

Ethics and Personality Deformation in Time and Space: A Semiotic Analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Black Cat*

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Abstract:

Romantic literature rose in the 19th century, and the Gothic novel evolved into one of the special genres. Allan Poe carries out the idea of unity of effect. He uses internal and external perspective conversion in *The Black Cat*, reflecting the continuity of self-consciousness in different times and spaces. It realizes the interpretation of macroscopic ethics and morality connotation. The study focuses on the linguistic symbolic context. It discusses the changing process of the deformed personality of the black cat from the space-time construction implied in the narrative layer. This discussion has research significance in analyzing the signifier meaning of each language symbol and the relationship network of the ideographic system. The construction of time and space, which is full of philosophical thinking, is introduced into the interpretation of the text. At the same time, it further deepens the understanding of Ellen Poe's moral aesthetic angle. The literature review method and text analysis method are used in this study. From the perspective of the new combination of philosophy and philology theory, it goes further into the inner world of the characters. With the outburst of the negative suggestion power of the protagonist, the deformity of the character also reaches the climax of the intensity. From an interdisciplinary perspective, literary criticism offers a new way to the Alienation of capitalist society through the involuntary flow of consciousness and the conversion of narrative layers.

Keywords: Romantic literature; semiotic analysis; Allan Poe.

1. Introduction

Allan Poe is one of the most famous romantic poets and novelists in American literary history. His horror novels, tinged with romanticism, are of significance in reality. The works reflect a psychological state of alienation. Therefore, the themes of stories mostly reveal the dark side of the human consciousness and subconscious. *Black Cat* causes people to reflect on the pathological personality through the symbolic meaning of the black cat image. This article will discuss the transformation of different narrative perspectives and the relationship between various language symbols in *The Black Cat* to reach a multi-angle analysis.

Allan POE is a great writer of Gothic novels. Since there is much research and discussion on his works at home and abroad, the interpretation of the black cat presents the characteristics of comprehensiveness and pluralism. According to previous research literature, most domestic studies combine Poe's creative motivation with his wife. It is developed around the ideological connotation, image metaphor, and multiple Gothic narrative styles of the text.

Unreliable narratives, Aesthetic thought semiotics, Freudian psychoanalysis, and the perspective of body space release are elaborated in-depth on the analysis of *Black Cat* in foreign studies. A part of the research uses the text comparative analysis method. However, studies regarding the time and space construction of the text lack a certain breadth and depth, and the discussion is mostly carried out from a single Angle. Theories used in this article include Genet's narratology theory which indicates the story time referring to the chronological sequence of events in a story. Discourse time refers to the false timing of story events in the narrative. Saussure's structuralism emphasizes holistic research and opposes isolated local research. Language is a closed and complete system, and it is necessary to pay attention to the interdependent and restrictive relations among the elements of language. Language sign has rich meaning, it is the combination of signifier and signified [1]. Bergson's theory of duration proposes that time is a collection of countless moments of difference in different directions. The movement of time appears in a concrete qualitative stretch. Stretch is the indivisible,

continuous, flowing state of the material of consciousness. Each of the successive states permeates each other, while each present state contains the past, indicating that the future is qualitatively different from the other states. These theories are relevant to this study.

Given that the text unfolds in a first-person narrative, there is a shift between the internal and external perspectives. It is necessary to study the construction of time and space behind the flow of characters' consciousness. Studying the interweaving of different spatiotemporal narratives in the context of linguistic symbols and strengthening the compound of text research is conducive to a deep understanding of the deformed power hidden in the character's heart. This paper explores the inconsistency between the narrator and the implied author in the disunity of text narration. "These narrators pretend as if they have been following the intellectual norms of the work, but they are not." [2]. It provides a new dimension for literary criticism. At the social macro level, it is beneficial to explore the moral and ethical significance under the alienated society of capitalism.

2. Analysis

The novel begins with a dark, dilapidated house. The mottled portraits on the walls are mixed with the musty smell, creating a grim and depressing atmosphere and setting the tone of horror. The fusion of visual and psychological cues prompts readers to immerse themselves in the horror. Black and dark colors appear frequently, such as a black cat, night, and dim lamp. The light changes suddenly, the candle flames out, and the moonlight is slightly transparent to enhance the horror effect. The subtle use of color and light, dark tones associated with terror, and light changes create mystery. Overall approach to enhance the reading tension, enhance the story horror experience.

The novel combines Western Marxist theory. "For a certain discourse, its meaning can only be understood by placing it in its context." [3]. The use of symbols is mainly reflected in the symbolic treatment of characters, objects, scenes, and other elements. These symbols not only enrich the connotation of the novel but also deeply reveal the social situation and the operating mechanism of ideology.

The first black cat was an evil mystery, associated with the witch and the name of Pluto. It symbolizes the fall of temptation and encourages the perpetrators to commit crimes and bury their wives. This symbol accords with the semiotics of Western Marxism, shows the practical history and sociality of the symbol, and reflects the inner struggle of the narrator. The second black cat, shaped like the first cat, symbolizes judgment and retribution, intensifies fear, and resembles the shadow of crime. The white spot on his chest, like a gallows, strengthens the symbol of trial and

concretizes the narrator's inner fear and guilt.

The symbolization of the wife's image. It enriches the connotation of the novel and reveals the complexity of social reality and human nature. At first, she was a symbol of loyalty and kindness and a pillar of warmth for the family. In the end, however, he was killed and became an innocent victim, a process that denounced personal tragedy and revealed moral decay. This symbolization process deeply analyzes the weakness of human nature, criticizes selfish and cruel behavior, and challenges moral concepts. The process of denormalization in black cats is divided into four stages. With the progress of the narrative, the degree of deformity of the narrator becomes more and more serious.

In the initial stage, the narrator starts from a person with a good nature and compassion. He gradually became a murderer, and his heart gradually reached the peak of metamorphosis and deformity. In the novel, the protagonist, the narrator, appears as a loner with a good nature who is not understood by his peers. However, the narrator's special feelings for animals transcend the common values of society at the time. It makes the narrator seem out of place among his peers and even an object of ridicule. This social pressure not only intensifies the narrator's loneliness but also gradually erodes the narrator's mental health. In the second stage, when the narrator is separated from the social environment and rejected by the external environment, the inner evil desire and negative emotions of the narrator increase wildly. When these negative feelings build up to a certain point, they begin to erupt in twisted and extreme ways, causing a fire that leads to the death of the first black cat. In the third stage, the narrator has persistent violence. After the fire, though, he expressed regret for the loss of the black cat and tried to find a replacement. But this cannot hide the fact that the narrator has stepped into a state of hypocrisy. When he finally kills his wife, he makes no secret of the fact that this is a sign that human deformity has reached its peak.

2.1 Atmosphere Creation and the Use of Symbols

First of all, in terms of the time and space of the narrative, Poe is adept at setting the bizarre and grotesque events in the novel at night when the human mind is defenseless and in the dark cellar, which makes the irrationality of the text greatly increased [4]. At the beginning of the novel, the author carefully constructs a dim and shabby scene, depicting the room where the narrator lives in detail. This depiction of the setting is like a somber painting that sets the tone for the subsequent development of the thriller plot. This description visually presents the physical space in which the story takes place and is capable of strong emotional resonance. The visual impact and subtle psy-

chological cues intertwine into a web that involuntarily immerses one in the horror of the story. In the original, the use of black and dark shades can be described as ingenious. Whether it is the dark fur of the black cat, the depth of the night sky, or the dim lighting, all of them are silently reinforcing the horror atmosphere of the story. Subtle changes in light, such as the terrifying moment when the candle suddenly goes out, or the faint moonlight seeping out of the window, subtly enhance the indescribable mystery and uneasiness, and such a depiction can make you feel tense and fearful constantly during the reading process, thus significantly enhancing the horror effect of the story.

Besides, the novel profoundly explores the complex emotional map of the narrator's inner world, which not only makes the characterization more three-dimensional and complete but also enables readers to experience the narrator's psychological struggles and environmental changes in a specific environment. This profound emotional analysis undoubtedly adds to the literary quality of the novel. Reflecting on the Western Marxist theory, the use of symbols in the novel is particularly skillful. Characters, objects, scenes, and other elements are endowed with rich symbolic meanings, which not only expands the depth of the novel's connotation but also profoundly reveals the multi-faceted nature of social reality and human complexity. For example, the image of the "black cat" carries a variety of symbols, representing evil and mystery, as well as the power of temptation and destruction. Its appearance and changes deeply reflect the narrator's inner struggle and corruption.

The interweaving of environmental description, color, psychological analysis, and symbolism at the beginning of the novel creates a literary world full of horror and suspense, which makes readers feel the seamy side of human nature and deeply reflect on the alienation of individuals in the tension and anxiety of capitalist society. In Western Marxist theory, capitalist society often leads to the deformity of human beings, for example, the alienation of individuals from their nature, others, and from nature. In the novel, the narrator's gradual addiction to alcoholism and evil thoughts, which eventually lead him to crime, can be seen as a microcosm of the phenomenon of alienation in capitalist society. The fall and destruction of the narrator symbolize that in a capitalist society, an individual may lose his self-narrator and become a victim of society due to material pursuits and spiritual emptiness. At the same time, the narrator is not a purely evil person; he is full of inner conflicts and struggles. He has both the desire to commit a crime and the shame and remorse for his behavior; he loves his wife but kills her on impulse. This complexity gives the narrator a way to symbolically express

the intertwining of good and evil in human nature, and the conflict between reason and desire.

2.2 Spatial Deformation of Human Nature and the Transformation of Narrative Layers

2.2.1 Shift in perspective inside and outside the first person

In Narrative Discourse, Genette introduced the term "focus" and proposed a trichotomy, such as "zero-focus visual angle", "Internal-focus visual angle", and "external-focus visual angle" [5]. This narrative technique enhances the sense of immersion in the story, increases the narrator's inner monologue, invariably deepens the story's level and depth, and makes the reader follow the narrator's thinking.

In the first stage, the novel opens with the first-person point of view within the scope of "internal focus", with the first narrator as the starting point, in a clear discourse space will be the psychological space of the characters in the core of the narrative, from the first paragraph of the first-person external point of view of the seemingly objective self-reporting to the second paragraph of the first-person internal point of view. A shift from the narrative voice of the dying narrator in the present to another narrative voice. In effect, it is easy to maintain the integrity and independence of the following narrative events, so that the reader is also curious about the cause of the narrator's confession, thus maintaining the mystery of the first narrative layer, and the experience since the narrator's narration draws the reader closer to the narrator.

"The story I am going to tell is very absurd and very homely Tomorrow is the day of my death, and I shall hasten to tell it today, so that my soul may live in peace." [6]. This way the opening chapter points out the identity of the narrator's criminal, and his narration is also completed in the prison, the separation of the story space and discourse space, as well as the location where the discourse space is located - the prison, which will give the reader a sense of inquiry, the narration is full of intense contradictory conflicts, and the narrator is proud of his own. The narrator is on the verge of insanity, yet still sane, and tormented by these "trivialities", for which he is in awe but not repentant. In this first stage, the narrator, who is not yet deformed, has a good nature but becomes an object of ridicule among his peers. This extraordinary kindness and compassion seem out of place among his peers and is even ridiculed and misunderstood. This social pressure may cause the narrator to feel lonely and unappreciated, further deepening the inner sense of loneliness and alienation. The relationship between the narrator and the cat at this point is embodied as a parallel relationship in a symbolic sense. The narrator mentions that the black

cat is one of his favorite pets and that they share a special bond and dependence. The narrator often plays with the cat and enjoys each other's company, and this close emotional connection sets the stage for subsequent plot developments. The narrator takes the cat for walks, shares his joys and sorrows, and even considers the cat his confidant to some extent. These shared experiences make the relationship between the narrator and the cat even closer and more parallel.

In the final stage of the novel, the narrator has no remorse for killing his wife but thinks carefully about the best place to hide the body. The narrator's heart here is already extremely twisted, and after killing his wife, the narrator calmly hides the body and faces the police's interrogation with ease, but in the critical and climactic moment, the narrator speaks out of the blue, and the black cat's purr seems to be like the last bell ringing to announce the narrator's death crime. the death of the narrator's crime. Here, the narrator laughs at his stupidity and shifts his point of view, appearing to be in a state of frenzied desire and the perfect escape from the crime that prompted the narrator to open his mouth to the police, but in fact, the narrator has already been manipulated by the black cat, a symbol of judgment and justice. The past events are presented by the first-person point-of-view judgment in the tone of the narrator's external point-of-view, which reveals a mocking, absurd, and unbelievable attitude, reflecting the narrator's regret for having invited the police with his words. Whether in the past or the present, the narrator is never remorseful of his criminal behavior, and the dark and cold-blooded side of the narrator's heart marks the peak of the narrator's human deformity. At this point, there is a complete antagonism in the sense of symbolic relationship, i.e., the complete antagonism between the narrator as a criminal and the "black cat" as a judge is achieved by the imbalance. The unequal relationship between the narrator and the black cat and the imbalance in the sense of symbolic relationship profoundly reveals the change of human nature in the process of degradation.

2.2.2 The transformation of the experienced self-narrator and the narrated self-narrator

In the second stage, the narrator is gradually poisoned by alcohol, and his addiction to alcohol not only weakens the narrator's self-control, but also becomes an important catalyst for his psychological aberration. When the narrator is enraged by the cat's avoidance and biting, and even brutally plucks out the cat's eyes, this behavior is far beyond the scope of normal human reaction, revealing the narrator's deep-seated tyranny and coldness. After the eye-gouging incident, although the narrator develops an "emotion of fear and regret," this emotion is "hazy and ambiguous," failing to truly touch the narrator's soul and

make the narrator realize his crime. On the contrary, the narrator soon escapes from his inner condemnation by "drinking wildly", using the paralysis of alcohol to drown the memory of what he has done. Instead of making the narrator repentant, this escapist behavior intensifies the narrator's psychological and spiritual deformity. As the story progresses, the narrator's evil desire gradually spreads, no longer satisfied with the simple harm to innocent lives, but heading to a more extreme and irreversible situation. In the end, the narrator hangs the black cat, an act that is not only an extreme contempt for life but also a further deterioration of the narrator's psychological deformity. As the narrator puts his evil desires into action, his psychological and mental deformity continues to accelerate. The anesthetic effect of alcohol makes the narrator lose his basic judgment of morality and ethics, and each act of violence further strengthens the narrator's tyrannical tendency in his heart. This vicious circle makes the narrator eventually fall into an abyss from which he cannot extricate himself. The "empirical self" and the "narrative self" do not produce the desired effect in the "confession", but the opposite narration produces the effect of tension, and the more thorough and detailed the narration is, the more realistic the psychological display is, and the more it reflects the perverted psychology of the narrator. The more thorough the narration of the sin, the more realistic the psychological display, and the more it reflects the perverted psychology of the narrator [7].

After gouging out the eyes, the narrative shifts from objective recollection to the current narrator's debate on the "abnormal mentality". This is a reflection of the viewpoints of past narrators and current narrators, where the experiential self-narrator and the narrative self-narrator have been arguing for the rationality of "abnormal mentality". In memories, it was mentioned that the narrator still had lingering feelings for the black cat after gouging out their eyes. However, the emerging unethical and extremely evil mentality has gradually taken the upper hand of reason. The "abnormal mentality" that violates normal human morality can be seen as the connecting and overlapping point between the past and present narrative layers. From the perspective of current scrutiny, the narrator interprets the act of gouging out the eyes of a black cat in the past as a normal "abnormal mentality". At the same time, a large number of rhetorical questions are used to reinforce the narrator's viewpoint and express the strong emotions that are stirring within the narrator. This emotion is not guilt and self-blame for committing a crime. After sufficient explanation and reasoning, it further explains the narrator's motive for hanging the black cat through this mentality. Thus, achieving a transition from a past perspective to a present perspective, and finally a repeated

horizontal jump from the past perspective.

As the narrative comes to an end, the relationship between the black cat and the narrator has also undergone a certain degree of imbalance and change. The narrator gradually falls into alcoholism and madness, and his attitude towards the black cat undergoes a sharp change. The emotional shift from love to abuse directly reflects the unequal relationship between the two. The narrator cut off one eye of the black cat after getting drunk. This act of violence is not only a physical injury to the black cat, but also a torment to its soul. This extremely violent behavior causes an imbalance in the power balance between the narrator and the black cat, leaving the black cat in a helpless and victimized position. At the same time, the narrator attempts to control the black cat through violence, while the black cat resists with the weak force of biting the narrator. However, this resistance appears insignificant in the face of the absolute power of the narrator, further exacerbating the unequal relationship between the two. And this imbalance reflects the gradual deformity of the narrator's inner self.

2.3 Perspective of Time to Deformity of Human Nature and the Transformation of Narrative Layers

In *L'Evolution Créatrice*, Bergson distinguishes time into two types. One is the time that is habitually measured by clocks, which he calls spatial time. The second is the time experienced through intuition, known as psychological time, which he calls continuity. Bergson believed that there is a real continuity in which diverse moments permeate each other, and each moment can be connected to a situation that exists simultaneously in the outside world, and because of this connection, it can be separated from other moments. In this way, continuity has an illusory form of a pure medium; and the link between space and time occurs simultaneously, which can be defined as the intersection of time and space [8]. Edgar Allan Poe also depicted the difference between psychological time and objective time in *The Black Cat*. In the novel, as readers can already foresee the ominous implications of the gallows, the narrator mentions the black cat in the house named Prudo and the gallows pattern on the back of the second black cat, which creates a conflict between the narrative time and the storytime. The narrative tense utilizes the narrator's unique emotional experience and the transformation and connection of their mentality, achieving the non-continuity of objective time and space. The continuum is a kind of "flow" with numerous and permeable successive appearances, and the continuum is an ontological nature, which is not spatial, not indivisible "pure time". Thus, continuity is the essence of life, the true reality, which does not belong to the outside world but "only to the conscious mind" [9]. This brings a unique psychological time experience,

strengthening the reader's inner emotional intensity.

In the third stage, facing the raging fire after the atrocities, the narrator does not believe there is a causal relationship between them. Although the narrator easily explained the astonishing fact just described to their rationality, the fact still left a deep impression on their imagination. There were also two transitions in narrative tense and narrative perspective here. In terms of narrative effect, it separates the distance between the narrator and the reader and returns to an objective perspective to view the reality of the black cat relief that appeared after the fire. But now it can still be viewed with a more "rational" perspective, which has an objective level of abnormality and contradiction. Based on the prompts of time words and the content of the text, it can be inferred that the narrator later explains past emotions with a current understanding. Regret and attempts to retrieve similar cats may not be seeking true self-narrative redemption and compensation measures, but rather mixed emotions. The narrator's emotions towards it are complex, with both awe and fear coexisting, reflecting the non-equilibrium tendency between the narrator and the black cat in this subtle relationship.

3. Discussion

Based on the theory of symbolic context, this article explores the implementation of symbolic meanings in texts and the distortion of human nature. The gradual distortion within human nature stems from profound spiritual conflicts and personality imbalances. This distortion can be seen as the result of the interaction between symbolic meanings. The fusion of pre-narration and reverse narration in the text presupposes the event's profound and terrifying impact on the narrator. As the narrative space shifts and the plot develops, the conflict between the narrator and the black cat intensifies, reflecting the psychological distortion caused by the id, ego, and superego imbalance. External factors such as social value conflicts, alcohol, wives, and black cats exacerbate the inner turmoil of the narrator, ultimately evolving into strong negative forces, revealing profound variations in human nature in complex contexts.

This article depicts the psychological distortion of the narrator's shift from gentleness to paranoid killer. By utilizing the changes in symbolic meanings and the transformation of narrative tense and perspective, the dynamic evolution of the relationship between the narrator and the black cat from harmonious coexistence to extreme opposition is demonstrated. From being a close friend at the beginning to the narrator ultimately becoming an aggressor and being judged, the black cat transforms into a just judge. This process reflects the narrator's inner struggle and moral decline, ultimately leading to legal sanctions. Specific sym-

bols, such as black cats, are not only plot components but also ideological carriers that criticize capitalist alienation. From the perspective of Poe's series of short stories and creative concepts, his idea of conceptualizing writing for the ultimate purpose and effect highlights the importance of the ending of the novel or story, using the ending of the work as a concentrated embodiment and sublimation of the explicit artistic effect and implicit moral implications [10]. The text profoundly reveals the twisted trajectory of human nature and showcases its unique charm in literature and art.

Perhaps the author intends to point out to anxious readers that only by walking through darkness and danger can one see the beauty of life, and only through the highest suspicion of death can one deeply understand the truth of life [11]. The frequent switching of first-person perspectives in this article reveals the narrator's ideological and value orientations, especially in the "rational" narration of the abnormal mentality and the relationship with the black cat, which hides the sprouts of desire and evil. Between perspective shifts, the distance between the text and the reader changes, the authenticity of the narrative is questionable, and the distortion of the narrator's inner thoughts is reflected, ultimately leading to moral decay and human nature distortion. Narrative level transformation is not only about advancing the plot but also a medium for psychological analysis. From loving cats to fearing and hating cats, and finally, to insane destruction, it demonstrates the profound impact of emotions and social environment on psychology. This transformation reveals the premonitions of human distortion under the heavy pressure of capitalist society, such as helplessness, loneliness, and despair, and enhances the critical power of the text on human alienation.

4. Conclusion

This study conducts an in-depth analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Black Cat*, using symbolic context interpretation, flexible narrative perspective transformation, and combining Bergson's theory of continuity to explore the discontinuity of space and time, revealing the profound trajectory of the narrator's gradual distortion of human nature in the process of narrative layer transformation. This narrative technique not only enhances the suspenseful and terrifying atmosphere of the text but also profoundly reveals the hidden dark side of human nature and the process of moral decay. The conclusion points out that the deformity of human nature is a complex and dynamic psychological evolution, influenced by both internal and external factors. *The Black Cat*, with its unique narra-

tive strategy, has become a literary model for exploring this theme. At the same time, this study has a significant impact on understanding the psychological horror elements, narrative techniques, and exploration of human nature in 19th-century American literature, promoting the cross-integration of literary criticism with fields such as psychology and philosophy. However, the specific interpretation of symbolic contexts may be subjective, and the application of Bergson's theory needs further refinement. Future research can attempt to introduce more diverse theoretical perspectives, combined with reader feedback and criticism, to more comprehensively reveal the multi-dimensional manifestations of human deformity in literary works, and explore their practical significance and enlightenment in the contemporary social context.

Authors Contribution

All the authors contributed equally and their names were listed in alphabetical order.

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