



University of Tikrit

College of Education for Women

English Department

Second year/Short Story

Lect. Dr. Salwa T. Fizee

E.mail: sfaezi@tu.edu.iq

THE BLACK CAT

"The Black Cat," one of Edgar Allan

Poe's most memorable stories, is a classic example of the gothic literature genre that debuted in the *Saturday Evening Post* on August 19, 1843. Written in the form of a first-person narrative, Poe employed multiple themes of insanity, superstition, and alcoholism to impart a palpable sense of horror and foreboding to this tale, while at the same time, deftly advancing his plot and building his characters. It's no surprise that "The Black Cat" is often linked with "The Tell-Tale Heart," since both of Poe's stories share several disturbing plot devices including murder and damning messages from the grave—real or imagined.

Plot Summary

The nameless protagonist/narrator begins his story by letting the readers know that he was once a nice, average man. He had a pleasant home, was married to a pleasant wife, and had an abiding love for animals. All that was to change, however, when he fell under the influence of demon alcohol. The first symptom of his descent into addiction and eventual madness manifests with his escalating maltreatment of the family pets. The only creature to escape the man's initial wrath is a beloved black cat named Pluto, but one night after a serious bout of heavy drinking, Pluto angers him for some minor infraction, and in a drunken fury, the man seizes the cat, which promptly bites him.

The narrator retaliates by cutting out one of the Pluto's eyes. While the cat's wound eventually heals, the relationship between the man and his pet has been destroyed. Eventually, the narrator, filled with self-loathing, comes to detest the cat as a symbol of his own weakness, and in a moment of further insanity, hangs the poor creature by the neck from a tree beside the house where it's left to perish. Shortly thereafter, the house burns down. While the narrator, his wife, and a servant escape, the only thing left standing is a single blackened interior wall—on which, to his horror, the man sees the image of a cat hanging by a noose around its neck.

Thinking to assuage his guilt, the protagonist begins searching out a second black cat to replace Pluto. One night, in a tavern, he eventually finds

just such a cat, which accompanies him to the house he now shares with his wife, albeit under greatly reduced circumstances.

Soon enough, the madness—abetted by gin—returns. The narrator begins not only to detest the new cat—which is always underfoot—but to fear it. What remains of his reason keeps him from harming the animal, until the day the man's wife asks him to accompany her on an errand to the cellar. The cat runs ahead, nearly tripping his master on the stairs. The man becomes enraged. He picks up an ax, meaning to murder the animal, but when his wife grabs the handle to stop him, he pivots, killing her with a blow to the head.

Rather than break down with remorse, the man hastily hides his wife's body by walling it up with bricks behind a false facade in the cellar. The cat that's been tormenting him seems to have disappeared. Relieved, he begins to think he's gotten away with his crime and all will finally be well—until the police eventually show up to search the house. They find nothing but as they're headed up the cellar stairs preparing to leave, the narrator stops them, and with false bravado, he boasts how well the house is built, tapping on the wall that's hiding the body of his dead wife. From within comes a sound of unmistakable anguish. Upon hearing the cries, the authorities demolish the false wall, only to find the wife's corpse, and on top of it, the missing cat. "I had walled the monster up within the tomb!" he wails—not realizing that in fact, he and not the cat, is the actual villain of the story.

Symbols

Symbols are a key component of Poe's dark tale, particularly the following ones.

The black cat: More than just the title character, the black cat is also an important symbol. Like the bad omen of legend, the narrator believes Pluto and his successor have led him down the path toward insanity and immorality.

Alcohol: While the narrator begins to view the black cat as an outward manifestation of everything the narrator views as evil and unholy, blaming the animal for all his woes, it is his addiction to drinking, more than

anything else, that seems to be the true reason for the narrator's mental decline.

House and home: "Home sweet home" is supposed to be a place of safety and security, however, in this story, it becomes a dark and tragic place of madness and murder. The narrator kills his favorite pet, tries to kill its replacement, and goes on to kill his own wife. Even the relationships that should have been the central focus of his healthy and happy home fall victim to his deteriorating mental state.

Prison: When the story opens, the narrator is physically in prison, however, his mind was already imprisoned by the shackles of madness, paranoia, and alcohol-induced delusions long before he was apprehended for his crimes.

The wife: The wife could have been a grounding force in the narrator's life. He describes her as having "that humanity of feeling." Rather than saving him, or at least escaping with her own life, she becomes a horrible example of innocence betrayed. Loyal, faithful, and kind, she never leaves her husband no matter how low he sinks into the depths of depravity. Instead, it is he who is in a sense unfaithful to his marriage vows. His mistress, however, is not another woman, but rather his obsession with drinking and the inner demons his drinking unleashes as symbolically personified by the black cat. He forsakes the woman he loves—and eventually kills her because he can't break the hold of his destructive obsession.

Major Themes

Love and hate are two key themes in the story. The narrator at first loves his pets and his wife, but as madness takes hold of him, he comes to loathe or dismiss everything that should be of the utmost importance to him.

Other major themes include:

Justice and truth: The narrator tries to hide the truth by walling up his wife's body but the voice of the black cat helps bring him to justice.

Superstition: The black cat is an omen of bad luck, a theme that runs throughout literature.

Murder and death: Death is the central focus of the entire story. The question is what causes the narrator to become a killer.

Illusion versus reality: Does the alcohol release the narrator's inner demons, or is it merely an excuse for his horrendous acts of violence? Is the black cat merely a cat, or something imbued with a greater power to bring about justice or exact revenge?

Loyalty perverted: A pet is often seen as a loyal and faithful partner in life but the escalating hallucinations the narrator experiences propel him into murderous rages, first with Pluto and then with the cat that replaces him. The pets he once held in highest affection become the thing he most loathes.

As the man's sanity unravels, his wife, whom he also purports to love, becomes someone who merely inhabits his home rather than shares his life. She ceases to be a real person, and when she dies, she is expendable. When she dies, rather than feel the horror of killing someone he cares for, the man's first response is to hide the evidence of his crime.