

The Black Cat



Edgar Allan Poe

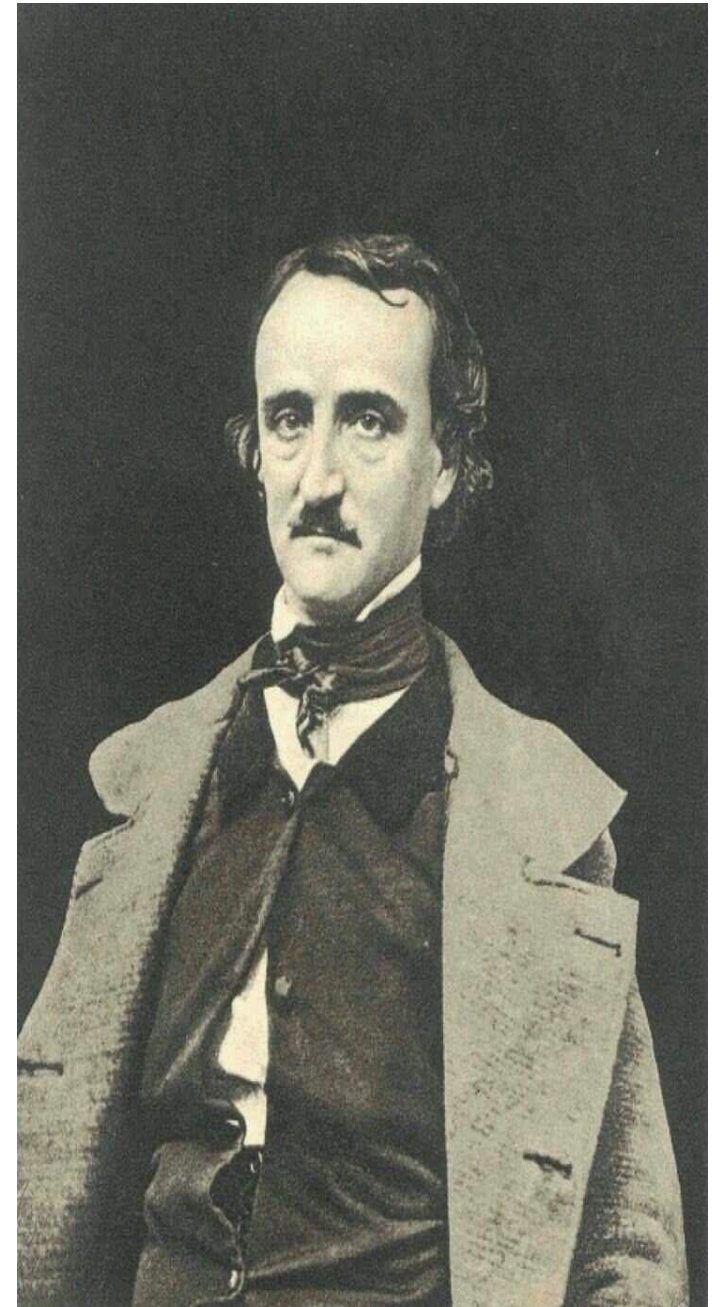
Asst. Lect. Sumaya Majeed Al-Yassiry

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849)

was born in Boston. His mother was English and his father was from Maryland, and both of them were traveling actors. Poe became an orphan before he turned three, so he was raised by foster parents in Richmond, Virginia. He went to the University of Virginia but left in 1826 without getting a degree. His first book of poems came out in 1827, and his first short stories were published a few years later.

From that time until his mysterious death in Baltimore in 1849, Poe's reputation continued to grow. He became well-known as an editor, critic, poet, and fiction writer. He is considered one of the most important figures in the early period of American literature.

Poe is often called the "father of the short story." He made many important contributions to the genre. He was the first American writer to clearly explain what a short story should be, and he developed rules and patterns for writing it.



Poe believed that a short story should be a carefully structured piece of writing with a clear beginning, middle, and end, all working together to create one strong overall impression, or “totality of effect.” This idea was new at the time. Poe was a master of technique, and he became famous for writing stories in which character, setting, atmosphere, theme, and plot are all tightly connected.

In a story like “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Poe used shock, terror, and horror elements that readers already knew from the Gothic romances popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. However, he changed these elements and created something very different and more original than the Gothic works that came before him.

Poe repeatedly argued and showed through his own stories that the short story was not a trivial form, but a serious kind of literature worthy of respect as both art and entertainment. He worked hard and had great talent, even if his work was sometimes uneven. The success of his short stories in magazines like Graham’s Magazine helped build a growing and excited audience for this “new” American literary form.



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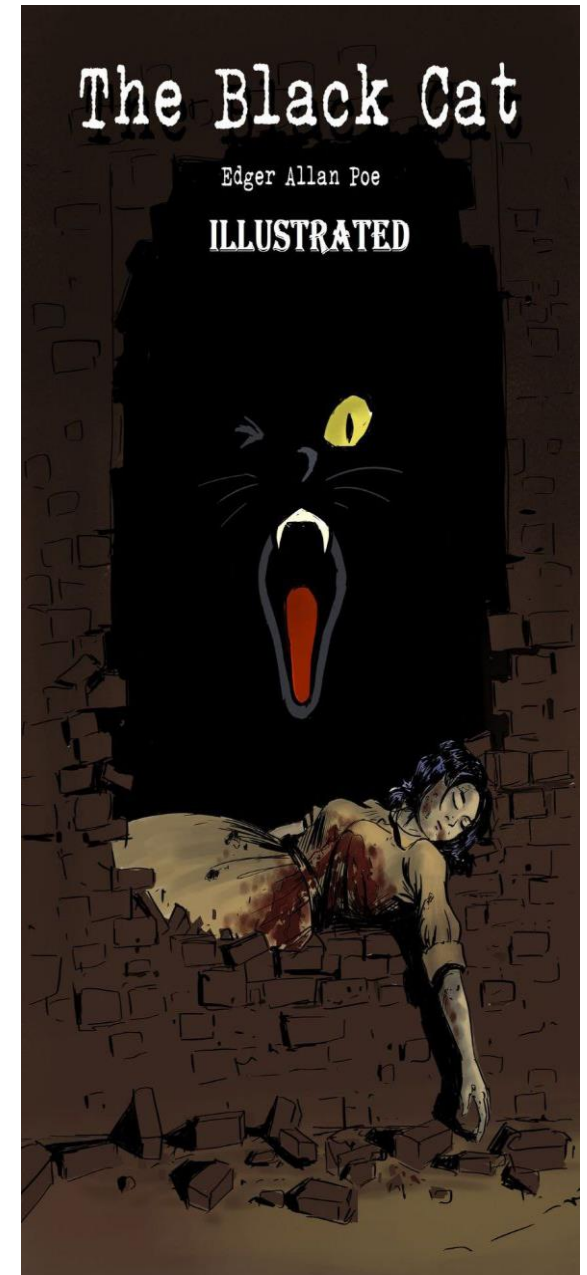
Plot Structure

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, whom 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 this 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 terrible acts one after another, first hurting and killing his cat, and then murdering his wife. The narrator's mental state is clearly not normal; he may actually be clinically insane. It seems that he never learned how to form healthy relationships with people, even though he once showed kindness to animals. This idea appears when he says that an animal's love is better than the "paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere Man," which suggests that he had bad experiences and disappointments when trying to connect with others. He also does not seem to understand how his actions lead to consequences, which finally bring him to his death sentence.

He tries to convince himself that his behavior was caused by the "spirit of PERVERSENESS," which he believes is a natural part of human character. By saying this, he tries to avoid taking responsibility for what he did. Yet, his own words show that he knows his actions are sinful and offensive to God.

It also seems that the narrator may secretly want to be caught. His tapping of the wall with his cane and his claim to the police that the cellar walls are very solid are unnecessary actions that reveal the truth and lead to his arrest. Another possible explanation is that he is simply arrogant and wants to enjoy a moment of victory over the police before they discover his crime.

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 is the narrator's first and most beloved pet in *The Black Cat*. He is a large, all-black cat who is calm, gentle, and very loyal. At the beginning of the story, Pluto represents kindness and love, because he has a strong bond with the narrator, who used to be a kind and caring man. Pluto always follows the narrator around the house and shows him affection, which makes the narrator love him even more. However, when the narrator becomes addicted to alcohol, his personality changes completely. He becomes angry, violent, and cruel, even toward the animals he once loved. Sadly, Pluto becomes the victim of this change. The narrator first injures Pluto by cutting out one of his eyes, and later, in a moment of madness, he kills him by hanging him. Pluto's suffering shows how far the narrator has fallen from kindness into darkness. In the story, Pluto symbolizes innocence destroyed by human weakness, and his death marks the beginning of the narrator's moral and psychological decline.



Although Pluto is innocent and gentle, the narrator later begins to see him as a symbol of evil. This idea does not come from Pluto himself, but from the narrator's damaged and guilty mind. After becoming addicted to alcohol, the narrator loses control of his emotions and starts to believe in dark and superstitious thoughts. Because Pluto is a black cat, the narrator connects him with old beliefs about bad luck and the supernatural. When the narrator hurts and kills Pluto, his guilt becomes so strong that he feels as if Pluto is haunting him. He imagines that the cat represents a dark force that is watching him and punishing him for his cruelty. In reality, Pluto is not evil at all, the evil comes from inside the narrator. Pluto becomes a symbol of the narrator's fear, his guilt, and the moral decline that destroys him from within.

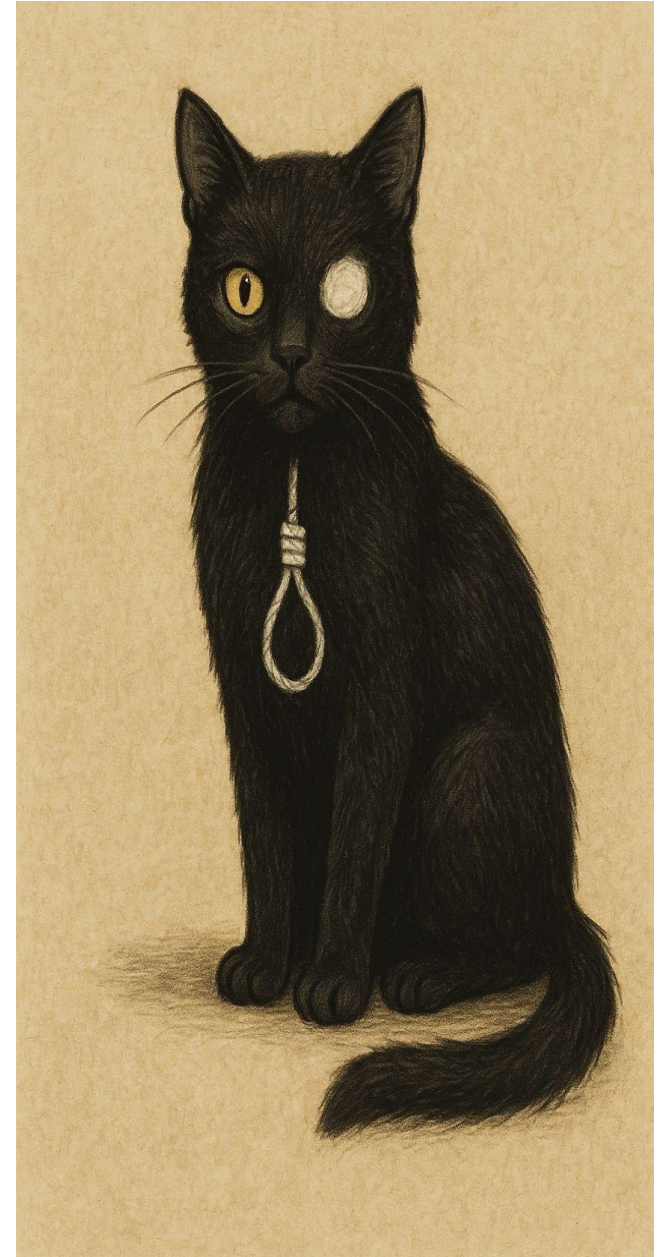


The second cat in the story is very important. It looks almost exactly like Pluto, the first cat, but there are two main differences. First, the second cat has a white patch on his chest. Second, he is missing one eye, just like Pluto after the narrator hurt him.

At first, the narrator likes this cat because it reminds him of Pluto. But soon, the cat becomes a source of fear and guilt for the narrator. The white patch on the cat's chest starts to look like a "gallows" a frame used for hanging people. This scares the narrator and makes him think the cat is a symbol of punishment.

The second cat follows the narrator everywhere and seems to watch him closely. The narrator believes the cat knows his secret crimes and is punishing him. The cat is affectionate and sometimes friendly, but the narrator sees it as evil and dangerous.

In the story, the second cat represents the narrator's guilt and fear. It is like a living reminder of the wrong things the narrator has done. The cat's presence makes the narrator feel trapped and haunted.



Setting

Many of Poe's stories describe rooms in great detail, but in *The Black Cat*, the settings are vague and not described much. The narrator is writing his last words from jail, so he might not have time to explain details like when or where the events happened. This vagueness makes the story's homes feel like any homes, anywhere.

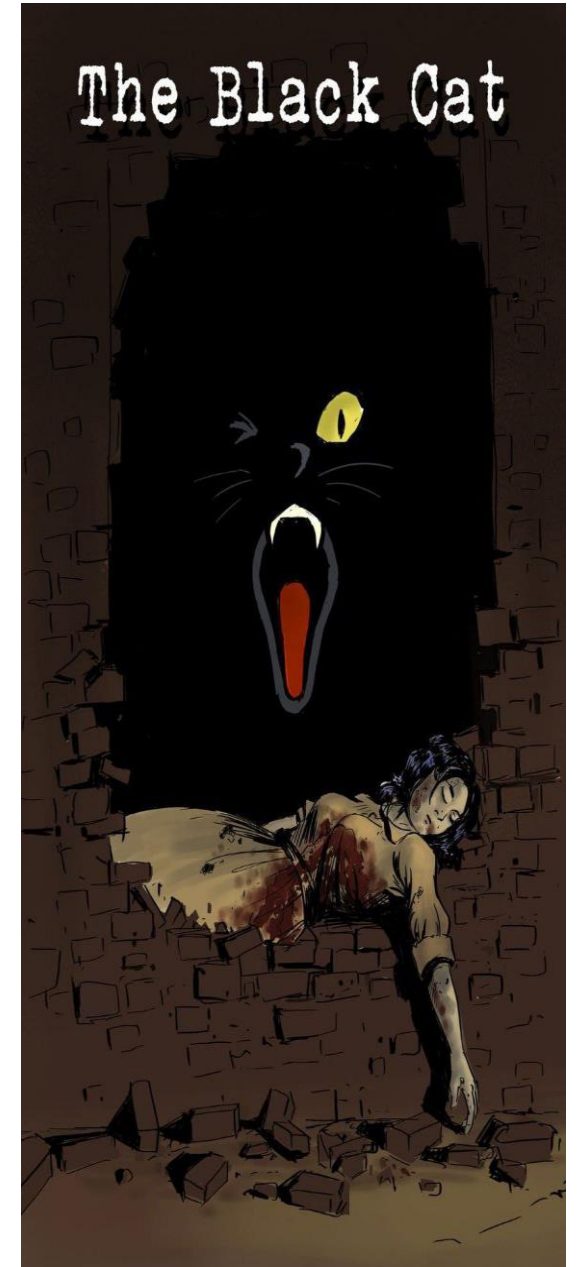
The story focuses on bad things happening at home and the theme of "Freedom and Confinement." The narrator is physically confined in prison but still free to tell his story. This tension between freedom and being trapped appears many times in the story.

Before the fire, the narrator and his wife were wealthy and lived in a nice house. Back in the 1840s, people kept their money at home, so losing the house in the fire meant losing all their wealth. After the fire, they move to an old, small house that feels like a prison, especially for the wife and pets. The narrator acts freely and cruelly in both houses, hurting those around him.

Walls are important in the story. In the first house, one bedroom wall survives the fire and shows a raised image of a "gigantic cat." This foreshadows the second cat's role and symbolizes the mental walls the narrator builds between himself and his family. His crimes destroy the walls that give him freedom, like privacy and safety.

The cellar in the new house is even more confining. It reflects the narrator's inner fears and dark desires. The cellar is where the narrator hides his wife's body, and it becomes the most trapped place in the story. The second cat is locked there for four days, showing the increasing confinement.

In the end, the story moves from more open and free spaces to smaller, darker, and more trapped places, matching the narrator's mental decline and growing guilt.



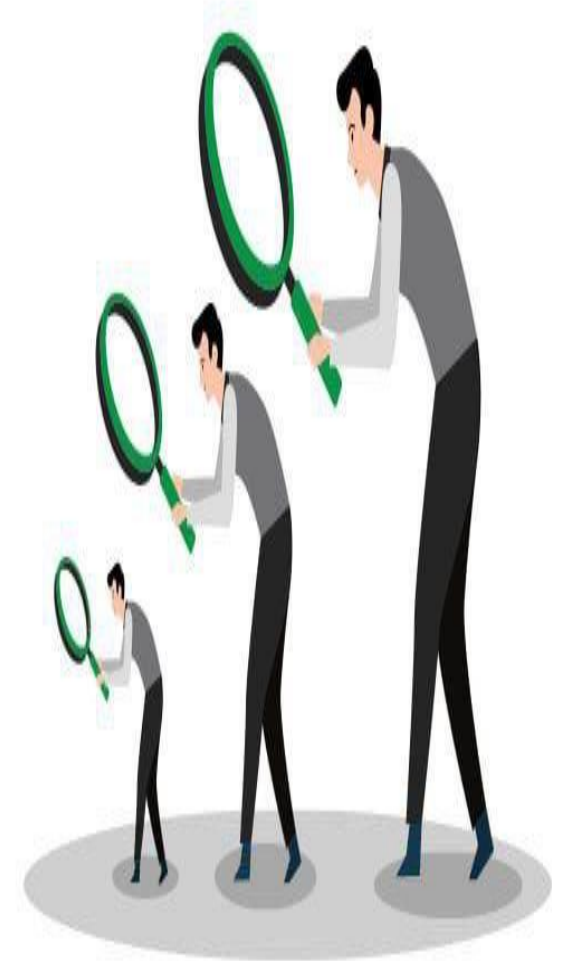
Narrator Point of View

In “The Black Cat,” the story is told by a first-person narrator, which means the narrator is a character who uses words like “I” and “me.” He is a central narrator because he talks about what he did and what happened to him.

However, he is an unreliable narrator. This means we cannot fully trust what he says. From the beginning, he tells us that he doesn’t expect us to believe him. This makes us doubt his story.

The narrator hides many things, and sometimes his words suggest more than he directly tells us. For example, he describes his wife as “uncomplaining,” “patient,” and “usual.” “Unusual” here can mean she is his usual victim, or that she suffers in the usual ways crying or screaming. This shows that he treats her like an object and ignores her feelings.

Because we only see the story from his point of view, we cannot know what is true and what is not. Poe uses this unreliable narrator to make readers think deeply, question details, and look for hidden meanings. At the same time, the story leaves room for mysterious or even supernatural possibilities.



Mythological and Psychological Symbolism

The two cats in the story represent the dark parts of the narrator's mind that he tries to hide. The first cat is black and named Pluto, which is important because Pluto is the Greek god of death and the underworld.

Pluto reminds the narrator of the side of himself he refuses to face. Since he cannot accept or control this “dark” part of his personality, the cat becomes a symbol of his inner problems and follows him everywhere.

Because the narrator does not understand his own mind, he reacts with anger and destroys the first cat. But his problems do not disappear. A second cat appears, symbolizing his guilt and the punishment that is coming for him.



The Symbol of Fire

In “The Black Cat,” fire is an important symbol that represents the narrator’s self-destruction, guilt, and the consequences of his violent actions.

First, the fire destroys the narrator’s house on the same night he kills Pluto. Even though he refuses to see the connection, the fire symbolically shows how his evil behavior is burning down his life. It is like a punishment or a warning that his cruelty will lead to disaster.

Second, the fire leaves behind the strange image of the cat on the wall. This image reminds him and the reader of his crime. In this way, the fire becomes a symbol of exposed guilt. The truth rises out of the ashes and cannot be hidden.

Third, the fire represents the narrator’s inner collapse. Just as the house burns and falls apart, his mind and his moral self are also breaking down. The fire reflects his increasing madness and the destruction he creates around himself.

Finally, fire can symbolize fate or retribution. It destroys everything he owns, showing that violence brings destruction back to the one who causes it.



Commentary

"The Black Cat" shows how the human mind can watch itself slowly fall apart. The narrator knows he is losing control and becoming mentally unstable. Sometimes he even understands that he is changing, but he cannot stop himself from sinking deeper into madness.

Poe believed in creating a "total effect" in his stories, one strong feeling that controls the whole story. In "The Black Cat," this effect is perverseness, meaning doing wrong things simply because they are wrong. Many of the narrator's actions have no logical reason; he acts out of pure self-destruction.

Like many Poe narrators, this one insists he is not mad while telling a story that clearly shows his madness. He starts by describing himself as a calm, kind man who loved animals. He and his wife even had many pets, including a black cat named Pluto a name connected with the god of the underworld.

But after he becomes addicted to alcohol, he changes completely. He becomes angry, cruel, and careless about others' feelings. One night, drunk and imagining the cat is avoiding him, he violently cuts out its eye. This begins a series of increasingly cruel acts, which help Poe create the dark emotional effect he wanted.

As the first cat continued to avoid him, the narrator felt a strong, irrational desire to do evil for no reason. One morning, he put a rope around the cat's neck and hanged it. Even while doing it, he cried because he knew the cat had loved him and did nothing to deserve such cruelty. This shows his pure perverseness hurting just to hurt.

That same night, his house burned down. The narrator refuses to believe the fire is connected to killing the cat. He tries to explain everything logically, even though his mind is clearly unstable. The next day, he sees the image of a huge cat with a rope around its neck on a wall that survived the fire. He invents a complicated explanation, but the image's large size suggests it exists mainly in his disturbed mind.

Months later, after drinking heavily, he finds another black cat that looks almost exactly like Pluto but has a white patch on its chest. He takes it home. At first he likes the cat, but soon it begins to disgust him, and he starts to hate it especially after he notices it also has one missing eye. He becomes convinced this cat is Pluto reborn.

Eventually, the white patch on the cat's chest turns into the clear shape of a gallows. This terrifies him and deepens his growing madness.

One day in the cellar, the cat nearly makes him fall. Furious, he raises an axe to kill it, but his wife stops him. Instead, in a sudden, shocking moment, he kills his wife with the axe. This horrible act shows how far his madness and perverseness have taken him.

The narrator's murder of his wife is even worse than hanging Pluto and shows how deeply his perverseness has taken over. Like Poe's other mad narrators, he knows he must hide the body. Instead of cutting it into pieces, he chooses to wall it up in the cellar, similar to the method in "The Cask of Amontillado." After hiding the body and cleaning everything, he tries to kill the second cat, but it has mysteriously disappeared.

For three days he feels calm and sleeps well, showing that he has lost almost all sense of guilt. On the fourth day, the police arrive unexpectedly to search the house. Feeling confident, the narrator proudly shows them around. In a moment of madness, he knocks loudly on the wall where he hid his wife, almost bragging about how well he concealed his crime.

To his horror, a loud, inhuman scream comes from inside the wall. The police tear it down and find the wife's body and the black cat standing on her head. The narrator had accidentally trapped the cat inside the tomb with her.

In the end, the cat becomes the force that reveals his crime and brings justice. The narrator, who insisted at the beginning that he was not mad, finally proves through his actions that he truly is.