

An Analysis of “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar” from the Perspective of Aesthetic of Ugliness

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Abstract: With the development of aesthetics, ugliness is no longer seen as the opposite of beauty, but as an independent entity to be studied and perfected in the aesthetic field. Edgar Allan Poe is considered to be the most important originator of horror fiction and the author of the aesthetics of ugliness. In his short story "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar", instead of brightness and beauty, many ugly images and plots are presented to reveal the dark side of human nature, which is meaningful and profound. This paper uses the principle of the aesthetics of ugliness to analyse the ugly images and plots in the short story "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" to explore the construction and meaning of ugliness and its impact on the study of aesthetics, and at the same time to reveal the intrinsic value of ugliness and the truth of life that Poe wanted to tell his readers in his story, which established a position of his works in literature.

1. Introduction

1.1 The facts in the Case of M. Valdemar

The story mainly revolves around a medical experiment in which Dr. P mesmerises his friend M. Valdemar in his articulo mortis (at the point of death). Repeated attempts are made by Dr. P to awaken M. Valdemar from his death state of death and he succeeds in doing it for several times. Over the next seven months, M. Valdemar's bodies continue to show the signs of death such as his swollen and blackened tongue and his rolling white eyes, while he appears to be consciously alive. However, as Dr. P struggles to revive him for the last time after seven months, M. Valdemar's frame rots away in an instant to a liquid mass of disgust.

The story is considered one of the earliest examples of the aesthetics of ugliness, a philosophical concept that explores the value and meaning of ugliness in art and life. The story also raises ethical and metaphysical questions about the nature of death, the limits of science and the consequences of tampering with the unknown. The story is of great literary and artistic research value, but is now little studied. The study of Edgar Allan Poe's works focuses on works such as "The Black Cat" and "The Cask of Amontillado". The study of "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" enriches the study of Edgar Allan Poe's works and fills the research gap in the field. The choice of topic for this paper is groundbreaking.

1.2 The Essence of Ugliness

Ugliness is the opposite of beauty and a part of aesthetics. In order to use the aesthetic of ugliness to analyse literary works, we must first understand the nature and development of ugliness. Ugliness and beauty can be produced only in the process of man's practice. It can indicate the relationship between the aesthetic subject and the aesthetic object. It's a kind of judgement from the perspective of value and emotion, but not the inherent attribute of the object [1]. Human activities are complex and changeable, so the principle of distinguishing ugliness and beauty would change with the society.

People in primitive society could hardly distinguish between beauty and ugliness because they worshipped everything in nature and had no consciousness of themselves as human beings and as subjects. They could only feel safe, threatened and afraid. They lacked rational cognition of themselves and the whole world. As human beings gradually developed their rational cognition, they acquired the ability to distinguish between subject and object. They saw themselves as the subject in the world and took the side of the aesthetic subject to observe and inspect the world. After that, they were used to understanding the rules of the world in a rational way. They began to summarise the generality of things that they considered beautiful. Principles such as the golden section are the product of rational cognition.

Rational cognition is the means by which man summarises the law of beauty. Beauty is formally harmonious, unified and balanced, while ugliness does not conform to the law of beauty because it is chaotic, superfluous and disordered. Ugliness does not correspond to man's understanding of the natural world or society. It's contrary to man's purpose and goal. That is to say, in this sense, ugliness is the product of irrationality. The aesthetics of ugliness is a way for readers to explore the art of irrationality [2]. Irrationality actually contains the deeper level of the new and powerful rational mind [3].

1.3 Aesthetic of Ugliness

The theory of the aesthetics of ugliness considers ugliness as an independent entity in the study of aesthetics and states that ugliness has its own meaning and intrinsic value. According to Karl Rosenkranz's proposal, "understanding ugliness as the opposite of beauty is true, but incomplete. As a mere negative, ugliness cannot have a sensual form and therefore cannot become an aesthetic object" [4]. His conclusion is that ugliness should be seen as an independent object of study with its own profound meanings, rather than being explained as part of beauty. Ugliness should be presented directly to the reader and examined objectively, but not under the guise of beauty, such as "grotesque beauty", "beauty of horror", which is contrary to the ideas of many scholars. Aesthetic ugliness can be analysed in terms of physiology (appearance, behaviour), psychology and morality.

In general, ugly images tend to create a sense of error and confusion, mutation and morbidity, grotesqueness and absurdity [5]. Listowel summarised that ugliness makes people feel uncomfortable and even unhappy. It's happiness with a bitter taste and the production of the modern mind [6]. These senses make people feel physiologically and mentally uncomfortable, so they naturally avoid ugly images, which becomes an obstacle to the development of an aesthetic of ugliness.

With the development of literature and fine arts, however, beauty is no longer the only central theme; ugliness has become its counterpart. In the painful process of confronting ugliness directly, people gradually complete their aesthetic value system. The study of the aesthetics of ugliness is meaningful and important because it challenges conventional understandings of beauty and its relationship to art, culture and morality. Ugliness is not simply the absence or negation of beauty, but a complex phenomenon that can have positive, creative and transformative effects on both the aesthetic object and the perceiver. By exploring the various forms, causes and functions of ugliness, the study of the aesthetic of ugliness reveals the diversity, richness and dynamism of aesthetic

experience and judgement. It also helps us to appreciate the value of difference, diversity and dissent in a world that often imposes rigid and oppressive standards of beauty.

In recent years, discussions about ugliness have gradually emerged, and ugliness is being rationally analysed and studied. For this reason, the theory of the aesthetics of ugliness has become important for research, especially in the field of literature. Zeng analyses the development and evolution from aesthetics of ugliness to new aestheticism, revealing the historical and cultural contexts and ideological and academic origins from which it emerged, and using a dialectical and rational viewpoint to strike a new balance between restoring the aesthetic autonomy of traditional aesthetics and the radical stance of contemporary anti-aestheticism. Zeng provides a reflection for the construction of a new paradigm of aesthetic criticism. [7] Chen uses Aesthetic of Ugliness to study the main character in the Chinese prose "Lao Wang", which offers a new perspective for analysing the complex psychological world of characters in literature. [8] Aesthetic of Ugliness is also used to analyse the phenomenon of internet celebrity, and the studies are of contemporary significance. In the research conducted by Shanghai Maritime University Marxist Marine Civilization and China Road Research Centre and Hitotsubashi University, the researchers analysed the reasons behind the phenomenon of Aesthetic of Ugliness and the relevant management methods. Their research based on Aesthetic of Ugliness is of high current value[9]. These examples fully demonstrate that the theory of Aesthetic of Ugliness is valuable for further research.

2. Analysis of ugliness images

Poe's works are representative of the "Aesthetic of Ugliness" theory. His works are full of negative images, such as murder, death, darkness and horror, which represent ugliness and are opposed to the usual beautiful images, such as immortality and brightness, creating an atmosphere of terror. According to Poe's "single effect" theory, writers should first conceive the effect of expression they want to convey to their readers, and then try every method to achieve the goal. Every word, sentence and action should have a certain unifying, preconceived and symbolic effect [10]. Undoubtedly, Allen Poe maintained his original horrific style in this story, directly presenting the ugliness to us from both the external and humanistic aspects, thus revealing the truth of life.

2.1 External ugliness

Throughout the story, the construction of the character's image plays an important role in the representation of ugliness. Two parallel clues can be found in the story. One is the changes to M. Valdemar's body, which represent physical ugliness, and the other is the seven-month process of Dr P's mesmerism, which represents humanistic ugliness.

2.1.1 Physical ugliness

The story discusses physical ugliness as the most superficial level of ugliness construction. It comprises three aspects: visual sense, auditory sense, and smell. These aspects help readers visualize the ugly image and uncover the hidden value behind external ugliness.

The physical appearance is described in detail, including the cadaverous hue of the skin, circular hectic spots on each cheek, a swollen and blackened tongue, and a liquid mass of loathsome substance with a pungent and highly offensive odor. Additionally, M. Valdemar's voice is described as hideous, as if coming from a vast distance or deep cavern within the earth.

The image of the deceased is constructed through visual, auditory, and olfactory perspectives, portraying detailed and vivid physical decay. This creates a strong impact on the reader. The ugliness is presented to evoke feelings of disgust and fear. The use of feeling may hinder readers from

progressing, but it can also make the story more engaging by creating a unique reading experience.

Edgar Allan Poe's works emphasised the auditory sense, using descriptions of sound to convey the characters' mental activity. The stories often take place in quiet environments, with the suspense building towards the climax [11]. The story "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" mainly describes the sounds produced by M. Valdemar in a calm environment. The auditory sense is the focus of the description.

At the expiration of this period, there issued from the distended and motionless jaws a voice such as it would be madness in me to attempt describing. There are, indeed, two or three epithets which might be considered as applicable to it in part; I might say, for example, that the sound was harsh, and broken and hollow; but the hideous whole is indescribable, for the simple reason that no similar sounds have ever jarred upon the ear of humanity.

In the first place, the voice seemed to reach our ears—at least mine—from a vast distance, or from some deep cavern within the earth. In the second place, it impressed me (I fear, indeed, that it will be impossible to make myself comprehended) as gelatinous or glutinous matters impress the sense of touch.

----- "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar"

Poe's use of diction and synaesthesia creates an auditory experience that contrasts with beauty. Phrases such as "no similar sounds have ever jarred upon the ear of humanity" and "from a vast distance, or from some deep cavern within the earth" evoke associations with death and suffering, particularly in Western Christian culture where the devil and hell are often used to represent these concepts. These images cause disorder and agony. According to the concept of ugliness presented in this paper, the descriptions of auditory sensations fall within the realm of ugliness.

The description "gelatinous or glutinous matters impress the sense of touch" objectifies the auditory sense. This type of sensation can be experienced when touching rotten or decaying objects. The story's plots and atmosphere create a sense of ugliness that is reinforced by the use of sensory descriptions. The auditory sense, in particular, contributes to the overall effect.

By providing sharp and strong sensory details, the author allows readers to form their own reflections on the experience [12]. During the process, readers can pay closer attention to details, form their own thoughts, and gain a deeper understanding of the serious issues at hand.

The descriptions also serve as indications of the changes that occurred to M. Valdemar, demonstrating the passage of time and increasing the credibility of the story by presenting the gradual putrefaction of the body.

2.1.2 Humanistic ugliness

The concept of humanistic ugliness is often obscured by its physical manifestation, which can be more readily apparent. From a fine art perspective, life and death can be distinguished by their respective beauty and ugliness, while from a moral standpoint, they are differentiated by their goodness and evil. The exploration of humanity lies at the heart of the story's aesthetic of ugliness, both in terms of principle and morality. The seven-month experiment also exposed the less desirable aspects of Dr. P's character. Throughout the process of mesmerism, Dr. P played a dominant role in determining the experimental procedure and its conclusion. He was the sole witness to M. Valdemar's death which made him an unreliable narrator.

Initially driven by curiosity, Dr. P continued the experiment despite M. Valdemar's repeated expressions of a desire to simply die, which were conveyed through frightening sounds.

"Yes; —asleep now. Do not wake me! —let me die so!"

"No pain—I am dying."

"Yes; —no; —I have been sleeping—and now—now—I am dead."

“For God’s sake! — quick! — quick ! —put me to sleep—or, quick! —waken me! —quick ! —I say to you that I am dead!”

“Dead! Dead!”

----- *“The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar”*

The words uttered by M. Valdemar convey a sense of restlessness and pain, indicating that his consciousness is struggling between life and death, causing immense agony. Despite this, Dr. P persists in his experiment, stating, “In this attempt I soon saw that I should be successful - or at least I soon fancied that my success would be complete - and I am sure that all in the room were prepared to see the patient awaken.” Dr. P's desire to be admired as the first person to wake the dead controlled him, causing him to ignore his friend's pain. The text has been improved to adhere to the desired characteristics of objectivity, comprehensibility and logical structure, conventional structure, clear and objective language, format, formal register, structure, balance, precise word choice, and grammatical correctness. The story gradually reveals the evil desire, cruelty, and lack of morality in humanity.

The ugliness portrayed is closely related to irrationality. Dr. P neglected M. Valdemar's wish to die, despite being the subject in the experiment. Dr. P impeded the natural process of death for M. Valdemar, causing him great agony. The use of mesmerism at the point of death is irrational and goes against the laws of nature. From a moral standpoint, Dr. P's actions appear to be detached and lacking in basic consideration. He appears to view M. Valdemar's distressed soul with a cold indifference, suggesting that he had lost his rationality and empathy as a human being.

Dr. P's character exemplifies the humanistic ugliness that can arise from the irrationality inherent in human nature. The author's action and purpose prompt readers to contemplate the topic of mortality and vitality, revealing the underlying theme of the story.

2.2 Conceptual ugliness

Dr. P's use of mesmerism in the story is another way to show the horror and ugliness. Mesmerism is a scientific and conventional medical treatment for mental illness in the modern world. However, in this story, the special settings and backgrounds give mesmerism a horror colour.

The attempts to wake the dead are more spiritism than mesmerism. It is evident that the story has deviated from convention and crossed a moral line, reinforcing the impression of ugliness. Poe blurs the line between science and superstition, combining rational cognition with irrational sense. Consequently, disorder and conceptual ugliness are emphasised.

In the story “The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar”, the construction of ugliness is all-encompassing. Poe establishes the tone of the story by incorporating various aspects of ugliness. And at the same time, the conceptual difference and the bias in the nature of the experiment guaranteed that the short story is about irrationality and ugliness.

3. The analysis of the theme

Beneath the construction of ugliness, Allen Poe actually wanted to talk about the eternal themes of disillusionment with science and reason, which lead to the construction of a system of power discourse and the choice between life and death. What's more, by blurring the line between death and life, Allen Poe once again provided us with profound insights into the aesthetics of ugliness, which is why Allen Poe's works have great impact in his time and in modern society.

3.1 Disenchantment with Science and medicine

When Allen Poe wrote the story, Mesmerism had been popular for a while. Almost all of these authors introduced their readers to the magical, soothing powers of Mesmer's doctrine, which claimed that human beings could open channels to higher spiritual levels without relying on divine inspiration [13]. It seemed that science and medicine had opened up a new path to happiness for their readers. A system of power discourse was constructed around them, in which the words of doctors became almost truth.

But in this story Allen Poe tried to break the idolatry of science. The line between fantasy and fact is blurred. The plot of the story is impractical and against science, because it never happened that a corpse shrank to liquid in a flash. Despite Dr P claiming several times that what he says is fact, it is still not convincing. Also, Dr P doesn't give a reasonable explanation for the horrible end of M. Valdemar.

One possibility is that the living, including Dr. P himself, are the ones who are hypnotised, and that's why they don't notice the decomposition of M. Valdemar's body. All the horror scenes are fantasies of the people around him.

Based on the analysis, in the story no one can tell fantasy and fact, which represents science and reason. The role of science in reason is weakened and hidden, replaced by irrationality and the bizarre, further highlighting Edgar Allan Poe's scepticism about the reign of absolute reason.

3.2 The questioning of absolute rationality

Poe is the representative writer of the Romantic literary movement. Romanticism, with its emphasis on individual emotion, imagination and love of nature, is opposed to rationalism and the ideas of the Enlightenment. Poe's works are full of horrific Romantic elements, showing his deep interest in fantasy, mystery and horror. Poe wrote the story "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" in 1845, three years after his cousin and wife Virginia died of tuberculosis. Since M. Valdemar in the story also died of tuberculosis, the story could be seen as an elegy for his beloved. The spirit of defying absolute rationality is contained both in their love and in the story, revealing his ultimate human concern.

Their marriage at that time was not recognised by the world and did not conform to the standards of morality and rationality because they were close relatives. Nevertheless, they decided to marry. Their marriage itself can be seen as an expression of personal emotion, inner monologue and rebellion against the absolute rationality represented by the secular vision. And this kind of mentality is projected into the text.

In the story, the images of rationality are all questioned, as they are obstacles for people to find true happiness and tranquillity, such as a peaceful death, which M. Valdemar didn't get in the end. The development of science and technology comes at the cost of personal sacrifice. The use of the aesthetic of ugliness in the story despises the order and the promised happiness under the rational rules and laws, which sometimes goes against human nature. Human reality should be manifested, and that's the truth of the world. What's more, all tests against morality and humanistic care are bound to fail.

Although from the perspective of modern society some of Poe's thoughts need to be further explored and discussed, his works with ugly images are thought-provoking. Poe was opposed to the habit of writing in which truths are mechanically stated; instead, he chose to describe by showing. The aesthetic of ugliness then helps the reader to realise the ultimate concern for humanity in Poe's works. His works are still instructive in modern society.

3.3 Death and life

Through all the descriptions and discussions Poe sought to reveal the truth about death and life, which is the perennial theme in Poe's works that death is part of the law of nature and can't be avoided. Even with the development of technology and medical treatment, man is still weak in the face of death.

In fact, Poe's story blurs the line between death and life. M. Valdemar's body is dead, but his consciousness is still alive. The struggle and conflict between the flesh and the spirit eventually creates an agony that makes M. Valdemar simply wish for death. It's a sharp contrast and has the effect of satire -- people who try to prolong his life will end up begging for death.

Death is serious and of great importance, and it is also a great philosophical statement. In Poe's works, death seems to be an inevitable end, and most of the time Poe just describes the moment of death with a few words. Death does not seem to play a significant role in Poe's work. For example, in the story "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar", Poe describes M. Valdemar's final demise as "On the bed, before the whole company, lay an almost liquid mass of loathsome-of detestable putrefaction". It happened in a flash. By leaving the reader with an ugly image of death in a flash, Poe avoided telling us some serious truths directly, but left us the space and freedom to imagine and fill in a gap.

In fact, Poe was hiding his ultimate human concern about death and life by using understatement, that whether it's from the goal of science and technology or not, all attempts against the natural coming of death are bound to fail. People have every right to die peacefully and with dignity. The ugliness in the story of death can successfully remind people of this. That's why Poe's works are still thought-provoking in modern times, when medicine and technology are highly developed and people have more chances to fulfil their desires, but they cannot find peace physically and psychologically. The aesthetics of ugliness helps readers to refine the true beauty in our lives and complete the system of aesthetics.

4. Conclusion

The paper analyses Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" have been analysed from the perspective of aesthetic of ugliness, a theory that explores the artistic value of the repulsive, the grotesque, and the horrifying. Poe's story reflects his own views on the nature of art and the role of the artist, as well as the cultural and historical context of his time. By applying the aesthetic of ugliness to Poe's story, it has been demonstrated that ugliness can be a powerful and meaningful mode of expression, and that beauty and horror are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary and interdependent.

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