

Myth and the Finite Sublime: A Study of Edgar Allan Poe's Mythological Works

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By *VIRGINIA EUDY*

Thesis Director
Dr. Blake Hobby

Thesis Advisor
Dr. Erica Abrams Locklear

Haunting, dark, and sublime, Edgar Allan Poe's works have fascinated generations for almost two centuries. One of his most renowned works, "The Raven," epitomizes Poe's use of the finite sublime, a term that describes the transcendent experience of mortality. "The Raven" describes the inner turmoil of a man grieving the death of his lover, Lenore, culminating in the narrator's realization of his own mortality: "And the lamp-light o'er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor / And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor / Shall be lifted - nevermore!" (106-108). This quote epitomizes Poe's use of the finite sublime. He uses electrifying imagery to remind the reader of the brevity of life. The discussion of the bird's shadow, in particular, creates for the reader a sublime experience. The ethereal shadow traps the narrator to the point of incapacitation, which instills in the reader a sense of foreboding and negative transcendence. In addition to "The Raven," in "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher," Poe confronts issues of mortality. Poe uses the allusions of a siren, the House of Atreus, and Hades to remind the reader of the unavoidable commonality in humanity, the inevitability of death. In "The Philosophy of Composition," Poe argues that his "thought concerned the choice of an impression, or effect, to be conveyed... throughout the construction, [and he] kept steadily in view the design of rendering the work *universally* appreciable" (744). Poe's seeking of universal effects, led him to use mythology in an unconventional manner. While most mythology focuses on transcendence and universal truths, like the story of Persephone and Demeter, which focuses mainly on the creation of the seasons, Poe uses myth to remind the reader of her ultimate sublime and finite experience: death. Edmund Burke, in his essay entitled, "A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful," describes the sublime as, "[w]hatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime" (51). Poe uses mythology as a means of connecting his readers to the "strongest emotion

which the mind is capable of feeling,” seeking to juxtapose the horror and finitude of life (Burke 51). Poe uses mythical elements in his settings, characters, and plots to lead the reader to his dark conception of a finite sublime.

In “The Philosophy of Composition” Poe asserts that, “objects should be attained through means best adapted for their attainment” (744). Although this argument may initially perplex the reader, Poe argues that the reader should not have to work to understand the author’s intentions or subject matter. Instead, Poe explains that he takes from his surroundings “combinations of event, or tone, as shall best aid [him] in the construction of the effect” (“Philosophy” 742). Thus, Poe uses mythology in order to better “adapt” the object of the sublime for his readers. Many critics have commented on Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition,” and it has often been assessed as his manifesto; in *The Cambridge Introduction to Edgar Allan Poe*, Benjamin Fisher voices the opinion of many critics that, “[this piece] might be considered as a core reading for understanding Poe’s conception of poetry and the poetic” (103). If this is true, then “The Philosophy of Composition” is fundamental in understanding the significance of Poe’s mythological references and his use of the sublime. Although somewhat dated, James Southall Wilson’s article reveals valid points about Poe’s method of composition. Wilson writes, “Poe tested art by the power to awaken in the mind competent to perceive it the same feeling or conception that the artist had conceived...To that end every other consideration was subordinate” (678). Wilson argues that Poe focuses on his aesthetic, which, in turn, deeply affects his readers and produces a certain feeling. If Poe concentrates on aesthetic response, then one must consider a reader’s consideration of her own mortality as not a rational pondering about death, but a deep and spiritual sense of foreboding that penetrates her very soul.

Poe's effectively dark aesthetic often lends itself to the mythical realm of hell and the land of decay. Poe fills his short story "Ligeia" with particular mythological allusions to classic creatures and setting that evoke the terror of death and decay. The narrator meets Ligeia in a small town on the Rhine River. The water reference recalls the residence of the mythological sirens, as this quote demonstrates: "I believe that I met her first and most frequently in some large, old, decaying city near the Rhine" (260). By creating a dark, dead, and decaying scene, Poe prepares his readers for the character's brushes with death and, in turn, reminds them of their own brief existence. In contrast to Poe's depiction of the sirens' dwelling, according to J. R. T. Pollard, in his article "Muses and Sirens" the original sirens "dwell[ed] in a flowery meadow, on an island set in a stormless sea" (62). This disparity between the siren's abode and Ligeia's own homestead, suggests that Poe considered the effect his location would have on the reader. Instead of placing Ligeia on a flowery island, he chooses a locale where the possibility of death envelopes her and readers. Poe's description of the lovers' meeting suggests a stagnant Hell, yet the narrator does not initially experience the pain and agony of Hell that the details would suggest. Nevertheless, Poe's depiction of the decaying city creates for the reader a world in which she must consider her own surroundings and their effect upon her mortality.

Similar to the imagery of the decaying city and its connection with Hell, Poe uses siren imagery to connect his reader to the darker side of beauty. In Greek mythology, sirens epitomize the unattainable and the sublime; with heads of beautiful women and avian bodies, the physical compositions of these creatures suggest the permanent possibility of flight or escape, making them irresistibly beyond human reach. Their forms terrorize the imagination by uniting the feminine and the avian. Their form suggests the possibility of a horrific death, torn apart by the talons of female beauty. Mythical monster scholar, Paul Murgatroyd explains that

Sirens are figures to conjure with, figures endowed with all kinds of reverberations (suggesting the appeal and deadliness of the female, the sea, flattery and knowledge.) They also represent a striking combination of the fabulous, the beautiful and the otherworldly with the macabre, the horrific and the sinister. (45)

Here Murgatroyd describes Poe's reasons for selecting Ligeia as his heroine. The character, Ligeia, shares her name with one of these ancient monsters, and by alluding to her ancient counterpart, Poe emphasizes the reader's inability to attain the object of sublime beauty. The overt allusion, in fact, conjures thoughts of darkness, as well as the beauty of the voices and the sailors' inability to ignore their call. Like the finite sublime itself, Ligeia leads the reader and the narrator upwards with the beauty of her voice, only to simultaneously remind them of their human finitude and the possibility of gruesome death.

Although Poe's greatest use of mythology is to emphasize the brevity of life, he must first create characters that can facilitate the sublime experience. In the case of "Ligeia," Poe incorporates the dark vision of the siren by emphasizing the bird-like features of the heroine: "I looked at the delicate outlines of the nose... [with the] scarcely perceptible tendency to the aquiline" (261). Although the combination of bird and female suggests a hideous monster in mythology, Poe's siren modernizes the horror that the contemporary reader misses in reading the ancient texts of Homer. In Latin "Aquiline" means "eagle-like;" similarly, Ligeia's aquiline appearance suggests the ferocious nature of an eagle. Eagles are not humane birds; instead of consuming insects and grains, they suddenly plummet from the sky to ensnare their unsuspecting victims. Much like sirens and eagles capture their prey, Ligeia traps the narrator. Thus, Ligeia becomes an agent of death.

Acting as an agent of death, Ligeia urges readers to consider further their own mortality, an inescapable eventual state. Moreover, by connecting Ligeia to an eagle, Poe all but forces the

reader to examine her own beliefs about the unattainable, since birds have the capacity to escape through flight. Yet while Poe urges readers to think about Ligeia's escape route, he also furthers her avian connections. The narrator describes Ligeia's hair as "raven-black," "glossy," and "luxuriant" with "naturally-curling tresses, setting forth the full force of the Homeric epithet, 'hyacinthine!'" (261). Poe's overt reference to Homer reiterates his intentional allusion, since Homer is one of the first Greek authors to depict the sirens. Moreover, Ligeia's raven-black hair furthers Poe's reliance on bird-like images and the macabre: he could easily use obsidian or ebony to describe her hair, but instead, he uses specifically avian imagery. Ravens naturally suggest morbidity, for they are birds of death. Poe suggests that if Ligeia maintains these avian affiliations she could remove herself from the final entrapment, her demise; yet the narrator and the reader will not be so fortunate.

Poe's emphasis on mythology even permeates the construction of the text. Just as Poe references Homer within Ligeia's description, the narrator invokes the powers of Ligeia's name in the same way that Homer summons the name of the Muse in *The Odyssey* or *The Iliad*: "Ligeia! Ligeia! Buried in studies of a nature more than all else adapted to deaden impressions of the outward world, it is by far that sweet word alone—by Ligeia—that I bring before mine eyes in fancy the image of her who is no more" (260). In this quote, the narrator recalls the memory of his lost love, for he depends upon her memory to recount their story. Even the repetition of the name, Ligeia, instills in the reader the sense of urgency and dependence upon the inspiration of the heroine. The narrator's praise of Ligeia's knowledge also connects her with the Muses. The Muses used their expansive knowledge to inspire writers, artists, and storytellers. Ronald Bieganowski, explains Poe's use of the classical style, writing that,

To a large extent, these lines summarize the basic action of the story: the narrator in uttering "Ligeia" brings before imagination's eye the image of Ligeia. It is, of

course, the dynamic process of literary art. In a text containing a narrator particularly self-conscious of narrating, the story becomes an illustration of what verbal utterance does to its narrator as well as to its reader. (179)

In other words, Poe purposefully uses the classical structure to call upon not only the image of Ligeia, but also the corrupting power of lost love. The narrator's fixation upon Ligeia affects the reader as much as it does the narrator. By recalling the image of the lost Ligeia, the narrator creates an environment in which the readers contemplate their own muses or lost loves.

While Poe leaves readers still confronting their own sirens, he simultaneously draws their attention to the ethereal and sublime beauty of Ligeia. For instance, the narrator describes her eyes as "far larger than the ordinary eyes of our own race...yet... her beauty...[was] the beauty of beings either above or apart from this earth" (261). The narrator becomes fixated on Ligeia's sublime beauty. He uses the words "our own race" to distinguish between ethereal and earthly beauty that coalesce in the form of Ligeia, ultimately narrowing the allusion to contrast both the reasonable and the sublime. As Jack and June Davis argue, "The narrator further describes her beauty in such exaggerated terms that the reader should realize he is not expected to accept her as real" (172).

Though Poe's use of hyperbolic description creates distrust in the reader, Poe's exaggerated details also ensnares the reader, leading her to accept the reality of Ligeia's bizarre death. In Greek mythology, sirens use their enchanting voices to lure naïve sailors from their ships to their deaths amongst the rocks; Ligeia uses her eyes. When the narrator goes on to describe her "jetty lashes" Ligeia becomes both the captivating siren and the agent of his demise (262). The narrator, like the sailors, willingly succumbs to her mesmerizing eyes but fails to see the "craggy rocks" blocking his embrace. As the sailors were doomed to perish on the rocks surrounding the siren's island, so too does the narrator metaphorically die upon the barrier surrounding Ligeia's eyes. Poe's focus on

Ligeia's entrapment of the narrator and her inaccessible state deepens the connection between Ligeia and her ancestors.

Although Poe's narrator cannot physically attain Ligeia, he draws yet another connection to her predecessors. Approximating a siren, Ligeia announces her presence through her voice, which Poe uses to further his macabre effect upon his reader. Without her voice, Ligeia's presence is so imperceptible to the narrator that he "was never made aware of her entrance into [his] closed study save by the dear music of her low sweet voice, as she placed her marble hand upon [his] shoulder" (260-261). Wilfred P. Mustard, in his article "Siren-Mermaid," suggests the overarching characteristic in sirens is their "sweet song" (24). Both Poe and Mustard's repetitive use of "sweet" in reference to the sirens is ironic, for the monsters themselves are far from sweet, just as Ligeia's final words suggest, "Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will" (266). Readers can immediately discern the irony that stems from Ligeia's words, for her predecessors, the sirens, preyed on man's feeble will. They sang songs of longing and loneliness, and as Ligeia's declaration suggests, death is the greatest loneliness. Ligeia's final quote actually stems from one of Poe's original poems, "The Conqueror Worm." Poe scholar, Allen Tate suggests Poe selected this poem because of the significant messages behind it. He writes, "In "The Conqueror Worm," we are taught that life is a "drama" in which we think we are the protagonists; but the actual hero is death in the guise of a gigantic Worm" (5). As Tate suggests, Poe uses Ligeia's final words, as well as the poem itself to draw the reader deeper into the world of death and decay. The poem mirrors the experience of the reader, for it outlines the circle of life; in the end, only death can win for the reader cannot escape her own mortality. Before reading "Ligeia," the reader acknowledges the sublime as a transcendent experience; however, Ligeia's death forces the reader to come to terms with her own "horror of death and bodily

corruption” (Tate 5). As the siren draws the narrator in only to destroy him, Poe’s writing invites the reader to a place of dark and destructive beauty, only to take the reader’s breath away by reminding her of the insufficiency of art in the face of death.

The insufficiency of art and beauty in death haunt many of Poe’s works, which creates for the reader a sense of terror and fascination. His use of dark mythology, as well, sparks within the reader an awareness of the brevity of life. Poe’s later works include these characteristics and include a greater sense of connection to the sublime. In “The Fall of the House of Usher,” published in 1839, Madeline Usher displays several characteristics of the mythic heroine, Clytemnestra. Poe creates a character based upon the horror of myth; like the sirens, Clytemnestra is infamous for the destruction of men. Aeschylus, the Greek playwright, attributes the murder of Agamemnon to Clytemnestra. While the myth has had many faces throughout the ages, the overarching consensus of scholars is Clytemnestra’s guilt. In his tragic trilogy entitled, *Oresteia*, Aeschylus details the story of the mythological House of Atreus, which includes both Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Clytemnestra’s story is one of tragedy and betrayal. When the fabled Agamemnon returns from the Trojan War, he brings the news of a terrible betrayal. In order to return to Mycenae, he has to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia. Enraged by her husband’s actions and distraught over the loss of her daughter, Clytemnestra kills both her husband and his concubine Cassandra. This myth creates for the reader a sense of foreboding and dismay, and when used as a narrative structure the reader can only expect destruction and death. The initial description of the house and its surroundings instills in the reader the impression of death, decay, and betrayal:

I know not how it was --but, with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable; for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasurable, because poetic, sentiment, with which

the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible
 I looked upon the scene before me...with an utter depression of soul which I can
 compare to no earthly sensation. (303)

Poe's description of the house creates for the reader a horrifying scene. The "insufferable gloom" also sinks into the bones of the readers. The description of the house also holds Poe's definition of the sublime: the absolute and inexplicable depression of the soul. Although his description perfectly sets the scene for the finite sublime, in "The Fall of the House of Usher," Poe focuses not only on the sublimity of death through the descriptions of the house, but also through the actions of the Usher family.

In his representation of Madeline Usher, Poe accentuates the archetypal frail female turned maniac. Just as Clytemnestra becomes a shell of her former self after hearing the news of her daughter's sacrifice, Madeline Usher also suffers from, "a settled apathy, a gradual wasting away of the person, and frequent although transient affections of a partially cataleptic character" (308). Poe's imagery not only suggests Clytemnestra's state of grieving, but it also draws the reader into a similar state of mind. In order for the reader to experience the sublime, she must be able to leave behind her previous suppositions, embracing Madeline Usher's "settled apathy." After banishing her previous suppositions, the reader now fully experiences the sublimity Poe creates. The illness inflicting Madeline emphasizes Poe's tendency towards the sublime, for the description of her affliction fails to summarize her symptoms adequately. However, Poe does draw a connection between Madeline and Clytemnestra, for what Clytemnestra experiences as grief, Madeline projects as illness. Thus, by accepting Madeline's "settled apathy" the reader also finds herself connected to the ancient murderess, which in itself is its own sublime experience.

Poe's connection between Clytemnestra and Madeline, at first, disorients the reader. However, as his connections continue, the reader grasps their dark implications. Although Clytemnestra has children, while Madeline remains barren, she is the only surviving daughter of Leda, and similar to Clytemnestra, Madeline is the last of her line. As Madeline's brother Roderick voices, "her decease...would leave him the last of the ancient race of the Ushers" (307). Without Madeline, Roderick cannot hope to further the Usher line. The lives of Roderick and Madeline Usher mirror the idiocy of aristocratic inbreeding, for together the twins create an interesting parallel between Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. As Sociology scholar Nancy L. Fischer contends, "The immorality of incest, [is] based on the idea that blood relatives should not mate and the progeny of such unions are tainted and unnatural" (92). Although Madeline and Roderick never produce a human "tainted" progeny, Poe clearly alludes to their incestuous behavior to within the text: "Usher race, all time-honored as it was, had put forth, at no period any enduring branch; in other words, that the entire family lay in the direct line of descent" (304). Poe uses the horror of what incest can produce to envelop the reader into his inexplicable world. Though Poe does not give the twins a direct descendent, he does play with the idea of another sentient heir.

In order to instill the horror of incest into the reader, Poe uses the physical house of Usher as the "tainted" progeny of the twins Roderick and Madeline. He describes the house as bearing all of the signs of a deformed child born in the context of impure love,

The conditions of the sentience had been here, he imagined, fulfilled in the method of collocation of these stones—in the order of their arrangement, as well as in that of the many *fungi* which overspread them, and of the dead trees which stood around—above all, in the long undisturbed endurance of this arrangement, and in its reduplication in the still waters of the tarn. Its evidence—the evidence of the

sentience—was to be seen, he said...in the gradual yet certain condensation of an atmosphere of their own about the waters and the walls. The result was discoverable, he added, in that silent, yet importunate and terrible influence which for centuries had molded the destinies of his family, and which made *him* what I now saw him—what he was. (311).

The house takes on an ironic sentience, and the irony derives from the death and decay which surrounds it. The fungi feed not only on the ruined house, but also on the soul of the narrator and the reader. Poe places the reader within a dire context; the house, now with a life of its own, no longer presents an innocent setting in which the reader can witness the story. Instead, this vile sentient witnesses the many transgressions of the Usher family and now pays the price. Poe uses the sentience of the house to remind the reader of her own transgressions, and the transcendent act of death.

While the Poe uses the fear of the progenies of incest, he also plays upon the reader's fear of insanity and perpetual misfortune. The curse of the Ushers coincides with the House of Atreus: both houses remain cursed until all original perpetrators meet their doom. Thus, as Agamemnon seals his fate with the sacrifice of his daughter Iphigenia, so Roderick seals his fate when he buries the cataleptic Madeline. By drawing parallels between the mythological House of Atreus with the House of Usher, Poe creates a transcendent experience for his readers. His use of mythology reminds his readers of the universality of tragedy, which, in turn, allows them to ruminate upon their own ideas of death and morbidity. However, though he incorporates several elements of the House of Atreus, he never overtly alludes to it. Poe's striking connection creates for the reader a sense of general disgust for humanity. The sublimity enters through the readers' presumable terror of incest and deformities that can occur from such relations. The reader's fear of deformity and

incest, however, cannot compare to the universal fear of insanity and death, which Madeline Usher experiences in the final scene. The confrontation between the Usher siblings forces the reader to reconcile her own ideas of the finite sublime; for in Roderick and Madeline's momentary meeting, both of the siblings' lives cease to exist.

Although her final meeting with Roderick ends in her death, Madeline's sudden return from the grave sparks the elemental link between Madeline and her ancient counterpart. Like Clytemnestra, Madeline seeks vengeance for the unjustified sacrifice:

For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold— then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated. (317)

Madeline kills her brother for his unforgiveable offense towards her. Before Roderick buries her alive, Poe purposefully accentuates the “liveliness” of Madeline's appearance:

The disease which had thus entombed the lady in the maturity of youth, had left, as usual in all maladies of a strictly cataleptical character, the mockery of a faint blush upon the bosom and the face, and that suspiciously lingering smile upon the lip which is terrible in death. (313)

As this quote shows, Roderick places her within the tomb, knowing she is alive. This complete disregard for life mirrors that of Agamemnon when he sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia. In order to attain a sense of justice, Madeline does not pause to hear justification, nor does she show any sign of rationality. Reminiscent of Clytemnestra, Madeline attacks the source of her pain regardless of the effect on herself. The terror Poe creates through the imagery of the final scene conjures thoughts of the sublime experience, death, for Madeline perishes, destroying not only

herself, but also the entire Usher line. Clytemnestra later dies by the hand of her own son Orestes, and in a similar way, Clytemnestra also inadvertently commits suicide on the night she murdered her husband, Agamemnon. Their similar fate, however, appears within the meaning of their names. Clytemnestra's name, according to Kathleen Komar in *Reclaiming Klytemnestra: Revenge or Reconciliation*, means "famous cunning", [and] imbues Klytemnestra with more intelligence and self determination; it thereby also makes her more guilty in Agamemnon's slaying" (28). Thus, Clytemnestra's name defines her fate. Similarly, Madeline's name reflects her sudden transformation. According to Claudine Herrmann and Nicholas Kostis,

Madeline's name, moreover, is unique, as rare in English as in French, and also capable of being doubled: "Mad," obviously signifying crazy, is coupled with "line" which means limit, line, and race. It is at the very moment when Roderick speaks of the race of Ushers that Madeline appears to incarnate this mad race of artists which feeds on incest, transgresses limits, and inscribes itself textually in the very lines of the story. (40)

Poe's minute attention to detail, even to Madeline Usher's name, creates for the reader a world in which even identity is tainted. Through his selection of Madeline's name Poe suggests that his characters cannot escape their own fate; he proposes the meaning of his characters' names, in fact, dooms them. By creating a world in which the character cannot escape her own name's fate, Poe uses his mythological references to subject the reader to the sublime as a finite human being. He suggests with his own character's names that his readers may also share in this dark fate because of their namesake. Within the world Poe creates, he forces readers to reconcile their own name's meaning and fate.

Similarly, Poe uses the name Lenore in “The Raven” as the entire basis of his rhyme scheme, which subjects the reader to its hopeless meaning, for Poe continually couples the name with “nevermore.” Despite the pervasive repetitions of Lenore’s name and the foreboding phrase, which subjects her lover to his irreversible fate, Poe’s poem never becomes didactic. Instead, multiple readings are present at once, which overpower the reader into a sense of a sublime but undefined foreboding. This form of sublimity is not a choice; it is not something that the reader fully wants, for this kind of sublime that can only end in destruction. In the case of “The Raven,” the destruction of the narrator lies in his obsessive fixation. The narrator enamored by Lenore’s beauty dwells upon her loss to the point of mania. He feels great “sorrow for the lost Lenore,” and his description of her, alludes to Helen of Troy: “For the rare and radiant maiden whom angels named Lenore” (10-11). Similar to Helen, Lenore’s origin derives from the ethereal plane: as Zeus and Leda’s union produce Helen, the angels name Lenore. In her book, *Helen of Troy: Goddess, Princess, Whore*, Bettany Hughes describes Helen’s conception: “Zeus saw the young queen and was enraptured. Determined to have Leda, he turned himself into a giant swan and raped her” (22). While Hughes bluntly describes Helen’s conception, Poe chooses to romanticize Lenore’s origin, and although Lenore’s birth is not as horrific as the rape that produces Helen, the mystery of her extraordinary birth remains open for the reader to interpret.

While Poe leaves the origin of Lenore’s birth open for interpretation, Poe’s conceptualization of Lenore creates for the reader a sense of longing, which stems from her ancient counterpart. Hellenistic scholar Margaret R. Scherer describes the legendary figure as, “the ideal of classic beauty” (369). The ideal of classic beauty, however, comes at a steep price. Just as Paris lusts after and captures Helen from the unsuspecting Menelaus, the raven metaphorically separates

Lenore from the narrator. Poe uses the desperation of the narrator to suggest the sublime dimensions of human loss.

If Lenore plays the role of the beautiful Helen of Troy, then the narrator plays the role of Menelaus. Like Menelaus, the narrator questions the reasons for his loss: “Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of the bird, and bust and door; / Then upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking / Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of yore... Meant in croaking “Nevermore” (69-72). As Menelaus unleashes an army on Troy in order to win back Helen, the narrator barrages the Raven with a series of questions to verify Lenore’s demise. In his book, *The Iliad: Structure, Myth, Meaning*, Bruce Loudon describes the duel between Paris and Menelaus. He suggests that, “though neither man is in the first rank of fighters, in having the two warriors with competing claims to Helen fight each other, the narrative offers simultaneously a version of the war’s cause and its possible conclusion” (54). In other words, by having the dual lovers of Helen battle, Homer foreshadows the eventual triumph of the Greeks. Poe, however, darkly twists the original ending. While in the *Iliad* Paris, the captor of Helen, is eventually destroyed, the Menelaus of Poe’s poem remains forever at the mercy of the Raven: “And the lamp-light o’er him streaming throws his shadow on the floor / And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor / Shall be lifted - nevermore!” (106-108). While the original Menelaus eventually triumphed and held his Helen once more, Poe’s narrator is doomed never to see his beloved Lenore again. This contrast shows Poe’s macabre use of mythology as a reminder to the reader that the loss of a loved one is an imminent event that may lead to an emotional response similar to the narrator’s expression of grief. By connecting the reader to the narrator’s state, Poe creates another sublime experience of death, beauty, and loss. His narrator’s utter yearning for his beloved eclipses the

comprehension of the reader, which draws her attention further to her own losses of relationships and beauty.

Although the metaphor of the narrator as Menelaus and Lenore as Helen yields the sublime experience of death, beauty, and loss, another possible allusion is the myth of Persephone and Hades. This allusion contains not only the previous themes but also focuses more on the Raven's role and his influence on the reader's sublime experience, for in this allusion, the narrator's mental Hell becomes his physical surroundings. As Poe creates a specific Hell for "Ligeia," so too does he for "The Raven." Poe even creates for this hell a ruler, and in order to understand this allusion, the reader must understand the role of the raven. In the poem, the raven represents the god of the underworld, Hades. Though the Raven's entrance never appears mundane, a closer inspection of his description reveals a connection to the Plutonian god: "There stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore / Not the least obeisance made he; not a minute stopped or stayed he / But with mien of lord or lady, perched above my chamber door" (38-40). The narrator immediately suggests the bird's connection to another time. The bird's uncompromising attitude also suggests a connection to a god; the raven's inability to acknowledge the narrator and simply alight on the bust of Pallas connotes superiority. The Raven's position above the narrator's chamber door not only gives him power over the narrator, but it also resembles the entrance to the underworld. Hades guards that door as well, never releasing his prisoners once they have entered his domain; much like Hades guards Persephone, the Raven guards the lost Lenore. In this way, the narrator enters a metaphorical hell in which he cannot escape. This increases the emphasis on the sublime, for though readers could contemplate entering hell, the thought of entering an inescapable hell proves too horrific for words.

Poe emphasizes the setting of hell in order to draw a stronger comparison between Lenore and Persephone. Lenore mirrors the goddess Persephone, another beautiful woman stolen from the earthly realm in her youth. In Greek mythology, Hades captures and whisks Persephone away to the underworld. Mythological scholar Larry J. Alderink describes the scene of Persephone's abduction and rape; Hades, entranced by her beauty, kidnaps the young, unsuspecting Persephone, and takes her to his shadowy domain. He then rapes her, making her his wife (Alderink 1). Although Persephone did not physically die, both her virginity and her spirit perished on the day of Hades' rape. As Hades kidnaps the physical Persephone, the Raven ensnares the memory of Lenore,

“Prophet!” said I, “thing of evil—prophet still if bird or devil!
By that Heaven that bends above us—by that God we both adore—
Tell this soul laden if, within the distant Aidenn,
It shall clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels name Lenore...”
Quoth the Raven “Nevermore.” (91-96)

When the narrator pleads with the Raven to see Lenore, the bird simply denies him. The raven becomes the captor of the fair maiden. The raven alone holds the power to connect with Lenore, just as Hades held that power over Persephone. By denying the narrator access to Lenore, he creates a world in which the reader must examine her own relationships, and her inability to control them completely. The inability to control one's connection to another provides yet another sublime experience for the reader. Poe forces the narrator to connect with Lenore solely through the plutonian raven, and the reader now realizes she too cannot separate herself from this terrible fate.

If the raven is Hades, then the narrator becomes Demeter searching for her beloved child. Although scholars usually refer to the narrator of “The Raven” as “he or him,” the voice could just

as easily come from a distraught mother. This interpretation creates an entirely different meaning in this poem, an interpretation that further disorients and forces the reader to consider what she sees within the poem. When compared to Demeter, Poe's narrator becomes the bereft mother. Demeter expert Mary Louise Lord writes, "Demeter hears her daughter's voice and hastens over the land and sea in search of her...But a more terrible and more savage grief comes to her, and in anger against Zeus she thereupon avoids the assembly of the gods" (183). As much as Demeter withdraws from the assembly of the gods so too does Poe's narrator. Tucked away inside of his darkened chamber, with only "the silken, sad, uncertain rustling of each purple curtain" to assuage him, Poe's narrator personifies the lost soul. Yet, in the original myth, Hades allows Persephone to return to her mother. Poe again distorts the myth, forcing the reader to reconcile the meaning of the distortion. The Raven dooms the narrator, as well as the reader to a metaphorical hell in which neither can escape.

Although "Raven" alludes both Helen and Menelaus as well as the Persephone, Hades, and Demeter myths, Poe only uses one overt mythological reference: the bust of Pallas. In the "Philosophy of Composition," Poe states,

I made bird alight on the bust of Pallas, also for the effect of contrast between the marble and the plumage—it being understood that the bust was absolutely *suggested* by the bird—the bust of *Pallas* being chosen, first as most in keeping with the scholarship of the lover, and, secondly, for the sonorousness of the word, Pallas, itself. (748)

As Poe describes, he chooses the bust of Pallas, also known as the goddess Athena, for not only the aesthetic but the lore as well. Athena is the Greek goddess of Wisdom. As Poe implies, a bust within a room signifies the scholarship of the narrator and his desire to learn. However, the bust of

Pallas also exhibits the characteristics of the overarching mythological allusions Poe uses to shock the reader into a moment of recognition. Patricia Merivale asserts, “[The] statues are the greater, more reflective children of Poe's Helen” (694). As Merivale suggests, Poe’s use of the bust essentially becomes an effigy of Helen. In this way then, the raven physically captures both the metaphorical Helen of Troy and the goddess Persephone. Poe scholar Roy J. Basler, explains Poe’s physical manifestation of his other allusions,

Thus, when he came to revise the story, his artistic sense, rooted deeply in his own unconscious processes (or, if one chooses, in "the spirit's outer world"), did not permit the alteration of the conclusion to fit an interpretation essentially superficial and incomplete in its perception of the psychological origin of the story. (371)

Basler suggests that Poe taps into the mythological unconscious, a term that refers to the vast “pool” of influences that surround the contemporary author. By tapping into the mythological unconscious, however, Poe forces the reader to face the sublime. He uses the previous sources, which he often studied and reflected upon, in order to create the beginning of a world in which a reader would be dazzled by the stark reality of her own mortality. His mythological unconscious, corresponds with that of the reader’s.

Within his three texts, and his self-reflexive comments in the “Philosophy of Composition” Poe challenges the traditional concept of the sublime. Poe’s works of distorted mythology assaults the reader with ambiguous meaning rather than guiding the reader upwards toward an ultimate truth. Once there, the readers must not only face their fears of alienation and bereavement, but also their own death. Though referring to “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Bruce Olson’s claim that, “the story itself demonstrates that the artistic imagination cannot be intellectually understood” also applies to both “Ligeia” and “The Raven” (556). Olson suggests, while a reader

may analyze Poe, the creative mind will discover an intuitive answer before an intellectual one. Rather than soliciting a clear response, Poe's rich images conjure ambiguous connections not only to ancient mythology but also to his own texts. Furthermore, Poe transcends his own use of allusions by unconsciously inserting archetypal myths. This creates what G. R. Thompson calls, "a tension between the creative and the destructive impulses of the Universe" (298). The tension between creation and destruction lies in Poe's use of mythology. By incorporating myths and then altering the meaning, Poe destroys in order to create. Therein lies the connection to the sublime. For Poe, the sublime does not end in creation but destruction; the sublime experience takes place within a space of internal destruction and disillusionment, which ultimately ends with the absolute and inexplicable depression of the soul.

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