

# Analysis of Allen Poe's Death Theme in His Short Stories

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**Abstract** - Edgar Allen Poe is a famous American author of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From his first short story *Metzengerstein* in 1832 to his death in 1849, he had written over 60 short stories, of which death is his constant focus. This paper, by studying his short stories comprehensively, explores the expression and reasons of death in his works. Death theme in the stories is the object of study, so this paper will study his short stories as a whole.

**Index Terms** - Allen Poe, Death theme, Analysis of reasons

## 1. Allen Poe's Thanatopsis

### 1.1 Complicated Thanatopsis

Allen Poe has pointed out in *The Poetic Principle* that "Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones." Of all the melancholy tones, death is the most melancholy, and death of beauties is the tightest combination of death and beauty. Therefore, some have regarded this as the sole starting point to interpret his stories, and believe that his huge descriptions of death are for the sake of such beauty; some believe that he's an author who's sickly obsessed with death. Allen Poe has denied in the preface of *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* published in the year 1840 that "it cannot be fairly inferred—at all events it is not truly inferred—that I have for this species of writing, any inordinate, or indeed any peculiar taste or prepossession." Death in Allen Poe's short stories is not just a reveal of death's terror and therefore is much complicated.

Readers can find traces of traditional gothic novels: gloomy old castles, strange plots, fantastic death. Allen Poe has admitted that such characters are more attracting to readers, so he's willing to retell human being's constant fear toward death, portray those who're caught in the maelstrom of fate and describe their struggles and pains when they face death. Allen Poe had joked in *How to Write a Blackwood Article* that "There was 'The Dead Alive', a capital thing!—the record of a gentleman's sensations when entombed before the breath was out of his body—full of tastes, terror, sentiment, metaphysics, and erudition. You would have sworn that the writer had been born and brought up in a coffin."

### 1.2 Changing Thanatopsis

Greatly influenced by European gothic literature, death in Allen Poe's early stories is to create a horrific atmosphere. With the advent of time, death in his works is more about personal thinking and comprehension, which reveals his uniqueness. In his work *Morella* published in 1835, Allen Poe has made initial analysis of what human's nature is through characters in the play. In *The Premature Burial* published in 1841, the leading role had taken different actions from those in other works, and sentences "I went abroad. I took vigorous exercise. I breathed the free air of Heaven. I thought upon other subjects than Death." reveal that the leading role is not afraid of death and is prepared to embrace life. This work is a clear signal which can also be found in previous works, take *The Pit and the Pendulum* and *A Descent into the Maelstrom* for example; in the two works those who're brilliant and courageous are rewarded to regain survival rights. In his later writing periods, there's another noteworthy works, namely *Mesmeric Revelation* published in 1844, in which he regards imaginary hypnosis experiments as basis for an

assumption. The assumption is that human have two forms in different periods, which is similar to caterpillar and butterfly, and death is just a change of forms, so our experiences throughout our life are preparations for glorious, infinite and immortal future. This work is not like a novel, but like a scientific experiment. In this short novel, he explores truth that goes beyond life and sense and considers things which may still be found after death.

## 2. Allen Poe's Expression of his Thanatopsis in Novels

Descriptions of death are very common in Allen Poe's short stories, and vary in different works. Characters can be divided into two groups according to their final fates: those who're dying and those who go beyond death. This chapter mainly discusses the first group. Characters in the first group have beautiful life at the very beginning, but draw near death gradually and cannot escape from death even though they have made painful protest. Based on different forms of death, their death can be divided into murder, suicide and disease.

### 2.1 Murder

Murder is a normal form of death in his novels. This concept is related to two identities: perpetrator and victim, and perpetrator, driven by some motives, take away life of victims on purpose. There're many novels related to murder in all his works, take *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *Metzengerstein*, *The Black Cat* and *The Imp of the Perverse* for example. Those works portray a ordinary being who indulges himself, kill those around and in the end be hanged. Some other works are also related to murder, but confined by its type of detective novels, murder in those novels only act as chains which hang on the chest of truth.

On the one hand, Allen Poe understands human's violation of reasons and indulgent of vulgar desires; on the other hand, he'll let disasters fall on those characters once they take actions against reasons; deprivation of life is the most severe punishment, so descriptions of death is not only to reveal terror of death but also to warn human beings of standards.

### 2.2 Suicide

There's only one novel discussing suicide, but it's extremely excellent. Normally suicide means that individuals kill themselves by various means deliberately or voluntarily, but suicide in this novel is different, which readers come to understand suddenly as the narrator in the end.

To some degree, suicide is also murder, and its slight difference is that perpetrator and victim in this process is one. Therefore environment of murder is purer, and ending of destruction cannot be attributed to other factors. In this process, morality has prevented character from death for many times, but ultimately personal constraint pushes characters to choose death.

### 2.3 Disease

Due to physical diseases, characters' health in the novels deteriorated sharply and characters choose to surrender to death, which is the expression of death caused by disease in Allen Poe's

short stories. Different from previous death discussed above, most victims of death caused by disease are female, for example, female characters in *The Oval Portrait*, *Berenice*, *Morella* and *The Fall of the House of Usher* all die at early ages, which are not simple embodiment of uncertain destiny or to make people lament through destruction of beauties. Death caused by disease is of particular significance if roles played by males are considered.

Allen Poe's love and worship for females have made females in his works beautiful and charming. Death caused by disease is widely different from murder and suicide as disease brings physical damages and withering of appearance gradually. At a later stage, the characteristics of beauty held by women are stripped, and the time beauty dies away is exactly the time death falls. Allen Poe reveals that loss of love from dominant position is fatal and deprivation of beauty equals deprivation of life.

### 3. Causes of Allen Poe's Thanatopsis

The formation of Allen Poe's thanatopsis is influenced by many factors which include both external and internal factors. For example, social historical background, cultural perspective, knowledge structure, hobbies and interests and life experiences all influence his thanatopsis to varying degrees. This chapter shall discuss causes of his complicated and changing thanatopsis from three main aspects.

#### 3.1 Cultural Background

Allen Poe enters academic circles as a literary critic. At that time, Washington Irving and Fenimore Cooper enjoyed a high reputation, but Allen Poe held a different idea. Most contemporary writers, including Irving, had been criticized by Allen Poe. He worshiped English literature and believed American excellent works were far behind English works. These strident remarks in fact revealed his worry for American literature and wish for an equal position of American literature as English literature. There're profound origins for his worship for English literature.

First, he had a long history with UK. When he was 18 years old, he had moved with his adoptive father John Poe to England and then settled down in London. He had lived in England for five years, during which foreign life had impressed him deeply. The novel *William Wilson* is set against a lord's house which is used as a school, and the background information "My earliest recollections of a school-life, are connected with a large, rambling, Elizabethan house, in a misty-looking village of England, where were a vast number of gigantic and gnarled trees, and where all the houses were excessively ancient." shows that Allen Poe remembered life then and his worship for English literature began at that time. He had special love for works of English writer Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his romantic theories spreading to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When he returned to America, he not only reads lots of English writers' works, but also concludes his own unique explanation through hard work and divided spiritual world of Samuel Taylor Coleridge into three categories.

Besides, as a magazine editor, he wished to have the best magazine in America, so he drew upon English magazine. He is particularly fond of *Fraser's Magazine* and *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, and the later magazine is popular on both sides of the Atlantic for its issue of appalling articles, of which Allen Poe had mentioned many times in his works. Allen Poe's first novel *Metzengerstein* is no different from popular gothic novels that time, but later he had developed his own styles while inheriting traditional gothic novel's expression of death. His unique style is greatly related to his accumulation of knowledge and interests.

#### 3.2. Knowledge and Interests

While studying in University of Virginia, Allen Poe had read

lots of literal works and some books on American history. When he studied at West Point, he received military management and learned scientific knowledge on algebra, geometry, physics and chemistry as the academy attached high importance to education of military theory and scientific knowledge, paid less attention to literature and even forbade students to keep books of novels and poems. It's the study then that made him interested in science. Allen Poe's sensitivity had helped him easily capture slight changes of human's mentality, and the accumulation of scientific knowledge and cultivation of scientific habits had made him show yearn for science and sense, which is of particular use even in works with death theme. At the same time, he's a reader with extensive hobbies; besides works of literature and philosophy, he's also interested in science and cryptology and uses these knowledge to write whodunits; what's more, he also learns some popular pseudoscience, hypnotism and some other knowledge aimed at exploring instincts. He finds that human's sense is the most active and their emotion is the least repressed regarding life and death. Therefore, there're lots of descriptions about mental disorder, telepathy and some other abnormal or special thoughts, by doing so Allen Poe tries to show that glimmer of human's inner soul will be doubled when they face death.

#### 3.3. Personal Experiences

Allen Poe, by extraordinary imagination, has described death in great details for us as he has experienced much death in his life. Allen Poe was born in Boston in 1819. His father died in 1810, and the next year his mother Elizabeth Poe died of tuberculosis. When he was three years old, he was adopted by a tobacco supplier John Allen who was from Richmond. His adoptive mother passed away in 1829 and he left home for Baltimore as he broke up with his adoptive father. In Baltimore, he lived with his aunt Maria Ctemm and his sister Virginia and his brother Henry Poe. However, Henry died of intemperance and tuberculosis in August. Allen Poe adored Henry as Henry had rich experiences: he had been a sailor and written poems in newspapers. Therefore, his death influenced Allen Poe greatly.

Allen Poe married Virginia in 1836. His wife and aunt had given him great comfort, and they lived a peaceful and happy life even though they're poor. However, good times don't last long. In 1842, Virginia's blood vessels burst when she was singing. Tough her life was saved, she had never been as healthy as before and her disease repeated constantly, which resulted in Allen Poe's fluctuation between desperation and hope. Then he began intemperance. He was found to be insensible on the street of Baltimore on 3, October, 1849, and passed away in the hospital three days later. Then he was buried carelessly in Westminster Abbey. In over forty years, Edgar Ellen Poe had been from Richmond to London, and then back to Richmond. He had described death millions of times in his stories. He had to face death of so many people, Elizabeth, Dave Poe, Fanny Allen, Henry Poe and Virginia, and eventually his own death. In his novel, there're reverence toward death, humorous banter, courage facing death and efforts to go beyond death. In fact, he had recorded all his painful and happy moments into the story and described those common feelings of human beings subtly.

### 4. Conclusion

Leading characters in Allen Poe's works had a soul-striking opposition toward death. In his stories, time of stories and background was diluted on purpose, so he can have profound analysis of soul. To make the impact more intense, Allen Poe had added death in the story. For those who had deviated from correct course, death will be their ending even though they're more sensible than ordinary people and easier to loose self-control. Allen Poe had showed understanding and sympathy for them, but ethics principles will never vanish, so once they go against ethics and make unforgivable

mistakes, they will be punished by Allen Poe to be dead. Allen Poe is not only a narrator of death, but also a recorder and seeker of human's external and inner dilemma. Sometimes when external and inner dilemma are combined, human's contention and death begin to show deeper metaphor.

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