

# PSYCHOANALYZING “THE BLACK CAT”: THE JOURNEY FROM EMOTIONAL TRANSFERENCE TO DISPLAYS OF PSYCHOPATHY

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**Abstract:** This article discusses a novel approach to the possibility of interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe’s narrative “The Black Cat”. It offers an interpretive model of the narrative on the basis of the psychoanalytical approach with the focus put on anti-social behavior coupled with the psychological phenomenon of emotional transference. The analysis of the story’s narration focuses on the unreliability of the narrator with respect to the transparency of the events unfolding during the course of the story. It also uncovers the element of the social realm of human experience within the story which asserts itself as a pivotal part of the narrative.

**Key words:** Edgar Allan Poe, The Black Cat, psychoanalysis, psychopathy, transference

## Introduction

The psychoanalytic approach has proven to be a very effective medium when trying to explain the seemingly irrational behavior exhibited by individuals. Even in the realm of literature, it has become an acceptable and popular mode of deconstruction through which various behavioral patterns of literary characters can be explained. However, when it comes to analyzing Poe’s work in light of psychoanalytic discourse, the focus of this approach among academics is put on the deconstruction of Poe’s own psyche through the investigation of his poetry and, occasionally, fiction as well. Authors such as Scott Peeples, Llewellyn Ligoeki, Justyna Rusak and others employed psychoanalysis as a vital tool in their attempt to try to peer into the mind of Poe. They are all in concordance with the notion proposed by Jacques Lacan that the most important tool of psychoanalytical inquiry is the written discourse. Nevertheless, what this approach lacks is not the immersion of Poe’s psyche in psychoanalytical discourse but rather his fiction upon which the idea of this article builds.

This paper centers around one of the best known narratives of Edgar Allan Poe called “The Black Cat”. It offers a novel approach to one of Poe’s greatest short stories. The aim of this paper is to demystify the psyche of the narrator while rationally explaining the various discrepancies in the narrator’s perception of reality which, during the course of the story, slips into the realm of the supernatural. For the purposes of this paper, the focus within the vast framework of psychoanalysis will be put on psychopathy, as one of the forms of antisocial behavior, coupled with the psychological phenomenon of transference.

## Psychoanalysis and the Antisocial

In psychoanalysis, moral and social deviations are examples of a fragmented psyche caused by the malformed unconscious. This distorted counterpart of the conscious realm of human experience is the result of a crumbling or non-existent superego which, according to Sigmund Freud, represents the basis for the moral conscience of an individual. The superego is the most fundamental part of the structure of the unconscious. It overrules the ego in the same manner as the ego overpowers the id (Freud, 1991b: 105-6).

In case of a fully functioning superego an individual is capable of accepting and conveying a large palate of different emotions. Ranging from love to hatred, a human being with a strong sense of right and wrong is able not only to express, but also to control the impulses of the basis for emotion known as the id (Freud, 1991a: 342). The measure of this control is what makes the person fit into a society with a similar moral compass. In other words, keeping ones emotional outbursts in check constitutes societal equilibrium.

On the other hand, someone with a twisted superego is more prone to violence on the account of the fact that they are incapable of restraining the outbursts of emotion put forth by the id. Instead of sublimating the natural violent urges into the creation of culture, the individual maladapt to the conditions of society. In this case, maladaptation to social pressure becomes the cause of sociopathy or, in case of the analyzed work of art, psychopathy.

### **The Changing Facets of Reality**

As Jacques Lacan wrote, the nature of psychoanalytic discourse is a “commonsensical fact that relies solely upon words”; and that we “must recognize, in the privileged attention paid to the function of the nonverbal aspects of behavior in the psychological maneuver, a preference on the part of the analyst for a vantage point from which the subject is no longer anything but an object” (Lacan, 2006: 177). In other words, it is not only possible to perform psychoanalysis on the written text, it is imperative for the analyst, or, in this case, the interpreter of a work of art, to rely chiefly upon the written discourse. It is exactly the written word which stands at the center of the road to objectivity.

When performing an analysis of a work of art written by Edgar Allan Poe, one must establish a firm standpoint concerning the presence of obvious supernatural elements in the author’s stories. Either an interpreter of Poe’s work assumes the position of one who takes the preternatural elements for granted, or, as it is in the case of this paper, one attempts to deconstruct them and remodel them in accordance with an interpretive model of one’s own choosing.

Adopting psychoanalysis as an interpretive model of Poe’s fiction offers a truly remarkable analytical viewpoint because it delves into the depths of the characters’ psyche and has the power to completely transform the general ambience of the story, giving it a new prism for fictional reality as experienced by the protagonists of Poe’s stories. Because the focus of psychoanalytical interpretation is put on the main character’s perception of reality and Poe’s stories, including “The Black Cat”, are narrated predominantly in the first person, it is imperative to perceive the events of the narrative strictly through the lens of the protagonists’ psyche.

However macabre and supernatural Poe’s stories may seem, there is always a great deal of reason embodied within their scheme. Everything that happens in the narratives is explainable and is bound by the causal chain of events. In “The Black Cat”, however, a notable element of the irrational is present. It is incorporated in the protagonist’s inclusion of the supernatural in his perception of reality. From the beginning of the story, the main character portrays himself as someone who is “noted for the docility and humanity of [his] disposition” (Poe, 2004: 235). The interesting thing is that the protagonist, since he was a child, has been “especially fond of animals and was indulged with a great variety of pets” (2004: 235) which may be perceived as great irony considering the fact that the story centers around him gauging his pet cat’s eye out and later hanging it by the neck.

Notwithstanding, in light of the employment of psychoanalysis, the aforementioned irony becomes reality. The narration of the story is written in a very rational manner; therefore the protagonist’s irrational behavior towards his cat presents a discrepancy in his perception of reality. At first, the main character attempts to rationalize his behavior by stating that this sudden change in his character was caused by “the instrumentality of the Fiend Intemperance” (Poe, 2004: 236) which is a metaphor for alcohol. Nevertheless, alcohol in itself is not the cause for this behavioral shift because a person’s actions are motivated by his subconscious desires and that means that there must have been the emotion of hatred present prior to the protagonists drinking problems. Assuming he grew up with animals and has never harbored any ill will toward them, from a psychoanalytical standpoint, it can be

stated that the protagonist's anger which he has been harboring was not aimed at his cat, but rather was somehow displaced.

### **Is It Really about the Cat?**

The displacement of emotion is very well known in psychoanalytic circles and it was first defined by Sigmund Freud, who called this phenomenon transference. Transference is one of the cornerstones of psychoanalytic discourse and it has been understood as “a reproduction of emotions relating to repressed experiences, [...] and the substitution of another person [...] for the original object of the repressed impulses” (Freud, 1959: 313). In laymen's terms, transference is the displacement of amorous or hostile emotions from the original subject of said emotions onto another completely different subject. Transference encompasses one more very important element within its recesses. It is a phenomenon which is “universal [...] and in fact dominates the whole of each person's relations to his human environment” (Freud, 1925: 67).

That being said, the discussed narrative acquires an entirely new dimension for the explanation of the transpired events within the story. The key component to transference is that the subject towards whom an emotion is felt has to be human but the subject towards which the emotion is conveyed via its displacement, can be a human, animal or an inanimate object. With respect to the narrative, it means that the protagonist's feelings of anger and hatred are aimed at a person rather than at the cat. It is important to note that the only other character in the story, apart from the policemen who show up towards the climax of the story, is the protagonist's wife. After their pet cat is killed, another one appears and the main character assumes a rather strange attitude towards it: “when it [the second cat] reached the house it domesticated itself at once, and became immediately a great favorite with my wife. For my own part, I soon found a dislike to it arising within me. This was just the reverse of what I had anticipated; but – I know not how or why it was – its evident fondness for myself rather disgusted and annoyed me”(Poe, 2004: 238). This radical and sudden shift in the behavior of the protagonist directly points to the element of transference being present within the recesses of his psyche. He is unable to communicate and act on the negative emotions bubbling under the surface of his subconscious mind which are targeted at his wife, so the element of transference takes hold and the anger is aimed at “the next best thing,” his wife's beloved cat.

This claim is in concordance with the story as their new cat has a coincidental deformity – it has only one eye which “only endear[s] it to [his] wife” (Poe, 2004: 238). In just a few short sentences, the narration takes an unexpected turn and the subject of the **cat** finally assumes the position of the original subject of transference - **the wife**. In other words, the narrator's wife and the cat at which the hatred of the protagonist is directed, both become one and the same thing. Thus the meaning of the narration assumes a new level of interpretation and a very different experience for the reader.

### **It May not Be about the Cat, after all...**

Suddenly, the gradually escalating loathing for the “cat” becomes a metaphor for the picture of a slowly crumbling familial relation. The narrative gains a social perspective as it slowly unfolds and culminates in the death of the protagonist's wife. Finally, it is possible to substitute the words **cat**, **beast**, **thing** or **creature** in the text for the word **wife**. The result is a very interesting metaphorical reading of Edgar Allan Poe's “The Black Cat”. For example, when the narrator writes: “[...] the **creature** left me no moment alone, and I started hourly from dreams of unutterable fear to find the hot breath of **the thing** upon my face, and its vast weight – an incarnate nightmare that I had no power to shake off – incumbent eternally upon my heart” (Poe, 2004: 241, my emphasis). All things considered, transference appears to be

the force at play during the second part of the story. The protagonist's wife and their pet cat merge into one twisted persona within the depths of the narrator's psyche. Though he does not realize it, his unconscious mind is directing his actions as well as his conscious mind. The excerpt above describes the futility and helplessness which the protagonist feels in relation to his wife. He clearly detests his wife, yet via the social pressure imposed upon him by the institution of marriage, he is forced to submerge his feelings and, as a result, he defensively acquires psychopathic traits. Unable to cope with his hostile feeling towards his spouse, the force of transference immediately takes hold and directs the feelings to the object of the protagonist's wife's affection – the cat. In this case, transference serves merely as “a hydraulic engineer's artifice [...], intended to ensure the crossing of certain dams” (Lacan, 2006: 176). The narrator's feelings and the confusion they convey are walled into his subconscious mind and his impotence in making the emotions surface into his conscious mind, is the cause of his defense mechanisms in the form of transference to take control. Transference simply helps the protagonist to “cross the dam” of social pressure but in the process, it takes its toll in the form of the protagonist acquiring psychopathic traits.

A psychopath is defined as an individual with characteristic deviant behavior in the form of “a disregard for laws and social mores, a failure to feel remorse or guilt and a tendency to display violent behavior” (Bonn, 2014). As it can be seen from the written discourse of the narrator and feeling that a reader gets when reading “The Black Cat”, the protagonist picks up all of the above mentioned traits. The social pressure instituted upon him by the act of marriage forces his subconscious to act for him by, at first, displaying violent behavior towards his cat, then, as transference gradually releases its hold, killing the true object of his repressed feelings – his wife, an act which results in the disregard for the social realm of the human experience as well as the total repression of his superego.

The latter is realized solely through the protagonist's narration near the end of the story. After he kills his wife, he immediately dryly expresses his absolute disregard for the brutality and hideousness of the act of murder. There is a radical shift in the narration present, as the protagonist completely and utterly dehumanizes his wife. An animate human being becomes a mere it:

This hideous murder accomplished, I set myself forthwith, and with entire deliberation, to the task of concealing **the body**. I knew I could not remove **it** from the house, either by day or by night, without the risk of being observed by the neighbors. Many projects entered my mind. At one period I thought of cutting **the corpse** into minute fragments, and destroying them by fire. At another, I resolved to dig a grave for **it** in the floor of the cellar. Again, I deliberated about casting **it** in the well of the yard – about packing **it** in a box, as if merchandise, with the usual arrangements, and so getting the porter to take **it** from the house. Finally I hit upon what I considered a far better expedient than either of these. I determined to wall **it** up in the cellar, as the monks of the Middle Ages are recorded to have walled up their victims (Poe, 2004: 242, my emphasis).

This appears to be the moment when the protagonist decisively comes to terms with his feelings which merge with his real persona of a psychopath. After the murder is committed, the further discourse offers only fleeting mentioning of the cat. This leads to the assumption that the narrator does not really care about the cat because his misdirected feelings towards it have finally found the originally intended target who becomes his victim.

## Conclusion

The analysis of Edgar Allan Poe's short story “The Black Cat” as perceived through the lens of psychoanalytic discourse has shown that fictional reality in this story, as perceived by the narrator, is greatly unreliable on the account of the fact that the psychoanalytic inquiry

of his actions has shown considerable discrepancies in his perception of reality which is tinged by the inclusion of supernatural elements within the narration. The analysis has also concluded that “The Black Cat” can be interpreted as a narrative dealing not with the supernatural, but rather with the natural and the causal. Furthermore, the deconstruction of the narration has uncovered an underlying motivator behind the inner workings of the story progression which materializes in the form of a strong social element woven into the fabric of the narrative. The social element is realized through the protagonist’s malformed unconscious which, through the employment of the element of transference, forces the character to acquire psychopathic traits as a defense mechanism against the frustration and hostility which is being kept at bay by society via the institution of marriage. This conclusion uncovers a new way of reading Poe’s story and consequently offers a novel approach to the interpretation of “The Black Cat”.

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