Hannah Walker

“The Black Cat:” A Reflection of Pre-Civil War Slavery

In 1843, Edgar Allan Poe published “The Black Cat” against a tumultuous political backdrop regarding the “peculiar institution,” slavery. Within Poe’s lifetime alone, the Missouri Compromise banned slavery north of Missouri, the Nat Turner Rebellion displayed the increasing power of slave uprisings, and William Lloyd Garrison’s *Liberator* spearheaded the movement to abolish slavery (Biagiarelli). Though Poe, a Virginia native, never formally stated his political stance on slavery, literary critics look to his work as a reflection of antebellum sentiments coming to a boil in the years preceding the Civil War. While most critics rationalize the events in “The Black Cat” with either supernatural or psychological explanations, other critics point to the political context of Poe’s time to illuminate the strange events of the story. Some of these critics, such as Leland Person and Lesley Ginsberg, interpret “The Black Cat” solely as a literary reenactment of the Nat Turner Rebellion while others, such as Joan Dayan, read the story as a reflection of Poe’s personal political views. However, by labeling each character as a historical player within the institution of slavery as a whole, a more ominous statement about racial currents of Poe’s era appears. Specifically, “The Black Cat” functions as a racial allegory that depicts the injustices of slavery and, ultimately, shows how slavery dams the South.

One of the most telling details of “The Black Cat” which reveal it as a racial allegory is the distinct symbolism casting the narrator as a slave owner and the black cat as a slave. The strongest indication of the narrator’s white master role arises when the narrator describes a “spirit of perverseness” that overcomes him and causes him to hang his cat “because [he] knew it had loved [him]...because [he] knew that in so doing [he] was committing a....deadly sin” (Poe 852).
Although slave owners often felt fondly towards their slaves (and thought their slaves “loved” them in return), they commonly unleashed their rage and violence upon them, rationalizing that slaves were “animals” anyway. The master figure’s extreme remorse for these “deadly sins” display that his violence did not fall on a scale of animal abuse, but on that of “damnable atrocities” towards another human being. The narrator, like a white master, demonstrates this violence at several points in the story—the first appearing when he “grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket” (851). After this violent encounter, the black cat continually flees its master. Similarly, many slave owners in the 1800s grappled for an explanation as to why their supposedly devoted slaves would run away from their master’s plantations. Nineteenth century physicians (disregarding the obvious reasons a slave would attempt escape) ultimately concluded that the only logical justification that their “pets” would run away was a mental disorder called drapetomania, a psychological illness which caused a once adoring pet to flee its owner. According to these physicians and pre-Civil War slave masters, drapetomania was believed to be “common to Blacks and to cats” (Person 215). In this way, the first black cat functions as a surrogate slave, displaying the same drapetomania that vexed slave owners of Poe’s day.

Turning to the black cat’s function within the piece, Lesley Ginsberg interpreted the story as a Gothic retelling of the Nat Turner revolt, claiming that “the narrator’s drama with a dark animal [Nat Turner]...allows his story to be read as the nightmarish return of the South’s inescapable repressions” (117). Although Ginsberg read the black cat as a specific symbol of Nat Turner himself, the narrator’s master-slave-like relationship makes a broader implication—that the black cat is a type of any given slave within the institution. Poe obviously illustrates this connection by describing the cat as a “remarkably large and beautiful animal, entirely black, and
sagacious to an astonishing degree” (850). With its strikingly human attributes, readers can conclude that the narrator was drawing a portrait of an intelligent slave, rather than a mere household cat. In addition, nineteenth century white Southerners saw their slaves, not as human beings in their servitude, but as devoted animals or pets. This owner-pet mentality presents itself in the “master” narrator’s reference of “the unselfish and self-sacrificing love of [his] brute” (850). Because these characteristics, of both physical features and disposition, apply to the African slave demographic at large, the story must be read as a microcosm for the South’s overall sentiment towards slavery, not just an isolated incident of the Nat Turner revolt.

Moreover, the manner in which the narrator kills his “brute” offers a compelling indication of the black cat’s significance within the racial allegory. Readers of the time surely would have drawn the connection between the image of the hanged black cat in a tree and that of a lynched slave. In fact, in 1792, famous poet and artist William Blake painted an iconic portrait of a runaway slave hung alive by the rib after being recaptured. This particular piece became a notorious, yet rampant image which spread throughout the South with its shocking display of slave-owner violence (“A Negro Hung Alive”). “The Black Cat” makes a clear allusion to this imagery in this scene. The black cat’s function as “slave” comes into play again when the narrator sees “as if graven in bas relief upon the white surface [on a wall of his burnt home], the figure of a gigantic cat” (Poe 853). That the narrator takes special note of the black-on-white inscription indicates the rampant fear amongst slave owners that their slaves, seen as dependent animals, were adopting characteristics “reserved” to the white man alone.

“The Black Cat” also showcases the expanding force of the abolitionist movement through the sudden appearance of the black cat with the white splotch. Although Leland S. Person and several other critics claim this cat is in fact the same black cat with a white mark
representing “white racial guilt and black revenge,” (218) the narrator’s uncanny apprehension towards this second cat indicates another meaning: the spreading white mark on the black cat typifies how rights once exclusive to the master were trickling down to slaves. The narrator demonstrates his mounting dread of the second cat when he describes waking up to “the hot breath of the thing upon [his] face, and its vast weight—an incarnate Night-Mare that [he] had no power to shake off—incumbent eternally upon [his] heart!” (Poe 856). If read in the literal sense, the narrator’s abhorrence of the cat seems baseless or melodramatic; however, if read through a lens of political symbolism with the narrator cast as a white slaveholder, the spreading whiteness upon the black cat justifies such a paranoid reaction. Again, the second cat proves itself a figure of stirring unrest in regards to slavery when the narrator claims that the cat’s mark “assumed a rigorous distinctness of outline...the image of a hideous—of a ghastly thing—of the Gallows!” (854). Just as the narrator felt physically oppressed by the presence of the white-splotched cat, Southern slave owners also experienced the rising pressures of political change on their plantations. Though highly unlikely that the cat’s mark shifted shape in reality, the narrator’s perception that it did illustrates the “Old South’s” hysteria in the face of a new racial order—one where slaves, cognitively aware of past redresses, became restless for justice.

Within the story, the appearance of the second cat triggers the rapid deterioration of the narrator’s psyche. Joan Dayan taps into this line of thought, asserting that “Poe writes “The Black Cat” to demonstrate how destructive the illusion of mastery [is]: just as the pet of perfect docility turns into ‘a brute beast,’ ‘a man, fashioned in the image of the High God,’ is dependent on and enslaved by the very thing he has so lovingly brutalized” (252). Although Dayan makes a valid argument about the mutually destructive effects of slavery on both slave and master, she asserts that it was Poe’s political intent and personal attitudes that anchor the story. In contrast, it
seems that the story is a broader observation of the ruinous master-slave dynamics of the pre-
Civil War era. Specifically, the narrator’s obsessive loathing of the second cat displays how over
time, the act of dominating another creature instills “hatred of all things and of all mankind” (Poe
856) and leads to the narrator’s ultimate downfall.

With the stage set—the black cat cast as slave and the second marked cat as the ever
“whitening” slave—the final, most powerful allusion to the South’s peculiar institution presents
itself in the final scene of the story. When it comes to dissecting the symbolism of this last scene,
critics struggle to cast the narrator’s wife in a role within the racial allegory. Leland S. Person
complicates the symbolism, arguing that the “possessive, murderous relationship between master
and slave” is embodied through the white woman in the story (214) while Betsy Erkkila believed
that “Poe associated the ideal of fair womanhood with the social ideals—and health—of
Southern culture” (“The Poetics of Whiteness” 54). However, neither of these theories explains
why the narrator, or master figure, would kill his wife at the story’s conclusion. The narrator
explains that it is only when his wife arrests his hand from killing the second cat, or slave, that
“with a rage more than demoniacal, [he] withdrew [his] arm from her grasp and buried the axe in
her brain” (Poe 856). Within the story, the narrator only explicitly reveals two instances of
violence: towards the first black cat and finally towards his wife—only when she defends the
second cat.

In order to understand the significance of the wife symbol in “The Black Cat,” readers
must look to historical parallels of the time—namely, the Philadelphia riots of 1838. During this
time, white mobs frequently rioted in the streets to rebel against social change. In their warpath,
they destroyed buildings, vandalized personal property, and murdered slaves and abolitionists
who tried to interfere. In 1838, the worst riot erupted when anti-abolitionists burned a black
church as well as the Pennsylvania Hall for Free Discussion where the second Anti-Slavery Convention of American Women was taking place. It just so happened that Edgar Allan Poe lived in Philadelphia during these riots and surely witnessed this battle between women abolitionists and white slaveholders (Lemire 177).

With this historical context, the narrator’s wife assumes a pivotal role within the story: she represents Northern abolitionists in their fight to abolish slavery and defend those currently enslaved. From the beginning, the narrator explains that his wife originally “lost no opportunity procuring those [pets] of the most agreeable kind” (Poe 850). Early in the nation’s history, Northern abolitionists did not take a firm stance against slavery primarily because they were unaware of the brutal degrees of violence and atrocities committed against slaves. As blatant violence towards Southern slaves increased in the years preceding the Civil War, abolitionists (who began providing refuge for increasing numbers of runaway slaves) finally took action (‘The Constitution’). The wife in ‘The Black Cat,’” standing as a symbol of these abolitionists, also takes a solid stand against the narrator in the final scene when she plainly sees the narrator’s attempted violence towards the second cat. Like the abolitionists and slaves, the wife and cat seem to join sides in the final scenes of the story when the cat “domesticated itself at once, [becoming] immediately a great favorite with [the narrator’s] wife” (854-855). Here, Poe poses the two polar characters against one another, one representing an opponent of slavery and the other, an advocate. The mounting tension that arises between the narrator and his wife as a result of her “humanity of feeling” (855) towards the black cat paints a clear picture of how the North and South finally erupted over slavery in the Civil War.

Finally, “The Black Cat” unravels the lasting message of the story in the concluding scene where the second cat’s scream from within the wall reveals the horrendous murder and
entombment of the narrator’s wife. The narrator describes the “wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph...from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation” (859). The plural use of “throats” clearly alludes to the 620,000 deaths that resulted from the Civil War—thousands of these being black soldiers and their Northern defenders (“Civil War Casualties”). The United States government ultimately heard these cries from the grave, passing the Emancipation Proclamation in 1862 and the 13th Amendment in 1863. The South was devastated: crops, farm animals, schools, and homes lay in burned ruins, inflation skyrocketed, and the basis of Southern class society, slavery, was no more. Mark Twain, one of Poe’s fellow Southern writers, explicated the haunting shadow of slavery over the South:

“In the North one hears the war mentioned, in social conversation, once a month; sometimes as often as once a week; but...The case is very different in the South. There, every man you meet was in the war, and every lady you meet saw the war. The war is the great chief topic of conversation, it is vivid and constant; ...In the South, the war is what A.D. is elsewhere: they date from it” (Biagiarelli).

Functioning as a racial allegory, “The Black Cat” stands as an omen of the damning effects to come if the South continued to unleash aggression towards slaves and Northern abolitionists. The second cat’s cry of vengeance foreshadows this event, particularly in the last lines of the story: “the hideous beast [slavery]...had seduced me into murder, and...had consigned me to the hangman” (Poe 859). Likewise, the South followed the narrator’s exact pattern of abuse towards slave, killing of Northerners in the Civil War, and the ruinous wake thereafter.

Charles Godfrey Leland, one of Poe’s contemporaries who also observed the rapid social changes in the South stated that “whoever shall write a history of Philadelphia from the Thirties
to the era of the Fifties will record a popular period of turbulence and outrages so extensive as to now appear almost incredible” (Lemire 177). Poe captures this era of rapid social transformation in “The Black Cat,” recreating the story of master-slave brutality and the South’s ultimate damnation of itself through its violence towards both slaves and abolitionists. Dissecting the political symbolism within “The Black Cat,” breathes new purpose into Poe’s masterpiece which in the past, critics bound to reflections of the human mind or tactful storytelling of the supernatural. Rather, “The Black Cat,” offers far greater insight into the social and political happenings of Poe’s day that ultimately led to one of the bloodiest wars in American history. Poe masks the leading players of this conflict—masters, slaves (in their submissive and progressive states), and abolitionists—through characters whose interactions parallel those of the years leading to the Civil War.

Within the subgroup of critics who do delve into Poe’s historical setting to explain the plot’s significance, very few fail to grasp the “big picture” racial allegory, pointing to specific events, such as the Nat Turner Rebellion, or speculating on Poe’s intent of writing a political allegory altogether. As Terrance Whalen stated, Poe’s stories matter “because both his utterances and his silences were part of a coherent strategy to expel politics from the literary commodity” (34)—“The Black Cat” being his best historical and political text yet. Furthermore, by viewing the “The Black Cat” as a literary reflection of slavery, readers obtain a telling primary source from the pre-Civil War era which allows them to delve directly into the rationale and substantiated fears of the antebellum mind.
Works Cited


