

A Study of the Liberation of Physical Space in Edgar Allan Poe's Novels

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Abstract:

In Edgar Allan Poe's novels, deaths often occur at night, in narrow stairwells, and in dark, confined basements, hidden within the thickness of walls or beneath the ruins of collapsed buildings. By integrating Henry Lefebvre's theories of social space and physical space with the plot of Poe's stories, this paper conducts a textual analysis to interpret the author's intentions in choosing specific social spaces. In Poe's novels, the murderer's use of space to commit murder and conceal the truth of death is a manifestation of the individual's struggle for power within the society they inhabit and the deprivation of others' power, reflecting the alienation of human nature. To counter such alienation, Poe regards the individual body as the subject of social space production in his novels. By focusing on the depiction of "resurrection from the dead" and other magical and romantic elements, and by emphasizing the liberation of bodily sensations—particularly the medium of sound—to reveal the truth of death, it is argued that Poe's novels demonstrate the purpose of bodily resistance to the alienation of human nature through the liberation of physical space.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe; Henri Lefebvre; social space; bodily space; liberation.

1. Introduction

Many studies focus on the beauty of death depicted by Edgar Allan Poe, the "carnivalization" phenomenon presented in his novels, and so on. There is a lack of analysis of the elements constructed by "architecture" in Poe's novels and the metaphors behind them. Therefore, this study focuses on analyzing the social spaces constructed by architecture in three of Poe's short stories, aiming to fill the gaps in the research on Edgar Allan Poe's novels, particularly in the areas of how space reveals social alienation and the resistance to such alienation.

This study primarily utilizes Henry Lefebvre's theories on the production of space to analyze the social spaces depicted in three of Edgar Allan Poe's short stories, revealing the process of power behind the hidden social spaces in the novels. It also discusses Poe's unique method of using the romanticization of bodily space to resist the alienation and exploitation brought by society through the romanticization of physical space, to liberate human nature. The discussion is presented in three parts. Through the relatively novel entry point of "architecture," this study aims to analyze Poe's exposure to the alienation brought about by the development of capitalism at the time and his call for the liberation of human nature.

This study primarily employs textual analysis, which in-

volves reading the text and then applying relevant theories to analyze it, to contemplate Poe's writing intentions, facilitating the progress of the research.

2. Social Space in Poe's Novels

Henry Lefebvre, a French Marxist philosopher, conducted an in-depth analysis of the nature and development of space, noting that it is not merely a container but also a symbol of the evolution of a capitalist society. His unique theories on space provide insightful foundations for analyzing the alienation and resistance of physical space implied by social spaces in Poe's novels.

Swiss German scholar Schmid summarized Henri Lefebvre's definition of social space in *The Production of Space*: Social space is a product of social nature born based on natural space through human practice, which is mainly recognized as two types of spaces: "the natural and material physical domain" and "the logical and formalized abstract mental domain." [1]. The former refers to material reality, considering space as a material entity, such as the "bucket" and "can"[2]. Containers are commonly seen in daily life; the latter refers to the mental space constituted by language and symbols, such as the abstract concept of "nation" that is not a concrete entity. Both types of space exhibit characteristics of "mutual inclusion, interdependence, and presupposition" [1].

In Poe's three novels, the depicted social spaces are more covert and deceptive, with even new social spaces formed by secondary labor. They combine the material and mental spaces, reflecting the inclusivity and resonance between the two. For example, in *The Cask of Amontillado*, the physical space is depicted more deeply through the perspective of "I" with the wine cellar presenting its long and spacious characteristics, implying its inescapable nature — "the white web-work which gleams from these cavern walls" "We had passed through walls of piled bones, with casks and puncheons intermingling" directly into the inmost recesses of catacombs: "Three sides of this interior crypt were still ornamented in this manner. " "Within the wall thus exposed by the displacing of the bones, we perceived a still interior recess" "It seemed to have been constructed for no special use within itself but formed merely the interval between two of the colossal supports of the roof of the catacombs, and was backed by one of their circumscribing walls of solid granite. " [3]. Suggesting how Fortunato will be executed by "me". In the climax, "I" has built the wall for a full eleven layers, completing the entombment. The mental space is primarily composed of the dialogue between "me" and Fortunato—"It is not the engagement, but the severe cold with which I perceive you are afflicted. The vaults are insufferably damp." "A draught of this Medoc will defend us from the damps" [3]. The mental space corresponds to the secretive and inconspicuous nature of the cellar; at the end, "I" and Fortunato suppress each other with strange noises, and after confirming his state of confusion through the irrational dialogue, "I forced the last stone into its position." [3]. The integration and close resonance of the two types of spaces are thus formed. In *The Fall of the House of Usher* the setting is a castle far from human habitation. The ailing master of the castle places his sister's corpse in a "terrible" cellar with a heavy iron door, which is small and deep, as a prelude to the plot. It is not until the climax that "I" read the plot from the book while the imagined sounds coincide with the real sounds captured: "It seemed to me that I heard a sound coming from some quiet corner of the mansion, and that echo was very similar to the sound of the door being broken described by Sir Lancelot Canning in the book." A clever "echoing" between the dead and the living is gradually achieved. The mental space and the physical space have achieved a high degree of overlap [4]. "The breaking of the hermit's door, and the death cry of the dragon, and the clangor of the shield! --say, rather, the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault!" [3]. Finally, the physical space of the castle echoes the truth spoken by Usher in the mental space and collapses with a thunderous crash; In *The Black Cat*, the most vivid

depiction is of the wall imprinted with the image of the dead black cat, "the steep staircase". The narrow cellar and the wall, hastily repaired to bury the wife's body, only at the end burst forth with the mental space's echo to the physical space: the black cat let out a shrill cry from within the wall. The meticulous portrayal of the interplay between the two types of spaces serves two purposes: on one hand, it provides the appropriate preconditions for the development of the plot in Poe's stories, where secretive spaces can often conceal the truth and the crime of murder; on the other hand, it allows Poe to use his writing to depict narrow and dimly lit spaces, offering readers a synesthetic experience that generates psychological pressure and fear, thereby enhancing the horror atmosphere of the novel.

3. The Power Dynamics in the Social Spaces of Poe's Novel

Henry Lefebvre, in his theories on the production of space, mentioned: "Space is a mode of power" and "Space incorporates power in the form of buildings, monuments, and works of art." [1]. That is to say, architecture, or space itself, possesses symbolic power, and according to Lefebvre's theory, space demonstrates its symbolic nature through the combination of the dialectical triad of elements. Space production includes spatial practice, representations of space, and represented space. Poe's novels depict spatial interactions that are a clever interpretation of the inseparable triad of elements, reflecting the process of spatial power dynamics through the plot and demonstrating the symbolic power of space.

Spatial practice involves the production and reproduction of specific places based on particular historical periods, modes of production, and other factors. These specific places typically refer to buildings, squares, parks, cemeteries, and so on in daily life. These spaces are "prerequisite on the use of the body", and can be perceived by the senses, that is, they can be seen and have visibility [1]. The entities that control the production and reproduction of these specific places are the stakeholders with vested interests. To create more benefits and demonstrate authority, they require controllable spaces, transforming a part of nature into a political domain through the form of architecture. In *The Cask of Amontillado*, the vast wine cellar was once a symbol of the family's immense power and wealth—"These vaults he said, 'are extensive. The Montresors, I replied, were a great and numerous family.'" Nowadays, with the development of the economy, it has been transformed into a storage cellar for wine sales to generate greater profits; in *The Fall of the House of Usher*, the immense yet desolate castle not only proclaims the

noble status of the Usher family but also foreshadows the decline of the family's fortunes [3].

Lefebvre refers to spatial representation as "conceived space," which is the space that has been conceptualized and is often tied to the "order" imposed by production relations. For example, in *The Black Cat*, the biological production relationship formed by "me" and my wife constitutes a conceptualized space: the family. The order that comes with the family is generally considered to be an ideal state where husband and wife should support each other and share interests, which in terms of spatial representation means "we" as a family unit own a house to live in together.

Representational space is the space of direct experience, that is, the concrete places in everyday life. This space emphasizes experientiality and transformability. As a subject within a certain space, one has the power not only to enjoy the space but also to modify it. For example, in *The Black Cat*, "I" dig up the wall that had been filled in to bury a corpse, and in *The Cask of Amontillado*, "I" use the collapse of the wall to achieve the purpose of burying Fortunato alive.

In Poe's three stories, the spatial practices often take place in hidden locations such as cellars, stairwells, and castles. The murderers in the stories, to release their repressed desires and instincts, break the order of production relations through the most violent means—depriving life. They take advantage of the deceptive nature brought by the visibility of spatial practice and cover up their crimes through a secondary production of space. Combining these three elements and arranging the plot to form a closed loop that reveals the process is precisely the power dynamics behind the production of space that Poe wants to express. For example, in *The Cask of Amontillado* merely because "I" believe Fortunato has "dared to insult" "me" and affects "my" ability to gain greater profits in the wine trade, it arouses "my" twisted desire for revenge. Taking advantage of his drunkenness, "I" lead him into the wine cellar, a space practice filled with "my" own power, which is conducive to achieving "my" objectives, "fettered him to the granite", "Throwing the links about his waist", meticulously depicting how "I" engage in secondary production of space—by building up eleven stone walls—to entomb him within. In *The Black Cat* the suppressed violent emotions within "me" gradually spiral out of control, beginning to vent on the wife and pets. In *The Black Cat*, "I" feel that the authority of being "for me a man, fashioned in the image of the High God" is challenged, because "a brute beast" has "worked out for me so much of insufferable." [3]. The behavior of the black cat almost tripping "me" became the spark for this kind of indignation, leading "me" to kill "my" wife who came to stop it. However,

the moral order in the heart of the murderer has already been chaotic, and without any remorse, "I" think about how to deal with the body, and finally enclose it within the sealed cellar wall. In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, either out of despair at the family's decline or depression due to an incurable illness, Usher ignores his sister's pleas, he places his still-living sister into a coffin. Put her into the cellar, which is "deep underground" [3]. "immediately beneath that portion of the building in which was my sleeping apartment.", Since then, he has been living in constant fear and unease. "The pallor of his countenance had assumed, if possible, a more ghastly hue", and "I beheld him gazing upon vacancy for long hours, in an attitude of the most profound attention, as if listening to some imaginary sound." [3]. Every hint reveals his cowardly nature, as well as the fear and unease in his heart over the secret of having buried his sister alive. It even reached the point where he was hallucinating, and on the brink of collapse, he was still lamenting to himself: "Yet I dared not --oh, pity me, miserable wretch, that I am! --I dared not --I dared not speak!" [3].

Poe deftly integrates the three elements to uncover the latent power dynamics within human relationships through social space. He illustrates how individuals, as the subjects of space, maintain their power by depriving and suppressing the rights of others to exist within the social space and its reproduction. This reflects the dictatorship, exploitation, and alienation of individual power at the time, as well as the alienation of human nature.

4. The Rebellion and Liberation of Romanticized Physical Space in Poe's Novel

Poe does not merely expose the alienation of human nature; through his three short stories, it can be observed that he is keen on using the depiction of individual deaths and the romanticized treatment of these deaths to resist exploitative power and achieve the liberation of human nature. Lefebvre proposed that before humans use their bodies to produce and create, the body already exists as space, and the body, as a „machine,“ has a duality: „ On the one hand, it is driven by a vast supply of energy (food and the energy of metabolism); on the other hand, it is defined by delicate and subtle energies (sensory materials). [1]“ Sensory materials can correspond to what Nietzsche referred to as the Dionysian spirit, which is the true desire and spirit of human beings. It can be „barbaric,“ bringing instinctual destruction and madness to others, or it can be the creation of art through desire—dance, music, theater, and so on. Especially through tragedy, it „explains the mysteries and horrors of the world,“ opening „the path

to the mother of existence, the most intimate core of all things," that is, the artistic impulse to express oneself, which has both contradictory and unified aspects [5]. For Poe, death, „this most melancholy of topics, is most poetic“ that is “when it is most closely connected with beauty.“ [6, 7] Therefore, the depiction of death after one individual persecutes another in his novels embodies the intense collision of contradictions in the duality of the sensory materials of physical space. Then, by aesthetically treating the harsh death brought about by the release of the instinct for destruction, he achieves a fusion of the two sides, imbued with Poe’s mysticism and romanticism, focusing on the depiction of the process of murder and the revelation of the truth. The three novels seem to develop unconventionally, actually, he uses the death caused by individual murders and the magical treatment of death as a form of resistance for the self and humanity.

In this kind of magical treatment, Poe often chooses „resurrection from the dead.“ The body, is the first space that a human individual possesses, according to Henri Lefebvre’s theory: „At the true core of space and the discourse of power is the body, the body that cannot be simplified, reduced, or overturned. It rejects the reproduction of relationships that deprive and destroy it. Is there anything more fragile, more easily tormented in the world than the body? Is there anything more resistant in the world than it?“ [1] Combining his theory of spatial representation, it is not difficult to find that he and Poe have a high degree of overlap in their understanding of the role of bodily space: they both believe that the process of bodily resistance and liberation is the process of revealing the self and liberating human nature.

Lefebvre further proposes that the liberation of bodily sensations is precisely the destination of physical space and a form of resistance against the alienated social space. Based on Herder’s related theories, he „emphasized the comprehensive value of hearing in coordinating the functions of other senses: not as vague and obscure as touch, nor as overly clear as sight, but finding the golden mean between distance and closeness, inside and outside, length and shortness.“ [8]. So in Poe’s novels, Poe uses sound, that is, hearing, as the most critical element and medium of physical space resistance. Leveraging the characteristic of the auditory space that „its source is beyond the reach of sight, as it cannot be located and seems to arise from everywhere and anywhere“ [9]. Poe intentionally narrows or even deprives the characters and readers of their visual space, instead focusing extensively on the description of sounds, highlighting the resistance of physical space. For example, In *The Black Cat*, „Using sound to unite women and animals as accomplices against the power mechanism.“ [10]. The black cat that was walled up for several

days at the end miraculously survives, and as the victim of persecution, it replaces the woman who has been deprived of her voice and right to exist, becoming the medium of sound. As „I“ was complacently knocking on the wall, the black cat responded with a voice that was „half of horror and half of triumph,“ „such as might have arisen only out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation.“ [3]. This sound dramatically revealed „my“ crime to the police, completing the mission of resistance and revenge. In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, there is no direct depiction of the resurrected corpse. Instead, the resistance of the woman who has been deprived of her right to exist and to make her voice heard is mainly conveyed through the combination of human voices and the sounds of nature. Madeline’s voice, after being buried alive, Usher often „as if listening to some imaginary sound „, which causes him „extreme fear“ and torment until he can no longer bear it, reaching a state of „a restrained hysteria in his whole demeanor.“ Following that, the narrative cleverly allows „me“ as a third party to detect something unusual within the natural sounds—the „wind.“ This serves as a medium to transform the hallucinations that Usher hears into sounds that are both real and illusory. It then naturally leads to the revelation of the truth—The plot that „I“ read aloud all resonates with the true sounds that cannot be captured by sight and can only be discerned by sound, indicating that the corpse is getting closer step by step. Firstly, „the noise of the dry and hollow-sounding wood alarmed“ corresponds to the „sound of a door being broken down,“ followed by „the dreadful noise of dragon“ corresponding to „the most unusual screaming or grating sound“, and the „a mighty great and terrible ringing sound „, made by the copper shield falling to the ground corresponds to the „hollow, metallic, and clangorous, yet muffled reverberation“. Throughout the process, the sounds of nature also grow stronger. Just as Usher said, all these sounds correspond to the struggle and resistance of the deceased against Usher’s neglect of her voice while she was alive and all the acts of live burial. The final, indeterminate sounds breached Usher’s psychological defenses, after admitting the truth, the corpse broke down the door and entered. „with a low moaning cry „, [3]. It pulled Usher down, and Usher was finally punished, „bore him to the floor a corpse,“ and the castle collapsed in the end.

All of these combine the sense of hearing with grotesque romantic elements, on one hand, they create a terrifying atmosphere, and on the other hand, they break through and dissolve the deceptive nature constructed by social space and visual space. By using the artistic beauty of death to achieve a strong impact and call for humanity,

they also achieve the purpose of self-resistance for the exploited physical space.

5. Conclusion

In summary, this study, with the aid of Henri Lefebvre's theories on the production of space, has reached the conclusion that it has understood and analyzed the presentation of the hidden power relations and the phenomenon of power exploitation and alienation of human nature in Edgar Allan Poe's works. Through the sharpest contradiction—death, by leveraging the visual space and seemingly absurd romanticized plot treatment, the truth of death is revealed, the resistance of the exploited subject to authority is expressed, and the liberation of human nature is called for. This study provides some valuable reference perspectives for future research on the alienation and resistance of human nature in Poe's novels. Future research should focus more on in-depth exploration in the direction of social space interpretation.

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