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Monster Quest: Background Myth and Contemporary Context of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Conqueror Worm"

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MONSTER QUEST: BACKGROUND MYTH AND CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT
OF EDGAR ALLAN POE'S "THE CONQUEROR WORM"

by

FARRAH SENN

(Under the direction of Caren Town)

ABSTRACT

Poe's short story "Ligeia" and its companion poem "The Conqueror Worm" have garnered little critical attention, though he believed them to be his best works. Considering the archetypal image of the worm, contemporary references, and Poe's other uses of the symbol, an analysis of the poem and its context within the short story reveals the identity of the "hero" described in the final verse. This paper explores the archetypal nature of the worm by looking at snake myths from across the globe and applying Platonic/Jungian ideas to the image and its function in the poem. This work also discusses the worm symbol in the work of Poe and his contemporaries, along with biographical information that provides insight into other symbols in the poem and the short story. The information considered demonstrates the poem's allegorical nature with multiple layers of meaning including an interpretation for the individual, for mankind, and for the universe. Finally, though the prevalence of snake myth would lead to its equation with the Miltonic serpent and its cross-cultural counterparts, the "blood-red" and "writhing" creature represents death as a beginning. Using mythos, Poe's contemporary knowledge, and Poe's own writings leads to the conclusion that the "conqueror" is the deathless soul of the lowly "worm," man. Poe plays out this idea in "Ligeia" where she, a human, succeeds in conquering the primordial power of death.

INDEX WORDS: Poe, Ligeia, Conqueror Worm, Archetype

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	5
CHAPTER	
1 INTRODUCTION.....	7
2 THE WORM AS ARCHETYPE	10
<i>Poe, Plato, and Jung</i>	10
<i>Egyptian</i>	14
<i>Mesopotamian</i>	15
<i>Indian</i>	17
<i>Greek</i>	18
<i>Hebrew</i>	19
<i>Celtic</i>	20
<i>Other Cultures</i>	21
3 THE WORM AS A CONTEMPORARY IMAGE	23
<i>Biographical Evidence</i>	23
<i>References in Poe's Work</i>	25
<i>References of Poe's Contemporaries</i>	26
<i>Other Possible References</i>	29
4 THE WORM AS USED IN POE.....	32
<i>The Worm in the Poem</i>	32
<i>The Worm in Context</i>	46
5 CONCLUSION	49
Works Cited	56
APPENDIX A.....	64
THE CONQUEROR WORM.....	64

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Edgar Allan Poe said in “The Poetic Principle” that: “He must be theory-mad beyond redemption who, in spite of these differences, shall still persist in attempting to reconcile the obstinate oils and waters of poetry and truth” (76). Poe does not contend that poetry and truth are incompatible, just that they are wholly different in substance. In essence, Poe deplored didacticism, rejected truth as the primary objective of poetry, and asserted instead that a poem should be beautiful in its own right:

It has been assumed, tacitly and avowedly, directly and indirectly, that the ultimate object of all poetry is truth. [...] We have taken in into our heads that to write a poem simply for the poem’s sake, and to acknowledge such to have been our design, would be to confess ourselves radically wanting in the true poetic dignity and force: but to look into our own souls, we should immediately there discover that under the sun there neither exists nor can exist any work more thoroughly dignified – more supremely noble than this very poem – the poem per se – this poem which is a poem and nothing more – the poem written solely for the poem’s sake. (“The Poetic Principle” 75-76)

Thus, according to Poe, the purpose of poetry is the inward reaction of the “soul” to the poem’s aesthetic. Though these passages show that he privileged beauty over truth and meaning, one nevertheless searches for them in his work. Paradoxically, seeking truth and meaning in his short poem, “The Conqueror Worm,” which is found inside his short story, “Ligeia,” can actually help to reveal the inherent beauty of the poem.

“The Conqueror Worm” and “Ligeia” both deal with themes that pervade Poe’s works. The poem describes a scene in the “lonesome latter years” in which an audience of veiled and crying angels sits in a theatre watching the tragedy called “Man.” A “blood-red thing” intrudes upon the scene, and human flesh is devoured. In the end, the angels rise and unveil themselves, and the “hero” is designated the “Conqueror Worm.” This poem, in the middle of “Ligeia,” is supposedly written by the eponymous heroine right before her death.

Ligeia’s lover narrates the story, which opens with an epigrammatic poem attributed to transcendentalist Joseph Glanvill (the importance of this epigram will be clear later). The narrator describes Ligeia as a woman of great mystery and intelligence, and together they search for secret and transcendent knowledge. She, however, is overcome with an illness, and though she wants him to read “The Conqueror Worm” to her, she repeatedly recites the Glanvill epigram, which celebrates the unconquerable strength of the will. James Schroeter said of the apparently opposing dynamics of these two poems that they “struggle dramatically within Ligeia, but, in the end, the Glanvill quotation, which she affirms with her dying breath, proves victorious” (402). The distraught narrator takes another wife who also becomes ill and, perhaps by his malign actions, dies. Her body goes through several fits of revival and is finally taken over by the narrator’s former dead lover, Ligeia.

This poem and its host story are particularly important in Poe Studies because the author himself regarded them as his best works (Quinn 430), and because they contain Poe’s core ideas about the afterlife. This study becomes even more important because, while criticism on Poe’s other works is abundant, the critics are nearly silent on this particular piece. Where it *is* discussed, critics say little about the namesake of the poem, the worm. In fact an essay written by Klaus Lubbers less than a generation after Poe’s death, poses questions that still remain today:

“Who are the ‘vast formless things’? What is the ‘Phantom’? In what way do Madness, Sin, and Horror function as the ‘soul of the plot’? Even the nature of the Worm seems to have presented difficulties” (379). The answers to these questions cannot be obtained by a cursory reading of the poem. Poe constructed this allegory with layers of symbolism and meaning, and a reader must work at peeling back these layers to get to the core of the piece. This challenge, as Lubbers states it, has gone unanswered as of yet.

One approach to solving this puzzle focuses on the central figure in the poem: the worm. From there, a telescopic investigation can proceed, moving from the larger view of the worm/snake as a universal archetype, to the possible contemporary influences of Poe’s “Conqueror Worm,” to a close look at the poem, its content, and its context. Applying the archetypal and contemporary influences in a close reading of “The Conqueror Worm” within the context of “Ligeia” uncovers the poem’s symbolism and reveals the identity of the worm.

CHAPTER 2

THE WORM AS ARCHETYPE

In spite of Poe's disdain for the "heresy of the didactic" ("The Poetic Principle" 75), the words and images he chose were nonetheless inspired by something, though as Lubbers noted, "He transformed what he borrowed so as to make it completely his own" (376). In regard to the conqueror worm, a good start can be made by exploring the possible inspiration for the creation and use of this creature image. Once the most likely sources emerge, the meaning of the worm symbol, or perhaps what Poe hoped to accomplish with it in the short story and the poem, becomes clearer. Understanding widely-held beliefs about the creature gives the conqueror worm an identity and enhances its credibility as a symbol.

Poe, Plato, and Jung

By far the most available writings about worms are theological and mythical stories about what may be arguably considered large worms: snakes. The enthrallment with this creature extends from ancient myths, to Poe's worm, to the present-day Harry Potter series. Looking back to the origins of this primordial and innate fascination reveals that the serpent figures centrally in creation myths and pantheons from the dawn of the earliest civilizations, including Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Indian, Greek, Hebrew, and Celtic cultures, among others. Brad Howard comments: "Critics of the poem have understandably stressed the worm's literal connection with the grave as well as with Satan, *worm* being an archaic term for *serpent*. But Poe was almost certainly aware of an alternate symbolic tradition involving the figure of the serpent" (40). Poe invokes these symbolic traditions by referencing ancient cultures in several passages in the poem and in "Ligeia," suggesting that he sought to impose the deific awe of the remote ancient past to images, characters, and locations within the works.

For example, Poe said the mysterious Ligeia was from an ancient family and that “in the classical tongues was she deeply proficient” as well as in the dialects of (then) modern Europe (“Ligeia” 100). The narrator first remembers meeting Ligeia in “some large, old, decaying city near the Rhine” (Poe, “Ligeia” 97). Even the primary setting for the action, the bridal chamber, calls up images from the ancient past. The narrator describes “solemn carvings of Egypt” venetian glass, a semi-Gothic, semi-Druidic vaulted ceiling, and “a huge censer of the same metal, Saracenic in pattern and with many perforations so contrived that there writhed in and out of them as if endued with a serpent vitality, a continual succession of parti-colored fires” (Poe, “Ligeia” 103). Because of its presence within the story, the theme of ancient myths from past civilizations is also carried over into the poem, including Judeo-Christian angels, Greek ideas concerning tragedy, and Egyptian symbols such as the condor. These references to the ancient past imply an association between Poe’s worm and characteristics and ideas associated with the snake across cultural and continental boundaries.

Most continents, and indeed most countries, have a snake myth, and many have similar beliefs regarding the creature. The serpent is not only seen in creation stories, but is also usually given other attributes such as wisdom, healing, and immortality (Wake 380). Moorehead confirmed the serpent’s universal association with wisdom (208), and added that, “Deified as the serpent has been all over the world, it has always been the emblem of the evil principle in nature, and its worship was inspired rather to avert evil than to express reverence or gratitude” (206). Although many of the conclusions drawn about these connections are widely disputed, the fact that serpent worship occurred all over the world in antiquity is certainly evident. As George Dibley said in response to C. Staniland Wake’s 1973 lecture entitled, “The Origin of Serpent

Worship,” “To ascertain the origin of serpent-worship appears to me to be a most difficult subject as it lies still in the depths of the yet unfathomed ocean of antiquity” (388).

Wake raised the same concerns about Poe’s usage of snake symbolism:

The student of mythology knows that certain ideas were associated by the peoples of antiquity with the serpent, and that it was the favourite symbol of particular deities; but why that animal rather than any other was chosen for the purpose is yet uncertain. (373)

The answer, however, may be in Wake’s question. The widespread existence of snake myths suggests that the serpent is a Jungian archetype, part of the “collective unconscious.” Renowned psychologist Carl G. Jung describes the concept as “dealing with archaic or – I would say – primordial types, that is, with universal images that have existed since the remotest times” (Jung 5). He further describes the archetype as “essentially an unconscious content that is altered by becoming conscious and being perceived, and it takes its colour from the individual consciousness in which it happens to appear” (Jung 5). Jung’s ideas indicate that the reaction to the serpentine creature results from a shared primordial past, with only nuances of difference due to different cultural interpretations of the same phenomenon.

Jung built upon Sigmund Freud’s idea of the snake as a “universally applicable dream symbolism” representative of the male organ (Freud 294), but broke with Freud, saying that he felt it “incorrect to assume that the snake . . . has a merely phallic meaning; just as incorrect as it is to deny that it may have a phallic meaning in some cases” (Jung, “Collected Works” 185). Jung felt that every symbol has multiple meanings, and he felt that exclusively sexual interpretations were “one-sided and therefore insufficient” (“Collected Works” 185).

Jung was more interested in universality of the symbol, or the idea of the archetype. This idea, if not the term itself, goes back to Plato. Plato, whom Poe referenced and discussed in his *Marginalia* and in various works, developed the “allegory of the cave” in *The Republic*, which describes how prisoners chained underground and only able to look in one direction could only perceive shadows of reality (Leitch 60-64). Poe similarly calls upon the “shadow” in “Ligeia” to reference remote antiquity, incomplete remembrances, and especially the questionable presence of Ligeia in the bed chamber after Lady Rowena’s death. This play with the concept of forms is much like Plato’s ideas of primordial forms, or things that humans react to in certain ways without knowledge of why or how. What Jung came to call “archetypes,” Poe called “memories” and suggested that they “are of our past unity, our existence prior to our differentiation from One, and are therefore also necessarily omens of our future ‘destiny’” (Taylor 205). Taylor further explicates Poe’s ideas, saying the author believed:

The temporality inherent to a memory that is simultaneously a prophesy speaks to the fact that our ostensible “individual” lives are bracketed by a nondifferentiated mode of being. It also illustrates that “we” are not truly independent even in this life; these “shadows” and “memories” “speak to,” “pursue,” and “haunt” “us” in the present reminding/foretelling “us” of our irrevocable/inevitable past/future loss of self. (205)

Taylor’s assertion that memories from the shared primordial past are at work in the present and affect the future changes the concept of time from linear or chronological to circular, like the infinite circles and “mimic routs” in Poe’s poem. This idea of a primordial and universal knowledge may explain why so many cultures include the serpent in their myths in very similar ways. References to Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Indian, Greek, Hebrew, Celtic, and other cultures

within the two texts highlight their mythos as important background to critical interpretation of these works. A survey of ancient myths with symbolism and ideas most relevant to “The Conqueror Worm” and “Ligeia” helps to clarify this association, revealing overarching meaning and establishing Poe’s use of the creature as an archetype.

Egyptian

Ancient Egypt is referred to several times in both the short story and the poem, especially in descriptions of the bridal chamber (Poe, “Ligeia” 103), and Egyptian mythology and writing abounds with snake deities and images. Their shape-shifting gods often took the form of a snake to achieve varied purposes. In a conversation with the goddess of the netherworld, for example, the chief god Atum predicts the destruction of the world and his return to the form of a serpent (Skinner 42). The primeval deity Amun is also represented as a serpent, and his consort the Goddess Mut is called ‘Mut the resplendent serpent’ (Skinner 43). Quoting Henri Frankfort, Skinner says, “the primeval snake . . . survives when everything else is destroyed at the end of time” (Skinner 42). Additionally, the Egyptian symbol for eternity was a snake biting its tail (Skinner 43). The snake also symbolized resurrection. The *Book of the Dead* (“Book of the Dead”) says that the deceased person is given new life by transforming into a serpent at death.

Several other serpent images are present in the *Book of Gates* (“Book of Gates”), most notably the supreme serpent deity Apep, or Apophis, and Mehen. Apophis was the arch nemesis of the sun god Ra. In the *Book of Gates*, Ra journeys through the underworld and must pass through 12 gates where he must have special knowledge to enter, and he must fight the great serpent Apophis first at gate seven, and then finally securing him in chains at the eleventh gate, with the aid of another serpent named Mehen. Ra’s journey is believed to be the journey the sun takes each night, as well as the journey of each soul in the afterlife. This post-mortem battle with a serpent seems to be the crux of “The Conqueror Worm,” which presumably devours man in the

“lonesome latter years.” Further, Poe even said in “Ligeia” as she was dying that “she wrestled with the Shadow” with a “fierceness of resistance” (101), and as Ligeia presumably overtook Lady Rowena’s body that the dead woman “wore the aspect of a struggle with some invisible foe” (107). Also, Rowena’s body seems to revive and fade again several times before her final resurrection, paralleling the struggles at the different gates that must be overcome for the soul to reach the afterlife, including the several encounters with the mythic serpent Apophis.

Besides its affinity with the afterlife, the serpent pervaded other aspects of ancient Egyptian belief. For example, Wadjet, the name of the serpent goddess of Lower Egypt, was the general term for cobra and was the symbol of immortality, growth, and health (Skinner 43). Also, a sect of Egyptian Gnostics called the Ophites connected the serpent with their Christianity (Moorehead 208). Gnostics, whose name is derivative of the Greek word for “knowledge,” believed that “the beginning of perfection is the knowledge of man, but absolute perfection is the knowledge of God” (King 19). They were seekers of hidden truths, similar to Ligeia and the narrator, and questions of immortality also underlie the plot in the story, as well as the poem. This is expressed not only in the couple’s quest for transcendence but also in the narrator’s description of “the intensity of her wild desire for life” (101) and his belief that she can and did return from the dead.

Mesopotamian

Ancient Mesopotamia worshiped deities very similar to those of Egypt, and assimilated beliefs from Sumerian, Babylonian, Akkadian, and Assyrian cultures as well (Pemberton 81). Poe alludes to this region when he references the Egyptian goddess “Ashtophet” (97) very early in the story. This name is most likely a juxtaposition of the widely-worshiped ancient goddess of fertility, Ashtoreth (Remler 21), with the city of Tophet, a place of Baal worship, and possible child sacrifice and a symbol of Hell for the Hebrews (Jer. 10:11). According to the Jewish

Encyclopedia online, Ashtoreth, though of Semitic origin, was the same as the chief goddess “Ashtarte” of Phoenicia, the goddess “Ishtar” of Babylonia, “Athtar” of Arabian worship, and “Astarte” of Hebrew and Greek mythology. Given the actions of the narrator in “Ligeia” it is interesting that these ancient cultures held that Ishtar, also called “Inanna” in Sumeria, journeyed to the underworld to restore her dead lover back to life by traveling through seven gates (Pemberton 84). In Canaanite belief, the goddess was represented by a serpent and a dove and was believed to be the chief consort of the supreme deity El. The worship of this goddess of love pervaded many cultures, with attributes remaining constant throughout, and Poe uses the reference to Ashtoreth to ascribe the goddess’s ethereal appeal to Ligeia and to justify the narrator’s “idolatrous love” for her.

In addition to the connection with Ashtoreth explicitly made by Poe, other myths of this region include serpent imagery. Tammuz, a Sumerian god of vegetation, was linked to the snake, as well as Ningizzida, called in Sumerian “the companion of Tammuz” (Skinner 44). The Gilgamesh epic of Mesopotamia also includes an adversarial snake. When Gilgamesh attempts to procure the plant that will give eternal life, an evil snake snatches it away and gains its immortality (Pemberton 82). In Persian tradition, Ahriman creates a serpent to destroy such a plant created by Ahura Mazda (Skinner 45). Here, again, the serpent is linked to immortality, the primary concern of Ligeia and her lover, and a concept of central importance in “The Conqueror Worm,” as will be discussed later.

Details in poem and short story also relate to several other figures from ancient Mesopotamia. The Babylonian *Enuma Elish* describes primeval monster serpents of chaos with sharp fangs and poison blood, recalling the “blood-red” writhing creature in the poem with “fangs in human gore imbued” (Poe, “Ligeia” 102). Tiamut, usually depicted as a serpent and

sometimes a dragon, is the leader of these serpents, but is killed by Marduk and her body cut in half to form the seas and the sky (Skinner 43). The Phoenicians, located west of Mesopotamia in the Mediterranean coastal plain, had a deity named Eshmun of Sidon whom they worshipped as a god of medicine and whose symbol was the serpent (Skinner 43). The Syrians also had a god of healing whose image was the serpent (Skinner 43). The Chaldæan serpent god Héa was the revealer of knowledge, and is thought by some to be linked to the serpent in the biblical Garden of Eden (Wake 384). Tiamut, Eshmun, the Syrian healer god, and the Chaldean Héa exhibit characteristics of the serpent seen in other cultures, including association with creation, immortality, healing and wisdom. These characteristics become central concepts in “Ligeia” and “The Conqueror Worm,” both of which deal with life, the afterlife, resurrection, and “secret knowledge.”

Indian

Poe draws attention to yet another region in his description of items in the bridal chamber, including the bridal couch “of an Indian model” (Poe, “Ligeia” 103) and “ottomans of India” (105). Not surprisingly, this region also features the snake in its pantheon. The ancient Indians held that the serpent god of drought, Vritra, swallowed the primordial ocean, and that Indri, the god of rain and thunder, split the serpent’s stomach with a thunderbolt (Pemberton 145). Also, a god named Vishnu, considered the supreme god by many Hindus (Pemberton 146), slept on the coiled body of “Shesha,” the world serpent. The Hindu belief that the world is resting upon a mighty serpent that bites its own tail is similar to that of other cultures (Moorehead 207). Once again, the serpent figures centrally in the Indian creation story just as in creation myths of other cultures.

Greek

Greek references also pervade both the short story “Ligeia” and “The Conqueror Worm,” especially in the descriptions of Ligeia as a “Daughter of Delos” and of her Greek spirituality (Poe, “Ligeia” 98) and in the use of the Greek concept of “tragedy” in the poem. The Grecians had a complex system of mythology that went through several periods of change in the ancient world. One of the oldest snake myths from this region is similar to Judeo-Christian beliefs, to be discussed later. This story, accredited to the Pelasgians who appeared in Greece around 4,000 B.C.E, tells of Eurynome, a lonely goddess, who emerged naked from chaos and divided the sky and waters so that she could dance on the waves (Leeming 116). As she danced, she caught the wind and from it created the serpent god Ophion. After intercourse with the serpent, she became pregnant and turned into a dove. In this form, she laid the world egg, encircled and protected by Ophion, from which would emerge the sun, moon, stars, and earth with all its creatures. Ophion and Eurynome lived on Olympus until he was banished to earth due to arrogance, his head flattened and teeth broken in the process (Leeming 116-17).

The Greeks not only associated the serpent with creation, but also with healing, as in the other cultures discussed. The Greek god of medicine, Asclepius, is represented by a staff with snakes intertwined around it, a motif still familiar today in medical symbolism (Skinner 49). Homer, who is consequently also referenced in “Ligeia” (98), related that Asclepius’ ability to cure the ill and resurrect the dead enraged Zeus who killed him with a thunderbolt (Welsh 20). In one story, when a plague broke out in Rome, they sought Asclepius, who came to them in the form of a serpent (Welsh 21).

Other Grecian snake-like figures include Medusa, the snake-haired gorgon, and Python, a monstrous dragon that came from the mud of the great flood and was slain by Apollo. The Roman version says that Python was cast down from heaven by Jupiter (Moorehead 209).

Another Roman myth holds that Minerva, goddess of wisdom, seized the great serpent that was attacking Jupiter and the gods, flung it into the heavens, creating the constellation Draco (Moorehead, 209). In this myth, wisdom and the serpent are again linked, just as the knowledge-seeking Ligeia and her narrator/lover are linked to this “conqueror worm” in Poe’s work. In essence, Greek beliefs regarding the serpent encompass the same characteristics that are associated with the creature in other cultures, and with Poe’s worm by extension.

Hebrew

Poe calls upon another region in his description of “Ligeia” and in various terms in the poem. He says that the perfection of Ligeia’s nose is found “nowhere but in the graceful medallions of the Hebrews” (“Ligeia” 98). Also, the “God,” seraphs, and angels featured in the poem are of Hebrew origin. As in other cultures mentioned in the works, serpent imagery abounds in ancient Hebrew belief as well. The infamous serpent of Genesis in the Bible was a tempter of mankind, persuading Eve to eat from the Tree of Knowledge, which caused her (and Adam’s) expulsion from the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Life. Abraham used a brass image of a serpent to heal those bitten by snakes sent to God punish them. Later, Moses transforms his rod into serpents, which devour the rod serpents of Pharaoh, in an attempt to convince him to free the Israelites from Egyptian bondage.

Another serpentine creature mentioned in the Bible in Job 41, the leviathan, so named from the root word for “to coil” or “twist” (“Leviathan and Behemoth”). The leviathan is king of all water creatures, while the behemoth is king of all land creatures, and man can defeat neither (“Leviathan and Behemoth”). The primordial leviathan is said to correspond with the Babylonian Tiamat, sometimes represented as a serpent, and Kingu, meaning “serpent”. Isaiah 27:1 KJV also speaks of the leviathan as a “wriggling serpent.” The Jewish Encyclopedia says that according to Hippolytus, “Behemoth and leviathan form in the Gnostic system of the

Ophites and others two of the seven circles or stations which the soul has to pass in order to be purged and to attain bliss” (“Leviathan and Behemoth”). This imagery not only connects the serpent imagery with the Gnostic search for wisdom but also the quest for immortality which features prominently in “Ligeia.” The circles through which the soul has to pass is reminiscent of language in the poem, especially the third stanza line that describes the “Phantom chased forever more, / By a crowd that seize it not, / Through a circle that ever returneth in / To the self-same spot” (Poe, “Ligeia” 102).

Celtic

Another description of the bed chamber invokes Gothic and Celtic myth. Poe describes the ceiling of the room as “excessively lofty, vaulted, and elaborately fretted with the wildest and most grotesque specimens of a semi-Goth, semi-Druidical device” (“Ligeia” 103). “Goth” was a term used to refer to people of the Eastern Germanic Tribes, also referred to as “Teutons” (Waldman and Mason 336)” In Teutonic mythology, serpents lick the ears of Melampus, making him able to understand animals (Grimm 1491). Similarly, eating a white snake helps man understand the language of the beasts (Grimm 1492). Snakes are also used in magic and healing (Grimm 1490).

The serpent and the sun were associated with ceremonies of the Druids (Moorehead 207), the priestly order of ancient Celts and other parts of Europe (MacCana 14). Their creation beliefs, similar to the Phoenicians and Egyptians, were represented by a serpent in a circle with the cosmic egg in its mouth (Moorehead 207). Moorehead claims that Stonehenge in England, along with the ancient cairns of Scotland, the stone circles at Abury, Stanton Drew, and many stone temples in Brittany and France, is actually a temple of the serpent (207). Once again, as in other cultures, the serpent is connected with creation, wisdom, and healing in Gothic and Celtic culture.

Other Cultures

Similar serpent-centered creation myths are found in several other cultures such as the Fon's "Aido Hwedo," the rainbow serpent who coils itself around the earth, biting its tail for stability (Leeming 111); the African voodoo snake God Da or Damballa the sky serpent (Anderson 30); the aboriginal Australian's rainbow serpent, who writhes up from the ground, and their Milky Way serpent (Pemberton, 176); and the Chinese Nüwa, the woman-headed snake who created humans out of clay (Leeming 84). Besides its role in these larger civilizations, the serpent is found in creation of myths of far flung islands and the most remote localities. Many of the tribes of indigenous people of the Americas also had snake myths and deities, most associating the snake with the underworld (Hudson 128). The *Popl Vuh* of the Mayans describes a feathered serpent god Gukamatz who created the first humans (Pemberton 172). The Aztecs had a similar feathered serpent god, Quetzalcoatl, considered the founder of wisdom (Skinner 48) and associated with wind, dawn, arts and knowledge (Pemberton 132).

Over and over, in each of these cultures, the snake is featured as prominently in mythology as "The Conqueror Worm" is in "Ligeia," making the idea of the universal snake myth compelling as a possible source for Poe's symbol. Kenneth Burke talks about such a universal myth in this way:

To what extent does the paradigm give us, not some 'first story' from which many versions and variants were derived, but rather a "perfect" form towards which such a story would "naturally" gravitate? And could we so define its nature that such an 'entelechy' would seem natural? In brief, Poetics would ask: . . . what form "ought" the story have? (286)

Given that snake myth was universal and that certain ideas and feelings about snakes are probably part of the "collective unconscious," Poe's choice of the symbol becomes clearer. In

an introduction to “The Poetic Principle” in their anthology, Adams and Searle observed that Poe admits to appealing to the primordial man when he advised poets that their work should be “‘universally appreciable,’ and convey a particular tone, adding that: “Poe opts for sadness, which he considers the most legitimate of all tones” (580). Many of his works include themes of primordial fear, such as being buried alive. Poe described one innate sensibility as the “beautiful,” saying: “An immortal instinct, deep within the spirit of man, is thus, plainly, a sense of the beautiful. This it is which administers to his delight in the manifold forms, and sounds, and odors, and sentiments amid which he exists” (“The Poetic Principle” 76). Similar to both Plato’s theory of forms and what would later become Jung’s theory of archetypes, Poe believed there are certain forms, or archetypes, that appealed to man’s inner, primordial nature, and perhaps this is what he explored in “The Conqueror Worm.” In this work he calls upon the universal image of the serpent to convey some of the ideas and feelings cross-culturally associated with the creature since the dawn of time, chiefly its prominence in creation, its association with wisdom, healing, and immortality, and, ultimately, its connection to the End of Days.

CHAPTER 3

THE WORM AS A CONTEMPORARY IMAGE

Though an understanding of the archetypal snake in Poe's "The Conqueror Worm" is a good place to begin, a more complete picture develops when one considers the author's biography and education. Information concerning Poe's life as well as some of his other works proves useful in understanding some of his concepts, images, and ideas. Further, as a critic, he was well-aware of, and indeed scrutinized, the work of other authors of his day, noting their use of language and symbolism. Also, since comments in his *Marginalia* suggest that he read medical articles (104-05), he likely saw medical documentation of snake-infested humans and newspaper articles relating sightings of large snakes.

Biographical Evidence

A brief synopsis of Poe's tragic life shows that his personal experiences may have contributed to the pervasive melancholy of his works and especially his interest in the possibility of reuniting with dead loved ones, as in "Ligeia." Orphaned by the deaths of his actor parents David and Eliza Poe, Poe was adopted by John and Frances Allan as an infant (Quinn 51). Quinn's biography relates that Poe was educated in England for a short time as a boy, and knew Latin well by age 13. He attended the University of Virginia for about eight months. After a stint in the army and an unsuccessful attempt at West Point, and upon a fairly complete break in relationship with his foster father John Allan, Poe began a newspaper career as an author, a critic, and an editor. He married his very young cousin Virginia Clem May 16, 1836 (Quinn 252) and although they lived in poverty, they seemed happy together. However, Virginia burst a blood vessel one night while singing and lingered on unwell for four years before her death January 30, 1847 (Quinn 527). It was during the time of her illness that Poe penned both "Ligeia" and "The Conqueror Worm." Quinn relates that Poe was devastated and nearly driven

mad by his wife's illness (347). In a letter dated January 4, 1848, Poe tells George Eveleth that: "It is the horrible oscillation of hope and despair which I could not longer have endured without total loss of reason" (Quinn 347-48). Several biographers contend that Poe drank heavily (Thomas & Jackson 237; Quinn 682, 683; Whitman 13, 83), and Allen reported accounts of probable experimentation with opium (299), though each account differs in the extent to which he abused either. Poe died October 9, 1849, of an unknown malady (Quinn 652), though causes proffered at the time include alcohol poisoning, "cooping," tuberculosis, or epilepsy, and modern hypotheses include diabetes, dehydration, rabies, lead poisoning, carbon monoxide poisoning, or most recently, a brain tumor ("Mysterious Death"). He was found semiconscious in Baltimore and robbed of his trunk and clothes, but no one knows why he was there (Quinn 652). Poe, who had spoken of himself as a "victim of a pre-ordained damnation" (Quinn 56), uttered as his dying words, "God help my poor soul" (641). The tragedies in his life are believed by some to offer "important insights into the probable origins of Poe's chronic perverseness" (543).

Though Poe's life was filled with adversity and he lived for the most part in abject poverty, he was very well read. There is evidence in Poe's *Marginalia* and in biographical accounts that he not only had knowledge of classical mythology, but was also literate in German (Poe, *Marginalia* 137-139), Greek (Poe, *Marginalia* 75, 79), Spanish (Quinn 153), French (Quinn 71), Hebrew (Poe, *Marginalia* 38, 52, 70), and Latin (Poe, *Marginalia* 70). His knowledge of the Koran is evident in "Israfel," whose namesake is an angel in the holy book (Quinn 180), and his longest poem, "Al Aaraaf," is named for the Arabic purgatory (142). In his parable, "The Shadow," he demonstrates his familiarity with the gods of Greece, Chaldea, and Egypt, and quotes from the Bible (Quinn 216). Evidence of his extensive knowledge of the Bible not only comes from his early schooling but also in notes such as that in his *Marginalia*

where he observes the singular versus plural use of the Hebrew word for “god/s” in Genesis (38), and that the word “Jehovah” is not Hebrew (52). In the same work, he also comments on Grecian polytheism (38). His further acquaintance with mythology is evident in his allusion to Jacob Bryant’s *Mythology* (Quinn 250), probably “A New System; or, An Analysis of Antient Mythology,” which attempts to explain the commonalities of flood myths, especially Egyptian, Phoenician, and Hebrew accounts, through etymology (Trawick 171-187). Also, comments made in *Marginalia* show his acquaintance with Chinese philosophy (210) and even Kabbalah (18). Dayan suggests that Poe’s rearing in pro-slavery Virginia provided him a familiarity with the hoodoo of the plantation slaves and may be the source some of his ideas:

Poe’s gothic, his unique tools of terror, finally have less to do with “Germany” or the “soul” . . . than with African American stories of the angry dead, sightings of teeth, the bones and matter of charms, the power of conjuring. . . merging with early Christian folk beliefs transplanted in the south, as well as the frenzy of revivals with whites and slaves caught up in the Holy Spirit, might also have encouraged the strangely sentient landscapes of Poe, his obsession with the reciprocities between living and dead, human and animal, the possessions and demonic visitations of his most well-known tales. (265)

Though opinions vary on how much Poe drew from his surroundings, his education, and his own life, direct evidence of his breadth and depth of knowledge of ancient mythos, religion, and culture is summoned directly in various references in “Ligeia” and lies just below the surface of the poem for one willing to look deeper.

References in Poe’s Work

Antecedents to the images and terms in “The Conqueror Worm” appear in some of Poe’s other works. In fact, he personifies death as the conqueror of love in his very first published

work, “Tamerlane.” There is another reference in his poem, “The Sleeper”: “My love, she sleeps! Oh, may her sleep, / As it is lasting, so be deep! / Soft may the worms about her creep!” (746). Poe also acknowledges that the short story “Morella” is a preliminary study of “Ligeia” (Quinn 214). The name “Ligeia” is also used in another poem “Al Aaraaf,” which reads in part:

Ligeia! Ligeia!

My beautiful one!

Whose harshest idea

Who to melody run,

O! is it thy will

On the breezes to toss? (Poe 779)

Poe deals with same theme of the returning dead in “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Premature Burial.” In these earlier works Poe also introduces other themes featured in “Ligeia” and “The Conqueror Worm”: the idea of the beautiful, the importance of the will, and the mystery of the afterlife.

References of Poe’s Contemporaries

Besides references in his own work, Poe’s acknowledgement in letters and in his marginalia shows his knowledge of the works of contemporary authors. In his profession as a critic, he no doubt was aware of much of the published poetry literature of his time. He read Voltaire and Goethe (Poe, *Marginalia* 137), Emerson and Longfellow (Quinn 328), Hugo (Poe, *Marginalia* 208), Dickens (Quinn 315), Coleridge (Quinn 246), Carlyle (Poe, *Marginalia* 211), Leibnitz (Poe, *Marginalia* 27), Milton (Poe, *Marginalia* 28) and Hawthorne (Quinn 334). From a reference in *Marginalia* (77), it seems Poe may have even read the early works of Charles Darwin from the Galapagos Islands, though *Origin of the Species* was not published until after Poe’s death. Poe in his preface to *Poems* noted his disdain for the metaphysics of Wordsworth

and his appreciation for Coleridge's impressionism (Quinn 175). Routh not only believed that Poe's "Al Aaraaf" exhibited familiarity with Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" (73), but he felt that "The Conqueror Worm,' with its drama of death, and the dissolution of the gorgeous scene as the worm appears" may be compared to Shelley's "Lines Written among the Euyanean Hills" (73-74). Poe's ideas of life and the afterlife as explicated especially in *Eureka* may be shown to be at work in "Ligeia" and "The Conqueror Worm."

Interestingly, several of these authors also use worm symbolism in their works. In Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*, in a chapter entitled, "The Bishop in the Presence of an Unknown Light," reads: "The Bishop hung his head and replied, 'Vermis sum--I am a worm.'" Though the archetypal nature of the worm or serpent has already been demonstrated, this contemporary use of man as worm presents another perspective from which to approach the study of the poem in question. Poe's familiarity with the use of serpent imagery by his colleagues allows speculation of the meaning of the symbol in his works. While the mythos he studied established the serpent as an archetype of ancient wisdom and immortality, contemporary authors also used the imagery to represent the lowly and sinful nature of mankind.

Similarly, in Voltaire's *Candide*, the old woman says to Candide, "This ridiculous weakness is perhaps one of our worst instincts; is anything more stupid than choosing to carry a burden really one wants to cast on the ground? To hold existence in horror, and yet to cling to it? to fondle the serpent which devours us til it has eaten at our heart?" (Puchner 373). Various worm and serpent references abound in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which Poe had read (Quinn 175). Voltaire's idea of the serpent eating at the human heart is similar to imagery used in "The Conqueror Worm." Though Poe could have been inspired by Milton's serpent, Poe said that he believed Milton himself preferred his *Comus* to *Paradise Lost*, (Haviland 844). It may be that

Comus inspired another theme in “Ligeia,” namely the idea of a female figure’s obstinate assertion of free will. Ligeia’s recitation of the Glanvill epigram that “man doth not yield himself to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will” (Poe, “Ligeia” 96) reflects the strength of will exhibited by Milton’s “Lady” in *Comus* as her unfaltering self-control continually overcomes the temptations offered her by the treacherous Comus.

James Russell Lowell, with whom Poe was well acquainted, also uses worm imagery in his poem “Rosaline”:

It is my curse! Sweet memories fall
 From me like snow, and only all
 Of that one night, like cold worms, crawl
 My doomed heart over, Rosaline! (Lowell 17-18)

Recall the same imagery of these crawling worms, a woman’s corpse, and a broken-hearted lover in Poe’s “The Sleeper” mentioned above as well as the imagery and concepts in “The Conqueror Worm” and “Ligeia.”

Quinn asserts that a poem which may have influenced Poe’s choice of imagery is Spencer Wallace Cone’s “The Proud Ladye,” which Poe reviewed in *Burton’s* in June 1840, before the first publication of “The Conqueror Worm” in 1843 (390-91). A line in the poem reads: “Let him meet the conqueror worm/ With his good sword by his side” (qtd. in Quinn 391). The full text of the poem also refers to the worm as the “monarch of the grave” and later refers to a very Ligeia-like lady with dark hair and ivory skin who “stept as a conq-ror steps” (Cone 10). Multiple connections between subject and terminology can be made between Cone’s poem and Poe’s.

One notable contemporary, with whom he corresponded, and whom Marks believed even satirized Poe, was Nathaniel Hawthorne. Marks notes that Hawthorne had even written in one of his journals of 1842 a note that read: “a man to swallow a small snake – and it to be a symbol of cherished sin” (608). Hawthorne used the serpent in several instances in his works, notably in “Young Goodman Brown,” *The Scarlet Letter* and in his possibly satirical essay “Egotism, or, the Bosom Serpent.” In “Young Goodman Brown,” Satan disguises himself as a man with a serpent staff who tempts the young man into sin and cynicism. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester Prynne is described as growing “pale whenever [her secret] struggled out of her heart, like a serpent from its hole” (qtd. in Bush 181). An actual snake in the heart of Roderick in “Egotism” and the snake-like characteristics he apparently derives from it, are further examples of Hawthorne’s use of this image. The possibility that “Egotism” was a satirical commentary on Poe is well defended by Bush, who also comments: “The concept of the snake in the breast was thus for Hawthorne a recurrent emblem for the weight of guilt on the spiritual and psychological consciousness of man” (181). However, since “The Conqueror Worm” was written before “Egotism,” although just shortly before, it is unlikely that Poe borrowed the concept from Hawthorne explicitly. However, this usage demonstrates contemporary ideas about the worm imagery, and yet another perspective from which to consider the creature in the poem.

Other Possible References

If Hawthorne’s symbolism here can be seen as similar to Poe’s, then perhaps the possible origins of Hawthorne’s ideas are also similar. In “Bosom Serpents before Hawthorne: The Origins of a Symbol,” Bush offers several plausible sources for Hawthorne’s use of the symbol, including contemporary newspaper stories of current medical cases, earlier medical accounts and theological writings. Bush goes on to detail several newspaper accounts during Poe’s time in which a human was infested with an actual serpent, described as anything from an electric eel to

a brownish slimy snake, which was ingested in some infantile stage and grew inside the person, and sometimes remained alive upon evacuation. According to one account, “Rodgers threw up the snake, which was so lively that it was with difficulty caught” (189). Accounts in medical books of the time were also noted, and comments in Poe’s *Marginalia* show that he read medical articles (104-105). Interestingly, another possible origin of the snake and staff medical symbolism is the traditional method of removing the parasitic guinea worm from an infested human by slowly winding it around a stick (Dyson 62). This phenomenon echoes the literary references to a human infested with a worm or snake as a possible approach to understanding the worm in the poem. The 19th century fascination with the worm or snake, and especially infestation, could be due to the general fear of loss of agency. Modern movies where aliens or microorganisms take over a human’s body such as in the ever popular film *Aliens*, show that humans now, just like those in the 1800s, have a general anxiety about losing control of themselves and their bodies to an alien organism.

There may be another basis in Poe’s lifetime for the conqueror worm. Strothers provides evidence from historical sources that serpents of unusually large sizes actually existed, or were at least reported to exist. Sightings gave sizes of anywhere from 29 feet in length to 159 feet, and were all across the globe. These accounts of actual large serpents can either be drawn from ancient inferences about fossils, ancient historical observations of rare snakes or primitive myth (221).

Though references to worms in classical myths, in his other works, in works of other authors, and in medical and news articles of his day are possible – and some even probable – sources of Poe’s imagery in “The Conqueror Worm,” Poe himself said: “It is really a critical stupidity to speak of the sources at all; they are merely suggestions out of which a creative artist

made something new” (Quinn 596). However, understanding the sources and inspirations for concepts and imagery used in “Ligeia” and “The Conqueror Worm” can help the reader understand the purpose behind the artist’s new creation. Poe conjures a powerful mythical and literary figure in the worm, adding depth of meaning to the otherwise brief lines of the piece. It is possible that he draws upon the themes in ancient myths and various contemporary influences to take familiar imagery and make something distinctive. His combining of these past and present associations is perhaps an artistic expression of his ideas on some of the fundamental questions of life.

CHAPTER 4

THE WORM AS USED IN POE

Now that the worm/snake has been established as a symbol with universal and contemporary appeal, and that Poe was apt to use such symbols in his works, identifying the conqueror worm becomes possible. Armed with this information, an analysis of “The Conqueror Worm” and its parent text “Ligeia” reveals the significance and function of different references, characters, and events in the overall work.

The Worm in the Poem

Poe’s comment in his *Marginalia* that “man is in error to consider himself a citizen of a certain planet instead of as a ‘denizen of the universe’” (201) encourages the reader to look beyond the individual “man” and even beyond “mankind” to his place in the overall universe. Given the poem’s allegorical nature, a close reading shows how this work can be read from three perspectives: first as a literal and imaginative drama, second as an allegory of the life of an individual man, and third as an allegory of mankind in general.

The first verse begins by setting up the time setting of the poem in the lines 1 and 2: “Lo! ‘tis a gala night / Within the lonesome latter years!” (Poe, “Ligeia” 101) The *Oxford English Dictionary Online* defines “gala” as “of French origin and meaning either gala dress, festal attire; festivity, gaiety, rejoicing, esp. in days of gala; or a festive occasion or festival characterized by the display of finery and show.” While the second definition shows the reference in “days of gala,” Poe has begun this poem as a “gala night,” already casting darkness on a would-be festive occasion.

The second line furthers this gloominess with the choice of the word “lonesome.” The “latter years” can be understood as a reference to the End of Days or End of Time, the latter years of the earth. The End Time is discussed in several different books in the Bible, most

notably in Daniel, Isaiah, and Revelation. Some interpret Revelation as describing a period of tribulation lasting seven years, at the end of which a series of natural disasters culminate in a final battle between the forces of good and evil at Armageddon. Many other cultures have beliefs concerning the “latter days” or an End Time, such as what has recently become referred to as the “Mayan Doomsday” prophecy in *The Dresden Codex*.

This End-Time imagery continues in lines 3 and 4, which read: “An angel throng, bewinged, bedight / In veils, and drowned in tears” (Poe, “Ligeia” 101). The introduction of a “bewinged” angel throng also is reminiscent of religious imagery, and of imagery of the End Time. The winged angels of Judeo-Christian belief include cherubim and seraphim, who are the heavenly creatures standing closest to God (“Seraphim”). Some connections have been made between the seraphim and the Egyptian “seref,” described as “a composite winged creature, half lion, half eagle, which guarded graves, carried dead kings up to heaven and transmitted prayers thither” (“Seraphim”). However, most pertinent to the nature and subject of this work, the word “seraph” in Hebrew means “serpent,” reminiscent of the flying serpents described in Isaiah (“Seraphim”). This would indicate a dual or ambiguous nature of the serpent as either those grave guarders who escort the dead to heaven or the intruding figure who devours the flesh. Brad Howard comments on this duality, stating: “Poe was surely aware of the polarity of the traditional symbolic associations of *worm/serpent*: death and life, earthly and divine, evil and good” (43).

A throng, or multitude, of angels is present at significant events in the Bible, especially at the birth of Christ in the Christian Bible (Luke 2:13 KJV). They are said to have watched helplessly at the crucifixion. Also, interestingly, a multitude of angels were said to have been cast out from heaven with Satan. There are several types of angels described in different texts,

but the term here is not specific. Since the angels described at the beginning are “watching” the drama, they may be the “Watcher” angels who took human wives and created a hybrid race as described in the *Book of Enoch* (Laurence 30). Again, the ambiguity of the nature of the angels is perhaps purposeful, an example of Poe’s “deliberate obscurantism” (Carlson 22), inviting the reader to ponder and probe deeper.

The angels are “bedight in veils,” meaning simply that they are wearing them. The veils are interesting in a number of ways. Poe comments on veils in his *Marginalia* in his definition of art: “Art: the reproduction of what the senses perceive in Nature through the veil of the soul” (198). Another appropriate reference may be found in the Gnostic version of the apocryphal *Book of Enoch* (“Book of Enoch”). In one passage, Enoch relates how he was carried away in a vision and saw a body of people united in prayer:

The Lord Jehovah stood in the middle of them, but they could not see him, for their faces were veiled. I asked the holy angel who stood near me, “Why are their faces veiled so that they cannot see the Lord Jehovah standing among them? The angel replied, “Because they belong to the physical plane, their eyes are blinded by the veil of darkness so that they cannot perceive the Light which is among them. Only when they receive that gnosis which will tear off the veil will they be able to see that which is real. Teach them, Enoch; help them rip off the veil and bask in the radiant Light of Truth. Enoch 6: 1-3

This similarity to the Gnostic text again recalls the “Watcher” angels such as those “watching the drama” and the core tenant of Gnosticism, which is the search for “gnosis” or hidden knowledge. Being “bedight in veils” then, implies an incomplete understanding, while “unveiling” implies the wisdom has been imparted. This wisdom again reflects not only the ancient myths

surrounding the serpent, but also the narrator and Ligeia's search for "secret knowledge" throughout the short story.

The weeping angel imagery suggested by "drowned in tears" recalls even more passages from the Christian Bible. Matthew 13:41-42 reads: "The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." In Poe's *Marginalia*, reviewing a work that suggests we are unimportant to the angels, he said: "The design is to reconcile us with evil based on the premise that we are of little importance on the scale of creation; evil is unimportant because man is unimportant, and must be regarded as unimportant by the angels" (184). In Poe's understanding, then, humans are important to the angels, and they may indeed weep at mortal sufferings, just as the angels are weeping as they watch the tragedy "Man" in the poem. Though the angels must fulfill a predesigned purpose, they are sympathetic to the sufferings of man.

Another biblical verse alludes to the reason the angels are crying. II Peter 2:4 reads: "For God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to chains of gloomy darkness to be kept until the judgment." Perhaps they sympathize with the subjects of the play they are about to witness. If this is the case, these angels are thought to be the angels who were cast out of heaven at Lucifer's defiance of God, as described in the book of Job. Similarities in the apocryphal text of the *Book of Enoch*, as translated by Richard Laurence, suggest the same. Describing itself as a book of "reproof of the Watchers," the *Book of Enoch* describes that they "all being collected together stood weeping in Oubelseyael, which is situated between Liba-nos and Seneser, with their faces veiled" (Laurence 36).

Lines 5 and 6 of the first verse give more information about the setting and subject. They tell that the veiled and crying angels “Sit in a theatre, to see / A play of hopes and fears” (Poe, “Ligeia” 101). The angels, described as seated and watching, are already being depicted as being passive observers. The tense of the verb and infinitive in these lines, “sit” and “to see,” indicate that the angels are just now seated and await “the play of hopes and fears,” some coming event, or some event just now unfolding. The juxtaposition of the opposites “hope” and “fear” sets up the central tension in the play and in the poem.

Lines 7 and 8 bring an ambience to the scene: “While the orchestra breathes fitfully / The music of the spheres” (Poe, “Ligeia 101). That would make the orchestra, then, no less than the entire universe. That they are breathing “fitfully” indicates that they are playing music *allegro* (fast) and/or *staccato* (successive lines of short, punctuated notes) and therefore music that is climactic sounding, as opposed to, say, a lullaby. When a musician wielding an instrument of wind or brass must play a composition of this type, he or she must take frequent breaths in order to maintain the sound. Percussionists and stringed instruments players would also become fatigued from the accelerated movements of their arms.

However, this image of an orchestra playing a frenzied melody is undermined in the next line. Poe very specifically spoke of “the music of the spheres” in his *Marginalia*. To clarify what Plato meant by “music of the spheres,” Poe writes:

The phrase of which our poets, and more especially our orators, are so fond – the phrase “music of the spheres” – has arisen simply from a misconception of the Platonic word *μουσική* – which, with the Athenians, included not merely the harmonies of tune and time, but *proportion* generally. In recommending the study of music as ‘the best education for the soul,’ Plato referred to the cultivation of

the Taste, in contradistinction from that of Pure Reason. . . By “music of the spheres” is meant the agreements – the adaptations – in a word, the proportions – developed in the astronomical laws. He had no allusion to music in *our* understanding of the term. (196-97)

The music of the spheres then is just the general harmony of proportion of the universe, and is not music at all – it is perhaps even silence. This would be fitting for Poe who said, “I know that indefinitiveness is an element of true music – I mean of true musicale [sic] expression. Give to it any undue decision – imbue it with any very determinant tone – and you deprive it, at once, of its ethereal, its ideal, its intrinsic and essential character” (*Marginalia* 31-32). Already, this paradox sets up the allegorical nature of the poem. Though from one perspective an orchestra plays as a backdrop to the drama being enacted, the general harmony of the universe is alluded to perhaps as a backdrop to a drama on a cosmic scale.

The next stanza is again filled with imagery and movement: “Mimes, in the form of God on high / Mutter and mumble low” (Poe, “Ligeia” 101). Using the character of a mime again indicates silent movement. Since mimes also are imitators, they are imitating, or indeed are like, God. Their mumbling and muttering indicates a stupefaction of speech, or at least lack of eloquence. They seem to be grumbling about what is taking place. The fact that they must talk low indicates that there is someone in the vicinity that they do not want to hear their mutterings, perhaps a superior that is the subject of their grumbling.

Lines 3 and 4 in the second verse introduce another set of characters: “And hither and thither fly – / Mere puppets they, who come and go” (Poe, “Ligeia” 101). Here Poe introduces even more confused and frantic action, with these “puppets” that “fly,” meaning either flitting about in the air or hurriedly moving, or both. Their sporadic movement is perfectly accompanied

by the “fitful” orchestra. The use of “mimes” and “puppets” is also crucial to the understanding of this poem, and its context. The mimes, which are only imitators of something else, and the puppets, which must be controlled by something else, lack something crucial: free will. This lack of agency becomes an important theme in the short story, “Ligeia” as well. That these puppets are bidden by “vast formless things” that shift the scenery “to and fro” continues this idea of an unseen supervisor of the action which is still fitful, shifting, and repetitive.

Many have taken the “mimes” to be men (Quinn 391), probably since Genesis 1:27 KJV says that God made man in his own image. However, given Poe’s definition of the “music of the spheres,” they might be seen differently. If the poem is viewed on a cosmic scale, these mimes who mumble low may mean the heavenly bodies, which in Plato’s idea, drawn from Pythagoras, emit a “tone” or a low, almost inaudible hum (Bostock and Thomas, 52-53). Also, the planets are named after Roman gods, who simply grafted new names onto existing Greek deities, i.e. the chief God Zeus was called Jupiter (Welsh 77), and Poseidon, God of the Sea (Welsh 123-24), was called Neptune (Welsh 95). The shifting of the scenery, then, could mean the changing astronomical view from earth due to the movement of the heavenly bodies. Once again this imagery operates on different levels, the mimes in the onstage drama, individual man in the drama of his life, and the universal drama of constantly shifting scenery of the rotating planets revolving around the sun amid the shifting scenery of the stars.

The final two lines of the second stanza introduce another element of mythology: “Flapping from out their Condor wings / Invisible Wo!” (Poe, “Ligeia” 101). Here myth is utilized again in the figure of the Condor, or vulture, which was associated in Egypt with royalty (Remler 198), protection (131) and as a symbol for the Goddess Mut, the mother of the pharaohs (126). Consequently, Herndon says of Poe that he, like Ligeia was “prey to the tumultuous

vultures of stern passion” (121). Poe also mentions the “Condor” in another work, a short poem entitled, “Romance,” in which romance is described as familiar winged colorful bird of youth that becomes “Of late, eternal Condor years” (Allen 533) that “shake the very Heaven on high, with tumult as they thunder by” and:

And when an hour with calmer wings
 It down upon my spirit flings, -
 That little time with lyre and rhyme
 To while away – forbidden things!
 My heart would feel to be a crime
 Unless it trembled with the strings. (Allen 533-34)

The Condor can be seen in this light as not only a trying time, but also as aging, where time is flying by in the drudgery of everyday life. The scale again is cosmic, with the heavens invoked as tumultuous because of the flight of this bird, from whose wings “invisible woes” emanate. Either as passion or the passing of time, the Condor signifies an unseen force that compels action. Humans are moved by passions and emotions and are hurled through time every day, just as the universe is moved by the unseen force of gravity in motion.

The third verse tells how this “motley” drama will not be forgotten. “Motley” is another word with multiple applicable meanings. The *OED* says that “motley” is an adjective to describe multi-colored or patchwork cloth, as in a jester’s costume, and also gives the following definitions (among others): “A jester or fool; an incongruous, multifarious, or confused mixture or assembly; of a thing or collection of things; composed of elements of diverse or varied character, form, appearance, etc. frequently with the implication of poor design or organization; variable, changeable.” The appropriateness of Poe’s word choice in conjunction with the other

elements of his poem is clear. A fool or jester, like the mimes and puppets, performs at the bidding of a superior. The diverse array of characters in the poem already includes an angel throng, an orchestra, mimes, puppets, and vast formless things who are all crying, fitful, mumbling, flying hither and thither, shifting to and fro, flapping – a poorly organized cluster of confusion with constantly changing scenery. Here again, Poe uses the seemingly haphazard stage drama to represent the chaos of human existence and that of the universe at large.

This motley drama includes a “Phantom chased for evermore, by a crowd that seize it not,” and lines 5 and 6 continue: “Through a circle that ever returneth in / To the self-same spot” (Poe, “Ligeia” 102). In the literal reading of the poem, it seems that the crowd is the audience, or the seated, weeping throng of angels. The Phantom can be seen and sensed but is not real, in contrast to the “vast formless things” and the “invisible woes” which can’t be seen, but are real. This recalls the image of the ancient African and Greek beliefs discussed of a great serpent encircling the earth, biting its tail. Poe says, regarding poetry in general, “There is still a something in the distance which [man] has been unable to attain ... This thirst belongs to the immortality of man. It is at once a consequence and an indication of his perennial existence” (583). For the individual, the phantom, then, is immortality; the chase, the quest for it. Further, man’s “perennial existence” is symbolized by the circle “returning to the selfsame spot” as in the life cycle. In the Bible and in other creation myths, man is made from dirt, mud, or the dust of the earth, and returns to the ground by the grave upon death. As it says in Ecclesiastes 3:18-20:

I said in mine heart concerning the estate of the sons of men, that God might manifest them, and that they might see that they themselves are beasts. For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath

no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again.

A similar idea of this circular life cycle applied to the individual man is the Pythagorean/Orphic “wheel”(Russell 28). Bertrand Russell relates: “To the Orphic, life in this world is pain and weariness. We are bound to a wheel which turns through endless cycles of birth and death; our true life is the stars, but we are tied to earth. Only by purification and renunciation and an ascetic life can we escape from the wheel and attain at last to the ecstasy union with God” (28). These ideas closely align to Poe’s as describe in his cosmological piece *Eureka*. Expanding the allegory in regard to the universe, the crowd could be the heavenly bodies again. The “circle that ever returneth” to the same place resembles the continual rotations of the planets and their orbital revolutions around the sun.

The final two lines in the third stanza convey the climax of the play and the poem. Madness, Horror, and Sin are the “soul” of the plot. Poe’s *Marginalia* may illuminate his word choice here: “Who ever really saw anything but horror in the dying and the dead?” (46). Then, the first lines of verse four interject a new figure, a “crawling shape” described as: “A blood-red thing that writhes from out / The scenic solitude!” (Poe, “Ligeia” 102). This shape appears amid the “mimic rout.” This monotony contrasts Poe’s idea of the desire of the soul: “The desire of the new is an element of the soul. The most exquisite pleasures grow dull in repetition” (60). The color of the “thing” described is not just red, but “blood” red, painting an even more vivid picture of its character. The color red is connected with Satan in Christian belief, and with the god Seth in Egyptian belief. However, the Egyptians use it in two ways: to represent victory and life and to represent anger. Seth was the God who slew the serpent Apep, or Apophis each night, as discussed earlier, but is also considered evil because he murdered his brother Osiris, god of

vegetation and the Nile waters (Welsh 107-08). This ambiguity of character thwarts a traditional sense of duality, i.e. good versus evil. The writhing of the “crawling shape” already begins to give us a picture of its serpentine qualities. The physical form of a snake is amorphous, its shape being as indefinite as its nature.

The notion that it “writhes from out the scenic solitude” is troublesome. From the literal view, with all of the characters so far introduced and the flurry of action taking place, the scene of the play cannot be considered solitude; in fact, it would be the opposite. This seems to suggest that the line refers to the “blood-red thing” as coming from a solitary place. On an individual scale, this solitude, combined with the earlier use of “lonesome” in the first verse, suggests that all of this is taking place internally, an inner struggle. On the cosmic scale, this solitude of the creature is reminiscent of the serpent deities previously discussed, almost always one large solitary snake, as opposed to a den of snakes. Also, in several mythic stories, this snake is cast out, or sent into seclusion by the creator god, such as in Greek myth where it is cast to the heavens or as in the case of Satan and Ophion, cast down to earth. The serpent in the drama represents death for the individual man, the adversary of mankind, and the outcast from the universal myth of creation.

The last half of the fourth verse takes the poem in an even more morbid direction:

It writhes! – it writhes! – with mortal pangs
 The mimes become its food,
 And the angels sob at vermin fangs
 In human gore imbued. (Poe, “Ligeia” 102)

The *OED* describes “pangs” as sharp, shooting pains, especially used to describe the pain of death and the pain of childbirth (“Pangs”). Here again we see the combination of meanings of

opposing, or it could be said, companion forces, of life and death. Recall from the earlier discussion that though the serpent is considered evil in many of the creation myths in which it is featured, in others it is simply a powerful force that opposes the creator being, neither good nor bad. In fact, the word “Satan” in the Bible means “adversary” and he is connected with the angel Lucifer, which the Jewish Encyclopedia relates as meaning “brilliant one,” “son of the morning,” or the morning star. Importantly, Poe espoused that mortal suffering is a precept of joyous afterlife: “To be happy at one point we must have suffered at the same. Never to suffer would have been never to have been blessed . . . The pain of primitive life of Earth is the sole basis of the bliss of the ultimate life of Heaven” (Quinn 419).

After “Sin” is earlier introduced, the eating of the human gore by the “vermin” is reminiscent of the Egyptian God Ammut, the Devourer of Souls. This creature punishes those whose hearts – the seat of the soul to the Egyptians - did not balance on the scale of truth by eating them, ending their possibility of immortal life, or life beyond physical death (Remler 10). There are also verses in the Bible and in the apocryphal *Book of Enoch* that use imagery similar to that in the poem. Enoch 1:9 reads: “And behold! He cometh with ten thousands of His holy ones to execute judgment upon all, and to destroy all the ungodly; And to convict all flesh of all the works of their ungodliness which they have ungodly committed against him” (Laurence 30).

Books in the canonical Bible also have interesting parallels. Job 24:20 KJV reads: “The womb forgets them, the worm feasts on them; the wicked are no longer remember . . .” Isaiah 66: 24 KJV reads: “And they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind,” and Isaiah 51:8 also speaks of worms devouring the flesh of the unrighteous.

As if the scene were not already horrid enough, the final stanza becomes even darker:

Out - out are the lights – out all!
 And over each quivering form,
 The curtain, a funeral pall,
 Comes down with the rush of a storm, (Poe, “Ligeia” 102)

Already described as being in the night, now all the lights are out making the darkness complete. A “funeral pall” comes violently down over the “quivering forms.” For the literal theatrical drama described, the funeral pall coming down is the curtain closing, signaling the end of the performance; for the individual, it is the death of the soul; for the cosmos, it is the end of the world as it is known.

The last lines of the final stanza again feature the uprising angels, assumedly going back up to Heaven, the domain of the Hebrew God (Dionysius 165).

And the angels, all pallid and wan,
 Uprising, Unveiling, affirm
 That the play is the tragedy, “Man,”
 And its hero the Conqueror Worm. (Poe, “Ligeia” 102)

The angels are “pallid and wan,” perhaps having lost their color due to the shock of what they’ve seen. They rise and unveil. Here, the play is called a “tragedy” entitled “Man.” From a comment in *Marginalia* in which he said, “To the Greeks . . . their drama seemed perfection . . .” (142), it seems that Poe here is drawing from the Greek Philosopher Aristotle’s *Poetics*, a common source for understanding “tragedy” as a poetic and theatrical term. Aristotle’s definition of tragedy is: “a representation of a serious, complete action which has magnitude in embellished speech, with each of its elements used separately in various parts of the play;

represented by people acting and not by narration; accomplishing by means of pity and terror the catharsis of such emotions. . .” (Leitch 92). Finally, we see the hero of the tragedy, “The Conqueror Worm.” These terms are troublesome, however, given Aristotle’s idea of the traits heroes in tragedy should have, including being “good” and “life-like” but painted “finer than they are” (Leitch 100).

If Poe is indeed appealing to the universal awe of serpents, then he is perhaps focusing on the lore most widely known to his audience – that of the Egyptians and the Hebrews (and Christians). This is evident in the already mentioned references in the poem and others, as well as in “Ligeia” where he juxtaposes the name of the Egyptian goddess of fertility, Ashtoreth (Remler 21), with the city of Tophet, a place of Baal worship, possible child sacrifice and a symbol for Hell for the Hebrews (Jer. 10:11). Another line from the text of “Ligeia” reads: “And, indeed, if ever that spirit which is entitled Romance – if ever she, the wan and the misty-winged Ashtophet of idolatrous Egypt, presided as they tell, over marriages ill-omened, then most surely she presided over mine” (Poe, “Ligeia” 97). Also, the bewinged creatures mentioned have Hebrew and Egyptian roots, respectively. The seraphs, short for seraphim, or the angel throng mentioned in the first stanza, are in the Hebrew religion one of the higher ranks of angels and were in direct communication with God (Dionysius 164-65). The concept of Sin in the third stanza is a component of Hebrew belief.

If the phantom sought is immortality – which they “seize” not – who, then is the conqueror worm who frustrates the chase cycle or “mimic rout” by his intrusion on the scene? Many familiar with Christian dogma would be quick to equate the conqueror worm with the serpent in the Hebrew Garden of Eden who brought sin into the world, and death, since according to the Bible, “the wages of sin is death...” (Rom. 6:23 KJV). Given the discussion so

far, several characters at work in the “drama” emerge as candidates for the “hero”: the man as worm or a lowly creature; death, or the “vermin” worms that free the soul by devouring the carnal body; and the universal adversarial serpent of creation myths. Although a close reading of the poem brings to light much of its meaning, even more is elucidated by situating the poem in the context of the short story which features it: “Ligeia.”

The Worm in Context

“The Conqueror Worm” first appeared as a poem in *Graham’s Magazine* in January 1843, and was added to “Ligeia,” for which Poe acknowledged the receipt of \$10 for its appearance in the *American Museum* September 4, 1838 (Quinn 269). The most prominent words in “Ligeia” could hold the key to understanding the premise of both: “...shall this Conqueror be not once conquered? Are we not part and parcel in Thee? Who – who knoweth the mysteries of the will with its vigor? Man doth not yield him to the angels, nor unto death utterly, save only through the weakness of his feeble will” (Poe, “Ligeia” 102).

This passage in “Ligeia” supports the argument in one of the few academic works found specifically devoted to studying the poem: “It is abundantly clear that the author was not thinking of Satan but of personified death” (Lubbers 379). The conqueror worm, then, could be death, or factoring in the words echoed in “Ligeia,” could be death due to a weakening of will. With the worm as death, the universality of the snake myths and the universal fear of death lend credence to the former’s use as a symbol for the latter.

The Gnostic *Book of Enoch*, again, to which other images in the poem can be related, has this to say regarding the “will”:

Light and darkness coexist in Eternal enmity; their warfare never ends. Even from among the Gods, there are those who have been won by darkness, rebelling against the Way in which they should walk to follow their own wills. Two

hundred of the seraphim have descended to the physical plane, where they have impregnated mortal women, thinking in this way to produce a better race to inherit the earth. This is a parody of the Divine Plan, for the seraphim cannot generate the power to create Eloheim out of mortal men and women.

The seraphim following their own will was their cardinal sin, the reason for them being cast out of heaven, and perhaps the reason for their sympathetic weeping in the poem.

While like his concept of “phallic symbolism” Freud’s idea of the uncanny was not developed until after Poe’s death, the concept solidifies the serpent’s association with death. Maria Tatar writes: “In his essay on the uncanny, ‘Das Unheimliche,’ Freud defined the term of his title as ‘something familiar or old-established in the mind that has been estranged by the process of repression.’ Uncanny events have the power to provoke a sense of dread precisely because they are at once strange and familiar” (169). What is more dreaded, yet more familiar than death? And though death is a surety for any living thing, little is known about it or its aftermath. The snake is equally uncanny, being a common creature, recognized in different ways throughout the world, definitely dreaded by many, and full of mystery still.

Knowing this, a few more questions may be answered. Why do the seraphs sob and become pallid and wan? It is because, as “Ligeia” suggests, death could be overcome by an intensity of will. In “Ligeia” it is said of the supreme deity himself, “For God is but a great will pervading all things by nature of its intentness” (Poe, “Ligeia” 99). The seraphs know that, as opposed to themselves, humans have freedom to exercise their will, but here do not exercise it to its full extent, or to its best purpose, but run around in circles as mimes unaware. This is precisely why it is a “tragedy.”

The epigram which Ligeia is repeating here is attributed to Joseph Glanvill. Although Glanvill was an actual person noted for his Transcendentalist beliefs, the source for this particular passage has not been found (Herndon 119). Henderson believed that Poe was satirizing Glanvill's beliefs as well as Transcendentalism in general: "Poe achieved a double-edged irony by attributing an Emersonian hyperbole to Glanvill . . . Poe appears to have taken literally Emerson's metaphorical affirmation of mortal man's superiority over death in order to make Transcendentalism more susceptible to satirical treatment" (120-21). Henderson further suggests the "Ligeia" is a direct attack on Emerson's *Nature* and the general notions of Transcendentalism (Herndon 127). His disdain for the movement is clear in *Marginalia*, where he proclaims, "We need Art, as Art is now beginning to be understood . . . founded in nature and common sense . . . not an onstage soliloquy of ranted transcendentalism" (119).

Taken as an antithesis to Glanvill, as suggested by Davis and Davis (174), the function of "The Conqueror Worm" becomes clearer. The poem is read just before, or even while, the narrator's beloved Ligeia dies. That point marks the precise moment that Ligeia begins to elude the narrator through death and his simultaneous descent into madness. As Gargano states: "I believe that 'Ligeia' can best be understood as the tale of a man (the narrator and not Poe) who, having once inhabited the realm of the Ideal, seeks even unto madness to recreate his lost ecstasy" (338). Later he asserts that "though the narrator of Ligeia cannot be forever 'married' to the Ideal, he will be forever haunted by it. His life will be a continuous quest for it, a dream or nightmare of it..." (339). At the very moment she is estranged from him by death, the poem foreshadows his morbid destiny to chase the "phantom" and "seize it not," predicting much madness, sin, and horror to come until his sanity is completely lost.

CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSION

This is not the first assertion that the conqueror worm could be the manifestation of death. In his biography of Poe, Quinn said, “The association of the worm with death appeared in ‘The Sleeper’ and is, of course, an ancient idea” (391). Indeed, a general reading of the poem may lead to that conclusion. However, in the event one is tempted to ascribe to any new philosophy inherent in Poe’s poem, Poe’s comment in *Marginalia* warns: “It is laughable to observe how easily any system of Philosophy can be proved false: - but then is it not mournful to perceive the impossibility of even fancying any particular system to be true?” (97). Along these lines, the reader cannot simply stop at recognizing the worm as death. Further questions to be explored concern who or what died, who is the conqueror, and whom or what is conquered.

Many of Poe’s critics obviously missed these points, dismissing the poem simply as “morbid” (Quinn 484, 496, 515; Thomas and Jackson 629) and “repulsive” (Thomas and Jackson 718). Even one of his kindest biographers said, “In the last stanza Poe explains the meaning of the poem so carefully that it seems as though he were afraid we would miss the moral. This flavor of the didactic is alien to his poetry” (391). When Poe wrote his friend David Cooke asking for his opinion of the short story, Cooke told him that Ligeia should have only come back as a ghost, showing the Cooke had probably missed the greater meaning of the work as well (Thomas and Jackson 271). While the short story and the poem exhibit numerous parallels – the night within the “lonesome latter years” of the poem and the night in late September in the bed chamber, the rushing storm in the poem and the “rushing atmosphere” in the bed chamber, the funeral pall curtain in the poem and the tapestry in the bed chamber, the uprising and unveiling angels and the risen and unveiled Ligeia, being a few (Tritt 21-22) – some commentators, such as Michael Tritt, do not quite grasp the full analogy offered: “The conclusion of the poem brings

the curtain fall with death supreme, while the tale's conclusion, in my opinion significantly discrepant from the poem's, brings the triumph of will and life" (22). Tritt sees death as the conqueror of mankind in the poem, but saw Ligeia as the conqueror of death in the short story, and felt the two ideas working at odds to create drama (21).

However, interpreting the poem in this manner works to eradicate this discrepancy and makes the parallel between the story and the poem more complete. This meaning is found in the climax of both the poem and the short story: the concept of the second death. Returning to the idea of primordial spirituality, Corrigan says, "Among the earliest notions of soul perhaps the simplest is the idea that something survives the death of the body. Sometimes the sacred snake is possessed of the soul of the dead" (360), making the worm a fitting emblem of the immortal soul of man.

This idea of the two possible deaths, the sure eventual death of the physical body and the possible death of the soul, is a Biblical concept, though other belief systems hold the same ideas as well. This concept is understood by Selley who said, "Poe's 'posthumous' voices show that life on earth is death, and that death – although it must break down through decay all matter and spirit – allows the man of imagination to be born again" (100). Further evidence of his belief of this is found in his comments on Foqué's *Undine* in *Marginalia*: "How thrillingly are the few and simple words made to convey his belief that the mere death of a beloved wife does not imply a separation so final or so complete as to justify an union with another" (54-55). He further describes how, very much like Ligeia, the soulless Undine possesses another soul and transitions into the soul possessing wife (56). No doubt this concept struck a chord with Poe because of the loss of his own beloved wife. However, as Edmund Clarence Stedman observes, "the essential Poe is found in poems such as "The Conqueror Worm" and further regarding his collection of

poems that “they do not offer the expected consolation of Christian theology, that they are not based on the revelations . . . of The Great Book” (Quinn 260). Poe’s idea instead is more that, “What we call ‘death’ is the painful metamorphosis . . . At death, the worm is the butterfly . . .” (Quinn 429).

Much of this concept in the poem and the short story, including even some of the language, again echoes the Gnostic *Book of Enoch*:

The angel replied, “These are the sons of Perdition, who have sold their souls to darkness. They know the Way of Life; it has been perfectly revealed to them, but they have rejected Light and embraced darkness. Darkness has neither joy nor peace in it. It is horror and despair, anger and vengeance, hatred and fear. These negativities take possession of their souls so that they must dwell in this horror of darkness until they find release through Eternal oblivion. Only on these does the second death have any power.” We moved upward into another realm. Here, too, there was suffering, but not despair. “This is hell,” said my guide. “These are suffering the pains of errors which they have followed but their suffering is purifying them, until they will be prepared to dwell in a world of Light. These will come up in the second resurrection, but they will not be lost.” (Enoch 9: 4-5)

The horror repeated here recalls the “horror” referred to in the poem. Horror is for those who will experience the second death, the death of the soul. Redeemable souls, those who will not experience the second death, must suffer pains for purification so that they may then enter heaven. This type of purging echoes Aristotle’s idea of the goal of “tragedy” in drama.

Aforementioned references of Poe’s contemporaries, his predecessor Milton, and even of Biblical references to man as a “worm” or lowly creature resigned to suffering resemble the

sentiment in Job 25: 4-6 KJV, which reads: “How then can a mortal be righteous before God? How can one born of woman be pure? If even the moon is not bright and the stars are not pure in his eyes, how much less a mortal, who is but a maggot – a human being, who is only a worm!” Because of man’s mortal sins, the tearing away of his flesh can be understood as necessary to release his soul, which is then free to rise. The unveiling of the uprising angels in the last stanza “affirms” that the suffering - the tragedy - is now over and they no longer need to cover their eyes. The conqueror is not evil incarnate, Satan, the great serpent, or even death. Though Poe uses the archetypal serpent imagery to introduce primordial concepts and fears, the serpent is the proverbial red herring. Like his contemporaries’ references to mankind as a “worm,” the “conqueror worm” in Poe’s poem is the eternal soul of man that defeats sin by transcending the physical body. This is also played out in “Ligeia,” as McKee relates: “In Ligeia, too, the life force conquers. . . from the narrator’s point of view, his will has conquered death, the grave has opened, and Ligeia lives again” (2). Though Ligeia’s condition at the end of the story has been read by some as a hallucination or even as the narrator’s “anima” projection of his feminized unconscious (Andriano 27), several critics concur that Ligeia actually returns from the dead. Howard comments similarly: ” In the context of ‘Ligeia,’ the language of the climactic ending of the poem closely parallels that of the ending of the story . . . This resurrection suggests a triumph over, a *conquest* of, the mortal part of man” (42). While Maurice Bennet interprets the work as a metafictional projection of the “author as God,” he too saw a connection between the story, the poem, and Poe’s metaphysical beliefs as expressed in *Eureka* and his critical work. He asserts that: “The philosophic and aesthetic discourse that is the primary concern of the criticism reappears, in nearly identical terms, in ‘Ligeia’ but narrative form turns the treatise into a tale” (5). Essentially, Bennet felt that this work exemplified the beliefs Poe expressed in his non-

fiction works through the art of fiction. As Howard suggests, the poem and the tale are the “theatre” in which he uses the “characters” as actors to play out his ideas in dramatic form. Making the connection between the poem, the story, and his core beliefs about the universe provides insight about them all.

Much of Poe’s metaphysical philosophy appears in *Eureka* and show that in contrast to Trancedentalism, which sought transcendence by indulgence, Poe’s type of transcendence, as described in *Eureka* and played out in “The Conqueror Worm,” is obtained by asceticism, suffering, and purging the spiritual of all things physical and carnal, even to the body itself. Many overlook this concept because the idea of the serpent as an evil, mythical figure is so readily available, as shown by the earlier review of global mythos. However, just as the narrator and Ligeia in the short story, the reader must diligently search for the “secret knowledge” contained within the work. While some like Cooke overlooks this crucial idea in the poem and short story, others like contemporary critic Thomas Dunn English understood the poem for the deeper allegorical meanings it contains (Thomas and Jackson 599).

It also represents a combination of the most ancient belief systems. Poe comments in *Marginalia*: “Imagination chooses the most combinable things that are not yet combined, creating something new and totally different” (188). In Poe’s mind, baffling as it may seem, there would be no differentiation. His metaphysical piece *Eureka* deals with the relations of “a still existent Being and those creatures who are really but infinite individuations of Himself” (Quinn 555). Earlier in the same work he said, “All Things and All Thoughts of Things with all their ineffable Multiplicity of Relation sprang at once into being from the primordial and irrelative One” (548). The Gnostic *Book of Enoch* echoes this, saying that “But this is the great secret, Enoch. We are not different from each other, but different manifestations of the same

reality: (*Enoch* 6:7). Poe's beliefs as outlined in *Eureka* suggest that he believes everything will eventually return to this divine unity from whence all things came. Likewise, in "The Conqueror Worm," once the soul conquers the sins of the mortal body by being painfully freed from it, it arises and returns to heaven to presumably reunite with God. Similarly, Ligeia conquers the death of her body and reunites with her lover.

Poe said that "The Conqueror Worm" was one of his best poems, and he said repeatedly that "Ligeia" was his best story (Quinn 430). Quinn says that this poem is important as well because it marks a step in the poetic treatment of God and Man (391). In this work, Poe's ideas on man, mankind, and the universe at large (as described especially in *Eureka*) are artistically played out on multiple levels. Not only does he describe an actual tragic theatrical drama unfolding, but also the plight of each individual when the soul is released to heaven by the horrific death of the flesh, as well as the eventual transformation of all mankind from the earthly body back to original spiritual unity with the divine, and, on a cosmic scale, the rebirth of the universe into a new world.

One critic of "Ligeia" said that "perhaps the intention in the story was not entirely clear and rationalized in his own mind, preoccupied as he was with the very ideas and obsessions which motivate the hero of the story" (Basler 371). While the origin, identity and meaning of "The Conqueror Worm" eludes full exposition, Poe admitted (though in reference to his last poem, "Ulalume"): "I would endeavor to explain what I really meant by the poem, if it were not that I remembered Dr. Johnson's bitter and rather just remark about the folly of explaining what, if worth explanation, should explain itself" (Quinn 534). The only modification to this point would be that some necessary explanations can be found by understanding the contemporary literature and the knowledge of ancient myth that informed Poe's work during his lifetime.

Though the poem does not “explain itself,” understanding these sources gives modern readers an idea of what Poe believed to be self-evident.

Quinn said fittingly of Poe, “The poet who wrote the lines, ‘For the fever called living is conquered at last’ . . . has not ceased to possess the secret of the magnificent phrase (600). The secret in that phrase, however, is exposed here by revealing the identity of the conqueror worm: the conqueror is not death overcoming the living, but the living overcoming death. Since “Ligeia” is often interpreted as an almost autobiographical work based on Poe’s suffering at the loss of his wife and his own personal struggles, this examination of the worm/snake symbolism and contemporary context gives insight not only to the poem and the short story, but perhaps also to the mind of the troubled yet remarkable American author himself.

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APPENDIX A

THE CONQUEROR WORM

LO! 'tis a gala night
 Within the lonesome latter years!
 An angel throng, bewinged, bedight
 In veils, and drowned in tears,
 Sit in a theatre, to see
 A play of hopes and fears,
 While the orchestra breathes fitfully
 The music of the spheres.

Mimes, in the form of God on high,
 Mutter and mumble low,
 And hither and thither fly —
 Mere puppets they, who come and go
 At bidding of vast formless things
 That shift the scenery to and fro,
 Flapping from out their Condor wings
 Invisible Wo!

That motley drama — oh, be sure
 It shall not be forgot!
 With its Phantom chased for evermore,
 By a crowd that seize it not,
 Through a circle that ever returneth in
 To the self-same spot,
 And much of Madness, and more of Sin,
 And Horror the soul of the plot.

But see, amid the mimic rout
 A crawling shape intrude!
 A blood-red thing that writhes from out
 The scenic solitude!
 It writhes! — it writhes! — with mortal pangs
 The mimes become its food,
 And the angels sob at vermin fangs
 In human gore imbued.

Out — out are the lights — out all!
 And, over each quivering form,
 The curtain, a funeral pall,
 Comes down with the rush of a storm,
 And the angels, all pallid and wan,
 Uprising, unveiling, affirm
 That the play is the tragedy, “Man,”
 And its hero the Conqueror Worm.