

Damn cat: the
blasphemous
spirituality of poe's
the black cat



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In the tradition story-telling, few concepts are as popular as supernatural intervention into human life. These interventions typically feature a very familiar, nearly house-hold collection of descriptive forms: angels, demons, invisible kinetic forces, and even nature itself are all used as representations of divinity, and unknowable power. It is the mark of a true master to escape from this gallery of cliché and craft details which make a unique statement; in Edgar Allen Poe's short story *The Black Cat*, so much is accomplished in chilling, gruesome style. For Poe, the Christian concept of God is irrelevant, and he writes from a position of his own morality, in which there is no guardian, no benevolent light to guide souls from the path of darkness. There is only unstoppable, disembodied retribution, as the abuses of the narrator are punished not spiritually, in the next life, but in the present, with shocking violence. Following original sin, in which the narrator slices out one of his beloved cat Pluto's eyes with a pocket knife in repayment of "a slight wound upon the hand" (Poe 30), madness rapidly begets madness, as patterns of destruction invert upon the narrator's life and psyche. The lack of a clear antagonist in the story is essential. Pluto, alcohol, the house fire, and the gallows: distinct events and narrative aspects, each touched by an unspecified element of the supernatural, run together like the frames of a film reel, weaving a concept of spirituality in which evil is not a part of life, but a vast, looming framework in which the trappings of mortal life are but small parts. In *The Black Cat*, horror itself is the only God which Poe recognizes, fear is far from abstract, and morality is enforced not by a righteous, perfect creator, but through vicious twists of madness and fate.

Key to a correct interpretation of this tale is the narrator's devil-may-care regard for the concept of a rational explanation. In his own words, " I am above the weakness of seeking to establish a sequence of cause and effect, between the disaster and the atrocity" (Poe 31). There is no true sensible explanation for the image of the hung cat appearing in the wreckage of the sudden fire, just as there is no true sensible explanation for the mad swings of violent temper the narrator repeatedly experiences. Instead, a reader is forced to turn away from reality, to the world of the extra-sensory, the world of fate, insanity, fortune, and doom. In Poe's imaginings, this second world is every bit as real as the first, fully capable of crossing boundaries of perceptions to leave a damning message on a crumbling wall, the breast of a cat, or at the bottom of a gin bottle. Of course, Poe is not merely a teller of ghost stories and bloody parables; his work *The Black Cat* is notably lacking in any formal theological or mythological structure in which to place the supernatural events which occur. In an ideologically mature literary decision, Poe shuns dogma, be it Christian or even Pagan, in favor of humanity's ultimate boogey-man: the unknown.

In addition, spare moments of irony, hidden between the actions packed lines of this brief tale, do much to illustrate its anti-Christian themes. It is no coincidence the first cat, Pluto, shares a name with the Roman god of the underworld; this parallel emphasizes the strength of superstition over traditional faith. Also, in a quiet instance of reflection following the murder of his wife with an axe, Poe's narrator remarks, " I determined to wall it [the body] up in the cellar - as the monks of the middle ages are recorded to have walled up their victims" (Poe 33). This unusual portrayal of monks as

having victims is not incidental, and the conversational tone serves to underline the sense of inexplicable comfort with which society accepts and overlooks the bloodier aspects of organized religion. Religious individuals themselves are not the only ones to fall under criticism; the essential Christian concept of man as uniquely holy is excellently satirized as the narrator laments, “ A brute beast – whose fellow I contemptuously destroyed – a brute beast to work out for me – for me a man, fashioned in the image of the High God – so much of insufferable wo!” (Poe 32) To conceive of a murderous, raving drunkard as sacrosanct, as being essentially removed by virtue of creation from the abject madness of the animal world, is laughable. Yet, in context, it is an intentionally bad joke, one to be met with quiet horror, eliciting new thought in regards to just what exactly elevates mankind from the cruelty of his environment. That is, if there ever has been any true elevation, at all.

Edgar Allen Poe’s short story *The Black Cat* is a thematically rich, grisly tour-de-force, one in which concepts of alcoholism, vengeance, violence, and fate are tackled in raving triplicate. However, the story’s true brunt is carried in its twin absence of rationality, and of the presence of God. Miracles occur, as mere splotches of white fur change slowly into accusations of murder, but these miracles exist without an established faith to claim responsibility for them. Fear comes alive in *The Black Cat*, mocking the narrator as he builds about himself the house of his own demise. As to what is truly behind it all, Poe offers no answer, only the knowing implication that every choice, once chosen, carries inescapable consequence.

Works Cited Poe, Edgar Allen.

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“ The Black Cat”. Introduction to Literature. Ed. Manya Lempert. Tucson: University of Arizona. 2015. 29-35. Print.