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English 2H

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Period 2

Imagery in Poe Poems and Short Stories

Edgar Allen Poe was a writer and poet in the nineteenth century. He was a pioneer of the horror and detective genres, and was one of the greatest American writers. In his works, he uses description of images and sounds to give readers the recurring feeling that they are in the story and are experiencing what the narrator is experiencing. This can be seen in many of his stories, such as “The Pit and the Pendulum,” “The Black Cat,” and “The Masque of the Red Death.”

In “The Pit and the Pendulum,” when the narrator is describing the process of his being sentenced to death, he says “I saw the lips of the black-robed judges. They appeared to me white—whiter than the sheet upon which I trace these words...I saw them writhe with a deadly locution” (“Pendulum” 62). The reader feels the tension and worry that the narrator feels when the judges are dooming him to death. Later, Poe describes the pendulum by saying “its nether extremity was formed of a crescent of glittering steel, about a foot in length from horn to horn...and the under edge evidently as keen as that of a razor” (“Pendulum” 68). From this description, the reader can feel the horror and increasing panic of the narrator as the pendulum descends.

When Poe depicts the hanging of the cat in “The Black Cat,” he says, “I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree; – hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse in my heart” (“Black Cat” 110). Readers experience this passage as if they are present, and can feel the remorse of the narrator even as he commits the deed. When the narrator raps on the wall containing his dead wife, the cat trapped in it howls, and he describes it as being “like the sobbing of a child, quickly swelling into one long, loud, and continuous scream, utterly anomalous and inhuman – a howl – a wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell” (“The Black Cat” 114). The sound of the cat's howl reverberates in the reader's ears, and the reader can imagine the terror of the narrator.

“The Masque of the Red Death” takes place in a castle, inside which an extravagant party is taking place. The party is hosted in seven chambers, the last of which contains a clock. When it strikes, the clock makes a sound “which [is] clear and loud and deep and exceedingly musical, but of a peculiar note and emphasis” (“The Masque of the Red Death” 58). From the imagery of the previous passage, the reader can clearly imagine the discordance of the clock.

Edgar Allen Poe was a master of sensory detail. He could create a clear picture of any scene, drawing readers in and lending them the impression that they are experiencing the scene, not simply reading it. In “The Black Cat,” “The Masque of the Red Death,” and “The Pit and the Pendulum,” the rich description of images and sounds brings the story to life.