

Narrative in Poetic Sound, Form and Meaning: Melancholy in Poe's Poem of "Ulalume"

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"Melancholy" has been one of the most typical themes in Allan Poe's literary works, and is also vividly represented in the Poe's poem of "Ulalume". This article is going to analyze the "melancholy" in Poe's "Ulalume" with the three-dimensional narrative approach from poetic sound, form and meaning, and demonstrate how Poe represents the theme of "melancholy" aurally, visually and mentally.

Keywords: narrative, poetry, Poe, melancholy

Introduction

With the development of narratological studies, narrative in lyric poetry has aroused increasing attention. And lyric poetry, as the most characteristic literary style, has its uniqueness in three aspects of sound, form and meaning. The author believes, only with consideration of the three aspects, can the narrative function of lyric poetry be fully exerted. Thus, the author proposed a three-dimensional analytical framework for lyric narratological analysis, based on lyric's unique stylistic features of "sound", "form" and "meaning" (Tang, 2018, pp. 87-97). This article is going to take the three-dimensional approach to analyze Allan Poe's poem of "Ulalume", which in sound, form and meaning represents the theme of "melancholy".

Poe and the Melancholy "Ulalume"

As a central figure of American Romanticism, Edgar Allan Poe is well known for his Gothic writing style in his fiction, short stories and poetry. Poe takes "Beauty" as the province of the poem, and regards "melancholy" as "the highest manifestation" and "supreme development" of Beauty. In the essay of "The Philosophy of Composition", he confesses that, "Melancholy is thus the most legitimate of all the poetical tones" (Poe, 1978, pp. 16-17). He even declares in his poem:

I fell in love with melancholy,
And used to throw my earthly rest
And quiet all away in jest—

——"Introduction" (Poe & Kennedy, 2006, p. 406)

In the earthly world, "melancholy" seems to be the comfortable place to settle his soul. This distinctive tone prevails in his poems, while for Poe, of all melancholy topics "the death, then, of a beautiful woman is,

unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world, and equally is it beyond doubt that the lips best suited for such topic are those of a bereaved lover" (Poe, 1978, p. 19). Poe is obsessed with the theme of a dead young woman who is still deeply loved by an affectionate man, typically exemplified in his famous pieces of "The Raven", "Annabel Lee", "Ligeia", and also one of the finest—"Ulalume", which was published short after the death of Poe's wife in 1847.

Though Poe's poetic output in relation to his status as a great poet has been questioned by many poets, the "Ulalume" has been universally acknowledged as one of his masterworks. Even F. Scott Fitzgerald's shows his appreciation in his *This Side of Paradise*, by setting the self-centered protagonist Amory Blaine to get into the habit of wandering through the countryside "reciting 'Ulalume' to the corn-fields", and Amory's encounter Eleanor Savage who has caught his recitation earlier and offers to play Psyche, his soul, as he recites (Fitzgerald, 2009, pp. 191-193). The reason that "Ulalume" wins such favor of the readers, apart from Poe's typical melancholy theme, can be attributed to the musical trait of the poem. Poe is particularly keen on the musical sound of the poetry. In "Letter to B" Poe states that:

Poetry with indefinite sensations, to which end music is an essential, since the comprehension of sweet sound is our most indefinite conception. Music, when combined with a pleasurable idea, is poetry; music without the idea is simply music; the idea without the music is prose from its very definitiveness. (Poe, 1978, p. 11)

From Poe's perspective, music is the essential element to arouse the indefinite sensation in poetry; and it is only the combination of music and a pleasurable idea imbued in the poetic lines that constitutes poetry. In "Ulalume", Poe excellently exercises his poetic belief of the uniformity in sound, form and meaning, with which he narrates his most typical theme of "melancholy".

Narrative Melancholy in Sound, Form and Meaning

For a start, the title of the poem, "Ulalume", has set the tone for the whole poem. "Ulalume" is the name of the narrator's lost wife, whose death still tortures the narrator. This name "Ulalume", which starts and also ends with the lingering long vowel /u:/, inserted with double rhythmical /l/ in the middle, sounds like the whistling and chugging of a departing train, which not only creates a musical effect of melancholy, but also indicates the leaving of his beloved wife. Poe seems to be especially favorable to the "l" sound, that so many of his female characters are named with it, like Annabel Lee, Eulalie, Helen, Lenore, Ligeia, Morella, Madeline, etc. The articulation of "l", with the tip of the tongue falling from up to down, creates an acoustic effect of forlornness, which also predestines the tragic fate of these female characters. The title "Ulalume" serves like a prelude to the poem that reveals the basic melancholy tone in the following.

— — — — — ()

The skies | they were a|shen and sober; —

— — — — —

The leaves | they were crisp|ál | and sere—

— — — — — () — —

The leaves | they were wi|thering and sere;

— — — — — ()

It was night | in the lone|some October

— — — — —
 Of my most | immemo|rial year:
 — — — — — ()
 It was hard | by the dim | lake of Auber,
 — — — — —
 In the mi|sty mid re|gion of Weir:—
 — — — — — ()
 It was down | by the dank | tarn of Auber,
 — — — — —
 In the ghoul-|haunted wood|land of Weir. (Poe & Kennedy, 2006, p. 426)

It begins with environment description in the first stanza. With a series of adjectives like “ashen”, “sober”, “crispéd”, “sere”, “lonesome”, “dim”, “misty”, “dank”, “ghoul-haunted”, Poe creates semantic field of a desolate and gloomy autumn setting before the narrator’s presence. These cheerless imageries of the environment just indirectly reveal the lonely and despondent feelings of the narrator. The metrical pattern of the stanza proceeds mainly with anapestic trimeter, with each line consist of three feet, and each foot with two unstressed syllables and one stressed syllable. Except for five small variants of feet (the syllables in the brackets), only in the beginning of the first three lines and the end of the fifth line, the anapests alter into iambuses, which Poe himself calls it as “variable foot” (Poe, 1978, p. 50). The proceeding of anapestic feet with the on-going rhythm of “da-da-DUM” creates a lulling and hallucinatory sound effect, which adds mysterious and sober tone to the atmosphere.

The most notable trait of these poetic lines lies in the form—the employment of “refrain”, which is a line, or a group of lines, of verse, repeated in its totality so regularly or in such a specific pattern (Childs & Fowler, 2006, p. 200). Poe is highly enthusiastic about this technique, and mentions multiple times in his essays and critics. In “The Philosophy of Composition”, he frankly expresses his favor that, “In carefully thinking over all the usual artistic effects or more properly points, in the theatrical sense I did not fail to perceive immediately that no one had been so universally employed as that of the refrain” (Poe, 1978, p. 17). He also points out that, “The pleasure is deduced solely from the sense of identity of repetition”, and in order to avoid such impairment, he proposes to vary “the application of the refrain, the refrain itself remaining, for the most part, unvaried” (Poe, 1978, p. 17). Poe practices this principle thoroughly in the “Ulalume”. In the first three lines of the first stanza, with the totally same sentence structure, the second line repeats four words out of eight from the first (The “X” they were “X” and “X”), and the refrain in the third line even alters one word only from the second (The leaves they were “X” and sere). In the following six lines, the sentence structures are also similar, and every two poetical lines are highly repetitive, with alterations of certain words. By repeating the major part of the lines, the refrains make the poem remarkably musical in sound. It creates an acoustic sense of wandering and circulation, which just corresponds to the narrator’s dazed and dreamlike state that is betrayed by the word “immemorial”, and also parallels the narrator’s metaphorical voyage in the poem which is told later that he was returning to Ulalume’s tomb unconsciously. Such effect is also enhanced by the rhyme scheme. In the first stanza, it rhymes in A1-B1-B1-A2-B2-A3-B3-A3-B3, with B1, A3, and B3 repeating the words of “sere”, “Auber” and “Weir” respectively. Such echoing sounds strengthen the circulated sensation, and also conform to plot in narration.

In the second stanza, there appear the characters. What's weird is that the narrator is not by himself alone, but accompanied by his soul—Psyche, who is a female character: "Here once, through an alley Titanic, / Of cypress, I roamed with my Soul— / Of cypress, with Psyche, my Soul" (Poe, 1978, p. 426). His soul is not bound to his body, but stays external to it—the grave grief of losing his beloved one has fractured his mental and physical state apart. The mystical supernatural plot is Poe's typical Gothic style. On their mysterious voyage, they come across "a liquescent and nebulous lustre", which the narrator refers to the Phoenician goddess "Astarte". On whether or not they should approach Astarte, their opinions diverge.

And I said—"She is warmer than Dian;
 ...
 Come up, | in despite | of the Lion,
 To shine | on us | with her | bright eyes—
 Come up, | through the lair | of the Lion,
 With love | in her lu|minous eyes."
 But Psyche, uplifting her finger,
 Said — "Sad|ly this | star I | mistrust—
 Her pa||lor I| strangely| mistrust—
 Ah, hasten! | —ah, let us | not linger!
 Ah, fly! | —let us | fly! —for | we must."
 ...
 (Poe & Kennedy, 2006, p. 427)

In the fifth and sixth stanzas, the narrator and his psyche argue on whether "come up" or "fly", and the conversation is eager and intense on both sides. We may find that the metrical pattern is no longer regular. Compared with the lulling and lingering anapestic feet in the first stanza, here in the two stanzas, with larger number of shorter feet of iambus, trochee and spondee, higher frequent stressed syllables create a more intensive and drastic rhythm. The disrupted and forceful beats correspond with the combat between the narrator and Psyche, which reveals the fierce confrontation between the narrator's unconscious body and conscious mind. And in the end, the body conquers the mind. "Thus I pacified Psyche and kissed her, / And tempted her out of her gloom— / And conquered her scruples and gloom" (Poe, 1978, p. 428). Psyche, transforming into a female figure, however conscious and instinctive, is still weaker and fragile, which also indicates the doom of the narrator's passed love.

Following with the unconscious guide of the narrator, they eventually come to the final of their voyage—Ulalume's tomb:

— — — — — ()
 And I said |—"What is writ|ten, sweet sister,

On the door | of this le|gended tomb?"

She replied |—"Ulalume—|Ulalume!—

'T is the vault |of thy lost |Ulalume!" (Poe & Kennedy, 2006, p. 428)

With their reaching to the heartbreaking site, the poetic rhythm comes back to the anapestic trimeter, from intensive beating to melancholy tone back again. As Psyche repetitively replies, "Ulalume—Ulalume!—", it sounds like a mournful song lamenting the dead woman in the tomb.

Then my heart it grew ashen and sober
 As the leaves that were crisp and sere—
 As the leaves that were withering and sere—
 And I cried—"It was surely October
 On *this* very night of last year,
 That I journeyed—I journeyed down here!—
 That I brought a dread burden down here—
 On this night, of all nights in the year,
 Ah, what demon hath tempted me here?
 Well I know, now, this dim lake of Auber—
 This misty mid region of Weir:—
 Well I know, now, this dank tarn of Auber—
 This ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir." (Poe & Kennedy, 2006, p. 428)

In the ninth stanza, the first three lines are the refrains of the opening lines—the environment description, while here what is "ashen and sober" is no longer the sky, but the narrator's "heart". He finally comes to his consciousness that, not in the "immemorial year" but "last year", "I journeyed down here!" He all recollects, the "Auber" and the "Weir", which are also the refrains from the first stanza. These refrains here echo with the poetic lines in the first beginning, which imitates the chorus of a piece of music that repeats the similar melodies before and after; it also forms a perfect loop that metaphorically mimics the narrator's tour of returning to the tomb of his dead wife, before and after, the similar environment and emotion, but not exactly the same. For the past whole year, the narrator still cannot recover from the agony of losing his beloved, days becoming "ashen and sober"; his conscious soul, "Psyche", intends to flee from the grievous pain, but his body still unconsciously comes back to the sorrowful place. In the last stanza, with the narrator's voice harmonizing with Psyche's, his body unites with his soul ("Said we, then—the two"). He realizes that, the grief, after all, is what he cannot escape from, but can only confront and reconcile himself with.

Conclusion

In "Ulalume", Poe masterly represents his melancholy with three-dimensional narrative approach. In sound, with the changing of metrical and rhyme schemes, it creates varied acoustic effects that correspond to the different phase of the narrative. From the regular anapestic trimeter and repeated rhymes, to irregular intense beats, and finally back to the original form, it forms a complete narrative line in sound. In form, Poe's revised

refrain—changing from identical refrains to the refrains unvaried for the most part—creates a subtle sense of *déjà vu*, which coincides with the narrator's swinging between dream and reality, between the body and the soul. In meaning, with ten stanzas, Poe narrates an intriguing story of the narrator consciously and unconsciously mourning for his lover Ulalume. With changes of scenes, the narrator moves from reality to dream, and finally back to reality, only being left alone to endure the loneliness and melancholy. With Poe's masterful use of narrative techniques in sound, form and meaning, he brings readers the sense of melancholy aurally, visually and mentally.

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