

Poe's Art of Portraying Pestilence: Metaphoric Silhouette in "King Pest"

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ABSTRACT

Poe's masterpiece from the 'vanitas trilogy', "King Pest", is a microscopic view of the gothic symbols that are unique to the writing style of the author. His work is an elaboration on the presentation of disease through royal figures that are influential beyond class and culture. The atmosphere throughout the whole story outlines gothic elements that form the basis of the analysis in the paper. This paper is an attempt to describe the metaphoric mastery of Poe from the perspective of disease and death using analysis of gothic phenomena to portray both fear and its ignorance under pestilential pressure. It also underlines the contrast established by the author between the aristocrats and commoners using tales, symbols and the concept of 'Demon of Disease.'

Keywords: Death, Disease, Gothic, Grotesque, Pandemic Literature, Pestilence.

INTRODUCTION

"King Pest", a story plague-driven enough to be categorised in pandemic literature, is unique in its portrayal of disease and death in numerous ways. One, it has a whole lot of personified figures that blur the real essence of pestilential crisis and the imagination of disease as a being in itself. Two, the story is not a regular encounter of characters falling into the hands of disease or of an experience shared by all. It is distant from the emotional resonance that readers feel in other stories associated with pestilence; rather, it targets the psychological impact through manifestation which can also be associated with the folklores and tales about mythical creatures and demons responsible for the spread of diseases. Third, Poe uses the consequences of pestilential crisis to bring the indifference, ignorance and negligence of society to surface. One of the overlapping ideas in the story is the realisation of truth and the overwhelming power of disease over humanity that can only be accepted when experienced.

Pandemic narratives are responsible for creating metaphors unique to the disease. This story is a perfect example of the distinct words often making the story creative and engaging. But that is not the only purpose of those metaphors. The underlying meaning of those words have helped in establishing a genre that Woolf in her essay "On Being Ill" feared could not be accomplished – "among the drawbacks of illness as matter for literature there is the poverty of the language." (34)

Symbolic Significance of Characters

The two seamen in the story, Legs and Hugh Tarpaulin, are distinct figures created for contrast and not just for laughter. Their appearance serves the purpose of inclusivity through their differences, be it in height or in response to the situation. They, in many aspects, become the symbol of mankind directing at the ordinariness and commonality of people that sometimes makes them an object of ridicule when placed in extreme situations like that of a royal court gathering obsessed over "Archangel Death." The fearlessness of the two men portrays the resilience of working class and the acceptance of death as a common experience. Pandemic narratives often show how multiple deaths, generally leaving one or two people in a family of ten or twelve alive, or doctors witnessing multiple deaths a day, leave psychological impact, sometimes creating a mocking attitude towards death to escape reality. Many works dealing with pandemic, like Camus's *The Plague*, showcase characters with such background story to surface this kind of attitude. Poe's story signifies that these characters are more often than not in the delusion of shaking off the feeling of restlessness and fear through intoxication or trance. Here, humour becomes escape and resistance of real-life problems. The pretentious royalty is not just grotesque but defines the decaying nature of disease. Each of the six royal figures have one feature that defines not only their disfigured selves but the outcomes of what pestilence looks like. This reference is an example of the equality before disease, the meaninglessness of class, money and status. Poe creates dark comedy that is meant to engulf the psyche of the characters with unusual mockery. By engulfing, it is suggested that there is no room of escape from death, the absurdity, that is suggestive of the deformity, cannot be easily dealt with and so the royalty has gathered to understand as the King Pest clarifies:

... we are here this night, prepared by research and accurate investigation, to examine, analyze, and thoroughly determine the indefinable spirit— the incomprehensible qualities and nature of those inestimable treasures of the palate,

the wines, ales, and liqueurs of this goodly Metropolis: by so doing to advance not more our own designs than the true welfare of that unearthly sovereign whose reign is over us all— whose dominions are unlimited— and whose name is ‘Death.’” (760)

The reference of Davy Jones as a reply to this statement is another clever reference by Poe to refer to the myths about Death associated with sea. The casual mention of the name of a figure famous among the pirates and seamen not only shows variety of tales associating death among various people and hierarchy but also adds a humorous nautical flavour connecting maritime culture to urban grotesque. Davy Jones’ Locker is a euphemism for the grave of drowned sailors expressing the bravado of seamen while contrasting it with the death caused by pestilence. This creates another instance for laughter where Hugh Tarpaulin is lightly joking at the centre of a court filled with plague-ridden corpse like people. Poe’s reference to the Death in two completely dissimilar tones show the fragility of social structures comparing the sensitivity of the idea of death among various classes.

Symbols, Motifs and the ‘Black’ Silhouette

The story also underlines the common practice of creating stories and attributing the cause of disease to “Pest-spirits, Plague-Goblins, and Fever-Demon.” Popularised as ‘popular imps of mischief’, Poe’s idea is to point out another escape route through story-telling and imagination. There are instances in classical literature about disease referred as the punishment of Gods like Apollo’s wrath in Homer’s *The Iliad*. Many motifs have been used in painting and oral tradition like the ‘Pale Horse, Pale Rider’ to refer to one of the four horsemen as the one causing plague.

Another interesting reference is the route to court through the narrow-streets, often considered more prone to causing spread of pestilence. In present context, this can also refer to the lack of social distancing. London’s labyrinth, or the alleys, referred to as the ‘intricate’ streets represent the suffocating nature of the symptoms of a disease, often characterised by breathing problems which can also refer to the influenza— popular in many of Poe’s stories. It is also symbolic of the confusion and disorientation caused by the nature of disease reaching a point of inescapable deterioration of body and mind, described by the court. The alley can also be understood as the claustrophobic environment— a foreshadowing of the scenario that the courtroom possess.

Another recurring motif is alcohol focusing on indulgence in illegal trade of wine and lawlessness. Uncontrolled circulation of wine and reference to Blue-ruin also brings to surface the urge to escape and lose control of senses— a way to bring courage to eye death in its face. The conversation among the royal members and seamen sets a similar tone.

‘Black’ as a word runs in Poe’s stories carrying deeper meaning than its colour. It shows terror, daunting images, reference to death and decay, and even style. From King Pest’s garment made of ‘black silk velvet’ to the sentence of drinking a gallon of ‘Black Strap’, the word remains elegant, horrifying and gothic. The garment is symbolic of hiding the otherwise evident symptoms of disease in various senses. It shows how royalty tries fashion as a mask to create silhouette of health. The cloak’s colour is Poe’s way to satirise the aristocrats and further establish the inevitability of death.

Luxury and Fashion

Each of the six figures of the royal court are dressed in attires befitting their title and personality but none can hide the deformity unique to each. Like the black silk-velvet pall worn by King Pest inspired by the Spanish cloak, the queen is adorned with a “dress consisting of newly starched and ironed shroud, . . ., with a crimped ruffle of cambric muslin.” Ana-pest “wore a large and winding-sheet of the finest Indian-Lawn” and one the aristocrats had bandages of ‘muslin’ on likely to hide the effects of some disease. Style and fashion represent monetary escape in many senses. Not everyone can afford luxury that makes royalty unique in finding ways to hide if not escape disease. Fashion is one of the many ways to achieve the self-satisfaction and ignorance of the inescapable. This also shows the psychology of the diseased, where the want to conceal reality lurks as a ghost inside people to maintain their stance in society. In *Disease and Death in Eighteenth Century Literature and Culture: Fashioning the Unfashionable*, similar deductions have been made about the role of fashion and inevitability of disease from it.

The Beginning and the Ending

The story begins with a quote from *Ferrex and Porrex*:

The Gods do bear and well allow in kings

The things which they abhor in rascal routes.

The quote, when read from the perspective of pestilence, can be analysed from numerous perspectives. One can be the luxury that the rich enjoy to conceal their failures is not accessible to commoners. In the story, the attires can be one good example to justify the same. Another is the acceptance of Death as the supreme inescapable entity to which our fellow seamen joke around casually ignoring the reality. It is, however, ironical that acceptance and escape is blurred

when the rich want to hide what they know is already a part of reality. The beginning shows Gods, as mentioned in quote, would allow relief to the kings, which common people are not blessed with. But the ending becomes another element of irony where the easy-going seamen are able to escape the courtroom filled with the Black Strap whereas all the royal members except one could not. This can be referred to getting rid of the malign disease with only aftereffects left that Ana-Pest signify. The ending also shows survival of the commoners challenging fate in contrast of the quote at the beginning. It also shows movement opposing the stillness of a diseased mind and body showing a way to normalcy at the end. The chaos at the end is not heroic but a matter of fate which indicates the commonality and dependency of humans on circumstances and luck more than actions. The juxtaposition of kings favoured by Gods and king trapped in the courtroom also dismisses the presumption of unequal favour bestowed upon others yet establishing that King Pest was not favoured in the situation.

Poe's work is a stark contrast to Susan Sontag's argument, in *Illness as Metaphor*, where the former uses the metaphors to bring to surface the reality of disease opposing the latter's argument of denying illness as a metaphor. But Poe's metaphor is not about creating a romantic tale around the subject. It is an 'allegory', as he mentions in the title, that exposes the predetermined notions of disease and possibilities of entrapment or escape.

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