“The Black Cat” Notes

Edgar Allan Poe

The first thing the narrator tells us is that he doesn't "expect" us to believe the story he's about to write, or ask us to believe it. He says he'd have to be crazy to think we'll believe him – he can hardly believe it himself. Then he says he isn't crazy, and he isn't dreaming. He is, however, going to die the very next day, and he wishes to confess everything to set his story straight. His purpose in writing the story is to give "the world" the plain facts of "a series of mere household events" (read: "stuff that happened around the house") that have caused him intense fear, extreme discomfort, and have actually "destroyed" him. He hopes that some reader can see that everything that happened, everything that the narrator makes such a big deal about, is really "nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects."

Even as a kid, the narrator was thought to have an attitude of "docility and humanity."

Vocabulary:

Docility: submissive, easily managed or taught.

His friends even made fun of him because he was too nice (read: effeminate).

He loved animals, and his parents let him keep lots of pets; he spent most of his time taking care of them. His love of animals stayed with him even as he grew from a boy, to a man, and he felt a particularly deep connection with his "faithful and sagacious dog". ("Sagacious" here means “clever” or “perceptive”.) While still a young man, the narrator got married. He tells us that he and his wife got along very well. In fact, she noticed how much he loved animals and bought him lots of them, including – "a cat".

This was a big cat – black, and gorgeous, and "sagacious". In fact, the cat was so smart and sensitive that the woman suggested that the cat might be a witch "in disguise" (as was a prevailing superstition). Of course, the woman was just kidding around. The narrator only mentions this because he now remembers it.

The cat's name is Pluto, and the man loved him dearly. Pluto loved the man, as well. In fact, the cat had to be kept from following the man out of the house. This loving relationship between man and cat continued for a few years.

Eventually, the man started drinking and suffered a personality change "for the worse," and of which he is much ashamed. (The narrator doesn't say he started drinking – he says that his personality changed as a result of "the Fiend Intemperance." "Intemperance" means any excessive behavior or habits. In Poe's time, the word was used to describe excessive drinking.) As the narrator drank more and more, he became a nastier character with each passing day. He
used "intemperate language" to his wife, and physically abused her. The pets, too, were neglected and abused whenever the narrator was near them – except for Pluto the cat. At first, the narrator refrained from abusing his favorite pet. But the "disease" of "Alcohol" got worse and worse. Soon, even Pluto was made to feel his wrath.

The narrator stumbled home one night, drunk, after partying in town. He called for Pluto, but the cat tried to hide from him. Furious that Pluto would not answer, he grabbed the cat, and it bit him. The narrator grew furious with the cat. He took out his "pen-knife" (a knife originally used for sharpening quill pens) and cut one of the cat's eyes out with it. Remembering the occasion from his prison cell, the narrator now feels extreme shame and horror to "pen" (or write) what he did to Pluto.

In the morning, after the narrator had sobered up, he again felt remorse for what he has done to the animal. But his shame was fleeting. He went right back to his drinking ways.

The cat (you'll be glad to know) got better. Sure, his empty socket was nasty looking, but he didn't seem to be in "pain". For a while the man's feelings were hurt because Pluto didn't love him anymore. Soon after, Pluto started getting on his nerves, and the narrator was overcome with "the spirit of PERVERSENESS".

Perverseness, the narrator says, is an innate characteristic of human nature; all people sometimes do bad things just because they know they aren't supposed to. According to the narrator, human beings have a natural desire to break the law.

(If you are intrigued by the discussion of perverseness, you'll want to read Poe's famous essay "The Imp of the Perverse").

The narrator writes that this "spirit of perverseness" led him to finally "consummate" (i.e., complete) the damage done to Pluto. One morning (instead of having coffee) the narrator hanged the cat from a tree, while crying. Why was the narrator crying? Three reasons: 1) Pluto loved him; 2) Pluto did nothing to deserve being hanged; and 3) because it would be a sin for which the narrator could never be forgiven.

(In case you were wondering, Hang derives from Old English and means to be attached from above without support below. This is one of the core meanings, as shown in the sentence: The picture hangs on the wall.

However, there are several other related uses, for example:

- To let droop or fall – hang your head in shame.
- To fall in a certain way – this costume hangs well.
- To pay attention to – I hang on your every word.
- To hold on tightly – My daughter is hanging onto my skirt.
- A way of doing something – She couldn’t get the hang of it.
To be oppressive – a cloud of gloom hangs over him.

The regular past tense of *hang* is **hung**, which would be used in all the examples listed above. However, there is one difference when it comes to hanging someone by the neck. In this case the past tense is **hanged** which means *killed by hanging*.

That night, the narrator was woken from his sleep by people screaming about a fire. Oh no! It's the narrator's house and his bed was aflame. Somehow, the narrator, his wife, and one servant got out of the house alive. (We don't know how many servants there were to start with, but we learn that the couple is now left with only one.) Everything they owned (financially speaking) was lost. The narrator surrendered to live, from then on, in "despair".

The next day, the narrator returns to the ruins. Except for one, all the walls had collapsed. The only wall standing was the one his bed was pushed up against. The narrator thinks it resisted the flames because it had been recently plastered. Many people were standing near the wall when the narrator came on the scene; they were checking it out with great interest and surprise. As the narrator nears the wall, he realizes that there, raised slightly (in "*bas relief*") out of the plaster is the image of a cat, complete with rope around the neck.

At first the narrator thought he was imagining things, but then he figured out a “logical” explanation: he hanged the cat from the tree in his garden, and (because he apparently hadn't bothered to remove the dead cat from the tree before going to sleep) when the fire started, all the people rushed into the garden. One of these people must have taken the dead cat out of the tree and, to wake up the narrator, must have then thrown the cat through the narrator's window. Somehow, the cat got stuck in the newly plastered wall. Thus, a combination of the chemical "lime" in the plaster, the flames, and the "ammonia" coming off of the dead cat, created the raised cat-picture seen on the wall.

The image of the plastered cat stayed with the man for several months. During that time, the man halfheartedly mourned Pluto, and even hoped he might find a replacement. Then, one night when the man was drinking in a "den of more than infamy," he noticed a black cat sitting on top of a "hogshead" (a big barrel) of either "Gin" or "Rum." (Note: If someone is **infamous**, they're famous for being evil. "More than infamy" suggests he's in a really seedy joint, all kinds of bad things could be happening.) He'd been looking at said barrel for a while, but he hadn't seen the cat. It's almost as if it *magically appeared*. He pets him a little and is surprised to discover that this cat looks just like Pluto….

…Except for the "splotch of white" on the new cat's chest (Pluto was entirely black).

The cat seemed to enjoy being petted; it purred and stretched. The narrator tried to buy him from the bartender, but he said the cat wasn't his to sell. When the narrator headed home, the cat followed him. Here, then, was a replacement for Pluto!

The woman loved the cat right away. The cat soon got on the man's nerves, however, and began to gross him out. The narrator tried to steer clear of the cat; he refrained from physically abusing him by "a certain sense of shame" and the memory of the other cat. His resistance lasted several
weeks. During that time he developed an "unutterable loathing" (unspeakable hatred) for the "odiferous" (extremely smelly) animal.

The narrator’s hatred began when he realized the cat was missing an eye, just like Pluto. To his wife, this just made the cat more loveable.

As his hatred grew, the cat followed him around everywhere, and was constantly jumping up on him, looking for affection. The cat also tried to trip him whenever he got up, and even clung with its claws to the man's clothes. The narrator wanted to strike it but didn't, due to the reasons stated above, but also because he was completely terrified of "the beast."

At this point in the story, the narrator reminds us that he is writing this confession from a "felon's cell."

He tells us that his fear of “the beast” was for good reason. However, he is ashamed to admit the reason, because "it was by one of the merest chimaeras it would be possible to conceive." ("Chimaera" here means an imaginary monster. The narrator refers to the smallest imaginable imaginary monster.) His wife often pointed out to him the patch of white fur on the cat. As was previously explained, the white fur was the only way to tell that this cat was different from Pluto. As time passed, this white fur began to change, and eventually took on the shape of a specific object - "the GALLOWS! – oh, mournful and terrible engine of Horror and of Crime – Of Agony and of Death!" ("Gallows" refers to any wooden structure used for hanging…like the tree in the narrator’s garden.)

For a picture of a medieval gallows, follow this link:

http://www.knightsedge.com/medieval-weapons/medieval-gallows-4802.jpg

By now, the narrator knew he was in big trouble, and he couldn't believe that a simple animal had gotten the better of a man made "in the image of the High God." After that, the man could never relax or sleep. The cat stayed with him at all times, and if he fell asleep, he would wake up to find the cat sitting on his chest and breathing in his face. Since the cat was so heavy, it was hard to move him when he got in that position, thus tormented, the man lost all goodness. He now found solace only in his evil thoughts. These evil thoughts, he says, were his only friends. He began to hate everyone and everything, including his wife, whom he beat, and whom, he says, didn't complain.

"One day" the narrator and his wife attended to some errand in the basement of the “old” house which they now lived in because of their. The cat followed behind them, and nearly tripped the narrator down the steep flight of stairs. The narrator loses all control and furiously picks up an axe to destroy the animal...

…But his wife held back his arm. This made him so mad that he "buried the axe in her brain."

Now the man needed to hide the body. He couldn’t move it, because the neighbors might see. Therefore, he considered many different ways to conceal his wife's body (read Paragraph 24 of
the story for the gruesome details), but finally decided to "wall it [his wife's body] up in the cellar."

The cellar was good for walling people up in. The walls were recently plastered, and the plaster was still damp. It also had a fireplace that had been bricked over (leaving a space behind it). The narrator decided to remove the bricks, put the body in the fireplace, put the bricks back, and then plaster the whole mess over. Nobody would notice a thing. When he had finished this task, he intended to find the cat; the narrator was going to kill the animal as well.

He looked everywhere, but couldn’t find the cat. He finally conceded that the cat had left. Obviously, it was frightened by what had happened. It therefore ran away.

This sudden absence of the cat gave him great relief. The cat didn't come back that night, and the man slept soundly, even with "the burden of murder upon [his soul]." Another day went by, and then another, and still no cat. The man felt free, and incredibly happy. He wasn't worried about the fact that he murdered his wife. The narrator says there were some questions (presumably about her disappearance), and a "search" that yielded nothing. (The narrator doesn't say who reported her missing – he might have done it, or someone who missed her.)

Three days after the day of the murder, without notice, the police show up at the narrator's house. Not worried, he let them search. They went down to the cellar several times, and the narrator still kept his cool. He even walked around down there, with his arms crossed. Soon "[t]he police were thoroughly satisfied" and were about to leave the scene. The man started talking – he couldn't help it – he wanted to more fully convince them that he didn't kill his wife. He wanted to allay their suspicions that he had hidden her body in the cellar. He told the policeman how well built the house was, and to demonstrate, he hit his cane against the bricked and plastered fireplace. As soon as the cane hit the wall, a crying sound, that turned into a "scream," that turned into an "inhuman…howl" part "horror" and part “triumph.”

The narrator felt faint. For a moment, the police stood there on the stairs, but then ran to the bricked-over fireplace and began tearing out the bricks until the wall was gone. The dead body was standing up, rotting and bloody. On top of the corpse, "with red extended mouth and solitary (read: one) eye of fire" was – you guessed it – the cat. He "had walled the monster up within the tomb!

Violence

In "The Black Cat" the unnamed narrator offers us a parade of violent acts. Eye gouging, hanging, axing – these are the gruesome highlights. Until the end of the story, when somebody is killed, the detailed accounts of violence are focused on Pluto, the black cat who moves from pampered pet to persecuted beast. The violence the unnamed narrator practices against his wife and the other pets is rather vague. Yet, we get a pretty clear picture of what is happening. And by the end of the story the narrator has completely destroyed his family, and perhaps, completely destroyed himself in the process. In this horror classic, violence is an insidious beast that creeps, spreads, and grows uncontrollably, destroying all the bodies and minds it touches.
1. How did you react to the violence in the story? Was there a particular act of violence that struck you? If so, which one?

2. What do you think made the man turn violent? Do you believe him when he implies he wasn't violent before he got married and started drinking? Try to use the text to support your answer.

3. Does the man do violence to himself? If so, how? If not, why not?

4. Is there psychological abuse in the story? If so, where do you see it? Does the narrator state it explicitly, or is it only implied? Pick a passage to show what you mean.

**Alcohol**

In some stories (think stories by Ernest Hemingway) drinking has both positive and negative effects on the drinkers. Not so in "The Black Cat." The unnamed narrator of this grim tale claims he began abusing his wife and pets when his drinking got out of control, wrecking his personality. Some readers think this is a "temperance" narrative, a popular genre in Poe's day. "Temperance" in this context means "sobriety." The Temperance Movement focused on educating the public on the perceived dangers of drinking, and pushing legislature prohibiting the manufacture, use, and sale of alcohol. In a temperance narrative alcohol is the major issue, and is to blame for all the bad things that happen in the story. Here, alcohol fades out of the story just when things get bad, suggesting that alcohol is only one of many factors in the narrator's moral breakdown.

1. How does the narrator feel about alcohol? How do you know? Pick a passage where he talks about alcohol, and see if you can find any double or hidden meanings.

2. Do you think alcohol is to blame for the man's problems?

3. Does the narrator stop drinking after the second black cat moves in? How do you know?

**Freedom vs. Confinement**

"The Black Cat," a claustrophobic tale of marital life gone wrong, offers a distinct movement from freedom to confinement. We meet the narrator already in his prison cell, writing, to free himself from his bonds – the literal bonds of the cell, and the bondage confining his mind and heart. How he became so trapped is the subject of his writing and the reason why he has taken the pen to the page. We learn how he traps his wife and pets in a cycle of violence and abuse. As things go from bad to worse, the physical spaces the characters inhabit shrink. While the man's story begins in a house of wealth and comfort (or so he implies) it ends in brick tomb in the cellar of a rundown building.

1. Who is the most trapped character in the story? Why do you think so? What are some of the things that trap this character?

2. Did the story make you feel claustrophobic? Would this reaction be significant?

3. Why doesn't the woman free herself from the situation? Does the story provide enough information to answer the question? If so, pick a passage to demonstrate. If not, does this omission comment on the story as a whole?

4. What are some reasons Pluto and the second cat stay in the home, even though they are abused?
5. Is anyone free at the end of the story? How do we know he or she is free? If not, what
does this tell us about the story's take on freedom.
6. How do you define freedom? What makes you feel trapped? Does this story help you
think about these things?

Character Analysis

The Narrator

The narrator has major issues. This unnamed character is an abusive bully and a murderer. He
made home a living hell for his wife, pets, and himself. He's writing to us from his prison cell, on
the eve of his scheduled death by hanging. In addition to the details of his heinous crimes, he
reveals his psychological transformation from “nice guy” to villain. He tells us that around the
time he murdered his wife, all "good" had been driven from his personality.

And – get this – he doesn't seem to be confessing out of a sense of guilt. Over the course of the
story, the narrator provides several reasons for his various behaviors. But mostly he seems to be
blaming the cat (or cats) for all his problems. According the narrator, it's the cat's fault that the
domestic scene of the story ultimately turned so foul. This seems to be his real point in telling us
the story.

Is this a case of the insanity defense?

Like the narrator in Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart," this narrator also begins his story with the
declaration that he isn't "mad," and that his story is no "dream" (1). He says he knows we
probably won't believe it. He also says that what happened is "a series of mere household
events," you know, just the day-to-day business of family life (1). The final line of the first
paragraph is important. The narrator says that he lacks "logic" and that he's too "excitable" to tell
the story plainly, to show that the murder of his wife is completely understandable. He hopes a
logical reader, who isn't too "excitable" will be able to demystify the story and understand what
it means.

So what is going on here? The man seems to contradict himself at every turn. He says he isn't
crazy, but then he says he isn't capable of understanding his own reality. Is he trying to sound
crazy? Well, that's exactly what some critics believe.

There is an excellent essay on this subject titled "Irresistible Impulses: Edgar Allan Poe and the
Insanity Defense," by critic John Cleman. In it, Cleman argues that the narrator might be trying
to prove he's insane to avoid his death sentence. You might have heard of the "insanity defense."
Basically, this is a principle of law which states that if a person is insane, he or she can't be held
fully accountable for the crime which he or she has committed. The tricky part is proving
insanity.

For a brief history of the “insanity defense,” visit the following website:
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/crime/trial/history.html
In British law (on which the American law is based) in 1581 being insane meant not being able to tell the difference between right and wrong, in the same way that "an infant, a brute, or a wild beast" would be unable to know the difference.

Now it's time for a brief history lesson: In 1843 (the year this story was published) this legal principle made it into the books when the Scottish woodcutter Daniel M'Naughten accidentally shot and killed the secretary of the Prime Minister of England. The shooting and the killing wasn't accidental, but the victim was. M'Naughten meant to hit the Prime Minister himself, because he thought the man was the mastermind of a hideous plot against him. Since M'Naughten was found insane, he didn't get the death penalty. Instead, he spent the rest of his life in mental institutions. The media was all over the story, and Poe, who read everything, probably would have known all about it.

(For a more recent, and much more famous case of the insanity defense, consider the 1982 trial of John Hinckley, Jr. In an effort to impress Jodie Foster, Hinckley tried to assassinate then President Ronald Reagan. You can read more about this famous trial by visiting the following website: http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/FTrials/hinckley/hinckleytrial.html.)

That brings us back to "The Black Cat." Basically, if the narrator can prove that he doesn't know the difference between right and wrong, then he can avoid the gallows. He can't just say he doesn't know right from wrong, he has to show it, which is where the cat comes in. If he can compellingly argue that the cat did wrong, not him, the he has things in the bag.

Now, if the narrator is writing this from jail. He's already been to trial, been found guilty, and been sentenced to death. This means either that his lawyer didn't raise the insanity defense, or that the lawyer did raise it but the jury didn't buy it. So, the letter might be a kind of final appeal. If he can bring his sanity into question, he might be able to at least get another trial.

Since we don't have enough information to know whether the narrator does know the difference between right or wrong, we can't say for sure whether or not he's insane (in terms of the insanity defense). That ambiguity is part of what makes this story exciting.

The Narrator's Transformation: Youth and Bachelorhood

Though it might be hard to believe at first, the narrator says that ever since he was a baby, he was sensitive, kind, and mellow. He was so nice that the other kids made fun of him. He absolutely loved animals, and his parents got him lots of them. "[F]eeding and caressing" his pets were his favorite activities once he reached "manhood." His favorite pet was a dog, and he says that the two had a close relationship.

This sounds good on the surface, right? But, now that he's a killer, we have to put a different spin on it. We could look at the young narrator as a kid tormented by playground bullies (though perhaps for reasons other than his "tenderness of heart"). In his despair he turned to animals. They couldn't judge him or hurt him. They loved him for his company, and his food. He makes no mention of a social life, or love interest, other than his dog, who loved the man with "the unselfish and self-sacrificing love of a brute."
The portrait the narrator paints of himself as a young man is flat, or one-dimensional. According to him, he started off all good, and ended up all bad. Unless we want to believe he was born evil, it's important to at least entertain the possibility that he was once good. This glimpse of a kinder, gentler narrator allows us to feel bad for him, as uncomfortable as this might be. If this is an insanity defense, the possibility that he was once good, and therefore could be good again, might be rather persuasive.

The Narrator's Transformation: Married Life

Somehow, the narrator took time out from his relationship with his dog and other pets to find a woman and get married. Love of pets is the common ground between the man and his wife. He doesn't give us much more information about their relationship, until he starts to abuse her, and their lives become nightmares.

Though he blames the cat (or cats) for many things, the narrator doesn't complain at all about his wife. When she defies him in the end, he does kill her, which is like a complaint, the first one of the story. Whether this is also the first time she defied him, we know not.

So what happened? We don't really know. You could fill in the story's gaps in many different ways. Here's my interpretation: While happy as a bachelor, married life proves too much for our narrator. Driven to drinking and violence by the pressures of marriage and lack of deep, meaningful connection with his wife, the man gradually loses all his goodness. Even more so than today, marriage between a man and a woman was considered the ideal, proper situation for most people. Divorce was a hotly disputed issue in the law.

So, maybe the man was just unhappy in his marriage but couldn't admit it, or get out of it. It seems awfully suspicious that his first good night of sleep in who knows how long comes just after he kills his wife. Now, suppose the man wasn't happy in his marriage, and knew it. Suppose he felt he could only get out of it by killing his wife. If he is going for the insanity defense, it would not be smart to say bad things about his wife in the appeal. That would give him a motive for killing her, and destroy his defense. If he blames the cat, he has a chance.

The Fiend Intemperance

Before the death of Pluto, the narrator offers two important explanations for his behavior. The first is "the fiend Intemperance." The second one is "the spirit of PERVERSENESS," which you can read about in the next section.

The narrator says that his "general temperament and character -- through the instrumentality of the fiend Intemperance [...] experienced a radical alteration for the worse."

What does that mean? Well, if a person is "temperate," he avoids drinking alcohol. "Intemperance" means the opposite. In Poe's day various groups were involved in the Temperance Movement. The movement lobbied for laws prohibiting and restricting the manufacture, use, and sale of alcohol. It also tried to educate people about the dangers of alcohol. "Temperance" stories offered fictional accounts of people driven to evil and despair from
drinking. Poe seems to have used alcohol frequently, and probably had some conflicted feelings about it. As far as we know, he wasn't part of the Temperance Movement. Still, some critics and readers think "The Black Cat" is a temperance narrative.

But, because all mention of alcohol drops out of the story after the second black cat appears, we tend to doubt this. In a temperance story, alcohol takes center stage. It doesn't step out of the way for cats, no matter how fuzzy and cute they might be. This doesn't mean alcohol isn't portrayed negatively in this story. It is. But it's only one of many issues involved.

If you want to find out more about the Temperance Movement, visit this website: http://www.victorianweb.org/science/addiction/temperance.htm.

The Spirit of Perverseness

Now for the second explanation the narrator offers, "the spirit of PERVERSENESS." Poe has his own definition of the word "perverse." To put it simply, "the spirit of PERVERSENESS" is what makes people do things they know will be bad for themselves and others. The discussion of perverseness is in the paragraph describing the murder of Pluto. The narrator asks:

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? Have we not a perpetual inclination [...] to violate that which is Law, merely because we understand it to be such?

The narrator suggests that this perverseness as an essential part of human nature. It's what makes people break the law, just for the fun of breaking the law, even if they know they'll get in trouble, even if they think the law is just. This, the narrator says, is why he killed Pluto. And if he hadn't killed Pluto, the second cat wouldn't have come to haunt him and force him to kill his wife.

Wait a minute. The narrator seems to be saying that he does know the difference between right and wrong, but that this perverse impulse "one of the primitive impulses of the human heart" made him do it anyway. This could throw a wrench in the insanity defense, which depends on him being able to show that he doesn't know the difference between right and wrong. This quote from Frontline's history of the insanity defense might give you an idea of what Poe was up to here:

"IRRESISTIBLE IMPULSE"
One of the major criticisms of the M'Naughten rule is that, in its focus on the cognitive ability to know right from wrong, it fails to take into consideration the issue of control. Psychiatrists agree that it is possible to understand that one's behavior is wrong, but still be unable to stop oneself. To address this, some states have modified the M'Naughten test with an "irresistible impulse" provision, which absolves a defendant who can distinguish right and wrong but is nonetheless unable to stop himself from committing an act he knows to be wrong. (This test is also known as the "policeman at the elbow" test: Would the defendant have committed the crime even if there were a policeman standing at his elbow?).

Poe seems to be drawing the criticisms of the M'Naughten rule into his story as a way to more
fully explore the issue.

But, insanity defense aside, Poe seems to be sincerely asking, why do we do things we know will be bad for us? Is the narrator insane, or is he just taking normal human behavior to extremes? Poe presents this possible explanation (i.e., being influenced by the perverse) for at least some of the man’s behavior in an over-the-top, almost mocking manner, but that doesn’t mean it’s not a real issue, or unimportant. The idea of perverseness works with the other possible explanations for the man’s behavior to help form a complex and mysterious profile of a very disturbed man.

The Narrator’s Wife

The brief outline the narrator provides us of his wife suggests that she is kind, giving, loyal, and even heroic at the end. The narrator says she has "in a high degree, that humanity of feeling which had once been [his] distinguishing characteristic." She is a highly sympathetic character, in her own right. The fact that the narrator abuses her, and her beloved pets, makes her even more sympathetic, and makes us think that the man is a complete bad guy.

So we know she's a sympathetic character, but what about her past history, her interests, her looks, where she met the man, how old she is? None of this is in the story. If we want to picture her, we have to use our imaginations. Do you have a mental picture of her? If so, what does she look like? Why? If you don't picture her, is she a shadow, a blank, a dark spot?

"The Black Cat" is a psychological thriller. As a genre, psychological thrillers invite us into the twisted mind of the narrator. It doesn't exactly invite us into the mind of the woman, but it does invite us to question her psychology. The biggest question readers have about her is the following: why did she stay with the man?

I can't tell you that without hearing from her. So I’ll leave that question up to your imagination. We can tell you that in the 1830s divorce was a hotly contested issue in the US. Both men and women had a difficult time getting out of an unhappy marriage. Usually, men had much more power than women, especially in terms of finances. There were limited educational and job possibilities for women.

Of course, none of this explains why this particular woman stayed with this particular man. But, looking at the cultural scene Poe was writing in might be helpful in making sense of this confusing character.

Transformations

Now, the woman is not a complete blank. The narrator does talk about her, and, when we look at his account, we can see that she undergoes transformations.

The woman is the one who bought "the birds, gold-fish, a fine dog, rabbits, a small monkey" and Pluto. The narrator seems to suggest that she did this, at least in part, to please him. As noted in his character analysis, the narrator transforms from an animal lover to an animal abuser and killer. The woman follows a reverse path. Her love for animals seems to increase throughout the
story. She even gives her life for the second cat at the end.

This love seems connected to pity and perhaps guilt. When she learns that the second cat is missing an eye, like Pluto, this makes her love him (the cat) even more. This brings up a difficult question: did the woman try to stop the man from hurting the animals when he first started hurting them? The limited information we have makes it difficult to answer that question. But, if their behavior in the cellar is part of a pattern, maybe the narrator started hurting his wife when she tried to stop him from hurting the pets. Or, maybe she didn't try. Maybe she was too afraid or felt too powerless. What do you think?

When the new cat arrives, things work a little differently. The narrator doesn't abuse the second cat, even though he wants to. But, he does continue hurting the woman. He says his "uncomplaining wife […] was the most usual and the most patient of sufferers." Here, the narrator may be having fun with language. "Usual" has a double meaning. She's the narrator's "most usual" victim because she's the one he hurts most often, and/or a "usual sufferer" because she suffers in the usual way, by screaming and crying.

Notice also that she is the one who points out that the cat has an image of the gallows on his chest. This gallows on the cat is what keeps the narrator in check. He knows it's both a warning and a reminder of his crime (hanging Pluto). Could his wife have engineered this somehow? Was this a creative way to keep him from hurting the cat? If her main goal was to keep the second cat safe – she succeeded and became a soldier in the battlefield of a dangerous home.

Superstitious

The man claims that Pluto was of above average "intelligence." He tells us that the woman jokingly wondered, quite often, if the cat was really a witch, drawing on the myth of "all black cats as witches in disguise." He claims to provide this information, not for any particular reason, but because he remembered it. Hmm. That makes us suspicious. It sounds like the narrator is using his wife to inject the possibility of the supernatural into this tale.

In this same paragraph, he suggests condescendingly that his wife is overly superstitious. A superstition is an irrational belief or fear. Belief in the supernatural is often considered superstitious. This is ironic, considering that he's the one trying to convince us that a black cat is to blame for all his problems.

As discussed in the above section, the woman is also the one who convinces the man that the second cat has the image of a gallows on his chest. Again, the man uses his wife to inject the possibility of the supernatural into the story.

We don't know exactly why, but the woman seems to be, in addition to a victim of spousal abuse and murder, connected with the possibility of the supernatural. We would almost expect her to come back to life and haunt the man. The fact that she doesn't brings us back to reality. The supernatural possibility seems like just another way for the narrator to evade responsibility for his actions.
Pluto

Pluto is fine specimen of a cat. All black, large, fuzzy, and "and sagacious to an astonishing degree." (Sagacious is a cool word to know. It means extremely wise, intelligent, and perceptive.) Over the years Pluto moves from a pampered pet to an abused beast. He is blinded and ultimately murdered by his owner. The narrator might have us believe that he is actually a witch in disguise (see the "Character Analysis" for the narrator's wife), transforming from witch to Pluto, to the second black cat. To be fair, I'm giving the second cat his own "Character Analysis," so be sure to check that out. For now, we are focusing on the cat the narrator calls Pluto.

Some critics argue that Pluto is a cat, and only a cat. Others think he's a symbol or allegory for other things. Others think he's both. We'll explore the third option. Poe had pets of his own, and is suspected to have been an animal lover. At a most basic level, the story seems designed to invite sympathy for animals, and raise awareness of animal abuse. Since you probably don't need a lecture on being nice to cats, we'll focus on a few allegorical and symbolic possibilities.

Pluto as a Murdered Slave

If it wasn't for the fact that that the cat is black, and that he was hanged from a tree, this interpretation wouldn't work. But, as is shown in several essays in the book Romancing the Shadow: Poe and Race, it's hard to ignore the possibility that Pluto is an allegory for a murdered slave. Poe didn't explicitly state his views on race and slavery, so we can't use his views as evidence for the interpretation. Poe's work in general shows a high degree of interest in the pressing legal and social issues of his day. Since Poe was writing before the abolition of slavery in the US, it's likely that slavery was on his mind.

Some readers might be offended by the idea of a black cat representing a black man. As you know, slavery was often justified by the harmful myth that black people were more like animals than human beings. Legally speaking, a slave owner had the same rights over a slave as over an animal. A slave could be bought, sold, abused, or killed, all under the law, just like an animal. Some readers might view Poe's story as perpetuating this harmful idea, or in exploiting fears of slave revolts that were prevalent at the time.

You could also argue that the story tries to show, through the figure of the cat, that both black people and animals needed protection under the law. Instead of trying to figure out what Poe might have meant if he intended this allegory, we might say that the story expresses anxiety, uncertainly, and fear about the institution of slavery and the treatment of black people in Poe's time. If you want to go deeper, check out Romancing the Shadow, and also Toni Morrison's book Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination.

Pluto as a Child

The cat might also be an allegory for a child. Notice that the man and woman don't have any children. This story is concerned with the idea of home and family, and children, like animals, are at the mercy of the adults in charge of them. Poe himself didn't have any kids, that we know
of, and children seem mostly absent from his work. In Paragraph 31, the narrator even likens the second black cat's cry to "the sobbing of a child." If this angle interests you, visit this website: http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2005/may/18/childrensservices2. The site gives a detailed history of US child protection laws.

Pluto as Art

Some readers are puzzled by what the man sees on his bedroom wall when he returns to the home after the fire:

I approached and saw, as if graven in bas-relief upon the white surface, the figure of a gigantic cat. […] There was a rope about the animal's neck.

"Bas-relief" is an art term. According to the narrator, the bas-relief image of the cat, isn't just an image, but the actual body of the cat. So, the dead black cat actually becomes art. This reading suggests that the story expresses anxiety about not just a host of social issues, but about art itself, particularly the finished product. This isn't the only explanation for this bizarre moment. If you are into science, you might analyze the scientific-sounding explanation the man offers for the phenomenon, and explore the state of science in the 1840s.

(Visit this website: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/amrs/hd_amrs.htm for some examples and a definition.)

Pluto in Mythology

Edgar Allan Poe seldom allows unimportant details to muddle his quest for effect. As an example, you’ve likely noticed that most of his characters remain nameless. Who they are aren’t as important to the story as what they do. Unlike “The Tell-Tale Heart,” however, not all characters are without a name in “The Black Cat.” The narrator does tell us the name of his cat.

In ancient Roman mythology, Pluto was the god of the Underworld. He ruled over – and protected – the dead. In Greek mythology, on which the Romans based their own belief system, Pluto was called Hades. Not very subtle, is it? Pluto the cat, thus, seems to symbolize death to the narrator. That he gave the cat this name suggests that he thought it a sinister creature from the moment he first saw it. More importantly, it allows us to infer who – and what – the second cat is, but I’m getting ahead of myself. Let’s move on to the next section.

The Second Cat

The second black cat looks almost exactly like Pluto. He's big, black, and missing an eye. The only difference is the white spot. The spot starts off innocently enough, but then grows into an image of the gallows, if the narrator can be believed.

With all these similarities, and with the narrator's insistence that the cat is more than just a cat, we might think the second black cat is some kind of supernatural version of Pluto. How, we might ask, could the second black cat be missing an eye, if he isn't Pluto undead? There is a
possibility that Pluto never died. But, the narrator tells us that Pluto was not only hanged, but left hanging all day and night, and then somehow embedded in the plaster wall thereafter. It's pretty doubtful Pluto survived. So what about the missing eye?

Well, if you think about it, in Poe's time there were probably plenty of stray cats with missing eyes. The second cat could have been abused by a previous owner. Or he could have lost it in a fight with another cat, or some other kind of accident.

I don't deny the possibility of the supernatural – we'll discuss this next – but to focus too heavily on it distracts us from the narrator's abuse of the creature. Interestingly, the man's own account of the cat seems to work against a supernatural possibility. This is the man's description of the cat's voice coming from inside the tomb:

[It was] at first muffled and broken, like the sobbing of a child, and then quickly swelling into one long, loud, and continuous scream, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell…

If the cat was such a cunning monster, why would he 1) wait so long before crying out, and 2) cry like a baby when he did cry? If you were a poor animal, on the verge of release from being buried alive, wouldn't you be both horrified and triumphant? This terrible moment is effective in making us think of the cat as an innocent victim.

Has Pluto Returned from the Dead?

In Greek and Roman mythology, The Furies (also known as The Dirae, meaning “The Terrible,” or The Erinyes, meaning “The Angry Ones”) were the goddesses of revenge. The three sisters were sometimes called the “Daughters of the Night” or “Those Who Walk in Darkness.” The Furies were the righters of dire wrongs, and they were never kind about it. They haunted criminals who committed wrongs against blood relatives and murderers who offended the “natural” order, regardless of motivation. They were untrusting and persistent in their pursuit, impartial and indifferent when carrying out their duty. They continued to torment wrongdoers even after death, until the criminal showed remorse. They lived the Underworld, tormenting sinners under the command of Pluto.

As was discussed earlier, by naming the black cat Pluto, Poe calls our attention to the stories of Roman mythology. Fury or not, the Roman gods always avenged crimes against themselves. If we read “The Black Cat” as a ghost story, then we may infer that the second cat is Pluto, back from the dead. In ghost stories, the apparition is usually there to right a wrong, to punish a transgressor. They have become the Furies of modern fiction, doling out judgment as they see fit. They are harsh, sometimes cruel, almost always implacable.

It doesn’t take long for the narrator to regret bringing the second cat home with him. The companionship he so longed for soured at dawn. Now sober, the narrator now “sees” his new pet differently. This happens immediately after discovering the missing eye of this second cat. (Note the obvious similarity to “The Tell-Tale Heart.” There, another narrator responds to his companion’s “vulture eye” in much the same way.)
His growing fear and loathing of the cat is, again, laid out to a natural cause. He feels guilt about what he has done to Pluto. Transferring that emotion to the new arrival, while unjust, is understandable, it is a reasonable explanation. Furthermore, this new cat, being a cat, won’t leave him alone. It perpetually rubs against him, hops on him, and seeks all manners of attention. In my experience, cats always seem drawn to those people that like them least. It is as if they know they are not liked and they wish to change this, by force if need be. Still, most cats learn not to walk in front of people; they seldom want a person to stumble and fall.

Whether it is natural cat behavior or the act of a vengeful spirit, the results are the same. The narrator becomes unhinged. His fear and hatred for the creature grow. He even starts seeing things. The white fur on the cat’s chest takes a shape; it soon represents the gallows, the ultimate fate of the criminal (and here, a reminder of his earlier crime). The narrator suffers greater guilt, hatred, and self-loathing. Mostly, the narrator suffers a feeling of dread. He believes there is something wrong with the creature.

When he finally attempts to destroy the animal, his wife intercedes. In anger, he murders her and conceals the body in the wall. Pluto, ruler and protector of the dead, enters the crypt and joins the dead woman. It then waits for an opportune time to reveal the murderer and his victim to the police.

**Symbolism, Imagery, and Allegory**

The narrator faces new perils when the second cat comes along. The cat won't leave him alone, day or night. If the man falls asleep, he has bad dreams, and always wakes up with the cat sitting on his chest, breathing on his face. So the narrator eventually stops sleeping.

The narrator describes the cat as a "Night Mare," though some texts, run the two words together to form nightmare, which is the usual contemporary spelling. According to a footnote in *The Selected Writings of Edgar Allan Poe*, "The Night Mare myth was a dream horse ["mare" is another word for "horse"] that trampled people in their sleep, its great weight causing a sense of suffocation” (353).

In many Poe stories, we aren't completely sure whether the narrator is asleep, awake, or somewhere in between. "The Black Cat” is one of those stories. The narrator admits to nodding off frequently, and to sleep deprivation. His dream life and his waking life combine to form an almost seamless nightmare-scape.

As with all his other problems, the narrator blames this situation on the cat. In his old cat-lover days, he might have considered the cat's snuggling a sign of affection, but the cat has become an easy victim for his rage. He sees it as a sign of menace, and of his guilt. It is only once the cat (and his wife) are gone that the man is able to sleep.

The Pen-knife, Eyes, and Vision

"The Black Cat” is a brutal story, where the home becomes a site of torture, terror, and murder. The man admits to abusing his wife and animals, but only goes into detail a few times. The first
A pen-knife is supposed to be used for sharpening the narrator's quill pen. Still, it is a knife and always has the potential to be used as a weapon. When the narrator uses the knife to "deliberately cut one of [Pluto's] eyes from the socket" the knife's potential is fulfilled. When we read the above lines we might get some kind of intense image in our mind. It probably provokes a variety of feelings.

When we understand the knife is meant to sharpen pens, the imagery becomes confused. The mind wants to see a pen where it sees an eye. Symbolically, the man is sharpening the cat's eye with his knife. Pluto learns to see that his beloved master is cruel and violent to the extreme. He also will experience a literal change of vision – from this moment forward, he'll see the world through only one eye. Not coincidentally, the reader's eyes are sharpened at this moment as well. Crimes of violence not seen before are revealed.

In literature, damage to a character's eye represents a changing vision in the story. By shaking us up with violence, damaged-eye symbolism might also put us in a space to experience changed vision ourselves. Most notably it might make issues of animal cruelty and spousal abuse more visible to us.

But it gets even deeper. As the narrator reminds us in the line following the one quoted above, he is penning or writing his confession. By making the man the writer of his own story, Poe creates a twisted double of himself, the real writer of the story. Working with the pen-knife, the story becomes an allegory about writing.

Writers often draw from the real life to write their stories. If they go too far, they can hurt the people they write about. There is also the possibility of hurting the readers, either with bad writing, or with good writing that gives readers bad thoughts or ideas. Writers are often conscious of the ability of writing to do violence to the vision of others.

The Axe and the Cellar

The axe and the cellar offer some vivid imagery. We can imagine that in a story like "The Black Cat," going to the cellar is a bad idea. We can almost smell the musty cellar smell wafting up at us. We might even experience a slight clouding of vision as the narrator, his wife, and the cat descend into the darkest depths of the "old" building. The imagery is vague and murky, until we get to the axe.

Like the knife, the axe has the potential to be used for violence. Most uses of the axe are violent, like chopping wood, for example. Firefighters use axes to save people, but the axe is still used violently to break things down. Here the axe is a symbol of the man's breakdown, and of the violent breakdown of his family.

If you see someone holding an axe, you might be slightly uncomfortable. You probably don't want one hanging about in your living room, either. When the narrator says he picked up "an axe," we think, "uh oh."
We know what's probably going to happen next, especially if we've read Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. When he says he "buried the axe in [his wife's] brain" our predictions come true. We are certainly horrified at the brutal murder of the woman. But, we might also be somewhat relieved that the cat managed to escape unscathed. As we discuss in "Writing Style" the narrator's fancy prose can hide meaning if we don't read carefully. Here, he's surprisingly blunt. Nothing fancy. Yet, this is one of the story's strongest images and we can understand it instantly.

Since the narrator keeps us in the cellar for the most of the rest of the story, we get walled up, or trapped, in the story. This speaks to our theme of "Freedom and Confinement." It also speaks to the narrator's trapped state of mind. Although he is free for a time to hurt others, the story shows him increasingly imprisoned. Everything comes together in the cellar – which is just one step away from the jail cell.

**Style and Interpretation**

"*The Black Cat* is one of the most powerful of Poe's stories, and the horror stops short of the wavering line of disgust" (Quinn 395). Poe constructed this story in such a way that the events of the tale remain somewhat ambiguous. As the narrator begins to recount the occurrences that "...have terrified--have tortured--have destroyed [him].," he reminds the reader that maybe "...some intellect more calm, more logical, and far less excitable than [his] own," will perceive "...nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects."

As the narrator begins to tell his story (flashback), the reader discovers that the man's personality had undergone a drastic transformation which he attributes to his abuse of alcohol and the perverse side of his nature, which the alcohol seemed to evoke. The reader also discovers (with the introduction of Pluto into the story) that the narrator is superstitious, as he recounts that his wife made "...frequent allusion to the ancient popular notion, [that] all black cats [are] witches in disguise." Even though the narrator denies this (much as the narrator in *The Tell-Tale Heart* denies that he or she is insane), the reader becomes increasingly aware of his superstitious belief as the story progresses.

As in other Poe stories ("*The Tell-Tale Heart*," "*The Pit and the Pendulum*" and "*The Gold Bug"), biting and mutilation appear. The narrator of "*The Black Cat*" first becomes annoyed when Pluto "inflicted a slight wound upon [the] hand with his teeth." After he is bitten by the cat, the narrator cuts out its eye. Poe relates "eyes" and "teeth" in their single capacity to take in or to incorporate objects. This dread of being consumed often leads the narrator to destroy who or what he fears (Silverman 207).

Poe's pronounced use of foreshadowing leads the reader from one event to the next ("one night," "one morning," "on the night of the day," etc.). Within the first few paragraphs of the story, the narrator foreshadows that he will violently harm his wife ("At length, I even offered her personal violence."). However, are the events of the story, as the narrator suggests, based upon "...an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effect," or are they indeed caused by the supernatural? By using, three main events in this story (the apparition of the first cat upon the
burned wall, the appearance of the gallowslike pattern upon the chest of the second cat, and the
discovery of the second cat behind the cellar wall), a convincing case can be presented for both
sides.

While making a case for the logical as well as the supernatural, one must remember the state of
mind of the narrator. All events are described for the reader by an alcoholic who has a distorted
view of reality. The narrator goes to great lengths to scientifically explain the apparition of the
cat in the wall; however, the chain of events that he re-creates in his mind are so highly
coincidental that an explanation relying on the supernatural may be easier to accept.

Once again, the reader wonders if the narrator's perceptions can be believed as he describes the
gallowslike pattern upon the chest of the second cat. Maybe what he sees is just a hallucination
of a tormented mind. The markings of an adult cat surely would not change that much, unless
maybe the pattern was not part of the animal's fur, but only a substance on its surface which,
with time, could wear off and disappear (a substance such as plaster?). Afterall, the second cat is
also missing an eye. Poe is very careful to avoid stating if it is the same eye of which Pluto was
deprived. Are there really two cats in this story, or did Pluto (possibly "a witch in disguise")
survive, and return for retribution.

Of all the incidents, the discovery of the cat (first or second) behind the cellar wall is the easiest
to believe. The cat was frightened by the man, and logically, sought shelter. What is somewhat
strange is the fact that the police searched the cellar several times, and not one time did the cat
make a sound. It was not until the narrator rapped heavily with a cane upon the wall, that the cat
responded. Was it a series of natural causes and effects, or was it what the narrator described?
"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."

Themes

"The Black Cat" is Poe's second psychological study of domestic violence and guilt (the first
being "The Tell-Tale Heart"); however, this story does not deal with premeditated murder. The
reader is told that the narrator appears to be a happily married man, who has always been
exceedingly kind and gentle. He attributes his downfall to the "Fiend Intemperance" and "the
spirit of perverseness." Perverseness, he believes, is "...one of the primitive impulses of the
human heart." "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?" Perverseness provides the rationale
for otherwise unjustifiable acts, such as killing the first cat or rapping with his cane upon the
plastered-up wall behind which stood his wife's corpse "...already greatly decayed and clotted
with gore."

We might argue that what the narrator calls "perverseness" is actually conscience. Guilt about his
alcoholism seems to the narrator the "perverseness" which causes him to maim and kill the first
cat. Guilt about those actions indirectly leads to the murder of his wife who had shown him the
gallows on the second cat's breast. The disclosure of the crime, as in "The Tell-Tale Heart," is
caused by a warped sense of triumph and the conscience of the murderer.
What makes this story different from "The Tell-Tale Heart" is that Poe has added a new element to aid in evoking the dark side of the narrator, and that is the supernatural. Now the story has an added twist as the narrator hopes that the reader, like himself, will be convinced that these events were not "...an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects."

1. **A human being has a perverse, wicked side–another self–that can goad him into doing evil things that have no apparent motive.** The narrator himself admits that a perverse, primitive impulse–a desire to do evil even though he had no explanation for doing it other than overindulging in wine–triggered his violent behavior.

2. **Heavy drinking can bring out the worst in a human being.** Alcohol abuse alone did not cause the narrator to strike out. But, as he readily acknowledges, it certainly put him in a foul mood.

3. **A weak, unbalanced human psyche may be highly vulnerable to the power of suggestion.** The narrator's wife had suggested, apparently in jest, that Pluto was a witch in disguise.

4. **Evil deeds invite vengeance.** Pluto gets even, the narrator indicates, by causing the fire that burns down the narrator's house. And, if the second cat is indeed Pluto reincarnated, Pluto sweetens his revenge by alerting police with his crying behind the wall hiding the corpse of the narrator's wife.

5. **Fear of discovery can bring about discovery.** At the end of the story, the narrator's strange behavior makes the police suspicious of him.

**Irony**

After the narrator cuts out Pluto's eye, the cat sees better–figuratively. Previously, the cat loved and trusted the narrator, following him around, climbing into his lap, and licking his hands. But after the cat loses an eye, it sees the narrator for what he is–an unpredictable, dangerous man. It gains insight that it lacked before.

**Point of View**

First-person unreliable: Readers learn from the narrator’s story that he is obviously deranged, though he declares at the outset "mad am I not." He tells readers that excessive drinking helped to bring on his erratic, violent behavior. (It may be that the drinking worsened an existing mental condition.) The narrator tells his story as he sees it from his demented point of view. As in many of his other short stories, Poe does not name the narrator. A possible explanation for this is that the unnamed narrator becomes every human being, thereby enhancing the universality of the short story. In other words, the narrator represents anyone who has ever acted perversely or impulsively–and then had to pay for his deed.