

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat"

Author Biography

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49) American writer; he became an orphan in early childhood, and was taken into the household of John Allan, adopting his foster-father's name as his middle name from 1824 onwards. He came to London with the Allans (1815-20). He published his first volume of verse, *Tamerlane and Other Poems* (1827), anonymously and at his own expense. After a period in the US army, and in journalism, he married his 13-year-old cousin Virginia in 1836. His first collection of stories, *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1839, for 1840), contains 'The Fall of the House of Usher', a Gothic romance in which the narrator visits the crumbling mansion of his childhood companion Roderick Usher to find both Usher and his twin sister Madeline in the last stages of mental and physical weakness. His tales characteristically explore states of obsession and mania. In 1845 his poem 'The Raven' was published in a New York paper and then as the title poem of *The Raven and Other Poems* (1845). Poe's one attempt at novel writing was the unfinished *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket* (1837), which describes a surreal voyage to the Antarctic. *Eureka: A Prose Poem*, an extended meditation on cosmology, appeared in 1848. Poe was much admired by Baudelaire, who translated many of his works, and in Britain by Oscar Wilde, W. B. Yeats, and others. Freudian critics (and Freud himself) have been intrigued by the macabre and pathological elements in his work, ranging from hints of necrophilia in his poem 'Annabel Lee' (1849) to the indulgent sadism of 'The Pit and the Pendulum' (1843). Jorge Luis Borges and many others have been impressed by the cryptograms and mysteries of the stories which feature Poe's detective Auguste Dupin ('The Murders in the Rue Morgue', 1841; 'The Purloined Letter', 1845) and the morbid metaphysical speculation of 'The Facts in the Case of M. Waldemar' (1845). His critical writings include 'The Philosophy of Composition' (on the process of composing 'The Raven') (Birch and Hooper, 2012: 1354).

THE BLACK CAT: Text

FOR the most wild yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. 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 do I not dream. But to-morrow I die, and to-day I would unburden my soul. My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events. In their consequences, these events have

terrified—have tortured—have destroyed me. Yet I will not attempt to expound them. To me, they have presented little but horror—to many they will seem less terrible than *baroques*. Hereafter, perhaps, some intellect may be found which will reduce my phantasm to the commonplace—some intellect more calm, more logical, and far less excitable than my own, which will perceive, in the circumstances I detail with awe, nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects.

From my infancy I was noted for the docility and humanity of my disposition. My tenderness of heart was even so conspicuous as to make me the jest of my companions. I was especially fond of animals, and was indulged by my parents with a great variety of pets. With these I spent most of my time, and never was so happy as when feeding and caressing them. This peculiarity of character grew with my growth, and, in my manhood, I derived from it one of my principal sources of pleasure. To those who have cherished an affection for a faithful and sagacious dog, I need hardly be at the trouble of explaining the nature or the intensity of the gratification thus derivable. There is something in the unselfish and self-sacrificing love of a brute, which goes directly to the heart of him who has had frequent occasion to test the paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere *Man*.

I married early, and was happy to find in my wife a disposition not uncongenial with my own. Observing my partiality for domestic pets, she lost no opportunity of procuring those of the most agreeable kind. We had birds, gold-fish, a fine dog, rabbits, a small monkey, and a *cat*.

This latter was a remarkably large and beautiful animal, entirely black, and sagacious to an astonishing degree. In speaking of his intelligence, my wife, who at heart was not a little tinctured with superstition, made frequent allusion to the ancient popular notion, which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise. Not that she was ever *serious* upon this point—and I mention the matter at all for no better reason than that it happens, just now, to be remembered.

Pluto—this was the cat's name—was my favorite pet and playmate. I alone fed him, and he attended me wherever I went about the house. It was even with difficulty that I could prevent him from following me through the streets.

Our friendship lasted, in this manner, for several years, during which my general temperament and character—through the instrumentality of the Fiend Intemperance—had (I blush to confess it) experienced a radical alteration for the worse. I 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. At length, I even offered her personal violence. My pets, of course, were made to feel

the change in my disposition. I not only neglected, but ill-used them. For Pluto, however, I still retained sufficient regard to restrain me from maltreating him, as I made no scruple of maltreating the rabbits, the monkey, or even the dog, when, by accident, or through affection, they came in my way. But my disease grew upon me—for what disease is like Alcohol! —and at length even Pluto, who was now becoming old, and consequently somewhat peevish—even Pluto began to experience the effects of my ill temper.

One night, returning home, much intoxicated, from one of my haunts about town, I fancied that the cat avoided my presence. I seized him; when, in his fright at my violence, he inflicted a slight wound upon my hand with his teeth. The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fiber of my frame. I took from my waistcoat-pocket a penknife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket! I blush, I burn, I shudder, while I pen the damnable atrocity.

When reason returned with the morning—when I had slept off the fumes of the night's debauch—I experienced a sentiment half of horror, half of remorse, for the crime of which I had been guilty; but it was, at best, a feeble and equivocal feeling, and the soul remained untouched. I again plunged into excess, and soon drowned in wine all memory of the deed.

In the meantime, the cat slowly recovered. The socket of the lost eye presented, it is true, a frightful appearance, but he no longer appeared to suffer any pain. He went about the house as usual, but, as might be expected, fled in extreme terror at my approach. I had so much of my old heart left, as to be at first grieved by this evident dislike on the part of a creature which had once so loved me. But this feeling soon gave place to irritation. And then came, as if to my final and irrevocable overthrow, the spirit of PERVERSENESS. Of this spirit philosophy takes no account. Yet I am not more sure that my soul lives, than I am that perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart—one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of Man. Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or a stupid action, for no other reason than because he knows he should *not*? Have we not a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best judgment, to violate that which is *Law*, merely because we understand it to be such? This spirit of perverseness, I say, came to my final overthrow. It was this unfathomable longing of the soul *to vex itself*—to offer violence to its own nature—to do wrong for the wrong's sake only—that urged me to continue and

finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute. One morning, in cold blood, 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 at my heart;—hung it *because* I knew that it had loved me, and *because* I felt it had given me no reason of offence;—hung it *because* I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin—a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it—if such a thing were possible—even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God.

On the night of the day on which this most cruel deed was done, I was aroused from sleep by the cry of fire. The curtains of my bed were in flames. The whole house was blazing. It was with great difficulty that my wife, a servant, and myself, made our escape from the conflagration. The destruction was complete. My entire worldly wealth was swallowed up, and I resigned myself thenceforward to despair. I am above the weakness of seeking to establish a sequence of cause and effect, between the disaster and the atrocity. But I am detailing a chain of facts—and wish not to leave even a possible link imperfect. On the day succeeding the fire, I visited the ruins. The walls, with one exception, had fallen in. This exception was found in a compartment wall, not very thick, which stood about the middle of the house, and against which had rested the head of my bed. The plastering had here, in great measure, resisted the action of the fire—a fact which I attributed to its having been recently spread. About this wall a dense crowd were collected, and many persons seemed to be examining a particular portion of it with very minute and eager attention. The words “strange!” “singular!” and other similar expressions, excited my curiosity. I approached and saw, as if graven in *bas-relief* upon the white surface, the figure of a gigantic *cat*. The impression was given with an accuracy truly marvellous.

There was a rope about the animal’s neck.

When I first beheld this apparition—for I could scarcely regard it as less—my wonder and my terror were extreme. But at length reflection came to my aid. The cat, I remembered, had been hung in a garden adjacent to the house. Upon the alarm of fire, this garden had been immediately filled by the crowd—by some one of whom the animal must have been cut from the tree and thrown, through an open window, into my chamber. This had probably been done with the view of arousing me from sleep. The falling of other walls had compressed the victim of my cruelty into the substance of the freshly-spread plaster; the lime of which, with the flames, and the *ammonia* from the carcass, had then accomplished the portraiture as I saw it.

Although I thus readily accounted to my reason, if not altogether to my conscience, for the startling fact just detailed, it did not the less fail to make a deep impression upon my fancy. For months I could not rid myself of the phantasm of the cat; and, during this period, there came back into my spirit a half-sentiment that seemed, but was not, remorse. I went so far as to regret the loss of the animal, and to look about me, among the vile haunts which I now habitually frequented, for another pet of the same species, and of somewhat similar appearance, with which to supply its place.

One night as I sat, half stupefied, in a den of more than infamy, my attention was suddenly drawn to some black object, reposing upon the head of one of the immense hogsheads of gin, or of rum, which constituted the chief furniture of the apartment. I had been looking steadily at the top of this hogshead for some minutes, and what now caused me surprise was the fact that I had not sooner perceived the object thereupon. I approached it, and touched it with my hand. It was a black cat—a very large one—fully as large as Pluto, and closely resembling him in every respect but one. Pluto had not a white hair upon any portion of his body; but this cat had a large, although indefinite splotch of white, covering nearly the whole region of the breast.

Upon my touching him, he immediately arose, purred loudly, rubbed against my hand, and appeared delighted with my notice. This, then, was the very creature of which I was in search. I at once offered to purchase it of the landlord; but this person made no claim to it—knew nothing of it—had never seen it before.

I continued my caresses, and, when I prepared to go home, the animal evinced a disposition to accompany me. I permitted it to do so; occasionally stooping and patting it as I proceeded. When it reached the house it domesticated itself at once, and became immediately a great favorite with my wife.

For my own part, I soon found a dislike to it arising within me. This was just the reverse of what I had anticipated; but—I know not how or why it was—its evident fondness for myself rather disgusted and annoyed me. By slow degrees, these feelings of disgust and annoyance rose into the bitterness of hatred. I avoided the creature; a certain sense of shame, and the remembrance of my former deed of cruelty, preventing me from physically abusing it. I did not, for some weeks, strike, or otherwise violently ill use it; but gradually—very gradually—I came to look upon it with unutterable loathing, and to flee silently from its odious presence, as from the breath of a pestilence.

What added, no doubt, to my hatred of the beast, was the discovery, on the morning after I brought it home, that, like Pluto, it also had been deprived of one

of its eyes. This circumstance, however, only endeared it to my wife, who, as I have already said, possessed, in a high degree, that humanity of feeling which had once been my distinguishing trait, and the source of many of my simplest and purest pleasures.

With my aversion to this cat, however, its partiality for myself seemed to increase. It followed my footsteps with a pertinacity which it would be difficult to make the reader comprehend. Whenever I sat, it would crouch beneath my chair, or spring upon my knees, covering me with its loathsome caresses. If I arose to walk it would get between my feet and thus nearly throw me down, or, fastening its long and sharp claws in my dress, clamber, in this manner, to

my breast. At such times, although I longed to destroy it with a blow, I was yet withheld from so doing, partly by a memory of my former crime, but chiefly—let me confess it at once—by absolute *dread* of the beast.

This dread was not exactly a dread of physical evil— and yet I should be at a loss how otherwise to define it. I am almost ashamed to own—yes, even in this felon’s cell, I am almost ashamed to own—that the terror and horror with which the animal inspired me, had been heightened by one of the merest chimeras it would be possible to conceive. My wife had called my attention, more than once, to the character of the mark of white hair, of which I have spoken, and which constituted the sole visible difference between the strange beast and the one I had destroyed. The reader will remember that this mark, although large, had been originally very indefinite; but, by slow degrees—degrees nearly imperceptible, and which for a long time my reason struggled to reject as fanciful—it had, at length, assumed a rigorous distinctness of outline. It was now the representation of an object that I shudder to name—and for this, above all, I loathed, and dreaded, and would have rid myself of the monster *had I dared*—it was now, I say, the image of a hideous—of a ghastly thing—of the GALLOWS!— oh, mournful and terrible engine of Horror and of Crime—of

Agony and of Death!

And now was I indeed wretched beyond the wretchedness of mere Humanity. And *a brute beast*—whose fellow I had contemptuously destroyed—*a brute beast* to work out for *me*—for me, a man fashioned in the image of the High God—so much of insufferable woe! Alas! Neither by day nor by night knew I the blessing of rest any more! During the former the creature left me no moment alone, and in the latter I started hourly from dreams of unutterable fear

to find the hot breath of *the thing* upon my face, and its vast weight—an incarnate nightmare that I had no power to shake off—incumbent eternally upon my *heart*!

Beneath the pressure of torments such as these the feeble remnant of the good within me succumbed. Evil thoughts became my sole intimates—the darkest and most evil of thoughts. The moodiness of my usual temper increased to hatred of all things and of all mankind; while from the sudden, frequent, and ungovernable outbursts of a fury to which I now blindly abandoned myself, my uncomplaining wife, alas, was the most usual and the most patient of sufferers.

One day she accompanied me, upon some household errand, into the cellar of the old building which our poverty compelled us to inhabit. The cat followed me down the steep stairs, and, nearly throwing me headlong, exasperated me to madness. Uplifting an axe, and forgetting, in my wrath, the childish dread which had hitherto stayed my hand, I aimed a blow at the animal, which, of course, would have proved instantly fatal had it descended as I wished. But this blow was arrested by the hand of my wife. Goaded by the interference into a rage more than demoniacal, I withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain. She fell dead upon the spot without a groan.

This hideous murder accomplished, I set myself forthwith, and with entire deliberation, to the task of concealing the body. I knew that I could not remove it from the house, either by day or by night, without the risk of being observed by the neighbors. Many projects entered my mind. At one period I thought of cutting the corpse into minute fragments, and destroying them by fire. At another, I resolved to dig a grave for it in the floor of the cellar. Again, I deliberated about casting it in the well in the yard—about packing it in a box, as if merchandise, with the usual arrangements, and so getting a porter to take it from the house. Finally, I hit upon what I considered a far better expedient than either of these. I determined to wall it up in the cellar, as the monks of the Middle Ages are recorded to have walled up their victims.

For a purpose such as this the cellar was well adapted. Its walls were loosely constructed, and had lately been plastered throughout with a rough plaster, which the dampness of the atmosphere had prevented from hardening. Moreover, in one of the walls was a projection, caused by a false chimney, or fireplace, that had been filled up and made to resemble the rest of the cellar. I made no doubt that I could readily displace the bricks at this point, insert the corpse, and wall the whole up as before, so that no eye could detect anything suspicious.

And in this calculation I was not deceived. By means of a crowbar I easily dislodged the bricks, and, having carefully deposited the body against the inner wall, I propped it in that position, while with little trouble, I re-laid the whole structure as it originally stood. Having procured mortar, sand, and hair, with every

possible precaution, I prepared a plaster which could not be distinguished from the old, and with this I very carefully went over the new brickwork. When I had finished, I felt satisfied that all was right. The wall did not present the slightest appearance of having been disturbed. The rubbish on the floor was picked up with the minutest care. I looked around triumphantly, and said to myself: "Here at least, then, my labor has not been in vain."

My next step was to look for the beast which had been the cause of so much wretchedness; for I had, at length, firmly resolved to put it to death. Had I been able to meet with it at the moment, there could have been no doubt of its fate; but it appeared that the crafty animal had been alarmed at the violence of my previous anger, and forbore to present itself in my present mood. 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. It did not make its appearance during the night; and thus for one night, at least, since its introduction into the house, I soundly and tranquilly slept; *aye, slept* even with the burden of murder upon my soul.

The second and the third day passed, and still my tormentor came not. Once again I breathed as a free man. The monster, in terror, had fled the premises forever! I should behold it no more! My happiness was supreme! The guilt of my dark deed disturbed me but little. Some few inquiries had been made, but these had been readily answered. Even a search had been instituted—but of course nothing was to be discovered. I looked upon my future felicity as secured.

Upon the fourth day of the assassination, a party of the police came, very unexpectedly, into the house, and proceeded again to make rigorous investigation of the premises. Secure, however, in the inscrutability of my place of concealment, I felt no embarrassment whatever. The officers bade me accompany them in their search. They left no nook or corner unexplored. At length, for the third or fourth time, they descended into the cellar. I quivered not in a muscle. My heart beat calmly as that of one who slumbers in innocence. I walked the cellar from end to end. I folded my arms upon my bosom, and roamed easily to and fro. The police were thoroughly satisfied and prepared to depart. The glee at my heart was too strong to be restrained. I burned to say if but one word, by way of triumph, and to render doubly sure their assurance of my guiltlessness.

"Gentlemen," I said at last, as the party ascended the steps, "I delight to have allayed your suspicions. I wish you all health and a little more courtesy. By the bye, gentlemen, this—this is a very well-constructed house," (in the rabid desire to say

something easily, I scarcely knew what I uttered at all),—"I may say an *excellently* well-constructed house. These walls—are you going, gentlemen?—these walls are solidly put together"; and here, through the mere frenzy of bravado, I rapped heavily with a cane which I held in my hand, upon that very portion of the brickwork behind which stood the corpse of the wife of my bosom.

But may God shield and deliver me from the fangs of the Arch-Fiend! No sooner had the reverberation of my blows sunk into silence, than I was answered by a voice from within the tomb!—by a cry, at first muffled and broken, like the sobbing of a child, and then 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, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation.

Of my own thoughts it is folly to speak. Swooning, I staggered to the opposite wall. For one instant the party upon the stairs remained motionless, through extremity of terror and awe. In the next a dozen stout arms were toiling at the wall. It fell bodily. The corpse, already greatly decayed and clotted with gore, stood erect before the eyes of the spectators. Upon its head, with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman. I had walled the monster up within the tomb.

Plot Structure

Introduction

The first thing we learn is that the nameless narrator is going to die the next day, and that he wants to write his story, which will be ugly. This story, the narrator says, is going to be about some things that happened to him at home. The "consequences" of what happened "have terrified – have tortured – have destroyed" him. We don't yet know why he's going to die the following day, or where exactly he is.

Complications

The narrator tells us that as a kid he was a kind, sensitive animal lover. We also learn that he and his wife had "birds, gold-fish, a fine dog, rabbits, a small monkey, and *a cat*". The cat, of course, is Pluto. The conflict begins to unfold when the man

describes the way his personality changed for the worse when he started drinking heavily, several years after Pluto became his pet. The conflict is within the narrator's home, between himself and his wife and pets, who he begins to abuse, physically and verbally, except for Pluto. When the narrator turns on Pluto, he doesn't do it halfway. First he cuts the cat's eye out, and then he hangs him from the tree in his garden – leaving the body there when he goes to sleep. This definitely complicates things for the narrator. He is now a cat murderer, and his once happy home seems to be more and more nightmarish, especially for the other characters.

Climax

Somehow, when the narrator goes to sleep that night (after murdering Pluto in the morning), his house catches on fire. Someone (it's never revealed who) wakes him from his sleep with a warning, just in time. The narrator, his wife, and "a servant" escape the flames. All the family's financial security goes up in smoke. Presumably, the birds, gold-fish, [...] fine dog, rabbits, [and] small monkey perish in the flames, though the narrator never mentions them again. The climax propels this desperate family into poverty and into changing residences.

Resolution

As we discuss in "What's Up with the Title?" we can think of the second cat as either a modified version of Pluto, or a completely different cat. In any case, the arrival of the second cat marks the halfway point in this story. It is suspenseful precisely because we aren't sure what the second cat is. If the narrator can be believed, the cat is not only missing an eye, like Pluto, but also grows an image of a gallows on his chest (a "gallows" is an apparatus used for hanging people). The cat also seriously gets on the narrator's nerves. We might see the cat as affectionate, and desperate for affection, but the narrator sees him as executing some awful plot against him. In the stage we see the narrator getting worse and worse. And we learn that the narrator is writing from a "felon's cell". Waiting to see what lands him in jail adds another layer of suspense to the story. During that fateful trip to the cellar of the family's new residence (an "old building") the narrator tries to kill the cat with his axe. When his wife intervenes, the axe is turned on her. The narrator thinks he's successfully hidden the body and bluffed the cops. He isn't upset about killing his wife, and is happy he has managed to make the cat run away.

Conclusion

In the conclusion, the cat reappears, and the murder is discovered. The man seems convinced that the cat exposed him on purpose. The description of the cat's "voice" coming from inside the wall suggests that if the cat did intentionally allow himself to be walled up, in order to expose the man, he paid an awful price for it.

Character Analysis

The Narrator

The narrator is never named, and his occupation is not mentioned. He is a man, probably still young, who tells his tale while he sits in a prison cell awaiting execution. He appears to have had a normal childhood, and he was noted for the "docility and humanity" of his disposition. He was fond of animals and his parents provided him with many pets. He spent most of his time looking after them and derived great pleasure from it. This continued into adulthood and formed the principal pleasure of his life. He married when he was young, and his wife made sure he had many pets, including birds, goldfish, a dog, rabbits, a small monkey, and a cat. The cat was his favorite pet for some years. But then some weakness or flaw in the narrator's personality manifested, and this led him to drink to excess. The addiction to alcohol altered his personality. Instead of being gentle and kind, he became irritable, moody, and inconsiderate of the feelings of others. He was abusive towards his wife, and also neglected and ill-treated his pets. He went progressively downhill, drinking more gin and wine, hating everything and everyone and becoming obsessed with evil thoughts. He committed one atrocity after another, mutilating and then killing his cat and then murdering his wife. The narrator's state of mind is obviously abnormal; he may well be clinically insane. It would appear that he never developed the ability to have good relationships with others, his former kindness to animals notwithstanding. This is suggested when he compares the love of an animal to the "paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere Man," which hints at past disappointments in his attempts to create bonds with others. This man never seems to understand the chain of cause and effect in the series of events that eventually result in him being condemned to death. He convinces himself that his actions were in effect caused by what he calls the "spirit of PERVERSENESS" that is a fundamental part of the human character. In doing so he tries to evade taking personal responsibility for his own actions, although his comments about his reactions to what he does also shows he is aware that what he has done is a sin and would be offensive to God. It seems that the narrator has an unconscious desire to be caught, since his rapping of his cane against the wall,

and his statement to the police that the walls of the cellar are solidly built, are completely unnecessary and ensure his downfall. Another explanation of that final moment is that he is simply arrogant and wants to enjoy his moment of triumph over the forces of law and order.

The Narrator's Wife

The narrator's wife is not named, her physical appearance is not described, and her character is little developed. However, the narrator does comment that she was of a kindly disposition, just as he was when he married her. She gave every sign of being a good wife. She observed that he enjoyed animals, for example, and made sure that their house had many pets in it. When he became violently abusive towards her, she put up with it without complaint, being endlessly patient. She loved the cat that replaced the dead Pluto, especially because it had only one eye. His wife, the narrator says, "possessed in a high degree, that humanity of feeling which had once been my distinguishing trait." Indeed, it is the wife's goodness that leads to her death, since she arouses the narrator's fury by trying to prevent him from killing the second cat.

Pluto

Pluto is the narrator's black cat. Large, beautiful, and intelligent, he is very fond of the narrator and follows him around the house. When he becomes old, however, he becomes peevish and starts to incur the displeasure of his owner. Pluto plays a significant role in the story because he becomes the focus for the narrator's unreasoning aggression. The narrator abuses and eventually kills him. Pluto might be seen as the symbolic embodiment of the darker forces within the narrator's personality that he at first attempts to repress but which eventually establish control over him.

SETTING

Many Poe stories feature elaborately decorated rooms, described in great detail. In "The Black Cat" we have several different settings, but none of them are given much physical description. The narrator is writing his last words. He might not have had time to fool around with certain details, like when and where. Besides, we don't need the specifics. The story is about the bad things that can happen at home. The vagueness of the homes in the story allows them to be *any* homes, anywhere.

The story is written from the narrator's jail cell, highlighting the theme of "Freedom and Confinement." The narrator writes from a space of confinement, and detailing the events that led him to prison is one of the few freedoms he has left. This tension between freedom and confinement is repeated throughout the story, and is particularly intense when we look at some other aspects of the setting. After the narrator's house burns down, we learn that he and his wife were wealthy people, before they lost everything in the fire. In the 1840s, when this story was written, people didn't rely on banks as much as they do now, and insurance was far less common. It's believable that the man had most of his wealth stored in the house. Of course, we don't know the source of the wealth, or what, if anything, the man does for a living. We do know he must have had enough tucked away to set the family up in a new pad, though the narrator's brief description lets us know that the new house is "old" and not what he and his wife are used to. Both houses seem like prison cells for everyone involved, especially the man's wife and pets. He seems free to come and go as he pleases, and do to them what he pleases. In both houses, the most amount of description is given to *the walls*. In the first house the bedroom wall becomes important when the man sees that it's the only wall that wasn't burned up. More importantly, it holds a raised image of a "gigantic cat" on it (11). This moment foreshadows the second cat's live-burial in the second house, and also introduces the motif of walls into the story. The repetition of building and destroying of literal walls helps us see the mental or psychological walls the narrator is building and destroying. He builds literal and psychological walls between himself and his wife and pets. By his crimes he destroys the walls that allow him to be a free citizen. That one's a bit of a mind twister. The walls of our homes give us privacy from the outside world. If we are arrested and placed in jail, the walls of privacy, and the freedoms of home, come tumbling down. The cellar is another important aspect of setting. Notice how the setting in "The Black Cat" moves from less confining spaces to more confining spaces, reflecting the increased *psychological* confinement the narrator describes, and tapping into our deepest fears concerning home and home life. For example, we know that the first house the family lives in is supposedly a nice house, the house of a wealthy family. In roomy, fancy houses with servants, life seems to be more free and easy than in the cramped, decrepit quarters of the second house. Of course, because of the way

the man treats his wife and pets, they are trapped, and can't even enjoy their plush surroundings. For Pluto, the fresh garden in which he is meant to frolic is turned into a death chamber. Likewise, "for [the] birds, gold-fish, [...] fine dog, rabbits, [and] small monkey" the house becomes a death trap when it goes up in flames. If that's what happened in the first house, think of what will happen in the poor, crummy one they move into when they lose their wealth. Things become increasingly confining for all involved after the move. All this culminates in the cellar. The cellar is *under* the rest of the house. If the setting reflects the consciousness of the man (and other characters) the cellar echoes his *subconscious*. (*Sub* means *under*.) The unconscious is supposed to be that seething pool of desires and fears that lurk beneath the surface of our conscious thoughts. While in the cellar, all the man's deepest fears and desire culminate in the murder of his wife. Also note that the homemade tomb *inside* the cellar is (arguably) the *most* confining space in the story. Just ask the second black cat, who has to live there for four days. It's also confining for the narrator because he now has murder on his soul. Interestingly, the opening up of that confined space leads to the narrator's confinement in the prison cell. Now, head on over to "Symbols, Imagery, Allegory" for more on the creepy cellar.

NARRATOR POINT OF VIEW

A "first person" narrator is a narrator who is also a character. You know the narrator is a person because he or she uses pronouns like "I," and "me." By contrast, a "third person narrator" is not a definite person, but usually a disembodied voice of unknown origin. So, the unnamed narrator of "The Black Cat" is obviously a "first person" narrator. He's a "central narrator" because he's talking about things that he did or things that happened to him, rather than things he watched, or heard about. Like many Poe's narrators, this one is unreliable. This means he gives us reason to doubt one or more aspects of what he tells us. We are put on the defensive from the first lines of the story, when the narrator says he doesn't "expect" us to believe him, and that he won't even ask us to. If we try to figure out if the narrator is telling the truth, we might fall into the story's dark and bottomless trap. If we think the narrator is lying about, say, the image of the gallows on the second cat's fur, then is he lying about all the abuse and murder as well? Without

any outside perspective, it's all or nothing. If we try to sort truth from lies we dismantle the entire story.

As such, a helpful way of approaching the narrator's unreliability is by looking for what might be left out of the story, or what the narrator misses, but the reader sees. To that end, watch out for this guy's fancy language. The more carefully we read, the more the narrator actually reveals to us. If we go too fast, he loses us in his web of words. For example, the man admits freely to horribly abusing his wife. During the worst of this he describes her (chillingly) as "uncomplaining" and "the most usual and the most patient of sufferers". Now, "uncomplaining" and "patient" are fairly obvious, but "usual" has a double meaning. It means that she's the narrator's "usual," or most frequent, victim. It also means that she suffers in the "usual" way, i.e., crying, screaming, etc. So, the man might be slyly admitting that he's being sarcastic when he describes his wife as silently and obediently submitting to his abuse. But, maybe he's not being sarcastic. Maybe she was that traumatized, and found silence and submission the safest way to deal with him. The point is, the narrator dehumanizes her in his story, treating her like a thing. He leaves out her point of view, almost completely. You can take a look at her "Character Analysis" to see what we've done with the little information we have on her. Poe wanted his stories to help readers exercise their analytical skills, and was fascinated by the idea of "secret writing" which you can read about [here](#). An unreliable narrator helps keep us awake and on the lookout for errors, inconsistencies, and improbabilities, and invites us to read actively, and to openly challenge what we read. While this is an excellent practice, we can't get *too* carried away. In other words, the story also invites us to leave open the possibility of the supernatural, and to recognize that the workings of human (and animal) hearts and minds are infinitely mysterious, no matter how many facts we have under our belts.

Mythological and Psychological Symbolism

The two cats in the story symbolize the part of the narrator's consciousness that he represses. The fact that the first cat is entirely black is significant, as is his name, Pluto. In Greek mythology, Pluto is the god of death and the underworld.

The presence of the cat Pluto acts as a goad to the narrator, a constant reminder of his lack of psychic wholeness. Since he has failed to integrate the "dark" side of his personality in a manner that would enable him to live a stable, productive life, the symbol of his deficiency, the black cat, follows him around everywhere.

Because the narrator appears to have no understanding of his own psychic processes, all he can do is lash out in ignorance and destroy the cat. But since he

has not cured his original condition, another cat soon appears on the scene and functions as an even more direct symbol of the narrator's guilt and of the fate that awaits him.

Commentary

More than any of Poe's stories, "The Black Cat" illustrates best the capacity of the human mind to observe its own deterioration and the ability of the mind to comment upon its own destruction without being able to objectively halt that deterioration. The narrator of "The Black Cat" is fully aware of his mental deterioration, and at certain points in the story, he recognizes the change that is occurring within him, and he tries to do something about it, but he finds himself unable to reverse his falling into madness. In Poe's critical essay, "The Philosophy of Composition," he wrote about the importance of creating a unity or totality of effect in his stories. By this, he meant that the artist should decide what effect he wants to create in a story and in the reader's emotional response and then proceed to use all of his creative powers to achieve that particular effect: "Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart or the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?" In "The Black Cat," it is obvious that the chief effect that Poe wanted to achieve was a sense of absolute and total perverseness--"irrevocable . . . PERVERSENESS." Clearly, many of the narrator's acts are without logic or motivation; they are merely acts of perversity. In virtually all of Poe's tales, we know nothing about the narrator's background; this particular story is no exception. In addition, it is akin to "The Tell-Tale Heart" in that the narrator begins his story by asserting that he is *not* mad ("Yet, mad am I not--") and, at the same time, he wants to place before the world a logical outline of the events that "have terrified--have tortured--have destroyed me." And during the process of proving that he is not mad, we see increasingly the actions of a madman who knows that he is going mad but who, at times, is able to objectively comment on the process of his increasing madness. In this story, the narrator begins his confession in retrospect, at a time when he was considered to be a perfectly normal person, known for his docility and his humane considerations of animals and people. His parents indulged his fondness for animals, and he was allowed to have many different kinds of pets. Furthermore, he was very fortunate to marry a woman who was also fond of animals. Among the many animals that they possessed was a black cat which they named Pluto. Since his wife often made allusions to the popular notion that all black cats are witches in disguise, the name Pluto (which is the name of one of the gods of the underworld in charge of witches) becomes significant in

terms of the entire story. The other popular notion relevant to this story is the belief that a cat has nine lives; this superstition becomes a part of the story when the second black cat is believed to be a reincarnation of the dead Pluto with only one slight but horrible modification--the imprint of the gallows on its breast. Interestingly, Pluto was the narrator's favorite animal and for several years, there was a very special relationship between the animal and the narrator. Then suddenly (due partly to alcohol), the narrator underwent a significant change. "I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others." To reiterate the comments in the introduction to this section, Poe believed that a man was capable at any time of undergoing a complete and total reversal of personality and of falling into a state of madness at any moment. Here, the narrator undergoes such a change. The effect of this change is indicated when he came home intoxicated, imagined that the beloved cat avoided him, then grasped the cat by its throat and with a pen knife, cut out one of its eyes. This act of perversity is the beginning of several such acts which will characterize the "totality of effect" that Poe wanted to achieve in this story. The next morning, he writes, he was horrified by what he had done, and in time the cat recovered but now it deliberately avoided the narrator. As the cat continued to avoid the narrator, the spirit of perverseness overcame him again--this time, with an unfathomable longing of the soul to "offer violence . . . to do wrong for the wrong's sake only." Suddenly one morning, he slipped a noose around the neck of the cat and hanged it from the limb of a tree, but even while doing it, tears streamed down his face. He is ashamed of his perversity because he knows that the cat had loved him and had given him no reason to hang it. What he did was an act of pure perversity. That night, after the cruel deed was executed, his house burned to the ground. Being a rational and analytical person, the narrator refuses to see a connection between his perverse atrocity of killing the cat and the disaster that consumed his house. Again, we have an example of the mad mind offering up a rational rejection of anything so superstitious that the burning of the house might be retribution for his killing the cat. However, on the following day, he visited the ruins of the house and saw a crowd of people gathered about. One wall, which had just been replastered and was still wet, was still standing. It was the wall just above where his bed had previously stood and engraved into the plaster was a perfect image of the figure of a gigantic cat, and there was a rope about the animal's neck. Once again, the narrator's mad mind attempts to offer a rational explanation for this phenomena. He believes that someone found the cat's dead body, flung it into the burning house to awaken the narrator, and the burning of the house, the falling of the walls, and

the ammonia from the carcass (cats *are* filled with ammonia; Poe wrote essays on cats, their instincts, their logic, and their habits) --all these factors contributed to the creation of the graven image. But the narrator does not account for the fact that the image is that of a *gigantic* cat; thus we must assume that the image took on gigantic proportions only within the mind of the narrator. For months, the narrator could not forget about the black cat, and one night when he was drinking heavily, he saw another black cat that looked exactly like Pluto--except for a splash of white on its breast. Upon inquiry, he found out that no one knew anything about the cat, which he then proceeded to take home with him. The cat became a great favorite of his and his wife. The narrator's perversity, however, caused him to soon change, and the cat's fondness for them began to disgust him. It was at this time that he began to loathe the cat. What increased his loathing of the new cat was that it had, like Pluto, one of its eyes missing. In the mind of the narrator, this cat was obviously a reincarnation of Pluto. He even notes to himself that the one trait that had once distinguished him--a humanity of feeling--had now almost totally disappeared. This is an example, as noted in the introduction, of how the mad man can stand at a distance and watch the process of his own change and madness. After a time, the narrator develops an absolute dread of the cat. When he discovers that the white splash on its breast, which at first was rather indefinite, had "assumed a rigorous distinctness of outline" and was clearly and obviously a hideous, ghastly, and loathsome image of the gallows, he cries out, "Oh, mournful and terrible engine of Horror and of Crime--of Agony and of Death!" As we were able to do in "The Tell-Tale Heart," here we can assume that the change occurs within the mind of the mad man in the same way that he considers this beast to be a reincarnation of the original Pluto. One day, as he and his wife were going into the cellar, the cat nearly tripped him; he grabbed an axe to kill it, but his wife arrested the blow. He withdrew his arm and then buried the axe in her brain. This sudden gruesome act is not prepared for in any way. It has been repeatedly pointed out that the narrator loved his wife very deeply. Consequently, this act of perversity far exceeds the hanging of Pluto and can only be accounted for by Poe's theme of the perversity of the narrator's acts. Like the narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart," the narrator here realizes that he must get rid of the body. He thought of "cutting the corpse into minute fragments," he says, as did the previous narrator in "The Tell-Tale Heart," but rather than dismemberment, he decided to "wall it up in the cellar" in a similar way that Montresor walled up his victim in "The Cask of Amontillado." The walls next to the projecting chimney lent themselves to this type of interment, and after having accomplished the deed and cleaning up in such a way that nothing

was detectable, the narrator decided to put the cat to death. Unaccountably, it had disappeared. After three days, the narrator decided that the "monster of a cat" had disappeared forever; he was now able to sleep soundly in spite of the foul deed that he had done. This lack of guilt is certainly a change from what his feelings were at the beginning of the story. On the fourth day, a party of police unexpectedly arrives to inspect the premises. As in "The Tell-Tale Heart," when the police arrive unexpectedly, we never know what motivated the police to come on a search. And in the same way, the narrator here is overconfident; he delights in the fact that he has so cleverly and so completely concealed his horrible crime that he welcomes an inspection of the premises. However, here, in an act of insane bravado, he raps so heavily upon the bricks that entomb his wife, that to his abject terror, a "voice from within the tomb" answered. At first, it was a muffled and broken cry, but then it swelled into an "utterly anomalous and inhuman . . . howl . . . a wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation." The police immediately began to tear down the brick wall, and they discover the rotting corpse of the narrator's wife and, standing upon her decayed head was the "hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder . . . I had walled the monster up within the tomb." The final irony, of course, is that the cat which he had come to so despise--the cat that might have been the reincarnation of Pluto--serves as a figure of retribution against the murderer. By the end of the story, therefore, we can see how the narrator, in commenting on his own actions, convicts himself of the madness which he vehemently declaimed at the beginning of the story (Roberts, 1980: 22-5).

Some Questions

- 1. Find out some examples of figurative language in the story text (metaphor, similes, personification, apostrophes).**
- 2. Classify the types of characters in this story.**
- 3. Can you tell about the major themes in the story?**