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Lesson Nine

FOCUS: Content and Context

VOCABULARY WORDS

From “Ligeia”:

Abstruse, *adj.*

Hard to understand; deep; recondite

Metaphysical, *adj.*

1. Very abstract, abstruse, or subtle
2. Beyond the physical or material; incorporeal, supernatural, or transcendental

Ethereal, *adj.*

1. Of or like the ether, or the upper regions
2. Very light; airy; delicate
3. Not earthly; heavenly; celestial

Transcendentalism, *n.*

Any of various philosophies that propose to discover the nature of reality by investigating the process of thought rather than the objects of sense experience

Censer, *n.*

An ornamented container in which incense is burned

In her encyclopedic *Edgar Allan Poe A to Z*, Dawn B. Sova describes “Ligeia” as “one of Poe’s most critically acclaimed stories, as well as the tale that he identified as his personal favorite,” and quotes George Bernard Shaw’s comment that “[t]he story of the Lady Ligeia is not merely one of the wonders of literature: it is unparalleled and unapproached. There is really nothing to be said about it: we others simply take off our hats and let Mr. Poe go first.”

Even if we share Shaw’s estimate of the story’s merits, there are some things to be said about it. As does “The Raven” with Poe’s poetry, “Ligeia” in some ways synthesizes a number of the characteristic elements of Poe’s fiction (and in the process perhaps takes them to another level): the Gothic atmosphere and settings, an unstable and perhaps unreliable narrator, and of course “the death of a beautiful woman.” On this last point, however, in light of the biographical information supplied above in connection with “Annabel Lee” and “Ulalume,” teachers should point out that “Ligeia” was published in 1838, several years before the onset of Virginia Poe’s illness.



Discussion Activities

By way of establishing this story’s unusual place in the Poe canon, emphasize the fact that the relationship between the narrator and the beloved is described more fully than is usually the case in Poe’s writings. Ask the class why the narrator loves Ligeia (see page 39: not merely for her beauty and the emotional sustenance she provides, but even more for her learning and intellectual inquiries; you might also connect this celebration of intelligence with the characterization of Dupin in “The Purloined Letter”).

Ask your students what they believe is really happening in the story. Responses might range from “It’s all in his head, a drug fantasy” to “It’s all true, to be taken at face value.” Pick two or three popular interpretations; form the adherents of each view into a group; and have each present and defend its view with detailed grounding in the text.



Writing Exercise

Ask students to write a three-paragraph essay on the following question: Can a story (or poem) be enjoyed and appreciated without the reader having a precise sense of what it is really saying, or must it communicate a definite meaning in order to be satisfying?



Homework

Have students read Handout Three. Ask students to begin their essays, using the Essay Topics in this guide. Outlines are due the next class period.