The Characteristics of Edgar Allan Poe’s Detective Stories

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the four basic characteristics of Edgar Allan Poe's detective stories. They are mysterious atmosphere, intriguing plots, familiar characters and particular settings. Then the functions of these characteristics are also presented. Poe tried his best to create the nervous and mysterious atmosphere, which can arouse readers' first sight loving of the stories by using the crime solving and the puzzles unraveling.

KEYWORDS

Edgar Allan Poe, characteristic, detective stories.

INTRODUCTION

Edgar Allan Poe tries his best to create the atmosphere that is mysterious and suspending enough to get the stories started. Unraveling puzzles and solving crimes, which prompt the development of plots, become the biggest expectation of readers. The writer always begins his stories with crime cases, and then unravels the secrets of crimes gradually.

MYSTERIOUS ATMOSPHERE

In The Murder In Rou Morgue, when people arrived the crime spot, a spectacle presented itself which struck every one present not less with horror than with astonishment – Madame L’Espanaye and her daughter were killed with door locked and the key inside. An unusual quanting of soot being observed in the fire place, a search was made in the chimney, and the corpse of the daughter, head downward, was dragged therefrom; it has been thus forced up the narrow aperture for a considerable distance. Upon the face were many severe scratches, and upon the throat, dark bruise, and deep indentations of finger nails as if the deceased had been throttled to death. The corpse of the old lady lay on a small paved yard, with her throat so entirely cut that, upon an attempt to raise her, the head fell off. There is no slightest clew to this horrible mystery. Witnesses heard the shrieks, but they described in very different way. At this moment, this crime seems to be a dead mystery. Who did it in such a room with the door and windows closed? What were his motivations? How did he...

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escape after the crime? An appalling crime involved more and more mysteries. In this way the puzzles unraveling and crimes solving push forward the writer’s conception of plots. In the process of detective’s crimes solving, what the writer attaches much importance and readers pay much attention is how the detective figures out persuasive evidence from a lot of true and false things, and finds the murder. Madame L’Espanaye and her daughter have already been out of readers’ attention now. The proper neglect of victims’ identifications allows the writer to draw readers attention to the detective. In “The Purloined Letter”, the same means was also employed, but with some differences. In this case, the identification of the thief, the motivation and aim of the thief are clear. The most important thing is to find out the evidence. It is known that the letter was stolen by Minister D--. The problem is where it is. Why was the letter still unfound after the police’s struggling searching?

The writer uses so many words to describe how thorough and struggling the police’s work was. They took their time, and they searched everywhere. They took the entire building, room by room; devoting the rights of a whole week to each. They examined first, the furniture of each apartment. They opened every possible drawer. They examined the rungs of every chair, and, indeed, the jointing of every description of furniture, by the aid of a most powerful microscope. They looked into the mirrors, between the curtains and carpers, examined the moss between the tricks, looked among D—’,s papers, and into the books of the library, even turned over every leaf in each volume, also measured the thickness of every book cover, with the most accurate admeasurements, and applied the most jealous scrutiny of the microscope one by one. They examined almost every possible inch in the house. Such an exaggerative description of their work makes the simple crime more mysterious and is full of puzzles. When the police employed every possible investigation means to solve the crime and failed, readers put all their expectations on the super competent detective, so all deeds and words of the detective became the focus of all their concern. Even if the fact that the owner of the letter is the Queen, cannot arouse readers’ much sympathy, or draw their much attention.

**INTRIGUING PLOTS**

In Edgar Allan Poe’s three Dupin-center detective novels, the narration of cases closely follows the appearance of the detective. The writer narrates the case in detail, but in a situation, which seems impossible to solve for readers. Various detailed and cleat clues present clear facts, while it seems that everything is in a mass, but in fact while in such a mysterious situation, the detective’s sudden relevant answers make the novel in a troublesome situation. This is the typical pattern of cases in detective novels. For example, In “The Purloined Letter”, readers know that it is Minister D—who stole the letter, and they are convinced that the stolen letter was still in his hand, but the cop cannot find that letter. Similarly, in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, the mother and the daughter who were killed cruelly and the frightening spot together demonstrate that someone has committed the murdering; however, the closed window seems to show that it is impossible for anybody to step in or out. These paradoxical clues attract readers’ interests and lay a good foundation for the detective to take action to solve the crime.
After the crime scene and clues are presented to readers, the detective began to investigate the case. In this stage, a series of witness, suspects appear. During this process, there may be some wrong judgment. In *The Murders in Rue Morgue*, witnesses’ words are given through newspaper. Each witness stated what they had seen and heard, but paradoxical factors are mixed in these various evidence. In *The Mystery of Marie Roget*, various narrations seem paradoxical and disordered, making narrators and readers confused. Just the detailed descriptions make the case seem complex and hard to solve. In this way, it paves the way for the detective to appear. After thorough investigation, the detective usually announces the result unexpectedly, and then he explains the process of solving the crime in details. When the narrator states the story, he is usually trapped into the complex clues and the lacks of evidence, on contrast, the detective is calm and has the whole situation in mind, and suddenly announces the crime is solved. This makes both narrators and readers get a shock. Besides the intriguing plots, Poe creates a set of characters in his stories; four important ones are victims, criminals, detectives and the persons who are threatened by the crimes but unable to solve them, including witnesses, mediocre police as well as the assistant of detectives. Now that the detectives are the central characters in stories, others are the minor characters. The crimes themselves only provide chances, or ways for the detectives to reason out the puzzles. Therefore, all the criminals and victims are not described much. After all the victims of tragedies always earn a lot of sympathy, then the writer has to use some wise techniques to make a balance between the people’s attention of solving crimes and their sympathy of victims. In stories, the fact that writer provides us simple background of victims which relate to the crimes, makes us know something about victims and give our passions properly on one hand, give us more space to pay attention to solving of crimes on another hand. In *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, the writer only provides the background of victims roughly through witnesses’ words rather than states specifically.

In the design of criminals, the writer always makes them the most impossible ones, and he also does not use many words to state the information about criminals. In “The Purloined Letter”, Minister D—has a high social status. The reveal of his crime undoubtedly will bring him serious punishment. Nevertheless, the writer does not state it in detail, because it is out of importance. The criminals are always the least possible one. When all the suspects are excluded, then the least possible suspect is always proved to be the criminal. Exclude all the possible elements, the left is the truth. When the crime is more unusual and mysterious, to solve it becomes more easily and the result if more simple. Just as In “The Purloined Letter”, it is sure that Minister D—is the thief, but the question is where the letter is. So when all the places where the letter is possible hid are searched by the police, the least possible place is proved. In “Thou Art the Man”, the man who seemingly takes the responsibility of a detective turns out to be the criminal. This kind of writing skill brings a lot of accidents, and makes the stories more dramatic.

The detectives are central characters because they are very different from other. They are aliens, and they are always independent from governmental institutions. Their motivations of investigating crimes are mostly the interests to answer certain intellectual riddles rather than from the concern of society and moral values. Dupin said “If it is any point requiring reflection, we shall examine it to better purpose in the dark.” Dupin, the detective created by Poe, is an introvert man. He not only has the
surprising imagination and preternatural ability of analysis, but also has the talent for poetry and mathematics.

PARTICULAR SETTINGS

In Poe’s detective stories, crimes are always happened on a small scale such as old house, isolated outskirts, or a river with nobody passing. These all colure the stories, and become an important element of Poe’s detective stories. In *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, the atrocity happened in a room of an old house with the doors and windows close. In *The Mystery of Marie Roget*, the crime also happened in a secluded area. Marie Roget’s corpse was found floating in the Seine near the shore which is opposite to the Quartier of the Rue Saint Andre, and at a point not very far distant from the secluded neighborhood of the Barriere du Roule. Because the crime solving in detective stories depends on the detectives’ logical analysis, these small-scale crime scenes just provide a proper background for the detectives to make full use of his talents.

CONCLUSION

Edgar Allan Poe wrote few detective stories; however, he presented a way of writing western detective stories. The four elements employed in Poe’s five detective stories compose a classical pattern of western detective story writing and imitated by the detective storywriters from all over the world. The four elements are: firstly, mysterious atmosphere which is always suspending and attractive. Secondly, intriguing plots which includes several steps: the appearance of the detective, to describe the criminate situation and clues, to investigate the case, to announce that the case is solved, to explain the process of solving the crime, the end. Although the six elements appear in different orders, they are indispensable since they comprise the basic pattern of the plots of detective stories. Thirdly, familiar characters which is mainly about the preternatural detectives, the least possible criminals, the slow assistant and the people who are threatened by the crimes but cannot conquer the crimes. Fourthly, particular settings, which are always in secluded areas or on small sales. To some extent, Allan Poe set up the basic pattern of western detective story writing all by himself. Until the end of 19th century, some famous detective writers like Conan Doyle appeared on the stage, the detective stories began to flourish.

REFERENCES