

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for

The Black Cat

by

Edgar Allan Poe

Book Information

Edgar Allan Poe, The Black Cat

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Interest Level: UG

Poe's tale provides a ghastly journey through the subconscious of a murderer.

Topics: Classics, Classics (All); Horror/Thriller, Misc./Other; Mysteries, Murder; Series, Creative Short Stories; Short Stories, Short Stories (All)

Main Characters

Pluto the first black cat

the narrator the main character in the story, who becomes intemperate and kills his cat and wife

the second black cat a black cat with some white fur in the shape of the gallows

the wife the narrator's wife; she is fond of both cats

Vocabulary

anomalous abnormal

gossamer light and delicate

phantasm an illusion, fantasy

sagacious having keen judgment

tinctured tinged with a trace amount of something

Synopsis

The narrator introduces his tale by explaining he does not expect his story to be believed, yet he assures the reader it is no dream. He also states he is not insane, but he must tell this tale to unburden his soul.

When the narrator was young, he was known for his kindness and docility to his fellow man and animals. He married a woman early in life who shows a similar disposition and shares his love for pets. They

have many pets, but the narrator's favorite is a large black cat named Pluto.

Several years later, the narrator's heavy drinking brings an adverse change to his nature. He begins to treat his wife and his pets violently, and one night he cuts an eye from Pluto after the frightened pet bites him. The cat slowly recovers but avoids its master. Finally the narrator surrenders to his perverse soul and hangs the cat.

That night his house burns down, and even though he, his wife, and a servant escape the fire, he loses all of his wealth. One wall of the house remains standing, and on it is an impression of a cat with a rope around its neck.

Regretting the loss of the cat, the narrator searches for a new cat in the places he frequents and comes upon a large black cat. He caresses the cat affectionately, and it follows him home and settles in. While the cat quickly becomes a favorite pet of his wife, the narrator soon begins to hate the cat, especially since this cat, too, has only one eye. As time progresses, the narrator's hatred turns to dread, for what first seemed to be an indefinite white mark on the cat's breast now has become an outline of the gallows.

One day as the narrator and his wife descend the steep steps of their cellar, the cat nearly causes the man to trip and fall. In a rage, the man raises an axe to kill the cat, but his wife arrests the blow. The narrator withdraws from her grasp and kills his wife instead. After much debating as to what to do with her body, he decides to enclose her in the cellar wall. Despite his act of murder, the narrator sleeps well since the cat, it appears, has fled.

Several days pass and the police arrive, suspecting foul play in the wife's disappearance. Though the police seem satisfied at the end of their search, the narrator impulsively comments on the solid construction of the house and begins to rap his cane against the cellar wall. A howl comes from the wall, prompting the police to tear down the wall, revealing the corpse of the narrator's wife. Upon the wife's

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head stands the hideous cat, which had been walled up within her tomb.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

Why does the narrator kill Pluto?

Pluto shows his dislike for the narrator after he cuts out the cat's eye. The cat's rejection irritates the narrator further. The narrator indicates he is taken over by "the spirit of Perverseness," a primitive impulse of the human heart. The narrator then resolves to do wrong for wrong's sake; he hangs the cat because he knows he is committing a sin -- a deadly sin that is beyond the mercy of God.

Literary Analysis

The narrator indicates he has undergone a complete personality change. How does he change, and what causes the change?

The narrator tells us that he had always been docile, kind, and tender toward humans and animals. But then he becomes a heavy drinker of alcohol, and a radical change in personality and temperament takes place. The more he drinks, the meaner he becomes. Finally, after a long period of drinking, he loses control of his actions and his mind.

Inferential Comprehension

The second black cat is almost identical to Pluto. How is the similarity between the cats important to the storyline?

The cats' strikingly similar appearance, the color and the missing eye, may suggest Pluto has come back from the dead to avenge his death. Another possibility is the second cat's likeness to Pluto is just coincidental, but the similarities cause the narrator to be haunted by his own conscience.

Constructing Meaning

This story is entitled *The Black Cat*. Why would Poe choose a black cat rather than a cat of another color for the events in this story?

Black cats, according to ancient notions, symbolize evil and the supernatural. An old saying states that cats have nine lives. The black cat in this story seems supernatural because it seems to avenge the death of Pluto and the murder of the wife. The cat seals the fate of the narrator by revealing to the police where the corpse of the wife is hidden, which leads to the arrest of the narrator.

Teachable Skills

Extending Meaning In this story, the narrator is cruel to animals. Have students research animal abuse and what punishments can be given to people who have been found guilty of these acts. Next, have the students role-play a court trial. One student can play the narrator, who will be tried for cruelty to animals. Others can take the parts of judge, jury, witnesses, prosecution, and defense.

Describing Actions or Events Some evidence indicates the narrator has a mental problem. Have the students research the insanity plea for murder cases. Have students choose sides, with one side writing a legal brief suggesting that the man murdered his wife in a fit of insanity, while the other side writes a legal brief contending that the man was sane when he murdered his wife.

Comparing and Contrasting Poe reveals the events of *The Black Cat* only through the main character's point of view. Have the students rewrite a scene from the story using another viewpoint.

Responding to Literature Ask students to imagine and plan the sound effects for a movie version of the story. Choose pieces of music, either classical or popular, to use in key scenes or in the introduction or closing. Incorporate the sounds and the music while dramatically reading the story as a class.