



THE BLACK CAT

ADAPTED FROM THE SHORT STORY BY
EDGAR ALLAN POE

CAST

NARRATOR	<i>Teller of a Strange Tale</i>
VOICE	<i>Narrator's Speaking Voice</i>
CHILD ONE	<i>Childhood Bully</i>
CHILD TWO	<i>Childhood Bully</i>
WIFE	<i>Narrator's Wife</i>
PLUTO	<i>Black Cat</i>
BARKEEPER	<i>Tavern Owner</i>
MAN	<i>Man in the Crowd</i>
WOMAN	<i>Woman in the Crowd</i>
POLICEMAN	<i>Constable of the Law</i>
BLACK CAT	<i>Another Black Cat</i>

NARRATOR: For the most wild, yet most homely, narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it. It is a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. Yet mad am I not—and very surely do I not dream. But tomorrow I die, and today I would unburden my soul.

From my infancy I was noted for the docility 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. With these I spent most of my time and never was so happy as when feeding and caressing them.

CHILD ONE: Look! There he is! The animal-lover!

CHILD TWO: Ha! If it weren't for your pets, you wouldn't have any friends.

NARRATOR: This peculiarity of character grew with my growth, and in my manhood I derived from it one of my principal sources of pleasure. I married early and was happy to find in my wife a disposition not uncongenial with my own. Observing my partiality for domestic pets, she lost no opportunity of procuring those of the most agreeable kind. We had birds, gold-fish, a fine dog, rabbits, a small monkey, and a cat.

WIFE: (*happily*) Oh, my dear! I am so happy that you love animals as much as I do! There is no home more blissful than one filled with pets!

NARRATOR: Our cat was a remarkably large and beautiful animal, entirely black, and sagacious to an astonishing degree. In speaking of his intelligence, my wife, who at heart was not a little tinctured with superstition, made frequent allusion to the ancient popular notion, which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise.

WIFE: Pluto is so intelligent. Look how he watches us. It makes me think of that old superstition that black cats are witches in disguise! (*laughs*) What a silly idea!

NARRATOR: Not that she was ever serious upon this point, and I mention the matter at all for no better reason than that it happens, just now, to be remembered.

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.

PLUTO: (*friendly meowing of a cat*)

WIFE: No, Pluto, you must stay here! Your master must go about his business! (*to the narrator*) Oh, how Pluto loves you!

NARRATOR: Our friendship lasted, in this manner, for several years, but then the Fiend Intemperance crept into my life. I drowned myself in alcohol, and my general temperament and character experienced a radical alteration for the worse. I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others.

WIFE: (*frightened*) Darling, what is the matter? You have never spoken to me in this manner before. Have you been to the tavern?

NARRATOR: I suffered myself to use intemperate language to my wife. At length, I even offered her personal violence.

WIFE: (*weeping*) I don't understand! You have changed!

NARRATOR: My pets, of course, were made to feel the change in my disposition. I not only neglected, but ill-used them. For Pluto, however, I still retained sufficient regard to restrain me from maltreating him, as I made no scruple of maltreating the

rabbits, the monkey, or even the dog, when by accident, or through affection, they came in my way.

(*cries of pain from pets*)

NARRATOR: But my disease grew upon me, for what disease is like alcohol? At length even Pluto, who was now becoming old, and consequently somewhat peevish—even Pluto began to experience the effects of my ill temper.

One night, returning home, much intoxicated, from one of my haunts about town, I fancied that the cat avoided my presence. I seized him. When, in his fright at my violence, he inflicted a slight wound upon my hand with his teeth.

PLUTO: (*hissing*)

VOICE: (*cry of pain*)

NARRATOR: The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. I took from my waistcoat-pocket a pen-knife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket!

PLUTO: (*horrendous cry of the cat*)

NARRATOR: I blush, I burn, I shudder, while I pen the damnable atrocity.

When reason returned with the morning—when I had slept off the fumes of the night's debauch—I experienced a sentiment half of horror, half of remorse, for the crime of which I had been guilty. But it was, at best, a feeble feeling, and the soul remained untouched. I again plunged into excess and soon drowned in wine all memory of the deed.

In the meantime the cat slowly

recovered. The socket of the lost eye presented a frightful appearance, but he no longer appeared to suffer any pain. He went about the house as usual, but, as might be expected, fled in extreme terror at my approach.

PLUTO: (*hissing*)

NARRATOR: I had so much of my old heart left as to be at first grieved by this evident dislike on the part of a creature which had once so loved me. But this feeling soon gave place to irritation and then to a spirit of perverseness. I believe this is one of the primary sentiments of man. Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or a silly action, for no other reason than because he knows he should not? This spirit of perverseness, I say, came to my final overthrow.

WIFE: Darling! Darling! What are you doing to the cat?

NARRATOR: One morning, in cool blood, I slipped a noose about the cat's neck and hung it to the limb of a tree—hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes and with the bitterest remorse at my heart—hung it because I knew that it had loved me and because I felt it had given me no reason of offense—hung it because I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin.

WIFE: (*weeping*) No! No!

NARRATOR: On the night of the day on which this cruel deed was done, I was aroused from sleep by the cry of fire.

WIFE: Fire! The house is on fire!

NARRATOR: The curtains of my bed were in flames. The whole house was blazing.

(*sounds of a raging fire*)

NARRATOR: It was with great difficulty that my wife, a servant, and myself, made our escape from the conflagration. The destruction was complete. My entire worldly wealth was swallowed up, and I resigned myself thenceforward to despair.

WIFE: What shall we do? We have nothing in the world. Nothing.

NARRATOR: I am above the weakness of seeking to establish a sequence of cause and effect between the disaster and my crime. But I am detailing a chain of facts and wish not to leave even a possible link imperfect.

On the day succeeding the fire, I visited the ruins. I found a dense crowd gathered about the ruins—examining them. The walls, with one exception, had fallen in. This exception was found in a compartment wall, not very thick, which stood about the middle of the house and against which had rested the head of my bed. The wall plastering had resisted the action of the fire—a fact which I attributed to its having been recently spread.

(*murmuring of the crowd*)

MAN: Strange! Look at that shape there on the wall.

WOMAN: How singular! It looks like...a cat.

NARRATOR: As if graven in *bas relief* upon the white surface of the wall was the figure of a gigantic cat. The impression was given with an accuracy truly marvelous.

There was a rope about the animal's neck.

When I first beheld this apparition my wonder and my terror were extreme. But at length reflection came to my aid. The cat, I remembered, had been hung in a garden adjacent to the house. Upon the alarm of fire, this garden had been immediately filled by the crowd—by some one of whom the animal must have been cut from the tree and thrown, through an open window, into my chamber. This had probably been done with the view of arousing me from sleep. The falling of other walls had compressed the victim of my cruelty into the substance of the freshly-spread plaster. The lime of which, with the flames, and the ammonia from the carcass, had then accomplished the image as I saw it.

WIFE: A cat? You saw the image of a cat? Are you sure? What could that mean?

NARRATOR: For months I could not rid myself of the phantasm of the cat. During this period, there came back into my spirit a half-sentiment that seemed, but was not, remorse. I went so far as to regret the loss of the animal and to look, among the vile haunts which I now habitually frequented, for another pet of the same species and of somewhat similar appearance with which to supply its place.

BARKEEPER: You again? What will it be? The usual?

NARRATOR: One night as I sat, half-stupefied, in a den of more than infamy, my attention was suddenly drawn to some black object, reposing upon the head of one of the immense hogshead barrels of rum. I had been looking steadily at the top of this barrel for some minutes, and what now

caused me surprise was the fact that I had not sooner perceived the object thereupon.

BLACK CAT: (*purring and meowing*)

NARRATOR: I approached it and touched it with my hand. It was a black cat—a very large one—fully as large as Pluto, and it closely resembling him in every respect but one. Pluto had not a white hair upon any portion of his body. But this cat had a large, although indefinite splotch of white, covering nearly the whole region of the breast. Upon my touching him, he immediately arose, purred loudly, rubbed against my hand, and appeared delighted with my notice. This, then, was the very creature of which I was in search. I at once offered to purchase it of the landlord.

BARKEEPER: That cat? Never seen it before! Don't allow cats in here anyway. Take it with you!

NARRATOR: When I prepared to go home, the animal evinced a disposition to accompany me. I permitted it to do so—occasionally stooping and patting it as I proceeded. When it reached the house, it domesticated itself at once and became immediately a great favorite with my wife.

WIFE: Oh, dear! It looks so much like Pluto! Here is one brief spot of joy in all our misery!

NARRATOR: For my own part, I soon found a dislike to it arising within me. This was just the reverse of what I had anticipated. By slow degrees, these feelings of disgust and annoyance rose into the bitterness of hatred. I avoided the creature. A certain sense of shame and the remembrance of my former deed of cruelty

prevented me from physically abusing it. I did not, for some weeks, strike, or otherwise violently ill use it, but gradually—very gradually—I came to look upon it with unutterable loathing and to flee silently from its odious presence as from the breath of a pestilence.

What added, no doubt, to my hatred of the beast, was the discovery, on the morning after I brought it home, that, like Pluto, it also had been deprived of one of its eyes. This circumstance, however, only endeared it to my wife.

WIFE: The poor thing! It has been wounded!

NARRATOR: With my aversion to this cat, however, its partiality for myself seemed to increase. It followed my footsteps with a pertinacity which it would be difficult to make the reader comprehend. Whenever I sat, it would crouch beneath my chair or spring upon my knees, covering me with its loathsome caresses. If I arose to walk it would get between my feet and thus nearly throw me down.

BLACK CAT: (*hissing and meowing*)

NARRATOR: At such times, although I longed to destroy it with a blow, I was yet withheld from so doing, partly by a memory of my former crime, but chiefly—let me confess it at once—by absolute dread of the beast. This dread was not exactly a dread of physical evil—and yet I should be at a loss how otherwise to define it.

I am almost ashamed to own—yes, even in this felon's cell, I am almost ashamed to own—that the terror and horror with which the animal inspired me, had been heightened by a strange event. My wife had

called my attention, more than once, to the character of the mark of white hair, of which I have spoken, and which constituted the sole visible difference between the strange beast and the one I had destroyed. This mark, although large, had been originally very indefinite. But, by slow degrees—degrees nearly imperceptible—it had assumed a rigorous distinctness of outline. It was now the image of the gallows.

During the day the creature left me no moment alone, and, in the night, I started, hourly, from dreams of unutterable fear, to find the hot breath of the thing upon my face, and its vast weight—an incarnate nightmare that I had no power to shake off—eternally upon my heart!

Beneath the pressure of torments such as these, the feeble remnant of the good within me succumbed. Evil thoughts became my sole intimates—the darkest and most evil of thoughts. The moodiness of my usual temper increased to hatred of all things and of all mankind.

WIFE: (*weeping*) Why are you so cruel to me? Don't you have a soul?

NARRATOR: One day my wife accompanied me, upon some household errand, into the cellar of the old building which our poverty compelled us to inhabit.

BLACK CAT: (*meowing and hissing*)

NARRATOR: The cat followed me down the steep stairs, and, nearly throwing me headlong, exasperated me to madness. Uplifting an axe, and forgetting, in my wrath, the childish dread which had hitherto stayed my hand, I aimed a blow at the animal which, of course, would have

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proved instantly fatal had it descended as I wished. But this blow was arrested by the hand of my wife.

WIFE: (*shrieking*) No! No!

NARRATOR: Goaded by the interference into a rage more than demoniacal, I withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain. She fell dead upon the spot without a groan.

(*thudding sound*)

NARRATOR: This hideous murder accomplished, I set myself forthwith to the task of concealing the body. I knew that I could not remove it from the house, either by day or by night, without the risk of being observed by the neighbors. Many projects entered my mind. At one period I thought of cutting the corpse into minute fragments and destroying them by fire. At another, I resolved to dig a grave for it in the floor of the cellar. Again, I deliberated about casting it in the well in the yard. Or I thought of packing it in a box, as if merchandize, with the usual arrangements, and so getting a porter to take it from the house. Finally I hit upon what I considered a far better expedient than either of these. I determined to wall it up in the cellar—as the monks of the middle ages are recorded to have walled up their victims.

For a purpose such as this the cellar was well adapted. Its walls were loosely constructed, and had lately been plastered throughout with a rough plaster, which the dampness of the atmosphere had prevented from hardening. Moreover, in one of the walls was a projection, caused by a false chimney or fireplace that had been filled up and made to resemble the red of the cellar. I

made no doubt that I could readily displace the bricks at this point, insert the corpse, and wall the whole up as before, so that no eye could detect anything suspicious. And in this calculation I was not deceived.

(*sounds of construction*)

NARRATOR: By means of a crow-bar I easily dislodged the bricks, and, having carefully deposited the body against the inner wall, I propped it in that position while I re-laid the whole structure as it originally stood. Having procured mortar, sand, and hair with every possible precaution I prepared a plaster which could not be distinguished from the old, and with this I very carefully went over the new brickwork. When I had finished, I felt satisfied that all was right. The wall did not present the slightest appearance of having been disturbed. The rubbish on the floor was picked up with the minutest care. I looked around triumphantly, and said to myself...

VOICE: Here at least, then, my labor has not been in vain.

NARRATOR: My next step was to look for the beast which had been the cause of so much wretchedness, for I had firmly resolved to put it to death. Had I been able to meet with it at the moment there could have been no doubt of its fate, but it appeared that the crafty animal had been alarmed at the violence of my previous anger, and forbore to present itself in my present mood. 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, since its introduction into the house, I soundly and tranquilly slept. Yes, slept even with the burden of murder upon my soul!

The second and the third day passed, and still my tormentor came not. Once again I breathed as a freeman. The monster, in terror, had fled the premises forever! I should behold it no more! My happiness was supreme! The guilt of my dark deed disturbed me but little. Some few inquiries had been made, but these had been readily answered.

MAN: I have not seen your wife about. Is she well?

NARRATOR: Even a search had been instituted—but of course nothing was to be discovered. I looked upon my future felicity as secured. Upon the fourth day of the assassination, a party of the police came, very unexpectedly, into the house, and proceeded again to make rigorous investigation of the premises.

POLICEMAN: We would just like to have a look around. Standard practice, you know.

NARRATOR: Secure, however, in the inscrutability of my place of concealment, I felt no embarrassment whatever.

POLICEMAN: You may come with us and show us around.

NARRATOR: The officers bade me accompany them in their search. They left no nook or corner unexplored. At length, for the third or fourth time, they descended into the cellar. I quivered not in a muscle. My heart beat calmly as that of one who slumbers in innocence. I walked the cellar

from end to end. I folded my arms upon my bosom, and roamed easily to and fro. The police were thoroughly satisfied and prepared to depart. The glee at my heart was too strong to be restrained. I burned to say if but one word, by way of triumph, and to render doubly sure their assurance of my guiltlessness.

VOICE: Gentlemen, I delight to have allayed your suspicions. By the by, gentlemen, this is a very well-constructed house.

NARRATOR: In the rabid desire to say something easily, I scarcely knew what I uttered at all.

VOICE: Yes, it is an *excellently* well-constructed house. These walls are solidly put together!

NARRATOR: Then I rapped heavily with a cane, which I held in my hand, upon that very portion of the brick-work behind which stood the corpse of the wife of my bosom.

But may God shield and deliver me from the fangs of the Arch-Fiend! No sooner had the reverberation of my blows sunk into silence than I was answered by a voice from within the tomb!

(sound like the sobbing of a child)

NARRATOR: It was a cry at first muffled and broken, like the sobbing of a child, and then quickly swelling into one long, loud, and continuous scream—a howl—a wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell.

(hellish shriek)

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NARRATOR: Of my own thoughts it is folly to speak. Swooning, I staggered to the opposite wall. For one instant the party upon the stairs remained motionless through extremity of terror and of awe. In the next, a dozen stout arms were toiling at the wall.

POLICEMAN: Tear it down! The sound came from behind the wall!

VOICE: No! No!

NARRATOR: The wall fell bodily. The corpse, already greatly decayed and clotted with gore, stood erect before the eyes of the spectators. Upon its head, with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman. I had walled the monster up within the tomb!

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is Pluto the cat supernatural? Explain.
2. If not, what is another explanation of the events of this story? Explain.
3. Why did Poe choose to use a first person narrator?
4. Do you agree with Poe—is there a spirit of perverseness in mankind?
5. Do you feel sorry for the narrator and his fate? Explain.