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Edgar Allan Poe versus Espido Freire:
When a voice is given to a voiceless woman

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This paper will compare Edgar Allan Poe’s short story, *Ligeia*¹, with *De Tremaine*², a short story written by the contemporary Spanish author Espido Freire. The main purpose will be to analyze how the image of women in Gothic literature has changed to the point that a secondary character in the original short story becomes the main character in a subsequent story written two hundred years later. According to Helene Meyers³, “whereas the nineteenth-century Gothic […] explored the domestic violence that was officially repressed in order to maintain the ideology of the home as a safe haven, contemporary Gothics critically engage with feminist discourse on violence against women” (Meyers 2001: 19), as demonstrated by the character of Rowena in *De Tremaine*.

*Ligeia*, by Edgar Allan Poe, is the story of a nameless narrator who meets a mysterious woman, Ligeia, in Germany. She is wealthy and beautiful, as well as full of wit and intellect. However, Narrator cannot recall most of the details surrounding their life together because after her tragic and unforeseen death, he develops an addiction to

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opium. Narrator moves to England, buys a gothic abbey with the money Ligeia left him, and marries Rowena Trevanian of Tremaine, a woman physically the opposite of Ligeia. After two months of marriage, Narrator discovers Rowena does not love him. She falls ill and dies but comes back several times—each time having changed her physical aspect slightly. The last time Rowena reawakes from her death, the shroud falls and Narrator finds the body of Ligeia. In the story, Rowena is absolutely voiceless, a victim who serves as a recipient for the transmutations of Ligeia and as a receptacle of Narrator’s solitude, depression and wrath. Ligeia is the empowered *femme fatale*, Poe’s female depiction of himself and the character he was most proud of in his whole literary career.

In 2009, for the 200th anniversary of Poe’s birth, Editorial 451 edited a book in which seven contemporary authors revisited Poe’s tales, framing them in an alternative world, or giving them an original approach. Espido Freire was in charge of revising *Ligeia*. Instead of reimagining the story in a modern world like other authors did, she wrote *De Tremaine*, retelling the story of *Ligeia* from Rowena’s perspective. By giving her the role of protagonist, Freire also gives her a voice. In *Ligeia*, Rowena never has the chance to speak and we know nothing about her feelings, impressions, actions, or attitudes. We only know how Narrator reacts to her presence. By the end of the story, we have a clear sense that Rowena has been a tool for both Narrator and Ligeia, serving as a means to forget for the former, “I [was] a bounden slave […] of opium […] [amongst] these absurdities […] in a moment of mental alienation, I led [her] from the altar as my bride;” (Poe 1984: 270), and a mere receptacle for the latter.

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Freire’s unique narration serves as a point of contrast between the two stories. In *De Tremaine*, femininity has the leading role. The authors themselves differ in gender, location, century, and narrative style, but these differences are precisely what favor the comparison of their work. Quoting Helene Meyers, the reality of nineteenth century works is: “the Gothic […] [has] a thematic emphasis on violence against women,” (Meyers 2001: xii) although Poe’s intention was never to subjugate Rowena, but to show Ligeia’s power through her. As an icon of perfection for both Poe and Narrator, Ligeia is the only woman in his whole work who overcomes death and is acknowledged to be superior, even to men. Ligeia resurrects, revives, extends and persists in her existence; she is indestructible, identified by the reader as a gothic *femme fatale*.

Those familiar with the work of Poe might know that the females in his work are always polarized: the dark ladies (tanned, voluptuous women with long black hair and black eyes) versus the fair ladies (pale skinned, petite women with blond hair and green or blue eyes). This motif is deeply embedded in universal literature, present even today which makes Poe’s stories wonderfully current. The dark ladies are represented as the temptress, abnormally intellectual woman, and the fair ladies the extremely innocent and unsophisticated woman. Ligeia is the perfect depiction of this. We find these two ladies in opposition in Poe’s tale, an example of the dark versus fair lady motif. According to Karen Weekes, the scene of Rowena becoming Ligeia shows a clear struggle between Poe’s dark ladies and fair ladies, represented respectively by Ligeia and Rowena. When Poe writes, “each agony wore the aspect of a struggle with some invisible foe,” (Poe 1984: 276), we see a real struggle, a real fight between these women. This fight, in the
words of Margrit Shildrick⁵, shows the pursuit of Ligeia’s identity: “Identity is realized only as the lived body is immersed in the lived bodies of others,” (Shildrick 2002: 44).

In Freire’s work, the first sign of Rowena’s empowerment is the public acknowledgement that she didn’t want to marry Narrator and her remarks on his defects. Defining the experience as “being sacrificed” (Freire 2009: 123), she says: “I never wanted to marry a widower; I was looking, as we all do, for a landowner willing to see beauty beneath my beauty. Or an American heir, someone who, despite his terrible accent, would redeem his new money with some old blood” (Freire 2009: 121-122)⁶. The “new money” that Rowena is describing is the money Narrator inherited from Ligeia in Poe’s story.

One of Poe’s narrative techniques is to veil reality through the consumption of opium: Narrator is drugged throughout the story; he calls Ligeia “the radiance of an opium-dream” (Poe 1984: 263), and leaves many questions unanswered. We never know for sure why Rowena dies; does Narrator kill her? Does Ligeia? While the reasons for her death are unknown, one thing is certain: Rowena is emotionally punished by her husband and physically punished by Ligeia. Ligeia uses Rowena’s body to come back to life – in the same style as spirits that possess mediums. Narrator considers this possession an act of love: “but in death only, was I fully impressed with the strength of her affection” (Poe 1984: 267). Freire’s witty rewriting explains this episode in a very convincing way:

⁶ My translation. Original quote: “No quise nunca casarme con un viudo; buscaba, como todas hacemos, un hacendado dispuesto a ver bajo mi belleza otra belleza. O un heredero Americano, alguien que, tras su pésimo acento, quisiera redimir su dinero nuevo con algo de sangre vieja.”
Narrator, or “The German” as he is called in her story, is deranged and believes that Rowena is someone else. In Freire’s story,

“[The German’s former wife] did not stand out. [...] She was a sad flower that everybody knew was doomed to die soon. They were not happy. No, she was not brunette, nor did she have curly, lustrous hair, and huge dark eyes like a calm lake. She was, like me, blonde and shapely, with long braids curled at the temples, according to the custom of her country. Her name was Madeleine” (Freire 2009: 133-134).

A pun for those familiar with the work of Poe, what Freire is actually saying here is The German is in fact Roderick Usher talking about his sister Madeleine, with whom he shared “sympathies of a scarcely intelligible nature [that] had always existed between them” (Poe 1984: 329). Was their marriage, then, a hoax? Was Ligeia a product of his imagination? Freire follows Poe’s style and leaves these questions unanswered.

The second sign of Rowena’s power lies in her becoming numb to the pain until she sees herself in a masochistic relationship. She uses the speech of a battered woman who thinks the pain her husband is causing her is hidden affection:

“It doesn’t matter what I think, I've learned to be what they expect from me [...] There is no life without pain. I welcome the pain. Whoever does not bear it is dead [...] The distance between life and death has been minimal [...] I’ve nailed bush thorns in my stomach and the same face was reflected in the mirror. I know how to lie to the point that my semblance does not reflect anything else than a fictitious serenity. I pretend better because I’ve pretended more” (Freire 2009: 122).

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7 My translation. Original quote: “[La ex mujer del Alemán] no destacaba. [...] Era una flor triste que sabían condenada a morir pronto. No fueron felices. No, no era morena, no tenía el cabello rizado y lustroso, ni los ojos enormes y oscuros como un lago en calma. Fué, como yo, rubia y bien formada, con largas trenzas acaracoladas en las sienes, según la costumbre del país. Se llamaba Madeleine.”

8 My translation. Original quote: “Que más dará lo que yo crea, si he aprendido a ser lo que esperan de mí [...] No hay vida sin dolor. Me complace el dolor. Quien no lo soporte está muerto [...] La distancia entre la vida y la muerte ha sido mínima [...] Me he clavado espinas de zarzal en el estómago mientras en el espejo se reflejaba el mismo rostro. Sé mentir hasta el punto en que mi semblante no refleje nada más que una serenidad ficticia. Finjo mejor porque he fingido más.”
In Poe’s work, Rowena dying in repeated occasions is the last datum that captures the narrator’s contempt for her. In the time when the story was written, women were expected to ensure the happiness of their husbands by remaining young and beautiful, thus reaffirming his youth and saving him from aging and death. For the narrator, discovering Rowena’s vulnerability takes away his illusion of immortality.

Glanvill’s quote, repeated four times in the story, makes clear Poe believed those who died were in possession of a feeble and weak will: “man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will” (Poe 1984: 262, 265, 269). In reaction to this reality, Freire makes Rowena strong enough to endure the pain and willing to transform into Ligeia, instead of letting Ligeia possess her as we read in Poe’s work: “Over his kisses like bites and the brutality to which I had become accustomed and which I now almost longed, over his monologues full of old names and brilliant lectures, I loved the man who loved Ligeia. Ligeia was the noblest, most beautiful part of our marriage” (Freire 2009: 136).

“To some extent, now that he’s losing me I am becoming, more than ever, Ligeia. When I die [...] I will be back as Ligeia. [...] I will speak and he will answer me, and I will open my eyes, and I will smile to him with them. They will be black, as he wished in his Ligeia, as he couldn’t find in any of us, his real women. [...] I will be Ligeia, what Rowena always wished to be” (Freire 2009: 136-137).

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9 My translation. Original quote: “Por encima de sus besos como mordiscos y de la brutalidad a la que me había acostumbrado y que ahora casi añoraba, por encima de sus monólogos cargados de nombres antiguos y de brillantes disertaciones, yo amaba al hombre que amaba a Ligeia. Ligeia era la parte más noble, más hermosa de nuestro matrimonio.”

10 My translation. Original quote: “En cierta medida, ahora que me pierde me estoy convirtiendo, más que nunca, en Ligeia. Cuando muera [...] regresaré como Ligeia. [...] Hablaré y me responderá, y abriré los ojos, y le sonreírme con ellos. Serán negros, como él deseaba en su Ligeia, como no encontró en ninguna de nosotras, sus mujeres reales. [...] Seré Ligeia, lo que Rowena deseó siempre ser.”
Rowena is finding her own identity here, and noting that the “contemporary female gothic explores the difficulties of, and the necessity for, taking gender oppression seriously without positioning women as pure victims” (Meyers 2001: xii). Her willingness to become someone else is her way to empowerment.

The German physically abuses Rowena, but she grows used to it: “The wedding night was painful, execrable. A butchery done with no previous warning, no love or compassion, the sheets and my thighs full of blood and the dull rancor that began beating in my throat: he didn’t see me. He was taking revenge on me for an old pain” (Freire 2009: 124). Behind the very explicit descriptions of sex and the definitions of marital endearment as an illness, Rowena explains that the female condition is so terrible it makes you love even those who hurt you. Rowena’s revenge is to love The German, even more than if she had chosen him as a husband, because they have become the same pain, the same flesh. Rowena has learned to love the poor way The German treats her, because, engaged in a sadomasochistic relationship, she is reminded of “times of shame but also of pleasure” (Freire 2009: 133). Gothic is a genre that not only “from its inception [has] been seen as feminine and female […] and has mediated upon the potential for female victimization” (Meyers 2001: 25-26), but also serves as a means of female protest and escape from oppression and silence.

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11 My translation. Original quote: “La noche de bodas dolorosa, execrable. Una carnicería realizada sin advertencia previa, sin amor ni compasión, las sábanas y mis muslos ensangrentados, y el rencor sordo que comenzó a latir en mi garganta: no me veía. Se vengaba en mi de un dolor muy antiguo.”
The voice of Rowena, under the auspices of a nineteenth century gothic narrative, which we know to be real but receive as exaggerated in the present day, helps to reflect a reality that is alien to many. Rowena’s power relies on her voice, on becoming who she wants to be, on knowing how to cope with her circumstances, and on presenting a reality that could be possible in the nineteenth century but which by no means can trespass into the present day. For every Rowena in the world that lacks a voice, there will always be a Freire that will give her the tools to express herself.