

Shaping and Revealing the Suspense of Fate in “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Signalman”

Mengqi Wen

School of Sports Economics and Management, Central University of Finance and Economic, Beijing, China
Corresponding author: 2020311705@email.cufe.edu.cn

Abstract:

The process of creating suspense in the short suspense novels of Edgar Allan Poe and Dickens is intertwined with the flow of the development of the protagonist’s destiny. The process of unveiling the suspense of the work is also the process of the arrival of the protagonist’s irresistible destiny. Through the desperate and destructive ending, the author wants to express the theme of revelation. In both “*The Fall of the House of Usher*” and “*The Signalman*”, a horrific atmosphere is created through the foreshadowing and hints of destiny, and the suspenseful effect is constantly realized along with the revelation of the established destiny. Therefore, this paper explores the author’s process of shaping and revealing the suspense of fate through the dynamic relationship between external objects and characters, the choice of narrator’s persona, the structure of the suspenseful plot, and the textual hints to find the differences between the author and the general suspense or tragedy text qualities. Through comparative analysis, find out how the two are conceived from the perspectives of the integration of external objects and characters, the construction of suspense structure, and textual hints. In the end will find out their unique performance methods in setting and revealing the suspense of fate, which will provide a reference for exploring the aesthetic and social values behind the suspense novels.

Keywords: The Fall of the House of Usher; The Signalman; Suspense Fiction; Suspense of Fate.

1. Introduction

Fatalism originated in ancient Greece and has been frequently applied in tragic novels, whether it is the tragedy of destiny or the later tragedy of character and social tragedy, where destiny is always intertwined. Miao Qiang pointed out in his research paper that the shaping process of tragedy often has an established structure and direction, and the fate of the characters always gives people a sense of déjà vu, i.e., the “sense of fate” [1]. In both works, can see the obvious “sense of destiny”, the protagonist himself and the reader’s feelings in the process of story advancement in the escalating, so that the continuous revelation of the tragic fate and the gradual deepening of the atmosphere of suspense and thriller complement each other, each other to promote.

The definition of a suspense novel is clearer in the academic world, here use Wang Duo-Qing’s definition “Suspense novels are articles that use suspense to promote the development of the article, starting from setting up suspicion, running through the suspense, and ultimately contacting the suspense of the article’s mode of operation” [2]. Simply comparing the two articles with the definition of suspense novels, it can be felt that the intention of the use of mysterious or horrifying imagery lies not only in the

depiction of suspenseful atmosphere but also in the revelation of its destiny and oppression, which distinguishes it from other suspense novels focusing on the solution of puzzles.

Because a large number of modern mystery novels focus on puzzle settings and cracking techniques while neglecting the humanistic significance and aesthetic effect behind the suspense. This paper uses narrative theory, unity of effect, and other research methods in the hope of analyzing Edgar Allan Poe’s “*The Fall of the House of Usher*” and Dickens’s “*The Signalman*” from the multiple perspectives of narrative text, structure, and point of view. The study examines the expression of fate suspense and thematic presentation in two literary works, identifying their distinct qualities. It explores the characteristics of suspense novels, particularly in terms of how fate is shaped, and suspense is constructed. Furthermore, the research provides a theoretical expansion on the creation of suspense and the portrayal of fate within literary texts. Additionally, it investigates the social and aesthetic values that underpin the revelation of tragic fate in these narratives.

2. Literature Review

In studies of “*The Fall of the House of Usher*” and “*The Signalman*”, the techniques of suspense building, and

atmosphere rendering have often been the focus of discourse, in addition to a steady stream of explorations of the metaphors and supernatural forces involved. John C. Gruesse suggests that the two analyses often made of "*The Fall of the House of Usher*" are categorized into rationalism and supernaturalism, which is to say that the story here is understood as either having a natural explanation or driven by supernatural forces and argues that this is not a matter of absolutes but should be analyzed in terms of the degree of insanity of the narrator [3]. In terms of the supernatural power perspective, Tang Weisheng points out in his thesis that it is not people but objects that are dominant in Usher's House, in which the objects have a mysterious power, i.e., they are analyzed from the perspective of supernaturalism, which suggests that it is the mysterious power that the objects have that influences Usher and the narrator [4]. David Roche defines unwellness as "foreign body" or 'contamination', which means that the House of Usher is unhealthy for the narrator and Usher both physically and mentally. And he argues that this unhealthy "aesthetics of contamination" owes much to the "constructiveness", the unity of narrative and lyrical structure and aesthetic effect [5]. Ellison D points out that Dickens employs a fractured narrative time in "*The Signalman*", where the narrator's experience of "*The Signalman*" is a late transcription and argues that Dickens expresses the theme of relevance by supernaturalizing the industry [6]. Yang Yun Qian explored the portrayal and metaphor of the ghost in "*The Signalman*", noting that its theme lies in the gaze of the underlying characters [7]. Most of the studies have addressed the implied meanings and aesthetic effects in both from multiple perspectives, but few articles have observed the commonalities in both and their guiding role in the creation of suspense novels.

3. Contrasting Analysis

3.1 The Relationship between Oppression and Integration of Foreign Objects and Characters

Both texts use a lot of narratives and constructions about external objects, which oppress the mental and spiritual world of the characters in different ways, and the authors use them to show the deepening of the characters' alienation.

The narrator's experiences and representations before and after "*The Fall of the House of Usher*" are particularly evident in this regard. When the narrator first arrives at the House of Usher, the author devotes a great deal of ink to describing the gloomy mansion and its depressing surroundings, which creates an oppressive force on the character. The author uses a lot of ink to describe the gloomy mansion and the depressing environment around

it, which creates an oppressive situation for the characters, including the descriptions of external objects repeatedly interspersed in the article, such as "moldy spots", "cobwebs", "deserted cellar", "damp", "low ceiling" and "low ceiling". Words such as "moldy," "cobwebbed," "deserted cellar," "damp," and "low" not only convey a horrible and depressing atmosphere to the readers but also serve as one of the manifestations and reasons for the psychological alienation of the characters in the text.

The result of this pressurization is that the characters merge with the external objects on some level. Initially, when the narrator arrives at the Usher House, it is the gloomy old mansion that brings him the most terror. The infectious power of the external objects makes the narrator inexplicably "gloomy", and at this point, the narrator is still able to analyze and look at the House and the state of Usher in a more rational way. In the middle and late stages, what infects him is not only the House of Usher itself, but also the House of Usher, which has begun to possess a "strong infectious force that is creeping into the narrator's heart". At this point, it is obvious that the oppression of external objects and Usher himself have begun to merge, and together they form an infectious force on the narrator, i.e., the "contagious" of the two siblings mentioned by David Roche in his thesis, in which the oppression of the external objects has already infected Usher's siblings and the narrator [5]. In this process, the narrator is also becoming more and more integrated into the Usher House as the infection grows, and this "inexplicable fear" has migrated from the perception of the environment and the state of the friends to the prediction of Usher's destiny.

The relationship between the narrator and the signalman is shaped by the foreign objects in "*The Signalman*" in a different way than in Usher House, in that the main effect is that the narrator perceives the oppressive influence of the ghost on the signalman and uses it to reveal suspense and to call attention to the signalman as a minor character. The narrator's perception of the signalman's alienation is unified by the process of his fate being revealed. From his strange attitude when he first meets the narrator to his subsequent special inquiries and the events of the apparition that he confesses to the narrator, the apparition's oppression of him is gradually revealed. From the moment he meets the apparition, the oppression and alienation that the apparition brings to the signalman's mind continue to rise, and by the time he encounters the narrator, it has reached a certain level, and his behavior is even as strange as the fusion of the apparition.

The signalman's fusion with the outside world is evident from the very beginning, as his singular title of "signalman" and the roaring train demonstrate in the opening scene that he has long since lost his identity, and has become inseparable from the entire railroad system, becom-

ing a part of this entire industrial system.

3.2 The Role of the First Person in Revealing the Suspense of Fate

In “*The Fall of the House of Usher*”, the presence of the narrator is more closely connected with the whole external environment and the characters, and the author’s revelation of fate and the shaping of the horror atmosphere is through the narrator to pull the reader’s emotions. The two levels of narration, Usher’s storyline, and the narrator’s experience, are not independently or unidirectionally connected but are mapped onto each other. The narrator’s presence not only serves as Usher’s observer and narrator, but also demonstrates to the reader the deepening of alienation through his changing moods, and pushes the suspense of fate to its peak through the narrator’s increasing premonitions.

The opening of the essay, depicting the external environment of the House of Usher through the narrator’s point of view, sets the dark and depressing atmosphere of the whole text and also brings the reader into a tense atmosphere. Later on, the abnormalities of Usher and Usher House are also conveyed through the narrator’s eyes and descriptions, and the tragic destiny of the underworld is also revealed by the narrator’s ever-changing mental state. The oppression and influence of everything around the narrator reaches the reader, thus completing the two-way communication between the narrator and the reader.

In “*The Signalman*”, the narrator’s existence is more independent from the external environment and characters; he is not directly connected to the entire railroad system and the ghosts, and the alienation he suffers and produces is almost non-existent. The narrator’s presence in this piece is more inclined to that of a mere narrator and recorder. The depth of his contact with the signalman shows layer by layer the signalman’s encounters and, thus creating suspense and revealing the fate, and at the same time, also allows the signalman, an inconspicuous little man, to be able to enter into the public eye and establish a connection with the reader.

In addition, it is also the lack of alienation of the narrator in this paper that gives him a greater sense of realism than in “*The Fall of the House of Usher*”, and makes it possible for him to over-associate after hearing about the spectral action not to be mistaken by the reader as a hallucination, but rather to think about it. In turn, the ending proves that the narrator’s associations are perfectly in line with the fateful hints, bringing the reader a shocking sense of suspenseful revelation.

3.3 Suspense Structure

From the overall essay structure, “*The Fall of the House of Usher*” in the fate of suspense shaping more inclined to constantly deepen the rendering of its events to promote

itself with a strong Edgar Allan Poe color, the plot development is not clear, a large number of pages in the rendering of the atmosphere of horror and suspense, his purpose is not to complete and logical advancement of a story, but the overall creation of a kind of atmosphere or mood.

The framework for the rendering is built through the depiction of the overall gloomy and depressing environment of the House of Usher throughout the text, with many references to Gothic external objects such as the narrow windows, the spire, the rotting floors, the cellar, and the dilapidated and large, empty furniture constructing the environment. The psychological and emotional aspects of the characters are also interspersed to fill in the framework of rendering to show the state of insanity and gradual deterioration of the mental state shown by Usher on the one hand, and on the other hand, the narrator’s psychological and emotional aspects are also given to the readers in many places in the form of coloring to give them a thrilling or suspenseful experience. In addition, Edgar Allan Poe decorates this rendering framework through the resonance of paintings, poems, and stories. The paintings that look like cellars and catacombs correspond to the hiding place of his sister’s body, the poem “*The Haunted Palace*”, which hints at Usher’s fate with the end of the monarch, and the book “*Mad Trist*”, which is read out on the night of the thunderstorm but contrasted with the reality one by one, deepen the shaping of the atmosphere in the details.

The structure of suspense in “*The Signalman*” is even more obvious, with a gradual process of narration: at the first meeting, the signalman hears the voice from above but looks down, initially throwing out suspense; at the time of parting, he asks the narrator whether he has seen him before, and why he shouts “below there”, again throwing out questions to the narrator and the reader; at the time of goodbye, he tells the narrator his ghostly sightings, revealing the previous In the goodbye, he tells the narrator about his sighting of the ghost, which reveals the suspense of the previous text and creates a mysterious and horrifying atmosphere that hints at the direction of the tragedy; the narrator temporarily pacifies him, and the story and the tension are temporarily eased; and finally the signalman dies, and the ghost becomes a foreshadowing of and a factor in his death so that the suspense is unveiled. Fewer “mini climaxes” push the story toward its inevitable conclusion more quickly and allow for a more direct trajectory of revelation, which also has a more immediate effect in suggesting to the reader the theme and meaning of the story [8].

Dickens misplaces the narrative sequences when constructing the entire framework of suspense. The complete timeline development should be that the signalman encounters two apparitions and corresponding accidents before he meets the narrator, who shouts the same thing as

the apparition to heighten the signalman’s suspicions, and through which the signalman can confide his encounters to someone, and ultimately, he moves towards the death ending. The narrator’s account overlaps with the signalman’s experience, but the first two apparitions are dislocated from the timeline, a setup that adds suspense and horror to the story and draws the reader’s attention and reflection through the signalman’s strange behavior when the cause is unknown.

3.4 Textual Implication

In terms of the organization of the hints of the suspense of fate, both texts can be regarded as a better embodiment of Edgar Allan Poe’s “unity of effect”, “In almost all genres of composition, the unity of effect or impression is of the greatest importance.” In Edgar Allan Poe’s view, the effect triggered by a literary work defines the writer’s creative process, i.e., the effect of the work on the readers or the unified impression left on the readers. Proper suspense setting can stimulate the narrative tension of the text, thus enhancing the reading experience of the readers [9]. The suspense settings throughout the text are by the effect of echoing back and forth to output a sense of suspense and fatalism to the reader.

In “*The Fall of the House of Usher*”, an ambush is laid at the beginning of the book, and “a fissure which could not be seen clearly” widens suddenly at the end and finally leads to the collapse of the House of Usher, and the initially insignificant fissure undoubtedly lays down the tone and suspense for the whole piece of writing which is constantly heading towards collapse.

David Roche refers to Edgar Allan Poe’s composition as an aesthetic of contamination and mentions the repetitive nature of its rhetorical effect, the repetition of words, and the repetition of the same root word, which creates a resonance in the text and unifies the lyrical effect [5]. In addition, the network of words used in the text is also involved in forming or suggesting the concept of alienation, the words themselves are not necessarily related to the semantic field of horror or disease, for example, physical emaciation can suggest mental restlessness, most of the combinations of words related to space and atmosphere, perception, and emotional effects form an oppressive envi-

ronment. Usher’s references to “absolute consequences,” “sooner or later,” and “leaving life behind” in the middle of his alienation are not only his sense of the tragedy of fate but also suggest to the reader the ultimate direction of fate. It also suggests to the reader the ultimate direction of fate.

The existence and arrangement of “textual texts” also increase the sense of destiny, that is, the literary theory of “intertextuality”, the presence of two or more texts together, and one text exists in another text [10]. The poem “The Palace of Ghosts” read by Usher explicitly mentions the fate of the king’s death; on the night of his death, the narrator reads a passage from the book that corresponds to the environment, which not only creates a tense and oppressive situation, but also undoubtedly gives the readers a sense of suspense that his fate has been written long ago, and is now finally unveiled.

The image of the ghost throughout “The Signalman” can even be regarded as the embodiment of fate, and its actions each time it appears to leave the signalman and the reader with suspense and uneasiness. However, from the two incidents of ghosts that the signalman has already seen, the ghosts overlap with the scene of the deaths to a certain extent, which not only deepens the rendering of the horror atmosphere and suspense but also ultimately hints at the established end of the industrial civilization, in which a lot of small people are heading towards death.

Including its repeated references to the red light and the bell that only he can hear, they are all hints of his alienated characteristics and fate. The appearance of the red light suggests the occurrence of emergency and danger, which is not only a reflection of the reality of the situation, but also one of the props that form an oppressive atmosphere for the signalman and the reader. The signalman turns on the lamp in his hand only when he encounters danger, and both the lamp that was lit up at the time of his death and the act of ignoring the warning suggest the alienation of his mental state at that time. The signalman may not have been able to distinguish between the warnings and their authenticity, and the repeated occurrences of the same cries factor into and suggest his death as if his fate had been written from the moment the apparition appeared.

Table 1. Summary of the wording used in the text of “The Signalman”

| Story nodes | Textual implication |
|------------------------------|---|
| When the two met | The signalman gave an odd look at the red light at the mouth of the tunnel. |
| Ghosts appeared | Red light |
| Perceived danger | Turn the light in the signalman’s hand to red |
| Before the narrator appeared | The ghost rang the bell |

| | |
|-------------------------|--|
| When the signalman died | Lighting the lamp in his hand in the daytime |
|-------------------------|--|

“*The Fall of the House of Usher*” and “*The Signalman*” can be said to be works of continuous revelation of the tragic fate of the characters, all the suspense and mystery are hints of fate, and the mystery is not intentionally probed or solved, but naturally emerges together with the direction of the destructive ending. In this kind of tragic fate, the meaning of suspense and mystery is more to reflect the fate itself and the oppression and mystery it brings, and this kind of suspense is not necessarily the existence of the real “truth” or “answer” but aims to explore the essence of human nature and the critique of reality that the author wants to express in the continuous revelation. Instead, it aims to explore the essence of human nature and criticism of reality that the author wants to express through continuous revelation. Its theme is different from most of the tragedies that embody the spirit of human resistance to destiny, in that the process of revealing destiny is often more depressing, and the spirit of resistance is missing or fragile. In “*The Fall of the House of Usher*”, the destruction of the Usher family highlights the insignificance of human beings, and in “*The Signalman*”, the portrayal of minor characters reveals the author’s reflection on and criticism of industrial civilization as a whole. Instead of fighting against destiny, they give people a shock of despair and emptiness to express the author’s ideological theme.

4. Conclusion

“*The Fall of the House of Usher*” and “*The Signalman*” have something in common in the shaping of the relationship between the characters and the external objects, the use of the first person, the suspense structure the textual hints, etc. Both of them depict the oppression of the external objects on the characters and the further fusion of the characters and use the first person to make this fusion of the oppressive influence conveyed to the readers to form a two-way communication, and to build up their respective suspense structures and textual hints to fill in the whole to achieve the effect of revealing the ending of the tragedy. The effect of the revelation of the ending is achieved. At the same time, the identity of the narrator in the relationship between objects and characters is slightly different, and the overall suspense framework construction is also

divided into two kinds: large-surface rendering and gradual advancement. The use of fate suspense in suspense novels can enhance the infectious force of the article characters, through the established sense of fate based on the reader’s shock and thus focus on the article theme reveals the object.

This study provides a lot of valuable reference significance for future research in this direction, mainly affecting the suspense setting structure and character fate-shaping techniques in suspense novels, which provides theoretical expansion, and at the same time explores the social and aesthetic value behind the tragedy of destiny, future research should be more focused on the atmosphere of suspense shaping rendering and the direction of the social value brought about by the future research in-depth investigation.

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