



## Edgar Allan Poe: The Black Cat

(1843)

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“The Black Cat” (1843), a classic tale of terror by Poe, has been described as combining “several themes that fascinated” the author, including “perversity”, “retribution”, and “reincarnation” (*Poe* 3:847). It was first published in the Philadelphia *Saturday Evening Post* (known briefly at that time as the *United States Saturday Post*) in August of 1843; reprints followed a few years later in Boston’s *Pictorial National Library* in November of 1848, with a French translation done by Isabelle Meunier appearing in January of 1847 in *La Démocratie pacifique*, and even a parody being published already in early 1844, written by Thomas Dunn English and called “The Ghost of a Grey Tadpole” (*Poe* 3:849). Poe’s tale is an anonymous narrator’s recounting, from a “felon’s cell” (*Poe* 3:855), of a “series of [what he terms] mere household events” (*Poe* 3:849). These events consisted of the torture and eventual killing of a black cat, the mysterious acquisition of a second cat of similar appearance, and the narrator’s murdering of his wife close to the conclusion of the tale. These events are all recounted in a detailed way by the deranged and criminal narrator who also reveals problems with alcoholism, and wife abuse, throughout the text. Poe scholar T.O. Mabbott suggests that the two main influences on Poe when writing the tale were the general supernaturalism and superstitions associated with black cats (i.e., bad luck and witchcraft), and also Poe’s own fondness for cats and their intelligence, an admiration seen a few years before the publication of this tale in a short article entitled “Instinct vs Reason” (1840), and in which Poe attempted to outline the reasoning power of felines (*Poe* 3:848). Another, more obscure source may have been the story “The Black Cat” by “T.H.S.”, a text published in the short-lived *Baltimore Monument* in late 1836 and in which “several youngsters and a servant swap tales concerning witchcraft, ghosts, and devils, which set the mood for a subsequent misadventure with a black cat” (Stewart 24).

Further suggested by Mabbott is that there may be a light autobiographical dimension to the tale, considering that Poe in boyhood once “wantonly killed a pet fawn belonging to his foster-mother, the first Mr.s Allan, something for which he very likely later felt remorse”. While it is possible that Poe revisits this incident in veiled form in the tale, more relevant is his working out in the text of his idea of perversity, considering that the narrator often does wrong things for their own sake when he should have known better. Poe would later treat perversity more philosophically in his short story “The Imp of the Perverse” (1845), a text not as well known or, according to Mabbott, “not quite so good” as “The Black Cat” (*Poe* 3:848). Frederick Frank and Anthony Magistrale consider “The Black Cat” an interesting “psychometric exercise in self-contempt”, in light of the fact that the narrator, a man initially of “kindly temperament”, is eventually “warped” through “perverseness” (43). It is perhaps this struggle in the narrator’s own mind against the spirit of perversity that largely defines the tale, its psychological intensity, and also its enduring popularity. According to Burton Pollin, the text has

generated more than 20 film renditions over the decades (qtd. in Reilly 487). Notable examples include two films by Universal Pictures entitled *Black Cat*, from 1934 and 1941, very loosely based on Poe's tale and starring Bela Lugosi and Boris Karloff, and Lugosi and Basil Rathbone, respectively. Also of note is Roger Corman's 1962 film *Tales of Terror* that combined for one of its tales the plots of Poe's "The Black Cat" and "The Cask of Amontillado", and starred Peter Lorre and Vincent Price. Earlier, in 1947, the *Mystery in the Air Radio Program* had already featured Peter Lorre as protagonist in Poe's "The Black Cat".

The first several paragraphs of Poe's tale are an opportunity for the nameless narrator to outline "mere household events" and the horrific "consequences" of some of those events (*Poe* 3:849). The narrator ponders whether or not some "intellect" exists more rational than his own, and that will reduce his "phantasm" to the domestic and commonplace, to "very natural causes and effects" (*Poe* 3:850). Such thinking early in the tale may be the narrator's attempt to relativize the seriousness of the later horrors he will proceed to outline. Already of note are characteristics frequently seen in the best of Poe's tales, most especially narrator unreliability, considering that everything is being related after the fact: thereby drawing attention to the narrator's own strength (or weakness) of memory.

Readers then learn how the narrator was known since his "infancy" for the "docility and humanity of [his] disposition"; his main source of pleasure derived from the many pets he kept and looked after, especially so since there is something "unselfish" in their love when compared to the "paltry friendship" of man, as emphasised by the narrator. Together with his like-minded wife, he kept a variety of birds, fish, dogs, rabbits, and a black cat named Pluto, his "favorite pet" (*Poe* 3:850). Of immediate significance is the cat's name, signifying the ruler of the underworld in Greek mythology: a possibly symbolic connection with the underworld (i.e., subconscious) of the narrator's own mind and his soon-to-emerge conflict with perversity. Roberta Reeder links the cat, in Jungian terms, with the *anima*, the instinctual force that extends further in the tale than the narrator's own *animus*, his rational vision that tries to control things and that indicates repressed emotions beginning already in his childhood: one defined by bland association with animals rather than interaction with the passionate and demanding world of humans (20). This happy blandness, the narrator relates, characterised his wife too, but, in classic Poe fashion, there is no way of knowing if this was really the case since all is filtered through his first-person voice. The later turn of events seems to suggest otherwise.

Next introduced in the text is the "Fiend Intemperance... for what disease is like Alcohol!" The autobiographical dimension is here apparent, considering that Poe often had trouble with alcohol, particularly via episodes of what is now known as binge drinking, and he may have been interested in analysing its consequences in fictional form. As the years passed, the narrator retells how he sank further into alcoholism, offering his wife at intervals "personal violence", maltreating several of the animals in his possession, and eventually turning his attention to Pluto too, who had by then become "old... and... somewhat peevish". Returning home one night, dreadfully intoxicated, the narrator began his career as a moral delinquent (characteristic of many Poe narrators) by cutting one of the cat's eyes, with a pen-knife, from its socket. The act is described as having been "gin-nurtured", a comment overlapping with the many "temples" dedicated to gin that another narrator notices when following a mysterious old man through the London streets of Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" (1840). Gin and crime are linked in that tale, written just a few years prior to "The Black Cat". Although briefly shuddering at his crime of attacking the cat, the narrator confesses that his "soul remained untouched" and that memories of the event were soon "drowned in wine" (*Poe* 3:851). Of note here is how, in the span of a couple of short paragraphs, the narrator has gone from being a docile character to an armed monstrosity. The change is extreme and happens quickly, suggesting various symbolic possibilities of a schizoid nature. Anticipated here is the Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde doppelgänger of Robert Louis Stevenson's 1886 novella, since the narrator appears now almost as a different character, or has taken on a different personality. More broadly, argues Richard Frushell, the cats in the tale themselves are like "halves" of one another and mark the "narrator's degeneration as he moves from analogizing himself with Everyman, to equating himself with God" (43).

Torture of his first cat indicates the narrator's initial degeneration, the phase culminating in his hanging of this cat one morning, an inexplicable act since the feline had given him "no reason of offence"; the narrator further elaborates that he knew this was a sin, that he was also aware of his actions, but that there was an "unfathomable longing of the soul *to vex itself*". This need to vex one's self is theorised by the narrator as the "spirit of Perverseness", a spirit not taken into account by traditional philosophy but that is one of the "primary faculties" giving direction to the "character of Man" (Poe 3:852). Of significance here is the rational, intellectual way in which the narrator attempts to explain his irrational behaviour. Also important is the phrenological context in which perversity is outlined. This "faculty" of thought suggested by the narrator is not something found in traditional phrenology, but Poe uses it as an explanation in this story for the irrational things that people often do, in this case the narrator, and that otherwise have no explanation.

In the earliest version of "The Black Cat", Poe included the statement that "Phrenology finds no place for it [perversity] among its organs", a phrase later modified (Poe 3:859) to refer more broadly to "philosophy" in the pivotal paragraph that discusses perversity as the narrator's reason for his horrible behaviour. According to Kenneth Alan Hovey, Poe's tinkering with an organ of perverseness in this tale indicates his dissatisfaction with the organ of "Veneration" used by traditional phrenology to explain man's position in relation to higher forces or authority figures. Poe reasoned, suggests Hovey, that perverseness made more sense than veneration since it was derived by induction through actual human behaviour, whereas veneration was "concocted *a priori*" from a greater supernatural design (358). Perversity, however, does not end in complete darkness for Poe, since the narrator, although vexing himself constantly, eventually feels enough guilt (or perversity) to admit his later crimes to others, similar to how the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843) cannot keep the secret of the old man's murder but feels compelled, eventually, to expose it. Other self-incriminating behaviour is seen with the narrators in "William Wilson" (1839) and "The Cask of Amontillado" (1846) too, all perhaps owing to perversity's gradual exposure of guilt.

In keeping with the connections implied by Poe between guilt and perversity, a fire erupts on the night of the day on which the narrator killed his black cat. His "entire worldly wealth was swallowed up" through the incident and he and his wife, and servant, barely made it out of the house alive (Poe 3:852). The episode serves as moral warning to the narrator, that he is on the brink of deeper degeneration. Frushell reasons that Pluto was the narrator's conscience, here consigned to the fire, and that Pluto's double, which will be found soon after, will do more than merely "warn" the narrator of his poor behaviour (43). Pluto's body, if the narrator's extreme explanation is to be believed, was thrown through his window to awaken him on the night of the fire, and, as the house burned down, the carcass was compressed into some fresh plaster that, together with lime, the flames, and "ammonia" from the cat, had created a portrait of a gigantic cat with a rope around its neck. The narrator discovers this amazing portrait on the day after the fire, having visited the ruins of his house and having noticed a "dense crowd" of people examining this natural curiosity on one of the intact walls (Poe 3:853). The explanation of how this portrait was created functions as one of the many lucid moments in the text; in this case it is the rational half of the narrator's irrational choice to have killed the black cat in the first place. Again, the schizoid nature of his behaviour is notable here, as is the oscillation between rational and irrational episodes in the text. The episode is rounded out through the narrator's regret over losing his cat and his longing to replace it with a similar one (Poe 3:853-4).

It is one night while sitting in a den of "more than infamy" devoted to "Gin" and "Rum", retells the narrator, that he spotted a black cat reposing on one of the "hogsheads" of alcohol, as large as Pluto and resembling him closely except for a splotch of white on its breast. The cat responded positively to the narrator's caresses; the narrator in turn elaborates on how he offered to purchase it from the landlord, but the latter knew nothing about the cat and "had never seen it before". Of note here is the mysterious appearance of this second cat, very much symbolic of the narrator's further degeneration since the cat followed the narrator home and became a "great favorite with [his] wife", but soon began to irritate the narrator himself: "just the reverse of what [he] had anticipated" (Poe 3:854). The sequence of events is greatly reminiscent of the narrator's worsening relationship

with Pluto, and again touches on the idea of perversity since the narrator cannot specifically account for why he began to hate this cat too. The explanation he offers, while retelling the story, is that he eventually discovered that this second cat was also missing an eye. The uncanny similarity to Pluto's deformity, inflicted by the narrator in that case, increases his "aversion" towards this feline. Also significant, and in keeping with the theory of perversity presented earlier by the narrator, is that this cat's fondness for him grows in proportion to his increasing disgust with it that culminated in "absolute *dread* of the beast" (*Poe* 3:855). Frushell argues that in this state of wretchedness the narrator comes closest to admitting that the cats, in this case the first one's double, are his conscience bubbling to the surface (43). In keeping with this association between cat and conscience, it is not coincidental that a near-supernatural transformation was spotted eventually by the narrator on the second cat's fur: what initially had been a white blotch on its breast had at this point in the text assumed the shape of the "gallows", thereby drawing attention to the narrator's killing of the first cat once again.

The narrator indicates that his "Reason" attempted to dismiss such transformation as "fanciful", but the supernatural dimension of this change continued to haunt him through various nightmares he began to have at that point, nightmares from which he would awaken only to find the "hot breath of *the thing* [this second cat] upon [his] face, and its vast weight... incumbent eternally upon [his] *heart!*" (*Poe* 3:855-6). The diction is reminiscent of the incubus-like weight that sits upon the narrator's chest in "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839) after Madeline is mysteriously entombed by her brother; in this tale, the weight is the burden that the narrator still felt for having killed the first cat, but the burden is finally thrown off since at that point, relates the narrator, "the feeble remnant of the good within [him] succumbed" and "evil thoughts" then predominated. His wife now became the "most patient of sufferers" while his "outbursts of fury" were "ungovernable". Domestic abuse, likely through the narrator's continued alcoholism, and fuelled through the transformation he interpreted as supernatural on the second cat's fur, marks a transition at this point in the text to the final, degenerate actions that will characterise this classic work by Poe. Also implied here is that perversity, since it has now pushed the narrator to hate "all things" and "all mankind" (*Poe* 3:856), marks both melancholy and guilty people, argues Hovey, as "essentially driven beings who cannot help what they do and thus seem to confirm the picture of... human determinism" (359). Such a deterministic form of perversity is also seen in Poe's only novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym* (1837-8), especially through Pym's indication of his own "desires" for "shipwreck and famine" that are ironically fulfilled towards the conclusion of that text (qtd. in Hovey 359).

The narrator retells how such evil thoughts finally culminated in the murder of his wife. One day, while she accompanied him to the cellar of an "old building which [their] poverty compelled [them] to inhabit", the second cat also followed them, causing the narrator nearly to trip; in a fit of exasperation, he attempted to kill the cat with an axe, the blow being "arrested by the hand of [his] wife". Further enraged through this kindly gesture, he "buried the axe in her brain" (*Poe* 3:856). Of significance here is how the negative energy directed first at the second cat is redirected at the narrator's wife, and also how it was his wife who tried to stop him from carrying out the cat's destruction. Reeder argues, in Jungian fashion, how both the cat and wife are female symbols of his repressed *anima*, and that as these instinctual impulses grow stronger throughout the story, so, too, does the narrator react more violently against them (20). At this point he has literally buried an axe in his *anima* and proceeds, according to Reeder, psychologically to wall it up (20). The narrator relates how he meticulously thought of various ways by which to dispose of the body, whether to pack it in a box as if "merchandize", destroy it by fire, or bury it in the cellar; his final choice was to "wall it up in the cellar—as the monks of the middle ages are recorded to have walled up their victims" (*Poe* 3:856-7). His detailed contemplation of how to rid himself of the corpse is similar to the narrator's careful choice to hide the old man's corpse under the floorboards in "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843); both narrators initially attempt to keep the murders as secrets, and very carefully hidden ones too.

After walling up his wife's corpse and noticing that the second cat was then nowhere to be found, the narrator "soundly and tranquilly slept" even with "murder upon [his] soul" (*Poe* 3:857). Two days later, retells the narrator, the cat was still not there, perhaps having "fled the premises forever"; this possibility gave him much

satisfaction. Inquiries regarding his wife were of no concern; a “search had been instituted” but nothing was found, and he looked at that point “upon [his] future felicity as secured”. On the “fourth day” after the murder the police arrived unexpectedly to do a second “rigorous” search of the premises, but again found nothing peculiar; the “glee” at the narrator’s heart then became “too strong to be restrained”, only to burst forth as a series of odd words and gestures that finally incriminated him. Drawing attention to the “excellently” constructed walls while the officers were still nearby, the narrator through the “phrenzy of bravado” rapped with his cane on the wall behind which was concealed his wife’s corpse (*Poe* 3:858). The perverse gesture was answered by the cat’s wailing, it having been walled up accidentally “within the tomb” by the narrator (*Poe* 3:859). Of note here is how the narrator, similar to his counterpart in “The Tell-Tale Heart” (1843), could not control his satisfaction at having managed to convince the authorities of his innocence, and went one step too far. Also of significance is some of the number symbolism; numerologically, four, as a multiple of two, carries similar meaning. The police finally discovered the narrator’s secret on the fourth day after the murder; four is a number that locates things in time and space, grounding them in reality, or, more symbolically, within the four corners of the world or of a room. Poe’s narrator was reconnected with reality once he exposed his crime to the police. Two is the number of the doppelgänger, and it is the second search by the authorities that did the narrator in, much as it is the second cat (the first’s double) that incriminated him by wailing behind the freshly mortared wall. The doublings also create a mirroring effect in the tale reminiscent of the *alter ego*’s behaviour in “William Wilson” (1839), the presence and commingling of two wives in “Ligeia” (1838; although they are opposites of one another), and most obviously of the nested and doubled voyages occurring in Poe’s only novel, *Pym* (1837-8).

Poe’s idea of perversity once again manifests itself in the last few paragraphs of the tale, since the narrator felt an inexplicable urge not so much to admit the crime as to draw attention to how he had meticulously covered his tracks; Frushell therefore argues that pride is as much the narrator’s problem and reason for his downfall as perversity (43). The mechanics by which he rapped upon the brick wall with his cane, and arbitrarily began commenting to the officers on the strength of the house’s construction, do however indicate an overall, perverse theatricality to his behaviour. It is relevant to suggest that, no matter how this classic Poe tale is interpreted, perversity is certainly one of its central concerns, and perhaps a broader, grim sense of determinism as well, as argued by Hovey. Poe, working as an editor, would certainly have had an opportunity to come across George Combe’s *The System of Phrenology* (in its 1838 or 1841 American edition) before penning “The Black Cat”; also possible is that he encountered Combe’s other famous work, of natural philosophy, *The Constitution of Man* (probably in its third American edition of 1834). Combe’s *Constitution of Man* generated more reaction in the 19th century than Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859), the former selling approximately seven times as many copies by 1900 than Darwin’s work (Van Wyhe: online). Combe’s overall idea in *Constitution* is that disobedience to natural laws (moral, physical, and organic) leads to “punishment”; the idea is broadly applicable to the narrator in “The Black Cat”, and to many other Poe narrators. More specifically, Combe’s comment that he is interested in discovering the “contrivances of the Creator” that “effect beneficial purposes” (*Constitution* 12) intersects with Poe’s theory of perverseness in a more interesting way: perverseness being Poe’s contrivance in “The Black Cat”, and designed to restore balance (i.e., incriminate the narrator) in the twisted world of this famous short story.

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