

The unpredictable  
map: unreliable  
narration in "the black  
cat"



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

When you are trying to find treasure, you follow the map. When you read a story, you listen to the narrator. Once you get to the final destination, you might not find treasure, a disappointment which would mean that you had a deceptive map. Similarly, the events might not come out to be as you predicted, so the narrator would be unreliable. You have to dig deep in the ground so that you can find out if the treasure is truly there. In the same way, as a reader, you have to dig deeper and read critically to figure out whether the narrator is reliable or not. “ The Black Cat” by Edgar Allan Poe concerns a narrator who is telling the reader his story about how he ended up where he is: in jail. It all starts when he gets a cat named Pluto that loves him until it gets abused which leads to many other horrific events. It becomes obvious that the narrator has no conscience because Poe reveals the type of character he really is. In “ The Black Cat,” the narrator indicates many signs of being unreliable, as he makes the reader question which details to believe, denies being insane, and states how he became perverse. To start off, the narrator starts to tell the reader his story with some details that might, in and of themselves, not be trustworthy. He begins to inform the reader what the story is about by stating that his story is “ without comment, a series of mere household events” (Poe 3). This means that the events that follow up to explain his situation are absolutely normal and relatable for others. While reading, the reader remembers this and discovers that that is not the case, and ordinary events are not told. Additionally, the narrator blames one and only one thing for the cause of all the situations he has been in: alcohol. He said, “ But my disease grew upon me – for what disease like Alcohol” took over and made him ill-tempered (Poe 5). The night that he was

intoxicated, Pluto bites the narrator which makes the narrator furious who ends up cutting one of Pluto's eyes out. With many events like that, the reader can judge his actions and conclude that alcohol was not the cause of every problem. Instead, it was the root of his downfall and led to all the bad habits he ended up with. Even if it did cause every problem, the reader cannot trust everything that is narrated because he was probably not in his senses and half of his story would just be assumptions. In general, many statements are false, but the narrator mentions them to convince the reader to believe him.

Moreover, another thing the narrator does is claim that he is not mentally ill right at the beginning. He had to say, " Yet mad am I not - and very surely do I not dream" right off the bat because he believes it is essential that the reader should be able to trust him since the things he says are abnormal (Poe 3). However, it is an obvious sign that the narrator is insane because of the fact that he is trying to prove that he is not. Even though he just said he is not crazy, the narrator tells the reader " to-morrow I die, and to-day I would unburthen my soul" (Poe 3). He wants to be relieved and begins to confess all of the horrendous crimes that he had committed. This becomes suspicious since it is not expected for him to try and convince the reader of his sincerity after telling them he is going to die for his actions. An implication can be formed about the narrator not delivering the right facts about the circumstances which would inform the reader to disbelieve his words. To sum up, the reader cannot trust the narrator's words as he is mentally unstable and is telling an ambiguous story.

Finally, more unreliability comes from the narrator when he declares that he has become wicked. As time passed, the spirit of Perverseness took over and the narrator defended himself by questioning “ Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or a stupid action, for no reason than because he knows he should not?” (Poe 6). He wanted the reader to have some sympathy because people can do stupid actions because of the same reason, but it was not acceptable. He thought it was okay to hang the cat that had once loved him so much. The reader cannot trust the narrator now because he knew he had committed a crime, but it had not bothered him when doing so. Moreover, he did not have a conscience when he killed his wife and walled her up with pleasure because she seemed like an obstacle. Once he got rid of her, he had admitted “...I soundly and tranquilly slept; aye, slept even with the burden of murder upon my soul” (Poe 13). There was no sign of guilt after he had done something totally unnecessary, but what he had considered worthwhile. The reader cannot believe someone who is a criminal wholeheartedly because none of his actions bothered him. Rather, the narrator was proud of what he had done. In conclusion, the words of a wicked criminal cannot be plausible since that is not sensible.

Overall, the narrator of “ The Black Cat” is not trustworthy because he confuses the reader with his words as he tells the story, states that he is not crazy, and has a natural maliciousness inside of him. He reveals statements about him that could be beneficial because the reader could believe him. The narrator also denies that he is mentally ill even though he is getting punished for his crimes. His crimes were an effect of his soul being evil. His actions were not morally right, but he did not even feel guilty. The reader

can infer all of this about the narrator because they dig deep into the story to figure it out. So the next time you read, make sure you dig all the way, because you may not have a foolproof map to the real state of affairs; you could be dealing with an unreliable madman of a narrator.