Deadly Damsels: Examining the Threat of Beauty in Edgar Allen Poe’s “Ligeia” and Washington Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow”

As women’s places in 19th century American society were slowly shifting, narratives of the period began considering the agency women had as well as the threat that this agency might present. Additionally, a heightened fascination with sexuality and the body within American literature portrayed women as not only objects of desire, but also as provoateurs of dangerous and obsessive fascination among men. The horror genre carved a place for these portrayals of women through stories that closely examine, with a great deal of anxiety, women’s beauty. Two masters of the genre, Edgar Allen Poe and Washington Irving, emphasize the roles of female characters that are involved in romantic relationships with obsessive and cognitively questionable male protagonists. In “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” (Irving) and “Ligeia” (Poe), the phantasm of perfect beauty, and the women who represent this intangible ideal, ultimately contributes to the downfall of spellbound protagonists, Ichabod Crane and the Narrator (“The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and “Ligeia,” respectively).

It is important to consider these pieces within the modes of thought acting on them at the time of their creation. While I will discuss how these works can be read through a modern lens, the bulk of this paper will examine “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” and “Ligeia” through the metaphysical mode of thought under which they were created. Literary scholar George Kelly discusses Poe’s approach to writing about beauty in his article “Poe’s Theory of Beauty.” Using
this albeit somewhat dated article, I will consider how these concepts play a role in the representations of women within the two stories.

Kelly explains that Poe’s general approach to beauty assumes that all forms of art are poetic by nature, but lyrical poetry is the superior form (526). Poe asserts that the artistic pursuit is bound by the overpowering desire to seek and recreate beauty in its most perfect form. Kelly explains Poe’s theory of beauty; “His own theory is concerned only with beauty; hence he posits a realm of pure beauty wherein beauty is a transcendental real whose essence is beyond the empirical knowledge of humanity” (522). The inimitability of beauty, Kelly suggests, was an obsession of Poe’s works; he desires to represent that which his own understanding of beauty asserts cannot be replicated in the tangible realm.

This theoretical framework is at work in both Poe and Irving’s works. Beauty is presented as something not only oddly indescribable, but also hauntingly intangible. The male protagonists of both stories are swept up in the quest to attain and wholly possess supernal beauty—a pursuit that Poe asserts is one mankind will forever fixate on, but never realize. Kelly quotes Poe’s explanation of man’s fixation on beauty:

It is the desire of the moth for the star. It is no mere appreciation of the Beauty before us—but a wild effort to reach the Beauty above. Inspired by an ecstatic prescience of the glories beyond the grave, we struggle, by multiform combinations among the things and thoughts of Time, to attain a portion of that Loveliness whose very elements, perhaps, appertain to eternity alone (XIV, 273-274) (523).

Ichabod and the Narrator are the moths that desire some unattainable star. Both are swept up in this eternal pursuit of beauty and ultimately driven to (implicitly physical) psychological ruin when it is revealed that their star will never be reached.

Both stories take place within a dreamlike (or nightmarish) realm. In Sleepy Hollow, “A drowsy, dreamy influence seems to hang over the land, and pervade the very atmosphere” (42).
The bridal chamber in which the heightened plot action of “Ligeia” takes place is described at great length, a relatively claustrophobic, but lavishly beautiful space in which “The phantasmagoric effect was vastly heightened by the artificial introduction of a strong continual current of wind behind the draperies – giving a hideous and uneasy vitality to the whole” (650). These “phantasmagoric” and “bewitched” realms implicate characters within them as phantasms themselves. This makes it all the easier to view the women introduced as haunting, ghostly or witchlike figures, while the male protagonists are presented as innocent members of the physical world who become ensnared in the ghostly traps of these dreamy places.

First, I will discuss Ichabod’s rapid fall into obsession with the beauty of Katrina Van Tassel. This relationship is less psychologically fraught than that of the narrator in “Ligeia,” and so it is a good point of entrance into the space between reality and the supernal realm. Ichabod is introduced as a rather unassuming man, someone who is well known in Sleepy Hollow, but not necessarily someone who is revered as a member of “high society.” From the beginning, it is clear that Ichabod is fascinated with women. For example, it is noted that after school let out, Ichabod “coincidentally” walked home pupils who “happened to have pretty sisters, or good housewives for mothers” (44). And yet again it is emphasized that, “Our man of letters, therefore, was peculiarly happy in the smiles of all the country damsels” (45).

Ichabod is a man with only a handkerchief full of worldly possessions; he is a wanderer. This in combination with the exaggerated qualities of his lanky physical stature paints him as a rather unstable figure. His physical/material instability is matched by a paranoid and nervous disposition. Ichabod is swept up in his own imagination often by reading ghost stories “until the gathering dusk of evening made the printed page a mist before his eyes” (45). Additionally, his overactive imagination works against him on his nightly rides through the forest. The narrator
exclaims, “How often was he appalled by some shrub covered with snow, which like sheeted spectre beset his very path!” Ichabod Crane is a skittish man, absorbed in his own mind and keen to the attentions of women. These qualities allow the reader to see him as an innocent bystander in the events that lead to his disappearance and provide more ammunition to point the finger at his female love interest as the primary reason for his downfall.

The narrator asserts that all of Ichabod’s psychological shortcomings and distractions by “phantoms of the mind” pale in comparison to the terrors brought about by his fateful introduction to Katrina Van Tassel;

…Though he had seen many specters in his time, and been more than once beset by Satan in diverse shapes, in his lonely Perambulations, yet day-light put an end to all these evils; and he would have passed a pleasant life of it, in despite of the Devil and all his works, if his path had not been crossed by a being that causes more perplexity to mortal man, than ghosts, goblins, and the whole race of witches put together, and that was – a woman (46).

Women are generalized as “beings,” immediately placing them in Poe’s supernal realm. There is something “perplexing” about women to men and men alone. Thus, Ichabod comes to be understood as the victim to this otherworldly creature. Interestingly, this description of women is presented to describe the bewitchingly beautiful female character in the story. The “pretty sisters” and “good housewives” Ichabod innocently interacts with are not threatening, perhaps because they do not dangle the temptation of supernal beauty in the way that Katrina does. From the moment of this introduction, to all the events that follow, Ichabod is fixated, trapped within the eternal quest to touch the intangible.

Katrina herself is not threatening; it is her beauty, her desirability that ensnares both Ichabod and his “competitor” Brom Bones. She is first objectified, as if to lessen the threat of the intangibility of pure beauty. She is described as “plump as a partridge; ripe and melting and rosy-cheeked as one of her father’s peaches”(46). The danger of a relationship with Katrina is
revealed when the narrator calls her “a little of a coquette.” “She wore the ornaments of pure yellow gold, which her great-great-grandmother had brought over from Saardam; the tempting stomacher of olden time, and withal a provokingly short petticoat…” (46-47; emphasis added). Katrina is described as having agency over the effect she has on men, making her beauty an even more convincing and dangerous phantom.

The effect of beauty is something that Kelly (and Poe) notes as one of the most important elements of understanding Poe’s theory of beauty. Assessing Poe’s examination of beauty Kelly quotes a passage of Poe’s work; “When, indeed, men speak of Beauty, they mean, precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect – they refer, in short, just to that intense and pure elevation of soul…(XIV, 197)” (525). In other words, beauty itself is not what we struggle to recreate, but rather the indescribable and overpowering effect of beauty is what has the capacity to overtake the senses and the mind.

The power and danger of the effect of Katrina’s beauty is demonstrated in the contrast between Ichabod’s upbeat journey to the Van Tassel home and his deadly journey home after the party has ended. As soon as he receives word that he is expected to attend a gathering at the Van Tassel home, Ichabod is overcome with excitement; he abandons all other responsibilities, rushing through his lessons with his pupils in order to be on his way more quickly. He mounts his trusty, but equally unstable steed, Gunpowder, and sets off on a pleasant, aesthetically charged ride through the country. The beautiful sights are described vividly; “It was…a fine autumnal day, the sky was clear and serene and nature wore that rich and golden livery which we always associate with the idea of abundance” (52). The dreamlike realm of Sleepy Hollow mirrors Ichabod’s internal conditions. It is important to note that the narrator does not promise good things for Ichabod, but explains that these sights replicate the “idea of abundance.” This
realm and this ride actually reinforce that Ichabod is very much within the realm of the intangible. Beauty in its purest form is intangible and can, as it is soon revealed, easily turn into something threatening.

During the Van Tassel’s party, Ichabod is overjoyed by his interactions with Katrina. Brom Bones, on the other hand, is jealous and angry. Brom, very likely responsible for running Ichabod out of town at the end of the story, is perhaps more threatening to Ichabod than Katrina. However, Katrina’s beauty, which has overtaken both Brom and Ichabod, as well as many other prospective suitors, is still held as the key fixation and consequentially, the primary cause for Ichabod’s psychological distress and downfall.

After listening to the ghost stories of the Dutch wives, and becoming entranced by the tale of the headless Hessian soldier, the atmosphere of Sleepy Hollow changes once again to mirror Ichabod’s internal state. “There was a contagion in the very air that blew from that haunted region; it breathed forth an atmosphere of dreams and fancies infecting all the land” (55). Ichabod, too, is “infected” by his own “dreams and fancies” about claiming and possessing the supernal beauty, Katrina. This infectious obsession with attaining his prize, his “star,” proves fruitless when, at the end of the evening, the narrator reveals that something has gone awry between Katrina and Ichabod. It is reinforced that Katrina has somehow orchestrated “poor” Ichabod’s disappointment when the narrator considers their final interaction:

Something, however, I fear me, must have gone wrong, for he certainly sallied forth, after no very great interval, with an air quite desolate and chopfallen – Oh these women! these women! Could that girl have been playing off any of her coquettish tricks? – Was her encouragement of the poor pedagogue all a mere sham to secure her conquest of his rival? (57)
There is no possibility that Ichabod could have been the reason their love did not bloom. Not only Katrina, but also “these women” as a group are demonized, blamed for all the unhappy men who have ever been let down by a failed attempt at love.

The failed relationship with Katrina leaves readers with a dejected Ichabod, setting off in an equally dejected atmosphere. The narrator states, “the hour was as dismal as himself,” and all of the formerly beautiful sights of the valley have turned to haunting shadows harboring only the promise of something bad on the horizon. As the story goes on, Ichabod comes face to face with what he believes to be the headless horseman of Sleepy Hollow, racing through the forest never to be seen again.

Once Ichabod fails to attain the beauty he becomes obsessed with, he is reduced to nothingness. The anxiety of the final conflict emphasizes the anxiety generated by the “mysterious creatures” known as beautiful women. Irving’s tale certainly serves as a good example of how beauty itself is perceived as possessing the power to ensnare men’s minds and ultimately reduce those men to emptiness once the pursuit of attaining supernal beauty is lost.

A similar, but as mentioned before, more psychologically contained and complex downfall into an obsessive quest to possess a supernal beauty, appears in Poe’s own “Ligeia.” His theory of beauty as something that is both inimitable and insatiably appealing to all of mankind certainly overtakes the male protagonist in this short story. Unlike Ichabod, the Narrator in “Ligeia” is perhaps more complex in his ponderings and observations—he is more directly aware of his desire to possess his fair and intangible beauty, Ligeia.

The Narrator begins his tale by trying, but failing in his own opinion, to describe his true, and now deceased love’s beauty. Ligeia is not like Katrina Van Tassel, she is not the wholesome
country beauty that Ichabod pines after, but rather she is more evidently an embodiment of the supernal beauty that Katrina’s character only hints at. He attempts to convey an image of Ligeia:

In beauty of face no maiden ever equaled her. It was the radiance of an opium dream – an airy and spirit-lifting vision more wildly divine than the phantasies which hovered about the slumbering souls of the daughters of Delos. Yet her features were not that regular mold which we have been falsely taught to worship in the classical labors of the Heathen… 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 a “strangeness” pervading it, yet I have tried in vain to detect the irregularity, and to trace home my own perception of “the strange” (645).

The Narrator’s description of Ligeia as something of an “opium-dream” already puts her in an intangible space. She is no longer a “real” person, but rather a phantasm of the idealized supernal beauty that Poe so adamantly asserts men eternally desire. Furthermore, the Narrator’s awareness of Ligeia’s position outside of “regularity,” which perhaps means outside of reality, poses the fearful quality of beauty. Ligeia is described to readers as a ghost before she appears as such at the end of the story. Even the memory of her beauty is so potent that the Narrator can hardly separate fantasy from reality.

Through his fixation on this blurry, unreliable memory of a supernal being that was, the Narrator reveals his own lack of trust in his mind. He explains that the process of remembering is, in itself, an unreliable activity, and one that is susceptible to tricks of the mind. He explains “that in our envdeavours to recall to memory something long forgotten we often find ourselves upon the very verge of remembrance without being able, in the end, to remember” (646). Thus, Ligeia is firmly settled in a space that cannot be accessed, one that is somewhere on the brink of reality and physicality, but never to be realized.

The Narrator goes on to explain that Ligeia is now dead and shortly after the loss of his “betrothed,” he is married to a far less enticing suitor, Rowena. Rowena is “fair-hared and blue-eyed,” a much less threatening figure by nature (649). The Narrator’s new bride is one of those
“beings” that Irving’s tale suggests is so threatening and impossible to understand, yet she is not portrayed as a threat to the Narrator. The Narrator is already a “bounden slave to the trammels of opium,” by the time he is married to Rowena (649). The failed attempt to possess the supernal beauty already has compromised his mind. Rowena is nothing more than a bystander in the Narrator’s life, a stand-in and perhaps a companion put in place for the sake of convention or propriety. Ligeia was the opposite of convention and “regularity,” the indescribable spectre that continues to haunt the Narrator throughout his brief marriage to Rowena.

The Narrator and Rowena pass their time in the haunting, claustrophobic bridal chamber until his bride falls ill. As Rowena lies on her deathbed, the Narrator is consumed more deeply with obsessive reflections about Ligeia. His mental state falters more and more as the effect of beauty takes over, pulling him into what Kelly calls Poe’s “concept of the realm of ideal beauty” (532). This realm is a component of supernal beauty “which defines the melancholy tone of beauty as an effect [of supernal beauty]” (532). The Narrator experiences this effect of beauty as an overwhelming excitement that leads to perpetual melancholy once it is revealed that supernal beauty is always just out of reach (like Ligeia).

The reader anticipates the Narrator’s fall into madness, but the anxiety of his atmosphere is still incredibly effective for conveying his obsessive fixation on the memory of Ligeia. His paranoia reaches a climax once Rowena dies and he sits “with her shrouded body, in that fantastical chamber which had received her as my bride” (651). He describes the deception of his own vision and his own mind recounting, “Wild visions, opium engendered, flitted, shadow-like before me. I gazed with unquiet eye upon the sarcophagi in the angles of the room, upon the varying figures of the drapery, and upon the writing of the parti-colored fires in the censer overhead” (651). Everything around him has become phantasmic, reminiscent of the process of
trying to remember Ligeia, of trying to grasp what her beauty is but always falling short. Everything he sees is just between reality and the supernal realm, an anxious and frustrating space.

It is suggested that had the narrator let go of the memory of Ligeia, of the quest to possess the beauty that he cannot put into words, he would not have fallen into the downward spiral towards a loss of self that he finds himself in sitting next to the dead body of Rowena. The nature of man’s desire for supernal beauty, though, is asserted to be too strong to ignore. The threat of female beauty is presented as even more dangerous than that of Katrina, who was simply hinted as having agency over her effect on men. Because Ligeia is the “pure” embodiment of the intangible supernal beauty that Poe’s theory asserts drives all artistic endeavors, “Ligeia” confronts the reader with a more explicit caution against women.

In the final gripping and terrifying moments of “Ligeia” Rowena’s dead body awakens. At first, the narrator, and presumably the reader, questions his vision, but the body springs to life twice more. In the final instance, the body rises erect before the Narrator. He doubts himself wondering, “What inexpressible madness seized me with that thought?” (653). He notices, then, that Rowena’s figure is taller than he remembered and as he approaches the body he describes the horrifying events that unfold;

Shrinking from my touch, 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. It was blacker than the raven wings of the midnight! And now the eyes opened of the figure which stood before me. “Here then at least,” I shrieked aloud, “can I never – can I never be mistaken – these are the full, and the black, and the wild eye of the lady – of the lady Ligeia!” (653).

This terrifying and impossible revelation ends the story. Perhaps the Narrator’s slow spiral from drugs, to confinement, to obsessive reflection on memories of Ligeia allowed him to envision this phantom. There is no saying whether or not this event actually occurred, just as there is no
proof that a headless horseman attacked Ichabod Crane. The reality of the situation, while fascinating to consider, is not required for understanding the impact of the effect of supernal beauty.

The Narrator is overtaken by his first encounter with what he believes is the pure supernal beauty that is the be all end all of what Poe suggests is mankind’s eternal quest. The memory of the embodiment of this ideal transports the Narrator into a perpetual state of melancholy, which removes him from any clear sense of reality. Ligeia represents that quality in women that is suggested to be so threatening, so damning for men. To be swept up in female beauty, this and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” suggest, is to be led to one’s own downfall.

Katrina Van Tassel and Ligeia represent anxieties generated, primarily by men, in 19th century American culture. A woman with power had the potential to change the social structures that had been upheld for hundreds of years. A beautiful woman with power, these stories seem to suggest, is even more threatening because supernal beauty, something Poe asserts men inherently desire to but forever fail to possess, imitate or represent, has the power to overtake those men who become ensnared by it and therefore bring them to their demise.

While the understanding of beauty and the assertion that mankind’s true desire in artistic pursuits is to attain the intangible is a notion from a different period of academic thought, the assertion that beauty is a threat persists in today’s culture. Women have assumed more equal roles within society, but there is a pervasive notion that beautiful women have the power to destroy men (e.g. the idea of a “man-eater” or an attractive older woman as a “cougar” with the potential to “devour” younger men). The (beautiful) deadly damsel is a trope that shows no signs of disappearing from American culture and literature.
Works Cited

