

# Allan Poe's Motivations to Adopt the First Person Narrative in Fictions Based on the Black Cat and the Murders in the Rue Morgue

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## Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe, a 19th century American poet, literary critic, and novelist, is an important member of the American Romantic trend of thought. He is the master of short stories, in which Poe employs a lot the first-person narrative. Based on the Gothic novel "The Black Cat" and the detective novel "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", this paper explores reasons why Allan Poe mainly uses the first-person narrative in his short novels from his life experience, the fiction creation and the reader response. Among them, the fiction creation could be analyzed from limitations of topic selection, characterization, effects of story and thematic function. By analyzing Poe's motivations to adopt the first-person narrative in fictions, this paper aims to give readers a better understanding and insight into Poe's novel creation.

**Keywords** - Allan Poe, the first-person narrative, motivations

## I. INTRODUCTION

Allan Poe is a controversial short story writer, poet and literary critic in the American literature history. Bernard Shaw and Tennyson have praised Poe for his greatness and originality, while some other people have ignored Poe's talents and magnified shortcomings of Poe's life into his works, questioning the thematic value of Poe's works. However, it is undeniable that many writers and works of later generations have been widely influenced by Poe, and the study of Poe and his works has never been interrupted.

In recent years, the study of Poe's works in China has mainly focused on themes, writing styles, literary theories and comparative studies. Firstly, it interprets and studies Poe's themes such as ugliness of human nature, love or death. Jia Linlin analyzes the evil of human nature and knowledge in Poe's novels, pointing out that Poe's description of ugliness and evil is exactly Poe's desire and pursuit of beauty and goodness.(2013) Shang Aiping studies the rich connotations of death theme in Poe's works, dividing death into horror, grotesque, revenge, romance and transcendence. (2010) Then, the study of Allan Poe's

style mainly focuses on Gothic style, detective reasoning, symbolism and narrative. Miao Cuihua combines symbols and narratives in Poe's novels to analyze the causes of his novel's grotesque and horrible style. (2010) Liu Qin explores the narrative art of Poe's short stories, i.e. the narrative perspective, narrative structure, narrative time and narrative space. (2010) Then, it uses literary theories, such as deconstructionism, psychoanalysis, prototype criticism or modernism to interpret Poe's works. Yan Zesheng explores Lacan's alternative interpretation in Poe's "The Purloined Letter" and points out the dialectics between the signifier and subjectivity. (2004) Liu Lili, starting with prototype theory and narratology, interprets Poe's novel "The Fall of the House of Usher", indicating the deep humanistic concern behind the absurd story. (2003) Finally, it is the comparative study, which mainly is the comparative study between Allan Poe and Chinese writers. For example, Cao Man contrasts Allan Poe with Meng Jiao, a Chinese poet, and holds that these two poets had similar psychological orientation of creation. They examine life with a unique perspective and praise death so as to achieve a desire and pursuit for life. (2001)

Study of Poe's works abroad is relatively mature, which is generally divided into three stages. It began in the mid-19th century when Poe's first poetry collection was published. The first stage underlines the influence of Poe's background on his creation, and even infers Poe's personality and living environment from his strange styles. This period attaches great importance to influences between text and social background. Bonaparte Marie mainly studies Poe's personal life, revealing Poe's attachment to his mother and his submission to his father's rights, which laid the foundation for interpretations of Poe's works with psychoanalytic theory. (1949) The second stage emphasizes the text itself and the analysis of the text, which may be influenced by the new criticism. For example, Quinn, A. H. , in her Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Biography, helped to get rid of the influence of Poe's social background and turn Poe's researches to the work itself. (1998) In the third stage, Poe's works have been analyzed from the perspective of literary theories like structuralism or deconstructionism, which means some new literary

theories have been applied to the analysis of Poe's works, such as Kenneth Silverman's *New Essays on Poe's Major Tales*. In the 21st century, Yu Lei believes that the study of Allan Poe abroad has three tendencies: returning to ethics, returning to creation and returning to native land. (2012)

Generally speaking, People have studied almost all aspects of Allan Poe, but there are some research spaces for interpretation, especially the narrative study of Poe's works, which can be roughly divided into three types. One is to analyze the narrative of Poe's novels from the perspective of holistic narratology; Then it is to select Poe's representative novels and explore them with narrative analysis; the last is to study Poe's novels from a certain angle of narratology. Although some achievements have been made in the study of Poe, there is still some room as for the narrative research, especially Poe's motivations for his narrative, without systematic analysis. Therefore, taking the Gothic novel "The Black Cat" and the detective novel "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" as examples, this paper briefly analyzes Poe's reasons to use the first person narrative in his works from three aspects: Poe's life experience, the fiction creation and readers' responses. Among them, the fiction creation could be analyzed from theme choice, characterization, effects of story and thematic function.

## II. CLASSIFICATION OF NARRATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Genette divides the narrative perspectives into "zero focalization", "internal focalization" and "external focalization". That is, the trichotomy. Among them, "internal focalization" can be divided into fixed "internal focalization", shiftable "internal focalization" and multiple "internal focalization". Shen Dan further divides Genette's trichotomy into "zero perspective", "internal perspective", "first-person external perspective" and "third-person external perspective". Among them, the "fixed internal perspective" in "internal perspective" includes "the first-person external perspective" and "the third-person internal perspective". In Poe's novels, the first-person narrative perspective is not invariable. There are intertwined internal and external perspectives of the first-person, that is, the conversion of the first-person external perspective to the first-person internal perspective, and the leap of the first-person narrative perspective.

## III. POE'S MOTIVATIONS TO ADOPT THE FIRST-PERSON NARRATIVE

Allan Poe's motivations to adopt the first-person narrative in fictions can be studied in the following aspects: Poe's life experience, the fiction creation, and the reader response. At the same time, fiction creation can be interpreted from theme choices,

characterization, effects of story, and thematic functions.

### A. Life Experience—Displaying Subjectivity

First of all, the first person narrative is related to Poe's life and social experience. For one thing, it is a tool for Poe to vent his emotions. For another, it reflects Poe's strong subjectivity. Literary works are inseparable from the writer's psychology, which is largely influenced by his life experience. (Pi, 2009) The early death of his parents made Poe lack of affection at an early age, and the contradiction with his adoptive father made him more rebellious and alcoholic. Later, his wife's premature death hit him hard and left him helpless, and his life-long illness caused him great pain and suffering. Poe suffered from both physical and mental torture in his life, just like an abandoned child. He had a rough life, so he also developed a lonely and strange personality. Fortunately, he has writing talents that no one else can match. However, in the era of Poe's life, his novels were not popular with the society. People thought that he was a drunkard who was addicted to alcohol. The absurd and unconscious descriptions in his works were crazy words and had no practical value. Therefore, he was excluded from the mainstream American novels at that time. Indeed, many plots in Poe's works are imaginary, but behind those unique stories, it is clear to see more about Poe's sober and rational understanding of life. As a writer with a long way to go, the use of first-person narrative can make him pour out and vent the depressed emotions of reality, experience the joy and pleasure in real life that he never had, and express his own feelings about life. Only in the fictional world of novel can he realize the spiritual compensation in the real world. He upholds Nietzsche's idea of "the death of God" and believes that he is his own God. Therefore, most of his novels have strong subjectivity, which is manifested in the first-person narrative, such as Poe's Gothic novel "The Black Cat". Of course, the voice of the first-person narrator is not the same as the author's own voice, but it is closely related to the author's thoughts, feelings and themes he wants to express.

### B. Fiction Creation

Poe once put forward his own creative principles in *The Review of Hawthorne's Twice-Told Tales*: "A wise artist does not incorporate his own ideas into his plots, but carefully plans ahead to come up with a unique and distinctive effect, and then invents such plots - he connects these plots, and what he does." Everything will be conducive to maximizing the effect of pre-conceived. (McMichael, 1980, p. 996) Writers should make their works achieve a unified effect, which is the so-called "unified effect theory".

According to Poe's principle of creation, short stories should achieve "the unity of effect and impression", and the novel should not be too long, should be able to read "within half an hour or two hours". (Shen, 2010, p135) In order to create a

successful novel, the author should first set up a single specific effect, and then spread the story around it. While creating the story, he should also pursue "the enjoyment of beauty", but this should serve theme of the work. Because of Allan Poe's pursuit and admiration for the theory of "unity of effect", a series of creative methods has been derived. One of them is the first person narrative in Poe's novels.

### **1. Theme Choice—Personal Adventures**

Looking at more than seventy short stories written by Allan Poe, Zhu Zhenwu divides them into five categories in his complete interpretation of Allan Poe's novels. The first is the type of moral introspection, such as "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Black Cat". The second type is detective Reasoning novels, such as "The Murders in the Rue Morgue", and "The Mystery of Marie Rogêt". The third one is the terror and mystery novels such as "The Fall of the House of Usher", and "The Masque of the Red Death". The fourth is Humor and Satire novels such as "The Spectacles" and "Hop-Frog". The fifth one is Science Fantasy novels like "MS. Found in a Bottle", "A tale of the Ragged Mountains" and so on. It can be found that Poe's short stories are not grand historical narrative themes, and such grand historical narrative themes mostly use the third-person narrative perspective to enhance the objectivity and authenticity. Poe's novels tend to focus on personal adventure, the detective terror and other aspects. In order to make the novel more convincing, it is very suitable to use the first personal narrative.

In addition, because Poe advocates that the novel should be short, concise and interesting. So there are not many characters involved in his novel, and the main line of the story is relatively single, suitable for the first person narrative. Poe's novel "The Black Cat" is a simple story. It mainly tells the story that "I" killed my wife by mistake for killing a black cat, and then built his wife and black cat into the wall together. In this story, "I" am both the narrator and the implementer of the story, that is, the protagonist. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" is about the murder of a mother and daughter in a secret envoy and how my friend Dubin solved the case. "I" am the storyteller and witness, not the protagonist. They all adopt the first-person narrative, and both stories have changed from the first-person external perspective to the first-person internal perspective. As the narrator and witness of the story, the first person narration of "I" adds to the reliability of the story. If we change to another narrative perspective, it will not only widen the distance between the story and the readers, but also greatly reduce the aesthetic feelings and effect of the work.

### **2. Characterization—Presenting Fullness**

Another important reason for Poe's choice of the first person narrative is that it can show different aspects and subtle changes of character. Using the first-person perspective, writers can describe lots of

psychological activities of character, and sometimes add some comments in the story, which reflects the delicacy of characterization.

In "The Black Cat", it begins with the first person external perspective of "I", describing himself as a very kind and docile image, trying to get sympathy for his crime, which is the value orientation of "I". Needless to say, this novel should be carried out with the tone of confession, but in this article there is no repentance awakening, but pride and chicanery. As the story unfolds, the first-person external perspective changes to the first-person internal perspective. The evil nature of "I" in the story begins to show gradually, and the repressed "I" emerge little by little. In describing the cause of the cat's death, "I" attributed it to alcoholism. But later he admitted that it was the evil side of his psychological heart. This contradictory and self-contradictory statement just embodies the hypocritical nature of the "I" in the novel. On the one hand, "I" defend myself, on the other hand, "I" carry out atrocities again and again, which indicates the narrator's cruel and morbid inner world.

In a word, with the first person narrative, this novel vividly shows the strong desire to do evil, the pleasure of doing evil, the regret after committing a crime, and the inner fear and contradiction. Although this kind of narration is unreliable, it plays a better role in showing the rich heart of the characters.

### **3. Effect of Story—Creating Tensions**

Novels with first-person narrative usually have literary blanks and artistic tension, which is the reason why Poe chose the first-person narrative. There is no need for writers to get things out of the box, because literature has a characteristic of "hiding secrets and never revealing them" (Hillis Miller, 2007, p.60). The effect and charm of literature are to tell readers several details and then let them follow their own judgement to comprehend.

In the Gothic novel "The Black Cat", "I" is not only the narrator of the whole story, but also the protagonist of the whole novel. The whole story revolves around the black cat to show the degeneration of "me" step by step, revealing the evil blending in "me", which presents the tensions of story. Generally speaking, the first person narrative is a restrictive perspective, sometimes the narrative of "I" is unreliable. At the beginning of the novel, "I" disguised as a kind and meek image, trying to excuse from the crime. If the whole story is based on an unreliable narrative, then the judgment of "I" in the novel is also unreliable. That is because "the narrative works pass on some evaluation of the narrator to the reader through the unreliable value judgment of the narrator." (Shen, 2010, p.83) Therefore, it also implies the difference between the author and the narrator, which is the manifestation of tensions in this work. The detective novel "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" traces the whole case through the narrator "I". It uses the blind area of "I" to draw readers through the

transformation from the first-person external perspective to the first-person internal perspective, which has played a very good role in blanking and tensions. Although the first person external perspective is limited, it still knows more about the development of the whole story than the first person internal perspective. At this moment, differences between the two perspectives undoubtedly will lead to tensions of the novel.

#### **4. Thematic Function—Avoiding Moralism**

One of the most distinguishing features of Allan Poe's works from those of his contemporaries is that he refuses to preach, but this does not affect the theme of his works. In the 19th century America where Poe lived, the criterion for evaluating the fiction is whether it has edifying significance or preaching function. But Poe does not think so. He pays special attention to the "effect" of literal work, which could be stimulating, horrible or thrilling. At the same time, Poe's pays great attention to explore character's inner world in his works, which fully reveal the evil and sickness of human nature. Poe's efforts exactly display his desire for light and his compassion for human beings. First-person narrative has a strong sense of story substitution. It seems that the author is telling his own experience, which is more convincing and more acceptable. Kearns once believed that the construction of novel or the text meaning could not be separated from the participation of the narrator. (Kearns, 1999, pp.64-65) It also reflects the importance of narrative perspective.

"The Black Cat" uses the expression of "confessional monologue". On the surface, the reader seems to experience a horrible and cruel story along with the "I" in the novel. In fact, Poe uses a series of events around the black cat to focus on "me" to "explore the dark side of human soul". He used his creation to reveal rather than solve the problem of human destiny. (Spiller, 1990, p.64). In the novel, it is clear to see the transformation of narrative. It begins with the first person external perspective. "I" as the narrator, tells readers the background of whole story. The opening paragraph shows that the author is standing in the present perspective to tell what has happened. "I" is not only the "I" when killing the black cat and wife, but "I" am a narrator who stands at a high level of contemplation of the past. Next, the author abandons this retrospective first person external perspective and turns to the first person internal perspective. He describes himself as a soft-hearted and gentle person. Compared with the first person external perspective, the first-person internal perspective is likely to narrow the distance between the reader and the story, creating a sense of intimacy and making the story more authentic.

But if we only use the first person internal perspective to tell the story, some of the plots can not be deliberated. Because, in a tense and terrible environment, it is impossible for a witness to express what happened in details at that moment. The success

of Poe's novel lies in the successful treatment of the first-person external perspective and the first-person internal perspective. He starts with the first-person external perspective to briefly introduce the background of the novel and draws out the story. Then he uses the first-person internal perspective to bring readers into the story and make it resonate. In the end, he uses the first-person external perspective to lead the reader out of the story. At this time, "I" in the novel have tensions and thematic significance. The first-person narrative perspective intertwined, less rigid and less boring preaching, which gives readers an unquestionable persuasion, leaving people the enjoyment of beauty.

#### **C. Reader Response—Reading Enjoyment**

The first-person narrative on the one hand enables readers with the narrator down the plot. And sometimes the narrator makes some commentaries in the story, which seems to be the interaction with readers. On the other hand, the limited perspective of the narrator can help readers to maintain sober positions and make their own value judgments. Usually, that can create endless aftertaste, producing uncomparable reading enjoyment.

For example, the detective novel "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" uses the first person narrative to create suspense. This novel discloses that a mother and a daughter was killed in a closed room, starting from the first person external perspective. "I", as the narrator, recall and narrate the investigation of my friend, detective Dubin. At this time, "I" can make a brief description of the overall background of the story, which could arouse readers' interests. Then it turns to the first person internal perspective, when "I" am a participant in the event to tell the story. "I" need to be separated from the original "omniscient" identity, like an unknown person to narrate, promoting the development of the story but not revealing the next step of detective Dubin. All of that will enhance the mystery and interest of this murder. As a whole, the first-person perspective is the restrictive perspective, that is, the narrator can not know the whole picture of the matter. It needs a bit of cocoon-pulling and truth-telling. This process just caters to the reader's needs in re-reading, so it produces better results. Therefore, the first-person narrative has incomparable effect in story suspense and reader's feelings, which is the reason why detective stories will adopt the first-person narrative later.

It can be seen that the author controls readers' sympathy for the narrator through the technique of narrative perspective (Currie, 2003, p. 23), because almost all information readers get is from the narrator. But sympathy does not mean identification. The former is a kind of friendly feeling, while the latter completely abandons the reader's subjectivity. In fact, there is a difference between the views of readers, narrators and authors, which produces a kind of narrative tension, leaves some room for readers' to think and enjoy.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Taking the Gothic novel "The Black Cat" and the detective novel "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" as examples, this paper makes an analysis of Allan Poe's motivations for the first-person narratives from three aspects. First of all, it is Poe's life experience. The first-person narrative can express Poe's depression and pressure in real life, give him a platform to vent his emotions, and reflect his subjectivity. Then it is analyzed from Poe's creative principle of "effect theory", which can be divided into topic limitation, role-shaping story effect and thematic functions. Poe's fiction is not often the epic storytelling, but mostly about personal adventure or exploration, which is more suitable for the use of the first-person narrative. Through the use of the first-person narrative perspective, Poe could not only show the delicacy and richness of the inner activities of "I" in the novel, but also see the different aspects of characterization. Because of the unreliability of such first person narrative and internal transformation, it indeed adds some tensions to the novel. Of course, all narrative methods serve the theme of novels. The use of first-person narrative reduces the didactic nature of novels and makes ideas conveyed in the novel more acceptable to readers. Finally, it increases reader's enjoyment of reading. First-person narrative can quickly establish contacts with readers. It can better create suspense in the novel, make readers have the desire to read and produce the pleasure of reading. All in all, by analyzing motivations of Poe's first-person narrative, this paper aims to give readers a better understanding and insight into Poe's novel creation.

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