

Illness Narratives in Edgar Allan Poe's Short Stories

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Edgar Allan Poe occupies a unique position in the history of American literature. His gothic horror novels prove astounding on account of extraordinary rendering the atmosphere and in-depth psychological description. In his gothic novels, pestilence, tuberculosis and madness are common and the protagonists always suffer from foregoing diseases. Based on the investigation of the relation between Poe's life and illness and the social and cultural background of Poe's time, the thesis aims to discuss the emergence and embodiment of illness narratives in Poe's tales in order to explore the aesthetic values and cultural connotations.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, illness narratives, gothic novels

Introduction of Edgar Allan Poe

Poe's childhood was a miserable one. He was born in Boston in 1809, the child of struggling traveling actors. Both of his parents died within two years after his birth. Poe witnessed his mother's death at an early age, and influenced by this traumatic event, Poe sought desperately for the replacement of his mother figure and repeated the tragic scene in his writings. Later Poe was taken into the home of John Allan, a wealthy merchant of Richmond, Virginia. The Allans failed to offer the orphan a normal home as father and son enjoyed nothing but an unhappy relationship together. Even after the breakup of Poe's relationship with Mr. Allan, Mrs. Allan remained being kind to Poe and attempted to restore the relationship between the two. However, like Poe's mother Elizabeth, Mrs. Allan was also died of tuberculosis. And Poe felt remarkably guilty for her death. For the time he lived in Baltimore with his father's sister, Mrs. Maria Clemm, and her daughter Virginia. Confident of a secure position and a steady income, Poe then married his young cousin, Virginia Clemm, who was only 13 at the time. Later they began a normal married life until she experienced her first hemorrhage from tuberculosis.

Poverty remained his typical condition. After an agonizingly slow decline, his young wife Virginia died of tuberculosis in the winter of 1847, in their bare cottage in New York City, whose death left him inconsolable and bitter with life than ever. Two years later, at forty, Poe was found in a tavern in a drunken and desperately ill condition. He died four days later.

Illness Narrative

As an eternal topic, illness is as long as life. In the beginning of human knowledge, illness was seen as the will of heaven and a kind of divine punishment and dissatisfaction with mankind reflecting human fear. With

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the advance of society and human understanding, the mysterious veil of illness is gradually unveiled so that people's fear of disease gradually decreases. In the course of fighting against illness, the word "illness" has been endowed with a variety of cultural connotations and metaphorical symbols, reflected in various fields of human cognition. At the same time, the fear of illness is beyond its physiological attributes, even evolved into a collective unconscious.

Illness in literature have a long history and have been concerned by scholars at home and abroad. Illness narrative is a concept both in modern medicine and literature. Its literary meaning never equals to that of the medicine. From the medical perspective, illness narrative is "one of our most powerful forms for expressing suffering and experiences related to suffering". Concerning about illness, personal narratives are means by which the links between body, self, and society are articulated.

Narratives for Tuberculosis

Tuberculosis, the disease that took the lives of the three important women that Poe loved, was portrayed as the disease of a beautiful death. Poe lived in the first half of the 19th century when a host of Americans were susceptible to infectious diseases such as tuberculosis, cholera, diphtheria and so on on account of the ignorance for pathophoresis and poor medical practice. In light of the advance of the industrial revolution, there appeared great industrial waste gas emission leading to Tuberculosis became an epidemic in Europe and America. At the same time, port cities were particularly susceptible to epidemic disease such as Philadelphia, and Boston where Poe was born there in 1809. Poe spent most of his life time in New England region and he witnessed these raging diseases especially Tuberculosis, which claimed the lives of his mother, foster mother and wife. And tuberculosis was a major cause of the misfortunes and miseries of his life.

Poe's young wife Virginia who died of tuberculosis inspired Poe to write his masterpiece *The Masque of the Red Death*. In 1842, while she was playing the piano and singing to amuse her husband, a blood vessel in her throat broke, and blood began to pour from her mouth. She finally died in 1847. In the five years from the first serious evidence of her illness, Virginia had become increasingly weak. Her fragile health and the destruction of her body by tuberculosis sent Poe into deep depression from which he would never fully recover (Sova, 2007, p. 7). He had no choice but only to watch her life fade away. Every time Virginia coughed up blood, Poe felt so painful and distressed that it reminded him of the nightmarish memory—his mother spat blood in his childhood. The two scenarios spanned time and space which flashed in Poe's mind constantly. Therefore, he wrote *The Masque of the Red Death* in 1842 on the basis of the miserable memories.

In *The Masque of the Red Death*, the disease called the Red Death is fictitious. The disease may have been inspired by tuberculosis (or consumption, as it was known then), since the two diseases have similar symptoms for weakness and prolonged cough with blood. The bleeding scenes run through the whole novel. Forgetting the scene of prosperity and gothic resplendent decorative style, the readers tend to be indulged in bloodcurdling scenes to a heart-stopping experience. It has also been suggested that the Red Death is not a disease or sickness at all but a weakness (like original sin) that is shared by all of humankind inherently.

Narratives for Madness

Madness narrative is an important composition of illness narratives. Madmen are always seen in works related to illness. In literary works, by writing madness, writers express the doubt and introspection to the modernity, the betrayal and transcendence to reason, and the query and salvation to the existence. Meanwhile, as a special kind of illness, the metaphorical meaning of madness also has its role to play in literature.

In *The Black Cat* (1843), written in the form of a first-person narrative, Poe particularly describes how a madman abused his pet—a black cat such as eye-gouging or hanging and he cruelly killed his wife. At the beginning of the short story, the narrator describes himself “Yet, mad am I not—and very surely do I not dream” (Poe, 2005, p. 108). The statement implies that the story may be unreliable and adds more suspense. Poe employs multiple themes of insanity, superstition, and alcoholism to impart a palpable sense of horror and foreboding to this tale, while at the same time, deftly advancing his plot and building his characters.

The Tell-Tale Heart is a short story first published in 1843. It is related by an unnamed narrator who endeavors to convince the reader of the narrator's sanity while simultaneously describing a madman the narrator committed. Likewise, at the beginning of the story, the narrator tells readers about himself, “True—nervous—very, very dreadfully nervous I had been and am; but why will you say that I am mad?” (Poe, 2005, p. 156). This sentence tells readers that the narrator proves insane and keeps extreme nervous. However, even during the procedure of the murder, the narrator repeatedly reminds readers that he is not mad. The victim was an old man with a filmy pale blue “vulture-eye”, as the narrator calls it. The narrator emphasizes the careful calculation of the murder, attempting the perfect crime, complete with dismembering the body in the bathtub and hiding it under the floorboards. Ultimately, the narrator's actions result in hearing a thumping sound, which the narrator interprets as the dead man's beating heart.

Conclusion

The narratives of illness prove a common phenomenon of text in Poe's novels. From these narratives, readers not only can have a knowledge of the societal landscape in that time, but also can gain impressive art experience. Poe's illness narratives characterize his writings; meanwhile it also serves as a unique approach of his sophisticated art. Through the depiction of illness and disease that happen to his characters in his tales, Poe presents the beauty of death aesthetically and explores the inner world of his incredible characters.

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