

Demons or Decisions

Reflections on Poe's "The Black Cat"

Ever since Eve gave in to temptation in the Garden of Eden and chose wrong over right, mankind has identified with her struggle. Following her pattern, ***"the serpent made me eat..."*** we have given in to the forces that cause us to blame other people, things, or circumstances for problems or sins. When carried to extremes, blame shifting can cause a person to lose his conscience until his thoughts and actions are of evil continually. Edgar Allen Poe, a master of the dark side of humanity, illustrates this concept in his horrifying tale, "The Black Cat." Step by step the narrator chooses the path of evil until he is finally overcome by "the spirit of perverseness" and ultimately destroyed.

We first meet the condemned narrator in his cell claiming that his downfall resulted from a common chain of events. ***"I detail with awe, nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects."*** He had been a man who loved animals and had married a woman who shared this love. They soon accumulated many pets including a cat named Pluto, ***"a remarkably large and beautiful animal, entirely black, and sagacious to an astonishing degree."*** This cat became the favorite pet, but the developing closeness began to annoy the man until he tortured and finally murdered the black cat. ***"One morning, in cold blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree; hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes and with the bitterest remorse at my heart; hung it because I knew that is so doing I was committing a sin –a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul..."*** Immediately after this, a fire burned the house down leaving a grisly reminder of the murder. ***"I...saw, as if graven in bas relief upon the white surface, the figure of a gigantic cat...There was a rope around the animal's neck."*** Acquisition, annoyance, annihilation. He chronicles these as mere cause and effect.

Then, almost magically, a new cat enters the narrator's life, a cat that like Pluto, had been deprived of one of its eyes. One day when the cat accidentally tripped him, he flew into a rage so intense that he was attempting to brutalize the cat with an axe. When his wife tried to restrain him he killed her. ***"...Goaded by the interference into a rage more than demoniacal, I withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain..."*** In the final episode of these "circumstances," however, and after he had buried his wife in the cellar wall, the cat seemed to expose the deed. ***"The corpse, already greatly decayed and clotted with gore, stood erect before the eyes of the spectators. Upon its head, with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder..."*** Thus the cat becomes the force to blame in this "simple chain of events."

Yet woven into this chain of events was another excuse. ***"...for what disease is like alcohol."*** His new cat had been discovered sitting on a hogshead, or large barrel of gin or rum. We are led to believe that alcohol caused, or at least exacerbated, the narrator's tempers. Without gin, ***"the furniture of his apartment"*** we might suppose the grisly murders might never have materialized.

The strongest and most frightening link to this chain of madness, however, was what the narrator himself explained as *“the spirit of perverseness, the vexing of a soul upon itself, the harming of the most innocent of creatures, doing wrong for wrong’s sake alone.”* This, more than all else, emerged as the motivation for murder and destruction. *“And then came, as if to my final and irrevocable overthrow, the spirit of perverseness. Of this spirit philosophy takes no account. Yet I am not more sure that my soul lives, than I am that perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart...”* The downward spiral was almost complete. The narrator had deliberately given himself over to the fiend, but this fiend was not the cat marked with the gallows, nor was it merely alcohol. It was his hard and perverse heart.

Mankind is and has always been involved in a struggle with the forces of darkness. Today we still offer multitudes of excuses for our evil actions. The horror of this tale, however, is the knowledge that the chain that links us to humanity and to God can break. We can excuse and indulge our anger and selfishness, watching evil overtake our souls until we are lost completely. Poe’s tale of the black cat, aptly named Pluto, offers a symbol for the struggle between good and evil and is a gruesome warning to us all.

*I wrote this piece in 1990 as an example for students of a literary essay using quotes from the text as support. I’d like for you to edit it using **Having a Writing Conference with Yourself** and/or **Looking for that je na sais quoi** a guide. After you’ve had time to grade the teacher’s early work, we will discuss the high and low points and learn positive lessons for writing as well as a lesson for life. Make your notes in this space below.*