

## ANALYSIS

“The Black Cat” (1843)

Edgar Allan Poe

(1809-1849)

“Another study in demonic compulsion, this tale takes the form of the murderer protagonist’s confession. Beneath the attempt at matter-of-fact truth-telling, however, lies enough hidden and suppressed guilt, fear, masochism, perversity, rationalization, and other compulsions—including the compulsion to confess—to add dramatic irony and symbolic value to the events and characters.”

Eric W. Carlson

*Introduction to Poe: A Thematic Reader*  
(Scott, Foresman 1967) 581

“This matter-of-fact narrator calls his narrative ‘the most wild yet most homely,’ and assures us that he is not mad.... However grotesque are the elements in the design of the ensuing Arabesque, they will declare themselves in an intelligible order to a ratiocinative mind of sufficient power. Once again we are faced with a problem in detection. As in ‘The Murders in the Rue Morgue,’ the crime is the murder of a woman. And, as in ‘The Purloined Letter,’ the culprit is identified from the start. The problem here is, from his confession *to deduce his motive*.

The narrator of ‘The Black Cat’ is a husband, yet his wife is never named. It is as though she has no name, or he cannot remember it, or he dare not speak it. Nearly everywhere else we have seen Poe bestow upon the beloveds, fiancées, and brides of his poems and tales the most euphonious and original cognomens: Eulalie, Ulalume, Helen, Annabel Lee, Ligeia, Morella, Madeline, Bernice. But this wife has no name. It is she who suggests, to the narrator who is so tender toward his pets, the old superstition that a black cat is a witch in disguise. As in ‘The Tell-Tale Heart,’ where the belief in the Evil Eye is introduced to make more spooky the power of the old man’s gaze, here too folklore is pressed into the service of Poe’s plot. Wife suggests, but husband may in truth believe, that black cat = witch. This, and other evidence...lead me to suggest that, in the synoptic and evasive glossary of this tale, witch = wife. Ergo, black cat = wife.

In this story we are told all about the narrator’s feelings—first of affection, then of loathing—for his cat, but of his attitude to or relations with his wife we learn next to nothing. The relation with the cat begins as mutual love, the cat (Pluto by name) cuddling up against him, he petting and fondling Pluto. Then the demon of intemperance (the Imp of the Perverse disguised as the Angel of the Odd) takes possession of the man. He becomes a drunkard, he curses his wife, he strikes her, and gradually he conceives absolute detestation of the affectionate cat. Becoming panicky at his unpredictable behavior, the cat bites his hand. Now enraged, he seizes the poor thing and with his penknife carves out one of its eyes.

Even for so horrible a misdeed he feels, when sober, inadequate remorse. The awful wound heals, and the cat, as before, continues to seek his companionship. His disgust and loathing grow. He can stand its importunities no longer—he hangs the creature by the neck, from a tree in the garden—‘hung it *because* I knew that it had loved me, and *because* I felt it had given me no reason of offence.’ That very night his house goes up in flames. All is destroyed save one wall, and on that wall, newly plastered, is imprinted by fire the image of the cat hanging from its noose. The narrator is much surprised by this graphic preservation of the crime which he forbears to cite as the cause of his disaster. He figures out an unlikely rational explanation for this phenomenon...

This would seem to be the whole story of the black cat. But no, in the manner of dreams which haunt the dreamer over again, there is a recrudescence of the black cat—the narrator becomes aware, in a gin mill one night, of *another* black cat, sitting atop a barrel, whose provenience no one knows. This creature attaches itself *to him*, follows him home, and he becomes aware that it is the spitting image of Pluto, even

to its lacking one eye. His wife is delighted with the new cat, but he notices that a splotch of white hair on its breast grows in time to resemble the outline of a *gallows*. Pluto habitually climbs, claws embedded in its master's clothing, 'to my breast.' At such times, he says, 'although I longed to destroy it with one blow, I was yet withheld from so doing...by absolute *dread* of the beast.'

One day, with his wife he goes down the steep cellar stairs on some errand. The cat follows, nearly tripping him headlong. In exasperation he grabs an axe and raises it, 'forgetting in my wrath the childish dread...' His wife impulsively tries to stay his hand (her Imp of the Perverse?). 'Goaded by this interference into a rage more than demoniacal, I withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain.'... Is the narrator overcome with remorse, prostrated with grief? Does he weep, does he lament the terrible accident? Not at all. 'This hideous murder accomplished, I set myself forthwith, and with entire deliberation, to the task of concealing the body.' This hideous *murder!* As though he can now admit it had been his unacknowledged purpose all along. How more plainly, without violating the dynamics of his tale, could Poe have told us that from the first the cat had been but a displacement of the wife!

Now the murderer, methodical as the madman who smothered the old fellow with the ever-watchful eye, must contrive to dispose of the body. As had that other youth, he considers 'cutting the corpse into minute fragments'; like him, this murderer also thinks of putting the parts beneath the floorboards. But no, he chooses instead (like Montresor) 'to wall it up in the cellar.' And this he neatly does. Now he notices that the cat is nowhere to be seen. 'It is impossible to describe, or to imagine, the deep, the blissful sense of relief which the absence of the detested creature occasioned in my bosom. It did not make its appearance during the night.' Which creature? Is it the cat whose absence by night delights his bosom with blissful relief? Not a word does he say of his feelings at the simultaneous disappearance from his bed and bosom of his wife. Well may we understand the tranquillity of this narrator's sleep when with one blow he has removed from his life both the real and the surrogate source of his terror."

Daniel Hoffman  
"The Marriage Group"  
*Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe Poe*  
(Vintage 1985)

Michael Hollister (2014)