Household Horror: Domestic Masculinity in Poe's THE BLACK CAT

The narrator of Edgar Allan Poe's 1843 story "The Black Cat" insists that his tale of horror is "a series of mere household events" (348); this insistence forms the basis of much of the criticism of this story. Critics have risen to the narrator's challenge to reduce these events to "the commonplace" and the "ordinary" (254) in their efforts to propose a motive for the narrator's violence.[1] Exploring the story through the lens of gender construction offers an additional perspective on this issue. Poe situates the story within the household, thus aligning the narrator with the feminized domestic sphere. The male narrator's feminine traits are apparent, and he struggles to recast this inappropriate femininity into a sensitive masculinity. He attempts to actively maintain a benign persona that masks his femininity; however, he performs a kind of hypermasculinity that manifests itself in increasingly horrific acts of violence.

The narrator's feminine traits, stemming from his childhood, are displayed in his "docility," "humanity," and "tenderness of heart" (254) and become particularly apparent in the nurturing, almost maternal, way he cares for his pets: he is "never [. . .] so happy as when feeding and caressing" his animals (254). This femininity has matured into a failed masculinity that the narrator both covertly recognizes and denies. Even as he describes his maternalistic relationship to domestic animals, he notes how his affinity for them affords one of the "principal sources of pleasure" of his "manhood" (254). He reinforces the universal, hence appropriately masculine, nature of this emotion toward domestic pets in his appeal to the reader who has "cherished an affection for a faithful and sagacious dog" (254). Such affection, according to the narrator, should be preferred over the "paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere *Man*" (254; emphasis in original). The dependent nature of the relationship between owner and pet—resulting in an "unselfish and self-sacrificing" love (254)—resembles that between mother and child, and the fact that the narrator's wife exhibits similar love for animals reinforces the maternal nature of this relationship.

While the narrator's marriage conventionally establishes his masculinity, he fails to fully inhabit the role of husband. The story spans several years, but the couple has no children, nor does the narrator appear to be employed. Both childlessness and joblessness indicate the narrator's inability to meet biologically and culturally determined gender expectations. In order to mask the feminine aspects of his identity and to counter his failed masculinity, the narrator performs increasingly violent acts. Blaming his actions on his consumption of alcohol, he becomes violent toward his wife and his pets. He glosses over the spousal abuse, but describes in gruesome detail his torture of his favorite pet, the black cat Pluto. While resorting to violence is stereotypically masculine, the narrator's cruelty in putting out the cat's eye is hardly an act of manly bravado; it is more the behavior of a prepubescent boy.

The narrator shows little remorse for his cruelty to the cat, only regret that it now "fle[es] in extreme terror" whenever it sees him (255). But regret turns into irritation. His earlier portrayal of himself as not simply respectable but lovable might indicate why he feels irritation and then "perverseness" (255). He uses this "perverseness" to reinforce his masculinity, noting that acting on such an impulse gives "direction to the character of Man" (255). Resorting to this masculine extreme, however, conflicts with his innate femininity, and his perverse cruelty results in the cat's alienation. Because the cat, his surrogate child, rejects the narrator's maternal side, the hypermasculine violence escalates and he kills the cat.

The narrator explains why he killed the cat: "*because* I knew it had loved me, and *because* I felt it had given me no reason of offence:— [. . .] *because* I knew that in doing so I was committing a sin—a deadly sin that would so jeopardize my immortal soul as to place it [. . .] beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God" (256; emphasis in original). Just as a recalcitrant child might misbehave to draw the attention of a neglectful parent, the narrator seems to be acting to force God to acknowledge his existence. Committing such an atrocity guarantees the narrator's punishment (in either this life or the next) for both this act and the earlier act of putting out the cat's eye. Yet guaranteeing punishment for an earlier crime by committing a worse crime is surely perverse. The key to understanding this perversity lies in the narrator's admission that he killed the cat because he lost its unconditional love. The cat sees through the facade of benign masculinity that the narrator so carefully constructed and into the reality of the narrator's failed manhood.

Not long after killing the cat, the narrator acquires another black cat that looks remarkably like the original except in one respect: it is marked with a patch of white that, for the narrator, increasingly comes to resemble a gallows—reminding the narrator of his violence toward the first cat and foreshadowing acts of violence to come. This second black cat also fails the

narrator: it becomes "a great favorite" with his wife (257). After noting the new cat's disposition, the narrator admits to disliking it. As he did with the first cat, the narrator treats any indication of this new creature's lack of devotion as justification for his hatred. While the cat endears itself to the narrator's wife, its attachment to the narrator is almost suffocating. Unlike the first cat, it does not flee from him, but physically attaches itself to him with "loathsome caresses" (257). Far from interpreting these "caresses" as indicative of the cat's attachment, the narrator sees them as inciting "terror and horror" (257). He admits his "absolute dread of the beast," and his relationship with it is fueled by both fear and hatred (257). Inevitably, the narrator resorts to more violence in order to reassert his threatened masculine power.

This violence, initially directed toward the second cat, ends in the narrator's murder of his wife. The new cat's resemblance to the first and its affection for the wife serve to constantly remind the narrator of his failed masculinity and, more importantly, what he has lost in denying his femininity. His wife still possesses "the humanity of feeling" that the narrator once considered his "distinguishing trait" and "the source of many of [his] simple and purest pleasures" (257). Rejecting his innate femininity in favor of violent hypermasculinity means he has irretrievably lost these pleasures; he is left "wretched beyond the wretchedness of mere Humanity" (257). His only recourse is to move beyond boyish cruelty and kill the cat, thus removing all shameful reminders of his loss. However, his wife intercedes on behalf of the cat, preventing the narrator from performing this aggressive show of masculinity; the consequence is his most excessively masculine act: he murders his wife.

Initially, the hypermasculine act of murder banishes all manifestations of the narrator's femininity. His concealment of his wife's body coupled with the inexplicable absence of the cat enable him to see himself as "a freeman" (259); he also behaves appropriately masculinely when visited by the police. Poe's description of these behaviors, however, is couched more as negative femininity than as positive masculinity: he "quivered not" and his "heart beat calmly" (259). This veneer of masculinity is short lived: the story ends with the narrator stripped of power and irrevocably aligned with the feminine. The cat's cries, "like the sobbing of a child," reveal the location of the wife's makeshift tomb. And when the police discover the body, the narrator swoons, perhaps his most telling, and stereotypically feminine, act (259). Despite his attempts to portray himself as "a man formed in the image of the High God," the narrator is left weak, faint-hearted, and emasculated (258).

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