

## Edgar Allen Poe – Compare and Contrast “The Tell-Tale Heart” with “The Black Cat”

Although Edgar Allen Poe (1809-1849) is well known for his short stories, he was also a poet, editor and literary critic. He did not publish his first short story or poem, The Raven, until four years before his death. He was a leader of the American Romantic Movement which reacted against the new technologies being introduced in the early Victorian period. The movement emphasised strong emotions as a source of experience such as fear and horror. Poe is now considered to be one of the first to write the short detective story. This format was later copied by writers such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in his Sherlock Holmes stories and Agatha Christie.

Poe starts off by using short sharp phrases which create a sense of anxiety in the reader:

“True!...Hearken!”

The first few sentences also include a number of exclamation and question marks, and the last few lines have many exclamation marks. This effect makes the text punchy and creates a sense of unease in the reader. By contrast, although they do occur, fewer exclamation marks are used in the Black Cat, making the text flow better than in The Tell-Tale Heart but still creating a sense of atmosphere. Both stories are written in the first person. In both cases the narrator is thought to be mad, though in the Tell-Tale Heart that is the truth as his interrogators appear to already know that, yet he argues against them:

“How, then, am I mad?”

In the Black Cat the narrator talks of “**perverse**ness” as being his driving force. In other words he thinks that something has taken over his true nature. His pampering of the two cats in the story contrasts sharply with his drunken cruelty to them:

“...never was so happy as when feeding and caressing them...”

But when drunk (gin-nutured i.e. after drinking gin) he became possessed by a “fiendish malevolence” or evil wickedness. Poe cleverly increases this already graphic image by qualifying it with “and a more than” which describes that his hatred was stronger than words can convey.

“...and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nutured, thrilled every fibre of my frame.”

The cold truth is that he found that the evil within him exciting, even exhilarating – “thrilled every fibre of my frame”. Surely these are the feelings of a true madman – to take pleasure in other’s sufferings?

We do not know why he killed his wife, but this might be because of his madness as he had called her “[uncomplaining](#)”. An eye features in both stories. The eye of the old man is what haunted the storyteller in the Tell-Tale Heart whereas in the Black Cat an eye was gouged out by the character in a fit of anger.

In both cases the murderer was unmasked because of sounds. It was a sound only heard by the narrator, the beating of the old man’s heart, that caused him to admit his guilt. In the case of the Black Cat, it was the wailing of the cat which he had walled in which led to his downfall. The murderer was caught in both stories because of his arrogance in dealing with the police and his bravado in front of them e.g. by tapping on the cellar walls in the Black Cat. This is a common feature in Poe’s short stories, where the criminal is caught out not by feelings of guilt or remorse but rather by his foolhardy actions.

A fear of being buried alive is present in many of Poe’s stories and these two stories are no exception – the old man buried beneath the floorboards and the wife buried behind the wall. Although both victims are dead, in the former the murderer believes the old man to be alive and in the second he is caught because of the cat which he had accidentally entombed with his dead wife.

Poe liked to use long impressive words. For example, in the Tell-Tale Heart we have:

*[dissimulation](#) [unperceived](#) [suppositions](#) [dismembered](#) [vehemently](#) [audacity](#)*

and in the Black Cat:

*[temperament](#) [intoxicated](#) [malevolence](#) [irrevocable](#) [perverseness](#) [consummate](#)*

The effect of these words on the reader can be varied. Firstly, we can be sent scurrying to the dictionary to understand them. But I think Poe wanted us to read them, without really understanding what they meant, and they would create an atmosphere of mystery by our not comprehending their true meaning. Because he sprinkled these complicated words so liberally throughout his stories, the effect on the reader was mesmerising. Many of his contemporary readers would have been barely

literate, and would have been impressed by Poe's use of words that they did not understand.

Detestation features in both stories. In the Tell-Tale Heart it is the hatred of the old man's eye:

"...for it was not the old man who Vexed me, but his Evil Eye."

The "veiled" eye symbolised evil to the narrator. It was almost that the film (veil) that covered the eye might fall and reveal the evil secrets. For this reason he must kill the old man. It is possible that the narrator had an even deeper secret, which is never revealed to us, but which he believed in the covered eye it held that horrible secret, that if revealed would cause untold suffering.

In the Black Cat detestation is focused on his hatred for the cat:

"a hideous beast had seduced [him] into murder".

He truly believed that he had been possessed by the evil spirit of the cat. This belief in the symbolism of the black cat as a medium of the devil was prevalent in the nineteenth century and Poe made use of this symbolism in some of his stories. Hence the "hideous beast" could have been the devil himself.

In spite of his description in great horrific detail of both heart and eyes:

"I saw it with perfect distinctness – all a dull blue, with a hideous veil over it that chilled the very marrow in my bones."

Poe glosses over acts such as murder and dismemberment:

"First of all I dismembered the corpse. I cut off the head and the arms and the legs."

This is the magic of Poe's work. He describes the smallest of imperfections (in the eye for example) in great detail so that we can vividly create it in our mind but then he contrasts this with the matter-of-fact realities of getting rid of a corpse.

The Tell-Tale Heart differs from the Black Cat in that there is no sense of the supernatural in the former whereas there clearly is in the latter, for example, the patch of white fur on the cat coming to resemble the gallows.

Poe wrote for the general public and was quite prolific, writing some seventy short stories. He also wrote three volumes of poetry. Along with Mark Twain and Ernest

Hemingway, Poe is an important author in popular American culture. Even 150 years after his death his stories are still enjoyable.