

The Transformation of Love into a Destructive Power in Poe's The Black Cat

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The human feelings are inner forces that can shape and be shaped by the human nature that accommodates them. They are complex and mysterious to the extent that man sometimes fails to identify one of them or to distinguish one from the others. They are flexible to the extent that they might undergo different sorts of changes according to the transformation in the psychology of the individual and the circumstances that surround him. Love, for example, is a positive feeling that can give man the power needed to go on in life and endure its difficulties. However, love sometimes takes the shape of hatred and vice versa. Through the character of Anderson in *The Devil's Disciple*, Bernard Shaw states that it is surprising to find "how like hate is to love".¹ Moreover, love might stimulate the married people to act like "jailers and slave owners than lovers".² Thus, love develops into a desire for possession and control that has a suffocating effect on the beloved ones. He further remarks that some people are able to conceal their real sentiment and pretend to be friendly before their

enemies. Accordingly, their animosity that is connected with hard feelings takes the shape of friendship that is connected with tender feelings. Willingly or unwillingly, people might mask their feelings with features belong to contradictory feelings. Thus, these feelings seem to be the same, though they spring from opposite sources. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne observes that the passions of love and hatred are the same at the core. Explaining that, he says that:

Each, in its utmost development, supposes
a high degree of intimacy and heartknowledge;
each renders one individual dependant for
the food of his affections
and spiritual life upon another;
each leaves the passionate love, or
the no less passionate hater, forlorn
and desolate by the withdrawal of his
object. Philosophically considered, therefore,
the two passions seem essentially the same,
except that one happens to be seen in a
celestial radiance and the other in a
dusky and lurid glow.³

Hence, evidently love and hatred are similar in the intensity and influence they have over the one that is obsessed by them. It is clear that there is no clear-cut line between them. Love can be transformed into a destructive power that is closer to hatred than it is to love. In *The Black Cat*, Poe portrays the transformation of a docile and humane man into a violent being that is haunted by a strong inclination for inflicting pain on those he has mostly loved. The story shows "the capacity for violence and horror lies within each of us".⁴

The main character of *The Black Cat* is a man whose dominant emotional feature is his love for animals. This love presents the energy and meaning of his life. He senses in the "unselfish and self-sacrificing love of a brute"⁵ (p.656) a sincerity that is lacked in the human love. He finds in the tenderness of animals an echo to his "tenderness of heart [that] was even so conspicuous as to make ... [him] the jest of ... [his] companions" (p.655). Hence, he is more attached to animals than he is to human beings.

Besides, animals become the mutual objects of his and his wife's interest, love and care. Thus, this love provides him with the emotional link that connects him with his wife. Consequently, love is reflected on the whole atmosphere of their home. It provides his marriage with the mutuality and warmth that are needed by any human relationship to be successful and healthy. His favorite pet among his animals is a black cat, Pluto, that is described as "a remarkably large and beautiful animal, entirely black, and sagacious to an astonishing degree" (p.656). There is mutual attachment between the man and his cat that follows him wherever he goes. His cat is the symbol of love roaming in all the parts of the home and providing its owner with "one of ... [his] principle sources of pleasures" (p.655). Clearly, this cat is the base and the pillar of the home, for once it is murdered, the whole home completely collapses with fire except for a wall that stands with the figure of a gigantic cat engraved on it.

The paradox of this story is that the murderer of the cat is the main spiritual beneficiary of its life, its owner. For unknown reasons, the man becomes a victim of alcohol. His addiction exposes and enhances a hidden territory of his self, one that has not had previously the stimulus that can activate its capacity for violence and evil. Being powerful, this evil aspect of the self dominates his being and creates a chasm between the man and the tender aspect of his soul. A sense of estrangement from his home

pushes him to spend much of his time in haunts about the town. When he returns home, he feels that the cat avoids his presence. It is evident that the cat is so attached to its owner that it is sensitive to the essential change he undergoes. On the other hand, the man's sensitivity to the avoidance of the cat proves that the cat means much to him. Had not the cat been so dear to him, he would have shown no attention to its negative reaction towards him. Incapable of satisfying those whom he loves, he nourishes a feeling of unrest within. A feeling whose source is the fact that he is emotionally unable to give love, for it is too much for a man with a distracted mind to bear the responsibility of love. The avoidance of the cat intensifies this feeling in him. Finding that his love for the cat causes him to suffer, the man decides to end it through destroying the cat. He starts inflicting pain on the cat and then cuts one of its eyes. It is clear that the intensity of violence gets its energy from the intensity of love that the man has towards the cat. Besides, the eye of the cat which is cut by the man is symbolic of the man's unwillingness to let the cat "get a clear perception of his evil heart".⁶

Till this moment the man is under the pressures of two conflicting forces—his love and his desire for destroying this love. It seems that after plucking out the eye of the cat, the force of love will have a painful effect on him. Therefore, he decides to paralyze its effect by estranging his soul from the whole experience he passes through. He says that he has "a sentiment half of horror, half of remorse, for the crime of which ... [he] had been guilty; but it was, at best, a feeble and equivocal feeling, and the soul remained untouched" (p.657). To prove to himself that he is indifferent to his sense of guilt, the man hangs the black cat with a noose from a tree. The hanging of the cat is symbolic of the man's inability to "accept love".⁷ After this cruelty, he claims that he is not sure that his soul lives and that he is governed by

"primitive impulses" and inclination for violence. Thus, he becomes an instrument of evil and hatred.

The man attributes his cruelty to the "spirit of Perverseness" which he defines as "the unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself—to offer violence to its own nature—to do wrong for the wrong's sake only" (p.658). It appears that he is possessed by an evil spirit due to his addiction. This "fiend Intemperance" (p.656) takes hold of him and stamps his behaviours with aggression. It makes him lose his balance and deadens his healthy perception of love. Eventually, he loses his will of life and love. By killing the cat, he attempts to negate his existence in life. His negation works through two levels. Firstly, destroying the cat is a process of self-destruction, for he makes "his ego ... merge with the ego of another",⁸ the cat. The cat becomes the symbol of his emotional identity. Hence, its elimination means his emotional death. Without emotions, man loses his human identity. Secondly, his violent act against the cat is the first step towards his revolt against the laws of his society. According to these laws, activity should be "organized into socially useful channels."⁹ He says that he wants to "Violate that which is law, merely because ... [he] understand[s] it to be" law (p.658). Then, he commits a more socially forbidden act, murdering his wife. Accordingly, his perseverance is a form of liberation from rules and an announcement of his indifference to the negative consequences of his evil deeds. This is a form of revolt against life itself.

Although the man destroys the cat, deep inside, he still has affections for it. He could not imagine it as a source of hurt to him. When he sees the gigantic image of the cat on the only surviving wall of his house, he thinks that someone has thrown the body of the cat through the window to arouse him from sleep. Consequently, the fall of other walls on the carcass and the flame have accomplished this image. He believes that the body is used

to save him from fire or he does not want to admit that the image is a sign of his guilt and an indication of the inevitability of his punishment.

Meaning much to him, the phantasm of the cat could not escape his memory for months. Nevertheless, he does not regret his ugly act against it. However, he is left forlorn and desolate by the withdrawal of his object of love and hatred. This leads him to look for another cat of somewhat similar appearance with the first one to substitute its place.

It sounds that the man fails to isolate himself from life because the fact of his existence imposes itself on him from within. The flame of emotions is not extinguished inside him. His love stained with a sense of guilt and symptoms of hatred projects itself in the shape of a second black cat.

The second black cat is similar to the first one in every aspect except one—a white spot that covers nearly the whole region of its chest. In the beginning, the narrator welcomes the appearance of this cat. But, in time, he feels disgusted with the cat. In fact, he is disgusted with his guilt. His annoyance at the presence of the cat increases when he observes that the spot on the cat begins to take the shape of "Gallows" (p.662) which reminds him of the noose with which he hanged Pluto.

It is not strange that this cat is liked so much by the man's wife. For her, love is the only hope in restoring warmth to her home. She considers this cat the object that can bring to life the tender side of her husband's nature. She is ignorant of the fact that her husband's previous love for animals is changed into "hatred of all things and of all mankind" (p.662). Over and above, she is unaware of the connotations of guilt and suffering that are connected with the cat in her husband's mind. Her attempt to save the cat from being killed by her husband this results in her own murder by him.

It is noticeable that the man's wife has been the victim of his drunkenness and violence. However, she has been "the most patient of sufferer" (p.662) in enduring the dreariness of her life due to the absence of a caring husband to support her. Her patience is an indication of her expectation of witnessing change in her desperate situation. But, the animosity the man has towards the cat signifies the impossibility of reviving the emotional link that once has been between her and her husband. This refutes any hope for change and consequently leads to her death. Hence, it is suggestive that the second black cat, whose presence reveals the inability of her husband to give love, is found with her corpse in the wall of the cellar.

It is worth mentioning that according to superstitions and popular notions, Satan and witches assume the form of black cats. This is also referred to jokingly by the man's wife. Accordingly, black cats are symbols of bad luck, sorcery, death, the spirits of the dead and witchcraft. In addition to that, the name of the first black cat is Pluto, who in Greek and Roman mythology is the god of the dead and the ruler of the underworld.¹⁰ Of course, this might indicate that the black cats are sources of evil and bad omen. In this point, it is questionable whether the black cats are the causes of the havoc inflicted on the man's life or mere symbols of the different phases of his love. As a matter of fact, after his addiction, the first cat becomes the reminder of his spiritual weakness and after its murder, the second one becomes the reminder of his guilt. So, for a period of time, their presence in his life causes him unrest. Anyway, they are so because they remind him of a negative aspect of his psychology or evil acts committed by him. Hence, the real cause of unrest comes from him. He consequently reflects this psychological unrest on his surrounding.

It is observable that both the avoidance of the first cat and the approach of the second one to him have irritated him. His attitude towards them is the touchstone for his attitude towards life. The fuel of his violent tendencies is the emotional force inside him that loses its tender touch and reserves its intensity. Indeed, it has been in his hand to decide the influence of the cats on his life—whether to be factors of construction or of deconstruction. He alone is to blame for the destruction of his life. Thus, the cats are reflections of his inner self.

NOTES

1- G.B. Shaw, *The Devil's Disciple* (London: Longmans, 1966), p.51.

2- Ibid.

3- Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1994), p.221.

4- Martha Womack, "The Black Cat-Symbolism", Internet Publisher. Christopher Nilsson, 5 July, 2004 (Poe's Prose), 17 May, 2006.

5- All quotations of "The Black Cat" are taken from Edgar Allan Poe, "The Black Cat" in *Tales by Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Laura Benet (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, INC., 1952).

6- Womack, Internet.

7- Ibid.

8- Wystan Hugh Auden, "Introduction" in *The Recognition of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. Eric W. Carlson (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1966), p.221.

9- David Punter, *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day*, Vol.1 (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1996), p.183.

10- Womack, Internet.

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