

The tell tale heart and the black cat



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The Tell-Tale Heart and the Black Cat

Overwhelming obsession and guilt often lead to deadly consequences. In “ The Tell-Tale Heart” and “ The Black Cat,” Edgar Allan Poe presents us with two men who each commit brutal murders motivated by overwhelming obsession. The narrators differ in their dispositions but fall victim to the same circumstances. The narrator of “ The Tell-Tale Heart” takes pride in the cunningness of his deed and that he is able to recount it with extreme calmness despite his usually nervous state, whereas the narrator of “ The Black Cat” is haunted so horribly by his guilt that he tries to erase the whole event from his memory. Even though the murders are very different—one premeditated, one spurred on by a temporary rage—both narrators are haunted by their dark deeds. As a result of the guilt these two men feel, they ultimately give in to their self-destructive tendencies and cause their own downfall. In the “ Tell-Tale Heart,” the narrator is characterized by his oblivious approach to his own madness. “ In a vain effort to prove his sanity by detailing how carefully he planned the gruesome deed, the narrator makes it abundantly clear from the first that he is dangerously deranged” (Howard). Challenging the reader to call him mad only serves to make him seem more insane. He also makes it very clear that he holds nothing but love in his heart for the old man but was driven to the deed “ because he was tormented beyond distraction by the old man’s eye.” This shows that the narrator does not lack simple human compassion, but that his obsession with the “ Evil Eye” is driving him to madness. “ Upon close examination, a sadomasochistic element emerges” (Pritchard). The narrator decides to kill the old man and describes “ with obvious pleasure how calculating he set about to do it” (Howard). Even when he’s about to kill the old man, he takes so much pleasure in the old man’s

fear that he “ may well have laughed.” The reader is aware that the narrator has empathy for the man he’s about to kill: “ the old man groaned slightly and the narrator knew that it was the sound of one overcome by deathly fear, for he too had experienced that terror deep in the night.” But, the narrator goes on to say, “ I knew what the old man felt, and pitied him, although I chuckled at heart.” This narrator’s pleasure-driven nature makes the murder only too easy. With extreme calm he dismembers the body and conceals it under the floorboards, making it impossible for anyone to know of the murder. However, like the narrator of “ The Black Cat”, he is unable to accept that he has gotten away with the deed, and ultimately condemns himself.“ The Black Cat,” not unlike “ The Tell-Tale Heart,” deals with a narrator who battles with deception, both of himself and the reader. “ Despite the narrator’s explicit claim of sanity in the story’s first paragraph, he immediately shows himself self deceived by terming his story ‘ a series of mere household events.’” He deceives himself by playing down the murder of his wife, while making the cruelty to his favorite pet more than he can bear. The narrator begins his tale by describing his early love of animals. “ His early reference to admiring the ‘ unselfish and self-sacrificing love’ of animals reveals the narrator’s blindness; ironically, his scornful words, ‘ the paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere Man,’ apply to himself.” This shows that, unlike the narrator of “ The Tell-Tale Heart,” he has a deficiency when it comes to human compassion and love. While he references his love of his cat, he never makes note of loving his wife. Indeed, he admits “ and dimly perceive[s] that he ha[s] lost the ‘ humanity of feeling’ that his wife retained.” Thus the narrator’s wife becomes a force of good that he must destroy. Also, it seems that this narrator feels guilt and disgust at his deed,

even though he will not admit it to himself. “ Sheer emphasis or proportion in the story—the great number of words he spends on the cats contrasted with the brevity of his remarks about the maltreatment and murder of his wife—indicates the deficiency in both the narrator’s insight and his feelings.” He is blind to the fact that his guilt caused him to put off mentioning his greatest transgression, the murder of his wife, until the very end. It is apparent that the guilt the narrator will not allow himself to feel is the reason he cannot allow himself to get away with the murder. “ When the brick wall is broken down, the black cat is found perched on the corpse’s head, one more indication of the narrator’s guilt and its cause”(Prinsky). The narrator cannot bear to relive what he has done, so he breaks down and confesses to the whole thing. Despite the great differences between the two narrators, they share one common characteristic: a suicidal or self-destructive nature. In “ The Tell-Tale Heart” as the police are questioning the narrator and as he is quite sure they have no idea what has transpired “ he then hear[s] what sound[s] very much like the old man’s heart beating again, and he bec[omes] very anxious, talking loudly and moving about the room, hoping that the police w[ill] not hear the heartbeat.” In his nervousness, he cannot see that it is not the old man’s heart, but his own betraying him. Finally, overwrought with the guilt of what he had done “ he admitt[s] to his crime and urge[s] them to tear up the boards and uncover that hideous heart.” The narrator’s suicidal nature shines through also with his obsession with the eye: “ The narrator destroys the ‘ evil eye,’ thus ensuring his own destruction, or incarceration at least.” Also, while he is murdering the old man, he betrays himself by yelling. “ Fearful that the neighbors would hear the heartbeat growing increasing louder, the anxious maniac yells as he

bludgeons the old man, and the neighbors certainly heard that” (Howard). The narrator seemingly sabotages or punishes himself because of the guilt he will not allow himself to feel. In “ The Black Cat” the situation with a self-destructive narrator is very evident. The events at the end are exactly the same as in “ The Tell-Tale Heart”: the police come to question, the narrator feels proud that he will get away with his crime out of the sheer cunningness of his concealment, and then there is the betrayal. “ As they [the police] are about to leave the cellar, the narrator, apparently with taunting bravado but really with unconscious guilt that seeks to delay them so he may be arrested and punished, remarks to them on the solidity of the house’s walls, rapping with a cane the very spot of the concealed tomb.” The narrator, while he doesn’t confess outright to his crime, gives the police one more chance to realize his deed. He is, in a way, punishing himself for the many wrongs he has committed. However, by the end, the narrator is still blinded because he cannot see that it was his own fault. “ Rationalizing to the end, the narrator blames the cat for his misdeeds and capture: ‘ the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman’”(Prinsky). The two narrators in “ The Tell-Tale Heart” and “ The Black Cat” may be very different superficially. One takes delight in cruelty, one takes pride in his compassion for animals. One carefully plans out his deed so as not to be caught, one carries out his deed in a fit of rage. However, both narrators are completely calm thereafter. They each question the reader, almost daring the reader to say that they are mad. Both narrators succeed in deceiving themselves, but they do not succeed in deceiving the reader. The narrator of “ The Black Cat” has a deficiency in human compassion, while the narrator of “ The Tell-Tale Heart” says freely

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that he loved his victim. But, they have one major characteristic in common—both men, set on punishing themselves, completely destroy any chance they have at a life or at freedom. Works Cited Howard, Ronald W. “ The Tell-Tale Heart”. Masterplots II: Short Story Series, Revised Edition Copyright 2004 by Salem Press, Inc. Prinsky, Norman. “ The Black Cat”. Masterplots II: Short Story Series, Revised Edition Copyright 2004 by Salem Press, Inc. Pritchard, Hollie. “ Poe’s The Tell-Tale Heart.(Critical Essay).” The Explicator 61. 3 (Spring 2003): 144(4). InfoTrac OneFile. Thomson Gale. Central Virginia Community College. 23 July 2006