

The concluding scene of The Black Cat is the climax to a narrative that has produced a combination of profound and disturbing emotions in the reader¹. Sheer terror and horrified revulsion, accompanied by an awe-filled sense of perplexity, are the most important emotions aroused by the bizarre and horrifying sequence of events which culminates in the narrator's revelation of the corpse of his murdered wife. This, he thought, had been carefully concealed behind a wall in his cellar:

When I was finished, I felt satisfied that all was right. The wall did not present the slightest appearance of having been disturbed. The rubbish on the floor was picked up with the minutest care. I looked around triumphantly... (146)²

This sense of accomplishment subsequently evolves into a "glee...too strong to be restrained" (148) that is based upon his conviction that the hiding place which he has chosen is inscrutable. Out of a burning desire to say something "by way of triumph" (148) to the policemen, he points out, in a "phrenzy of bravado" (148)), the sound construction of the house by rapping forcibly upon the very wall that conceals the corpse. This action produces an effect that is extraordinary in its terrifying unearthliness, an effect underscored by the use of alliteration and assonance: they hear an "utterly anomalous and inhuman" howl from within the cavity "such as might have arisen only out of hell, conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation" (148).

The reader would undoubtedly share with the policemen a degree of horrified revulsion at the gruesome sight of the "corpse, already greatly decayed and clotted with gore" (148). Because, however, the reader by this point is fully in the know about the murder, the nature of his/her shock is different from the policemen's "extremity of terror and of awe" (148) which is aroused precisely by the startling discovery of the corpse of a missing wife and the proof of her husband's guilt. It is,

rather, the presence of the cat perched on the head of the corpse, with "red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire" (148) that is likely to have the most startling impact upon the reader³. The entombment of the cat represents the culmination of a long chain of uncanny and mysterious events involving "the hideous beast whose craft," according to the narrator, "had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman" (148).

The effect of Poe's diction here in relation to the cat is designed to terrify in its implications of 'other-worldliness'. The narrator explicitly compares its "shriek" (148) to the agonised cries of tormentor and tormented combined in the infernal regions. It is a "hideous beast" that seems to possess both the intelligent capacity for thought (in the design and accomplishment of revenge upon its master) and cunning (with the connotation of witchcraft clearly attached).

The cat(s) is/are enshrouded by an atmosphere of the diabolic and the unusual from early in the tale. Pluto is named after the Greek god of the underworld and a popular superstitious notion about its colour is evoked, even if only to be dismissed: the narrator's wife frequently reminds her husband that black cats are alleged to be witches in disguise, not that "she was ever serious," he hastens to add, "upon this point - and I mention the matter at all for no better reason than that it happens, just now, to be remembered" (141). This notion is an instance of Thought in the Aristotelian sense with important links to the events to follow⁴.

The bizarre nature of the relationship that seems to link the cat to the narrator is most responsible for the reaction of amazed incredulity and fear that the tale invites from the reader⁵. Indeed, the implication of metempsychosis is subtle but clear: it seems to be implied, without ever being explicitly acknowledged, that Pluto's spirit transmigrates into a Pluto Mark II that is some weird way ultimately responsible for bringing its own and its mistress' murderer to justice. This is done in

a way that recalls Poe's insistence upon the necessity in "The Raven" of precisely that "suggestiveness...some undercurrent, however indefinite, of meaning" (while remaining always "within the limits of the accountable - of the Real" (PC, 491)) that is so integral to this tale's effect⁶. It is precisely this tantalising, ambiguously suggestive admixture of the plausible and the inexplicable extending right up to the very end which provokes that incertitude which is characteristic of the genre of the fantastic, according to Todorov (1973)⁷.

The Black Cat begins, significantly, in the present, on the eve of the narrator's execution, before proceeding to recount the crucial succession of events that have lead up to this moment. The "Horror" (140) provoked here by those "events that have terrified - have tortured - have destroyed me" (140) (there is a crescendo of intensity in the breathless proximity of these three verbs) in bringing him to this point is at least the equal of the dread which his impending execution inspires. This dread recurs at subsequent points in the narrative when, for example, the marked change in the shape of the patch of white fur on the second cat recalls the fate that awaits him in the present:

It was now the representation of an object that I shudder to name - and for this, above all, I loathed, and dreaded, and would have rid myself of the monster had I dared - it was now, I say, the image of a hideous - of a ghastly thing - of the GALLOWS! - oh, mournful and terrible engine of Horror and of Crime - of Agony and of Death! (145).

The ghastly tone of Poe's diction, here and throughout the tale, is calculated to stress the shuddering terror and loathing that the animal inspires in the narrator in the light of what comes to pass.

The narrator's very first sentence underscores his own perplexity as well as the potential for disbelief in the "wild" yet "homely" (140) narrative which he is about to pen. These are events in which he does not expect anyone to believe since, as he puts it, this is a "case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet mad I am not-and very surely do I not dream" (140). In spite of the

latter assertion that he is certain he is not suffering from some sort of delusion, he goes on to express the hope that some less impassioned intellect, one less afflicted with "awe" (140) than his own, will be able to see in what he characterises as his "phantasm" (140) an "ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects" (140).

In what, at first glance, appears to be a confession, an "unburthening" (140) of a guilty soul on the eve of execution, the narrator is clearly more eager to place the events that have terrified him so utterly by their very inexplicability into some sort of rational perspective than to express remorse or dread:

"My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events" (140). There is an implicit set of assumptions underlying all this that might be included under the rubric of Thought and which gestures to what Barthes might call a code of scientific enquiry reflecting that nineteenth-century rationalist spirit eager to see even seemingly supernatural phenomena as scientifically explicable⁸. The narrator's quandary is precisely how to reconstruct the logic of those experiences that have evidently befallen him without making them seem as "terrible" and as "awe"-inspiring (140) as his own imagination urges him to.

This code recurs elsewhere. For example, in the wake of the "conflagration" (143) that destroys all the narrator's "worldly wealth" (143), he takes pains to underscore that he is "above the weakness of seeking to establish a sequence of cause and effect, between the disaster and the atrocity" (143) that he had inflicted upon Pluto earlier the same day. He continues, somewhat apologetically, that he is simply "detailing a chain of facts" and does not want "to leave even a possible link imperfect" (143).

It is difficult for the reader not to feel a sense of fearful wonder similar to that of the crowd

assembled before the strange image that has appeared upon the wall at the head of what was the narrator's bed:

The words `strange!' `singular!' and other similar expressions, excited my curiosity. I approached and saw, as if graven in bas relief upon the white surface, the figure of a gigantic cat. The impression was given with an accuracy truly marvellous. There was a rope about the animal's neck. (143)

Although his "wonder and terror were extreme" (143), he settles upon an explanation that, although purporting to be more reasonable, seems at the very least as improbable: to wit, the cat, thrown in by someone in the crowd outside in order to alert the sleeping inhabitants, was compressed by falling walls into "the substance of the freshly-spread plaster; the lime of which, with the flames, and the ammonia from the carcass, had then accomplished the portraiture as I saw it" (143-4). The more the narrator overtly tries to discount the element of the "marvellous" in what has happened, the more he seems to underscore its likelihood.

Although this hypothesis is not entirely incredible, it would seem to demand (the scientific trappings notwithstanding) an exertion of belief at least on par with any effort to account for what has happened by reference to the supernatural. It serves, in the final analysis, to highlight precisely that function of the fantastic which is to stress ambiguity by virtue of the difficulty of choosing between either a scientific or supernatural version of the facts. The proof of this is that, despite the narrator's best efforts to reason thus, the apparition "did not the less fail to make a deep impression upon my fancy" (144). Even as the narrator insists that the events manifest purely naturalistic causes and effects, his own narrative seems to call attention to the fact that the chain of events evades a decisive interpretation.

Whatever the explanation for these events, they are, to the narrator's mind, connected and

proceed swiftly and inexorably to his present deplorable situation⁹. The plot of The Black Cat is complex, rather than simple (in Aristotle's sense of these terms), in that the narrator may be said to undergo a change of fortune from happiness to sheer "wretchedness" (145) which, far from being single and continuous, includes the reversal in his fortune that we have already seen occurs at the most crucial moment of the action.

If a plot, broadly speaking, may be seen as a movement from one state of equilibrium to another via a state of disequilibrium, it is clear that the plot begins with the presentation of a stable and rather pleasant scenario that, however, implicitly contains the seeds for its own undoing. The narrator emphasises the qualities of "docility and humanity" (140) that were the hallmark of a happy youth surrounded by animals for whom he felt a great fondness. His character¹⁰ at this stage is certainly virtuous and admirable, the only detectable flaw being what might be described as an excess of the particular qualities involved. His own words hint at this when he says that his "tenderness of heart was even so conspicuous as to make me the jest of my companions" (141) and when he alludes to his preference for animals over humans as a "peculiarity of character" (141):

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. (141)

The hints, left deliberately and menacingly vague here, of a certain imbalance in his personal relationships and of a misanthropic withdrawal from normal human society point forward to his future "hatred of all things and of all mankind" (145).

An initially happy domestic situation married to a woman who shares his "partiality" (141) for animals eventuates in the acquisition of (in italics, significantly) "a cat" (141), in particular, whose colour and astonishing "intelligence" (141) elicits the wife's superstitious comment noted above. It

will be the only animate object, including humans, granted a name in the story in a way that merely serves to underline the singular importance of the cat to the narrator's account. The mention of the intense bond that binds cat to narrator at this stage (he "alone fed him" (142), we are told, and it followed him everywhere) merely serves to accentuate the horrendous nature of the atrocities to be inflicted upon the cat later.

A "radical alteration for the worse" (142) occurs in the narrator's "general temperament and character" (142) which he attributes to the alcoholism that he personifies demonically as the "Fiend Intemperance" (142). He will use, significantly, similar metaphors to describe the cat, as we have seen. This is the occasion for another brief but important thought - "what disease is like alcohol!" (142)¹¹. The narrator explicitly blames it for his increasingly moody and irritable behaviour and his use of both intemperate language and violence to his wife, his pets and "at length even Pluto" (142) (for which he tries to offer something of an excuse: the cat is becoming old and peevish, we are told). The order in which he lists the objects of his abuse, culminating in his maltreatment of the prized Pluto, underlines both the degree and the swift momentum of his deterioration.

The cat's mutilation is a logical, even probable (albeit undeniably horrifying) consequence of this. Again, he attempts to displace responsibility for this onto alcohol and the behaviour of the cat itself. One night, upon the narrator's return home in an intoxicated state, the cat (which he fancies was avoiding him), bites him on the hand when he handles it too roughly:

The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fieudish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame. I took from my waistcoat-pocket a pen-knife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket! I blush, I burn, I shudder, while I pen the damnable atrocity [my emphases]. (142)

The almost matter-of-fact and understated way in which he describes the actual mutilation is designed to highlight, by contrast, the emotive language that is used to underscore the culpability of his alcoholism. He paints his rage as the effect of something akin to demonic possession, his diction underscoring the heightened intensity of his emotional state through the alliteration in the third sentence of the letter `f ("fiendish", "fibre", "frame") and the use of "thrilled" to denote the nervous tremor of excitement that passes through his being. The perhaps unintended effect of this, however, is precisely to magnify the horrendous nature of the atrocity he has committed. Indeed, any revulsion that the narrator feels is apparent only in retrospect as he writes this account and is underlined by the hard consonant sounds of the letters `b' and `d' in the final sentence which serve also to amplify the reader's own feelings of abhorrence.

The narrator's sentiments of "horror" mixed with "remorse" (142) were, by his own admission, "at best, a feeble and equivocal feeling, and the soul remained untouched" (142). He immediately tries to drown the memory of what he has done in wine. The cat recovers but shrinks, understandably, "in extreme terror" (142) from its master's approach. The initial hurt aroused by its "evident dislike" (142) gives way to increasing irritation. Finally, he senselessly hangs it "in cool blood" (143), fully aware of the lack of any justification for so doing as well as the nature of the consequences that it entails for his own soul. He states, making no reference to the influence of alcohol, that he

hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart; - hung it because I knew that it had loved me, and because I felt it had given me no reason of offence; -hung it because I knew that I was committing a sin that would so jeopardise my immortal soul as to place it - if such a thing were possible - even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God. (143)

The extent of the moral deterioration of the narrator's character is fully apparent in his conscious

decision to destroy the cat, fully cognizant of the ethical dimensions of the act and in violation of every humane principle that he formerly held dear with regard to animals. He opts for a path which, he emphasises at least twice, must lead to his "final and irrevocable overthrow" (142), impelled by what he terms the "spirit of PERVERSENESS" (142) that is one of "the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of Man" (142).

The narrator's thoughts on the nature of this motivation is, once again, a means to absolve himself of responsibility. There is, he suggests, a mechanism in the human psyche that induces one to do wrong for wrong's sake, an impulse that leads ultimately to self-destruction:

Have we not a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best judgment, to violate that which is LAW...this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself - to offer violence to its own nature - to do wrong for the wrong's sake only (143).

One thing seems clear, however, in all this: the narrator is fully aware of the unethical nature of his action.

We have already seen to what extent the narrator's eagerness to dismiss any causal connection between the atrocity, the ensuing fire that destroys his home and the "apparition" (143) of the hanged cat merely serves to highlight the probability of such a connection. The narrator's subsequent adoption, out of a "sentiment that seemed, but was not, remorse" (144), of a cat that he finds in a "den for more than infamy" (144) is uncanny in the singularity both of its occurrence and its consequences for the narrator. It is bizarre, for example, that the landlord does not know where it came from, never having seen it before. In the light of previous experience, it is not surprising to learn shortly after that the cat's "evident fondness" (144) for the narrator increases in proportion to the latter's aversion, quickly turns into a source of "disgust and annoyance" (144) (it, not insignificantly from the point of view of what happens later, would often nearly trip him up) and culminates in a

difficult to define sense of "dread" (145) that, more than any memory of the atrocity, serves to restrain his impulse to harm it.

The precise reason why he comes to flee its "odious presence" (144) with "unutterable loathing" (144) is mentioned with the casualness of an afterthought: "What added to my hatred of the beast, was the discovery...it also had been deprived of one of its eyes" (144), a startling point of resemblance (which only endears it to his wife). This is held back for four or five paragraphs perhaps in order to downplay its significance in keeping with the narrator's stated preference to see a natural causality in the events related. The inference of transmigration (in the cat's almost total resemblance to Pluto), however, gestures to certain underlying assumptions that may also be considered as Thought: Silverman (1993) argues that whether by metempsychosis, mesmerism or sheer 'unkillableness', death is frequently subverted in Poe's tales. His preoccupation with death (and what lies beyond it) records

how anxiously he wrestled with broader nineteenth-century questionings about the ultimate fate of the self in the wake of the collapse of traditional Christianity, trying...to find plausible alternatives for long-held religious beliefs. (23)

His "terror and horror" (145) is heightened by the resemblance of the splotch of white fur to a gallows. This may well be, he seeks to imply, the product of his imagination, "one of the merest chimaeras" (145), that "for a long time my Reason struggled to reject as fanciful" (145)).

The narrator is henceforth deprived of all "Rest" (145) by a beast seemingly intent upon tormenting him by fashioning "insufferable woe" (145): At night,

I started hourly, from dreams of unutterable fear, to find the hot breath of the thing upon my face, and its vast weight - an incarnate Night-Mare that I had no power to shake off - incumbent eternally upon my heart! (145)

He explicitly links this behaviour to the cat's predecessor that he "had so contemptuously destroyed"

(145). Under the pressure of such deliberately nightmarish torments, the narrator claims (once more in order to palm off responsibility for his actions), the "feeble remnant of the good within" him succumbs to "the darkest and most evil of thoughts" (145). He becomes increasingly subject to "ungovernable outbursts of a fury" to which he "blindly abandoned" (145) himself, the seemingly inevitable outcome of which is the vicious murder of his wife. Exasperated almost to "madness" (146), one day, by the fact that the cat nearly throws him down the stairs, he directs a blow that his wife arrests whereupon, goaded "by the interference, into a rage more than demoniacal" (146), he lodges the axe in her brain. The 'insanity' with which he was inflicted seems to be only temporary, however, as he, "with entire deliberation" (146), casts about for the means to conceal what he has done: "cutting the corpse into minute fragments" (146) is only one of the macabre alternatives which he considers.

The narrator attributes the "deep, the blissful sense of relief" (147) that he subsequently feels and the fact that he was able to sleep, "even with the burden of murder" (147) upon his soul, to the cat's absence. His supreme happiness (he confesses that the "guilt of my dark deed disturbed me but little" (147)) and his conviction in his own invincibility and the assurance of his "future felicity" (147) are destined to be short-lived, however: his sense of "triumph" (148) is quickly and rudely reversed in the way that we have seen leads to his presence in the "felon's cell" (145).

The sense of poetic justice that the conclusion affords is responsible in large measure for a cathartic dissolution of the extreme feelings of revulsion that the narrator's confession evokes in the reader. A gratifying sense that a brutal murderer has in the final analysis received his just desserts, the satisfying perception that it is the very same spirit of perverseness responsible for his hanging of the cat which ultimately proves his own undoing and the recognition that the role of the cat in the

gruesome discovery of the wife's corpse is in some way fitting cooperate to defuse those emotions of horror. In the final analysis, moreover, it may very well be precisely that quality of the fantastic in the tale, the inability to ultimately decide upon a supernatural interpretation of these events, which may serve finally to mitigate the full force of the reader's terrified awe.

The "Homely, the "Wild" and the Horror of "Mere Household Events":

The Aristotelian **Poe**-etics of The Black Cat.

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ENDNOTES

1. It was Poe's view that in "the brief prose tale, the soul of the reader is at the writer's control" ("Nathaniel Hawthorne" (henceforth **H**), 153)). To achieve this end, he argued that it was vital for the writer to decide upon one of "the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible" ("The Philosophy of Composition" (henceforth **PC**), 480). Having decided upon the desired effect, it was then the writer's responsibility to ensure, through a process of working backwards (a kind of a posteriori reasoning), that every element of the entire composition tended, directly or indirectly, to "the one preestablished design" (153). In this sense, the work of art, he argued, "may be said to have its beginning - at the end where all works of art should begin" (**PC**, 487).

2. All page references are to The Annotated Tales of Edgar Allan Poe.

3. One commentator, at least, has thought that the emphasis on the mouth's colour implies that the cat survived by feeding on the corpse which, if this is the case, could only underline the gruesomeness of the discovery (see Badenhause (1992)).

4. See Aristotle: Thought (Dianoia) "comes out in what they [characters] say when they are proving a point or expressing an opinion" (39). It is the "ability to say what is possible and appropriate in any given circumstances" (41). Together with character, it is one of "the two natural causes of actions, and it is on them that all men depend for success or failure" (39).

5. See Lovecraft's (1973) definition of the "weird tale" (15): "The one test of the really weird is simply this - whether or not there be excited in the reader a profound sense of dread, and of contact with unknown spheres and powers; a subtle attitude of awed listening, as if for the beating of black wings or the scratching of outside shapes and entities on the known universe's utmost rim" (16).

6. Compare this to Aristotle's view that the tragic effects of pity and fear are heightened when "things happen logically as well as unexpectedly, for then they will be more remarkable than if they seem merely mechanical or accidental...even chance occurrences seem most remarkable when they have the appearance of having been brought about by design" (45).

7. Todorov contends that the fantastic is "that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature,

confronting an apparently supernatural event" (25). This hesitation is frequently experienced by a character with whose reaction the reader's own response is integrated: "the reader's role is so to speak entrusted to the character" (33). If the reader decides that the event may be accounted for by the laws of reason, it is clear that such an event may be "incredible, extraordinary, shocking, singular, disturbing or unexpected" (46) but, in the final analysis, rationally explicable by reference to previous experience. In such a case, (s)he is in the realm of the uncanny, the past being the tense predominantly associated with the uncanny. Conversely, if the reader decides that there is no alternative to a supernatural explanation, then (s)he is in the realm of the marvellous or the supernatural and dealing with unknown phenomena, never before seen and thus still to come in the future. The realm of the fantastic, for Todorov, occupies precisely that duration of uncertainty about which choice to make, a hesitation that cannot be situated except in the present.

8. In his "Textual Analysis: Poe's 'Valdemar'", Barthes sees the text not as "a finished closed product, but as a production in progress, 'plugged' into other texts, other codes (this is the intertextual), and thereby articulated with society and history in ways which are not determinist but citational" (172). Barthes argues that "the mixture of the strange and the scientific had its high-point in the part of the nineteenth century to which Poe, broadly speaking, belongs: there was a great enthusiasm for observing the supernatural scientifically" (177).

9. Note Aristotle's strictures on the proper plot-length to be observed as being that which, "as a matter either of probability or necessity, allows of a change from misery to happiness" (42) (or vice-versa) to be easily held in memory. Poe agrees that a certain brevity is essential for the attainment of a unified effect: "A poem is such, only inasmuch as it intensely excites, by elevating the soul; and all intense excitements are, through a psychal necessity, brief" (PC, 482).

Poe suggests that it is the writer's task, having decided upon the particular effect desired, to "look about (or rather within) for such combinations of event, or tone, as shall best aid me in the construction of that effect" (481). By keeping what Poe calls the denouement constantly in view, the plot is given its "indispensable air of consequence or causation" (480). Compare this to Aristotle, who argues that the tragic emotions of pity and fear "take their rise from the very structure of the action", being entirely "bound up with the events of the plot" (49). Plot is the "ordered arrangement of the incidents" (39), a "sequence of events" that because it is both "probable and necessary" implies a certain "continuity" (45). Consequently, the removal of any particular episode from what is essentially a sequence of causes and effects will disrupt the effect of wholeness.

10. Aristotle defines character thus: "all people differ in their moral nature according to the degree of their goodness or badness" (33). Character is "that which reveals personal choice, the kinds of things a man chooses or rejects" (41), and "enables us to define the nature of the participants" (39). Aristotle suggests that the greatest pity and fear is evoked in tragedy by the representation of the sort of man who is "not conspicuous for virtue and justice" but whose "fall into misery is not due to vice and depravity, but rather some error" (48) or miscalculation.

11. This tale, Matheson (1986) argues, bears much resemblance to the first-person confessional narratives of so-called Temperance Literature that were popular around the time that Poe was writing this tale. In these, the drunkard proceeds to recount the monstrous actions that he committed while under the spell of alcohol. The effect of these was to make the alcohol-abuser seem more sinned against than sinning. Temperance Literature sought to depict alcoholism as a medical rather than a moral issue by representing it as a disease and not as the result of a deliberate decision to do evil.