

First-person Narrative in Edgar Allan Poe's Short Stories

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Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe is undoubtedly known as one of the most popular short story writers in the history of American literature. His unique style of writing has influenced numerous short story writers of different cultures throughout the world since the publication of his short stories in the middle of 19th century. And in his stories, first-person narrative point of view is extensively used and that has drawn the interest of a lot of critics. This paper tries to analyze the literary function and narrative effect of first-person narrative in Poe's masterpieces with necessary sample paragraphs.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, first-person Narrative, function, effect, short story.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Edgar Allan Poe is widely regarded as one of the best short story writers in history worldwide and his unique contribution to world literature has been internationally known ever since his death in 1849. According to many scholars, his stories can be roughly divided into two categories: horror stories and detective stories. The first category includes *The black Cat*, *The Tell-tale Heart* and *The Cask of Amontillado*, and *The Purloined Letter* is generally regarded as the representative piece of the second category, detective stories.

Horror stories are usually represented by the horror effect delicately organized by the author in his writing, with elements like death, murder, catacombs and vault etc. while in detective stories logical reasoning tends to be the most important factor that always draws the attention of both readers and scholars. But whatever the form of the stories can be, Poe created most of his stories with first-person narrative, which is probably one of few cases in history where first-person narrative is much loved and so largely used by a single writer.

Scholars usually ask the question why Edgar Allan Poe was so much interested in first-person narrative in his story writing. Naturally and evidently Poe must have thought of the matter carefully enough and there must have been something special about the first person narrative and its spectacular function that

Poe clearly realized. And these will be further discussed in detail in the following paragraphs.

2. Narrative Perspectives and Narrative Effect

Generally speaking, two narrative perspectives are most commonly used by authors in their literary creation: the third-person narrative and the first-person narrative.

2.1 Third-person Narrative

The third-person narrative is found more often used by authors for the simple reason that the narrator himself is not at all in the story and yet he knows everything about the characters, the plots and the psychology of the characters and so on. That's why the third-person narrative is known as the omniscient perspective and it is described by Cynthia Tucker as Third-Person Omniscient.

"When an author uses the third-person omniscient narrative point of view, the narrator plays God. He is all-knowing and can comment on the thoughts and feelings of any of the characters. He can comment on any of the story's events and make judgments about them. With an omniscient point of view, it is possible to get into the head of more than one character rather than being limited to one."

Many famous authors prefer to write stories or novels from third-person omniscient narrative point of view because they believe that they can shape the

characters more freely with proper psychological description of their inner world. Take, for instance, the famous literary giant Leo Tolstoy in his master piece *Anna Karenina*. In Chapter 1, when Stepan, Anna's brother, is thinking of the quarrel with his wife who has already got the evidence of his love affair with the governess, the author is surely telling the story from such a third-person omniscient angle.

"Yes, she won't forgive me, and she can't forgive me. And the most awful thing about it is that it's all my fault – all my fault, though I'm not to blame. That's the point of the whole situation," he reflected. "Oh, oh, oh!" he kept repeating in despair, as he remembered the acutely painful sensations caused him by this quarrel.

2.2 First-person Narrative

First-person narrative, however, seems to be quite different from the third-person omniscient narrative in several ways as Cynthia Tucker puts it like this:

In the first-person narrative, the narrator is a major participant in the story and speaks using the pronouns I, me, we and us. The narrator is often the major observer in the story, and the reader can see only what the narrator sees and chooses to share. The narrator cannot comment about anything he does not personally witness, unless another character tells him about it. The narrator is frequently the protagonist, which means he is the main character in the story and the reader is supposed to identify with him.

Evidently there can be some limitations for an author to tell a story when he is only able to express, through the narrator, the protagonist's idea, his mental activity and his vision is limited only to a particular single person. First-person narrator naturally only saw what other characters did, heard what other characters said, and see what the other characters are doing and hear what they are talking about. It is impossible for him to know enough about anyone else except the "I", the protagonist.

But one great advantage first-person narrative enjoys is that the narrator is able to have a direct description of the protagonist fully and vividly as if the story teller is talking vividly to readers face to face. This is, of course, the effect that third-person narrative is unable to reach.

3. Edgar Allan Poe's Practice of First-person Narrative in His Short Stories

No writers write stories from the first-person narrative point of view more often than Edgar Allan Poe did, for the simple reason they don't seem to like the limitations they have to suffer. Edgar Allan Poe,

however, showed particular interest in first-person narrative and this narrative is utilized extensively in almost all his short stories. He is thus regarded by scholars as one of the greatest masters for his persistence in using first-person narrative in his short story writing.

Why was Poe so keen on telling stories from first-person narrative point of view? Surely he didn't do so without any consideration of the factors that may influence the artistic effect. On the contrary, artistic effect was evidently of the first importance for Poe to consider when he was shaping a particular story in his mind, which of course shows his value in literary creation.

"... Having chosen a novel, first, and secondly a vivid effect, I consider whether it can best be wrought by incident or tone – whether by ordinary incidents and peculiar tone, or the converse, or by peculiarity both of incident and tone – afterward looking about me (or rather within) for such combinations of event, or tone, as shall best aid me in the consideration of the effect." (Qian Qin:192)

For Poe, the artistic effect must be set before he practically started to design the story and all the other elements including the content, the plot and all those necessary components of the story must serve the ultimate goal in order to achieve such an artistic effect.

It is generally regarded that Poe's detective stories are composed of a lot of meticulous logical reasoning and his horror stories are full of exposure of abnormal psychology. Both detective stories and horror stories, however, demand a great deal of suspense, which leads readers bit by bit into the further detail of the stories. This, of course, is a test for the author whether or not he is smart enough to put his skill into practice. And readers mostly enjoy the design of the story on the one hand and on the other hand gasp in admiration of the author's unique artistic technique.

Now that the effect is set, it is time for the author to determine from what narrative perspective he is going to tell the story. For Poe, he obviously regarded first-person narrative to be commanded in order to achieve his pre-set artistic effect better than anything else.

4. First-person Narrative and the Expression of Self Emotion

Apart from his persistent pursuit of artistic effect by means of first-person narrative, Poe probably has another reason to use first-person narrative so often in his stories.

As is known to all that Poe led a miserable life and he suffered far more from life than any other

writers in history. He lost financial support from his foster father when he was still young and jobless. This inevitably caused him to worry and feel distressed, sometimes desperate. He once worked with several magazines as an editor and barely made ends meet. In 1842, Poe's wife Virginia was seriously ill and he didn't even have enough money to send for a doctor. His wife's death in 1847 made Poe extremely sad.

Despite the hard time, however, Poe never stopped working hard in order to be independent and pursuing better life. Luckily he read extensively and showed unique talent in poem writing and story writing. Writing had become his only source of income. During the period he contributed his masterpieces such as *Ligeia* (1838), *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1843), *The Cask of Amontillado* (1846) and so on. Hard life taught Poe a lot of harsh lessons and he did learn a lot. What he suffered from real life enabled him to realize that fact he could express his self-emotion fully in his stories for the simple reason that he himself would decide what to write and how to write. What's more important is that first-person narrative point of view in story telling tends to help writers to achieve such a goal because of the use of the "I".

5. First-person Narrative and Readers' Response

In first-person narrative point of view, the "I" is used in the story as the story teller and protagonist. For readers, it seems to them that they are listening face to face to the "I" who is telling his own story or something he personally experienced. Everything the "I" tells tends to be regarded as true or trustworthy and thus readers tend to believe what they are reading. Surely this is a way for the author to win trust among readers.

Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado* (1846) is widely regarded as one of the best stories Poe ever wrote and Poe's unique literary creativity in unfolding a story and his super literary art of creating suspense and surprises are best demonstrated in this story. First-person narrative is used in the story, which is about how the avenger "I", Fortunato performs his revenge on Montresor, who is believed to have insulted Fortunato in the past. The "I", the protagonist is telling readers about his idea of revenge and bit by bit unveils the whole process in great detail about murdering Montresor.

Obviously Poe didn't care about other characters and what he is trying to do is to tell readers how the "I" leads poor Montresor into the trap he set earlier until the latter is fully controlled and walled to death in a deserted cellar. The first paragraph of the story is surely a typical psychological analysis of the avenger's state of mind in terms of performing the revenge.

"The thousand injuries of Fortunato I had borne as I best could, but when he ventured upon insult, I vowed revenge. You, who so well know the nature of my soul, will not suppose, however, that I gave utterance to a threat. At length I would be avenged; point definitely settled--but the very definitiveness with which it was resolved, precluded the idea of risk. I must not punish, but punish with impunity. A wrong is unredressed when retribution overtakes its redresser. It is equally unredressed the avenger fails to make himself felt as such to him who has done the wrong."
(Perrine:437)

When the "I" is telling his value and the principle on the matter of revenge, the language Poe used is super logical and philosophical, and readers are only stunned by the author's wit and led step by step into the further details of the story. Poe showed his incomparable ability of commanding English vocabulary, which is doomed to stimulate readers' *I-want-to-know-more* desire with his unique brevity and high efficiency until they are psychologically convinced and mentally touched.

6. First-person Narrative and Dialogues between Characters

Generally speaking, Poe didn't use a lot of dialogues in his short stories like *The Tell-tale Heart*, *Ligeia*, *The Black Cat* and *The Fall of the House of Usher*, etc. and the stories are largely told by a narrator or the "I", and thus full of psychological analysis of the characters. But readers tend to be more and more interested in vivid incidents of plots, which means that dialogues between characters will surely play such a fundamental role and the stories themselves tend to be more objective rather than subjective in developing further details. In this regard *The Cask of Amontillado* is generally regarded as Poe's master piece.

With huge amount of dialogues in *The Cask of Amontillado*, Fortunato, the other character, evidently sounds more real and objective. Readers seem to see the actual image of character vividly right in front of them while "I" in the dialogues seems to be more hypocritical.

"How?" said he. "Amontillado? A pipe? Impossible! And in the middle of the carnival!"

"I have my doubts," I replied; "and I was silly enough to pay the full Amontillado price without consulting you in the matter. You were not to be found, and I was fearful of losing a bargain."

"Amontillado!"

"I have my doubts."

"Amontillado!"

"And I must satisfy them."

"Amontillado!"

"As you are engaged, I am on my way to Luchesi. If any one has a critical turn, it is he. He will tell me—"

"Luchesi cannot tell Amontillado from Sherry."

"And yet some fools will have it that his taste is a match for your own."

"Come, let us go."

"Whither?"

"To your vaults²⁰."

"My friend, no; I will not impose upon your good nature. I perceive you have an engagement. Luchesi—"

"I have no engagement;—come."

"My friend, no. It is not the engagement, but the severe cold with which I perceive you are afflicted²¹. The vaults are insufferably damp. They are encrusted with nitre."

"Let us go, nevertheless. The cold is merely nothing. Amontillado! You have been imposed upon. And as for Luchesi, he cannot distinguish Sherry from Amontillado." (Perrine:438)

It can be seen very clearly that the first-person narrator, the "I", shows very strong concern with Fortunato's health and he is trying to be very considerate. This, however, is the very trick he plays over poor Fortunato in order to lead him into the trap successfully. Conversation here in the story sounds like a conversation in a movie scene and the two characters seem to be right here in front of the viewers, talking and moving vividly.

7. CONCLUSION

Poe's perfect command of first-person narrative and his proper use of dialogues in his stories undoubtedly increased the intensity of the story greatly, which made the story sound more attractive to readers. With the "I" as the first-person narrator, it seems to the readers that they are not only READING the story, but also HEARING the story directly told by the author himself. And the characters seem to be acting and moving about vividly just like what readers can hear and see around them each day. And what's more, Poe was trying, on the one hand, to impress readers with his unique technique, and on the other hand, he was trying to show his subconscious indignation and inner anger with the injustice he had suffered from real life.

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