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Elaheh Soofastaei
Sayyed Ali Mirenayat

**THE SATIRIC GROTESQUE
IN POE'S TALES
OF THE GROTESQUE
AND ARABESQUE**

Elaheh Soofastaei, *PhD Student in English Literature*

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication

University Putra Malaysia

E-mail: ela.soofastaei@yahoo.com

Sayyed Ali Mirenayat, *PhD Student in English Literature*

Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication

University Putra Malaysia

E-mail: ali.mirenayat@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

This paper surveys the grotesque which takes a principal position in the American literature since the nineteenth to the present. It outlines the evolution of grotesque from art to literary form, and its meaning that is combined from different critical works. Moreover, it describes the grotesque from the gothic to the textual analysis of Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque which is a short fiction by Edgar Allen Poe as a key literary writer in the ground of the grotesque. He appears as a groundbreaking writer in the nineteenth century American literature and a fruitful influence on his followers. His grotesques are not as common as his gothic stories because the former ones are of a humorous and unusual character when compared to his other stories. In fact, his grotesques fall into the territory of satirical grotesques. s.

Key words: grotesque; satire; horror; gothic; humor.

Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), an American poet and short story writer, is a well-known writer in horror fiction, not only in the nineteenth century, but to date. The grotesque in both art and literature is used significantly. Grotesque and arabesque are two artistic terms which are used in Poe's *Tales of The Grotesque and the Arabesque* in 1840. It derives from the Italian term *grotte* that it means caves in English. The archaic meaning of this word was the chambers of old historical building in sixteenth century. Such buildings had frescoes and decorative paintings including weird images of half-human and half-animal beings.

Thus, it is generally accepted that the word grotesque originated as a term descriptive of the fanciful murals, in which human and animal motifs were combined with foliage and floral decoration, found in the chambers of Roman buildings excavated about 1500, particularly in the Domus Aurea of Nero. [3, p.1]

In his short stories, he was both trying to cash in on present interest and also satisfy the readers. He shows a penchant for the combination of fantasy and grotesque for weird characters who are mostly doomed and isolated in strange dramatic settings.

Afterwards, the term of grotesque became synonymous with words of 'irrational', 'irregular', 'licentious', and 'immoral'. Although, this term extended to the field of literature in sixteenth century in France, but its common usage in literary works started from eighteenth century. In the nineteenth century, this word extended to the kind of art that was similar to caricature in order to exaggerate the characters. In that time, grotesques were satirical pictures which were used as sarcastic ways to present social, economic, political and religious themes satirically. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, this term has divorced from its archaic roots and has become a big umbrella term. The distinguishing of grotesque with gothic is the main reason for all misunderstandings in mystifying grotesque with something like deformity and monstrosity. The word of gothic to Brenden Hennessy has three principle meanings:

Barbarous, like the gothic tribes of the Middle Ages – which is what the Renaissance meant by the word; medieval, with all the associations of

castles, knights in armor and chivalry; and the supernatural, with the associations of the fearful and the unknown and the mysterious. [3, p.7]

From Gothic to Grotesque

Gothic in fiction includes different themes if deformity, fear, evil, crime, punishment, and death. In this genre of literature, the atmosphere of horror is displaced in the settings everywhere – dungeons, secret underground passages, castles, dark jungles, desolated cities and houses, winding staircases, and so on. The characters of this genre are mostly devils, cripples, and mysterious people. Therefore, fear is the birthplace of the gothic in which writers usually try to show it in every part of their stories. According to the German critic, Wolfgang Kayser, the grotesque is an alienated world which instills the fear of life rather than the fear of death. To him,

The grotesque is a play with the absurd. In spite of all the helplessness and horror inspired by the dark forces which lurk in and behind our world and have power to estrange it, the truly artistic portrayal effects a secret liberation. The darkness has been sighted, the ominous powers discovered, the incomprehensible forces challenged. And thus, we arrive at a final interpretation of the grotesque: an attempt to invoke and subdue the demonic aspects of the world. [7, p.188]

In general, the characters in the grotesque are exaggerated because the grotesque is characterized by distortion or unnatural combinations of the human and animal realms. These characters are mostly physically deformed or mentally distorted characters. They are usually depicted as victims of guilt, passion and insanity.

Although the themes of the grotesque are commonly contained by alienation, absurdity, ambiguity and insanity, the treatment is comic. To most of the twentieth century gothic writers, the grotesque is a psychic phenomenon, which intends to explore the levels of human experience. They succeed in locating horror within human being's psyche, not environment. Concerning the role of comic in the grotesque, Philip Thomson says,

In the discussion of the difficult role of the comic in the grotesque, it was pointed out that laughter at the grotesque is not 'free', that the horrifying or disgusting aspect cuts across

our amusement. In particular, it accounts in psychological terms for the essential paradox of the grotesque: that it is both liberating and tension – producing at the same time. [10, p.27]

Thus, the comic features in the grotesque are regarded to create such contradictory influences on the mind of the reader. In total, the world of the grotesque is placed somewhere between the tragic which is realistic, and the comic which is fantastic. The grotesque includes two kinds: the satiric, which is usually seen in ironic texts; and the demonic, which results in the feeling of disgust. The grotesque in Poe's works mostly contains humor and exaggeration. His basic technique of satire in most of his works is a distortion which is placed in the form of exaggeration.

Techniques of the Grotesque

Poe tries to look into the minds and hearts of his characters to show their thinking and emotions to the reader. He shows his satiric goal in his grotesque and his social satires and he camouflages death and fear in his stories. He, in this story, seems to criticize the poor literary taste of his contemporary writers. Characters like Mr. Lackobreath that is literally means 'lack of breath' and Mr. Windenough means 'enough of wind' show their roles in the story. Poe tries to describe with dramatic tone of unexpectedness like when the narrator loses his breath while abusing his wife in the story:

I was preparing to launch forth a new and more decided epithet of opprobrium, which should not fail, if ejaculated, to convince her of her insignificance, when, to my extreme horror and astonishment, I discovered that I had lost my breath. [4, p.485]

All the characters and happenings in this story are a beautiful imagination of Poe. He is a literature master in the nineteenth century who makes this story a mixture of fantasy and reality as the main characteristic of the grotesque. He unbelievably illustrates his characters of this story in all their grotesqueness. He strongly exaggerates a single characteristic in each character to make a perfect caricature of them as a grotesque. His descriptions of characters and happenings are comic irony that is a great combination of humor and horror. This is considered as a main requirement of the grotesque.

The most fetid and poisonous smells everywhere prevailed – and by the aid of that ghastly light which, even at midnight, never fails to emanate from a vapory and pestilential atmosphere, might be discerned lying in the by-paths and alleys, or nothing in the windowless habitations, the carcass of many a nocturnal plunderer arrested by the hand of plague in the very perpetration of his robbery. [4, p.193]

Another thing is that Poe's characters' names seem to be undermined: the Duchess of Bless my soul, the Marquis of So and So, the Earl of This-And-That, and his Royal Highness of Touch-me-Not. Poe tries to describe his story with dramatic suddenness for the reader's surprise. Although the story is based on reality, the characters and happenings seem artificial and illusionary. It makes the story a perfect synthesis of fantasy and reality which is a requirement of the grotesque. He succeeds in illustrating a perfect grotesque character in Mr. Smith by making him a cripple man with an artificial eye, leg, arm, teeth, hair and a voice-enhancing machine. The writer seems to hint at the truth that complete perfection is just a myth or a utopian ideal which happens only in the world of imagination. The real comic irony of the story lies in our realization of the hiatus between our imagination or expectations and actual reality that is what we imagine things and persons to be and what they are in actuality.

Poe sustains a feature of suddenness and surprise in accordance with the grotesque tradition. Even though all the characters and happenings in the story are a product of the writer's imagination, the main framework of the story is originated from the concrete social reality. He in this story digs at the pretentiousness of his contemporary writers in the field of science and progress. He makes a mocking satire about Democracy:

Thirteen Egyptian provinces determined all at one to be free, and to set a magnificent example to the rest of mankind. They assembled their wise men, and concocted the most ingenious constitution it is possible to conceive. For a while they managed remarkably well; only their habit of bragging was prodigious. The thing ended, however, in the consolidation of the 13 states, with some 15 or 20 others, in the most idioms and insupportable despotism that was ever heard upon the face of the earth. [1, p.547]

Poe rails at the spurious scholarship of contemporary society through fantasizing the revivification of an Egyptian mummy. Therefore, he makes fantasy as a tool for his criticism of reality in this society. He refrains from the character portrayal method, as he finds it dispensable to the plot which demands complete preoccupation with the mummy. He makes a terrifying description of the uncovering of the mummy which at once becomes grotesque. He originates the practice of comic allegorizing of names in the stories from the South Western humorists. The names that I have already mentioned include Mr. Windenough and Mr. Lackobreath.

To conclude, this story emphasizes the fact that Poe's grotesques are primarily satiric with the employment of techniques like distortion and exaggeration in the form of understatement, pretense, and others. Throughout the story, Poe introduced humorous observations on politicians and on contemporary notions of progress and delights in deflating the faith of modern men in their achievements and technology.

Conclusion

Edgar Allan Poe's satire is directed at the society at large. The important feature in his writing is the blending of humor and horror which is striking in his grotesque. Though he may start with conventional satiric playfulness, he dilutes it with exaggeration, puns and other

wordplay, literary burlesque, even private jobs. The comic sense in Poe often emerges from the very proliferation of such devices, and though they may be funny in themselves, they crowd and nudge each other to the point where satiric intent is smudged.

In his grotesque, horror also runs closely with satirical humor. He uses the grotesque technique of suddenness and surprise to reach the anticipated effect of humor or horror. His fiction share a common focus as far as the fusion of the elements of humor and horror are concerned. But a distance should be placed between them. Because the specific tone of his short story is comically ironic. His story usually has a completely imaginative setting. His grotesques sound to be either realistic or completely separated from the facts of American life as he masterfully illustrates characters, happenings and settings that search the everyday experience of human.

Even though he seems to be worried about life-like characters and settings, they are against a contemporary social reality. It causes the exceptional feature of his grotesques that is the intertwining of the territories of fantasy and reality. All in all, Poe's fiction fits into the category of satiric grotesque, as he belongs to the pre-civil period or the Age of Romanticism. He is a product of his time, namely, the nineteenth century American Renaissance.

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