

# Psychological mindsets in the black cat, my last duchess

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The reality of life is that at some point it will all come to an end. End, one referencing it to when one is pronounced dead. Since death is unavoidable, we must take into account death because it is the finalization of our lives spent on this earth as well as an account of the way we left this world. There are numerous ways that one can leave this world, some die peacefully while others may die by force.

The following will reveal the psychological mindsets concerning death as depicted in Poe's "The Black Cat", Browning's "My Last Duchess", and Dickinson's "Because I could not Stop for Death", and the ramifications of perverseness, pride, and eternity. In "The Black Cat," Poe uses perverseness to explain the narrator's pursuit to murder Pluto, the black cat, and eventually his wife. The narrator had once loved animals, but alcoholism contributed to his change of temperament and irritableness, which led to the abuse of his pets and his wife.

His reasoning for gouging Pluto's eyes out, and then murdering the animal was because it loved him as he rejected it. The narrator had a sense of self-loathing and self-hatred that made him want to continue doing wrong to Pluto, which we identify to be: This spirit of perverseness, I say, came to my final overthrow. It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself-to offerviolenceto its own nature- to do wrong for the wrong's sake only- that urged me to continue finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute (Poe 138).

After the death of Pluto, another cat who resembles Pluto, but with an added splotch of white fur becomes the narrators' new pet, which fills the void of

the narrator's loss of Pluto. The new cat begins to disgust the narrator: " By slow degrees these feelings of disgust and annoyance rose into the bitterness of hatred...I came to look upon it with unutterable loathing, and to flee silently from its odious presence, as from the breath of a pestilence"(Poe 140). The narrator doesn't inflict harm on the cat for a while because it reminds him of Pluto and his evil deed.

Although, the narrator feels shame and guilt he is not remorseful of his actions due to his perverse spirit because really: " Evil thoughts became my sole inmates-the darkest and most evil thoughts. The moodiness of my usual temper increased to hatred of all things and all of mankind..." (Poe 141). The narrator's soul, which is full of madness and hatred, led him one day while his wife came with him to run some errands into the cellar, to attack the cat in rage. The cat had somehow made the narrator trip as he followed them into the cellar and this ignited fury from the narrator's soul.

His wife stopped his attempt to hit the cat with an axe and because of his wife's actions, his madness shifted: " Goaded by the interference into a rage more than demoniacal, I withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain" (Poe 141). Poe uses the principle of perverseness in many of his other works as well as " The Black Cat" to portray: " To an ambiguous balancing of forces of attraction and repulsion (the seductive pull towards self destruction)" (Ketterer 28).

This is the reason why the narrator's perverse spirit caused him to murder with not much of a thought of remorse, but that he had committed a deadly sin, in which he found comfort in because what he was doing was leading

him to his own self-destruction. Also, the narrator can be depicted as a victim to his mind, which led him to murder because when one reads Poe's stories there tends to be an account where: "the imaging, then verbal expression create the fiend that overtakes the narrator's reason.... According to the story's analysis of the soul's faculties, the human imagination creates a tangible, readily perceptible being" (Bieganowski 176-177). The narrator can be considered a victim, because the reader can sympathize that he is helpless and sick to the perverse spirit that becomes his nature. The narrator constantly in his mind goes through the continuous tugging between right and wrong and good and evil, till he finally wants it all to stop and in his mind, everything is distorted to do evil, in order to cease the tugging.

In "My Last Duchess," Browning uses the motive of pride to provide the Duke of Ferrara's reasoning for why he has his wife killed. In the beginning of the poem, the Duke of Ferrara is addressing an ambassador, when he brings up a painting on the wall of his last Duchess. As his last Duchess is depicted, the Duke describes her as finding pleasure in the little things and not of the things he gave her. Furthermore she did not value his name nor admire him.

By the start of the poem, the Duke of Ferrara has shown his own insecurities about his last Duchess because he couldn't control her and therefore the picture of her on the wall is now his dominance over her. As the duke talks of his Duchess, her actions in some way displeased him as she did a number of things wrong: "A heart-how shall I say? -too soon made glad, too easily impressed...somehow-I know not how-as if she ranked my gift of a nine-

hundred-years-old name”(Browning 513). The Duke of Ferra is possessive, as well as arrogant and proud in nature.

Due to his character and mania the Duke took everything his Duchess did as an offence because he wasn't in control and so his pride led him to believe: Even had you skill in speech-which I have not-to make your will quite clear to such an one, and say you disgust me; here you miss, or there you exceed the mark-and if she let herself be lessoned so, nor plainly set her wits to yours, forsooth, and made excuse-even then would be some stooping; and I choose never to stoop (Browning 513).

The Duke of Ferra justifies killing his wife before even mentioning that he has had her killed because in the Duke's mind he sees the Duchess' smiles as incriminating. He thinks this because she didn't just smile for him, but others as well, which is one of the jealousies that consumes him. The Duke's jealous and possessive nature arouses his mania to be in complete control of a being, in this case his last Duchess. With all the Duke's frustrations and concerns about his last Duchess off his chest and because of his own sense of pride for her to be what he wanted her to be: “ I gave commands; then all smiles stopped together.

There she stands as if alive” (Browning 513). The Duke refers to his last Duchess as standing there as if she was alive as a means to show his vain character. When the narrator looks at his last Duchess, he doesn't just see in the painting the picture of her, but the painting is just another valued object, in which he is proud to possess. As pride is depicted for why the narrator went so far as to have his last Duchess murdered, the narrator's actions can

be self-evaluated to constitute the emotion of pride that overcame his judgment.

With emotions there is more than the substantial basis to how one feels: “ They are adaptive patterns of behavior arising from a person’s appraised relation to ongoing events... beginning with appraisals of notable changes in an individual’s goals, motives, or concerns (Tangey and Fischer 65-66). From this explanation of emotions, the narrator adapted his sense of pride from his careful watch of his wife as more and more things that she did offended him. The narrator took into consideration every action his wife did from her smiles to her total unawareness of the narrator’s notable name. Also from the explanation of emotions one can understand why the narrator didn’t simply just have his wife murdered swiftly when he was displeased with her the first time. The narrator came to a gradual decision to have his wife murdered because of his emotions of pride and the sense of mania that grew from the displeasure of the ongoing events of his last Duchess, which lead him to believe what he couldn’t control, was a problem.

Therefore, the narrator murders his wife due to the emotion of pride, which is defined: On the basis of a growing literature, we suggest that pride is generated by appraisals that one is responsible for a socially valued outcome or for being a socially valued person. Pride comprises action tendencies to present one’s worthy self or action to others such as a broad smile, beaming face, erect posture, celebratory gestures or comments, and comments that call attention to the self’s accomplishment. Internal reactions include increased heart rate and skin conductance as well as an erratic respiration.

The subjective experience of pride involves an experience of one's body or self as taller, stronger or bigger (Tangey and Fischer 66). In "Because I could not stop for Death," Dickinson uses death to depict a seducing trip to eternity. From the first lines of the poem they predict the courteous and smooth passage from death to a place of eternity: "Because I could not stop for Death- He kindly stopped for me- the Carriage held but just ourselves- And Immortality "(Dickinson 541). The Carriage driver is then depicted as being civil and courteous to the narrator.

As the carriage driver is taking her closer and closer to death, the narrator passes childhood like memories still eventually they stop at her grave: "We passed the school, where Children strove at recess-in the Ring...we passed the Setting Sun- or rather-He passed Us"( Dickinson 541). Then the narrator describes what she is wearing, which is a gossamer, a tippet, and a tulle that shows she is under dressed because she begins to quiver and expresses the sudden chilliness. Then the carriage driver stops. One can imagine it's a stop at the grave for we can conclude that the scenario is now darker and colder.

The narrator uses the description of the house to depict the grave. The whole stop is the actual death of the narrator. The last stanza talks about the horse's head that is pointed to eternity. This last part is in recognition that the narrator is guessing she's headed towards eternity. We can infer that this whole experience for the narrator was a natural occurrence. We can also infer that since the carriage driver was courteous and civil, and created the whole attraction to death, that the narrator is going towards eternity.

Furthermore since death for the narrator was a positive experience we can conclude that she will reach eternity. The occurrence of death in this story is linked to eternity. When one thinks of eternity it is a positive thought to what happens after our death. Therefore the whole experience of the carriage driver taking the narrator to her death had to symbolize the positive place that she would go next. This poem uses the seductive and attractive nature of the carriage driver to lure the narrator to her death, to the point where she doesn't realize that she is dying because it came so naturally.

The carriage driver is the male persona in this poem, because he creates a gentleman like approach to the narrator. To Dickinson death was an important part of many of her works. Emily Dickinson had an obsession for what happens after this life. This is one of the main inspirations for why most of Dickinson poems and stories revolve around death. This poem specifically "Because I could not stop for Death," uses her ideology: "For Dickinson, thought does not stop just because death cannot or does not appear.

Thus the thought-poem proceeds to "figure death out" in at least two ways, both of which rely on narratively precise imagery: one facing death...two the poet enacts through imagery the leap into the unknown of death" (Deppman 3). In "Because I could not stop for Death" Dickinson also uses: This category of personification carries two implications: first, that death becomes positive, becomes a thing or person and not an absence or cessation, and second, that there is a relation of self to another beyond death (Death, the gentleman).



All of the above maybe interpreted as strategies for a " creative" death-into-life approach (Nesteruk 28-29). Death was used in the stories of " The Black Cat," " My Last Duchess," and " Because I could not stop for Death". The psychological mindset of death depicted in each story or poem explained why the narrator or the protagonist acted the way they did. In " The Black Cat," Poe created a narrator whose perverse spirit led him to not only murder his cat, but his wife as well, in this mind debilitating circumstance where the narrator is leading a life towards self-destruction.

In " My Last Duchess," the Duke's pride drove him to murder his last Duchess and possess her as a painting that he is proud to own. In " Because I could not stop for Death," Dickinson uses a carriage drive to seduce the narrator towards her death, then eventually eternity. Works Cited Page \* DiYanni, Robert. Literature: Approaches to Fiction, Poetry, and Drama. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2008. Print. \* Ketterer, David. Edgar Allan Poe Life, Work, and Criticism. Canada: York Press, 1989. Print. \* Tangey, June P. , and Fischer, Kurt W. Self-Conscious Emotions: ThePsychologyof Shame, Guilt. Embarrassment, and Pride. New York: 1995.

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