

The Black Cat

by Edgar Allan Poe

Content Synopsis

In Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Black Cat," as an unnamed man broods in a cell, waiting to be executed the next day, he desires to confess the unexplainable events that led to the crime that put him here. He reminisces about who he used to be, insisting that he was humane. He loved all types of animals and, over the years, spent hours feeding and petting them. As a young man, he married a woman who shared his temperament and his love of animals. The young couple kept birds, goldfish, rabbits, a monkey, a dog, and a cat. The man cared for all of their pets, but had a special affinity for the cat, Pluto, who was large, black, and devoted to the man. His superstitious wife once noted old folk tales claimed that black cats were the animal form witches took.

For several years, the man and woman live in harmony with their menagerie. Then the man takes up drinking. His personality changes and he grows moody, grumpy, and violent. He begins to mistreat all of the animals except for Pluto. However, coming home drunk one night, he roughly handles Pluto, who bites him. In retaliation, the man gouges out the cat's eye with a pocketknife. The cat afterward avoids the man. The man continues to drink and becomes more unstable and vindictive. Eventually, the man hunts the cat and hangs it from a tree with no reason other than to kill.

That same night, the man's home catches fire. Though he and his wife escape the blaze, all their possessions are lost. The man later returns to examine the ruins of his home. He is alarmed to find on a single standing wall a burn mark that looks like a large cat wearing a noose. He tries to think of a rational explanation for the image, ultimately deciding that a neighbor must have thrown the cat's body in through a window during the fire, where it imprinted on the new plaster before burning.

The man begins to obsess about Pluto. He feels remorse and considers replacing the cat. One night, while out drinking, he sees a cat that resembles his late pet: it is large, black, and one-eyed, but has a white mark on its chest. Like its predecessor, this cat is affectionate to the man and follows him home. Despite his intentions however, the man's dislike for the creature grows daily, even as the cat's love for its benefactor increases. At the same time, the white spot on the cat's chest slowly becomes more defined until it resembles a gallows.

One day, the cat runs between the man's legs and nearly sends him tumbling down the cellar stairs. In a rage, the man tries to kill the cat with an axe. His wife holds back the blow, so his anger is deflected onto her. He splits her skull with the blade and she falls

dead as the cat scampers off. In order to cover up his crime, the man decides he must hide the body. He considers cutting up the corpse and burning the pieces. He thinks about burying it beneath the cellar floor or dropping it in a well. He calculates the logistics of boxing up the body and having it delivered somewhere. He eventually decides to wall it behind bricks and plaster in an alcove in the cellar where a fireplace used to be.

The man looks for the cat to eliminate it, but it is nowhere to be found. The police, alerted perhaps by the absence of the wife in the neighborhood, arrive to investigate. The first time they conduct a perfunctory search and depart. The second time, four days after the murder, they probe carefully. As they are about to leave, the man confidently boasts of the sturdy house, tapping the very spot where he hid his late wife. From behind the wall comes an inhuman wail. The policemen tear down the wall to find the decaying body of the wife. On the corpse's head, staring out, is the one-eyed cat.

Symbols & Motifs

The most important symbols in "The Black Cat" are the cats themselves. Black cats, specifically, have long held significance in folklore and pagan worship, where they were considered familiars (companions), manifestations of shape-shifting witches, or demons deserving of death. In many places, superstitious people consider black cats omens of bad luck or good fortune. The black cats in the short story serve as symbols of death. The first cat, Pluto, was named after the Roman god of the underworld and was killed in a uniquely human way. The second cat was slowly revealed to have the image of gallows imprinted in its fur, symbolizing the way Pluto was killed and alluding to the waiting fate of the man. In addition, the gallows-imprinted cat served as both the instigator of the man committing murder and the reason he was caught. The gallows and hanging also serve as a symbol of the man's guilt. He kills Pluto by hanging because he knows he is killing something innocent and, in his alcohol-induced state, he wanted to sin. Later, through his overconfidence, the man effectively hangs himself when he bangs on the wall and his crime is revealed by the gallows-imprinted cat.

Alcohol is used in "The Black Cat" to symbolize the evil capable by humans. Alcohol turns a loving man into a violent and twisted villain. If an individual, like "The Black Cat" narrator, overindulges, alcohol can lower inhibitions or self-control, thus serving as an agent of doom and bringing out the worst characteristics in a person.

Throughout history, walls have been constructed to keep things out or to keep things. In “The Black Cat,” the wall the man builds in his cellar serves dual purposes. It is intended to conceal his crime, the murder of his wife, from authorities to avoid punishment. The man states, “I determined to wall it up in the cellar—as the monks of the middle ages are recorded to have walled up their victims,” in reference to the monks who walled up monks and nuns who broke their vows of chastity, as well as for other offences. Likewise, the man walls up his wife in order to punish, but also to symbolically block out his own guilt about what he has done.

Historical Context

“The Black Cat” does not have a specific historical context.

Societal Context

In the early 1800s, the temperance movement, a societal movement that condemned the overuse of alcohol, gained a foothold in the United States. By the 1830s, there were over six thousand temperance societies across the country. The movement promoted moderation when drinking alcohol and cautioned against overdrinking; some factions even considered drunkenness a sin. While Poe himself was known to have abused alcohol throughout his life—he was fired from the Literary Messenger for drinking, then rehired after promising to stay sober—his depiction of it in “The Black Cat” aligns with the temperance movement’s thinking. In the short story, Poe uses alcohol, specifically the man’s apparent alcoholism, to explain his personality shift. He also blames alcohol as the root of the man’s subsequent evil acts. The story becomes a cautionary tale about the evils alcohol can produce.

Some critics maintain Poe’s grotesque stories were the product of hallucinations and fevered dreams inspired by the use or abuse of strong drink and laudanum. His letters mention both, and contemporaries remarked on his fondness for whiskey. By the time Poe wrote “The Black Cat,” first published in 1843, he may have become scornful of his own behavior. He was loosely affiliated with the temperance movement in the 1830s and 1840s. In 1849, the last year of his life, Poe joined the Richmond chapter of the Sons of Temperance in a final attempt to give up drinking.

Religious Context

As with other facets of Poe’s life, there is little information about his religious convictions. His foster parents, the Allans, had him baptized in 1812, when he acquired their surname as his middle name. He attended church with his devout foster mother, Frances. He took classes in religion during the family’s sojourn in England and was confirmed in the Episcopal Church. He traveled with a Bible given to him by his aunt and mother-in-law, Mrs. Clemm.

It might be argued that of all Poe’s work, “The Black Cat” is most steeped in spiritual atmosphere. The story distills, from the viewpoint of the narrator, the battle between the forces of light (Christianity) and dark (pagan, folklore, occult beliefs). The latter is represented by Pluto, named for the Roman god of

the underworld. The narrator embarks on a traditional Christian activity: confession to unburden his soul. He recounts the incident that initiated all the chaos, when Pluto bit him and he mutilated the cat—a literal interpretation of the Old Testament concept of an eye for an eye. The story is saturated with words and phrases that alternate between the sacred (sin, evil, immortal, guilt, remorse) and the profane (fiend, phantasm, witches, demon). When the narrator hangs Pluto, an act that affects him more profoundly than the axe murder of his wife, he bemoans that his sin has placed him beyond the reach of “the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God.”

At the time “The Black Cat” was written, the temperance movement was being backed by many religious institutes, including the Episcopal Church in which Poe was baptized. In adding religion to the movement, the consumption of alcohol became viewed as sinful. With alcohol at the center of the story, “The Black Cat” can also be seen as commentary on Poe’s own drinking habits and his complex relationship with the religion in which he was raised.

Scientific and Technological Context

In the third sentence of “The Black Cat,” the narrator proclaims: “mad am I not.” The negative construction and the character’s need to declare his sanity should alert readers to the fact that the speaker is unreliable, and his mental condition may be suspect.

Though assessing an individual’s sanity is still an issue today, it was particularly difficult in Poe’s time, prior to the formal development of psychology. Assessing a person’s mental state relied upon such pseudosciences as phrenology, which claimed personality could be predicted by examining the shape and configuration of a person’s skull. Poe was a pioneer in presenting proto-psychological stories like “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale Heart,” which treat homicidal maniacs like case studies. Offenders are anonymous. They confess, they feel remorse, guilt, and conscience—all factors in the process of psychological healing. In addition, alcoholism was viewed as a poor decision rather than a disease, but Poe uses it in “The Black Cat” as the catalyst for the man’s failing mental health and personality change. The short story connects alcoholism and mental health in a way that showed growth in the development of psychology.

Biographical Context

Edgar Allan Poe was born on January 19, 1809, in Boston, Massachusetts. He was the second of three children of Elizabeth “Eliza” Hopkins, a theatrical star, and David Poe Jr., a second-rate actor. When he was a year old, his father deserted the family. The following year, his mother died, while touring with her troupe in Richmond, Virginia. He was taken as a foster child into the home of John and Frances Allan.

In 1815, the Allans traveled to England, and Poe attended school in London. The family returned to the United States in 1820, where he continued his education in Richmond. In 1826, he enrolled at Thomas Jefferson’s newly founded University of Virginia, majoring in classical and modern languages. When John

Allan refused to pay Poe's gambling debts, he dropped out of school and enlisted in the US Army under an alias. He returned home and reconciled with John Allan, who sponsored him for entrance at West Point. Two years later, he was expelled. Unable to secure further financial assistance from John Allan, he began submitting stories, and he won a writing contest in 1833. His first published story, "Metzengerstein" (1832), included Gothic conventions that would become familiar in his later work. But he also experimented in other forms—broad comedy, science fiction, adventure, mystery, satire, horror, supernatural—that made it hard for readers to know what to expect. In 1836, he married his thirteen-year-old cousin, Virginia.

In the late 1830s, the Poes moved to New York City, and later to Philadelphia. In the latter city, he published his only novel, the whaling adventure *Narrative of A. Gordon Pym* (1838). He also wrote a full-length nonfiction scientific work, *The Conchologist's First Book* (1839). In the same year, he was hired as assistant editor of *Burton's Gentleman's Magazine*. Before leaving the magazine in 1840, he published a two-volume collection of short stories, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*.

The early 1840s were turbulent for Poe. In 1842, Virginia began coughing up blood. This was the first sign of what would be a long, slow decline culminating with her death at age twenty-four of tuberculosis, the same disease that had killed Poe's mother at a similar age. Troubled by his wife's condition and by his own inadequacies as a steady provider, Poe began heavily imbibing alcohol.

Poe struggled to make a name for himself while earning a living as a writer until 1843, with the publications of the short stories "The Black Cat," which first appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post*; "The Tell-Tale Heart;" and "The Gold Bug," for which he won a \$100 award. In 1844, Poe and his wife relocated to New York City, where the author gave lectures about American poets and poetry. Poe's 1945 poem "The Raven," (1945) which was arguably his most famous work, led to the publications of a book of short stories, *Tales* (1945), and a collection of poems, *The Raven and Other Poems* (1845).

In 1847, Virginia died from her disease. Two years later, Poe was found delirious in Baltimore, after apparently boarding the wrong train—he had been bound for Philadelphia. Taken to a hospital, he died four days later, on October 7, 1849, at the age of forty. The cause of his death—theories have suggested murder, disease, suicide, or accidental overdose—remains a mystery.

Complementary Works

- **Twice-Told Tales by Nathaniel Hawthorne.** A contemporary of Poe's, Hawthorne covered some of the same subjects in his short fiction, including dark romance, sin, and guilt.
- **Walter Woolfe; or, the Doom of the Drinker by Thomas Dunne English.** A person who became an enemy of Poe, English was a physician, lawyer,

journalist, writer, and politician. In this novel, English parodied Poe's efforts to achieve sobriety.

- **The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe, with a Memoir by Rufus Wilmot Griswold.** Reverend Griswold was one of Poe's occasional editors, his literary executor, and a bitter enemy. His supposedly nonfiction memoir appended to the collection of stories rushed into print after Poe's death was a hatchet job that besmirched the late author's reputation for years.
- **Edgar Allan Poe: Amateur Psychologist by Brett Zimmerman.** This work examines Poe's connection to psychopathology in the context of several of his works, including "The Black Cat."

Discussion Questions

1. What does the narrator mean in the opening paragraph by "very surely do I not dream"?
2. Why did Poe not name the narrator and his wife in "The Black Cat"? Why was the cat the only character named?
3. Why are there so few details of the story's setting?
4. For what reasons might the narrator have taken up drinking?
5. Does the narrator's anger at being bitten justify his half-blinding of Pluto?
6. Why does the narrator kill Pluto after the cat avoided him? Is it coincidence his house catches fire afterward?
7. Why does the narrator seek a replacement for Pluto? Why does he hate the animal so soon after finding it?
8. What do you think the replacement cat, who resembles Pluto down to the missing eye, represents?
9. Why does the narrator kill his wife?
10. If he had not tapped the wall in the basement while the police were present, would the narrator have gotten away with murder?

Essay Ideas

1. Compare and contrast "The Black Cat" with its companion story, "The Tell-Tale Heart," which likewise features an anonymous murderer.
2. Discuss the symbolism contained in the many references to hanging, gallows, nooses, etc.
3. Analyze the supernatural elements found in the story and their significance in plot development.
4. Argue whether the narrator should be considered sane or insane.
5. Discuss how the outcome of the story would change if the murderer chose a different method of disposing of his wife's body.

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