



On the comparative consciousness and researcher's influence in global ambiguity in nineteenth-century American Gothic: A study in form, history, and culture

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Abstract

This study intends to discuss Assistant Professor Wanlin Li's latest work *Global Ambiguity in Nineteenth-Century American Gothic: A Study in Form, History, and Culture* from the comparative perspective, which can be divided into two aspects. First, the research reflects the comparative consciousness in various respects such as mentioning Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant about their theory on "sublime" and comparing them to that of Edgar Allan Poe. Second, it implies that Wanlin Li, as a Chinese scholar with America learning experience, tries to explore American Gothic by a relatively "native" approach, but it still manifests the Chinese characteristics to some extent. By perusing Li's interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe's "Ligeia" and "The Fall of the House of Usher", this study may shed light on further research on American Gothic while employing the comparative perspectives in a broader cultural horizon.

Keywords: American gothic, comparative perspective, sublime, cultural studies

Introduction

Recent research on American Gothic has yielded fruitful results. Donald Ringe conducted the research "to show that a distinctively American mode (of Gothic literature) developed out of the British and German roots" (Ringe v). Teresa Goddu regards gothic "as an integral part of a network of historical representation" (Goddu 2), while Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet focuses more on the "ethical and political functions of the specific kind of unease created by the gothic" (Monnet 3), which have all provided luminous insights into the exploration of American Gothic. Based on prior research, Wanlin Li has focused her interest on the connection of American Gothic to narrative theories as well as American history and culture. Her latest research work *Global Ambiguity in Nineteenth-Century American Gothic: A Study in Form, History, and Culture* (2021) (referred to as *Global Ambiguity* below) concludes and compares previous research on American Gothic, and proposes her own viewpoints on the phenomenon of "global ambiguity". This study will focus on the chapter of "Edgar Allan Poe's gothic aesthetics and politics: ambiguity and rhetorical sublimity in 'Ligeia' and 'The Fall of the House of Usher'" (referred to as "Edgar Allan Poe" below) as an example in an effort to explore Li's comparative consciousness embodied in and researcher's own influences on the research, which may provide constructive enlightenment on further study. Under the background of economic globalization and civilization diversification, almost all literary research today is connected with the intersection of Eastern and Western cultures (Li 5). Because no culture or literature is isolated, but to some extent immersed in the global context. In this sense, the study on American literature cannot be limited in American history and culture, but pursue a broader horizon under the comparative perspective to figure out the commonness and interrelations within the concept of "literature" as a whole.

As a research work in English, *Global Ambiguity* is written by a Chinese scholar with abundant knowledge of American culture as well as living experience in America. It can be noticed that the researcher manages to write and think in an American "native" way, so the comparative perspective embodied in her research seems to be peripheral. Despite this, the author tries to delve deeper into the primary (the original literary texts) and secondary sources (the research findings) to figure out the comparative consciousness reflected in and the influence of the researcher herself on the research.

The comparative consciousness in global ambiguity

Although comparative approach is not emphasized as the main research strategy in Li's *Global Ambiguity*, there still exists certain comparative thoughts, presumably due to the researcher's hidden sense of autonomy or special intention.

The chapter "Edgar Allan Poe" will be used for detailed analysis, in which the core concept is "sublime" or "sublimity".

"Sublime" has been an important term in western literature, and it can be traced back to Longinus' *On the Sublime* in which the effect of "sublime" is a strong emotion and state of absorption that shakes and resonates with the audience (Yang 26). Here it will be chosen as an example to discuss how the comparative consciousness is embodied in Li's research.

1. The approach of influence study

Influence study focuses on the factual correlation and origin influences, and emphasizes the collection and verification of historical materials (Cao 44), which can be found in “Edgar Allan Poe” directly through the researcher’s review of Poe’s conversation with the English romantics on the nature of sublimity (Li 10). In this chapter, Li synthesizes the notions of the “sublime” defined by Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant and Edgar Allan Poe respectively while pointing out the influential relationships among them. For example, in demonstrating Burke’s and Kant’s theories on the “sublime”, she states that Kant “draws critically on many Burkean ideas of the sublime in his own theorization of the concept” and cites *The Critique of Judgement* in which Kant doubts and improves Burke’s argument on this term (Li 37). Similarly, according to Ljungquist, Poe’s historical knowledge of Burke’s Enquiry plays a vital role in developing his own theories of the “sublime”, as is mentioned by Li (38). All these above are illustrations of “positivism” featured by scientific approach and historical references, in which an awareness of scientific study can thus be embodied.

2. The cross-national parallel approach

According to Rene Wellek, “Art is not only the sum of sources and influences but a whole (53)”. The emphasis on the comparison of non-influence relationship points to the common law of literature and art (Cao 46). In other words, the parallel approach is free from the limitations of “factual influence” in exploration of the essence of literature.

Despite the relative implicitness of the parallel approach in the chapter of “Edgar Allan Poe”, it still exists throughout the research. An example is the viewpoints regarding the distance created by ambiguity, in which Li claims that it is “a distance that enables the readers to relish the terror instead of being overwhelmed by it (Li 36)”, which can probably be regarded as the paraphrase of the term “catharsis”. A more direct clue can be found in her argument regarding “Usher”, in which she believes the ambiguity in it “reveals the overwhelming power of terror” instead of “engaging the readers intensely with the narrator’s experience in order to provide cathartic relief in the end (Li 46)”. It is obvious from the above that a link is established between Gothic literature and Aristotle’s theory on tragedies, which are similar in their emotional or psychological effects. The implicit comparison between these two may conduce to revealing the mental mechanism in Gothic literature, which also has connections with later analysis on psychology and reader’s response.

3. The combination with other theories

Instead of focusing solely on the literary texts and cultural backgrounds, Li has also applied a variety of thoughts and theories from other theories like Reader-Response Criticism and Feminism.

Reader-Response Criticism

It can be noted that in the analysis of Burke’s theory on the “sublime”, Li mentions three forces shaping the readers’ reaction to a given story (Li 40), which largely coincides with the theory of Reader-Response Criticism which have come into prominence since the 1960s. Under this theoretical framework, the meanings of a text are the “production” or the “creation” of the individual reader (Abrams and Harpham 330), which are exactly embodied in Li’s research such as “...the gothicists were naturally drawn to a generic feature that can be manipulated to trigger reader responses”. Actually, she puts the role of “author” to a relatively peripheral position, and even “overlook or underestimate the relevance of authorial intention (Li 6)” to highlight the significance of the audiences.

It is noteworthy that there is a one-century gap between the literary works analyzed and the theory applied. Moreover, through such a long period, the social background and literary characteristics have greatly transformed, resulting to little common ground for comparison and borrowing. The actual comparison can be explained by two reasons. First, Edgar Allan Poe’s literary works and theories are forward-looking so later theories can be appropriated to explain some phenomenon in Poe’s works (e.g., Poe’s great emphasis on the effect of literary works (Yang 140) naturally leads to the reader’s response). Second, the researcher’s knowledge and the consciousness of comparison also conduce to the linking of these two seemingly irrelevant issues.

Feminism

As one of the most obvious thoughts in the research, Feminism is expounded at great length in the last part of “Edgar Allan Poe”. Simone de Beauvoir, one of the pioneers of feminism (Duan 233), once puts forward that “Women are determined by men. In addition, they are nothing. ...Men are the subject and absolute; while women are the other (9).” Similarly, in Li’s research on Poe’s “Ligeia” and “Usher”, she has expressed the same concern as that of Beauvoir in that women are requested to “conform to their assigned social roles” (Li 51), which reflects the presupposition of women’s attributes in that patriarch society. This can be explained as the reason why Poe has shaped rebellious women figures and even distorted images of women presumably to arise people’s awareness of that issue.

Despite the relatively late occurrence as a systematical theory in the last century, Li’s modern interpretation of Feminism in Poe’s “Ligeia” and “Usher” of the nineteenth century proves to be constructive and enlightening, in which an essential link has been constructed between women’s images and the society at that time, which explores deeper beyond the Gothic genre to the level of cultural studies.

The researcher's influence on *Global Ambiguity*

As mentioned earlier, as a Chinese scholar with overseas experience, Li manages to study American Gothic as well as American culture and society by a relatively "native" approach, and write even think in a "native" way, but her research still embodies the Chinese characteristics to some extent. Actually, Li has made the two cultures rolled into one, with the Chinese characteristics more implicit and Western ones more explicit.

1. The implicit Chinese way of thinking

It can be found that in discussing the supernatural and psychological reading in "Ligeia", Li suggests that Poe has kept these two possibilities "in balance (Li 42)", which means that although the predecessors in the West have fully studied and adhered to one side, she has internalized the balance and unity of both aspects from the ambiguity of Poe's works, which represents the typical Chinese way of thinking. Another example can be found in the comparison of Poe's philosophy with Burkean's and Kantian's on "sublime", in which Li argues that Poe "both converges with Burkean and Kantian philosophies on the sublime and departs from them (Li 45)". Actually, it is not difficult to discover that throughout the whole chapter of "Edgar Allan Poe", Li has maintained her general idea of "harmony among mixture", which is exactly what she intends to argue on "global ambiguity" - to find a delicate balance in the inevitable chaos.

2. The explicit Western way of thinking

In *Global Ambiguity* and its chapter of "Edgar Allan Poe", it is obvious that the researcher has, to a great extent, adopted the Western way of thinking which prefers rigid dichotomy and duality (Li 8), and which has become one of the deep-rooted prejudices in western sociology and even the whole western modern thought (Zheng 79). This can be seen in Li's argument that "...The readers thus represent a reverse mirror image of the narrator at the end of the story (Li 50)". The image of mirror is distinctive in Western culture, in which it emphasizes duality and symmetry. In a similar way, Li to some extent agrees with the dichotomy of psychological reading and supernatural reading in the creation of the "sublime", which all reflect a Western thinking mode.

The Enlightenment and suggestions for further research

As a combination of narrative theories as well as the historical and cultural issues, *Global Ambiguity* has intentionally or unintentionally applied the principles and thoughts in comparative literature, which provides us with a new perspective to explore American Gothic. On the whole, it is believed that the enlightenment gained from Li's research can be divided into two aspects.

First, it breaks through the boundary of time and space in American Gothic, presumably focuses more on the contemporary era to search for the commonness between the literary texts and various schools of thoughts or theories, as well as the historical and cultural issues. The modern interpretations of historical literary texts may provide us with a dynamic and diversified view of literature. Second, it makes endeavor to eliminate or mitigate the effects brought by the researcher's identity, and strives objectivity and scientific rationality, which is largely due to the researcher's own comparative consciousness and the broad cultural horizon.

Despite the contributions of *Global Ambiguity* to the exploration of American Gothic, the imperfectness can still be noticed for further improvement. It is undeniable that the researcher has emphasized on the concept of "ambiguity", in which she advocates a dialectical and integrating research approach. However, there is another "ambiguity" which appears to be overlooked and even marginalized, namely the ambiguity of the readers' identity. As discussed above, Li's research is linked to Reader-Response Criticism, but the concept of "readers" seems to be ambiguous. If they refer to Western or American native readers, how could Li grasp and internalize the details in the recess of their psychology? Compared to this, the other hypothesis is more implausible because the whole research is immersed in the native (or foreign from Chinese perspective) context. A more convincing explanation is the combination of these two, but it is also obvious that readers of different identity may respond to the texts differently. For example, regarding Poe's Gothic novels, the Western readers may incline to the supernatural reading due to their religious backgrounds while Chinese readers prefers psychological reading because most of them are atheists. Therefore, it is suggested that the readers be divided into American domestic and Chinese ones. This may not be the mainstream in the research, but the awareness of such division exactly reflects the cultural issues behind the topic, which also conduces to further comprehension of the Gothic essence in the literary texts. It has also been noticed that the researcher has searched for and synthesized a large variety of references to fulfill this work. However, it is also found that almost all of them are Western sources especially from America, but few are oriental sources especially from China which is the researcher's nationality. This will possibly lead to the incompleteness and one-sidedness in the exploration of American Gothic, because it neglects the diverse cultural studies which should not be limited to the country of the original work, but pay attention to the aspects of spreading and receiving in order to gain a more holistic view of it. Therefore, it is suggested that the related Chinese studies be involved in the research to reveal the different perspectives and viewpoints regarding American Gothic rather than an overbroad analysis on the literary text itself or sole focus on the single history and culture.

Conclusion

Wanlin Li's *Global Ambiguity* is more or less a successful practice in applying the thoughts and approaches of comparative literature, which is informative and inspiring for further study on American Gothic. Instead of

utilizing the methodology of comparative literature intentionally, Wanlin Li has inserted the thoughts and methods in her analysis more autonomously, which can be seen from the irregular mixtures and even juxtapositions of different theories and schools of thoughts. There are certain limitations in this article. First, the lack of depth of the knowledge on American Gothic may cause the author to be excessively influenced by Li's ideas and ways of thinking unconsciously, which may lead to less objective judgement and suggestions. In order to avoid the phenomenon of reiteration and lack of practical values, future research should clarify the objectives while analyzing other relative study with a critical and dialectical mindset. More importantly, a viewpoint of comparative literature may provide us with a broader platform in either examining the literary texts or literary criticism.

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