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SPRÅKISKA

The Rise of the Underworld

Felines, Mythology and Psychology in Edgar Allan

Poe's The Black Cat

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Abstract

The Rise of the Underworld: Felines, Mythology and Psychology in Edgar Allan Poe's The Black cat.

The narrator in The Black Cat tells the story which leads him to the gallows. The unreliable tale depicts the morbid details of violence and murder, hauntings and terror. At the centre of the story is the cat which suffers from the narrator's paranoia and alcohol abuse. The duality of good and evil, reason and instinct shifts back and forth between man and animal as the narrator unravels the chain of events which caused his concealed disposition to be revealed. By referencing to superstition and the uncanny, the narrator describes the cat as a creature of magical powers and ability to control and affect his actions and deeds. The "resurrection" of the cat adds further elements of mystique and brings the story beyond the realm of the living. The narrator's decayed mind creates a hell in which he projects responsibility and guilt onto the cat. With this essay I will propose a broader analysis of the cat as a symbol for mythological deities such as Hel, Odin and Bast. Their characteristics offer a figurative description of the cat as victim, judge and executioner.

Keywords: Cats, Myth, Hel, Odin, Bast, Paranoia, Superstition

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Introduction

Dealing with guilt, loyalty and deterioration of the human body and mind, *The Black Cat* is a short story in which the reader is subjected to the confession of a convicted murderer. It was written by Edgar Allan Poe who was born in 1809. His parents were actors and spent most of their time on tour. His father abandoned the family and his mother died in 1811. The loss of his parents and later on the death of his young wife highly influenced his writing. He was known as a melancholic and dark character with both alcohol and opium addictions, which presumably took his life. The circumstances surrounding Poe affected his choice of themes and death was a prominent subject. He wrote horror stories with elements from a gothic literary style as well as subjects about condemned souls and madness. He is also said to be the inventor of the detective fiction. His literary career contained numerous short stories, poetry as well as editorial work on periodicals and literary criticism.

The Black Cat was first published in *The Saturday Evening Post* in January 1843. It is told by an unnamed narrator who reports “household events”, as he calls them, on the night before his execution. He grew up seemingly alone due to his personality that was ridiculed and criticized for being sensitive and tender-hearted. As he felt rejected by humans he was drawn to animals for their love and loyalty. His wife that he married at an early age shared his disposition and they filled their house with pets. The black cat named Pluto was his closest companion and was highly cherished. They shared an uncommonly strong bond during the following years. The narrator, for some reason, began drinking heavily and that altered him day by day. As his temper and mind darkened, the wife and pets became a nuisance to him and he became violent towards them. One drunken night the narrator becomes annoyed with Pluto and cuts out one of the cat’s eyes. The narrator becomes more obsessed with the idea of committing a terrible crime, for a longing to break the moral boundaries of society and the mind. He decides to hang the cat in one of the garden’s trees. Later the same night, their house

burns down to the ground, leaving only one wall from the middle of the building intact, upon which an imprint of a cat with a noose around its neck has appeared. The narrator is haunted by the vision of the cat for months and aims to replace him with another pet. Another one of his drunken nights he stumbles upon a cat similar in size, colour and with only one eye. The only exception is a small white spot on the breast. The cat follows the narrator home and becomes the new pet as well as a new irritation and object of loathing. He finally decides to get rid of the cat and in an attempt to kill him, his wife intervenes and she is killed instead. He buries her inside of an old chimney and plasters the wall. The cat is gone and several days later the police investigate her disappearance and search the narrator's house as well as the cellar. As the police aim to leave the cellar after a thorough search, the narrator without intent starts to brag about the well-built house and walls, rapping on the wall with a cane which produces a scream from the inside. After digging up the wall, the Police find the corpse of the narrator's wife, with the cat sitting on her head.

There have been numerous analyses written about this story, dealing with the characters and the symbolism they might imply. The cat is the most central character of the story as it is based, surrounded and affected by the cat's presence and so the animal is too complex for one single representation. There is a Freudian term called condensation which describes that one object or character might be a symbolic carrier of several meanings. The name of the cat, the unexplainable "doppelganger" which replaces Pluto as well as the common superstitious beliefs of what a black cat represents, indicates a range of aspects that may be inferred and applicable in the story. Poe used a figurative expression to describe the narrator's mind and these traceable elements of historical myths and psychology used in the narration will be the focus of my essay, in which I want to suggest that the narrator uses the cat as a projection object for his thoughts and feelings, as his fear grows for his soul in the withering of his body and mind, due to depression and alcohol abuse. With the use of gothic

fiction, myths and legends about death and evil, Poe paints a descriptive picture of the landscape of a diseased and tortured inner soul. The psychology of the narrator is compared with superstitious beliefs and the addition of a name which refers to a mythological god, suggests a link which will be further investigated in the essay.

This project will be divided into two separate chapters in which I will support my thesis with the use of both psychoanalytical and mythological theory. The first chapter aims to give a deeper understanding of how the narrator's diseased mind functions. This will be supported with Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theories, where concepts such as condensation, the repression of instincts, and paranoia will be used to suggest reasons behind the transformation of the main character. In addition, Carl Gustav Jung's theories of myth and the mind will be introduced to further support my claim of using mythology to symbolically describe the psyche and its limitations, and to link the chapters together. The second chapter will explore the many representations of the cat as a superstitious symbol as well as adding links to mythology which might offer a new aspect of the cat as the Norse goddess Hel, Odin and the Egyptian goddess Bast. By analysing words, phrases, events, physical appearances and images, I will propose that several mythological deities may represent the narrator's thoughts and feelings about death, guilt and vengeance.

1. The transformation

The narrator of this story evolves from a friendly and loving man into an intoxicated and violent brute. During his transformation he gives his two cats different names; they evolve from pet and playmate to creature, monster, beast and brute. He views the animals as turning from domesticated to wild while he himself turns from civilized to savage. When he cuts out one of Pluto's eyes, he describes his soul to depart from his body. Left is only his body

without the reason and soul that supposedly is what separates us from animals. He lets his instincts act out without any thought of consequence or moral. He seems to want to rid himself from feelings of love, remorse or guilt. The morning after the deed, he experiences that his soul is still residing inside him and the fear of the consequences starts to eat at his core, more prominent than guilt which seems to only slightly appear. His alcohol abuse makes him paranoid and his confessions seem only to have been produced inside of his mind. When his house burns down, it could be interpreted as a purifying fire, a chance for redemption, and a chance to change. However, the narrator has set in motion a series of events which he is both unable and unwilling to put to an end and he is heading towards self-destruction. Freud's psychoanalysis is often linked to Poe, this is nothing new. However, to support my thesis about mythology and pagan beliefs as means of depicting a paranoid and delusional mind, Freud's theories will be included to give a clearer perspective and understanding of the psychology of the narrator.

1.1 Condensation

As previously mentioned, the Freudian term condensation applies to the representation of the cat. The narrator finds in Pluto a friend and equal. From his pet he also receives the loyalty and fidelity that he lacked from the brethren of his own race. As his mind gets intoxicated by his alcohol consumption, Pluto becomes the object of loathing as if he was a mirror in which the narrator becomes aware of his own degeneration. His outbursts and fits of rage seem to alter him towards the opposite of his disposition. His former feelings towards Pluto shift from friend to enemy as he puts the blame on the animal for being the instigator of his own deeds. The cat becomes the focus point of the story as he represents several meanings in his own being and this relates to the term condensation which Sigmund Freud used in his

interpretation of dreams. The narrator's alcoholism, for reasons that are unknown, erases his personality traits and he is transformed into an egotistical and aggressive man with wild mood swings. His depression might stem from his upbringing which was hinted to have been a lonely one. However, his trust being placed in the care of his animals, the state of loneliness and distrust evidently grew more roots than the narrator wants to reveal. His disappointment might be explained by comparing it to Freud's theory of depression. Freud related mourning to depression, comparing the reaction on the loss of a loved one to the reaction a depressed person may have on an internalized person or object. He explained it with saying that the attachment the depressed person might have had to someone who causes disappointment and destroys the relationship, is maintained by incorporating the person into the ego and places the relationship on an internal level. Furthermore, Freud suggested that a depressed person experiences torment, accusation and disappointment towards his own character which causes the person to regress towards an ambivalent stage, where sadism is initialized and self-punishment is performed on the inner person that creates gratification as well as a sense of revenge on the external object. (Fine)

The narrator replaces humans with animals for their loyalty and by doing so he puts the weight of his moral beliefs on the shoulders of the cat. One might interpret his former attachments to certain people, to have been internalized and created an inner critic, which degraded his disposition as weak and flawed and to which he causes harm by his heavy drinking. He projects these rejected dispositions onto Pluto, his wife and their animals which he punishes. The narrator also projects his own paranoid ideas of evil deeds as well as the perverse longing to do wrong, onto the cat, as he blames the animal for seducing him to commit murder. His shifting of blame from himself to the cat can be interpreted with Freud's concept of projection which is a process in which a person finds himself with inner feelings

that are unacceptable and as a defence mechanism projects these onto a person or object.

(Erwin 426)

1.2 Repression

The narrator is tormented by wishes that challenge the morality of his character as human and civilized. Yet his unconscious longings are released by his drug abuse. Freud describes the unconscious as based on instinctual needs that create impulses and wishes which aim towards being discharged. These wishes may reveal themselves through dreams, phantasies or neurotic behaviour. The unconscious function is defined by two processes, a primary process and a secondary. “The primary process seeks release above all, and thus helps to account for those phenomena that come out involuntarily or unconsciously” (Fine 38). The secondary process works as a contrast to the first and this is the rational thinking. Its aim is to stabilize the discharges that the primary attempts to slip through, yet this is not always successful and the unconscious might reveal itself into the conscious. Freud calls this “the return of the repressed”.

The narrator struggles with his inner wishes to do wrong and break the moral boundaries of society. He seems to want to reach beyond the point of forgiveness and salvation as an attempt of self-punishment. The duality of good and evil causes his personality to split as he moves from despair to obsession. The clash of destructive desires and the imprinted moral ideals subjects the narrator to submission of ambivalent evil and torments of intense guilt. The feeling of guilt is, according to Freud, the punishment from the superego. To understand this one must look at the definition of personality. Freud analysed the personality as consisting of three aspects: the id, the ego and the superego. The id consists of the drives, impulses and instincts as well as primary aggression; the ego deals with the

demands of reality; the superego combines ideals, commands and prohibitions, which we inherit from our parent figures, and which create our personalities. Guilt may be both excessively strong as well as unconscious which may drive people into commit crimes for the reason of being punished. The cruelty of the superego is both sadistic and destructive. The more a person tries to control his aggressive impulses, the more it intensifies his aggression directed towards his ego. (Fine)

1.3 Paranoia

The narrator becomes more and more violent; his anger gets harder to contain. These traits are common for a paranoid person. Distrust and bad self-esteem are also distinct features for this disease and resembles the changed disposition of the narrator. Paranoia works as a defence against earlier hurtful experiences and according to the Freud Encyclopedia the focus of a paranoid person lays upon the external world and its faults instead of focusing on its own feelings. This focus later evolves into narcissism (409). The narrator's confession adds confusion due to the shift of blame as well as for the irrationality of his behaviour. One might question his sanity as his paranoia leads to disastrous consequences. This makes the credibility of the narrator questionable as well as for the supernatural elements in his story.

When the narrator replaces Pluto with the 'new' cat, he seems to want to restore the order as it was before his gruesome deeds. However, the attempt to suppress his guilt and violence backfires as his paranoia forces him to remove the constant reminder of his loathsome mind. Kenneth Silverman states: "What has been hidden within the self will not stay concealed either" (208). He goes on to say that the character's attempt in *The Black cat*, as well as other of Poe's characters, to conceal the inner feelings for both himself and for others are futile as the lack of self-knowledge causes suffering of conflict: "...what his

characters deny or repress or project uncontrollably erupts” (209). Poe was interested and had an understanding for medical science which during his era was beginning to move away from superstition. This interest for psychopathology led to stories which dealt with mental illness. Benjamin Fisher states: “Nearly all of Poe’s protagonists evince paranoias, and some also power mania” (22).

Human experience and suffering throughout time has in literature been described by both vivid and most terrifying expressions. People’s fears and hopes have strong connections with religious beliefs. Carl Gustav Jung, a prominent psychotherapist active during Freud’s lifetime, linked religion with myths. He claimed that religion and myth were dependent on the other’s existence and preserved and sustained each other. Furthermore, Jung believed that myth originated from the human mind and was projected to the outside world in the shape of gods. Myth’s function was to discover and get in connect with the unconscious. However, it did not only exist inside of one person’s mind, myth served as a collective unconscious which was passed on from generation to generation. As Jung explained this: “The material brought forward – folkloristic, mythological, or historical- serves in the first place to demonstrate the uniformity of psychic events in space and time” (Segal 70). In addition, Jung claimed that myth had a social function by supplying advises for how to behave. He debated that when an instinct was turned into action, archetypes were the intellectual and emotional meaning of that action. Instincts “manifest themselves in fantasies and often reveal their presence only by symbolic images” (Segal 93). This was what Jung called the archetypes. These could take different shapes such as fire, gods, witches, heroes, life and death to name a few.

2. Mythology and folklore

The narrator fears for his immortal soul at the same time as he wants to reach beyond the point of salvation. His perverse longing to commit foul crimes jeopardises his soul and this is shown numerous times through words and common superstitious references to hell. The cat in the story is blamed for the narrator's deeds and feelings. The feline pet and its attributes can be linked to several mythological and pagan beliefs that represent death, Satan and those linked to him.

Poe was not a religious man or a believer in superstition. He was more drawn to medicine, science and astronomy. However, he used eerie circumstances; doubles and other elements that made readers feel the chill of terror and fear as if one experienced the world with a child's eyes again. By referring to the sense of the uncanny Poe was able to produce stories which erased logic. "Poe's works are owing to their power to confirm once-real beliefs from which most people have never entirely freed themselves" (Silverman 210). Poe's fascination with the mind and its will produced stories which showed the effects and progress of mental decay as it started with anxiety and ended in terror. Joris-Karl Huysmans argued that Poe gave death a "new look" by adding "superhuman elements" and making the characters feel haunted by hallucinations and nightmares. (Bloom 78) The narrator admits to have experienced chimaeras, ghosts of the mind. These hallucinations are described as superstitious creatures who torture the narrator.

Poe's vast interest in the psyche makes his use of hallucinations understandable as this was something which was studied during the beginning of the nineteenth century and hallucinations were linked to religious and visionary themes. Fantastic tales explored the elusive human psyche and how reality could be subjected to the irrational and unknown. "It could be said that, as a genre, the fantastic deals precisely with those aspects of human

existence that are perpetually both revealed and concealed” (Kessler 50). In this chapter the focus will be on the cat, first from a historical and cultural perspective of what a cat has represented, and later on as the characters of the story.

2.1 The many lives of a black cat

Black cats have always been the subject of different representations. Before they were taken into homes as pets they were merely seen as a tool for getting rid of rodents. Cats have been judged as cruel and cunning for their way of playing with their victims instead of merely eating them. A black cat crossing the street means bad luck in some societies yet is considered to represent good fortune in other parts of the world. One of the most common associations is the connection with witches. The cat could be a companion or agent of the devil or a witch or Satan in disguise: “Archival materials related to folk beliefs also reveal accounts of the devil himself assuming the form of a black cat” (Siikala 138). Cats as well as dogs are according to many minds to be associated with the kingdom of the dead. A black cat could also invade a home and bring chaos as an “outside force disrupting the life of an individual who has violated a norm” (Siikala 139). According to Paul Danielsson animals that were linked with demons were “large, of a certain colour, fiery-eyed or one-eyed creatures” (Siikala 133-134).

In the 13th century witch trials were beginning to terrorise Europe. Cats suffered the consequences of their supposedly connection with witches and were burned (Mercatante 162-163). In the story the narrator wishes to be saved from “the fangs of the Arch-Fiend” (537). Cat’s teeth were believed to hold venom and this might be linked to the narrator’s anger over the slight wound the cat makes with his teeth on the night when he loses one of his eyes. Poe often used teeth in his stories: “Like teeth, eyes arouse the dread of being consumed” (Silverman 207). The narrator also describes the second cat to have “the breath of a

pestilence” and him fearing for “the hot breath of *the thing* upon my face” (534-535). In the 13th century it was believed that the breath of a cat could cause disease. The witch persecutions reached its height during the 15th century in which thousands of cats and women were burned in attempts to drive out evil spirits.

The narrator mentions his wife’s ancient allusion of a cat’s association to witches for no other reason than that he recollects it. However, as his story is continued he makes further references to this allusion. He considers himself to have been “seduced” into committing murder by the “craft” of the “beast” (538). By making that statement he denotes that the animal has powers to persuade him into vicious acts. Seduction and craft are words often connected to witches. Blame could easily be put on women for their seductive powers over men and folklore also reported cats to have magical powers. Poe often used folk beliefs and folklore to add terror in his tales. He applied this knowledge in other tales as well where metempsychosis, which means the transmigration of souls, was used as a theme. Although the twin, physically, is almost identical with Pluto, the narrator experiences the “new” cat’s presence as different. He seeks the cat’s companion and affection which later evolves into a haunting feeling for the narrator. He grows fearful and terrified of the cat’s presence and the remembrance of his former deeds. He depicts the cat to be an incarnated “Night-Mare” (535) who sits on his chest with its heavy weight. According to Germanic folklore a mare was an evil spirit or goblin who rode the chest of a person causing them to have bad dreams. The narrator is haunted more by his guilt than the ghosts in his mind. However, due to his reluctance to admit guilt he chooses to interpret his anxiety as caused by supernatural powers. This ‘evil twin’ of Pluto becomes both like a thorn in his side and the reason for his decision to kill the cat. However, when Poe wrote this story, the cat had become a common addition to the households and people felt sympathy for a cat’s suffering instead of righteousness. Although cats had formerly been linked to Satan the evil in this story is linked to the narrator:

“the narrator’s irresistible, inexplicable urge to destruction and self-destruction, which might well be attributed to Satan’s part in human nature” (Rogers 76).

The two cats of the story share the same appearance yet they are separated by how they are perceived by the narrator, Pluto as intellectual and a friend, and the twin as evil and a tormenter. However, they are linked by the narrator inflicting cruelty towards them as well as being seen as a burden or nuisance. By analysing and interpreting the two fates of the cats as well as for their characteristics there are similarities with several gods and goddesses from Greek, Norse and Egyptian Mythology. To demonstrate this I will divide the cats into two separate subchapters.

2.2 Pluto

The first cat’s name is Pluto. This seems to be a too uncommon name to hold no meaning or symbolism at all. Poe rarely named characters in his stories, which might have been to make the tales universal. However, when he did give them names this was of great importance. “Like many other writers, Poe was keenly aware of significant underlying implications in names, so he sometimes used place names that extend beyond face value” (Fisher 31). In Greek Mythology Pluto is a euphemism for Hades who was the god of the dead and the underworld (Mercatante 528). The links to hell and the dominion of the dead are something that is pointed to numerous times in the story which I will show further on in this essay.

The underworld was a “dark”, “sterile” and “humourless realm” in which its inhabitants walked around like “shades of their former selves” (Lewis 174). The narrator’s transformation during his tale of confession draws him towards annihilation at the same time as he is reaching for his longing to explore new sides of his personality. His former disposition is gradually being erased and he becomes only a mere shadow of himself. Pluto

seems to be the last to receive the narrator's brutality as if he is closer to his owner than the wife. When also Pluto becomes a victim of the violence, he is deprived of one of his eyes by his drunken owner. Eyes were a commonly used symbol in Poe's literature. He often linked eyes "with pits, tarns, whirlpools and depths that could engulf" (Silverman 207). Plato once wrote the term "the eye of the soul" and others after him have used eyes as a symbol of knowledge, feelings and inner thoughts. Blindness as a literary symbol represents "inner sight" and "wisdom" (Ferber 70). By blinding Pluto the narrator seems not only to want to punish him; he also aims to blind his closest and dearest pet, whom to he does not want to reveal his deterioration and change in disposition. At the same time one might interpret the mutilation of Pluto as a solution for the narrator to get rid of a mirror in the cat's eye. In his once beloved and close friend he sees the disappointment and confusion for the change and violence that the cat experiences. The deed had not such an effect as he had wished for and by blinding Pluto he sets in motion the cause and effect that leads him to his own death, his self-destruction. Karma is the law of cause and effect; something that the narrator is reluctant to admit as being the reason for his circumstances: "I am above the weakness of seeking to establish a sequence of cause and effect, between the disaster and the atrocity" (532). Yet there seems to be a fear of getting in return what he had given to others, and as it happens Pluto's demise evidently becomes the narrator's fate.

Pluto's one-eyed appearance refers to another one-eyed person. In Norse mythology Odin, also called the terrible one, was once a god of the dead, the ones who died in battle reached Valhalla over which Odin was the leader. He was a very wise god. He could see all that took place on earth and in heaven, with the help of his two ravens. Odin wanted to gain the wisdom of the depths as well and sacrificed one of his eyes to the well of wisdom which was guarded by the giant Mimer. Through his sacrifice he became the god of foresight. However, Odin's quest for wisdom did not end there. He still wanted to gain the wisdom of

the occult, which only was possessed by those who were dead. To gain that knowledge, Odin hanged himself in Yggdrasill, an ash tree which surrounded the whole world, speared his side and hanged for nine days before he was resurrected with the knowledge in his possession. Odin was after this also called the 'Lord of the Gallows'. "Ygg means 'the terrible one' and *drasill* means 'horse', and it is now generally accepted that this compound noun must mean 'Odin's horse'" (Crossley-Holland 187). According to Old Norse poets often mentioned a gallows tree to be a horse.

The similarities between Pluto and Odin are the loss of one eye, the hanging and resurrection. Even though the double might only be a chimera, he is the exact image of Pluto and can therefore be interpreted as have been brought back from the dead. The gallows are recurrent through the story. Pluto's double has a white mark on his chest which grows with time into the shape of a gallows and in addition, the only thing which remains of the narrator's house after the fire is an imprint of a gallows. These recurrent images of the gallows add a red thread to the story. It becomes Pluto's fate as well as the narrator's. This linked to Odin's sacrifice for the knowledge of the dead offers yet a dimension of the underworld. Pluto is killed to gain the knowledge of the dead and come back to force the narrator to experience the torments of hell. The narrator cannot escape from his deeds as there are constant reminders which appear to torture him with guilt. Like Odin, Pluto might have gained inner sight and the ability to read the narrator's mind by the forced sacrifice of his eye, at least in the mind of the narrator. The cat already owns the knowledge of his owner's disposition. The transformation is apparent to all who meets him. It is only the narrator who believes his own concealment of his alteration. One might even bring it so far as to interpret the narrator, at times, to be blind towards his own self.

When the personality of Pluto's owner is altered, he tries to avoid the narrator in fear of violence. Their changed relationship infuriates the narrator who punishes Pluto by cutting

out an eye. The narrator is tossed back and forward in his steady decline of his mind. He seems to have surrendered to the supernatural powers that possesses him and drives him into madness. As he hangs Pluto in the tree, his eyes cry for the action he is committing and his heart ache for the knowledge that there was no reason that instigated the deed. Here his soul seems to penetrate his hardening surface and his eyes cannot lie. He knows he is committing a sin and he seeks punishment for his thoughts and actions; for the damnation and alienation from repentance.

2.3 The double

He appears during a drunken night and is taken home as a replacement of Pluto. His striking resemblance pleases the wife and the narrator finds a way to restore the former order of their household. Maybe in his mind it functions as a redemption or obliteration of his earlier deeds towards Pluto. However, the cat is never named. As aforementioned Poe only named characters if it held a symbolic reason for it. Here one might assume that the unnamed cat is only a figure of imagination derived from the narrator's mind. The torment which the narrator experience creates several different names linked to supernatural beings which are given to the cat. However, by leaving the cat unnamed it might give the narrator a way to physically replace Pluto or it might be out of fear to get attached to the animal. The cat is constantly believed to possess powers and ability to punish its owner. As opposed to Pluto who usually kept a distance after the abuse, the 'new' cat seems to cling to the narrator like a leech, draining him of energy.

The conclusions that have so far been drawn in this essay about concealment, death, and nightmares offer links to another Norse deity, namely the goddess of the dead, Hel. She was the daughter of Loki, who had three children with the giantess Angrboda. Their children were all hideous monsters, the wolf Fenrir, a serpent called Jormungand, and the third was

Hel who had a body which was half rotten. The gods decided that the children were dangerous and captured them. Hel was thrown down to Niflheim, by Odin. Niflheim was a world which was situated beneath the worlds. She was told to look after the dead, all those who died of old age or illness. Her kingdom was an “icy wasteland” surrounded by high walls which were impossible to pass except for the dead. (Scott 156) Hel’s name means Concealer and is said to originate from the Old Norse word “halija” which means “one who covers up or hides something”. These walls of Hel can be linked to the recurrent use of walls in the story. The wall of the house which is left with an imprint of Pluto’s fate, the wall which is used to hide the wife, and the mental walls which holds the narrator’s unconscious desires and wants enclosed. The revealing of the wife’s corpse further suggests an interpretation of the cat to be dead. As mentioned earlier, the walls of Hel were impossible to pass if not dead.

The narrator blinds Pluto and hangs him; he kills his wife and buries her. In desperation he tries to hide and conceal his crimes and his new disposition. Yet the same force that drove him into committing crimes makes him brag about his well-built construction and concealment which leads to the revealing of his wife’s body. As the wall comes tumbling down the narrator’s crimes are exposed and his true face is revealed. Although he continuously blames the cat for himself being unconcealed he seems to admit his own guilt as he states: “I had walled the monster up within the tomb” (538). By his statement he might refer the monster to be himself; by blaming the cat for his inexplicable deeds he admits to having denied and hid his own actions and disposition from himself. A wall is a symbol and image for defence, protection and safety. According to Ad de Vries the wall can also be the “outward body as the opposite of the indwelling spirit” (491-492). However, although his deeds have been revealed he still holds the cat responsible.

Hel had a horse, which was called nightmare, and when she was riding, the sight of her was a foretelling of death. As earlier mentioned in this essay, the narrator described the

cat as a nightmare riding his chest. Along with the white mark in the shape of the gallows on the cat's chest, it might be interpreted as not only a reminder of earlier deeds; it might as well have been a foreboding of his death. Earlier interpretations of the white mark has been claimed to be mother's milk. However, in addition to my interpretation the white may be a symbol of the cat's innocence.

Hel was also known for her appearance, she always looked grim and gloomy. Her body from face to her waist looked like a woman's yet from her waist down her legs resembled a corpse's. "her face and neck and shoulders and breasts and arms and back, they were all pink; but from her hips down, every inch of Hel's skin looked decayed and greenish-black" (Crossley-Holland 33). The duality of her body might be interpreted as the dichotomy of for instance beautiful or ugly, good or evil, white or black. The narrator is caught in the duality of his disposition and the duality between reason and instinct. In the beginning of the story the narrator describes the story as both wild and homely. This duality is recurrent throughout the whole story. Although the double nature of the narrator is the main topic of the story, it is projected onto the 'twin' cats which symbolise good and evil, tame and wild, repression and release, life and death. Their roles were to serve separate purposes. Pluto became the victim while the double served as someone who revealed the crimes. Hel was also seen as a judge of the souls of the dead to be good or evil and according to certain theories she had an eye of fire with which she could see the truth. At the end of the story the cat inside of the wall stares at the narrator with a "solitary eye of fire" (538). These theories have few references and will not be investigated further. However, it is mentioned because it is yet a link to my thesis.

There is yet another mythological deity who bears resemblance to the cat. The narrator splits his wife's head open with an axe and later when she is found inside of the wall the second cat is sitting on top of her head. One might interpret this positioning as if the cat

replaced her head. This vision resembles the look of the Egyptian goddess Bast or Bastet. She was a feline goddess with the body of a woman and the head of a cat. She was the daughter of Ra, the sun-god and by this relation she was linked with the rage that was inherent from her father's eye, the eye of Ra, which was his "instrument of vengeance" (Hart 45). The eye was a female deity with an enormous blood thirst. The eye of Ra was according to several myths assigned to other deities where most of them were female. This included Bast and when in the hands of the female deities the eye tended to be vengeful and causing sickness, death and violence. Anyone who harmed a cat was thought of as a criminal since cats were sacred to Bast. This could be interpreted as the double to have come in the form of Bast to avenge and to bring the narrator to justice.

One might also interpret the splitting of the wife's head to symbolise the duality between good and bad, reason and instinct. Furthermore, the sight of a human body with the head of an animal might be the narrator's constant praise of animal's disposition and the distrust in human loyalty. Here the two opposites are joined and might be interpreted as the narrator's ideal, namely the human reason combined with the animal instinct.

The gods and goddesses of death, vengeance, and knowledge which are traceable in this story, becomes symbols which reminds the narrator of his deeds and actions. His chain of events, the cause and effect has come full circle.

Charles Baudelaire was a dedicated defender of Poe as a person and author. He claimed that Poe believed in a mysterious force which made man commit inexplicable actions. He describes Poe's view on this:

This primitive, irresistible force is a natural Perversity, that makes man at once both a homicide and a suicide, assassin and executioner;-for he adds, with a remarkably satanic subtlety, the impossibility of finding a reasonable motive for certain depraved

and perilous acts might lead us to regard them as suggestions from the Devil, if history and experience did not instruct that God often draws on them to establish order and to punish rogues; *after having employed the same rogues as accomplices!* such is the thought that slips, I confess, into my mind, an implication as treacherous as it is inevitable (Foye 96).

Conclusion

With this essay I wanted to present an alternative and extended interpretation of the cat. As one of two main characters of the story, the cat represents the other side of a duality. Man and animal have at one time been linked into an inseparable unit yet are later divided into opposites by the narrator's growing paranoia. Their former unit evolves into the oppositions of wild and homely, instinct and reason, and turning into good and evil. The narrator becomes obsessed with the pursuit of the darkest longings of his soul, self-destructive actions which jeopardises his soul. Yet he cannot resist it and succumbs to his wishes. His identification with animals and separation from humans creates a loneliness into which he is pushing himself towards as he, one by one, eliminates his closest companions. His earlier struggle to create a home and family becomes useless as his mind turns bitter and resentful. The loathing and fear which he feels towards the cats is merely a reflection of feelings which he feels about himself.

Although Poe did not claim to be religious or superstitious he took advantage of the figurative expressions and vivid pictures of myths and old beliefs to create a terrible landscape of the psyche which inhabited unexplored wants and wishes. In a society built on religious and moral boundaries, Poe was ahead of his time in the fascination and exploration of the human psyche. What later came to be claimed considering the mind and its possible

links to superstition and myth might have been possible because of Poe's literary accomplishments.

Aside from the most visible associations to superstition in *The Black Cat*, the cats and their characteristics and visual appearances can with closer analysis, as shown in this essay, bring further meanings and perspectives on the story. The connotations of Pluto's and his double's appearances, such as the colour black or the loss of one eye, can in addition be linked to mythology. The rulers of the dead such as Hel and Hades, gives a description of the wasteland of the narrator's mind. He has been diminished to a mere shadow of himself, enclosed inside the walls of Hel. Judges and avengers such as Bast and Odin, gives a description of the revealing of one's soul, the complete knowledge of one's soul, and the damnation for one's deeds. The narrator already exists inside of his own private hell where he suffers the torments of guilt and devastation, and punishes himself for his own sins. All these elements of myth add to the description of a wasteland of a depressed and deranged human being as he moves towards annihilation.

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