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In the Hands of the Reader

Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Black Cat" is written from the perspective of a convicted murderer. The narrator pens the story of his downward spiral on the day preceding his hanging in order to "unburden [his] soul" (Poe 904). An alcoholic and clearly unstable, the narrator recounts his transformation from a compassionate child into a remorseless killer. The events that the narrator describes in "The Black Cat" are often symbolic and seemingly supernatural. Michael Lewis calls for a fictitious interpretation of such events. Lewis' interpretation of "The Black Cat" is accurate in its portrayal of the reader's role in and the relative fictitiousness of the story's events, yet it overlooks and overemphasizes other important elements that comprise Poe's story.

Lewis proposes and answers the question of the reader's importance in Poe's "The Black Cat": "How is the necessity of the reader emphasized? 1) Through the contingent and thus multiply interpretable signs of the text and 2) via the text's double-voiced fictionality, which establishes the reader as a potential expert..." (113). Lewis' argument is valid in its active involvement of the role of reader in "The Black Cat." The events of Poe's story include multiple elements that leave the reader questioning their validity. The fire is one such example. Following the narrator's hanging of his original black cat Pluto, his house unexplainably catches on fire and is completely destroyed with the exception of one wall. On this wall is an image of a cat with a noose around its neck. The narrator is deeply troubled. The event of the fire and the

cat's image leave a "deep impression upon [the narrator's] fancy" (Poe 907). Though the narrator makes a questionable argument about the image of the cat on the wall, the nature of the fire itself is never explained. The fire and the hanging occur on the very same evening, yet the narrator declares himself to be "...above the weakness of seeking to establish a sequence of cause an effect, between the disaster and the atrocity" (Poe 906). At this point, the reader becomes actively involved. Clearly seeing the juxtaposition of the cat's murder and the fire as well as the symbolism of the hanged cat on the lone surviving wall, the reader must step in to interpret the situation. Though the fire is not naturally justified or explainable, the reader must interpret its symbolism in proclaiming the narrator's guilt. The reader may even go so far as to doubt the truth behind the events of the fire given the narrator's mental state and instead interpret the fire as a manifestation of the narrator's guilty conscience. The reader is made to be highly involved in the interpretation of the otherwise unnatural events of Poe's story.

Lewis states, "The text's fictionality announces that everything that the reader is reading is a kind of lie: like a lie, it borrows from and employs many of the same measures and methods of credible narratives; it is plausible without necessarily being true" (108). Lewis interprets the events of "The Black Cat" as having the potential to occur yet truly being false. The narrator himself acknowledges and almost endorses this point of view: "For the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence" (Poe 904). From the very beginning of the story, the reader is placed in a position of doubt. Overall, the events that the narrator recounts have the potential to be conceivable. The progression of the narrator's fading sanity and alcoholism serve to explain his maiming and hanging of the black cat, the torment that the second cat brings him, the murder of his wife, and the walling up of the cat with

his wife's corpse. Though not normal or sane, these events can indeed be linked to the narrator's failing mental state. On the contrary, other more supernatural and unexplainable happenings do indeed occur throughout the span of "The Black Cat". The house fire occurs seemingly spontaneously on the night of the black cat's murder; the narrator happens upon a second black cat that resembles Pluto and even has one eye missing; the second cat has a white mark that resembles "...the image of a hideous – of a ghastly thing – of the GALLOWS!" (908). The preceding events are seemingly unexplainable and almost too coincidental; they factor into the cloudy lens that the story must be interpreted from. Centered around the actual events of the narrator's mistreatment and hanging of his first black cat, the supernatural events of Poe's story are more of an expression of the narrator's alcoholism, insanity, and guilty conscience than of truth. Though the narrator claims "...mad am I not..." (Poe 904), the reader must not be so naïve as to take the narrator at his every word but must critically interpret his narrative, ultimately from the viewpoint that all says is a lie based on partial fragments of truth.

As Lewis investigates the role of the reader, he also discusses the narrator's place in the story. He states, "Despite the attention it pays to interiority, "The Black Cat" does not present the narrator as a special case; instead, in its conscription of the reader into the scene of judgment, it suggests that no psychology—represented or otherwise—controls whether or not it deliberates or upon which object it deliberates" (105-106). Though the role of the reader is crucial to the interpretation of the story, Lewis largely underemphasizes the mental state of the narrator. Though the narrator's instability is alluded to in Lewis' interpretation of the text as fictional, he essentially ignores the impact that the narrator's mental state has on the text. He instead dismisses the narrator as unreliable, as he largely is, but then places the unfolding of the story's events purely in the reader's interpretation. The narrator begins his account by describing his

childhood. The narrator describes the “docility and humanity” as well as the “tenderness of heart” that characterized his boyhood disposition and often made him the object of ridicule (Poe 905). The narrator was “especially fond of animals...” (Poe 905) and spent most of his time with his pets even into his adulthood and marriage. The narrator can be seen as showing signs of mental instability and difficulty in relating to other people even from a young age. This mental state deteriorates to an extreme because of the narrator’s “Fiend Intemperance” (Poe 905). When he began drinking, the narrator “experienced a radical alteration for the worse...for what disease is like Alcohol!” (Poe 905). As the narrator becomes increasingly subject to the influence of alcohol, his already unstable emotional state quickly worsens. He begins to mistreat his pets, eventually even including his favorite black cat. The narrator plucks out Pluto’s eye and later hangs him “in cold blood...hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart...hung it *because* I knew that in doing so I was committing a sin...that would so jeopardize my immortal soul...” (Poe 906), clearly demonstrating his mental instability. Following the hanging of the black cat, the narrator is tortured by his guilty conscience which is further heightened as he slips deeper into his drinking. This combination of mental instability and alcoholism is beautifully juxtaposed upon the narrator’s discovery of the second cat: “One night as I sat, half stupefied...my attention was suddenly drawn to some black object reposing upon the head of one of the immense hogsheads of Gin, or of Rum, which constituted the chief furniture of the apartment...it was a black cat” (Poe 907). The narrator is tortured by the constant presence of the cat, leading to the eventual callous murder of his wife and the accidental walling up of the cat with his wife’s corpse. The narrator writes his story while awaiting his own death, contributing to his failing mental state and the questionable nature of his story. Though, as stated by Lewis, the reader is responsible for interpreting the

fictitiousness of the events of “The Black Cat”, the ultimate cause for the story’s fictionality is the narrator’s poor mental state rather than the authority of the reader.

According to Lewis, “Working against the internal accidents described in the plot...is the possibility that the implied authorial Poe (as god) caused that accident to happen, a non-contingency that is itself influenced by accidents of reading, writing, and publishing” (113). In addition to the role of the reader in “The Black Cat”, Lewis highlights the role of the subjective author. Inserting Poe as a quasi-character into his story, though, takes away the influence that the narrator holds. In this view, the narrator is exposed to cruel determinism in which, no matter what he does he will be condemned to hang; it seeks to involve Poe in his own story, when he should be viewed as being above it rather than within it. As the narrator is unreliable though, emphasizing the narrator’s role allows for the story to be viewed through a lens of interpretation by the reader. As the narrator recollects the desire that he had to confess his crime, he recalls, “In the rabid desire to say something easily, I scarcely knew what I uttered at all” (Poe 910). Lewis would interpret the narrator’s confession as being subject to the deterministic authority of Poe. However, Poe’s presence is removed from the story, and he allows the narrator to recount his story and for the reader to interpret the narrator’s motives, reliability, and truth.

As described by Lewis, “Poe’s text is narrow...because its narrator is monomaniacal” (111). As the narrator is unstable and therefore unreliable, the reader is brought into the story to interpret the truth or falsehood of the narrator’s story; “The Black Cat” as a whole should be viewed as a web of lies spun using strands of truth. Lewis strongly acknowledges the unreliability of the narrator yet fails to address in-depth the reason for this unreliability, the narrator’s unstable mental state. In Lewis’ overemphasis of Poe’s role within rather than above his story, he detracts from the influence of the narrator and the interpretation of the reader.

Overall though, Michael Lewis' interpretation of Poe's "The Black Cat" is fairly strong and allows the reader to interpret the narrator's account in new and insightful ways.

Works Cited

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