

An Inquiry into the Iceberg Principle Based on Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat"

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Abstract: Western suspense novels have garnered widespread readership, and the Poe's "The Black Cat" stands as a classic within the genre. Its success lies in its capacity to captivate and engross readers, allowing them to immerse themselves in a chilling atmosphere and provoke profound contemplation of the narrative. As time progresses, the discourse surrounding the text has expanded, encompassing a broader range of perspectives. For the modern people, the reading experience brought by reading the text has been awakened, and they enthusiastically pursue the high-quality reading experience. Amongst the various reading experiences available, readers themselves find great enjoyment in exploring the text and engaging in the process of inferring its deeper meanings. The iceberg principle is a creative technique that can satisfy this reading experience. This paper delves into the application of article structure, narrative technique, and imagery in the classic suspense novel, Black Cat, through the lens of the iceberg principle. The analysis reveals the inherent simplicity of the iceberg principle in shaping the article's structure, the layered narrative structure, and the symbolic significance of elements such as the "conflagration," "Monk," "black cat," and "wife." Furthermore, this paper examines the aesthetic significance of the iceberg principle by drawing parallels with the principles of Chinese blank space and iceberg, thereby uncovering distinct reader experiences and the observations of countless individuals. By exploring the humanistic care and hermeneutics, to analyze the philosophical significance of the iceberg principle, to get the humanistic care that the author gives the initiative to the readers and the inspiration to the contemporary creation.

Keywords: "The Black Cat", the iceberg principle, China blank space

1. Introduction

As a renowned poet, novelist, and literary critic in the history of 19th-century American literature, Edgar Allan Poe is widely known for his dark romanticism, unique writing style, and profound themes. Moreover, his diverse range of works has been extensively studied. Poe's dark romantic novel, "The Black Cat," is considered a classic Western mystery novel. It has garnered widespread discussion due to its exploration of the dark side of human nature, as well as its symbolic meaning, narrative techniques, and writing style.

The story of "The Black Cat" unfolds in the first person, with the protagonist initially being an animal lover. At the beginning of the story, the protagonist recounts their childhood love for animals

and mentions how they later acquired a black cat named Pluto as they grew older. Over time, the protagonist becomes trapped in a quagmire of alcoholism and emotional instability, causing their love for Pluto to transform into hatred. Gradually, the protagonist's emotions become unstable, leading them to abuse Pluto and ultimately hang it. After committing this dreadful crime, their house is destroyed by a fire. The burnt walls form a relief that resembles Pluto, with a noose around its neck. The act of hanging Pluto does not bring the protagonist any relief; instead, it plunges them into deeper fear and agony, as if Pluto's spirit still lingers in this world. As the protagonist's fear intensifies, they begin to search for cats resembling Pluto in places they frequently visit. Several days later, the male protagonist encounters a black cat in a tavern. Apart from a white patch on its chest, this cat is almost identical to Pluto. The protagonist brings the cat home, but soon grows disgusted with it and becomes increasingly deranged. They attempt to drive the cat away, but all efforts are in vain. This cat seems to possess the same soul as Pluto, constantly entwining itself with the male protagonist and becoming a part of their life. This gradually permeating fear drives the protagonist until they no longer have any good intentions. One day, they pick up an axe and attempt to strike the cat, but are stopped by their wife. The protagonist has a mental breakdown and, in a fit of rage and madness, turns the axe towards their wife, resulting in her death. In the end, the protagonist embeds their wife's body into the wall, and the second cat never appears. The story concludes with the protagonist becoming boastful and revealing evidence of their crime to the police, while also discovering the second cat within the wall. [1]The story ends with the image of the second cat sitting in the wall. This synopsis provides a general understanding of the background of the story.

The story unfolds in the first person, and the protagonist's narrative is subjective and incomplete. His account is presented from a personal standpoint, allowing readers to follow the narrator's perspective. Coupled with the ups and downs of the story line, this effectively enhances the overall atmosphere of horror and eeriness in the story. When analyzing "The Black Cat," most studies delve into the novel's themes, narrative structure, imagery analysis, and Personal analysis. Through rigorous argumentation, valuable processes of reasoning and highly insightful conclusions have been obtained. Due to the increased demand and desire for a more immersive reading experience among contemporary readers, the Iceberg Principle serves as a creative technique that enhances the reader's experience. This article combines the two, exploring Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat" and the contemporary research significance of the Iceberg Principle itself.

2. Explore the Iceberg Principle

The Iceberg Principle was first introduced in Ernest Hemingway's work "The Death in the Afternoon" in 1932. Hemingway believed that icebergs moving in the sea were solemn and magnificent because only one-eighth of them was visible above the water [2]. The effect presented in literary creation is similar to that of an iceberg. Hemingway divided literary creation into one-eighth that is visible and seven-eighths that is hidden. Firstly, this one-eighth is an important medium between the author and the reader. To establish and make this medium flexible, the author needs to be accurate and concise. In terms of accuracy, it requires the writer to have rich life experiences and profound emotional foundation, as well as concise, profound, refined, and implicit writing techniques and language style. This places high demands on the writer's life experiences and artistic accumulation. In terms of conciseness, on one hand, British novelist Herbert Bates praised Hemingway as a person with an axe because Hemingway eliminated redundant vocabulary and cluttered modifiers in his writing, presenting the true and objective characteristics of things in his work. On the other hand, the omission of background and perspective in Hemingway's novels is fully demonstrated, such as the blank background in "The Killers" highlighting the complex relationship between the killers and the victim, and the alternating past and present and the viewpoint jumps of Harry and the leopard in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" all present a peculiar beauty of omission in the Iceberg Principle [3].

3. Application of the Iceberg Principle of the Allen Poe's The Black Cat

Firstly, the writing style in "The Black Cat" is very concise. It makes the whole story plot really clear. "Writing Style" is that the author's writing characteristics and their personality in the creation. In "The Black Cat", he didn't introduce a lot about the protagonist's own background and social background. However, he put a lot effort on describing the incident about "I", two black cats, and wife in first person. The article is not too long, it is concise but without losing of meaning [4]. And because of the clearer words, readers can have a better understanding about the scenarios.

In addition, some of the words can reveal the deeper meaning in "Black Cat". It dated from the 1550s, the past participle form of the Latin root conflagrate. In the "Black Cat", a fire broke out after "I" killed the Pluto which is the first black cat. "My entire worldly wealth was swallowed up." [1]. And the word "worldly" means very sophisticated especially because of surfeit, versed in the ways of the world. If the author just wanted to express that "I"'s house is burning down, he didn't need to use the word "worldly". It shows that "I"'s behavior may not be an accidental act, but he did it deliberately. For "me", that fire is more like a celebration. In western literature, fire represents a humanity, it can refer to the inside of human heart [5]. And for here, this fire can reflect the hidden excitement of the protagonist's heart.

Another example is the word "monk". And the monk is a male religious living in a cloister and devoting himself to contemplation and prayer and work. It is from the Late Latin monachus and monastic, which originally referred to a religious hermit. In "The Black Cat", it said "I determined yo wall it upon inn the cellar- as the monks of the Middle Ages are recorded to have walled up their victims" [1]. The word is appeared here. The word "monk" has a religious character. The author used this word can shows the consciousness and a behavior of people. If author only want to express the way that "I" solve the problem about the corpse, he didn't have to use a simile. It means that the way that "I" handle the corpse of his wife is more like a solemnity. When religions are having a ceremony, they are really devout. it can show that "I" was kind of enjoy the process of killing his wife. For the way that he "walled it up in the cellar", for "I", the corpse is like a artistic creation so that he can enjoy that whenever he want.

At the same time, "The black cat" had a obvious symbolism. Symbolism is the use of symbols in order to represent something. First, the time that the second black cat appeared is interesting. It came out after "I" killed the first black cat. The interaction between second black cat and "I" is the 1/8 of the story which refers to the basic scenario of the story. It leads readers to explore the deeper meaning. "I" was afraid of the second black cat. "I" couldn't bully it for several weeks. However, "I" started to hate the cat again. The closer the black cat got along with "I", the more painful that "I" felt. Therefore, the second black cat is a symbol of the fear inside "I" and the moral criticism. The reason "I" was afraid of second black cat is that "I" thought it was a warning of his crimes [6]. And also, he thought the white dot on the second black cat is like a gallows. And the way that the cat tried to get along with him, put him into a much more deeper inner struggle [7]. And it made "I" want to finish this moral criticism by himself. This "moral condemnation" lead readers to explore the hidden crimes and the personality darkness in this novel. He treated the second black cat well is only because he was trying to use this way to make up his mistakes. Second, the wife is a interesting character. In "The Black Cat", the presence of wife is extremely little. And also, she is really weak, marginalized, and a character who is totally controlled by man. "I" use to love animals a lot and "I" was really kind at first. When "I" first got married with her, they kind of match up nice. However after that, "I" was addicted to drinking alcohol and easier to get mad, "I" still took pity on the first black cat. So he put all his mad and violence to his wife. It can show that the status of wife is even lower than a pet. It reflects the status of women in society at that time. In 19 centuries, women was in a really low status. They were more like an accessories. And they had no status in a family.

In “The Black Cat”, author also used a kind of narrative structure called “Climax” [8]. In “Iceberg principle”, in exposed 1/8, the plot is interconnected with each other. “Climax” is that according to the logical relationship, a rhetorical way in which three or more structurally similar phrases, sentences, or paragraphs are used to express the proportion of the order of quantity, degree, and scope, increasing or decreasing. In the story, author also used it. It started from “I” was a gentle guy and loved animals very much. And I raised the first black cat called “Pluto”. However the good times didn’t last long. I started to be addicted in drinking alcohol, and “I” totally changed. “I” killed first black cat and there was a fire. This is the first up and down in story. The second up and down is that “I” met second black cat. I treated it nice at first, but I also started to hate it not long after. When the wife was trying to stop me, “I” killed her in crazy situation, and built her into the wall. These ups and downs connected to each other tightly, leading readers and attracting readers to keep reading the story. It let readers have more interested in the self darkness of “I” in this story.

4. The Contemporary Research Significance of the Iceberg Principle

In terms of aesthetics, the principle of iceberg and the China blank space share a similar essence. Blank space refers to intentionally leaving empty spaces in the creation of a work, which often serves as a thought-provoking and inspiring element, enhancing the mystery and artistic effect of the piece. This artistic technique of blank space has a long history and is commonly employed in many works. The concept of blank space is closely intertwined with the historical context and personal thoughts and sentiments of the artist.¹ Its application not only reflects the artist’s aesthetics and interests but also strengthens the vitality of the work. Subsequently, the use of blank space became widely adopted in traditional Chinese art, finding profound expression in calligraphy, music, and poetry, symbolizing a brilliant cultural vitality.

The commonalities between the principles of blank space and the principle of iceberg are reflected in two aspects: firstly, in terms of artistic presentation. In this aspect, both blank space and the principle of iceberg provide a partial glimpse of the work, serving as a medium between the creator and the audience. This partial glimpse requires the creator to possess exceptional artistic techniques, a profound understanding and contemplation of life, as well as a refined and mature creative style. In the works of Edgar Allan Poe, for example, he carefully planned the parts to be revealed, creating layers of foreshadowing and atmosphere, ultimately delivering a unique and astonishing viewing experience. In “The Black Cat,” he deliberately presents the fire that occurs after the protagonist hangs his first cat, as well as the wall in which he hides his murdered wife. These profound and symbolic images represent the “one-eighth” that is revealed, encapsulating the parts the author wishes to showcase and serving as guiding clues for readers to explore. The remaining “seven-eighths” and “blank spaces” guide readers in their analysis and contemplation of the text. These intentional omissions by the author provide ample room for readers to draw their own conclusions. As a result, the work presents a situation where words are limited, but meanings are infinite, and a thousand people may have a thousand different viewpoints from various angles and perspectives. The second aspect is that both principles evoke diverse viewpoints from readers, each with their own unique perspectives. Firstly, due to the differences in readers’ backgrounds and experiences, each reader will have different points of empathy and resonance. The blank spaces and hidden elements in both principles have the power to silently trigger readers’ emotions, providing them with numerous opportunities to express their own viewpoints. Secondly, the hidden elements will be filled in by readers, but not every reader’s thoughts and answers will be able to fill the majority of the blank spaces left by the author. It is difficult for readers to immediately grasp the extensive blank spaces left by the author, as their reading perspectives may vary in different environments. It is through this diverse range of ideas that readers come closer to understanding the author’s blank spaces and the so-called “seven-eighths.”

In the philosophical sense, firstly, the Iceberg Principle embodies humanistic concern. In Zhu Guangqian's theory of the author-reader relationship, he identifies five types of relationships between authors and readers. Among them, the creative technique of the Iceberg Principle aligns with the concept of "looking up" [9]. "Looking up" refers to the author relinquishing control and interpretive power to the reader, providing ample space for the reader to understand, associate, and interpret, thus respecting the reader's independence. Simultaneously, it grants the reader sufficient respect and agency, mobilizing the reader's subjective initiative to comprehend and interpret the text. For instance, in "The Black Cat," Edgar Allan Poe deliberately conceals certain elements, which may serve to create a sense of terror, conceal the plot, or lay the groundwork for future developments. These hidden aspects await the reader's exploration, offering room for the reader's deductive process and reflecting the humanistic concern inherent in the act of creation.

Furthermore, there is a certain correlation between the iceberg principle and hermeneutics. Due to the passage of time, societal changes, and the different personal backgrounds of interpreters, their understanding of a text always involves a process of reevaluation and reconstruction. The same applies to the iceberg principle, as only one-eighth of the whole is visible, necessitating interpretation. The German philosopher Heidegger viewed his own interpretation as a quest, a journey through the "realm of the unsaid," aiming to bring forth what has been concealed in various ways throughout history [10]. In the context of the iceberg principle, the remaining seven-eighths are obscured, and subsequent readers offer different interpretations of the corresponding works, dissecting the submerged parts on the shore. In "The Black Cat," for instance, the psychological aspects of the narrator burning down the house, killing the cat, and his wife are concealed, and Edgar Allan Poe guides readers to analyze and interpret the narrator's actions. This also holds significance for contemporary writing: in the backdrop of contemporary writing, interpreting and expressing the unrevealed parts undoubtedly entails risks and uncertainties. However, if we solely adhere to the demand for objective correctness, it becomes difficult to encounter truth and foster innovation and progress within the broader context of contemporary writing.

5. Conclusion

In the current era of the flourishing Western mystery novels, the diverse writing techniques are worth readers' scrutiny and analysis. This article analyzes the writing technique of the Iceberg Principle, combined with the classic mystery novel "The Black Cat": the concise and compact narrative structure and length blur unnecessary parts of the story, directing readers' attention to the details, plot, the author's creative approach, and the intended meaning conveyed. Each detail and plot is essential, possessing valuable significance in terms of reading feedback, thus warranting analysis and scrutiny. The rich and varied imagery not only aligns with real-life and reflects it but also showcases the unusual nature of common imagery. Additionally, certain imagery resonates with historical connotations, revealing the theme of the text from a hidden perspective. The progressively layered narrative structure unfolds the content the text aims to present, leaving a lasting and impactful impression on readers regarding the expressive effect. The aesthetic significance of the Iceberg Principle itself has certain connections with the Chinese aesthetic of blank space, allowing each reader to have a unique experience, ultimately resulting in a myriad of interpretations after the completion of the work. The philosophical significance of the Iceberg Principle, as exemplified by the humanistic concern it embodies and its association with hermeneutics, also provides enlightening implications for contemporary writing. However, it is worth reflecting that the narrative contains Poe's conscious elaborate: "I think I can boast that none of my work is accidentally thrown out, and the whole work moves towards its purpose with the accuracy and rigorous logic of mathematical problems." [11]. Poe's narration in creation are often deliberately concealed and deliberately switching the reader's perspective and cognition. The overall purpose of these narratives is to serve for the unity of effect,

and every small purpose applied in the creation may not be identical, thus it is not appropriate to solely apply the Iceberg Principle to “The Black Cat” as a representative of Western mystery novels. This article only analyzes one Western mystery novel in its creation, and it is hoped that in the future, more research will explore the Iceberg Principle in conjunction with different types and characteristics of Western mystery novels, leading to more meaningful conclusions.

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