

A Psychoanalytical Approach to Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat"

Steve Lee

ELLT, College of English/Hankuk University of Foreign Studies, Korea

Abstract: Edgar Allan Poe's macabre stories have proven to be landmark examples of the literary genre, "gothic horror." His most popular tales, from "The Tell-Tale Heart," and "The Raven" to the "The Black Cat," His work is quintessentially gothic in nature due to a single, obvious reason: that true horror stems not from the external world, but rather, the internal one. One's mind is the abysmal hell-spring from which all terror, desperation, fear, and panic flow. Here, one may then make the rather reasonable assertion that Poe's work easily and thoughtfully be approached through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis. After all, the cat in "The Black Cat" may be interpreted as acting as a mirror of the state-of-mind of our protagonist and it is in this self-realization that his true horror is revealed, in full. Carl Jung once wrote, "The most terrifying this is to accept oneself completely." It seems Poe was quite aware of this as he peered into the terrified minds of his characters; characters that were often on painful journeys to find themselves. Poe would have agreed that true horror lies in oneself.

Date of Submission: 02-04-2022

Date of Acceptance: 15-04-2022

I. INTRODUCTION

Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Black Cat," lends itself fluidly to a psychoanalytical approach. It may be added that many of Poe's works may be approached from a psychoanalytical perspective. Any discourse on Poe's work must take into the account Poe's tendency to delve into the inner workings of the mind and its effects. This may be the primary reason why Poe and psychoanalytic literary theory seem to go together so well. This paper shall explore "The Black Cat," or more specifically, it shall explore the psychology of the narrator of the story. A Freudian lens shall be used in an attempt at interpretation. What we may come to discover is that the narrator of "The Black Cat," though only a literary character, displays many of the same symptoms as Freud's neurotic patients. We may go further to postulate that through the narrator's psychological struggles, we may understand the mind of the mentally unstable in more detail.

II. DISCOURSE

In the very first paragraph, the narrator attempts to recollect what he has done, trying to imagine that some reader of his tale can logically determine a cause and effect regarding the murderous rage he has been gripped with. Freud believed that all mental disturbances were based on the concept of determinism. In other words, Freud was convinced that all mental disturbances had a cause. The narrator describes his personality as previously docile, humane, and tender, particularly when in came to animals. As he becomes an adult, he believes that his love for animals is a "principal source(s) of pleasure" (Poe 271). This may be interpreted as a reference to the narrator's id, and more specifically, to Freud's "pleasure principle." Anthony Storr quotes Freud's Standard Edition (SE) regarding the id and the pleasure principle:

It [the id] is the dark, inaccessible part of our personality... [we] approach the id with analogies: we call it a chaos... It is filled with energy reaching it from the instincts, but it has no organization... [it has] only a striving to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctive needs subject to the observance of the pleasure principle. (Storr 61)

The narrator is often confused by his newfound, unprovoked hatred of animals, especially his black cat. He agonizes over the fact that he loathes the cat he once so loved and does not know from where this loathing has come. It has come from his "dark, inaccessible" id. He himself does not know his own id, because the id is the unconscious mind and thus, unknowable.

Further into the story, the narrator describes in more detail, his change of heart and personality. He says he "experienced a radical alteration for the worse... I grew day by day, more moody, more irritable ...I even

offered her [his wife] personal violence" (Poe 272). The narrator is aware of the change in his personality but the cause eludes him. He resorts to alcohol and considers his alcohol consumption a disease. He thinks that his new hatred and annoyance towards the cat is "the spirit of PERVERSENESS." In a profoundly Freudian statement, the narrator says:

...that perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart- one of indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of Man. (Poe 273)

This "primary faculty" may be regarded as Freud's "primary process," used primarily by the unconscious "id." "Primitive impulses" are analogous to Freud's "drives" and instincts. The narrator attributes correctly, according to Freudian theory, that his "perverseness" or psychological neurosis is caused by his innate "primitive impulses." What are these primary impulses and what do they imply for our narrator character? Freud's "aggressive instinct" is a viable term we may apply to these "primitive impulses." Freud came eventually to regard the aggressive drive in being just as real and just as important as the sexual one. Since our narrator is focused on expressing himself through violence rather than through sex, we may assume that there is a greater likelihood that the aggressive drive is the more influential to him. The narrator recalls how he felt about the cat as such: "It was an unfathomable longing of the soul to *vex itself*- to offer violence to its own nature- to do wrong for the wrong's sake only" (Poe 273). In this revelatory passage the narrator highlights several key points of psychoanalytical theory. First, Freud wrote of how the "death instinct" sprang from the need of any organism to be free from external stimulus. Freud wrote that the "aim of all life is death," and that these twin concepts or drives, sexual and aggressive/death, were always in conflict within an individual. This explains the narrator's urge to murder the ones he loves.

Storr writes, that according to Freud, "hate was closely connected with the ego's struggle for self-preservation." He continued by stating that, "sexual and ego-instincts can readily develop an antithesis which repeats that of love and hate." We now have an explanation as to why the narrator went from love to hate in his feelings about the cat. Love and hate are closely tied; it seems one cannot exist without the other, much like the dualistic concepts of yin/yang, heaven/hell, and God/devil. The scene in which the narrator hangs and kills the cat he once loved provides a good example of the dualistic nature of Freudian human psychology. The narrator commits a heinous act in killing but he is miserable in understanding the horror in his own actions. His super-ego-driven conscience gasps in shock while witnessing the violent effects of the primordial, unconscious, id-driven "destructive instinct." The narrator writes:

One morning, in cool blood, I slipped a noose about its neck and hung it to the limb of a tree;-hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart;-hung it *because* I knew that it had loved me. (Poe 274)

Storr summarized Freud's stance on aggression as such: "Freud considered that aggression was derived from the death instinct being redirected towards the external world." Freud believed that this redirection of the death instinct should be "moderated and tamed" to give the ego "satisfaction of its vital needs." However, the narrator in "The Black Cat" is not able to moderate or even control his aggressive impulses. Freud wrote, "...during the individual's lifetime, the death instinct is to a large extent directed outward as aggression" (Storr 68). This outwardly-focused aggression leads to the grisly murders of the first cat and of his wife, while his super-ego holds him guilty and accountable for the murders he has committed. It is interesting to note that though his id has come to the forefront in controlling his behavior, the narrator's super-ego remains intact, offering commentary on his actions. After he has cut the eyes out of the cat, he records, "I blush, I burn, I shudder, while I pen the damnable atrocity (Poe 273). This is clearly the voice of a moral, socially-aware inner voice; that of the super-ego.

III. Conclusion

"The Black Cat" is primarily focused on the psychological aspect of a man's violent actions. The narrator's violence may be attributed to Freud's concept of the "aggressive drive" or the "death instinct." Through a Freudian lens, we are able to interpret some of the causes as to why the narrator did what he did. On a larger scale, we may interpret why people in general exhibit violence we may at first think irrational or simply just "mad."

REFERENCES

- [1]. Poe, Edgar Allan. *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings: Poems, Tales, Essays, and Reviews*. New York: Penguin Classics, 2003. pp. 271-280.
- [2]. Storr, Anthony. *Freud: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Steve Lee. "A Psychoanalytical Approach to Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat." *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, 27(04), 2022, pp. 36-37.