

Symbolic Analysis of Animal Images in Edgar Allan Poe's Works

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ABSTRACT

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) is an influential writer in the history of American literature and even in world literature. He is a novelist, a poet and a literary theorist, who is known as a pioneer of horror fiction, science fiction and detective fiction. The style of his works is unique and fills with rich connotation and it involves dual personality and non-communication between people. In particular, the animal images account for most proportion in his all works, and this is the focus of this thesis. The present study is to analyze some typical animal images in Poe's works from the perspective of symbolism. Animal images in Poe's literary works are divided into two categories for analysis. One is about the real-world animals, which suggest the darkness and complexity of human nature and reveal people's living state and psychological state. Poe uses these animal images as tools to show a certain person's personality or instinct and manifest the inner world or spirit situation of social beings. The other group concerns the virtual unknown animal images, such as gold bug. In his works, Poe expresses the desire of mankind to know themselves and the world. This study is supposed to analyze the symbolic meaning and functions of animal images, whether the real ones or the imaginable one in Poe's works, which is expected to expand the perspective of animal image analysis in Edgar Allan Poe's works, and provide a broader development space for the study of Edgar Allan Poe. It helps to deepen readers' understanding of human nature and human life in Edgar Allan Poe's works.

Keywords: animal images, symbolism, horror fiction, Edgar Allan Poe

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INTRODUCTION

Edgar Allan Poe is an important American novelist, poet and critic in the nineteenth century. Poe occupies a pivotal position in the history of American literature. Although he has been excluded from the mainstream of American literature for a long time, his position in the history of American literature and the huge impact of Freudianism, French symbolism and detective novels is unquestionable.

In Poe's literary works, he mobilizes every elements of novel and uses many writing techniques to create a strong artistic effect. One of the most used writing techniques by Poe is symbolism. Poe's symbolism is not to stick to one pattern, but to exist everywhere in his works,

including settings, characters, animals and even themes (Zhu & Cheng 2008: 74). Poe uses symbolism to reveal humans' living state as well as their psychological state. He is good at employing specific things or images to express some abstract concepts or subtle emotions, through which readers can get an insight of his mind on how he views the world and how he perceives common objects and behaviors, and thus take advantage of the pleasure of reading his works creatively.

In the present study, animal images are divided into two categories for analysis. One is the real-world animals, which are melancholy, lonely and morbid. The other group is the virtual unknown animal image, such as gold bug. The thesis selects five animal images "The raven""The black cat""The fiery horse""The gold bug""The swan" to analyze their behind meanings.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction of symbolism

Symbolism, as a movement in literature, occurred and lasted from the 19th century to the early 20th century (Zhang 2009:18). Symbolic literature mainly covers poetry and drama and its influence has continued to this day. Western mainstream academics believe that the birth of symbolic literature is a watershed between classical literature and modern literature. Symbolism can be defined as the art of expressing ideas and emotions indirectly, "by suggesting what these ideas and emotions are, by recreating them in the mind of the reader through the use of unexplained symbols".(Jiang 2004: 7). The charm of symbolism is to explore the meaning that hiding behind every image. Symbolism focuses on personal illusion and inner feelings in the subject and it rarely relates to the broad social themes. It negates vague and general rhetoric and rigid and simplified preaching in the artistic method. Symbolism emphasizes textural image and the method of hint, contrast, associated to create works. Zhang (2009) gives me some inspiration. She thinks that many of the classics are filled with symbols, and it is the symbolism that causes the story to stick in the reader's mind and heart and gives the story extended meanings beyond its surface value. When we read, we may feel that certain characters and certain things in the story stand for more than themselves, or hint at larger meanings (Barnet, 2000:195).

Symbolic meanings of animal images

This study is to analyze animal images in Allan Poe's works from a symbolic viewpoint. There are a lot of animal images in Edgar Allan Poe's works, such as black cat, serpent, raven, horse and worm. The animal image he chooses is the description of reality, the contrast of his situation and his resistance to life. At the same time, this unique literary animal phenomenon that he created also shows his concern for people who are stuck in the weird and miserable living state, his worry about human's abnormal mental state and his consideration about human's future. Animal images in Poe's works are closely related to the characters.

In the present study, animal images are divided into two categories for analysis. One is the real-world animals, which are melancholy, lonely and morbid. They suggest the darkness and complexity of human nature and reveal people's living state and psychological state. Poe uses these animal images as tools to show a certain person's personality or instinct and reveal the inner world and spirit situation of people. The other group is the virtual unknown animal image, such as gold bug. In his works, Poe expresses the desire of mankind to know themselves and the world. He tried to find a path of development for mankind in a broader time and space, but the establishment of a new life style is not easy. The strange animal images in his works symbolize sin and death on the journey. All of Poe's works cannot be separated from his bumpy life, his unique artistic pursuit and his keen observation and deep thinking about the times.

Review of Allan Poe and his works

Symbolism was not given the priority to analyze Poe's works at the beginning time. Western academic researches on Poe and his works can be generally divided into three stages more than a century. The first stage is Personality dimension- biographies critical discourse, impressionism critical discourse, psychoanalysis critical discourse, and social and history critical discourse (Dayan, 1987:134). They are on the basis of Poe's life experience and personality. The second stage is text level - text analysis on the basis of Poe's works (Gerald, 2002:87). The third stage is abstract structure level - structuralism and post-structuralism critical discourse on the basis of Poe's abstract structure (Berkeley, 2001:94). As is discussed above, the mainstream overseas researches on Allan Poe tend to analyze his writing techniques, his writing style and his works from the perspective of the social background, life experience and characters. But actually symbolism is a magic key to interpret Poe's works, although they are not attached enough importance. In recent years, the domestic researchers began to focus on symbolic analysis on animal images. For instance, the black cat is one of the most preferable animal images, which is a symbol of morbid personality, a reflection with a lack of independent personality and a negative pursuit of inner beauty (Zhu 2004: 125-127).

The black cat is the embodiment of witch, which represents evil (Zhu 2009: 94). The Black Cat also permeates with ill-fated confession of the author. Jing (2006) uses the image of the black cat to reflect the psychological state of the characters and set off an indescribable sense of terror. There are also some articles about the image of raven. The raven is a messenger to convey the sorrow and despair of the narrator (Liu 2013: 14-15). In addition to the symbol of death, Poe gives the raven authority and strength (Lu 2005: 4). Poe uses black colors of black cat and raven to express characters' inner world, set off a terrifying atmosphere and show readers a theme of death and sin (Gao 2013: 205). Besides the above discussion on the significance of animal images, their functions in plot reinforcement are worth exploiting as well. The present study is to conduct a symbolic analysis on animal images in terms of both plot development and significance interpretation.

SYMBOLIC MEANING OF ANIMAL IMAGES

There are many animal images in Ellen Poe's works and symbolism is a magic key to interpret Poe's works. I choose five animal images from the "The Black Cat", "The Raven", "Metzengerstein", "The Gold Bug" and "Sphinx" to explore their symbolic meanings.

Real world animal images

The Raven

The success for Allan Poe's poem The Raven was not coincidental, for he succeeded in laying a sorrowful tone for the poem, creating various representational images and applying metaphorical devices in a unique and inventive way.

The protagonist weeps over his lost love. Though claiming that he will restrain his grief, he is still overwhelmed by sadness. When the raven intrudes into his room and answers his first question with "Nevermore", he thinks that "what it utters is its only stock and store, caught from some unhappy master." (Wu1990:14-15). His response is rational until this point, but as things proceed, he gradually loses his sanity. Whimsies after whimsies come into his mind, and he keeps questioning this raven but gets only one answer "Nevermore", which adds to the anguish and depression of this young man. He keeps upsetting himself with this kind of "self-torture" until he finds it unbearable and orders the raven to "Take thy beak from out my heart, and take thy form from off my door!" (Wu 2002:24-25). However, the ending of the poem suggests that the young man will never be able to forget the raven and what it represents, namely, his hope to reunite with his love is destined to be fruitless.

In this poem, the raven carries multiple symbolic meanings. It reminds people of either fortune or misfortune. In addition to its association with death and bad omen, the raven also symbolizes knowledge and heaven, especially when it is regarded as the messenger of truth. The fact that the raven rests on the bust of Athena, the goddess of wisdom, links it to intelligence. But some readers consider it sarcasm, for the young man seems to lose his intellectual integrity and grows superstitious after this raven makes its appearance. The raven's consistent reply of "Nevermore" strengthens its authority and conclusiveness and reminds people of the fact that ravens usually serve as the messenger of death in mythologies. From this perspective, when the man asks the raven whether it shall "clasp a sainted maiden whom the angels named Lenore", the answer of the raven implies the finality of death and his lost lover also refutes such a possibility. The raven utters nothing but "Nevermore" from the beginning to the end of the poem, but Allan Poe makes the reader see that imagination and symbolization can give rich meanings to a word.

The Black Cat

In the short novel *The Black Cat*, "I" am an alcoholic. After cruelly scraping out one eye from my cat, I hang it to death. Out of repentance, I adopt a one-eye stray cat. But I think that the cat follows my footsteps purposefully and makes me stumble, I become furious and kill the cat with an axe. My wife tries to stop me, so I kill her too and then hide her body inside the wall of the basement. I am not aware that the black cat is also sealed in the wall. When the police come to check on the basement, the cry of the cat leads the police to the evidence of my murder. By fictionalizing the plot of "killing cats" and "being killed by cats", the author achieves the expected terrifying effect. By developing "scare" into "terror", he depicts the images of two mysterious and terrifying black cats: a strangled cat with a noose tied around its neck and a black cat standing on the head of the corpse, the white furs on its chest forming a scaffold and fire of anger burning inside the sole eye that's left. The terrifying black cat images are a great shock to the readers and force them to apprehend the aesthetics behind.

The black cat in the novel is a special animal image. Allan Poe says in *Instinct vs. Reason—A Black Cat* that the boundary that separates animal instinct from human reason is undoubtedly the most blurry and unsatisfying. "There exists a shocking similarity between human reason and the behaviors of doodlebug, beaver as well as various kinds of spiders. With his observations of a black cat tactfully opening a door that does not open easily, he proves that the black cat applies perceptual ability and responsive ability in opening the door, which we think are only unique features of reasoning.

The author's in-depth reflection on the instinct of animals based on his observations of animal and cat behaviors is woven into the image of *A Black Cat* as harmoniously as salt resolves in water, and the result is a unique image of a cat with intelligence, emotions combined with instincts. The black cat is an animal that is endowed with feelings and intelligence, but it is only a textual connotation, namely, the objective connotation inherent in the image and story which is implied by the image of the cat. However, a symbolic connotation can be extracted from the plot and image of the cat. The author writes in the novel that "All black cats are the disguise of the witches", which reveals an implying and metaphorical connotation for the image of the black cat. In addition, by repeatedly describing the image of the black cat and retelling its story, the author intends to remind us of the frequently seen methods of image representation. He writes about cats, but actually aims to describe human; Seemingly, his story is about people murdering cats or cats killing people, but it is more about the cannibalism between human beings; Though he features the love and hatred between the black cat and "I", his real intention is to reveal the same attachment between humans and between nature and humans. What the author means to emphasize is the symbolic meaning of the black cat—reflection on morbid

personality. The black cat story embodies the author's reflection on the lack of independent personality of human beings. The writer creates a terrifying effect in building the image of the black cat. He tries to draw the attention of clinical therapy to the morbid and ugly side of human personality, which proves from the opposite side his pursuit of a beautiful and sound personality. With profound and wide representations, the image of the black cat manifests an aesthetic connotation that transcends the story itself and is more incisive and far-reaching, reflecting that image is larger than thoughts.

The fiery horse

Metzengerstein tells a story of century-long enmity and revenge between two wealth families. Envy and hatred make the two families in ever-lasting rivalry with each other. The Berlifitzings family, weaker in wealth and less powerful in affluence, holds a deep-rooted and insuppressible grudge against the Metzengerstein family, which is badly reputed for its ruthlessness, debauchery and infidelity. The horse first appears on a tapestry in the Metzengerstein mansion. The rider of the giant horse, who happens to be the ancestor of the Berlifitzings family, is depicted to be killed by the sword of "the dagger of a Metzengerstein". While Metzengerstein is staring at the horse, the Berlifitzings' stable catches fire. The next minute, the horse on the tapestry seems to have moved a bit, which leaves its owner in great shock. He felt haunted by an indescribable anxiety, which engulfed his consciousness like a shroud. Trying to escape from the terror, he flees. Meanwhile his enemy was burning in the fire in an attempt to save his horse. The dead Berlifitzings reincarnates in the form of a fiery horse and comes to his enemy with evil intentions. However, Metzengerstein had seen this coming for he claimed that this horse was a devil coming out of Berlifitzings' stable and was obsessed with an unexplainable desire to conquer it. The evilness sending out from the horse does not hold him back; on the contrary, it draws him even closer in a deep attachment to it. His infatuation seems to gain power from each new performance given by the horse that is said to have a temperament as fierce as a demon. Its sinister eyes, evil looks and the malicious back kicks arouse in him an overwhelming desire to conquer it. The horse harbors evil retaliatory intentions, while the duke tries to subdue it to himself through violence. At the end of this evil vs. evil fight, the horse that represents irrationality leaps into the flames, carrying its owner on its back on a tempestuous night. This fight between violence eventually leads to mutual destruction- they both disappear in the burning fire and the rising smoke. A cloud of smoke settles above the wrecked wall in the shape of the distinct colossal figure of a horse.

The fiery horse represents the evil of irrationality that has gone out of control. Through the image of the fiery horse, the author reveals the evilness in human. Triggered by retaliation, envy and the desire to conquer, it will lead to a destruction of not only themselves, but also others.

Virtual unknown animal images

The gold bug

Allan Poe's *The Gold Bug* tells a treasure seeking story. "I" and my friend Legrand are both experiencing a difficult time. Coincidentally, Legrand gets a gold bug and a mysterious sketch written on a goat skin. Legrand's wisdom and persistence leads them to solve the mysteries of the goatskin sketch and find a huge chest full of treasure buried deep in the forest. The story reflects the dream and desire of the young man to pursue wealth. Allan Poe speaks highly of the wisdom and courage of the protagonist. And the gold buck that brings them good luck is also give an air of holiness. The gold bug is of a mysterious origin and Legrand wonders that there is no bug that looks more like a scull than this one and that even a naturalist does not hear of its existence yet. Undoubtedly the bug carries strong symbolic meanings. However, in the text, the bug does not directly lead to the treasure. Instead, the protagonist locates the

treasure by solving the complex and strange patterns on the sketch that looks filthy and will easily be overlooked. But the protagonist won't be able to find the sketch without the mysterious and elusive bug. It is not only a guide, but also the symbol of wealth and the key to the treasure house. The protagonist is a wise and careful man who is eager to change the current dilemma he is in. "I" can see that he is highly civilized and extremely smart, but is sometimes subject to periodical indignation, which makes him shift between overwhelming ebullience and joyless depression. Such unpredictable temperament breaks out occasionally." Mental sufferings caused by an eager search for the correct life path were common among people at Allan Poe's time. In order to escape from their survival crisis and conflicts, people were in crazy search for a way out. The gold bug may represent some kind of human desire, but it also symbolizes the wish for a more comfortable living. Allan Poe realized that other than virtue and wisdom, Americans in the 19th century were also characterized by the greed for wealth, desire for power and pursuit for the remote and cruel freedom that was favored by Indians and wolves. However, it is such desires that drive people to venture enthusiastically, explore passionately and pursue wildly. The protagonist dreams of getting a large fortune: "I" was too anxious to obtain the fictitious treasure. My poor friend lost his consciousness over some dream of becoming rich overnight." Due to his unmatched intelligence and fortune, the lucky protagonist decoded the secrets of the bug and realized his wish.

The swan

The name "Sphinx" immediately reminds the readers of the close connection between the story and Greek mythology. Sphinx is a kind of swan. In Greek mythology, it refers to a witch with wings and the body of a lion and represents terror and death. Therefore, it gives a deadly atmosphere to the story and fills it with an air of horror. When Poe used animal images from Greek mythology in his works, he tended to lean towards their symbolic meanings to create an upsetting atmosphere and strengthen the shocking effects of his works. Words like "death, skull patterns" are used frequently in the novel. Though Poe's description of the animal image Sphinx only takes up a limited number of lines, being a symbol of death itself and the original prototype of Sphinx was a terror shocking enough to the readers.

THE INFLUENCING FACTORS IN POE'S CREATION OF ANIMAL IMAGES

Poe's Life Experience

Milan Kundera (2003) thinks that "all novels of all times focus on the mystery of the self" and Poe's works are no exception. Poe's life is filled with hardship and disasters. He lost all the care and love he could get in his childhood, and became mentally distorted. When he was in the literature world, he had many fights with well-accomplished literature masters and made himself a lot of enemies. Life was difficult and his dreams to set up a magazine failed. "Weird, depressed and desperate" is not only descriptions for his works, but also an authentic reflection of his life which was filled with sufferings and miseries. Though Poe excelled at his studies, he did not get along well with his classmates. Because he comes from a family of street artist, he was discriminated wherever he went. When he went to the University of Virginia at 17, he became addicted to alcohol, gambling and drugs. He was expelled from the university due to his uninhibited behaviors. Later, he completely broke up with his step father. Under great living pressure, he had to write literary works and work as editor for many newspapers and magazines so that he could barely survive. When he was 38, his young wife Virginia left him due to throat fracture. Suffering from mental and physical torture, Poe drowned his sadness in alcohol and his health deteriorated. In 1849, he died of cerebral hemorrhage at the age of 40.

Though Poe lived in a time of rapid capitalism development, his life was spent in poverty and misery. His ambitions, however great, ended up in vain. Overwhelmed by long-term affliction

and under the influence of alcohol addiction and compulsive gambling, he walked on the path of reality escapism. Therefore, it can be said that Poe's art is the fruit of his neurosis. He relived himself through artistic creation, because "what art expresses is higher than the imagination or thinking of the creator; Arts can be manipulated tactically to express something similar to the fantasy or thoughts of the creator, who will gain relief and pleasure from appreciating the process of such expression." Therefore, literature creation relives him of mental pressure. The animal images Poe created with his pen represent his anger over the world and act as a vent for his fear. They also imply his pursuit of the "gold dream" and hint at the lack of individuality of modern people. From his twisted life course, we may catch a glimpse of the subtle connection between his works and his experience.

Influence of the effect theory

As a critic, Poe has his own set of theories on literary creation, of which the effect theory is an important part. In his essays- *The Philosophy of Composition*, *The Poetic Principle* and *Review of Twice-Told Tales*, a large volume of arguments are made on the effect. "The effect of a literary work should come from itself". In his practice of literary creation, Poe always adheres to the principle of bringing shock to the readers and art for art's sake and creates his own aesthetic effect. In *The Philosophy of Art*, Poe explains his writing technique. He thinks that we should make a story before writing and choose an effect that can touch the readers. Then consider whether such an effect can be achieved through plot or tone. The next step is to search for the plot and tone that is conducive to creating the previously determined effect. *The Raven* can give us a clue of Poe's philosophy of composition: first, the most suitable tone for beauty is sorrow, so Poe chose raven instead of parrot because a raven is considered ominous and it is thus more consistent with the woeful and sad tone; Second, reiterative sentences can strengthen the expressiveness and infectivity of the poem. When the beauty's death is reiterated with the monotonous utterance of the raven, the readers' sorrow and depression will be raised sharply.

CONCLUSION

Poe revealed his inner thoughts subtly through his novels and poems. The animal images that symbolize the emotions of human beings and relate to prototypes of Greek mythology manifest Poe's life and experiences.

The thesis uses symbolic to analyze some typical animal images in Poe's works. There are a lot of animal images in Edgar Allan Poe's works, such as black cat, serpent, raven, horse and worm. The animal image he chooses is the description of reality, the contrast of his situation and his resistance to life. At the same time, this unique literary animal phenomenon that he created also shows his concern for people who are stuck in the weird and miserable living state, his worry about human's abnormal mental state and his consideration about human's future. In this thesis, there are two kinds of animal images, real-world animal and virtual unknown animal images. The real-world animal images such as the black cat, the raven and the fiery horse manifest human beings' unique spiritual world and delicate emotions. Poe set off a terrifying atmosphere and show readers a theme of death and sin. The virtual unknown animal images such as the gold bug and the swan reveal the desire of wealth and power drives people to venture enthusiastically, explore passionately and pursue wildly.

Until now, many of Poe's sarcastic novels have realistic significance. They make people laugh, which is beneficial to their health, though a bit of bitterness is sometimes detected at the end of their laughter. Actually, Poe is not only concerned about his own existence, but shows care for the mental state of all human beings living in the real world by making heart-wrenching literary creations. As the American scholar Robert Spieler (1990) put it: "Poe is the first of

American writers to reproduce life completely to set off human being's struggle and depression in times of difficulty." The writer of this paper intends to better appreciate Poe's works and comprehend his composition philosophy by exploring the animal images in his works.

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