



Environment and Psychology in the Works of Edgar Allan Poe: Natural Depictions and Spiritual Sustainability

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Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe is known for his unique depictions of horror, mystery and the supernatural. The purpose of this paper is to explore how the depiction of the natural environment in Edgar Allan Poe's works is intertwined with the psychological state of the characters, and to further analyze how this intertwining reflects the theme of spiritual sustainability. By analyzing several representative works of Edgar Allan Poe, this paper reveals that the natural environment is not only the setting of the story, but also a metaphor for the psychological and spiritual state of the characters, as well as a profound discussion of the sustainability of human spirituality.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe; environmental depictions; psychological states; Gothic literature; spiritual sustainability

1.. Preamble

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), a major figure in 19th-century American literature, is known for his distinctive Gothic style and his insightful explorations of death, horror, and the supernatural. Often categorized as Gothic literature, Poe's depictions of death, horror, and the supernatural, as well as his masterful mastery of suspense and psychological conflict, have made him an important figure in literary history.

2. Literature review

The study of Poe's works has always been an important branch in the field of literature, and scholars at home and abroad have deeply

explored Poe's works from many angles. The following are some representative studies.

2.1 A comprehensive study of Edgar Allan Poe's works

In their dissertations "A Review of Edgar Allan Poe's Career as a Short Story Writer and Critic" by Wang Diophane Shi (2017), "A Review of Domestic Research on Edgar Allan Poe's Poetry in the Past Ten Years" by Tang Qinfang and Huang Shixiang (2010), and "A Review of the Research on Edgar Allan Poe's Poetry in the West" by Li Huifang (2007), they analyze the research on Edgar Allan Poe's novels and poems at home and abroad. (2007) in their paper "A Review of Western Edgar Allan

Poe Studies”, analyzed the domestic and international studies on Edgar Allan Poe’s novels and poems, pointing out that most of the researches focus on the classic works, the theme of death, and comparative studies, and mentioning that the scope and depth of the researches have been expanded, such as the study of Edgar Allan Poe’s poetry, and the study of Edgar Allan Poe’s poems. It is also mentioned that the research scope and depth have been expanded, such as the attention to the spatial narrative, spatial representation and Americanness in Edgar Allan Poe’s works. Ren Xiang’s (2006) works *Literary Choices in the Age of Cultural Crisis: An Inquiry into Edgar Allan Poe and Detective Fiction* places Edgar Allan Poe in the context of Western culture and the rapid development of the industrial economy in the United States in the 19th century, and explores the cultural and philosophical significance of his creative works and their influence on the later generations. Liu Lihui and Xiang Yao’s (2020) article “The Allegorical World of Death: An Exploration of Edgar Allan Poe’s Fictional World”, with the help of Benjamin’s “Allegory” and the interpretation of Poe’s short stories, taking *Morella*, *The Manuscript in a Bottle*, and *The Masquerade of the Red Death* as examples. The macro-meaning of death in Poe’s short stories is explored with the help of Benjamin’s “allegory” interpretation. *The Complete Novels of Edgar Allan Poe* introduces by Zhu Zhenwu, interprets and appreciates nearly seventy short stories written by Edgar Allan Poe during his lifetime.

2.2 A study of humor and science fiction in Poe’s works

Zhu Zhenwu and Cheng Qinghua, in “Exploring the Origin of Edgar Allan Poe’s Humorous Novels”, discuss the creative tendency of Edgar Allan Poe’s humorous novels and his inheritance of early Native American humor. Zhu Zhenwu and Wu Yan, in “The Humanistic Concern of Edgar Allan Poe’s Science Fiction”, interpret Edgar Allan Poe’s science fiction in its historical and cultural contexts, and illustrate the seriousness and

nobility of spirit that Edgar Allan Poe possessed in the process of pioneering modern science fiction. [6]

2.3 Spatial Narrative and the Study of Americanness in Poe’s Works

In “The Spatial Reproduction of Edgar Allan Poe’s Horror Novels”, Li Tong analyzes the interaction between topographical space, space-time body space and textual space in Edgar Allan Poe’s horror novels on the basis of the theory of spatial narratology. In *On Edgar Allan Poe as a Constructor of National Literature*, Luo Ximing analyzes Edgar Allan Poe’s “Americanness” by exploring the relationship between Edgar Allan Poe and the nineteenth-century nationalist literary group “The Young Americans,” as well as the historical entanglement with Longfellow, a famous poet of the United States at that time.

2.4 A comparative study of the works and poems of Edgar Allan Poe

In *Comparison of Supernatural Descriptions in the Poetry of Li Shangyin and Edgar Allan Poe*, Tang Zhenna points out that both Li Shangyin and Edgar Allan Poe’s poems are characterized by strange worlds, simple sentiments, and the intertwining of reality and illusion, and both of them are rich in supernatural descriptions. In “The Beauty of Death: On the Concept of Death in the Poetry of Edgar Allan Poe and Hai Zi”, Zhang Junru and Zheng Fei explore the concept of death and the main theme of death in the poems of Edgar Allan Poe and Hai Zi respectively, and believe that the concepts of death in the hearts of both of them express the efforts of human beings to pursue the essence of the meaning of life.

These research results provide us with a comprehensive and in-depth perspective of Poe’s works, revealing the rich connotation and artistic charm of Poe’s works from different angles. However, the relationship between the description of the natural environment and the psychological state of the characters in Poe’s works, as well as how this relationship reflects

the spiritual sustainability, has not been fully explored. In this paper, we will analyze the environmental descriptions in Poe's works to explore how these descriptions shape the characters' psychology and how these psychological states reflect the sustainability of the spirit.

3. Environmental and psychological description

In the vast field of literature, the relationship between environment and psychology is a complex and fascinating theme. The environmental descriptions in literary works are not only for the purpose of building the background of the story, but they also profoundly affect the psychological state of the characters, promote the development of the plot, and to a certain extent reflect the author's philosophical thinking about the relationship between human beings and nature. Poe's works create a complex and subtle connection between environmental descriptions and characters' psychology, which is particularly important in exploring spiritual sustainability.

In Poe's writing, the natural environment is not only the background of the story, but also the mapping of the psychological state of the characters and the stage of spiritual conflicts. Through the detailed portrayal of these environments, Poe not only showed his deep sense of natural beauty, but also expressed his deep concern for the spiritual state of mankind. In this paper, we will analyze the environmental descriptions in Poe's works in depth, and discuss how these descriptions shape the characters' psychology, and how these psychological states reflect the sustainability of the spirit.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the interplay between environment and psychology in Poe's works, especially how the depiction of the natural environment affects the psychological state of the characters and how this psychological state reflects or influences the sustainability of the spirit. We will analyze how

Poe conveys a deep understanding of natural ecology and an exploration of the human spiritual world through the depiction of the environment in his works. We will then demonstrate the multidimensional function of environmental depiction in narratives through specific case studies of Poe's works. We expect that this paper will provide new perspectives for the study of Edgar Allan Poe and useful insights for literary creation and criticism.

4. Interweaving of environment and psychology depictions in Poe's works

4.1 Gothic nature and psychological alienation

Poe creates a Gothic natural environment in his works, which often echo the psychological alienation of the characters. For example, in *"The Masquerade of the Red Death"*, the prince locks himself in the palace to escape from the plague and organizes a luxurious masquerade. This setting not only creates an atmosphere of escapism, but also reinforces the theme of "death" as the prince's death occurs immediately when an unknown guest appears dressed like a grave. The contrast between the opulence of the setting and the suddenness and inevitability of death emphasizes the theme of death.

In the short story *"The Black Cat"*, the narrator "I", initially a mild-mannered person, gradually becomes emotionally unstable with his habit of drinking. After a drunken stupor, "I", as if controlled by the devil, brutally gouges out the eyes of a black cat. Although he feels remorseful for his behavior afterwards, the narrator cannot control the urge to continue his evil deeds and eventually hangs the black cat from a tree. Driven by this abnormal and uncontrollable malice, he even kills his wife and calmly hides her body in the cellar wall. By showing the narrator's drastic transformation from kindness to cruelty, Poe vividly depicts the process of the protagonist's psychopathy and reveals the latent, uncontrollable impulse to do evil in people's hearts^[1]. The environment in *The Black Cat* also reflects the creation of a

Gothic atmosphere. The description of fires, ruins and cellars in the story are common elements in Gothic novels. Especially the cellar, which is not only the place where the hero kills and buries his wife, but also the place where the police discover the truth. The cold and damp environment of the cellar creates a horrible atmosphere and makes the readers shiver. The psychological state of the protagonist gradually changes from kindness to cruelty and madness, which echoes the darkness of the setting.

In Poe's "*The Tell-Tale Heart*", there is no grudge between the narrator "I" and the old man, but "I" feel extremely uneasy and sensitive to the old man's "vulture-like eyes" and decide to kill the old man. However, I decided to kill the old man because I was extremely disturbed and sensitive to his "vulture-like eyes". After careful planning, "I" quietly entered the old man's room. In the darkness, the old man seems to be aware of the narrator's presence, and my sensitivity allows him to hear the old man's heartbeat accelerating and intensifying. Eventually, driven by uncontrollable fear, I kill the old man and cut up his body, hiding it under the floorboards. Through the first-person inner monologue, Poe deeply depicts the psychological state of the narrator, reveals his evil inner world, and shows the uncontrollable distortion, darkness, and ugliness of the narrator's inner depths [1].

The Collapse of the House of Usher represents the essence of Poe's Gothic horror novels. In this novel, twin siblings Roderick and Madeleine live in the House of Usher, which is virtually isolated from the outside world. Madeleine is chronically ill, while Roderick is psychotic due to chronic stress. When Madeleine's condition worsens and she is left unaccompanied, Roderick asks "me" to accompany him to the house. Soon after, Roderick mistakenly claimed that Madeleine was dead and buried her. However, on the seventh night after the burial, Madeleine awakens from her coffin, a sudden event that causes Roderick to die of shock and I, their

friend, to flee the scene. The story ends with the collapse of Usher's house and its sinking into a deep mountain lake [3][5]. This work shows the deep connection between Gothic nature and psychological alienation through the depiction of horror in the environment and the psychological alienation of the characters. In "*The Collapse of the House of Usher*", Poe creates a depressing and disturbing atmosphere by describing an old, dilapidated mansion. The cracks and decay of the old mansion symbolize the split and collapse of Roderick, the main character, and the description of the environment sets the stage for the fate of the characters in the novel, reflecting the meeting and fit between the characters and the environment.

In *The Masque of the Red Death*, Poe explores the themes of death and destiny by describing a plague-ridden palace. The interior of the palace is adorned with black velvet tapestries, and red firelight passes through the stained glass, casting a variety of brilliant and bizarre glimpses [2]. The contrast of colors and the use of light and shadow not only enhance the visual impact, but also deepen the mystery and horror of the story, reflecting the characteristics of Gothic art. In *The Masquerade of the Red Death*, the prince's arrogance and disregard for death eventually lead to his death, reflecting the alienation of the character's psychology and disregard for nature.

In *The Pit and the Pendulum*, the description of the rightmost room in the basement presents the reader with a space full of horror and despair. The setting not only provides a background for the story, but also deepens the understanding of the psychological state of the main characters and enhances the emotional tension of the story.

4.2. The poetic depiction of natural ecology and the spirituality of

Poe's works are also full of poetic depictions of natural ecosystems, which are often linked to the characters' spirituality.

In *The Garden of Landscapes*, Poe expresses his longing for natural beauty and his concern for the destruction of the natural environment in the process of industrialization through his poetic portrayal of natural landscapes. He rescued the tired souls of human beings by recreating a nature full of magic and divinity in the field of art^[4]. This idealized depiction of nature is not only a praise for natural beauty, but also a yearning for the spiritual home of mankind.

In *Ligeia*, *Ligeia* has unrivaled beauty and knowledge. *Ligeia's* death and subsequent resurrection scenes are manifestations of the supernatural. The novel reflects Poe's inheritance of the Gothic novel in terms of the horrors of the environment, such as the desolate abbey in England, the weak woman under the violence, and the tragedy of her life, as well as the deep connection between the natural ecology and the spirituality. These supernatural elements, combined with the hero's obsession with *Ligeia* and his fear of death, enhance the mystery and horror of the story. *Ligeia* becomes the hero's spiritual support, and her death and resurrection become part of his spiritual world.

In Poe's *The Golden Beetle*, the author skillfully blends scientific rationality with mysticism, revealing the close connection between science and the ecology of nature. In the story, the servant *Jupiter* fails to notice the tiny difference from the left eye to the right eye, an oversight that leads to the failure of *Legrand's* plan, thus highlighting the interdependence between science and mysticism, and the fact that in the "great work" of alchemy, the goal cannot be achieved in the absence of scientific precision^[7]. The error set up by Poe here not only emphasizes the extreme precision required to complete the final step of the "great work" of alchemical transformation, but also the inability to form a perfect geometrical figure due to this error ("God is a geometer", as Plato put it), and the fact that it is not possible to form a perfect geometrical figure (as Plato put it). As Plato said, "God is a

geometrician"), thus metaphorizing the limitations of human reason^[7].

In *Arnhem Land*, the expansion of the story of *Arnhem Land*, Poe creates an idealized natural landscape, reflecting his pursuit of natural and spiritual sustainability. This idealized portrayal of nature is not only a celebration of natural beauty, but also a yearning for the spiritual home of mankind.

In *City in the Sea*, Poe conveys a deep reflection on nature and human civilization through his depiction of the sea and the ruins of the city. This depiction of nature and ruins not only celebrates the beauty of nature, but also explores the spiritual world of mankind.

4.3 The interdependence of spiritual sustainability and natural ecology

Poe explores interdependence of spiritual sustainability and natural ecology in his work.

In *Man in the Crowd*, Poe explores the relationship between the individual and society and nature through the portrayal of the protagonist's loneliness in the crowd. This portrayal of the individual's sense of alienation in society reflects the alienation of man from nature and society, as well as the pursuit of spiritual sustainability.

In Poe's *The Collapse of the Cour d'Arc*, the author builds an invisible and closed space in the manor through the technique of "silence", which symbolizes the inner world of the protagonist: no more birdsong in the trees due to wilting, no more sound of running water in the pond due to stagnation, no more sound of wind in the wood carvings due to the absence of wind^[2]. In order to avoid producing any sound, the people in the manor almost collectively lose their voices, and even their movements become as silent as ghosts^[2]. In this invisible closed space, the protagonist's vitality is almost exhausted, and he is unable to get rid of his spiritual bondage. His depressed mood blends with the withered, dead and lifeless environment around him, making the reader

empathize with him and immerse himself in an atmosphere full of sadness and horror when he reads the book [2].

In *The Masque of the Red Death*, Poe explores the themes of death and destiny by describing a plague-ridden palace. The interior of the palace is adorned with black velvet tapestries, and red firelight passes through the stained glass, casting a variety of brilliant glimpses^[2]. The contrast of colors and the use of light and shadow not only enhance the visual impact, but also deepen the mysterious and horrifying atmosphere of the story, reflecting the interdependence between spiritual sustainability and natural ecology.

In *The Tell-Tale Heart*, Poe explores the tension between the human inner world and the natural environment through the protagonist's mental state and his fear of the old man. This portrayal of inner fear is not only an exploration of the individual's mental state, but also a reflection on the interdependence of natural ecology and spiritual sustainability.

In *The Golden Beetle*, Poe demonstrates the interdependence of science and natural ecology through the combination of science and mysticism^[7].

In *Premature Burial*, Poe explores the relationship between man and nature through the portrayal of the fear of being buried alive. This fear of death and nature is not only a depiction of individual life experience, but also a profound reflection on the interdependence of human spiritual sustainability and natural ecology.

In *The Crow*, the appearance of the crow and its constant repetition of "Nevermore" symbolize the spiritual emptiness and despair of the protagonist after the loss of his beloved Lenore. The shadow of the crow and its projection in the light deepen the protagonist's loneliness and contemplation of death, reflecting the interdependence of spiritual sustainability and natural ecology.

Through these examples, we can see how Edgar Allan Poe explores spiritual sustainability through the depiction of natural ecology in his works, and the interdependence between the two.

5. Analysis of the characteristics of environmental description in Poe's works

5.1 The creation of a Gothic atmosphere

In *The Masque of the Red Death*, Poe creates a Gothic atmosphere by describing a plague-ridden palace. The interior of the palace is decorated with black velvet tapestries, and red firelight passes through the stained glass, casting a variety of brilliant glimpses. ^[2] The contrast of colors and the use of light and shadow not only enhance the visual impact, but also deepen the mysterious and horrifying atmosphere of the story, reflecting the exploration of the theme of death and horror in Gothic literature.

In *The Black Cat*, the setting also reflects the creation of a Gothic atmosphere. The description of fire, ruins and cellar are common elements in Gothic novels. Especially the cellar, which is not only the place where the hero kills and buries his wife, but also the place where the police discover the truth. The cold and damp environment of the cellar creates a horrible atmosphere and makes the readers shiver. These environmental descriptions not only provide the background for the story, but also deepen the understanding of the psychological state of the main characters.

5.2 The combination of the natural and the supernatural

In *Ligeia*, Poe combines natural and supernatural elements to create a realm that is both real and fantastic. Ligeia's beauty and intelligence are beyond the ordinary, and her death and subsequent resurrection scenes are manifestations of the supernatural. These supernatural elements, combined with the protagonist's obsession with Ligeia and fear of

death, enhance the mystery and horror of the story.

In *The Golden Beetle*, Poe utilizes a great deal of alchemy, combining science with mysticism. The name of the servant Jupiter represents the metal tin, and these mystical symbols are used to integrate different elements in the story, making it more realistic and coherent. This combination of the natural and the supernatural not only adds depth to the story, but also reflects Poe's view of the interdependence of science and mysticism.

5.3 The use of psychological symbols

In *The Collapse of the Echelon*, Poe reflects the psychological state of the protagonist through environmental descriptions. The trees in the compound have no sound of birds singing because of their death, the pond has no sound of gurgling water because of its stagnant water, and the wood carvings have never had the sound of wind passing through them. This kind of "loss of sound" maps out the hero's fear of the outside world and his inner isolation. The dead silence of the environment echoes the psychological state of the protagonist, enhancing the psychological depth of the story.

In William Wilson, Poe explores the conflict between the ego and the superego through the protagonist's name and dual identity. Wilson's self-destruction and degradation, as well as his struggle with the other Wilson, are all uses of psychological symbols. These psychological symbols not only reveal the inner conflict of the protagonist, but also reflect Edgar Allan Poe's exploration of the dark side of human nature.

Through these case studies, we can see that Poe skillfully utilizes environmental descriptions to create a Gothic atmosphere, combines natural and supernatural elements, and employs psychological symbols to enhance the emotional tension and thematic depth of the story.

6. Conclusions

Upon in-depth analysis, we find that Edgar Allan Poe made exquisite use of natural settings to map the psychology of his characters and to explore the sustainability of spirituality. His works not only demonstrate a deep understanding of nature and the human spirit, but also convey insights into these themes through literature. Poe's environmental descriptions are not only the background of the stories, but also the carriers of emotions and themes, such as the plague palace in *The Masque of the Red Death*, the fire ruins in *The Black Cat*, and the desperate basement in *The Pit and the Pendulum*, which reveal the characters' inner worlds and psychological changes, and explore the durability and fragility of the spirit. The interaction between the environment and the psyche in Poe's works is multifaceted, which enhances the emotional tension, deepens the understanding of the characters' psyche, and highlights the theme of spiritual sustainability. These works remind us of the complex connection between the natural environment and the human psyche, and literature is a powerful tool for exploring this connection. Poe's works offer new perspectives on literary creation and criticism, stimulate reflection on issues of natural, psychological, and spiritual sustainability, and help us to gain a deeper understanding of the work of literary giants and important current issues.

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