A Study of Thing-Narrative in The Masque of the Red Death

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Abstract:

The Masque of the Red Death is one of Edgar Allan Poe's most important works, which has been studied by numerous scholars from the perspectives of style, narrative aesthetics, and semiotics. However, the relevant interpretation to date has almost completely ignored the description of things in the novel. At present, there is an obvious "material turn" or "non-human turn" in the field of humanities research, that is, the research perspective turns to the "object" components that have been largely ignored in the past, including animals, plants, minerals, ecosystems, landscapes, places, etc. Therefore, from the perspective of the thing-narrative, combined with the social and historical background of the works, this paper analyzes Poe's use of thing-narrative techniques through close reading of the text. Through the in-depth analysis of the interaction between things and characters in the story, the author explains how castles, rooms, and ebony clocks, as cultural symbols, agents with subjectivity, exist as noumenon, influence or predict the fate of characters, and promote the development of the plot. And to further clarify Poe's theme in this novel - the inevitability of death.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe; The Masque of the Red Death; thing-narrative.

1. Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe's famous short story *The Masque of the Red Death* has generated a lot of comments. Most of the comments focus on the style, narrative aesthetics, and death image of the novel, such as Chen Yi and Tian Keyu interpret the presentation of death effect in the *Red Death* from the scene and image. Xu Chaoyang analyzes the theme of the novel from four narrative perspectives: narrative space, focus, characters and narrators, implied author, and real author. Zhuoran analyzes some of the main images in the novel and probes into their inner symbolic meanings related to death. Although the above comments can undoubtedly reveal the meaning potential of the classic novel *The Masque of the Red Death* from different aspects, few scholars have explored it from the perspective of thing-narrative theory.

This study mainly analyzes how things promote the plot development and reveal the fate of characters in the novel from the perspective of thing-narrative, and deepens the theme of death conveyed by Poe. In this paper, literature analysis is used to search and read relevant materials and literature. The advantage of this method is that it can be well-discussed and conducive to the research. The final goal of this research is to focus on the interpretation of three things in the novel: castle, room, and ebony clock. This paper uses the thing-narrative theory to analyze how things act as cultural symbols, ontological beings, and agents with subjectivity, to promote the development of the story and deepen the theme. To achieve the goal, first of all, the author needs to clarify the narrative function of the thing. For literary narration, "thing" may assume three narrative functions. First of all, as a cultural symbol, mapping or influencing human culture. Secondly, as an agent with subjectivity, it acts on the actions of the characters and promotes the narrative process. Finally, it exists as an ontology, transcends the representation of human language and culture, and displays "the material nature of ontology". In literary narration, these three functions of "thing" can function independently or in combination, depending on the author's different rhetorical intentions [1]. Through the in-depth analysis of the interaction between things and characters in the story, the author explains how castles, rooms, and ebony clocks, as cultural symbols, and agents with subjectivity, exist as noumenon, influence or predict the fate of characters, and promote the development of the plot. And to further clarify Poe's theme in this novel - the inevitability of death.

2. Analysis

2.1 Castle: The Opposition between Romance and Classical

Tang Weisheng believes that "thing" may become a symbol in the narrative, and be used as a metaphor for culture, history, and society. The focus of research is not the thing

itself, but the cultural connotation of The Times reflected by the thing.

In the mid-to-late 18th century, Rationalism and Neoclassicism, which overemphasized reason, ignored imagination, devalued emotion and denounced the occult and supernatural, still dominated continental Europe and Britain. The development of Romanticism is in sharp contrast to Neoclassicism. Romantic artists drew inspiration and strength from Medieval culture, which has long been regarded as the antithetical example of classical and neoclassicism. Especially medieval Gothic art, with its non-classical aesthetic characteristics and critical spirit, played an important role in promoting the formation of Romanticism. The medieval legends of Gothic literature, with their morbid and exaggerated emotions, unrealistic imaginations, improbable stories of love and adventure, and various ghosts and ghosts, posed a threat to the century that emphasized order and law, reason, and virtue. Gothic architecture, as an important part of Gothic literature, as the embodiment of barbarism and superstition, despotism and terror, has become an effective tool for novelists to represent the current ideological struggle, and it represents the rebuttal of the emerging romantic trend of thought to neoclassicism. These architectures constitute a unique "gothic" space, which is not only the central setting of the story but also the key to driving the narrative and setting the dark, scary noir tone for the entire novel. Gothic architecture plays such a pivotal role in Gothic fiction that without it, "The whole structure of the Gothic saga loses its foundation and dominant atmosphere." [2].

After the 1820s, the center of Gothic fiction seemed to move to the United States. The writer who made the most prominent development of the internalization of Gothic literature was Edgar Allan Poe [3]. In Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death*, he constructs a chaotic center controlled by tyrannical violence - the castle. The castle is endowed with deep symbolic significance in the novel, and the ideographic function of the architecture is deepened in the literature. The castle in the story is not only the background of the story but as a core symbol in Gothic literature, carrying profound cultural and ideological significance. The castle embodies the architectural style typical of 18th-century Gothic fiction, and it is not only the center stage of the development of the story, but also the key element that moves the plot forward, Poe begins with an impassioned depiction of the gruesome "Red Death," whose choking horror sends the prince fleeing with a thousand friends to the "impregnable" castle. They tried to use the castle to keep away the Red Death, seeking "all joy and peace within the walls.", While outside the walls is a vision of the Red Death's world, death played out silently in this castle. Poe's castle, contrary to tradition, is

not intended to show its majestic grandeur, but to heavily reveal its isolation and oppressive closure, foreshadowing all sorts of disturbing fears [4]. The castle is a symbol of power, darkness, majestic independence, and inviolability, high and fortified walls with no light to leak in, it stands silent and alone, giving a sense of nobility and contempt to all who dare to intrude on its independent kingdom. However, this strength of the castle has been shaken by the "persistent" invasion of the "Red Death", in the face of stubborn death, the strong castle has not been able to hold people's lives, and finally, death broke everything.

Gothic architecture embodies Romanticism's high worship of transcendent power and spiritual will, as well as the transcendence of infinite spirit over limited matter, and transcendent power can only be expressed in movement and in intense antagonistic conflicts [5]. In *The Masque of the Red Death*, the opulence of the castle's interior contrasts with the desolation of the outside world, embodying the cultural clash between Romanticism and neoclassicism. The prince and his guards retreated to the castle, surrounded by strong walls and gates made of steel. Inside the castle, luxurious supplies and entertainment filled the interior, while outside the castle was the world of the Red Death. The seemingly safe castle was eventually destroyed by the Red Death, just as neoclassicism could not withstand the romantic trend, and the author uses this contrast to further deepen the theme of the essay. This contrast deepens the theme and atmosphere in the novel, shows the importance of things symbols in the narrative, and reflects the cultural connotation of The Times.

2.2 Room: Materialization of Color and Emotion

Jane Bennett proposed that "things" are not passive things, but as agents, "things" can not only promote or hinder human plans but also have their movement trajectory and nature. She uses the term "thing-power" to summarize this ability of "things" [6]. Similarly, Tang Weisheng believes that in narrative research, examining the main function of "things" can break through the symbolic mode of "cultural things" in the past, and examine how narratives reproduce the power of "things", highlight the ability of "things" to do things, and tell the history and story of "things" themselves, especially the positive role of "things" in narrative. In *The Masque of the Red Death*, the room highlights its narrative power, becoming a materialization of color and emotion that drives the story.

First, this study will analyze how the first six rooms affect the actions of the characters in the story. The description of the room in the text is "To the right and left, in the middle of each wall, a tall and narrow Gothic window looked out upon a closed corridor which pursued the windings

of the suite. These windows were of stained glass whose color varied by the prevailing hue of the decorations of the chamber into which it opened." [7]. In terms of color effects, the first room is blue, "That at the eastern extremity was hung, for example, in blue -- and vividly blue were its windows." Blue gives a feeling of vastness, tranquility, and detachment, so the arrangement of this room gives an illusion, like a fantasy in a movie, which makes people feel peaceful. This arrangement catered to the mentality of the people at the dance, they chose to use the surface of peace and detachment to suppress the inner depression and trouble and laid the groundwork for the following "Red Death" appearance. The color of the second room is purple, the decorative tapestry of the second room in the novel is purple, and the paneglass is purple, too. In the West, purple also represents nobility and is the color preferred by aristocrats, because the ancient Roman Empire of the Tirian people used purple dye only for the use of nobles, dyed clothes close to crimson, deeply loved by the monarch at that time. In addition, purple has been a religious color since ancient times: in Christianity, purple represents supremacy and the power of the Holy Spirit; The clothing or curtains and sacred vessels of the high priests of Judaism often use purple; The Catholic Church calls purple the bishop's color, the bishop wears purple clothes; In short, purple represents holiness, honor, love and so on. Entering the purple room will remind the guests of their noble status. The third room is green, which is often associated with words such as "spring", "nature" and "vitality", meaning renewal and hope. It also has several extended meanings and is often used to mean inexperienced, untrained, shallow knowledge, etc. "green hand" means "an inexperienced person". Green is a color that is light, refreshing, and pleasing to the eye, but here it is a satire on the blind optimism of the people within the city walls. They thought death could be cut off, but they didn't realize that by cutting off the Red Death, they were also cutting off their escape route. The fourth room is orange, a cheerful and lively color, reminiscent of the golden autumn, rich fruit, is a rich, happy and happy color. Poe used this color, which symbolizes the vitality of life, to echo the lively luxury of the ball, and to set off the depression and fear in the hearts of the people at the ball. The use of orange to contrast strongly with the dark color of death adds to the horror effect. The fifth room is white, pure, and clean, and can also let the revelers come here to find inner peace, when they step into the white room as if they came to a white and pure world, they mistakenly think that they have been redeemed, that they can avoid the disaster, but they do not know that death is slowly approaching. The sixth room is violet, which is more elegant and noble than purple, violet symbolizes the end of

life, meaning the cycle of life. At this time, the six rooms in the front have a subjectivity, inviting people to come through the color and the emotion it conveys, so that "But these other apartments were densely crowded, and in them beat feverishly the heart of life." Even "And these -- the dreams -- writhed in and about, taking hue from the rooms, and causing the wild music of the orchestra to seem as the echo of their steps."

In the story, the last room not only acts on the actions of the characters but also drives the narrative. The last room has a strong contrast of red and black colors, which creates a strong visual impact and a strong psychological oppression. The guests in the novel have an inexplicable fear of this grim, dark room because the fear of death is inherent in human beings [9]. Through the detailed depiction of the dark room, Poe concretised the nihilistic object of this fear and expressed it intuitively, enhancing its suffocating sense of terror. In this room, life cannot be hidden, the breath of death is everywhere, and with the arrival of death at midnight, all signs of life disappear. The reason why this setting makes readers feel deeply fearful is that it touches people's deepest instinctive fear of death. The dark and ominous atmosphere makes this fear constantly stimulated, which is an intuitive reaction to the nature of death. "But in the western or black chamber, the effect of the fire-light that streamed upon the dark hangings through the blood-tinted panes was ghastly in the extreme, and produced so wild a look upon the countenances of those who entered, that there were few of the company bold enough to set foot within its precincts at all." Even the climax of the story takes place in the last room, where the prince moves from the blue room to the black room in an attempt to fight off the Red Death, but dies in the last room, which directly drives the narrative.

2.3 Ebony clock: The Call of Reason and Death

In addition to cultural representation and powerful acting functions, the "thing" in narrative can also be described as having an ontological nature independent of human reason. Here, this paper draws on the relevant concepts of object-oriented ontology, an important branch of speculative realism, which is emerging in the Western philosophy circle in the 21st century, to see through the narrative mode of "thing" in *the Red Death.* As the name suggests, "object-oriented ontology" is to turn the perspective of speculative philosophy to "thing" and explore the ontological existence mode of "thing". In the view of Graham Harman, one of the main representatives of the school, "things" have a reality independent of human beings, but, unlike the previous "naive realism", Harman believes that the reality of "things" is infinite and withdrawn. There-

fore, it is impossible to fully grasp or reproduce. With the "thing", one can only grasp its qualities, or the sensuals it brings [10]. In this way, there must be a distance between the "thing" and its explicit features, and between the "thing" and the feeling.

In *The Masque of the Red Death,* the "clock of ebony" in the narrator's eyes, "It was in this apartment, also, that there stood against the western wall, a gigantic clock of ebony. Its pendulum swung to with a dull, heavy, monotonous clang……there came from the brazen lungs of the clock a sound which was clear and loud and deep and exceedingly musical, but of so peculiar a note" "a brief disconcert" "grew pale" "passed their hands over their brows as if in confused reverie or meditation". When the bell died down, the crowd "a light laughter at once pervaded the assembly;" and even "smiled as if at their nervousness and folly." They "made whispering vows, each to the other, that the next chiming of the clock should produce in them no similar emotion". In the narrative, only the external characteristics of these "things" and their influence on the narrator are depicted, but these "things" themselves are mysteriously hidden, thus establishing an insurmountable barrier between the narrator and these "things". This setup creates a terrible opposition between the narrator and the "thing".

The terror of "thing" is also reflected in its power - the power to affect people's reason. In *The Red Death*, when the black bell rings and makes a dull and monotonous sound, people recover their reason briefly and are immersed in the fear that death is coming, "The musicians of the orchestra were constrained to pause, momentarily, in their performance, to harken to the sound; and thus the waltzers perforce ceased their evolutions; and there was a brief disconcert of the whole gay company; and, while the chimes of the clock yet rang, it was observed that the giddiest grew pale, and the more aged and sedate passed their hands over their brows as if in confused revery or meditation. "But when the sound dies down, people return to their pleasure-seeking madness, "a light laughter at once pervaded the assembly; the musicians looked at each other and smiled as if at their own nervousness and folly, and made whispering vows, each to the other, that the next chiming of the clock should produce in them no similar emotion". Even though the next time the bell rang, they agreed not to be so mad, but the nervous, contemplative expression appeared again on their faces. The call of the clock is short-lived, and the people are destined to be possessed by madness, so when the last pleasure is over, the huge clock dies. The call of the ebony clock is both the call of reason and the call of death [11].

3. Discussion

As a cultural symbol, the castle in the story was a fortress built by the prince and other nobles to escape the Red Death, but eventually, the Red Death infiltrated the impenetrable "cage". While in reality, the castle, as a typical symbol of Gothic literature, embodies the opposition between Romanticism and classicism. As an agent with subjectivity, the six rooms entice people to come through the colors and emotions they convey, while the last room is "there were few of the company bold enough to set foot within its precincts at all". At this time, the room seems to be spiritual, making people feel the presence of death, but also tempting people to enter. Moreover, the black room becomes the place where the climax of the story takes place, which directly promotes the progress of the narrative. As a noumenal existence, the physical nature of the clock and its ringing sound transcends the symbol of culture and becomes a physical existence that cannot be ignored. The clock awakens people's rationality and makes them "there was a brief disconcert of the whole gay company; and, while the chimes of the clock yet rang, it was observed that the giddiest grew pale, and the more aged and sedate passed their hands over their brows as if in confused reverie or meditation". Realizing that they are not safe and that death is approaching. But when the bell ends, reason dissipates, and people return to their pleasantries.

4. Conclusion

The Masque of the Red Death is not only a novel full of Gothic elements, but also a profound exploration of the interaction between things and people, culture, and emotion. From the perspective of thing-narrative theory, things such as castles, rooms, and clocks not only serve as decorations in the background of stories but play an important role in promoting plot development, deepening the theme, and enhancing emotional experience. As an important symbol of Gothic literature, the castle embodies the cultural conflict between Romanticism and Neoclassicism in the novel. The ruthless invasion of the Red Death reveals the equality and powerlessness of all people in the face of death, and also reveals the powerlessness and demise of neo-classicism in the face of Romanticism, emphasizing the inevitability of death. The design and color of the various rooms drive the climax of the story through their unique objectification mood. In particular, the black and red room at the end, its spookiness and horror directly symbolize the breath of death, making it not only a part of the scene but also the subject of promoting fate. Each ringing of the clock is a brief call to reason and a sign of impending death. This design makes the ebony clock go

beyond a simple timekeeping tool and become a medium for humans to face the fear of death. The periodicity and irreversibility of the bell, like the inevitability of death, cannot be avoided or ignored.

To sum up, this study provides a lot of valuable reference significance for future research in this direction, which mainly affects the further development of the thing-narrative theory. Future research should focus more on the application of thing-narrative theory and conduct an in-depth exploration of more literary works.

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