



Edgar Allan Poe and His Detective Fictions

XU Wenru^{[a],*}

^[a]School of Foreign Studies, Shandong University of Finance and Economics, Ji'nan, China.

*Corresponding author.

Received 20 June 2013; accepted 26 September 2013

Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe is the originator of the modern detective fictions. His detective fictions, only five, but were translated into many different languages. As a poet with aesthetic tendencies, he uses horror and thriller to cause readers' aesthetic pleasure and tries to blend aesthetic appeal to popular culture in an experimental writing style which has a significant impact on the later Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie's detective fictions. In the background of theoretical prosperity, Poe's detective fictions have aroused many critics' attention from new criticism to psychoanalysis, poststructuralism and other perspectives.

Key words: Edgar Allan Poe; Detective fiction; Writing style; Aesthetic appeal

XU Wenru (2013). Edgar Allan Poe and His Detective Fictions. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 7(2), 59-62. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320130702.2761>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320130702.2761>

INTRODUCTION

The British holds that the patent right of invention of detective fictions should belong to them, but actually, an American named Edgar Allan Poe had finished five detective short stories between 1841 and 1845 which were imbued with the basic traits of defective fictions. He is therefore regarded as "originator of detective fiction" in public reading.

Edgar Allan Poe was born in Boston, Massachusetts. His parents died when he was a small child and he was informally adopted by Allan couple. Having shortly

attended the University of Virginia and served in the military, Poe left the couple. He published his first anthology "Tamerlane" (1821) at his own expense and embarked on his writing career from then on. Although Poe became so famous in his life time, he could never get rid of poverty. The death of his wife Virginia depressed Poe so deeply that he died two years later. His life experience deeply influences his writing. Poe's short fictions and poems which always spread with pessimistic even murderous atmosphere are access to his most exemplary writing, entry into his uniquely terrifying world, and intriguing connections to facets of their author's tragically disordered life.

1. TRADITIONAL DETECTIVE FICTIONS AND THEIR MODES

Poe created a story set in Paris (*The Murder in the Rue Morgue*) in 1841, so the detective fictions rapidly became a very popular literary genre in America, Britain and France to a lesser extent. The genre is most of time relegated to the category of low fiction, but actually is a durable literary form that has proven extremely flexible and creative. It is such an especially valuable literature that attracts so much attention from critics. Detective fictions' structure is to some extent very explicit. The basic premise of all detective fictions is that a society is ordered, real, but the result of the crime causes the society disordered. Under normal circumstances, a hero arrives—a legal staff, private detective or amateur sleuth—through hard work and luck, or through logical reasoning, to solve the crime, identify the perpetrators, and the social order is restored. In more recent times, especially in postmodernist novels, the latter few steps may not always occur, or sometimes the detection becomes a puzzle. In the detective fictions, the main thread is the criminal case-solving. The two sides of conflict are the detective who always represents justice and the criminal who represents

the evil respectively. The motive of crime is usually concerned with property, love, position, or fame. To some extent, the detective fictions possess the positive social significance and critical spirit. The detective fictions of excellence are concretely and smoothly structured which is unexpected as well as reasonable. At the same time, the detective fiction writers always insist "Literature is about human nature", so in the fictions of Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie and other famous writers, both the detective and the criminal are depicted so vividly and have the strong characteristics. The detection of the criminal case which is based upon the scientific facts inspires the reader to deduct on the basis of their own learning while reading, so the process of reading becomes an intelligence test. The writers always try their best to design difficult plots to attract readers' attention which results in the duel between the criminal and the detective that is also between the writer and the reader. The content is mixed together with much information from different scientific areas, such as physics, chemistry, geography, and history which readers can absorb to improve their mode of thinking and elevate their minds while intensifying their emotional reactions.

2. POE AND HIS DETECTIVE FICTIONAL PATTERNS

Poe's writing style is weird and decadent full of smooth and concrete writing skills and musical language. He insists that producing works of art is a purely subjective process of thinking, needlessly reflects any type of real life, and always emphasizes that pure art must give people aesthetic enjoyment. He champions art for art's sake (before the term itself was coined). He is consequentially an opponent of didacticism. Poe's technique of expression is always related with the dark and horrible corpse robber or some kind of monstrous doom atmosphere which hints that the dying can back to life or the soul can drift around us. All of these represent that he has an eccentric and morbid character. He was an advocate and supporter of the literary magazine. He felt "short story" or "tales" in the early nineteenth century which were usually considered as vulgar art, along with the magazines that published them were in fact the legitimate art forms with the novel or epic poems. He insists on the artistic value of the short story which is influential in the short story's rise to prominence in later generations. His short fictions are usually divided into two categories—detective fictions and horror fictions. A group of detective fictions produced by this abnormal writer are *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841), *The Mystery of Marie Roget* (1842), *The Gold Bug* (1843), *The Purloined Letter* (1844), *Thou Art the Man* (1844).

The success of these five fictions can be proved from four aspects. Firstly, Poe is the first writer who produces the defective fiction consciously. He takes the detection and reasoning as theme and murder as main

clue. The process of murdering and reasoning runs through the story from beginning to the end. He uses the technique of reasoning successfully. Firstly, excluding all the impossible elements, the rest are facts. Secondly, if the criminal details are more bizarre, the detection is much easier and also the conclusion is more simple. Poe considers that the fact never "lies at the bottom of a well". The really important fact must be superficial. The truth is not in the tip of a horn but where we only raise our heads. The murderer usually grasps this kind of psychology and purposely makes a mystery of simple things, but the conclusion is usually unexpectedly simple. Nobody can expect that the murderer is an orangutan in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* and the stolen letter is just under everyone's eyes in *The Purloined Letter*. The strategy will be used in many detective fictions especially in the works of Conan Doyle, whose description of details and characters' psychology is more exquisite compared with Poe. Then, evidence of his contributions lay not only in his employment of the detective's narrator, a Dr. Watson-like man who relays information to the reader, but also in the creation of some famous characters like C. Auguste Dupin (*The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, *The Mystery of Marie Roget*, and *The Purloined Letter*) and William Legrand (*The Gold Bug*). Dupin is a descendent of a famous French family. He can only live on his heritage, for his succeeding failures in his career. He likes reading books, dreaming and thinking about problems silently in the dark night, particularly curious about the doubtful case in everyday life. Decoding the suspense becomes his favorite. He has already possessed the analytical and deductive abilities which a detective is supposed to have. In order to set off Dupin's resourcefulness, Poe creates a character which is a stupid-looking and self-opinionated journalist. Dupin is nearly forgotten today, but his spirit lives on in the most of famous and successful detectives like Sherlock Holmes. As Watson is to remark "You remind me of Edgar Allan Poe's Dupin." Dupin is to strongly influence Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to create the famous detective Sherlock Holmes.

Poe creates five different kinds of criminal patterns through five detective fictions. *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* is full of suspense. The crime happens in an airtight house. It is hard to guess how the murderer an orangutan enters the room. The result is surprising. The detective excludes all the possibilities and finds the facts by induction, deduction and some other reasoning methods which prove that the setting of plot is extremely well-organized. In *The Gold Bug*, the criminal is exposed by decoding the suspense. The process of decoding applies a lot of mathematical operations and number's permutations and combinations and the design of plot-setting is covered by a magic color. *The Purloined Letter* exposes a mistake which is easiest to be made for detective story—The most obvious thing is also the easiest to be overlooked. It also proves the conclusion—If the details of a case are more

bizarre, the detection is easier and also the conclusion is more simple. In *The Mystery of Marie Roget*, the trick of murdering is also revealed by reasoning. In *Thou Art the Man*, the truth is found out by a psychological tactics which is asking a dead person to speak. In the five fictions, the detective firstly gives a hypothesis based on a thorough analysis of the murderer's psychological reaction and endurance and then proves his hypothesis by applying many flexible psychological strategies to solve the case. These criminal and detective patterns provide future detective fictions with many different modes of writing and make them become more mature in all aspects.

Finally, Poe makes up the detective story in the way of reasoning and psychological description. In Poe's stories, the murderous atmosphere is constructed so strongly that the reader feels as if he is participating. He relates the criminal acts with human's greed nature and puts forward a very important researching topic—motive of crime. We can call Edgar Allan Poe "originator of detective fiction" and he fully deserves this honor, though interestingly, Poe himself never admits. He only treats these five short fictions as his works of play. As a writer who insists on the pure art, he never considers the detective story-writing so meaningful, but his influence is still profound and lasting in the history of detective fictions.

3. POE'S AESTHETIC THEORIES AND HIS DETECTIVE FICTIONAL WRITING

3.1 Poe's Aesthetic Theories

Most of the elements used in Poe's horror fictions and poems affect his detective fictional writing deeply. The mysticism Poe praises highly and his dark and horrible writing style help his detective fictions even more mysterious. His success attributes to his talents not only in detective fictions but another two. The content of these fictions and poems is always concerned with the abnormal psychology and the situation of decadent and death. He said "the unity of effect or impression is a point of the greatest importance" (Poe, 2004, p.586). He tries to raise the funny to the weird, the scared to the horrible, and the strange to the mysterious. All he wants to prove is that evil is always the original motif in people's hearts. Certainly, in such a society that the criminal offences are rampant, Poe's detective fictions are not out of concern for the care of social problems, but for the interest in the description of psychological behaviors and mysterious incidents that we can find in his horror fictions. The writing skills and viewpoints in these two kinds of fictions complement each other to reach a unity. Poe's "pure poems" he called is also composed by the weird and morbid images completely giving us a kind of pessimistic feeling. In "Raven", his representative poem, he chooses this ominous bird to express his extremely sorrow and despair. The poem is rich with musical phrases, sensuous

and frightening images. All of these writing techniques and thinking modes help Poe to design so many different ways of murder and construct different kinds of horrible atmosphere. All of the elements he employs in his fictions and poems—delight, horror, fantasy, learning, suspense establish him to be an outstanding writer with dreamlike magic power. The common and basic principle of Poe's writing is that the writer should try to create a spiritual effect upon the reader. "There are no extra elements in Poe, no subplots, no minor characters, and no digressions except those that show the madness of deranged first-person ('I') narrators" (retrieved from internet). "Ultimately, Poe took writing to be a moral task that worked not through teaching lessons, but in simultaneously stimulating his readers' mental, emotional, and spiritual faculties through texts of absolute integrity" (Edgar Allan Poe).

3.2 Poe's Political Stance

The later appearing "father of detective fiction" Conan Doyle and "queen of detective fiction" Agatha Christie are all under the influence of Edgar Allan Poe. Actually, his appearance in literary history is not accidental. Poe lived in the south of America where the slavery was defended stubbornly. The writer himself also supports slavery which influences his writing deeply. For example, Chinese scholar argues that in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*,

Poe's ambivalence towards the beast and his obedience to the invisible rule of "political correctness" under the social circumstances in 19th century USA, marked by the notorious tradition of racial discrimination against African-Americans, who were and are alluded as apes, betray the subtle interrelation between literature and politics at the time. Poe, generally regarded an aesthete in art and a liberal in social life, was always torn apart between rationalism and irrationalism, reality and fantasy, and the conservative and the radical. That Poe took passive cynicism as an ideology and was ironically forced to face social phenomena while unconsciously exposing them was no exception in the "tale of ratiocination", a genre of "escapist literature" as it was and is (Yuan, 2012, p.62).

Among the representatives of American Renaissance writers, only Poe comes from the Old South, but the places, characters and themes in his works often transcend time and space constraints, not easy to paste the South or American regional labels. While his contemporaries Irving, Cooper, Hawthorne, Emerson, etc. often use American natural scenery as the background of their works which reflects the awakening national and ethnic consciousnesses. Most people think that Poe's ideas and creation get rid of the shackles of social politics, ideology and economical situation reaching a height of pure aesthetics. however, Poe's identities as employed editor and professional writer made him maintain a close contact with the sensitive and popular subjects in the American society. His decadent and pessimistic mood spreading all over his fictions and poems just reflects the sentiments of the declining classes of southern society. His cynicism

ideology (Zizek, 2002, p.40) and his yearning to be a “pure” poet and writer always contradict to the point that he cannot describe the integral human in his works.

Edgar Allan Poe’s “art for art’s sake” aesthetic theory and literary practice cannot escape from social, economical, political, cultural and ideological bondage and influence. Poe as an employed editor, critic, and professional writer maintained a close contact with the racial trauma and ethnic identity crisis which situated in the American cultural center in the 19th century. His works uses and deconstructs the pop cultural forms in the cultural market as well as reflects the horror and violence of slavery society in the form of horror fictions and detective fictions. When Poe parodies the racist stereotypes and clichés, he actually challenges and subverts the pure racial concept. In the detective fiction *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* and horror fiction *Black Cat*, Poe employs the image of animal to represent the slaves. He actually tries to evaluate the social divisional attitudes of slavery from a relatively more objective viewpoint and explore American political culture from the deep psychological perspective showing a cautious attitude towards the emancipation of the slaves. Poe reminded white Americans wary of slavery and the abolitionist movement, showing his conservative political views.

3.3 Poe’s Aesthetic Appeal

Poe’s detective novels have a dual nature: on the one hand, he maintains a critical attitude of the mainstream culture for his elite consciousness; On the other hand, adapt to the consumer culture, his detective fictions can be combined with the public experience and arouse readers’ pleasure. In this way, he tries to defend the author’s autonomy and independence without ignoring the market. It is the inherent tension between this bold and innovative artistic experimentation and aesthetic concept of art that gives Poe’s detective novels infinite charm.

For artistic creation process is also a production process, readers’ acceptance and reaction constitutes an important part in the literary production process. Consumers’ free choices of the text force the author to pay attention to reader’s horizon of expectations. Detective fictions as a literary aesthetic form made for mass consumption allow readers to the exposure of the aesthetic production process and to be involved in imagination, emotion, and aesthetic narrative construction. With the aid of traditional Gothic novel’s popular elements like suspense, murder and terror, Poe digs the detective fiction as a self-sufficient aesthetic object and renders the form to refresh his aesthetic ideal.

From some critics’ points of view, Poe’s detective fictions are not concerned about material life but the spiritual realm. He employs the popular form to convey profound spiritual messages. In his detective fictions like *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, he provides only a purely aesthetic judgment, rather than moral judgments to the reader which is coincident with Poe’s aesthetic philosophy and literature purport.

CONCLUSION

Poe, the most controversial and most understood writer in the literacy history, left us a great deal of literature legacy (Hayes, 2004, p.85). In the one hundred and fifty years time after Poe’s death, there are numerous controversies surrounding him. Especially after World War II, western criticism entered the times of pluralism, Poe is always the beloved of many critical discourses including reader-response criticism, psychoanalysis, new criticism, and postmodernism (like metaphysical detective fictions) (Nicol, 2009, p.164). Almost all the theoretical discourses benefit from Poe’s text. More worthy of our attention is that Poe creates a new style of detective fictions which has a significant impact on the later Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie’s novels.

Modern literature suggests that the distinction between high literature and low literature should be cancelled, especially in the postmodernist literature, like *The Name of Rose* by Eco, the author usually parodies some so called low fictions like detective fictions, science fictions and romantic novels, etc or picks up some messages from them as their tools to deconstruct or subvert the traditional values even the whole world, so detective fictions or some other popular genres of fiction have taken much more notice than before. A century and a half after his death, Edgar Allan Poe is instantly identifiable and remains immensely enjoyable.

REFERENCES

- Edgar Allan Poe. Retrieved from <http://www.enotes.com/edgar-allan-poe-essays/poe-edgar-allan>.
- Hartmann, J. H. (2008). *The marketing of Edgar Allan Poe*. New York: Routledge.
- Hayes, K. J. (2004). *The Cambridge Companion to Edgar Allan Poe*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Levine, S., & Susan, L. (Eds.). (1990). *The short fiction of Edgar Allan Poe*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Nicol, B. (2009). *The Cambridge introduction to postmodern fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Poe, E. A. (2004). A review: *Twice-told tales*. In P. Lauter (Ed.), *The heath anthology of American literature* (Volume 1.), (2nd ed.). W.W. Norton & Co Ltd.
- Poe, E. A. (2008). *A complete collection of tales by Edgar Allan Poe*. Beijing: World Books Publishing Corporation.
- Walker, I. (1997). *Edgar Allan Poe*. London & New York: Routledge.
- Yuan, H. G. (2012). Irony and cynicism in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. *Foreign Literature Studies*, (1), 62.
- Zizek, S. (2002). *The sublime object of ideology* (G. M. Ji, Trans.) Beijing: Central Compilation & Translation Press.