An Analysis Of Edgar Allan Poe’s Use Of Symbolism In “The Fall Of The House Of Usher,” “The Cask Of Amontillado” And “The Masque Of The Red Death”

One of the most important writers of the American 19th century was Edgar Allan Poe, and is a considered a legend by many. He is known for his work in American gothic literature and Dark Romanticism. These are very ominous writing themes but very gripping as well. They have immaculate stories usually and with Poe being the author, the story will be very enticing to read. Most of Poe’s work is a representation of people’s everyday fears. For example, death and dark sides of people from everyday evil.

In Boston, Massachusetts Poe was born in the year 1809. Poe’s parents had both died while he was young, therefore he was taken into the Allan family hence his last name Allan. Poe attended college at the University of Virginia, but then he ran into financial problems so he dropped out, then while he was enrolled for the US Military Academy he gets expelled for reasons not known. In 1827, Poe published a collection of poems called “Tamerlane and etc. Poems.” From 1827 to the day he died, he continued to write no matter what. Poe died very strangely and young. It was 1849 in Baltimore, Maryland and he was only 40 years old. In that time period, people didn’t live too long anyways due to lack of medicine and health advancements so 40 was a semi-old age to pass away at. This essay is going to be about three of Poe’s most famous pieces of literature “The Fall of the House of Usher,” “The Cask of Amontillado” and “The Masque of the Red Death” and the symbolism of a terrifying death, being buried alive, and the slow process of decay.

Poe’s writing style was quite unique and one must understand the way he writes before understanding his genre. The two genres that he wrote about were ‘American Gothic’ and ‘Dark Romanticism. During the time Poe was alive, American Transcendentalism took place and he thought it was derogatory and dumb thus influencing his writing to be very dark and ominous. Transcendentalism was about showing the good in man whereas Poe’s writing were the polar opposite of that. Jonathan Auerbach supports this statement by saying “Yet despite Poe’s own efforts to imagine a transcendent world elsewhere for his art, a dreamland ‘out of space, out of time,’ the tales themselves, the very shape of their plots, are informed by distinct external pressures that commentators have traditionally chosen to ignore (Auerbach, 80). He claims that Poe even though he tried, he couldn’t make a story with that type of theme, it just didn’t fit his personality and writing style. He worked around what everyone else was trying to write about and it turned out to make him more successful than anyone writing in that time era. According to Arthur Lerner he states that, “Poe’s writings includes, among other topics, such themes as love, horror, anxiety, fantasy, and strange conditions of the mind” (Lerner, 213). This confirms the themes that he wrote about as well as verify his mental state slightly as he was writing these stories.

Edgar Allan Poe’s overall mood of his work mirrored what the US was going through while he published his stories. The society’s culture in America was slowly getting darker and darker each day as Slavery was evolving into a giant problem and America’s view of their future was being seen as half empty instead of half full. Conflict associating slavery had been growing until,

like Montresor in “The Cask of Amontillado,” It fell apart. Similar to “The House of Usher,” the US was slowly decaying and falling apart like a rusty old car until it all fell apart.

In Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado,” “The Masque of the Red Death” and “The Fall of the House of Usher” the main characters of each story seem to be very wealthy and have an extremely inflated sense of self. According to J. Gerald Kennedy, “Poe's developing sense of imaginative power soon produced ‘The Fall of the House of Usher’ (Kennedy, p.19). Kennedy shows us that Poe uses his own imagination of power to display his characters as wealthy powerful people. Prince Prospero, the unnamed narrator in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” and Montresor see themselves as better people than to those around them or how in like “The Fall of the House of Usher” see themselves as having more knowledge around people that don’t have very much. The narrator here in “The Fall of the House of Usher,” has some sense of cockiness and try and control the creepiness around him. But as he does this, he then becomes exalted.

In “The Masque of the Red Death,” a horrendous disease (The Red Death) has sweeped across the nation. The disease makes people bleed from their pores and any kind of orifice on their body, it is a very gruesome and disgusting disease that is fatal to anyone who has it. The main character Prince Prospero runs from the plague and takes himself and all of his favorite nobles to his abbey way out in the country so they can be as far as possible from the disease and party until this disease is gone. Take note that Poe uses the spelling MASQUE instead of MASK. This means masquerade, which is a type of party where people where masks. This signifies that Prince Prospero’s inflated since self and he could care less about his dying people. According to William Freedman, “In his advertised palpability the fantastic and fantasizing Prospero is more substantial than the incorporeal envoy of the real who invades and decimates the phantasmagoric world of art (Freedman, p. 30). This proves how Prince Prospero advertises himself very confidently and with pride because his ego is out the roof. Within the mansion there are seven rooms with each room being a different color. There is blue, green, violet, black, white, purple, and orange. Each individual room symbolizes a person’s stage in life. They are organized from left to right where right is the beginning and left is the end. The last room on the list is black which is used to symbolize death. In the black room there is a very large ominous clock that is very important. It’s mentioned more than a character in a normal story therefore it should be its own character. When the clock strikes midnight, the guests notice a strange guests appear before them. The guest is dressed as a corpse, a.k.a. a victim of the Red Death. Everyone is too afraid to confront the guest even after Prince Prospero asked them to confront it. Eventually, being the very cocky and over confident Prince Prospero he was, decided to confront the guest himself. Prince Prospero goes into the black room to try and confront the new guest and as he enters he drops dead on the ground… Once this happened the guest realized this is not a normal guest, but rather a symbolized mask of The Red Death disease. All the lights are turned off and candles extinguished after this event took place then spreading to the whole mansion killing everyone in the house.

“The Cask of Amontillado,” starts off by Montresor being offended by Fortunato’s endless remarks against him. He finally got tired of it and thought it would ruin his image. This very much fits into the theme of decay. The reason why it does is because he was fine with all the negative comments but then one day he just had too much and it finally broke him down just like in “The Fall of the House of Usher”. Montresor is the symbolic form of decay since he is inflicted with such a burden of hate from a man and seizes to see Fortunato alive anymore. He traps Fortunato behind a wall that he builds with brick and masonry in the catacombs and chains him

to the wall so he can't run and try to escape while he was drunk. The crazy part about this whole story is that Montresor says that this had happened fifty years ago. And now he rejoices and celebrates because he figured out how to get away with murder and not be caught with any evidence under his name.

Just like "The Masque of the Red Death," decay is given an embodiment in "The Fall of the House of Usher." This embodiment is the House of Usher. The narrator arrives to the house but has a feeling of uneasiness deep down inside. He meets up with a man named Roderick Usher. Roderick tells the narrator that he suffers from a hypersensitivity to sound, light, and taste. Roderick claims that it's the same disease that is effecting his sister Madeline. The last set of ushers are Roderick and his sister, and once they're gone the family house will disappear as well. The decay of the House of Usher is a reflection of Roderick and Madeline's physical states and the deletion of their family tree. Madeline eventually falls to her disease, and Roderick proceeds to bury her. Now that she is dead the house continues to dissolve. Strangely, Roderick can still hear his sister from the grave and claims that she's still alive. She arises as if she had never died. She collapses on Roderick and ends up killing him. The house divides in half and sinks into the soil and may forever be deceased just like Roderick and Madeline's family line.

All three stories, the author Edgar Allan Poe created a narrator with an inflated sense of self, and the three stories symbolize their themes of decay and death. In "The Fall of the House of Usher," it is the House of Usher itself that is very slowly decaying and falling apart. With "The Cask of Amontillado," it is Montresor's nerves and the way he murders Fortunato. In "The Masque of the Red Death," it is the Red Death that is brought to life as a person dressed as a masquerader. Symbolization was a very highly used literary element by Poe, and in the three stories discussed, they are perfect examples of Poe's use of the American gothic genre and it exemplifies his mastery in this subject.

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