

Mad am I not : A reading of the narrator's confession in Poe's "Black Cat"

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Critics have long considered the narrator in Poe's "*The Black Cat*" mad and perverse. Carlson believes that the narrator should be held accountable for the evil deed he chooses by the primitive impulse of the human heart rather than believing that moral choice is an extension of self-interest; the concept of perverseness rests on the assertion that actions of moral consequence of good and evil are motivated by an unfathomable longing of the soul to offer violence to its own nature (249). Gargano believes that, in addition to perverseness, "*The Black Cat*" is on one level an intense study of the narrator's discovery of, and infatuated immersion in, evil, and on another level a subtle examination of the narrator's refusal to recognize the morality and meaning of his act (88). But critics have said little about the narrator's wife, other than speculating that the couple may have sexual infidelity (Hoffman, 241), making the husband turn his energy to grooming and torturing of animals, or saying that the black cats are in an alliance of witches, headed by the wife (235). Evidence of witchcrafts can be found in the tale. In fact, the narrator's marriage is his first attempt to contact the evil force; his subsequent confrontations with the evil force bring about his own destruction. When one solicits evil, it will materialize and can turn household events into a series of disasters. The narrator may have made a mistake in the marriage, but he is certainly not mad.

Surely, the narrator is having a "disclosure of the crime" (Quinn, 395) he has committed. But reading with care, readers see that the narrators

is accounting for how he has tried to fight evil and his fright of eternal suffering in the evil realm on the eve of his own execution. In that sense, the narrator is a sane person who writes in a disguised mad way and who admits his "perverseness", for fear that, after his death, he will be burnt eternally, not by "the Most Merciful" God (Poe, 600), but by the spirits of the evil agents that he has destroyed. The narrator and readers indeed have reasons to believe that his wife and the townspeople surrounding him are all evil. To the narrator, his wife is the sole embodiment of evil and witchcraft. After he discovered this fact, he tried to destroy his wife, and he has to write down in a cryptic reversed way, by employing "recurrent inversions and negatives" (Silverman, 206) as in his opening statement, "mad am I not—and very surely do I not dream" (Poe, 597). Although uncommonly put, the narrator is clearly sane; readers have to read the underlined message in this complicated sentence structure. He warns the world of the presence of evil among men. Readers must not think that he is mad; his deeds seem irrational but are not without sound causes.

The narrator hastens to provide clues and tell the readers that the problems happen at home; it is a "most homely narrative" (597) and the account is just "series of mere household events." These two hints tell readers to find the problem nowhere but in his own home, presumably with the homemaker, the wife. Since childhood, the narrator has possessed the quality of docility and humanity. It was not until his marriage that he has become violent. Since marriages are usually

arranged or proposed by the male party, this situation suggests the narrator has willfully invited evil and supernatural beings, who will not enter the human realm uninvited. He suffers for such an act. The early marriage suggests the prematurity of the narrator's state of mind as a human being; he is not ready to confront supernatural beings. The unnamed narrator and his wife, the unknown in-laws, relatives and neighbors, and the unspecified time and location of the story all suggest the universality of the story, the timelessness and the never-ending fight between good and evil.

When the narrator describes his wife, it is done in the most subtle and incomplete way. The wives in other Poe's stories all have origins; we know where they are from. For example, Berenice and Eleonora both are cousins to the narrators of the stories; Morella is a study partner of the narrator; Ligeia has been described in a most lengthy fashion by the narrator. All these women have a clear history before the respective narrators marry them. But the wife in "*The Black Cat*" materializes from nowhere; readers know nothing about the wife: no origins, no family, and no name! While Berenice, Eleonora, Morella, and Ligeia own a story each in themselves, it seems logical to consider that the wife's name in the story we are discussing is "*The Black Cat*"; thus, it suggests, as some critics have done, that she is a *bona fide* witch (Hoffman, 235). But it also implies that the narrator is too terrified of her evil and power and he is wise enough not to mention her name.

After the marriage, with no other descriptions of newly wed domestic life, the wife procures domestic pets of "the most agreeable kind" (Poe, 597). But those animals suggest different groups of tortures: the dog targets the rabbits, the monkey preys on the caged birds, and

the black cat victimizes the goldfish. These animals show the pattern of preying, a parallel to the wife preying on the narrator. These pets must have kept the wife's hands full for the narrator only takes care of the cat, his favorite pet and playmate; he alone feeds him (598). Only the black cat Pluto is allowed to enchant the narrator and the wife comments that black cats are witches in disguise (598). Upon reporting so, the narrator hastens to say "[n]ot that she [is] 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" (598, Poe's italics). In fact, the italics overtly emphasize the level of seriousness. This hasty remark substantiates that the narrator has caught himself in a slip of the tongue and he believes that he has revealed the identity of his wife. Therefore, he has to carefully remark that the wife is never serious on that point; but the message has already passed on to the readers. The word "disguise" (598) is also a clue to the readers, suggesting the "insane" account is somewhat in disguise, and it should not be read literally.

The innocent description of his love for dogs before his marriage shows the narrator's docility and humanity: "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*" (597, Poe's italics). This description is quickly contrasted with the brutal act he inflicts on Pluto. What makes the narrator shift from the love of dogs before his marriage to the love of a cat after the marriage? Nothing happens between the husband and the wife for several years, but a fond friendship develops between the narrator and Pluto (598). The span of these several years is casually mentioned in just a few words. The brevity shows the void of the

narrator's life after marriage and the emptiness regarding the relationship with his wife. He had, however, become "more moody, more irritable" (598). No doubt he must have discovered some of his wife's witchcraft or evil oddity and must have forced himself "to use intemperate language" and forced himself "to use intemperate language" and "personal violence" to his wife, though which he attempted to overpower and intimate his wife in order to protect himself. The unaccounted witchcraft must have been like the unnamed wife which cannot be penned down.

One night, the black cat attacks the narrator, not in the traditional fashion of scratching but by biting. Finding courage in an earlier alcohol event, he cut out one of the cat's eyes. This must have been a terrific experience, because the narrator still blushes, burn, and shudders (599) when writing this part. Perhaps he is terrified because he now confronts the symbol of evil, but he also reveals his excitement in disfiguring and disembodiment a member of the evil legion. He cannot kill the cat altogether because it is nighttime and it is believed that the evil power is collective and permeates in the air at night; the power disperses and is weakened in the daytime. More evidence is to come regarding how the narrator can fight the evil force better in the daytime.

The "bite" itself is significant. Domestic cats usually attack with claws; the biting, therefore, suggests vampirism. Hoffman has a lengthy discussion on the significance of the cat's biting and the narrator's scooping out of its eye. He suggests that the mouth and eyes both have a lubricating system and covers (lips and lids) which seem to open and close by a will of their own, thus resembling a woman's vagina. The biting is then a distorted kiss or caress with which the narrator cannot bring himself to terms, thus

suggesting sexual infidelity (237–240). Based on this line of thought, to scoop out the cat's eye is then to destroy the vagina of his wife; thus, the narrator's act is to destroy his wife's womanhood and her witch (maiden) head.

Sometime later, the narrator manages to hang the cat during the daytime. His description of the hanging is filled with duality and implications of his fake madness:

[I] hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart; —hung it *because* I knew 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 (599, Poe's italics).

He disguises his account with madness and perverseness in saying that he knows it is wrong to hang the cat, but that he still does it. Poe overtly makes the narrator pose the perverse act in opposition with human law (Elmer, 157). This passage provides an interpretation that the narrator destroys flesh of the cat but saves its soul, tears stream down for the sad departure of a good friend or a joyful celebration of the suppression of sin. The italicized operative word "because" emphasizes the narrator's high reasoning faculty; he needs his readers to know that he is a man of reason. In his era, when hanging was the punishment for murder, killing a domestic pet was hardly a crime; it stands to reason that the narrator does not need to go all the way in justifying his act and feeling remorse. He is deliberately showing his power of reasoning and explaining his sanity.

The narrator's house catches fire that very night. The house represents the narrator's state

of mind and the fire cleanses him and his “entire worldly wealth [is] swallowed up” (600). It is almost as though he sets the fire himself for he wants fire to cast out evil spirits. Since there is no mention regarding the other domestic pets thereafter, readers may conclude that they have become sacrifices in this cleansing ritual. Readers also should remember that the pets have all been procured or recruited by the wife; they are then all evil. Only the couple manages to escape.

No investigation is conducted as to how the fire has broken out, and the fire does not seem to bother other neighboring houses, as though those houses were protected by witchcraft and the neighbors knew all about it. The neighbors' only concern seems to be the impressions of the hanged cat on the wall behind the head of the bed. “About this wall a dense crowd [is] collected” (600), as if these witch allies were having a memorial service for the victim. Clearly they already know what the narrator has done to the cat. The impression is also a symbol foreshadowing the termination of the narrator.

The narrator's silent accusation of his wife's evil must have been confirmed by now. Although the wife shows her appreciation of the intelligence of Pluto, she is not mentioned again for quite some time. She shows nothing regarding the husband's indulgence in alcohol; she has not commented on the husband's brutal act of scooping out Pluto's eye and later executing the animal. She expresses no despair on the loss of the house in the fire and no comment about the strange impression of the figure of a gigantic cat. None of these seems to warrant her complaint. She does not seem to bother with the seemingly “insane” acts of the husband. A true wife would have consoled the husband, but this wife in question does not seem to care about any of these mishaps as if she already knew why they have happened.

Since the narrator does not want the other

evil agents to know that he already comprehends the witch alliance and what will become of him in the future, he hastens to explain the impression in a pseudo-scientific way. Readers doubt if the chemistry of heat, lime, and ammonia can produce such a cat impression; readers question if anyone would be walking outside the narrator's house in the middle of the night, and upon seeing the great fire, be too scared to bang on the door, but rather cut the hanged cat from the tree and throw it into the narrator's chamber to draw the house owner's attention (600). And in all this time, the narrator and his wife do not feel the fire at all until the blaze is on the curtains of the bed! It seems that his far-fetched explanation is a cover up to what he has wanted to do to his wife—to burn the witch. But the nighttime evil force must have given the wife a protective shield of some sort.

The narrator then procures another black cat one night, another invitation issued to the evil agent. Naturally, the cat immediately becomes “great favorite with [his] wife” (601). Only when daytime comes does the husband see the loss of one eye of the new cat; he grows to hate the cat at once. The unnamed status of the new cat draws readers closer to its association with the unnamed wife. The wife remarks on the cat's patch of white hair resembling a gallows. The hair reminds the narrator of Pluto and foreshadows his future death: “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!” (603). He now feels so unprotected; although he is “man, fashioned in the image of the High God” (603), the evil agent leaves him “no moment alone” and he has “no power to shake off.”

The narrator admits that the killing of the cat with one blow is a dreadful thought. But one day, he gets the opportunity to decapitate the head of the evil allies. The wife walks into her own

grave when she attempts to descend into the narrator's inner-conscience, represented by the cellar (underground). On that level, the narrator has no place reserved for evil. Seeing the narrator is about to kill the new cat, the wife interrupts him. Her interruption provokes the husband: in "a rage more than demoniacal", that is, stronger than the evil, he axes his wife with one blow on the head!

Her body is subsequently concealed in a wall of the false chimney. Symbolically and traditionally, the chimney is the heart of the house (Ketterer, 108). The elimination of the head of the evil and the burial of her body will fill the void of the heart—the false chimney. With the reference to the Middle Ages monks walling up their victims, the narrator decides to follow suit. The concealment will forever seal up the evil power. The description of his killing of wife reveals nothing but calmness. Readers should question why the narrator does not even sob upon his own act. Instead, the narrator plans meticulously, weighs among different methods for disposing of the corpse. He has become more determined in his mission.

Unlike the time when he killed Pluto, tears do not stream down his cheeks with the death of his wife. After he has finished walling up her body, he says triumphantly, "Here at last, then, my labor has no been in vain" (604). He thinks he has conquered the evil power and has found peace of mind, "even with the burden of murder upon [his] soul" (605). On the other hand, he seems to be clear on the fact that the new unnamed cat is still living somewhere nearby.

Neighbors and police stop by to investigate, about to investigate what? One naturally wonders: who has reported the missing wife to the police? Other than the family, who would actually care about the disappearance of a member in a household? Why do neighbors doubt the narrator

when inquiries are made and are readily answered (605)? Readers are led to believe that all townspeople are with the witch ally and come to haunt the narrator.

The narrator is compelled to rap on the wall and in so doing he exposes the corpse of his wife, all along still saying that his house is well constructed, implying his mind has been sound; but now his docility and humanity are finally destroyed. DeShell believes that it is guilt that reveals the crime (126); this can be true. But certainly since the narrator has twice invited evil into his house, he must suffer the consequence. He is not to play God, either; he is in no position to execute evil. What he should have done is to ignore the presence of evil. His encounter and confrontation with the evil force lead him to his own destruction; the evil status of the cat and his wife does not justify his killing of them, and he must pay for what he has done. Hoffman points out, "an 'I' for an eye"(242). The narrator "I" has to pay for his scooping out Pluto's eye. Poe is not willing to grant that men are not responsible for their conduct (Wagenknecht, 210).

In sum, the lack of a regular domestic life and chores, the indifferent attitude of the unnamed wife toward the narrator, and the fact that the narrator is stronger during the daytime rather than at night are clues to the presence of witchcraft. There is no reason for an insane person to confess every minute detail of his crime on the eve of his execution, unless he has special purposes in mind. On the one hand, the account is to warn readers about the danger of inviting evil power. If one does not submit to such power, he will bring himself to complete destruction. On the other hand, the narrator records his fear of burning in evil fire after being hanged, an episode which has been foretold by the hanging of Pluto and the subsequent flame.

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