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The Unspeakable: Madness in "The Black Cat"

A significant part of the pervasiveness of Edgar Allan Poe's work is the fact that he wrote his tales of horror with an emphasis on what everyday people feared. He targeted what he knew to be massive fears of his own time and blew these fears up into tales of suspense, horror, and the supernatural. Within "The Black Cat," for instance, Poe plays on the fear of madness, or a discernible lack of reason. The narrator of "The Black Cat" displays several attributes of madness — he maims an innocent cat, hangs it, kills his wife in a fit of temper, and finally hides her rotting corpse behind a brick wall. Throughout the text, however, the narrator does not refer to his condition as insanity: instead, he believes his choices and imprisonment were caused by a list of extraordinary events out of his control. However, Poe's readers should see that alcoholism may have acted as a catalyst for the narrator's descent into insanity, but did not cause his later violent actions. This avoidance of madness is the true fear being exploited within "The Black Cat": the narrator adamantly refuses to acknowledge the possibility he may be mad, and instead wholeheartedly attributes his downfall to alcohol and events out of his control, because even in his last hours, he fears being associated with madness.

In the beginning of "The Black Cat," for instance, Poe's narrator notes the "docility and humanity" he had displayed as a young child (Poe 718). His penchant for kindness and goodwill toward animals was praised by his family members. The man grew older, married and lived with many animals, including a cat named Pluto of which he was incredibly fond. However, this innocence changes when the "Fiend Intemperance," or alcohol, is introduced as the catalyst of his later madness. The narrator tells readers that he grew "day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others. I suffered myself to use intemperate language to my wife...[and] offered her personal violence" (Poe 719). Initially caused by his imbibing, the narrator experiences a radical personality shift that results in a much different disposition from his earlier docility. He goes on to maim the cat, his dislike for it growing afterwards into "irritation" (Poe 720), and eventually he hangs it outside his house. Yet he vehemently protests this resulting from madness, saying "Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet, mad am I not—and very surely I do not dream" (Poe 718). He explains that madness in this instance might be expected, but he is not affected by it.

The narrator believes what he has to explain is potentially unexplainable for the rational man, but as he thinks it truly happened, he must try to detail the events preceding his downfall.

Elsewhere, the narrator carves out the eye of a favorite cat because the animal bites him in fear. He blames the “spirit of perverseness” (Poe 720) for his murder of the same animal, which in truth he uses to cover and rationalize his madness as something experienced by all human beings. He skews this action, though, in order to garner sympathy and reasonable responses to his story, asking “Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or a silly action, for no other reason than because he knows he should not” (Poe 720). He uses the bandwagon effect to make his story believable, strongly reinforcing the idea that he is not mad. Doing this, the narrator attempts to connect with his readership, or the person he is confessing to, in order to conceal or overpower the idea he may be under the influence of madness and tilt the listener’s beliefs toward the unexplainable and out of the fault of the narrator.

His beginnings of madness are shown in his experiences with Pluto, but the narrator doesn’t name them due to the overlying stigma of being called mad. From the very first lines of the story, he makes his beliefs clear saying, “For the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief” (Poe 718): he realizes his tale is out of the ordinary, but only wishes to “unburthen my soul” (Poe 718). The narrator’s reasoning does not come from within but from without, in his surroundings. He hopes the person who listens to his story “will perceive, in the circumstances I detail with awe, nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects” (Poe 718). It is not his own personality, temperament, or some defective combination of the two that causes tragedy to befall him but, according to this narrator, something else.

The narrator has already been condemned to die for his actions, though he believes the succession of events leading to his confinement were out of his control at least, and at most, supernatural. In her journal article titled “Untold Story: The Lying Narrator in ‘The Black Cat,’” Susan Amper argues, “His tale is a fabrication, by which he seeks to conceal the true nature of the crime, exactly as he sought in walling up his wife’s body to conceal the fact of the crime” (475). The narrator’s reasoning is definitely falsified in an effort to hide his murderous madness, but the crime remains the same. His wife dies at his hands due to his unnatural dread of a cat resembling the one he murdered. His madness overrides his reason, and in a state of numb clarity, he is able to hide his wife’s body and carry on with his life. In her journal article by titled

“Diabolical Evil and ‘The Black Cat,’” author Magdalen Wing-Chi Ki argues that “Poe’s narrator is ‘mad’ because his behavior deviates from all the moral maxims in traditional ethics...his drive ethics is on the side of chaos, madness, and death” (569). The entirety of “The Black Cat” is about the narrator falling to madness, and while in its clutches, causing chaos to his loved ones.

Concerning the appearance of the second cat, it seems clear that the narrator’s clouded conscience and guilt over Pluto, who he murdered brutally for no tangible reason, played a definite part in its supposedly close resemblance to the original feline. Amper agrees, saying “The doubtful nature of the narrator’s account begins with the sheer improbability of his discovering a second cat virtually identical to Pluto, right down to the missing eye” (482). This is but another reflection of the madness that the narrator tries to hide. Consequently, his depiction of the cat should not be taken as truth, since the narrator’s connection with reality is heavily debatable throughout the text: he is unable to tell reality from his hallucinations. Another clear indication of his inability to tell fantasy from reality is his hallucination of an image within the white spot on the cat’s breast. When he first meets the new cat, he describes the spot as an “indefinite splotch of white” (Poe 721), but later on claims to see “the image of a hideous — of a ghastly thing — of the gallows” (722). In his madness, he hallucinates an image of his guilt onto the cat, a seeming twin of his first victim. In a journal article titled “Motive and Meaning: The Mystery of The Will of Poe’s ‘The Black Cat,’” Joseph Stark argues that “not only, for instance, is the narrator a confessed murderer, but his story also evidences a certain delusional paranoia” (259-260). This story from the narrator cannot be taken at face value as complete truth. Stark continues with, “when he blames his crime on human depravity, we are skeptical of this solution, simply because he offers it” (260). His madness greatly affects his ability to tell his narrative and can be seen in his wavering ability to rationally explain his crime and its causes.

When the narrator finally kills his wife, his calm demeanor afterwards gives him away. He represents someone without reason – uncaring and unfeeling. After hiding his wife’s body, he says, “my next step was to look for the beast which had been the cause of so much wretchedness” (Poe 723). He is entirely focused on the cat. His wife’s death is an unhappy accident, but one that matters little compared to the narrator’s hatred of the cat. Instead of feeling anything for his wife, he goes on to say, “It is impossible to describe, or to imagine, the deep, the blissful sense of relief which the absence of the detested creature occasioned in my bosom” (Poe

723). No guilt mars his conscience or disturbs him. He even notes how soundly and peacefully he slept “even with the burden of murder upon my soul” (Poe 723). Amper believes the narrator actually shows the guilt of his wife’s murder in his empathy concerning the loss of Pluto because he is hiding the fact that his wife’s murder was intentional (479). This interpretation is clever, though ultimately unhelpful in this discussion. Whether the wife was murdered before or after the cat, or with intent or not, the irrational way the narrator tells his story and his reported irrational acts within it, are enough to see clear indications of a lack of reason, which ultimately results in her murder and shows the narrator to be mad.

One major detail the narrator uses to avoid naming his madness as such is alcohol, though his admitted unreliability makes any excuse he uses questionable. Stark addresses this issue, saying alcohol as the narrator’s reason for murder “fails to account for what drove him into alcoholism in the first place” (260). The narrator introduces his addiction simply and without history, saying “through the instrumentality of the Fiend Intemperance — had (I blush to confess it) experienced a radical alteration for the worse” (Poe 719). His drinking problem is explained to have begun without reason, and is passed off as a momentarily lapse rather than a lasting addiction. Wing-Chi Ki believes this change to be all-consuming, saying “Poe invites his readers to see that alcohol has allowed the drive subject to push all identification aside and enjoy a new being” (575). However, as Stark notes, alcohol is not mentioned during the murder of his wife and attempted murder of the second cat (260). Only in the maiming of Pluto is his imbibing mentioned: when he actually hangs the cat, he says he does it “in cool blood” (Poe 720). No reasonable excuse can account for his murder of the animal other than he wished to kill it and therefore did so. The narrator is also shown to be completely sober when he ultimately ends his wife’s life. He says, “Uplifting an axe, and forgetting, in my wrath, the childish dread which has hitherto stayed my hand, I aimed a blow at the animal” (Poe 722) and later, “goaded, by the interference, into a rage more than demoniacal” (723). Alcohol is not said to have been in his system at the time of the murder. His madness, goaded into a frenzy by the cat and his wife’s intrusion in his attempted murder of it, is the true reason behind his actions. Alcohol cannot be used as a rational excuse because it is only used in the beginning of the story as explanation for his original maiming of Pluto, and then not mentioned again for the rest “The Black Cat.”

With his early alcoholism dismissed as a possibility behind his murderous actions, the narrator is left unreliable and greatly under the influence of his madness. However, the narrator

refuses to acknowledge this because madness is the only line he will not cross. He admits to the rest of his story – both of the murders, his illogical rage, and apathetic emotions – but will not say he is mad. Poe clearly understood widely feared topics and manipulated them in his texts to create horrifying stories often reflecting similar themes. Madness, or the unnamed and avoided likeness of it, is one such theme in “The Black Cat.” The maiming of Pluto, its eventual murder, and the horrifying murder and stashing of his wife are such brutalities that they become effective subjects of horror. Even with these topics, however, the true terror in “The Black Cat” is the narrator’s madness and his lack of reason. Wing-Chi Ki argues, “The hanging of Pluto is a voluntary act of calculated wrongdoing, or moral suicide in the traditional sense, for the narrator ‘enjoys’ the death of the cat and the damnation of his soul” (577). The narrator’s irrationality, already hinted at while under the influence of alcohol and later revealed when he hangs Pluto, is the true fear being manipulated within this work. Admitting to be under the influence of madness is the ultimate taboo because it is so widely feared in Poe’s own time. Given that the narrator reflects his audience, it is expected he would refuse to admit to madness and instead pass his circumstances off as something out of his control and possibly supernatural. An imaginary or out-of-this-world foe, in this case, is much more tolerable than the possibility of madness, for an extraordinary terror may potentially be explained with reason while madness is defined by its very lack of anything logical.

Oftentimes Poe aims to startle, awe, and horrify his readership with macabre mystery and gothic tales, but one of the major fears he focuses on in “The Black Cat” is madness, a topic so feared it cannot even be directly named as the driving force behind the narrator’s crimes. Instead, the narrator of “The Black Cat” depicts his insanity as something other than in his mind – be it his addiction to alcohol or the supernatural abilities of cats – although it seems clear, throughout the text but especially in narratorial descriptions and responses, that he actually suffers from madness. The mention of alcohol is only in the beginning of the story, fueling his original harm to Pluto. When he murders the cat and later his wife, he is under only his own influence. In “The Black Cat,” insanity works to be much more horrifying than any simply supernatural horror. More than the supernatural or unexplainable, the illogicality of madness and its ability to override a person’s reason, enabling them to commit brutal crimes without guilt, is the true fear being exploited within Poe’s “The Black Cat.”

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