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**Influence of Children’s Attachment to Pets on their Mental Health as Adults as Addressed by Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Black Cat”**

Over the years, different authors have used their literary works to address mental health and psychological well-being. This paper aims to find how The Black Cat addresses the psychological impact of attachment to pets on their owners. The Black Cat is a short story by the legendary American author Edgar Allan Poe. It covers the life of an unnamed man who grew up kind, calm, and with the utmost love for pets. “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. I was especially fond of animals and was indulged by my parents with a great variety of pets..” (Poe 1). As he gets older, the man turns out to be a violent and cruel alcoholic who tortures his wife and pets and eventually murders his cat pet, Pluto.

Although many literary analysis articles have covered the theme of mental health in the short story, there is a limited literal analysis centered on how Allan Poe covers the drivers of mental health issues through the narrator's life. For instance, Payerl's (11) analysis of The Black Cat views the book as a psychological study centered on mental illness through the main character. This analysis acknowledges the possibility of mental health issues in the main character during childhood due to his preference for pets over friends. However, it ignores the part pets could have played in this issue. Similarly, Hester and Seger (2) note that Poe uses the narrator to reflect psychopathy. However, they ignore what could have led to this condition. “In ‘The Black Cat,’ Poe created a narrator who lacks remorse, empathy, and a conscience, a character who deceives and manipulates those around him because of an impulsive, egocentric personality known as psychopathy” (Hester and Seger 2). Poe uses the narrator to show that pets significantly affect their owner's psychological well-being, both positively and negatively.

A few literary analyses have covered possible causes of the narrator’s mental health issues. Kertes et al. (4) argue that the narrator's psychological state could be linked to his id. A personality has three main structural components: id, ego, and superego. The id is the unconscious part presented in a newborn infant as the site of the mind’s energy. It is a combination of instincts that propel humans through life, such as aggression. He adds that it cannot distinguish between reasonable and unreasonable objects as it represents the basic inborn drives which include satiating hunger and seeking protection. Its functionality is based on the pleasure principle. Essentially, one’s source of pleasure changes as one ages. As the narrator grew older, his source of pleasure changed from petting domesticated animals to killing them to soothe his emotions. Additionally, the change in his favorite pet as he grew up signifies the change in the narrator’s character. As a child, the narrator’s favorite pet was a dog. “I derived from it one of my principal sources of pleasure. To those who have cherished an affection for a faithful and sagacious dog, I need hardly be at the trouble of explaining the nature or the intensity of the gratification thus derivable” (Poe 1). After meeting his wife, his pet of choice became a cat. “Pluto — this was the cat’s name — was my favorite pet and playmate. I alone fed him, and he attended me wherever I went about the house. It was even with difficulty that I could prevent him from following me through the streets” (Poe 1).

Poe’s chronological reflection of the narrator’s life shows the contributions of his connection with pets to his mental illness. In the Black Cat, the narrator opens his story by claiming that he is *not* mad ("Yet, mad am I not — ") and would want to present a logical outline of incidences that "have terrified — have tortured — have destroyed me" (Poe 1). Moreover, while proving that he is not mad, we see increasingly the actions of a madman who knows that he is going mad but who, at times, can comment on the process of his increasing madness objectively. The “have destroyed me” part could be Poe’s reflection on how the narrator’s childhood has led to this madness. The narrator begins his confession in retrospect, at a time when society considered him a normal person whose docility and humane consideration of people and animals made him stand out. “From my infancy, I was noted for the docility and humanity of my disposition…I was especially fond of animals and was indulged by my parents with a great variety of pets” (Poe 1).

In adulthood, the narrator marries a woman who also likes animals. Among the many animals they had was Pluto, a black cat. The naming of the cat was attributed to the narrator's wife, often commenting on the notion that all black cats are witches in disguise. Pluto is an underworld god of witches (Hanrahan 47). By bringing up this perspective, Poe reflects the superstitious power of a cat and, thus, its ability to impact its owners both positively and negatively. Poe’s perspective on the influence of pets on their owners is also evident in Raven (Payerl 14). Poe links animals with his narrators in both works to reflect their desires. This connection can be best understood through three lenses: attachment theory, the mirror stage theory by Jacques Lacan, and overall modern animal studies.

Attachment theory is centered on bonds and relationships, especially long-term, between people, including those between a child and a parent. It suggests that the earliest bonds formed by children with their caregivers and environment tremendously affect them throughout life (Kertes et al.6). For an extended period, pets, especially dogs, have been considered family members. In the American tradition of animal care, loving an animal with “no economic value demonstrated that the home was functioning as it ought to. In the mid-nineteenth century, animals entered American households in new ways--almost as family members and as signs of respectable domesticity. Good people--moral people--owned pets, took good care of them, and taught their children to do the same” (Hanrahan 44). Therefore, looking after animals carefully instilled character and values that made them better adults. Essentially, a happy pet owner was viewed as a compassionate, balanced, and productive member of society. Poe supports this with the narrator's statement that love for another living creature, let alone an animal, is among the most “unselfish and sacrificing” types of love a man can experience (Poe 5). In the story, the narrator is triggered by his thoughts that Pluto does not want to hang out with him. “One night, returning home, much intoxicated, from one of my haunts about town, I fancied that the cat avoided my presence..”(Poe 2). This shows that the attachment the narrator had with pets as a child still influenced his emotional state as an adult.

We can also draw from physiology and animal psychology. As cited in Payerl (15), Lacan, an animal studies expert, proposes that human infants pass a certain stage where the representation of the surroundings to the infant produces a psychic response that reflects their mental representation of self. This reflection affects how they see themselves. However, this image does not match their underdeveloped physical vulnerability and weakness. Ultimately, the subject’s ego is established through the mirror stage. Lacan also proposed that there is a structural mirroring between one's thoughts and what one says, such that the absence of language creates an internal gap. This gap evolves into a source of motivation that one's ego yearns to entertain. An infant's desire to speak is inescapable and impossible to fulfill at their age. As they grow, this process creates a vicious cycle driven by an intangible desire that can never be obtained. This is played out in The Black Cat through the narrator’s relationships with his pets. “With these, I spent most of my time and never was so happy as feeding and caressing them. This peculiarity of character grew with my growth, and, in my manhood, I derived from it one of my principal sources of pleasure. To those who have cherished an affection for a faithful and sagacious dog, I need hardly be at the trouble of explaining the nature or the intensity of the gratification thus derivable” (Poe 2).

A contemporary critical approach to this interlink is common in modern animal studies. Recently, animal studies have covered a variety of cross-disciplinary ways humans are understood as animals themselves and their interactions (Payerl 15). Additionally, animal studies have sought to understand animals as beings in themselves (Payerl 15). The narrator had a closer relationship with Pluto than any other pet. “Pluto… was my favorite pet and playmate. I alone fed him, and he attended me wherever I went about the house. Even with difficulty, I could prevent him from following me through the streets” (Poe 1). To some extent, this relationship indicates that the narrator viewed his evil self in Pluto, considering that his wife frequently talked about the myth of black cats as evil creatures. Referring to the cat as a “playmate” stresses this relationship. The following morning after injuring the cat, the narrator cites that he was horrified by what (evil) he had done.

Further, Poe uses the cat's behavior to reflect their emotional nature and, thus, able to connect with humans. Like humans, animals have and can show emotions and can therefore affect our emotions and psychological well-being (Hester & Seger 178). After the violent incident, the cat starts to avoid the narrator triggering his emotions, this time, with a soul longing to"offer violence . . . to do wrong for the wrong's sake only" (Poe 4). A few days later, the narrator murders Pluto by hanging it from a tree limb as tears stream down his face. This stresses the argument that the emotional connection between a pet and its owner is extreme. It leads to mental health issues that are, to some extent, uncontrollable.

The events that ensue after the narrator hangs Pluto highlight the longevity of the implications of pets on one’s life. After the cruel murder of Pluto, the narrator's house burns to the ground (Poe 5). Regardless, the narrator is too irrational to see the interlink between his perverse atrocity and the disaster. Poe uses silence and darkness of the night to create suspense and visual senses for the reader (Pendidikan 6). Poe also uses a theme of supernatural powers to stress the longevity of a pet’s life on one’s psychological well-being. The use of words such as "wonder," "apparition," and "amazement" makes the reader aware of the illogical nature of the incident.

After the fire disaster, the narrator visits his house's ruins, where he finds a crowd around. A wall, which was next to his bed, and had just been replastered, was still standing. A perfect image of the figure of a gigantic cat with a rope around its neck was engraved on this wall. The narrator heard the crowd say words such as “strange!” “singular!” and other similar expressions and he got curious. "I approached and saw as if graven in bas-relief upon the white surface, the figure of a gigantic cat. The impression was given with an accuracy truly marvelous. There was a rope about the animal’s neck” (Poe 11). These events gave the narrator flashbacks of a black cat. Late, the narrator, in his heavy drinking sprees, comes across another black cat resembling Pluto, apart from a splash of white on its breast (Poe 13). Subsequently, the narrator took the cat home, and it became a great family favorite, just like Pluto. After some time, the narrator's emotions changed such that the cat's fondness for them started to piss him off. It was at this time that he began to loathe the cat. Poe uses these coincidental incidents to stress the longevity of the impacts of his attachment to pets. As noted in the introduction, the narrator's long-lasting relationship with pets damaged his mental well-being.

The longevity of this effect is further stressed by the events after the narrator murders his wife. A few days after the incident, police visited the narrator's apartment. Calm and collected, the narrator helps the police check his premises, even into the basement. As the police prepare to leave, the narrator taps on the wall—behind which is his wife’s body—with a cane triggering a loud cry from behind the wall. After dismantling the wall, the mysterious cat which had been missing since the death of the narrator’s wife is found sitting on the corpse's head. Again, Poe uses coincidence to stress the longevity of the implications of the connection between pets and their owners. It is the cat that whistle blows on the narrator thereby giving the police a shred of evidence to prosecute him. The narrator’s statement, “logical outline of incidences that "have terrified — have tortured — have destroyed me” (Poe 2) is reflected in the interactions he had with cats.

In summary, Poe has used the life of the narrator to express his view on the implications of pets on their owner's mental health. Since childhood, the narrator had a close relationship with pets such that petting them was his favorite thing to do. To the narrator, love for another living creature, let alone an animal, is among the most “unselfish and sacrificing” types of love a man can experience. Poe has set the story in chronological order to show how the narrator’s character shifts from being a kind and loving child to a violent and cruel alcoholic adult. His relationship with pets as a child, connection with Pluto as an adult, and marrying a pet lover is coincidentally used to show the positive aspects of having pets. His cruelty towards Pluto, the other pets, his wife, and his alcoholism show the negative implications of being too attached to pets. Poe uses superstition and coincidence through the burning of the narrator’s house after murdering Pluto, the emergence of a perfect image of a gigantic cat with a rope around its neck engraved on the wall next to where his bed was before the incident, and the emergence of a cat with nearly the exact look of Pluto to show the longevity of the implications of this attachment.

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