

Melancholy Created by Symbols in the Poem “The Raven”

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Abstract: The article delves into melancholy created by symbols in Edgar Allen Poe’s poem “The Raven”. Poe is good at using symbols to create feelings in his poems. This article will analyze how the four symbols, Lenore, the raven, the time setting “midnight in the December” and the space setting “chamber” create a melancholy mood in the poem “The Raven”.

Keywords: Edgar Allen Poe, “The Raven”, Melancholy, Symbols.

1. Introduction

Melancholy is a kind of feeling that leads people to mental sufferings. It is linked with death in many of Edgar Allen Poe’s poems. Poe once wrote, “the death... of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world” (Harits, Ulfah). Although melancholy brings despair, it is still the most poetic subject for him, because it relates to the death of a lovely woman as shown in the poem “The Raven”. Besides, Poe is good at using symbols to convey feelings in poems. From the poem “The Raven”, we can see how the symbols Lenore, the raven, the time setting “midnight in the December” and the space setting “chamber” create an atmosphere of melancholy.

2. Melancholy Created by Two Main Characters

Above all, it is obvious that two main characters, Lenore and the raven, serve as symbols to add melancholy in this poem.

2.1. Lenore symbolizes death

First of all, Lenore serves as a symbol of melancholy because she is linked with the subject of death. As Poe once claimed, when he wrote the poem “The Raven”, “every aspect were measured with care, and from the melancholic theme, [he used] the subject of death to obtain readers’ sympathy through the involvement of a beautiful woman in creating a darker mood” (Harits, Ulfah). The death of beautiful Lenore enhances the melancholic mood in this poem. In reality, Lenore represents Poe’s wife Virginia, who “contracted tuberculosis in 1842, a disease for which there was no proper cure in the middle of the 19th century” (Watzlawik). Although she was not dead at that time, Poe knew Virginia would not recover from her illness. “The Raven” was written one year before her death, but for Poe this poem is “symbolic of all the loves he had lost as well as a foreshadowing of Virginia’s fate” (Watzlawik). Thus, Lenore, linked with the subject of death, further adds melancholy atmosphere in this poem.

2.2. The raven symbolizes darkness and irrationality

Secondly, apart from Lenore, the raven, as the primary

symbol of darkness and irrationality also enhances the melancholy mood in this poem. Firstly, the raven represents darkness because its color is black, which links to bad things. According to the Hebrew legend, ravens were originally white, but then “turned black for disobeying Noah in the story of the Ark” and they represent “the messengers to deliver bad news for Gods” (Harits, Ulfah). In this poem, the raven, first appears in the seventh stanza after the speaker hears knocks at the door again and again. As the poem describes, “Open here I flung the shutter, when, with many a flirt and flutter, / In there stepped a stately Raven of the saintly days of yore” (Lines 37-38). The arrival of the raven foreshadows darkness and badness for the speaker, which increases the melancholy effects. Before it arrives, the speaker is mourning his lost lover Lenore and hoping to reunite with her. However, the arrival of the raven brings despair to the speaker because it replies “nevermore” to each question given by him. Its answer makes the speaker more melancholic because he realizes: the night never comes to the end; there exists no life after the death; he and his lover Lenore will never reunite in Heaven (Harits, Ulfah). Besides, the impossibility for living people to see the raven proves that the raven comes from the hell. It links with death. As the ninth stanza describes, “For we cannot help agreeing that no living human being / Ever yet was blessed with seeing bird above his chamber door—”. Thus, the raven symbolizes darkness and conveys bad messages to the speaker, which creates a melancholy mood in the poem.

Apart from darkness, the raven also symbolizes irrationality, which reinforces the melancholy effect in this poem as well. Such irrationality can be proved from the important sculpture Pallas in the poem. When the speaker first sees the raven, it “[perches] upon a bust of Pallas”. Pallas refers to Pallas Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, which represents the speaker’s rationality in the poem. The color of the raven (black) and the Pallas (white) makes a contrast here, which further proves that the raven symbolizes the opposite aspect of rationality. The word “nevermore” said by the raven gradually makes the speaker lose rationality and believe that his Lenore will never return, which increases his melancholy mood dramatically. At first, the speaker endeavors to understand the word “Nevermore” of the Raven in a rational way. As the ninth stanza writes, “Much I marveled this ungainly fowl to hear discourse so plainly, / Though its answer little meaning-little relevancy bore”. These lines suggest that

the speaker uses reason. He discovers that the raven's word "nevermore" doesn't make sense in reality. The speaker's conjecture at that time is also very sensible: "What he utters is its only stock and store" (line 66). He speculates that the raven learns the word "Nevermore" from his "unhappy master" who went through "unmerciful disaster" (line 67). The speaker believes that the raven itself is a simple bird, it can only speak the word "Nevermore".

However, the speaker gradually shows how his rationality can't cope with the irrationality aspect symbolized by the raven. And finally his desperate desires to understand the raven make him insane and more melancholy. Take the twelfth stanza in this poem as an example:

'Raven still beguiling all my fancy into smiling,
Straight I wheeled a cushioned seat in front of bird, and
bust and door;
Then, upon the velvet sinking, I betook myself to linking
Fancy unto fancy, thinking what this ominous bird of
yore—
What this grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous bird
of yore
Meant in croaking "Nevermore."'

In this stanza, the speaker's attitude towards the raven goes through a change. At first, the raven "[beguiles] all [his] fancy into smiling" but in the end the speaker thinks the raven is a "grim, ungainly, ghastly, gaunt, and ominous" bird. The word "Meant" in the last line of this stanza shows that the raven merely talks like a parrot mechanically. The word "nevermore" doesn't refer to the context of the speaker's lost lover Lenore directly. It is the speaker who "interprets [the raven's] words in the context of his lost lover", which shows that the loss of rationality brings the speaker more melancholy (Harits, Ulfah). At the end of the poem, the raven "never [flits and sits] on the pallid bust of Pallas" (lines 103-104). It will cast a permanent shadow on the speaker, which shows irrationality finally dominates the speaker's rational state. The irrationality of the raven leads to the narrator's permanent despair and hopelessness.

Besides, the sound of the repeated word "nevermore" from the raven, a symbol of irrationality, also adds melancholy quality in this poem. As Poe claimed in "The Philosophy of Composition", he used this word "nevermore" because "the long 'o'-sound is the most sonorous vowel sound and pairs excellently with the 'r'-sound and it is the most variable consonant" (Watzlawik). Poe chose the word "nevermore" to intensify the melancholy atmosphere which the poem focuses on. The changing word from "nothing more" to "nevermore" in the poem shows incremental repetitions, which intensify the hopelessness and melancholy of the speaker. The phrase "nothing more" is dismissal and the speaker is comforting himself, but the raven's word "never more" emphasizes finality, which shows that definitely something will never happen. As the tone changes from dismissal to finality, the melancholy effects are increased in this poem.

3. Melancholy Created by The Setting

Except for the two main characters, the setting in this poem also serves as a symbol of melancholy.

3.1. The time setting "midnight in the December" symbolizes death and darkness

Above all, in the aspect of the time setting, the scene happens "upon a midnight dreary in the bleak December" (line 7). Midnight means "the end of the day" and December means "the end of the year" (Harits, Ulfah). They both reflect the darkness and add sorrows to the speaker's mental world. The time setting links to the end of life, which echoes the death of Lenore and further increases melancholy mood in this poem.

3.2. The space setting "chamber" symbolizes isolation

In addition, in terms of the space setting, the scene takes place in the speaker's narrow and dark chamber. The chamber shows the speaker's isolation and increases his melancholy. This chamber used to be the warm place for the lovers, but with the death of the hostess, all former love and lingering memories have disappeared. Besides, the chamber door in this poem symbolizes a door that separates the speaker's inner world from the outside world. The speaker is unwilling to accept the fact of his lover's death. The closed chamber door means the closed heart door of the speaker. It is the exit from melancholy. As Dale Thomas comments: "I would say that the narrator's chamber door symbolizes the portal to freedom from grief, an escape from his self-torture" (Watzlawik). However, the speaker does not want to open his closed heart to face the reality, so he can't relieve his sorrows. Although he tries to recover from the melancholy by reading books, he fails and finally he ponders and naps. "Such acts of contemplation and relaxation are symptoms of melancholy" (Watzlawik). The melancholy makes the speaker forget the flowing of time, because even if he sleeps, he still dreams his lost lover. Trapped in his own chamber, the speaker's melancholy is persistent and he can't release the painful feelings as time flies. Thus, both of the time setting and the space setting become symbols of melancholy in this poem.

4. Conclusion

Poe emphasizes the writing of a melancholy mood in poetry, and the poem "The Raven" is a typical example. Poe once said, "beauty was closely connected to endless sorrow as a genuinely romantic author" (Harits, Ulfah). For Poe, melancholy is beautiful. It is clear to see how Poe uses symbols to create the melancholic tone in the poem "The Raven". Not only the two characters, the raven and Lenore, serve as symbols to add melancholy but also the symbols of space and time setting, a chamber and a midnight in December, can express the speaker's extreme sadness.

References

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