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The Uncanny Mind: Perpetrator Trauma in Poe's "The Black Cat"

Bethanie Allyson Sonnefeld

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

The Uncanny Mind: Perpetrator Trauma in Poe's "The Black Cat"

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Among the psychological interpretations of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat," trauma theory has yet to make an appearance. However, the confessional nature of the story shifts—via a trauma reading—from an attempt by the narrator to ease his guilt to his attempt to understand what happened to him. The narrator's murder of his wife traumatized him, causing erasures in the timeline and several forms of dissociation. These erasures and dissociations cause an uncanny effect within the story, which occurs as the past, present, and future are conflated and as the narrator's mind is both known and hidden. The narrator's tale is an attempt at working through his trauma to come to an understanding and acceptance of the events. However, the unclear timeline—both how much time has passed since his wife's death and the passage of time in the story—suggests that the narrator does not have enough critical distance from the events, so telling his tale becomes a form of reliving that does not relieve the confusion he experiences. Ultimately, the narrator's confession does not provide the understanding he hopes for, which places the burden of creating an understanding of the story on the individual reader.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, The Black Cat, trauma, perpetrator trauma, uncanny

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

TITLE PAGE	i
ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	iv
Introduction.....	1
Poe and the Fictive Mind	5
The Traumatized Narrator.....	9
Timeline Inconsistencies.....	13
The Uncanny.....	18
An Attempt at Working Through.....	23
Conclusion	27
Works Cited	31

The Uncanny Mind: Perpetrator Trauma in Poe's "The Black Cat"

Edgar Allan Poe first published "The Black Cat" in 1843 in the *United States Saturday Post*. The tale was later reprinted twice during Poe's lifetime—first in a collection edited by E.A. Duyckinck entitled *Tales* in 1845, and second in the *Pictorial National Library* in 1848. "The Black Cat" was then posthumously republished in the first volume of Griswold's 1850 compilation of Poe's works, *The Works of the Late Edgar Allan Poe*. A significant amount of literary criticism has responded to "The Black Cat" since its initial publication, and psychoanalytic readings hold a prevalent spot among the many interpretations of this particular Poe tale.

In 1933, Marie Bonaparte published *Edgar Poe, étude psychanalytique*, a work that was translated into English in 1949 as *The Life and Works of Edgar Allan Poe*. In this book, Bonaparte printed the first psychoanalysis of Poe's works. As a student of Freud, many of Bonaparte's interpretations of Poe's stories focus on how the tales demonstrate tensions between a boy and his mother and father. Though her Freudian readings of Poe's works have lost some credibility since the book's original publication, the analysis Bonaparte penned opened conversations surrounding Poe's enigmatic "The Black Cat." Her chapter on the tale began a psychoanalytic discussion as well as a debate about the nature of the narrator's confession, both of which remain relevant in analyses of "The Black Cat" today.

In discussing the confessional nature of the story, Bonaparte suggests that the narrator "appears to be motivated by two apparently opposite trends: the pressure of conscience which demands punishment for our sins, and our instinctual urges towards criminal activities, which may even reach the exhibitionism we find here" (463). For Bonaparte, "The Black Cat" comes about as a result of both the narrator's pride in the murder and his guilty conscience: a man's

desire for the world to see his perverseness before he dies, while also hoping to assuage his guilt in confessing. Kelly Anspaugh expounds on the guilt the narrator feels in discussing how the narrator's confession is an attempt at expiation. Anspaugh suggests, "confession is precisely that which redeems (confession > expiation > absolution)" (146). However, Anspaugh, unlike Bonaparte, does not see a possibility for redemption in the confession—"there is no redemption—no scenes of divine absolution" (146)—perhaps due to the dual nature of the narrator's confession. The boastful exhibitionism and simultaneous acknowledgement of guilt portray him as unrepentant.

The critical view of "The Black Cat" as confession shifts when, in the mid-1970s, John McElroy suggests that the narrator "put[s] the blame for [his] actions on others or on circumstances" (115). McElroy argues that the narrator wants to take as little of the blame and guilt for his wife's death as possible. McElroy sees the story as an attempt by the narrator to blame anything else—Pluto and alcohol especially—for the murder of his wife. Later articles by John Cleman and Susan Amper build on McElroy's argument that the narrator is attempting to resituate the guilt for his wife's murder. Both Cleman and Amper look at the sanity of the narrator, using the narrator's mental capacity as the basis for their analyses. According to Cleman's reading, the narrator of the story is insane—suffering from delusions and anti-human tendencies—and is therefore attempting to plead insanity, on the basis that he was not fully rational when he killed his wife. Amper, however, argues that the narrative develops because the narrator is lying so that he may appear crazy, and she claims that he has doctored the details of his narrative accordingly.

Readings such as Amper's and Cleman's combine both the narrator's psychology with a motive for the narrator's story, and in so doing also open "The Black Cat" to discussions about

the abnormal psychology of the narrator that continue with the work of Vicki Hester and Emily Segir. Hester and Segir suggest that “Poe created a character that fits into current scientific definitions of psychopathy” (176); the narrator meets the legal definition of sanity, but he “lack[s] qualities that allow people to live together successfully” (176). These abnormal psychologies all suggest that there is something that feels wrong with the tale itself and place the source of the discrepancies within the mind of the narrator.

All of these readings of the story’s narrator leave something wanting when interpreting his psychological state. In the case of insanity, Poe created other characters who more prominently display insane tendencies, such as the narrator of “The Tell-Tale Heart.” Juxtaposing these two narrators creates a stark contrast that emphasizes the sanity of the narrator of “The Black Cat.” Amper’s suggestion—that the narrator merely lies, attempting an insanity plea—is only partially convincing because the narrator himself appears confused rather than set on convincing the reader about his possible sanity or insanity. Finally, while the narrator does seem “self-centered, callous, and remorseless” (176) at times, as Hester and Segir claim, he also expresses real emotions after killing Pluto, and he was somehow able to live happily with his wife for an indeterminate amount of time before the violence began.

Examining this tale with trauma theory in mind rationalizes the narrative’s inconsistencies—those details which cause the appearance of insanity—while also resisting what McElroy describes as the narrator’s attempt to resituate the blame elsewhere. Rather than illustrating his own insanity, lying to seem insane, or being a psychopath, the narrator of “The Black Cat” tells his story after being traumatized by the violence he perpetrated against his wife. Dominick LaCapra suggests that “traumatization of the perpetrator” can occur “without [the perpetrator] personally living through the traumatizing event” (*History in Transit* 113-14). The

narrator did not need to be the victim of violence to be traumatized; he traumatizes himself when he kills his wife.

Due to his traumatized state, the narrator cannot come to terms with his past, including the violence he committed against his wife. The trauma creates a psychologically distant state in the narrator's mind, one that masks the reality of what he did. According to Cathy Caruth, "Traumatic memory [...] totters between remembrance and erasure, producing a history that is, in its very events, a kind of inscription of the past; but also a history constituted by the erasure of its traces." (*Literature in the Ashes of History* 78-79). The telling of "The Black Cat," then, does not constitute a story about truth. The narrator tells "The Black Cat" as an attempt to regain the history that was erased due to trauma. He is writing to understand and accept what happened.

The narrator's confession is the composition of his testimony rather than a statement of truth. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub describe testimony as follows: "what testimony does not offer is ... a completed statement, a totalizable account of ... events. In the testimony, language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion ... or the self-transparency of knowledge" (5). The testimony acts as a processing of events, the attempt at reconstructing a timeline based on the available fragments of memory. The narrator of "The Black Cat," in writing his account, does not endeavor to give us a statement of truth regarding the murder of his wife. He is trying to determine how that murder occurred, to regain a sense of his erased past.

In reading "The Black Cat" as an attempt to regain the lost history of the narrator's violent acts, trauma theory clarifies why his own past and nature become foreign to him. In a sense, the trauma has created an uncanny situation within the mind of the narrator. Fred Madden theorizes a similar situation within "The Black Cat" in the form of Pluto—the household animal that should have been known, but which also has a revealed supernatural side. While Madden

looks at the seemingly known and hidden aspects of Pluto, he misses similar uncanny markers in the narrator's psychology. The narrator reveals a side unfamiliar to himself, the side brought out by the "Fiend Intemperance" (851). This could be read as an instance of the uncanny appearing within the narrator himself, which suggests a second nature in the narrator.

The story presents the narrator with two conflicting temperaments—the docile husband and the irascible murderer—but the narrative initially hides the second disposition. However, that second nature is still intelligible through an application of trauma theory, which also reveals that the narrator is experiencing symptoms of trauma that have hindered his ability to recognize his own damning past, to the point where he no longer trusts his own memory. The narrative, in this light, becomes not so much the quest of a man to deny his guilt by pleading insanity or by lying about past events. Rather, the story reveals a man's search to understand how he committed violent acts when trauma and preconceived self-understandings obscure his ability to reconcile his violent actions.

Poe and the Fictive Mind

Given that "The Black Cat" is a fictional story instead of the narrative of a real-life criminal, and since Poe wrote this story half a century before Freud even introduced his model of the human mind and helped create the field of psychoanalysis, it might, at first glance, seem strange to look at Poe's character and his story through the lens of trauma theory. While it is true that trauma theory lends itself readily to nonfiction narrative, it likewise yields productive readings of fictional accounts inflected by traumatic events. Indeed, LaCapra suggests that "truth claims coming from historiography ... may be employed in the discussion and critique of art (including fiction) ... with respect to extreme events that still particularly concern people at present" (*Writing History, Writing Trauma* 14). LaCapra, then, seems to recognize that the truth

claims of trauma theory can provide an avenue for interpreting fiction.

However, Poe's "The Black Cat" is not biographical, realistic, or historical fiction; it is a work of artifice, a tale, that—in many readings—incorporates the supernatural. Furthermore, some might argue that Poe is less interested in finding truths of the mind than he is interested in creating an impression. They may argue that Poe's effects result in accurate proto-psychological explorations, but that the effect in and of itself does not provide enough of a foundation to support using trauma theory to illuminate "The Black Cat." Yet, it is exactly because Poe seeks to create effects that a trauma theory analysis becomes possible. In "The Philosophy of Composition" Poe claims, "I prefer commencing with the consideration of an *effect*. ...I say to myself, in the first place, 'Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?'" (163). To know the effect Poe intended to create in "The Black Cat" may be impossible, but the story still creates effects for its readers. One such effect, as Kenneth Silverman has suggested, is the uncanny, a sense that something is unfamiliar or mysterious (207-209).

The uncanny effect of the tale works in concert with trauma theory. Marita Nadal, in one of the first trauma theory studies of Poe's tales, suggests that "Poe's brilliant treatment of elements ... can be analyzed in the light of trauma and the uncanny" which leads to "notions that foreground the search for origins and the instability of memory, and in turn evoke and mirror the crises of history" (179). Nadal suggests that despite the complete artifice of Poe's fiction, the commonalities between the uncanny, gothic genre of Poe's stories and the concepts within trauma theory are close enough to warrant reading Poe's tales via trauma theory.

Furthermore, LaCapra states—and this is a point Nadal stresses in her essay—"no genre or discipline 'owns' trauma as a problem or can provide definitive boundaries for it" (*Writing*

History 96). So while some scholars claim that trauma studies belongs to the realm of psychology, psychiatry, or history, trauma occurs or is depicted in many different fields and genres, including works of complete fiction.

The second resistance to a trauma reading of “The Black Cat” still remains: Poe writing in a pre-Freudian society. In addressing the pre-Freudian understanding of human cognition, it is important to note that while Poe lived before Freud and his contemporaries formally studied human psychology, Poe—within his tales—theorized and imagined similar principles. One principle similarly theorized by both Freud and Poe is the desire to self-harm. Freud hypothesized a person’s desire towards self-harm as a death drive. He conceptualized “a ‘life instinct’ in opposition to the ‘death instinct’” and suggested that “these two instincts were struggling with each other from the very first” (108). Caruth simplifies Freud’s definition of the death drive as “the originating and repeated attempt by the organism to return to the inanimate” (*Unclaimed Experiences* 143). In other words, the death drive is the desire to bring about one’s own death or destruction.

Freud’s death drive sounds familiar to readers of Poe’s “The Black Cat” and “The Imp of the Perverse”—two pieces in which Poe examines what he calls the perverse. In “The Black Cat,” Poe conceptualizes what he means most clearly as the narrator states, “this spirit of perverseness [...] was this unfathomable longing of the soul *to vex itself*— to offer violence to its own nature — to do wrong for the wrong’s sake only” (852). Poe’s perversion is to act against oneself. In most of the tales that involve instances of perversion—“The Tell-Tale Heart,” “The Imp of the Perverse,” and “The Black Cat” especially—the narrator’s perversion leads to his death.

While Poe does not call perversion a drive towards death, the implication of self-harm

does seem to foretell Freud's conception of the death drive—the push towards one's own destruction. The exception is that Poe's perversion is not necessarily a drive towards death, but a drive against one's own self-interest. Since the ultimate form of self-interest is to live, the extreme of perversion—as acting against one's self interest—would be a drive towards death. Poe's "The Imp of the Perverse" displays the benign self-harm in procrastination (1222) as well as a more extreme self-harm or drive toward death:

And this fall—this rustling annihilation—for the very reason that it involves that one most ghastly and loathsome of all the most ghastly and loathsome images of death and suffering which have ever presented themselves to our imagination—for this very cause do we now the most vividly desire it. And because our reason violently deters us from the brink *therefore*, do we the more impetuously approach it. (1223)

The latter example, more so than other places in "The Imp of the Perverse" or "The Black Cat," parallels the Freudian psychological principle of the death drive. Despite living in a pre-Freudian—or pre-psychological—time, it is conceivable that Poe's writings can mirror other psychologically theorized traits.

While the death drive is a specific example in which Poe preconceives Freudian principles, Robert Shulman has suggested that "Poe achieves acute insights into the mysteries, processes, and terrors of the human personality without draining our shared inner life of its basic mystery" (245). And, as Vincent Buranelli suggests, "Poe writes ... from the standpoint of psychology" (73). Buranelli and Shulman assert that Poe portrays nuanced understandings in the workings of the human mind. It is this understanding which would allow for trauma theory to elucidate what is occurring in the mind of the narrator of "The Black Cat." So while Poe's "The Black Cat" is purely fiction, the violence, the uncanny effect, and the psychological exploration

of the narrator within Poe's tales suggest a basis to allow for a trauma reading of "The Black Cat."

A final note: in arguing that the narrator traumatized himself, I do not intend to portray the narrator as the victim. LaCapra warns that "not everyone traumatized by events is a victim. There is the possibility of perpetrator trauma ... but it does not imply the ... simple collapse of all distinctions, including that between the perpetrator and victim" (*Writing History* 79). The narrator himself, by the end of his story, admits to several violent acts, including torturing and hanging Pluto and killing his wife; he openly admits his guilt, and in so doing, declares that he is not the victim of his tale (851-52, 856). The premise of this article, then, is to open "The Black Cat" to a new analysis based on the view of the narrator as a traumatized perpetrator.

The Traumatized Narrator

To view where the trauma occurs in "The Black Cat," this analysis will begin at the climax of the narrative—when the narrator kills his wife. Marie Bonaparte suggests that for Poe to "become the kind of artist he was, a woman had first to die" (qtd. in Peeples 38). While Bonaparte might have meant this as a biographic insight, a secondary meaning resides beneath the simple meaning: Poe's tales often begin or end with a woman dying. In looking at a broad selection of his tales—"Ligeia," "Morella," "Berenice," and "The Black Cat" just to name a few—the death, or in the case of "Berenice" the false death, of a woman serves as the catalyst for the narrative, providing a reason for the tale. Poe's male narrators tell stories that lead to or travel through the death of the women they love. Without the narrator murdering his wife, "The Black Cat" might not exist at all. With this in mind, beginning at the violent crux of the tale—the moment when the woman dies—will prove insightful.

When the narrator kills his wife, he traumatizes himself. The murder functions as a

traumatic event, which signals that the narrator's self-understanding undergoes a traumatic shift. La Capra describes a traumatic event as a past event that is "punctual and datable" (*History in Transit* 55). In terms of the narrative, the reader is aware of the wife's death as is the narrator; it is an event that the narrator recounts. He states, "I withdrew my arm from [my wife's] grasp and buried the axe in her brain. She fell dead upon the spot, without a groan" (856). Within the narrative, the reader witnesses this obviously violent event.

Furthermore, the wife's murder serves not only as a violent occurrence—which signals a possible traumatic event—but also as a limit event for the narrator. LaCapra defines a limit event as "an event that goes beyond the capacity of the imagination to conceive or anticipate it" (*History in Transit* 133). In light of the description the narrator gives us of his character before he began drinking—"[his] docility and [the] humanity of [his] disposition" and his "tenderness of heart"—the likelihood of the narrator murdering his wife seems remote (850). The narrator, even in the beginning of his tale, even knowing how the story ends, cannot seem to imagine himself as a murderer. In this way, the opening description of the narrator's character suggests an inability to conceive himself as violent, despite the violence having already occurred.

The narrator's inability to view himself as inherently violent is further demonstrated throughout the tale as he seems to distance himself from the violence he perpetuates. The narrator references "the Fiend Intemperance" as a "disease [that] grew upon [him]" and "the fury of a demon ... possessing [him]" as external forces (851). This attempt at distancing himself from the murder could result from an inability to actually imagine himself in those violent states of mind. By suggesting an outside influence, the narrator shows not an unwillingness to accept the blame for the murder, but an inability to see himself in the escalating violence he perpetrates. The externality of these descriptions suggests that, even after the event, the narrator has trouble

incorporating or imagining the violent images as part of himself.

However, these distancing descriptions also signal that killing his wife served as a limit event for the narrator. Limit events are clearer signs of traumatization than just an act of violence. LaCapra asserts, “such an event (or series of events) must in some sense be traumatic or traumatizing, and what would call for special explanation is the nontraumatization of one who had experienced it” (*History in Transit* 133). So not only does the violence cue the reader to the narrator’s trauma, but the narrator’s own inability to conceive of himself in any other terms than the initial description suggests that a traumatic break has occurred.

By labeling the narrator’s frame of mind as traumatized, the incomprehensible nature of the tale becomes more fathomable as the narrative discrepancies have a specific reason. Critics have wondered about the narrator’s sanity and morality, calling him insane, a psychopath, and a liar. However, in viewing the murder of his wife as a traumatic event, the narrator’s story does not have to be a cover up for the murder. Instead, the story, while still posing questions about the accuracy of the tale, shows how trauma has caused portions of the narrator’s memory to be confused about the events.

One way the events seem confused is through the dissociation associated with trauma. Bessel van der Kolk states, “it is the very nature of traumatic memory to be dissociated and to be initially stored as sensory fragments” without a coherent story (254). Take, for instance, the night when the second cat has disappeared and the narrator is somehow able to sleep calmly right after killing his wife. The narrator states, “It is impossible to describe, or to imagine, the deep, the blissful sense of relief which the absence of the detested creature occasioned in my bosom. It did not make its appearance during the night—and thus for one night at least, ... I soundly and tranquilly slept” (857). Van der Kolk suggests that one way in which dissociation occurs is “the

sensory and emotional fragmentation of experience” (250). What that means for “The Black Cat” is that the narrator’s emotional state may be separate from his other cognitions of the events.

In other words, the narrator realizes that the cat is finally gone, but his wife’s death—and subsequent absence—does not register on an emotional level. Instead, the narrator’s awareness of something missing centers on the cat, the true object of his rage, rather than on his victim. For the narrator, killing his wife was a reaction to her interference; one without a specific emotional impetus. The cat, however, had been increasingly despised by him, eventually becoming “detested” (857), so killing the cat was attached to an emotion. For this reason, as the narrator is remembering the night after the murder, the emotions that he remembers come from the absence of the hated animal, not for the person missing from the bed. The narrator remembers his feelings, but he has not integrated the feelings he remembers with the perceived lack of his wife. In trauma theory terms, the narrator has not completed the narrative—within the timeline he gives us, his wife is dead, but the narrator has not yet combined his feelings with his intellectual awareness of the murder—“the burden of murder upon [his] soul” (857)—to produce a single coherent narration.

The separation of the two states, the knowledge of the murder, but the lack of emotion from it, echoes the language used in the introductory paragraph. In fact, the narrator directly tells his audience of his traumatic dissociation as he begins his tale. The narrator states, “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. Yet, mad am I not — and very surely do I not dream” (849). The narrator cannot incorporate the disparate events into a cohesive experience, which suggests some level of dissociation with the events: the experiences have not yet been unified and therefore portions of his account feel foreign. The narrator’s statement that his senses reject their own

evidence sounds like the sensory dissociation which accompanies trauma. The narrator suggests his senses are separate from what he remembers. This occurs because the narrator has not integrated his senses into his memory of what happened; there is a lack of context and emotion for what the narrator is experiencing.

The presentation of dissociation in the opening paragraph should signal the presence of the narrator's trauma. However, because of the trauma at the beginning of the narrative, readers misunderstand the tale as one of insanity, lying, or the supernatural. By opening the tale with a statement of sensory dissociation, the narrator highlights the oddities and inconsistencies that occur throughout the tale, which leads to a view of the narrator as unreliable. However, when readers take the dissociative language of the opening paragraph into account with the violence of the climax, the presence of trauma and its effects on the narrative become clearer. In identifying the trauma in the "The Black Cat," readers not only recognize the discrepancies within the tale, but they also understand why the incongruities occurred.

Timeline Inconsistencies

In "The Black Cat," the narrator's facts are disordered or inaccurate, which leads to the questions that scholars have postulated on for decades: When did the narrator kill his wife? Did he really kill Pluto, or is there only one cat? When the narrator cried, did he cry over Pluto or his wife? While trauma theory cannot answer these questions specifically, it can provide us with a way of sifting through the implications.

For instance, Amper suggests that the "greatly decayed state of the [wife's] corpse" indicates an earlier death than the one the narrator reports (484-85). Such textual problems have led Amper to develop a secondary timeline, one in which Pluto was never killed, but, as Hoffman suggests, the narrator substitutes Pluto for his wife in the story—discussing the cat

when he means to talk about his wife (Hoffman 231, Amper 479). Trauma theory suggests that traumatized memory may “confuse self and others” (LaCapra 21), so it may be possible that the narrator switched Pluto and his wife, mistaking the earlier killing of his wife as the hanging of his cat. A reading where Pluto and the wife are switched realigns the narrator’s outburst of emotion more appropriately. James Gargano notes that “taken literally, the details of the story would be embarrassing even to the most shameless animal lover; it is an outrageous excess that the narrator should, for hanging of a cat, condemn himself as having committed ‘a deadly sin’” (173). Reading the cat as the wife and the wife as the cat would make the narrative more coherent emotionally, connecting the sin with the murder of the wife instead of the death of the cat. But this interpretation—substituting the wife for the cat—would also suggest that the narrator’s traumatization took place earlier in the tale and in a mode not described by the narrator—as a result of killing his victim via hanging, not with an ax (853, 856). This reading, too, leaves questions unanswered about the timing of events.

Another option, one that trauma theory allows, is to take the narrator’s word about what happened when he killed his wife and acknowledge that perhaps the timing of events is inaccurate. In a reading where the order of events is accurate, but the spacing of events is not, the narrator’s trauma would distort the amount of time that has past. “Trauma may bring radical disorientation, confusion, a fixation on the past, and out-of-context experiences (such as flashbacks, startle reactions, or other forms of intrusive behavior). A disorienting ... feature of trauma and the posttraumatic symptoms is that they are out-of-context experiences” (*History in Transit* 45).

The language of “The Black Cat” tends to show the out-of-context quality of the narrator’s experiences. Some of the events are only vaguely differentiated while other events

suggest the clear passage of time. Take, for instance, the beginning of the scene that happens after the fire: “One night as I sat, half stupified [sic], in a den of more than infamy, my attention was suddenly drawn to some black object...” (854). The scene opens with “one night,” which acts to show a jump in time, which is meant to suggest that the night in question occurs after the night of the fire. However, because of the narrator’s traumatized state as well as the unspecified relations between the times, the reader cannot know what the relation is between the morning after the fire and the night the narrator finds the unnamed cat. Such imprecise transitions for the passage of time riddle the story: “for several years,” “one night,” “one morning,” “by slow degrees,” and “soon” among them (851-52, 854). These transitions—while helping to gather scenes into units and explain the narrator’s violent transformations—lack the ability to clearly distinguish the timetable and how the events precisely relate to one another.

Even the passages of time that the narrator directly states within the tale may be decontextualized, failing to give an accurate account of the time. The narrator states, “Upon the fourth day of the assassination, a party of the police came, very unexpectedly, into the house” (858). However, as Amper suggests, the decomposition of the corpse seems unlikely a mere four days after the murder (484-85). The reader cannot rely on the narrator’s description of the passage of time as markers of time between events because of his trauma.

The “out-of-context” quality of trauma that LaCapra describes means that the narrator may not be reliving or retelling the story in the correct order or with the correct passage of time. The disruption of the timeline may help to account for the lack of emotional response after killing his wife—“I soundly and tranquilly slept; aye, *slept* even with the burden of murder upon my soul!” (857). This reaction to Pluto’s absence, as the narrator describes it, comes after he has murdered his wife; however, the relief he describes may actually come at a later date or be his

reaction from earlier when he killed the cat. When this feeling of relief occurred is not as reliable as the assertion that he felt it, which suggests either an ease with murdering his wife, an inaccurate dating of the feeling, or that the trauma had already obscured the act.

If the narrator is at ease with murdering his wife, then the text suggests the same callousness that Hester and Segir suggest in their psychopathic interpretation of the narration, with the narrator sleeping soundly “even with the burden of murder on [his] soul” (857). If the passage of time is inaccurate, then the narrator might have switched his reaction to killing his wife with killing his cat, crying over his wife’s death, while sleeping soundly after murdering Pluto, which would re-humanize him and suggest that the trauma scrambled the feelings associated with the different events. The “burden of murder” that he slept with would, in this possible reading, refer to murdering Pluto, but it becomes decontextualized to be associated with his wife. Or if the trauma obscures the murder, the narrator is unable to reconcile his feelings and the events into a single unified narrative.

Perhaps asking exactly when the narrator killed his wife is the wrong question. Instead, LaCapra notes that “Trauma and its symptomatic aftermath pose particularly acute problems for historical representation and understanding” (*Writing History* ix). While LaCapra means history literally, the term “history” can apply to literary studies in terms of searching for an accurate timeline, an unbiased perspective, or an objective truth. What LaCapra expresses is the problem with using trauma narratives to understand events—in trying to take a testimony and use it as fact. A historical example of this conundrum can be viewed in Laub’s work when he narrates an experience with a Holocaust survivor, who, despite living through an event, could not recall all of the historical details “accurately” (59-61). The suggestion is that the fracturing of memory and time that occurs with traumatization leaves unanswerable questions that, while presenting

misinformation, do not necessarily equate to a lie because the story's teller may not be attempting to deceive or purposefully mislead the listener.

So while many things can be discovered in studying "The Black Cat" with trauma theory, the timeline remains an unanswerable question. Perhaps the more important question, though, is *why* the timeline does not seem coherent. Caruth, as referenced in the introduction, has posited that trauma erases and creates new histories, which she describes as "the breach in the mind's experience of time, self and the world" and "not, like a wound of the body, a simple and healable event" (*Unclaimed Experiences* 4). LaCapra further states, "Trauma is a disruptive experience that disarticulates the self and creates holes in existence" (*Writing* 41). Trauma theory, then, helps explain why the narrator's tale has incoherencies which seem impossible to reconcile. In traumatizing himself, the narrator has broken the continuity of time; his perception of the events has become skewed from the violent wound he inflicted on himself when he brutally murdered his wife.

In short, whether the narrator killed his wife when he claims to have killed her or when he claims to have killed Pluto matters little. The narrator, in his traumatized state, may have conflated the cat and his wife, the trauma skewing his memory to soften the guilt he may feel. Or, the narrator may have killed his wife on the stairs with the ax as he states, but the timeline was not a mere four days before the police showed up, though the holes in his memory might have convinced him that only four days had elapsed.

In testimony, the truth is not the most important aspect of the given information. "[W]hat is important is the situation of *discovery* of knowledge—its evolution, and its very *happening*. Knowledge in the testimony is, in other words, not simply a factual given that is reproduced and replicated by a testifier, but a genuine advent" (Felman 62). This notion of the testimony as

processing events explains why the inconsistencies within “The Black Cat” indicate neither purposeful deception nor insanity. But the inconsistencies within the timeline help to produce Poe’s intended effect—the feeling of the uncanny.

The Uncanny

Conflations of the past, present, and future begin to create the uncanny effect in “The Black Cat.” Madden quotes Freud, saying that “the secret nature of the uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression” (52). This leads Madden to the terms “*heimlich*”—or the familiar or concealed—and “*unheimlich*”—the eerie or unveiled—“which at first glance appear to be antonymous but which for Freud converge on one meaning—the idea of the uncanny” (55-56).

The uncanny begins to develop through the conflations within “The Black Cat.” The opening paragraph presents the narrator’s reaction to an event that has already happened, but at the same time—at least for the reader—has not happened. LaCapra remarks that the “collapse [of] all distinctions, including that between present and past, [is] related to transference and prevail[s] in trauma and post-traumatic acting out” (*Writing History* 21). In relating the events as he does, the narrator holds the past as a future event, one which has not yet taken place for the reader even though it has already occurred for the narrator. The past and present as well as the future are all conflated in the narration of “The Black Cat.”

The past is told as if it were the future. In postponing the confession of the murder until the end, despite the reader’s awareness of a sin, the audience experiences the narrator’s confusion as he relives the events. The reader can both expect the confession of some sin—from the narrator’s admission that “to-morrow I die, and to-day I would unburthen my soul” (849),

which suggests a confession of some wrongdoing—while the telling of the murder is simultaneously delayed. The murder holds itself as both an anticipated fact and a future event hidden from the reader's knowledge.

Even the very framing of "The Black Cat" provides a sense of the unsettling nature of trauma for the reader. In recounting his story in the first person, the narrator is forcing the reader of his tale to live the experience through his eyes; the reader experiences the entire story from the narrator's point of view. The reader lives the events as the narrator remembers them, stepping into the perspective of the narrator. By processing the events through the narrator, the reader experiences the uncanny associated with trauma. The uncanny comes about because the reader sees through the narrator's perspective as he acts out the events. The reader sees what the narrator sees, but the reader suspects that the narrator has something to hide—some secret kept back from the reader's knowledge.

However, having the narrator's perspective also shows that he is repressing something. The repression becomes clear in instances when the narrator inserts commentary in the form of musing thoughts, given to the reader. In those moments the reader no longer sees an image of what is happening from the narrator's perspective, but a selection of what the narrator wants the reader to see or know. The narrator makes statements such as "But this feeling soon gave place to irritation. And then came, as if to my final and irrevocable overthrow, the spirit of PERVERSENESS. Of this spirit philosophy takes no account" (852). In this instance, the narrator's musings create a distraction, a philosophical tangent on perverseness to divert the reader's attention from his repressed feeling: anger. Before those musings, the narrator states "this feeling soon gave place to irritation," and the reader views a tiny glimpse of an angry narrator, the possibility that he could be violent. However, the narrator quickly moves away from

it, claiming his rationale for killing Pluto not as an anger at the animal, but as “this unfathomable longing of the soul *to vex itself*— to offer violence to its own nature — to do wrong for the wrong’s sake only” (852). The reader—because of the narrator’s philosophizing—can view a hidden side of the narrator, one that the narrator wishes to conceal.

The narrator’s attempt to conceal a portion of his nature suggests that his mind is a site of the uncanny. The concept of a Poe narrator having an uncanny mind, in and of itself, is not new. Silverman has theorized that “tales like ‘The Spectacle,’ ‘The Black Cat’ and ‘The Tell-Tale Heart’ dramatize failures to various defenses, the protagonists’ futile attempts to conceal from themselves and others what they feel. They and many other characters in Poe have little self-knowledge and suffer extreme conflicts” (209). Silverman’s theory, written in 1991, suggests that the narrator of “The Black Cat” did not completely understand himself. However, Silverman does not directly connect the concept of the lack of self-awareness to Freud’s uncanny. But Madden has already theorized the presence of the uncanny within “The Black Cat.” While Madden situates the uncanny in “The Black Cat” within Pluto, the uncanny also appears—in a trauma reading—within the mind of the narrator.

The narrator describes what he believes to be his nature, which functions as the *heimlich* portion of his psyche. The narrator states, “From my infancy I was noted for the docility and humanity of my disposition. My tenderness of heart was even so conspicuous as to make me the jest of my companions” (850). This is the acknowledged, the familiar side to the narrator, the portion of his psyche that makes sense to him and that he can incorporate into his self-understanding. This is the same description that the narrator holds to after he has killed his wife, which also suggests that this is the side concealing the deeper truth of the narrator’s nature, the *unheimlich* side, the violent disposition.

The narrator cannot integrate his violent temperaments as readily as he accepts his peaceful ones. He admits as much in the opening paragraph when he states, “my very senses reject their own evidence” (849), which suggests that he does not know his own mind, or at least that his understanding of his memories does not align with what he remembers. Some critics comment on the opening as proof of the narrator’s insanity, of the fact that his mind is tricking him. A person should know his own mind—this is the norm—which is opposed to the saying “losing one’s mind.” However, the narrator has not lost his mind, at least not all of it. Rather, it is possible that the narrator does not understand his whole mind; he only comprehends the nonviolent portion of his nature, the portion of his nature that he recognizes before the alcoholism and violence. Within the narrative proper, the narrator does not understand his whole mind. However, the timeline—the order of events unframed by the narrative—would suggest that before he began drinking, the narrator might have had a more complete self-understanding because he is able to understand his nature as a youth. The narrator accepted who he was initially, but as his nature changed, he no longer wanted to accept that he was a violent alcoholic, which allowed for his uncanny mind to deepen after the trauma. The uncanny nature of the narrator’s mind stems from the fact that he does not recognize the entirety of his own character—that he has both a peaceable and violent side. In traumatizing himself, the narrator further dissociates from the violent side, which ultimately results in the violent side being described as an outside influence—something that the narrator sees as completely outside of himself.

The narrator’s uncanny mind demonstrates the dissociation that occurs within the narrator’s self-conception. Van der Kolk describes two supplementary forms of dissociation—in addition to the sensory and emotional dissociation referenced earlier—as “depersonalization and derealization at the moment of the trauma and [the] containing [of] the traumatic memories

within distinct ego-states” (250). An ego state “may be described ... pragmatically as a system of feelings which motivates a related set of behavior patterns” (Berne 295); in other words, it is a set of behaviors that are distinguished and categorized separately from another set of behaviors, an extreme example being multiple personality disorders. The “Fiend Intemperance,” demon-like fury, and “a rage more than demoniacal” that the narrator expresses demonstrate both a depersonalization and separation from the violence, suggesting that he has relegated the violent traits and alcohol abuse to an unacknowledged ego-state (851, 856). In externalizing his violent nature as a separate ego state, the narrator both acknowledges the violent side of his nature and disowns it. He claims an influence on him that is violent, but he refuses to acknowledge that all of the violence is his own.

In this way, the narrator’s perverse nature suggests that the narrator’s mind is a location of the uncanny. In the narrator, there is both that which attempts to remain hidden, but also that which is ultimately uncovered—the narrator’s aggression. Try as the narrator might, he cannot cover the violence; he can only attempt to make it appear as a foreign entity, as an imp of the perverse. Despite the narrator’s attempt to distance himself from the violence, readers can still tell that the imp or fiend to whom the narrator refers still resides within the narrator’s own psyche.

Because of the nature of trauma, the effects of trauma on the mind and on understanding do not easily fade. LaCapra notes that “The experience [of trauma] is not punctual and ... has not passed away—a past that intrusively invades the present...In traumatic memory, the past is not simply history as over and done with. It lives on experientially and haunts or possesses the self” (*History* 55-56). The narrator’s second ego’s constant intrusion into the narrator’s tale suggests a past that the narrator cannot outrun. It suggests a past that the narrator—in a figurative sense—

still lives within and therefore cannot recognize. Dori Laub states, “While the trauma uncannily returns in actual life, its reality continues to elude the subject who lives in its grip and unwittingly undergoes its ceaseless repetitions and reenactments” (69). Thus, while the narrator’s violent nature seems obvious to the reader, the narrator himself can reject the acknowledgement of it, which explains the seemingly active deception in the tale because the narrator feels no connection to the actions of the violent ego state.

However, the narrator’s inability to understand his mindset does not necessarily mean that he is lying or actively deceiving his audience. Felman reminds us, “*it takes two to witness the unconscious*” (15, italics in original). While the reader sees both the narrator’s concealed and familiar sides, the narrator of “The Black Cat” is unable to see his repressed, violent side. This acknowledgement of the partnership needed to see the unconscious further resonates with the opening, when the narrator hopes that “Hereafter, perhaps, some intellect may be found which will reduce my phantasm to the common-place—some intellect more calm, more logical, and far less excitable than my own, which will perceive, in the circumstances I detail with awe, nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects” (850). The narrator himself cannot see his unconscious and cannot analyze his own mind, but he can tell that there is an imperfection in his story that he has yet to understand.

An Attempt at Working Through

“The Black Cat” is the narrator’s attempt to come to terms with the violence and experiences that he perpetrated—what happened and when. In trauma terms, the narrator is trying to work through the trauma in order to understand it. “Working through trauma involves gaining critical distance on those experiences and recontextualizing them in ways that permit a reengagement with ongoing concerns and future possibilities” (*History* 45). The narrator himself

states that he writes to “place before the world ... a series of mere household events,” the same events which led him to kill his wife (849). And in so doing, he attempts to create an understanding of his trauma.

In writing the events, the narrator—though he may not realize it—writes his testimony of them, his record of what happened. Within trauma theory, and especially in regards to working through and bearing testimony, “language is in process and in trial, it does not possess itself as a conclusion, as a constation of a verdict or the self-transparency of knowledge (Felman and Laub 5). The narrator, in providing his account of the murder of his wife, is providing a traumatized testimony, one that should not be taken as an assured statement, but as a process of discovery. The narrator himself is attempting to discover what happened when he killed his wife.

However, the stance that the narrator takes to understand the trauma is flawed, which undercuts the attempt the narrator makes to understand the violence he perpetrated. In attempting to act as a witness, the narrator confuses his position of witness with the position of testator. Giorgio Agamben has noted that “In Latin there are two words for ‘witness.’ The first word, *testis*, ... etymologically signifies the person who, in a trial or lawsuit between two rival parties, is in the position of a third party. The second word, *superstes*, designates a person who has lived through something, who has experienced an event from beginning to end and can therefore bear witness to it.” (17). The narrator, in attempting to tell his story “plainly, succinctly and without comment” attempts to act as a *testis*, but the reality of the situation is that he is a *superstes* (849).

The narrators’ position as *superstes* holds some bearing on his ability to tell the facts without comment. Agamben states “testimony [of a *superstes*] has nothing to do with the acquisition of facts ... he is not neutral enough for this” (17). The narrator cannot impartially describe the events that took place for the simple fact that, by participating in the events, the

events have colored his perception. So even as he remarks “My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events. ...Yet I will not attempt to expound them” (849), he is attempting to step into a role that he cannot naturally fill. As the only human witness of his wife’s murder, the narrator cannot reframe his understanding of the events, which leads him to comment on incidents throughout the tale, such as the apparition of a cat on the burnt wall several paragraphs later (853).

The narrator attempts to distance himself from a situation that he has yet to come to terms with. In so doing he attempts the opposite of testimony—to provide history, a statement of fact, or a total account of the event (Felman and Laub 5). Perhaps because of the trial, perhaps because of his impending execution, the narrator feels the need to objectively represent the events. But, his subjective perspective—as well as the traumatic breach in his memory—prevent him from presenting anything more than a loosely conceived testimony. The narrator’s written testimony does not allow him to actually come to an understanding of what happened to him because it does not allow him to find his story.

Because the narrator does not organically tell his tale, the question arises as to whether the narrator has the critical distance to come to terms with the trauma or not. The tale does not clarify the passage of time between the narrator’s arrest and his penning of the tale nor the passage of time since the narrator’s traumatization (especially since the timeline itself is in question). However, the tale does seem to suggest that the narrator did not have enough critical distance to successfully work through the trauma before beginning his story. The narrator admits, “these events have terrified—have tortured—have destroyed me” (*Black Cat* 849). This statement from the narrator seems odd—what about the experience could have terrified or tortured him? Trauma theory clarifies this passage through the concept of acting out: the narrator

has been repeating or reliving the trauma that he enacted. LaCapra states, “[people who undergo trauma] have a tendency to relive the past, to be haunted by ghosts or even to exist in the present as if one were still fully in the past, with no distance from it” (*Writing History* 142-43). The narrator’s language—especially in describing the event as “phantasm” which has “terrified” and “tortured” him (*Black Cat* 849)—reflect the language of LaCapra’s description of trauma as a haunting. It is almost as though his victim—his wife—is haunting the narrator through his memory of murdering her. The narrator’s story is trying to find a way to un-haunt himself. The narrator wants to discover how to make the events understandable within his self-perception by forcing his flawed self-conception on the events he remembers.

Furthermore, the narrator’s tale in and of itself seems to be an instance of acting out as the haunting aspects continue through the events leading to the narrator’s arrest. However, the haunting aspect of the tale is not what one might expect. The murder the narrator is being hanged for is the murder of his wife, but the haunting aspect seems to be the black cat. The wife factors little into the narrator’s story, being referenced only fourteen times in the entire tale. The black cat, however, appears constantly throughout the story, often when unwanted. The narrator states, “gradually — very gradually — I came to look upon [the cat] with unutterable loathing, and to flee silently from its odious presence, as from the breath of a pestilence” (854). The narrator’s reaction to the cat—whether Pluto or a second cat—is a repulsed one, one of avoidance, which eventually grows into “the terror and horror ... which the animal inspired” (855). The language the narrator uses to describe his interactions with the cat at this point suggests a haunting aspect, though it is not as blatant as the language the narrator uses in the introductory paragraph. However, if Hoffman’s assumption that the narrator refers to the black cat when actually referring to his wife is true (231), then within the narrator’s tale, the haunting figure may appear

as the cat, even if the truth haunting him relates to his other victim, his wife. The possible confusion of the cat and the wife indicates a variation of traumatic conflation—“confusing the self and others” (LaCapra 21)—that is to confuse two others. The presence of a conflation of two others suggests that the narrator does not have the distance he needs to differentiate his cat from his wife within his recollection of the trauma, signifying that all possible confusion between the cat and the wife is a form of acting out.

Furthermore, the continual presence of the cat mirrors the recurring presence of the memories themselves. Just as the cat comes to represent a horrible figure physically, the memories of the violence the narrator perpetrated horrify him. The repetition of the memories continually brings the violent images and actions to the narrator’s mind. The narrator, however, does not want to believe that he is capable of the actions because he has repressed them in a separate ego state. When the unacknowledged ego state rises through the traumatic flashbacks, the result is the horror that the narrator acknowledges as the events within this tale. This acting out suggests that he is unable to move on from his previous self-understandings, unable to reconcile past events with his present circumstances, and unable to come to an understanding of what led to him murdering his wife. The text suggests that the narrator’s trauma has concealed his own violent nature from him. His narration failed to integrate the dissociated portions of his memory, experience, and nature. The failed integration suggests that the narrator did not achieve the critical distance necessary to work through the trauma in recounting his story. And the narrator’s statement that “to-morrow I die” (849) shows that he will not be able to gain any additional critical distance—and therefore clarity—from the event itself.

Conclusion

That Poe conceived of abnormal psychological states is a position other scholars have

already taken. These scholars suggest insanity, delusions, and psychotic breaks occur within “The Black Cat” and other tales. While Poe did not write with a theorized understanding of psychology or trauma, his “The Black Cat” displays a proto-psychological understanding of what a traumatized mind could look like. In using trauma theory to analyze the narrative and narrator, the questions haunting readers begin to become clearer. The narrator’s record indicates psychological principles which current psychology associates with trauma such as emotional dissociation, separate ego states, conflated timelines, and feeling haunted by a past he cannot escape. The narrator of “The Black Cat” is a traumatized perpetrator, a murderer who cannot understand his own memories of killing his wife and who seeks for understanding as he writes his record of the events.

With the narrator of “The Black Cat” suffering from perpetrator trauma, the tale proposes a new implication for this confessional. To suggest that the narrator is attempting to reposition the blame for the murder would involve a different opening paragraph, one that would not accept his coming death. Rather than attempting to rebuff the blame or guilt of his wife’s murder, as McElroy directly suggests (115), the narrator wants to understand what has occurred to him—how his own inability to recognize violence within himself hid violent acts; how those violent actions led to the murder and death of his wife; and how his own memories can feel so terrifying and foreign to him—which would lead to the reintegration of the second ego state. The narrator’s suggestion that “some intellect may be found which will reduce my phantasm to the commonplace” (849) is a desire that someone will one day unravel the events that the narrator pens. When the narrator states, “But to-morrow I die, and to-day I would unburthen my soul” (849), he is telling us in what light to read the tale—not suspicious of the narrator’s intent, not trying to assuage his guilt by blaming others, but searching to relieve a burden.

One reading is that the burden is guilt, such as Bonaparte and Anspaugh suggest in their readings of “The Black Cat.” In their interpretations, the narrator is looking for absolution for the murder of his wife. However, the language of the text does not seek a religious relief of guilt. Rather, the paragraph in which the quote appears suggests that the narrator’s desired relief would come from an understanding of the events, one which would make them less horrible. The narrator states, in the two sentences following his desire to unburden his soul, “My immediate purpose is to place before the world, plainly, succinctly, and without comment, a series of mere household events. In their consequences, these events have terrified— have tortured—have destroyed me” (849). Unburdening his soul appears to relate to explaining calmly and logically what happened in the tale he relates, clarifying the events and why he does not believe them himself. Trauma theory allows for a reading that does just this.

Trauma theory looks at the narrator as a perpetrator, but also as a man who has lost the understanding of what has happened to himself, effectively allowing him to remain in his guilt while also allowing for relief from the confusion and horror associated with his memory of what has occurred. The narrator can accept the guilt and blame from the perpetrated violence and murder, but the narrator—because of a calm, rational explanation—can also be relieved of the burdens of trauma he feels. Unburdening the narrator is not a removal of guilt, but a clarification of events, of motives, of timing.

However, the failed attempt at working through does not actually allow the narrator to relieve his own burden. Rather, the narrator has resituated the burden on the reader, giving to the reader, not the blame, but the problem of determining what has happened so that the narrator’s mind is comprehensible. With the narrator giving the reader the burden of understanding, the story seems to be asking for the reader to over-empathize with the narrator—to, in a sense, take

on his trauma by investing too much emotion in the trauma narrative. However, the uncanny—through its reinforcement of the boundary between the narrator and the reader—provides the unsettling necessary to avoid over-empathizing, which would collapse the distance between the reader and narrator.

Instead, the unsettling nature of the uncanny—the realization that comes from the narrator's secrets that the reader is not the narrator—allows for the reader to regain a sense of the empathic unsettling that is necessary in trauma studies. This empathic unsettling is the ability of a listener to “[respond] empathically, while still being reflective about the difference between the trauma itself, the experience of the narrator, and the experience of listening to that trauma, thus recognizing the separation between self and other” (Anderson 102). The ability to distinguish self from other that comes from empathic unsettling allows readers to find a respite from the narrator's burden without taking his trauma, enabling the reader to more easily read the trauma narrative and walk away from the narrator's confusion, giving the reader a sense of relief from the trauma and the burden of understanding the narrator attempts to place on the reader. Though trauma theory does not ultimately provide a means to resolve the confusion of the narrator and to bring him peace, it does offer the reader a critical distance that helps the reader to understand why the narrator acts as he does, even if the reader cannot completely make sense of the narrative itself.

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