauty is, to the point of making comparisons between her and non-land mythical beings such as sylphs and naiads⁴, that is, beings we know through fairy tales such as fairies and mermaids. His feeling is beyond the young Berenice, which means he likes what her beauty gave him: peace of mind.

Suddenly, an illness settled on Berenice. Egaeus compares this disease to a simoom, which is a hot wind capable of causing great storms. He watches the metamorphosis suffered by his cousin and highlights the changes caused by this wind through the words: “[...] pervading her mind, her habits, and her characters, and, in a manner the most subtle and terrible, disturbing even the identity of her person”. (POE, 2015, p. 228).

At this point in the story, Berenice's disease intensifies. In this moment, Egaeus also becomes sicker. It is interesting to notice the evolution of the narrator's disease at the same time that his cousin also undergoes a negative evolution in her illness. Thus, Egaeus gets very recluse in his library. He cites some literary works that have absorbed his time quite a lot, as we can observe when he paraphrases Ptolemy Hephestion's poem:

Thus it will appear that, shaken from its balance only by trivial things, my reason bore resemblance to that ocean-crag spoken of by Ptolemy Hephestion, which steadily resisting the attacks of human violence, and the fiercer fury of the waters and the winds, trembled only to the touch of the flower called Asphodel. (POE, 2015, p. 230).

In this paraphrase of Egaeus about Ptolemy Hephestion's poem, we see the comparison that the narrator tries to make to show that his world had shuddered because of the disgrace that fell on Berenice. Egaeus claims that Berenice's disgrace caused his pain. Actually, it was such a strong feeling that could bring him back to lucidity. He says: “in the lucid intervals of my infirmity, her calamity, indeed, gave me pain, and, taking deeply to heart that total wreck of her fair and gentle life [...]”. (POE, 2015, p. 230).

Despite the feeling he recounts in this quote, the narrator elucidates that what saddened his heart was to contemplate the ruin of the Berenice's beauty that no longer

⁴ In our opinion, despite the narrator comparing Berenice with mythological beings, that is, beings with nonhuman characteristics, we understand that the author's intentions are to qualify positively the characteristics of Berenice.

existed. It was not the physical beauty itself, but the fact that Berenice no longer aroused feelings that he enjoyed once by squandering so much joy and youth. Egaeus reasserts this thought when he continues his words:

True to its own character, my disorder reveled in the less important but more startling changes wrought in the physical frame of Berenice- in the singular and most appalling distortion of her personal identity. (POE, 2015, p. 230).

Berenice was an object that brought harmony and peace to Egaeus, but now her current condition influences his idea of reality. The impact on him was so great that he started to realize the world outside and we can see this perception through the antagonisms that Egaeus uses to describe how the world was and how it is now. Briefly, he compares the world using words such as beauty and unloveliness, peace and sorrow, and good and evil.

The external reality that happened outside the walls of the library did not cause in Egaeus the behavior that was expected by himself up to this point of the tale. That means what was happening was mere a sight for him, something that will disappear soon. Berenice's startling appearance was not what really bothered him, but the fact that he could no longer contemplate the image that awakened the peace that him soul needed.

Egaeus claims that despite the incomparable beauty of the days gone by, he never felt love for his cousin. His feelings came from his spirit, not from his heart. He loved what she stood for, the admiration she had for him. This feeling represented to him the closest of his reality, that is, the reality available in his world within the library, within the books that were so connected with him intimately.

In the fourth paragraph of the story, we can testify a little bit about the reality of Egaeus:

The realities of the world affected me as visions, and as visions only, while the wild ideas of the land of dreams became, in turn - not the material of my everyday existence - but in very deed that existence utterly and solely in itself. (POE, 2015, p. 228).

Starting from the twelfth paragraph, Egaeus no longer remembered her as a living, breathing being worthy of admiration. He saw Berenice as something to be analyzed, in other words, as an object. Her presence, that once brought peace and joy, now brought an

inconstant agony. The narrator's behavior is described by him as: “now I shuddered in her presence, and grew pale at her approach [...]”. (POE, 2015, p. 230). Her decay saddened him, however, when he remembered she loved him deeply, he asked her to marry him.

In this sense, Berenice is seen as "something" and not "someone", that is, as an object to be analyzed and not as a target of love or admiration. Egeaus did not love her even before that terrible disease. At the same time that he felt fear in her presence, he regretted his unhappy condition. Therefore, he proposed marriage to her.

We may understand that Egeaus's marriage proposal occurred by virtue of his curiosity about Berenice's condition. Since he is a man dedicated to studies, her condition is something that arouses his interest, so conceiving her as a wife would be a way to keep her close and under his observation.

Based on the reflections above, we realize that the character Berenice in the Edgar Allan Poe's tale is a woman very present in the story, though her presence is based only from the perspective of Egeaus, her cousin and narrator. Berenice has no voice and all we can know about her and her life is a result of the narrator's perception.

Moreover, since we know Berenice by the description of the narrator, indeed we do not really understand her representativeness in tale. In fact, what is seen is an idealization that Egeaus has about her in his psychologically disturbed mind. In this sense, we understand Berenice as an object capable of bringing satisfaction to her cousin, in one moment this satisfaction is good and pleasant, in another one, it satisfies his madness.

3.2 Ligeia

This tale brings to view the female figures of the characters Ligeia and Rowena. However, the focus of my analysis will be on the character Ligeia, since she is the most representative character of the story and also she is considered a dark lady (as mentioned in the introduction).

Ligeia stands out among all of Edgar Allan Poe's muses and she is the main character of the story that has her name as title, first published in 1838. Of all the dark ladies, Ligeia stands out, as a text, due to the overwhelming attention and importance that the narrator dedicates to the character of Ligeia.

There is little information we can identify about the narrator. We do not know his name or any other important material about him, for example. Except for his love for the one who was his wife, his addiction to opium, and the frustrated life that he has because of the loss of his beloved.

Ligeia is a little bit different of the standard of the women of 19th century, since the importance attributed to woman of this century was given mainly through their role as wives, mothers, and women of the house. According to our reading of the story, we notice Ligeia is loved not only for her differentiated beauty, but also for her admirable intelligence as well as her amazing and immense knowledge.

For the narrator, Ligeia was the representation of beauty. Not the commonly admired beauty, the one we have mistakenly learned to worship, but rather a rare beauty, charged with a certain strangeness that goes beyond what we consider as normal. As we can see it in the following narrator's words:

[...] yet, although I saw that the features of Ligeia were not of classic regularity, although I perceived that her loveliness was indeed "exquisite," and felt that there was much of "strangeness" pervading it, yet I have tried in vain to detect the irregularity, and to trace home my own perception of "the strange." I examined the contour of the lofty and pale forehead--it was faultless--how cold indeed that word when applied to a majesty so divine!--the skin rivalling the purest ivory, the commanding extent and repose, the gentle prominence of the regions above the temples, and then the raven-black, the glossy, the luxuriant and naturally- curling tresses, setting forth the full force of the Homeric epithet, "hyacinthine!" I looked at the delicate outlines of the nose--and nowhere but in the graceful medallions of the Hebrews had I beheld a similar perfection. [...] For eyes we have no models in the remotely antique. They were, I must believe, far larger than the ordinary eyes of our race. They were even far fuller than the fullest of the Gazelle eyes of the tribe of the valley of Nourjahad. Yet it was only at intervals--in moments of intense excitement--that this peculiarity became more than slightly noticeable in Ligeia. And at such moments was her beauty--in my heated fancy thus it appeared perhaps--the beauty of beings either above or apart from the earth-- the beauty of the fabulous Houri of the Turk. (POE, 2015, p. 257).

We can understand the immensity of the narrator's feeling attributed to Ligeia by virtue of the number of paragraphs in the short story devoted to describing and extolling

the character's physical and mental features. This feeling is hardly identifiable though understandable, since many are the qualities of Lady Ligeia. In other words, what the narrator feels for Ligeia is beyond from what we understand as love. In fact, it is a strong, deep, insane, and strange feeling. We can comprehend that it is beyond any recognizable feeling present in this world. In our view, the narrator's feeling resembles deification.

The narrator's feeling for Ligeia does not reduce or disappear even before the incipient presence of death. To be more exact, when Ligeia becomes ill, the narrator makes it clear how strong she is, and how she fights for her life; thus, Ligeia's will to live ends up being a cause for the narrator's admiration.

This admiration can also be noticed by the readers of the short story, because we can note the greatness of the character created by Edgar Allan Poe. An excelente example of this perception appears through the reading of a poem by the narrator before Ligeia. In the last days of her life, Ligeia asks for her beloved to recite the five stanzas of the poem she had once written. As far as the poem, we would not like to go deeper into content; what we want to emphasize is the strong representativeness of Ligeia, since there is a literary production written by her within the story.

Since the existence of Ligeia has a strong and positive impact on the life of the narrator, we may expected that her death causes deep and negative impacts in him. The solitude of the narrator is described by him as well as his outburst about abandonment feeling that he affirms due to the fact that his beloved no longer exists. The narrator declares that he is like a child groping in the dark without Ligeia.

Some events occur as a result of the death of Ligeia. As some examples, we cite the fact that the narrator bought an abbey, in which he decorated extravagantly in order to alleviate his suffering; and a moment of mental confusion in which he marries a woman named Rowena.

Rowena had what was expected of a woman of her time, it means she possessed all the opposing characteristics of Ligeia. The narrator did not love Rowena, just as she did not love him. Their marriage only reminded him of how much he still loved Ligeia and suffered from her absence.

In this sense, we can realize that the representation of Lady Rowena's role in the story was linked to natural events, while Lady Ligeia's role represented something unknown, mystical, that means a mood full of mysteries that even the narrator himself

could not describe, but which left him totally enveloped in love. There was no other being in the world capable of replacing his beloved wife Ligeia. She was unique in personality and beauty. No one else possessed those black curly hairs like crow's feathers as well as those black eyes ripped like birds' eyes.

The tale shows us how remarkable Ligeia's presence is even after her death. However, Ligeia stands out from the others dark ladies since she returns from the dead. We have the impression that death cannot stop a being like her. Indeed the situations described by the narrator may be no more than insanity or even drug addiction as a result of the over-consumption of opium, but he also describes to us that voices and unnatural movements are noticed by Rowena. In a way, this fact gives us, as readers, some credibility in the narrator's words. That is, in our point of view, it is hard to believe that unnatural situations described by the narrator may be caused by insanity or drug addiction since ever Rowena also noticed these strange situations. In other words, since the tale is narrated in the first person, we might interpret that Lady Rowena's visions and perceptions may be consequences of the narrator's insanity or drug addiction. However, the tale shows us that when Rowena reported the strange situations, the narrator did not believe in her. Therefore, in our opinion, we can understand that Rowena really noticed strange situations.

We will not emphasis on the supernatural atmosphere of this tale. However, we agree that Edgar Allan Poe uses this textual artifice to elevate Lady Ligeia to a divine level in order to immortalize her. Thus, we can notice different and contrastive aspects in the story, such as love and terror, sublime and profane, death and rebirth.

If Lady Ligeia returned from death, we cannot say with success. Nevertheless, it is what her beloved husband suggested to us. Thus, we may understand that Ligeia's return has a great impact on the narrator. Allowing us to conclude that the female figure in this tale is extremely important for the unfolding of the story.

Based on narrator's words, Ligeia has so many physical and intellectual attributes that contribute to the construction of the work. Her striking personality is felt by the readers through all the descriptions reported by the narrator, which persists even after her sublime death. A death that exceeds all limits of what we consider as natural. Thus, Ligeia's figure ends up being immortalize as object of worship both by the narrator and, in our opinion, by the readers.

CONCLUSION

Berenice and Ligeia are presented to us throughout the perspective of the narrators of the tales. Therefore, all perceptions about female figures will be in accordance with the view that the narrators have of them. Thus, we can see that the narrators of the tales represent their women more mystically than earthly, as if they were described as beings belonging to a world other than Earth.

From this principle, we can imagine that these women are beings that are unattainable and distant from our reality. They are separated from the natural sphere and raised to the sublime from the words used by the narrator of their stories. The female figures in the tales in question are used to nourish the ambition of their narrators, being that motivated by love, madness or desires of their own interest. Since women of Edgar Allan Poe are usually afflicted by some evil we can perceive and highlight the behavior of their narrator regarding this fact.

It is evident that the evil that affects the female figures makes the tale's environment darker. However, we realize that it is necessary so that we know better both Berenice and Ligeia, and their respective narrators who are the male figures.

It is necessary that all female figures created by Edgar Allan Poe must experience death so that we may know their real perceptions in the eyes of their narrators. In both tales, we can also see that the ills suffered by women serve as models so the male feelings can also be externalized. In other words, we understand that the female figures in the stories represent a motivating force for the good or bad feelings of the respective narrators. The male figures depend on the female figures to stay alive, even in the face of pain, suffering, and other derogatory feelings.

In summary, Berenice and Ligeia are two strong female characters that stimulate feelings and experiences of the male characters. It is as if the wounds and deaths of the two female figures propelled the lives of the respective narrators. They needed death so that men could have life in the tales.

Thus, we can notice that the female figures in the short stories "Berenice" and "Ligeia" are different women from the period in which the stories were produced. Since tales are narrated from the masculine perspective, and both Ligeia and Berenice are the

driving force of men's feelings, we cannot identify a valuation of the male figure on the female. In the case of the Ligeia tale, this understanding is much more evident, since the female character is highly valued at all times, even after her death.

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