

The Perspective of American Transcendentalism in The Fall of the House of Usher

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Keywords: American transcendentalism; value of human; intuition; liberation of individuality

Abstract: American Transcendentalism came from 1830s, which was an important ideological liberation movement in American history. American transcendentalism regards humanism as springboard, emphasizes on the value of human, and advocates intuition and the liberation of individuality, objects to the authority. The features of American transcendentalism break the constraint of theology and foreign doctrine, and have a great influence on American writers. Edger Allan Poe is an American poet, novelist and literary critic. The Fall of the House of Usher is one of his masterpiece. This thesis will make analysis of individual in Roderick's self-reliance, intuition in The Fall of the House of Usher and spirit and oversoul in The Fall of the House of Usher by beliefs of American transcendentalism. It shows that his thoughts and writing style influenced by American transcendentalism, as well as American thoughts, especially on the aspects of human valuation, human liberation and so on.

1. Introduction

American transcendentalism, which is also called New England transcendentalism or American renaissance, is an important ideological trend in American, is a literature and philosophical movement and originates from 1830s. American transcendentalism is a significant factor in the development of romanticism. American romantic period played a great role in the development of America, since the political independence of America, the American national spirit and cultural field separated from Europe. American transcendentalism was called the American Declaration of independence in spirit. Emerson and Thoreau, who are transcendentalists, devoting the harmonious of soul and nature, advocating the spirit of self-reliance, and paying more attention to the spiritual life. These beliefs, which the transcendentalist advocated, helped American break up the constraint from reliance of foreign thoughts, built the confidence of America. The most important is that these thoughts built up American literature.

At that times, many American writers were affected by American transcendentalism. Edger Allan Poe, as an American transcendentalist, who had his own ideas on the beliefs of American transcendentalism. On the theme and imagination, Poe's short stories are called the wonderful works in European and American literature. He takes pains to depict the inner world, discusses overlooked mental state of man, and is particularly interested in performance of mental morbidity. Some critics said that Poe is devote to depict the reality and illusion, thus expands the breadth and depth of literature, and make a great contribution to the development of western modern literature. On the one hand, his works takes death and revenge as theme, which is full of apparently decadence, shows a psychopathic author. On the other hand, American literary critics believe that that is the highest expression of his creative genius.

2. Poe and his story The Fall of the House of Usher

Edger Allan Poe (1809-1849), who is an American poet, novelist, and literary critic in nineteenth century, is an important member of the romantic period American thoughts. Poe loves reading and full of imagination. His life was one of the poverty and misery. Poe is famous for his mysterious stories and horror tales. He is one of the pioneer in American short stories, is worshiped as the first person to do a mystery story, and is also the father of modern science fiction. Poe had been

misunderstood by his contemporaries for quite a long time, because his creative techniques and literary themes were totally different from the main stream in the field of literature in his time. It was not until the twentieth century that the academic world had recognized the importance of Poe's literary creations.

Poe's famous horrible story is *The Fall of the House of Usher*, which was first published in September, 1839 in Boston's *Gentleman's Magazine*. It has been recognized as one of Poe's best stories and has been famous for its grotesque atmosphere, complicated plot, exquisite structure and profound artistic ideology.

In that story, the protagonist Roderick Usher who lives in a declined and remote mansion suffers from mental disorder and nervous agitation and so invites the narrator to pay a visit and cheer him up. The narrator, on the contrary, is himself assimilated by Roderick and loses his rationality just like Roderick. After burying Madeline (Roderick's twin sister), Roderick becomes more and more agitated and the narrator is also strongly influenced by his nervousness. When Roderick finally cries out the fact that they have buried Madeline alive in a stormy night, Madeline's blood stained body appears and falls on Roderick. They finally perish together with the morbid mansion.

3. Three Main Beliefs of American Transcendentalism in *The Fall of the House of Usher*

American transcendentalism mainly incarnate three factors: Firstly, American transcendentalism put importance on individual. Transcendentalist hold that man is a key factor in society. Man need to learn self-reliance. Secondly, American transcendentalism advocate intuition and feeling. Thirdly, American transcendentalism insist that nature is a symbol of spirit and the oversoul. In the transcendentalist's view, nature has its soul, and the spirit of God exists in nature. The oversoul and soul are united. In the next section, it will combine with *The Fall of the House of Usher* to state the three characteristics of American transcendentalism.

American transcendentalism emphasis the importance of individual. Transcendentalists believed that the updated progress of the society can be achieved only through personal renewed progress. If people rely on themselves, educate themselves and improve themselves, which can be better and more perfect. As Emerson saying that it is endless that the possibility of people who develop and improve themselves. In *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Roderick (Poe 116), who like reading, drawing and so on, attach the importance to personal accomplishment. He wandered that he can get rid of loneliness, at the same time, eliminate his worries. From this point, it can identify that the importance of people's development in the transcendentalist's view.

In the story, Roderick put his beloved sister living in the tomb (Poe 116), from the perspective of transcendentalism, Roderick's behavior actually is self-reliance. In this way, he can get freedom. Because transcendentalism represented a new way to look at people. Everyone should realize he has the world and existence of the world for him. So he has right to decide his own way of life. Everyone should understand that he created himself through the world that shaped himself, and by portray himself to shape the world. Emerson said, "you know the world is waiting for you, so establish your own world", "believe in yourself", "shape yourself". Trust your own judgment, the world belongs to you. From this idea, it is easy to understand the manner of Roderick. It is undesirable to kill his Lady Madeline, but in a sense, he has to do that for the sake of his life and live positively. Edgar Allan Poe is different from other writers about death. He does not dislike and avoid death, but he treats death as a process of life-sublimate. From the attitude on death of Poe, the death occurred in his novel expressed the feeling of escape from reality and the ideal against evil. In *The Fall of the House of Usher* can identify that idea. At the end of story, the resurrection of Madeline and Roderick's death, and the collapse of house, which not only the destruction of man, but the hope of reborn and liberation of individual. Human has right to make decisions and become a better man.

American transcendentalism puts emphasis on intuition. Intuition enables us to know the existence of our souls and understand their relations to the oversoul, a reality beyond the physical world. In the beginning of this story, the narrator use "melancholy" to describe the House of Usher. When the narrator saw the House of Usher, he felt a sense of insufferable gloom. "...when I again

uplifted my eyes to the house itself, from its image in the pool, there grew in my mind a strange fancy—a fancy so ridiculous, indeed, that I but mention it to show the vivid force of the sensations which oppressed to me” (Poe 111). This sentence describes a horrible atmosphere, the occurring things deeply prove that the precise intuition of the narrator.

Intuition can tell us what our thinking. In the story, in order to relive the gloomy of Roderick, they read and painted together, and the narrator listened to the extemporizations of Roderick’s speaking guitar. The narrator “had painfully in his mind a certain singular perversion and amplifications of the wild air of the last waltz of Von Weber. From the paintings over which his elaborate fancy brooded, which grew, touch by touch, into vagueness at which I shuddered the more thrilling” (Poe 116), even more horrible. It is not easy to read the painting, but the scene on the painting is complicated. From Roderick’s creation, it is easy to learn about his sadness. His unconsciousness reflected his real conditions, which indicated the happening things.

Unconsciousness can reflect a man’s intuition. In the middle section, there was a verse, which were entitled “The Haunted Palace” (Poe 118-119), which created by Roderick. The theme of “The Haunted Palace” represented the two different states of Palace in the period of front and back. The forth section describes its glorious and happiness, describes fairy, wear beautiful clothes, dancing in harmonious rhythm. These scenes set off the majestic-looking lord. The last two section presents that disaster is arriving, the death of king, the ruin of palace and the blushed and bloomed palace. In a sense, the verse stands for the intuition of Roderick, which indicates that his death and the collapse of the House of Usher.

For transcendentalists, nature is not purely substantial, the universe is composed of nature and spirit. They believe that nature is the most pure, which has the most sacred influence on the morality of human. They advocate that to perceive the omnipresent God by inner heart. In nature, they are completely mix into the external world, totally immerse in nature and become a part of it. The soul beyond the limitation of body and share the God’s omniscient. That is to say, the soul entirely beyond the limitation of individual and become a part of God. Emerson believes that God is omnipresent, not only in the soul, but also in nature. In the novel, “...lurid tarn that lay in unruffled lustre by the dwelling, and gazed down—but with a shudder even more thrilling than before—upon the remodeled and inverted the images of the gray sedge, and the ghastly tree-stems, and the vacant part of the country and eye-like windows” (Poe 110). This sentence not only describes the environment, but describe the inner heart of the narrator. From this sentence, we learned the darkness and fearful in the narrator’s mind, but also rendering the atmosphere for the depth description, which indicates the occurred tragedy.

Emerson believes that nature is the symbol of spirit. In his view, the spirit permeate the human mind and nature, the material is a symbol of spirit. Everything in the world has its shape and connotation. The symbolism believes that it has closely link between spirit and nature. There is a corresponding with the tacit understanding in the visible and invisible things. Therefore, it can through these subjective consciousness to imply a man’s spirit and the state of mind. The atmosphere of whole story is so heavily, which causes a sense of foreboding.

Transcendentalists believe that nature connect man and God, and best the way to communicate with God is to be in exposure to nature. Everything, in the world, has anima. In the story, “The conditions of the sentience had been here, he imagined, fulfilled the method of collocation of these stones—in the order of their arrangement, as well as in that of many fungi which overspread them, and of the decayed trees which stood around—above all, in the long undisturbed endurance of this arrangement, and in its reduplication in the still waters of the tarn” (Poe 120). The whole story describes the gloomy awful atmosphere, which comes from inner mind of the narrator.

4. Conclusion

Edger Allan Poe’s writing style is different from other authors. He has his own personality and ideas, and dares to express his different opinions on pursue things. He advocates that the beauty is different from the natural beauty that transcendentalists advocate. He is exploring imaginary beauty, which exists in a writer’s imagination, not in the real world. He showed contempt for Thoreau,

Emerson and other writers in public. Edgar Allan Poe is often regarded as a representative of anti-transcendentalist because of the darkness, evil and negative characters depicted in his short stories, but it is just such characteristics that make him unique in the American transcendentalism. In 2011, Yu Jingyuan published a paper, which is named A Transcendental Poe: An Analysis on Poe's Vision of Transcendentalism in Eureka. He confirmed that Poe is a transcendentalist. Whatever genre he belongs, it is surely that he affected by American transcendentalism and makes a great contribution on American literature.

American transcendentalism has influenced the development of civilization and American culture. American transcendentalism alters the society, which makes American culture gradually away from European culture and makes American become a new nation. American transcendentalism plays an important role in the construction of American national culture, which is an inseparable component in American national culture and influenced American generations.

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