

The black cat essay sample



In "The Black Cat" Poe uses irony, symbolism, and a touch of the supernatural to express an overall theme of Karma. According to dictionary.com, Karma is "the cosmic principle according to which each person is rewarded or punished...according to that person's deeds." The narrator in the story certainly has a lot to atone for after murdering his wife with an ax, but Poe pulls the reader into the narrator's twisted mind and helps us to see what brought him there in the first place. This man is being unrelentingly tortured and haunted by the re-embodiment of his dead cat. This is his punishment from Karma due to his immense cruelty and the perverse nature of the cat's unjust murder. The second cat seems to appear out of nowhere, on a mission for revenge, which he gets by slowly driving the narrator insane. Unfortunately, this does lead to the murder of the narrator's wife, but once again this cat acts as the instrument of Karma and ensures that the narrator does not go unpunished. One of the major sources of irony used in this story is irony of circumstance. In the beginning of the story the cat Pluto is very affectionate towards the narrator and follows him wherever he goes. In fact, he says "it was even with difficulty that I could prevent him from following me through the streets." (137) Only after the narrator removed the cat's eye in a drunken rage is Pluto able to 'see' him for the hateful, abusive person that he has become. The narrator also ends up hanging the cat from a tree in his yard. At the end, the second cat ensures that the narrator is caught red-handed, thus leading him to the exact same fate of the aforementioned feline, when he was completely certain that he would get away with it. The setting of this story is especially important when considering this source of irony. The narrator says Pluto was "hung in a

garden adjacent to the house” (139) which filled with a crowd when his house caught fire. The narrator assumes the cat was cut down and thrown into his window by one of the crowd to wake him up, as if its corpse were a stone or a pebble. Such obvious animal cruelty may have gone unnoticed in 1843, but if this story were set in present day, the narrator would not have been a free man for long and events would not have unfolded as they were able to in the story.

Verbal irony is also used in “ The Black Cat.” The story opens with the narrator sitting in a cell professing his sanity as he recalls the “ causes and effects” (137) of the events. It is true that the narrator is a dynamic character. When he tells us of his early life he was noted for his “ docility and humanity of [his] disposition” (137), but he undergoes a dramatic change due to his affinity for alcohol and begins abusing his wife and pets. He says his “ general temperament and character...experienced a radical alteration for the worse.” (138) We discover throughout the story his behavior becomes more and more erratic due to the tormenting of the “ brute beast” (141) until “ evil thoughts became [his] sole intimates.” (141) His mental and moral decline finally culminate in the murder of his wife. These are not the thoughts and actions of a sane individual, as the narrator ironically declares himself to be in the first paragraph. “ The Black Cat” is heavily laden with symbolism. One of the first and most obvious symbols in the story is the story’s namesake, the black cat itself.

Throughout history the black cat has developed an unfair reputation. The superstitious would be inclined to say that a black cat is sure to cause you bad luck. In the narrator’s case the two black cats in the story certainly

burden him with ill luck in the burning of his house and the loss of his wife, freedom and sanity. The burning of the house and loss of his “entire worldly wealth” (139) is symbolism of Karma’s punishment for his actions towards Pluto. This also represents the complete loss of any feelings of empathy or morals that the narrator may have had. The very night of the fire was when he “jeopardized [his] immortal soul” (139) by hanging the cat simply because he knows it was a truly evil deed. The only thing that was left after the burning was the image of the cat. It seems that this ‘impression’ was the only thing left in the mind of the narrator as he “could not rid [himself] of the phantasm of the cat.” (139) The second cat is symbolic of the overwhelming guilt the man feels about his actions. He has no remorse for his actions, but is plagued and harassed by both guilt and the second cat. The cat becomes “an incarnate nightmare that [he] had not the power to shake off.” (141) This can also be said of his tormenting guilt.

The second cat, acting as the instrument of Karma, ensures that the man is hanged for his crime by alerting the officers of the corpse’s whereabouts and thus brings about the narrator’s impending doom. The white patch of fur in the shape of a gallows represents the fact that this cat will be responsible for the narrator’s death by hanging. Again, setting is an important factor where this symbolism is concerned. A gallows, being a common instrument of execution in 1843, would only make sense in this time period. The narrator initially describes his wife as having a similar disposition to his own in the beginning of the story when he was “tender of heart” and “docile.” (137) She is a static character and remained loving and loyal even when the narrator begins abusing her. Her murder by the narrator is symbolic of his

complete destruction of any goodness that may have been left in him and his final collapse into complete madness. Poe's literature is no stranger to hints of the supernatural and "The Black Cat" definitely has its share.

Black cats have been alluded to as "witches familiars" by the superstitious and the cats in this story do have a few unnatural abilities that make the mind wander. For instance, the cat's name is Pluto, which refers to the god of the underworld. Is it possible that the second cat, which so resembled Pluto, is in fact Pluto returned from the dead with the specific purpose of torturing the narrator? He says the animal inspired "terror and horror" (140) in him when his wife pointed out the changing shape of the patch of white fur on the cat's chest. Also, any normal cat that was trapped behind a wall would be incessantly meowing, but this cat kept strangely silent, biding his time as if he knew the perfect time to alert the officers of his presence. Many other critics feel that these supernatural attributes are delusions brought on by alcohol, which could in fact be true. (McCormack)

It certainly does appear that the mood swings are initially brought on by alcohol, but whether the supernatural aspects of the cat are delusions or not, Karma is still an effective theme for this story. The narrator's drinking did cause him to commit the heinous acts of cruelty, but, regardless of the cause, his punishment is no less severe. "The Black Cat" is truly a tragic story and an excellent insight into the machinations of a guilty mind. Whether it was intentional or not, this is a perfect example of how atrocious behaviors will catch up to you in the end.

References:

<https://assignbuster.com/the-black-cat-essay-sample/>

DiYanni, Robert, Literature: Reading Fiction, Poetry and Drama, 6th Edition, New York, McGraw-Hill, 2007, Print “ karma.” Dictionary. com, Unabridged, Random House, Inc., 09 Sept 2014 McCormack, Selina, “ Literary Analysis the Black Cat by Edgar Allen Poe”, www. humanities360. com, Np, 20 June 2007, Web, 09 Sept 2014