

An Analysis of Allan Poe’s Effect Aesthetics and Its Illustration in “The Fall of the House of Usher”

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Abstract

By thinking over each word before writing, Edgar Allan Poe finally built the horrible house of “Usher” which was well-known in the world. Poe’s novel creating theory is unity of effect. According to Poe, the writer should weigh his dictions and plan the plot carefully to form a certain effect he has expected. Even the theme should be subordinate to the writer’s deliberate construction of such an effect. All the novels of Poe followed this principle. The Fall of the House of Usher, one of Poe’s masterpieces, is the best model to study the practical use of effect aesthetics. Each description of scenes and depiction of characters are closely related, all of which contribute to the expected effect. This paper attempts to analyze the theory by Poe’s characterization of setting, character, and mental description and discuss what kinds of specific words Poe used in the story to create such a horrible atmosphere. Readers can not only understand how the unity of effect is applied in his story, but also feel the artistic charm in “The Fall of the House of Usher”.

Keywords: Allan Poe, Unity of effect, The Fall of the House of Usher, aesthetics

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1. Introduction

1.1 A brief introduction of Poe’s effect aesthetics

Edgar Allan Poe is acknowledged as a great figure of the flourishing American literature in the 19th century. His unique writing style as well as his novel criteria in viewing literature has made permanent influence on the world literary criticism. While reading his stories, especially his horror fictions, people can always feel a kind of suffocating atmosphere. This feeling may not be comfortable, but many readers are willing to taste such terrorism and immerse themselves in it. He triggers terror from readers’ psychology by making reconciliation of diverse elements into a “unity of effect” of horror instead of the direct depiction of blood and violence (Yu 2015:53).

There were very few American writers living a miserable life like Poe. He suffered a lot from the negative events throughout his whole life, which made him understand how to express the fear deeply. In Poe’s view, an excellent writer doesn’t put his thinking directly into his plot. Instead, he plans carefully to conceive a kind of unique effect, and then fabricates a corresponding plot. The writer makes all the plots join up to achieve the exact effect that he has planned before (Sheng 1993: 17). Each event, each depiction, even a word and a sentence should create a certain unity of effect (Chen 1982: 362). Poe insists on the effect aesthetics in all his stories, which contributes to the uniqueness and great attraction of his writing.

1.2 Critical responses to Poe abroad and in China

Poe is an outstanding writer of great eminence. He has been frequently labeled as a “controversial and misunderstood” writer (Peng 2009: 84). When he was alive, his works were not accepted by people.

In America Poe was commented by other writers in a negative way. Emerson thought Poe was just “a jingle man”; Mark Twain said Poe’s works were unreadable; Henry James gave such a statement that “an enthusiasm for Poe is the mark of a decidedly primitive state of development”. Although Poe was torn to pieces in America, actually in Europe he enjoyed a reputation. Shaw commented that Poe’s work was not only a novel, but a complete artwork. Charles Baudelaire declared that “Edgar Poe, who isn’t much in America, must become a great man in France.” (Jiang 2007: 7)

Most previous studies focus on Poe’s life experiences, the Gothic style, his feminine ideal, and the death theme. Recent studies tend to emphasize his aestheticism and his novel creating theory. While doing this, people usually use different short stories as models, such as “The Black Cat”(1843), “The Masque of the Red Death”(1842), “The Tell-Tale Heart”(1843), etc. Peng Di(2009) discussed Poe’s narrative art of time in The Masque of the Red Death. Li Shicun(2009) wrote a journal which discussed the function and significance of the background in Poe’s works, such as the temple in The Masque of the Red Death and the dark room in The Fall of the House of Usher. Luo Deqiong(2004) explored the death theme and classified it into four categories by analyzing “The Black Cat”, “The Masque of the Red Death” and other Poe’s works. Obviously their viewpoints are creative, especially about the four kinds of death. But it still needs to be studied and improved in a more profound way. There are some studies making a comparison between Poe and other writers, or between two and more writings of Poe. The other studies try to analyze the main plots or some careful depictions in Poe’s works. Of course there are people doing researches about Poe’s aestheticism in “The Fall of the House of Usher” or other works, but the discussions are not too profound. For example, some of the researchers didn’t magnify to a specific word, but discussed it in a more comprehensive way.

This paper will focus on more intensive aspects and analyze how the unity of effect reflects in his work. And then explain the concrete reflections in “The Fall of the House of Usher”. Many researchers have done a lot of studies about Poe in various aspects, which provides the feasibility to continue exploring a new point, and abundant useful materials and references relevant to the study.

2. An Analysis of Poe’s Effect Aesthetics

By now Poe is still a controversial writer. Many people have different points about him. But his contribution to literature is influential and undeniable, especially his literature viewpoint “Effect Aesthetics”.

2.1 The origin of Poe’s effect aesthetics

The word “Aestheticism” originated from an intellectual and art movement. The aesthetes supported the emphasis of aesthetic values more than social-political themes for literature, fine art, music and other arts during the 19th century in Europe (Paul 1998: 261). The slogan of the movement was “Art for Art’s Sake”. This slogan appeared in the work of Poe. He argued in his essay “The Poetic Principle”(1850):

We have taken it 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 the simple fact is that would we but permit ourselves 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, this poem per se, this poem which is a poem and nothing more, this poem written solely for the poem’s sake(Poe 1850: 5).

At first it was a viewpoint in poetic circle, but gradually had influences on novels, and other literary forms. Although at the start it was just a term about art and the conception about it wasn’t advanced by Poe. Many aestheticians think the object of aestheticism is about art merely and it’s a philosophy of art. However, Poe stated in his work The Philosophy of Composition and The Poetic Principle like this:

Beauty is the sole legitimate province of the poem...That pleasure which is at once the most intense, the most elevating, and the most pure is, I believe, found in the contemplation of the beautiful. When, indeed, men speak of Beauty, they mean, precisely, not a quality, as is supposed, but an effect-they refer, in short, just to that intense and pure elevation of soul-not of intellect, or of heart-upon which I have commented, and which is experienced in consequence of contemplating the “beautiful”(Poe & Griswold 1857: 262).

As we see, Poe thinks that “beauty” is not a particular scarce thing but a kind of effect. So he added the word “beauty” into his writings. He emphasized effect aesthetics and turned horror into a kind of art. This kind of innovation made him become a unique and excellent master of building effect.

2.2 The influence of life experiences on Poe's effect aesthetics

Knowing about Poe's life is very important for us to understand the formation of his effect aesthetics. Poe's miserable life experience makes a great contribution to his special literature view. He was born in Boston. Both parents died within two years after his birth. Then he was taken into the home of John Allan in Virginia.

But he didn't have a happy relationship with his foster father. When Poe was 17 years old, he went to the University of Virginia but didn't finish. He had an appointment with West Point but was dismissed less than a year later. In 1833, he became an editor of *Southern Literary Messenger* in Richmond. Due to excessive drinking and the inability to meet deadlines, he lost his job. In 1835 he managed to regain the job. At 27 he married his 13 year-old cousin, Virginia. Poe drifted for several years as editors in different magazines but remained poor all his life. In 1847, his wife died of tuberculosis. This was a devastating blow to Poe. On October 3rd, 1849, he was unconscious and found in a street of Baltimore. After several days, he died in a hospital.

As we see, Poe's whole life was tough and hard. His financial situation was quite depressing. All the pain he experienced was more bone-chilling than other writer and he had to worry about how he could earn a life anytime. These factors made his writing distinctive and caused that the themes of Poe's main works are usually negative and decadent. At the same time he could use his careful descriptions to make readers feel his gloomy mood and disturbance very easily. So the unusual life experiences were indispensable for Poe to form his own literary theory.

2.3 The features of Poe's effect aesthetics

2.3.1 The Length

The short stories, Poe believes, must be of such length as to be read at one sitting (brevity), so as to ensure the totality of impression. The very first sentence ought to help to bring out the single effect of the story. No word should be used which does not contribute to the "pre-established" design of the work (comprehension). Chang Yaixin (2003: 110) commented that Poe's theory for the short story is remarkable. A tale should reveal some logical truth with the fullest satisfaction, and should end with the last sentence, leaving a sense of finality with the reader.

Poe said in short stories the writer can get whatever effect he desired (Liu 1999: 631). About the length of a work, Poe thinks it should be read through just in one time. There are many trifles in people's daily life. If a work is too long, readers will be disturbed by those trifles and can't enjoy it. In one hour's reading, the souls of readers are controlled by the author completely. There is no trouble or bother from others (ibid.).

2.3.2 The Method

While reading Poe's works, it seems like that readers can step into the scene in the story and feel the depressive atmosphere. Poe can make people experience the plot in their mind and taste the horror. He created such a perfect effect by using some his particular methods. The careful depiction of scene is one of his methods. For example, usually in his novels there is a gruesome residence, a wet cellar and the bad weather, etc. Then the colors in his novel are mainly black, grey, and pallor. The character sketch and the depiction of mental activity are also remarkable in his creation. Just like the appearance of Roderick and the first person's psychology. The last one is the indispensable death in Poe's work, because beauty and death can always unite perfectly and harmoniously in his works (Nie 2006: 73). By following these, Poe deliberately plan each word in his novel to make the effect more influential all the time.

2.3.3 Unity of effect

In most horror fictions, normally there is some violence or bloody scenes. But in Poe's works, we can't find such direct and artificial description. Although there is not much sensory horror, readers feel the psychological malaise and the depressive atmosphere. That is the power of Poe's unity of effect, which makes his works unique and attractive. Poe (1846) believed that good literature can create a unity of effect, which serves as the powerful tool to evoke emotions and expose the truth. Distinct from others, Poe focuses more on reader's reactions. He asserts that it is the author who decides the purpose of writing, the effect he desires and the expected response from the readers. That is, to achieve the desired reaction, the author is primarily responsible for utilizing various factors within the story, including the theme, plots, conflicts, settings, and characters. Such combinations construct the unity of effect, through which, readers can perceive the truth and fears beneath the surface. Such criteria were quite against the preach function.

3. The Illustration of Poe's Effect Aesthetics in "The Fall of the House of Usher"

3.1 Effective Setting in "The Fall of the House of Usher"

3.1.1 The outside environment

At the beginning of "The Fall of the House of Usher", the protagonist came to visit his friend Usher. Poe described such a desolate and gloomy scene. "During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when the clouds hung oppressively low in the heavens, I had been passing alone, on horseback, through a singularly dreary tract of country (Poe 2009: 195)... " After reading the parts, everyone associates it with some unfortunate things. And readers will think about the question that what bad things will happen in such a situation. If people are curious about the story, they would like to go on reading. The words like "dull", "dark", "soundless", "oppressively" all give a kind of dead impression. Besides, Poe wrote that clouds hung in the heaven. Actually the meaning of heaven equals sky here, but it still cannot be replaced. Because sky is a neutral word, as for heaven, there is another meaning which refers to the place where people will go when they die. If it is replaced by sky, the stress will not be so strong as before. From this we can gradually notice the ubiquitous unity of effect in his work. Finally, Poe adopted "during", "dull", "dark", and "day" in the paragraph. The first letter of these four words is the same "D". With the addition of heaven, the word 'death' can easily occur to people's mind. Poe is not only a novelist but also a poet. So when he is writing novels, he also pays attention to the rhythm of sentences.

While approaching the house, "I looked upon the scene before me-upon the mere house, and the simple landscape features of the domain-upon the bleak walls-upon the vacant eye-like windows-upon a few rank sedges-and upon a few white trunks of decayed trees (ibid.)..."

The house is the hero's destination. It seems like that if people get into the house, a misfortune will befall him. Normally when we see a house with windows, some trees, sedges, and a tarn, these things may form beautiful scenery presenting in front of us. But Poe added some special adjectives before them. Just like bleak, vacant, rank, decayed, the words changed the scenery completely and expressed a desolate sensation. The parallelism here is to indicate the depressive atmosphere. The simile between the windows and eyes will create an extreme panic effect. When "I" am near the house, I found that its principal feature seemed to be that of an excessive antiquity. "The discoloration of ages had been great. Minute fungi overspread the whole exterior, hanging in a fine, tangled web-work from the eaves... Perhaps the eye of a scrutinizing observer might have discovered a barely perceptible fissure (ibid: 198)..."

Here Poe described the figure of the house in a very close range. The house seemed like to be ramshackle. When the hero discovered the fissure, Poe used the words "perhaps" and "might" to modify the action. So readers cannot be sure about if there is a fissure on the building, then Poe can evoke suspense and curiosity in people's mind.

3.1.2 The inside environment

Then "I" came inside of the house. "While the objects around me, while the carvings of the ceilings, the somber tapestries of the walls, the ebon blackness of floors, and the phantasmagoric armorial trophies which rattled as I strode (ibid.)..." These items were just ordinary decorations in the house, and the hero was familiar with some of them. But Poe used a verb to change this kind of feeling. All these things seemed like to rattle. The word rattle made the matters alive, and brought a sense of fear to readers. It reminds people that even if inside of the house, the depressive atmosphere will not diminish, but become worse. Poe carefully contemplates on every word to create the expected overall effect. The effect was unified whatever inside or outside. The hero finally came to the room to meet his old friend. The description about it was like this. "The windows were long, narrow, and pointed, and at so vast a distance from the black oaken floor as to be altogether inaccessible from within. Feeble gleams of encrimsoned light made their way through the trellised panes (ibid.)..." The main color was still dark and black which inferred to evil and death. The keynote still kept the same. But here we can notice that there is encrimsoned light in front of our eyes. Although the light was feeble, it still gave readers intense contrast in color. In such a circumstance, it was no doubt that people would associate it with blood and violence. This also implied the after plot which was not peace and made readers eager to go on the next part.

3.2 Effective Character Roderick in "The Fall of the House of Usher"

3.2.1 Appearance of Roderick

Roderick arose from a sofa and “I” finally could see his face. His appearance changed so much. “A cadaverousness of complexion; an eye, large, liquid, and luminous beyond comparison; lips somewhat thin and very pallid, but of a surpassingly beautiful curve; a nose of a delicate Hebrew model, but with a breadth of nostril unusual in similar formations... hair of a more than web-like softness and tenuity(*ibid.*: 196)...”

The depictions of this part about Roderick are so careful that we can imagine the face to life. Poe shows a face with refined features. Now Roderick is not in a good condition obviously, maybe he is troubled by some horrible things. And there is strong contrast in Roderick’s face, although we can infer Roderick must be a handsome man in the past, Poe selected the words like cadaverousness, pallid to modify a “remarkable” face. The effect will be strange and make people uncomfortable. Readers are easy to doubt that if the hero’s friend is still normal person or a vampire? His hair is soft like web. The word web can be related with insects or spiders. Using this word as an analogy will also add terror into his unity of effect.

3.2.2 Movements of Roderick

“In the manner of my friend I was at once struck with incoherence and inconsistency; and I soon found this to arise from a series of feeble and futile struggles to overcome an habitual trepidancy, an excessive nervous agitation(*ibid.*)” We can see Roderick has been a bit abnormal. Roderick told “me” he and his sister Madeline were suffering from a genetic disease. While talking about this, the lady Madeline passed by. When “I” saw this, “I” feel terrified. Then he couldn’t help crying. This movement shows he cares about Madeline very much and the mental state of his is fragile. The next part about Roderick’s description is after Madeline’s death. “I” tried to heal the anxiety of my friend and stayed with him. I listened to the improvisations he played by guitar. He was forgetive and painted some shocking works. These works were vivid and attractive but made me scary. Poe didn’t tell the reason in his narration which made the story stranger. At the end of the story, “Usher rapped, with a gentle touch, at my door, and entered, bearing a lamp. His countenance was, as usual, cadaverously wan-but, moreover, there was a species of mad hilarity in his eyes-and evidently restrained hysteria in his whole demeanor (*ibid.*: 211)...” He was tormented with the fear for such a long time. His action was abnormal and fearful. In this state people may worry about what he will do next and how his condition is. All the questions are exciting the readers. By now no one can wait to know what will happen and how the plot will develop. All the careful depictions before are working to create such a perfect atmosphere and effect. That’s the effective aesthetics of Poe.

3.3 Effective Mental Description in “The Fall of the House of Usher”

3.3.1 “My” feelings

Through the story, there are many mental descriptions about me especially when “I” see the scenery of the house of Usher. At first when “I” saw the walls, the windows, the sedges, and the trees, “I” felt an utter depression just like an addict sobered up from the euphoria. This metaphor here was used so vividly that everyone can feel the hero’s discomfort. The scenery of the house made me feel stressful and imagine strange things all the time. I realized this and tried to control this kind of unrealistic feeling but failed. If the things are rearranged, the scenery will get better. From this we can see the feelings of the hero are very conflicting. Before entering into the house, the hero put his head at the tarn childishly. Then the sense of oppression became stronger. And he tried to persuade himself that this kind of feeling is caused by superstition. When he looked at the house in the tarn, he believed that there is such a kind of special toxic gas which comes from the decayed trees, the bleak walls, and the quiet tarn. Although all of these are the hero’s imaginations, it leaves reader an indelible impression to the surrounding scenery of the house. And in the last part, when I escaped from the house, I found a wild light shot along the path. “The radiance was that of the full, setting, and blood-red moon, which now shone vividly through that once barely discernible fissure, of which I have before spoken as extending from the roof of the building, in a zigzag direction, to the base(*ibid.*: 216).” Here Poe used the color “blood-red” to modify the moon. It was similar to the word “encrimsoned” before. We can notice that Poe only used cold colors and red to describe things. This can form a kind of forceful contrast. Readers may doubt that why the moon is so scary? Is it real or just the hero’s imagination? Sometimes readers can feel the strong tension between reason and madness, normalcy and strangeness. Sometimes they find the boundaries between two poles are blurred. It’s difficult to determine the mental states of the characters and the narrator. So even the authenticity of the plot has become a problem, it has influences on reader’s reaction (Liu & Wang 2000: 248). Besides, the zigzag direction also echoed the before one which indicated the house will collapse finally.

3.3.2 Roderick’s inner world

As a visitor, I feel very stressful at the first sight of the House of Usher. But Roderick in the story has lived here for many years. So it's much easier for him to be influenced by the desolate environment. In the past he had a life with his sister Madeline. After she fell ill, Roderick was in extreme torment and couldn't release his pain. So he invited "me" to help and accompany for him. But the situation didn't get better.

Both of mental and physical conditions got worse and worse. Under the insufferable pain, he deceived the hero to help him bury his sister alive. After this he even experienced more pain than before. He felt the fear all the time and became more gaunt, anxious and neurotic. It seems like he has expected what will happen to him. "There were times, indeed, when I thought his unceasingly agitated mind was laboring with some oppressive secret, to divulge which he struggled for the necessary courage (ibid.: 210)." From this we can be aware of the contradiction in his inner world. He wanted to share the secret with the hero, but seemed like to worry about something. At the end, when his sister came out from the coffin to find him, he did nothing but to keep staring at the door and trembling with fear. He loved his sister so much which made his spirit abnormal. Finally he accepted his "anticipated" fate and died with his sister together.

4. Conclusion

Up to now, we have analyzed the formation of the horrific effect, and it can be turned into a kind of aesthetics in Poe's story. Each word in his work will generate a certain effect, none of which can be replaced. These words can form scary atmosphere which can catch people's breath, and finally break out to drive the plot to climax.

Poe is a master in creating horror. The readers all over the world enjoy the fear and immerse themselves in Poe's horrific fictions. He emphasizes that a writer should pay attention to the unity of effect as well as the ending of his story, making each part of the plot necessary. I have carefully analyzed how the effect aesthetics reflects in his story by taking some sentences as examples from his story. This included the descriptions of environment, the main character, and their mental activities. From these aspects we can learn the relevance between some adjectives picked by Poe. These words can be netted together and achieve a kind of integrated effect which Poe desired for.

Due to the limited time and resources, only one of Poe's works and only some typical examples in this novel are analyzed in this paper. Poe's effect aesthetics and an extensive range of his poems and novels are like a mysterious treasure, which need to be dug through deeper and deeper, and more surprises will be exposed to the world.

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