

Edgar Allan Poe's The Black Cat: A narcissist confession

Astorga, John Mark ✉

Granby Colleges of Science and Technology, Philippines (markapinya14@gmail.com)

Guevarra, Akiko C.

Granby Colleges of Science and Technology, Philippines (akikoguevarra947@gmail.com)

Feliciano, Hannah C.

Granby Colleges of Science and Technology, Philippines (hannahfeliciano1312@gmail.com)

Salon, Maria Lynnete D.

Granby Colleges of Science and Technology, Philippines (linetsalondavis@gmail.com)

Atienza, Jamil V.

Granby Colleges of Science and Technology, Philippines (Jamilatienza@gmail.com)

Mauricio, Aliyah Jekyll D.

Granby Colleges of Science and Technology, Philippines (aliyahmauricio25@gmail.com)

Cañete, Shaby R.

Granby Colleges of Science and Technology, Philippines (shabycanete01@gmail.com)

Milanes, Redielyn C.

Granby Colleges of Science and Technology, Philippines (redielynm@gmail.com)

Crooc, Ivanalaine G.

Granby Colleges of Science and Technology, Philippines (ivanalainecrooc@gmail.com)



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Abstract

This paper aims to prove that the narrator in the story “The Black Cat” by Edgar Allan Poe is a narcissist through the lens of Narcissism by Sigmund Freud. It proves whether the narrator is a narcissist or not. Most studies conducted about this story focused on Alcoholism. However, the characteristic of the narrator fits the idea of Narcissism. This research uses textual analysis methodology to carefully examine the texts in the story to prove that the narrator is indeed a narcissist. According to Freud (1914), Narcissism is a psychological concept where an individual is only focused on themselves, only prioritizing their own needs, self-satisfaction and desires over others. Therefore, this paper concludes that the narrator in the story “Black Cat” is a narcissist.

Keywords: Edgar Allan Poe, psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, The Black Cat, narcissism

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1. Introduction

According to Buday (2014), The Black Cat by Edgar Allan Poe can be interpreted using Psychoanalytic Criticism. Based on his conclusion, The "The Black Cat" can be interpreted as a narrative dealing not with the supernatural, but rather the natural and the causal. Psychoanalysis is the most suitable literary criticism to analyze the main character of this short story who is called "The narrator." According to Sigmund Freud (1957), during infancy the child is focused on its ego. The child feels like he is the center of the world and everything he wants and needs are provided by the parents. That, on the other hand, is connected to narcissism by Sigmund Freud himself. According to him, narcissism is a psychological concept where an individual is only focused on themselves, only prioritizing their own needs, self-satisfaction and desires over others. Since, this paper aims to prove that the narrator in the story "The Black Cat" is a narcissist, the idea of Narcissism by Sigmund Freud is used as the main basis to maintain accuracy of the results. Based on the idea of Narcissism, the narrator in the story clearly possesses narcissistic characteristics. The accuracy of the results of this paper relies on the idea of Narcissism by Sigmund Freud. It is clear that Narcissism fits best in providing a new perspective about the narrator in the story by evaluating his narcissistic traits.

According to Benvenuto (2024) narcissists attempt to love the essence of life-the fundamental value. However, we are not able to value ourselves or sincerely love it. Narcissism is the worst temptation, which shares a desire based on theories for consistency. The narcissist wants to love his satisfaction, which makes love meaningful. But this is not possible. We can be more or less selfish, but the contradictory is the only way to love others is to love yourself. As Freud said, we will not be not satisfied if we take the task of loving ourselves just because we assign worth to our lovable possessions. The only good way of loving ourselves is through melancholy.

Upon reviewing the series of literary criticism about The Black Cat, the researcher discovered that the topic is more on alcoholism. A study conducted by Fouzia (2014) concluded that Edgar Allan Poe suffered from Psychological troubles. He took alcohol as treatment to escape from those troubles. He wrote "The Black Cat" to know what really happened to him. Their study concluded that "The black cat" is a reflection of Edgar Allan Poe's own behavior. However, a study conducted by Karlina (2007) entitled, The Psychological Problems of the narrator in The Black Cat by Edgar Allan Poe proved that the narrator in the story suffered Abnormal Behavior consistent with psychoneurosis, psychosis and psychopath. The researchers suggested that it would be best to conduct a study about The Black Cat using different theories such as psychoanalysis and by having Sigmund Freud's Theory. Using the lens of Psychoanalysis and Narcissist theory of Sigmund Freud it is clear that the narrator possesses the characteristics of Primary and Secondary Narcissism.

This paper aims to prove that the narrator in the story The Black Cat by Edgar Allan Poe has a narcissistic characteristic based on Sigmund Freud's theory of Narcissism. This paper explores the psychological basis of the narrator's character framing his descent into violence and madness as a manifestation of his narcissistic personality traits.

2. Methodology

This paper uses Textual Analysis to carefully examine and evaluate the texts in the story "The Black Cat" by Edgar Allan Poe. This paper utilizes purposive sampling wherein texts are selected based on three criteria, these are, (1) texts that shows the different characteristics of the narrator, (2) texts that shows that the narrator showed remorse for his action, and (3) texts wherein the narrator exhibits characteristics aligned with primary and secondary narcissism. This paper also used some significant works from other researchers about Narcissism and Narcissistic Disorder. However, the researcher used Sigmund Freud's Narcissism as the main text to prove that the

Narrator is indeed a narcissist. Its analysis of Narcissism focuses mainly on the idea of Sigmund Freud.

The story "The Black Cat" must be seen in the sense of Narcissism. Most studies focus on the narrator being alcoholic and conclude that it is the reason behind his hideous actions. Some also concluded that it was based on the author, Edgar Allan Poe's life. That is why, Narcissism by Sigmund Freud is the best idea to use for this paper because it offers a new perspective to the readers in explaining the narrator's actions. According to Sigmund Freud (1957), Narcissism is divided into two, primary and secondary narcissism. Everyone is born with a certain amount of narcissism, which is essential to normal development. But once we grow up, our intense love for ourselves begins to fade and our love for other people takes over. Narcissism is a fresh and useful lens to deeply understand the narrator in the story.

This research was conducted because the researchers noticed that most of the studies conducted about "The Black Cat" uses mainly alcoholism and reflection of the author's own life as its theme. The researcher noticed that there is a need for a new perspective in explaining the narrator's actions and that is using the lens of Narcissism.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Characteristics:

Pet Lover

"I have always loved animals more than anything. When I was a little boy, my family always had many different animals round the house. As I grew up, I spent most of my time with them, giving them their food and cleaning them." (Poe 1845, p. 1)

For the reason that there have always been animals in the main character's surroundings, the text makes it clear that the main character loves pets. The main character expresses his love to his animals by giving them food and taking care of them.

"Pluto — this was the cat's name — was my favourite. It was always I who gave him his food, and he followed me everywhere. I often had to stop him from following me through the streets! For years, he and I lived happily together, the best of friends." (Poe 1870, p. 1)

In this text, the main character labeled his favorite animal named Pluto and the narrator expresses his love to his favorite animal by giving him food. The narrator considers Pluto as his best friend.

Short-tempered

"I could not understand why Pluto was not pleased to see me. The cat was staying away from me. My Pluto did not want to come near me! I caught him and picked him up, holding him strongly" (Poe 1845, p. 2)

"Suddenly, I was not myself any more. Someone else was in my body: someone evil, and mad with drink! I took my knife from my pocket, held the poor animal by his neck and cut out one of his eyes." (Poe 1845, p. 3)

The narrator already concluded that Pluto does not want him anymore and for him, Pluto does not love him anymore. And with that conclusion, the narrator lost his temper and he cut Pluto's eyes.

3.2 Exhibit Remorse

"The next morning, my mind was full of pain and horror when I woke up. I was deeply sorry. I could not understand how I could do such an evil thing." (Poe 1845, p. 3)

It shows here that the narrator felt sorry after hurting Pluto and the narrator questioning himself why he hurt Pluto. The narrator considered what he did as an evil thing.

“But I could not forget that black shape for months. I even saw it in my dreams. I began to feel sad about losing the animal” (Poe 1845, p. 5)

The narrator felt sad losing Pluto. He could not forget the shape of Pluto and it feels like Pluto is still hanging around in his house because even in his dreams he can see Pluto.

3.3 Narcissism

Primary Narcissism

“I have always been a kind and loving person — everyone will tell you this.” (Poe 1845, p. 1)

This shows that the narrator was full of love when he was a child. He was adored and favored by the people around him. This shows that he was able to fulfill his ego-libido as a child.

“I married when I was very young, and I was happy to find that my wife loved all of our animal friends as much as I did. She bought us the most beautiful animals. We had all sorts of birds, gold fish, a fine dog and a cat.” (Poe 1845, p. 1)

As time goes by, the narrator's ego is packed with libidinal energy and he starts directing his energy towards objects/others which in this story, is his wife and Pluto. This time, the narrator is no longer focused on his own satisfaction and pleasure and learns to love others.

“Pluto — this was the cat's name — was my favourite. It was always I who gave him his food, and he followed me everywhere. I often had to stop him from following me through the streets! For years, he and I lived happily together, the best of friends.” (Poe 1845, p. 1)

The narrator started directing his love towards others. It was clear that it was Pluto whom he loved the most. He even mentioned that he and Pluto lived happily together without mentioning his wife who was also living with them.

Secondary Narcissism

“I could not understand why Pluto was not pleased to see me. The cat was staying away from me. My Pluto did not want to come near me! I caught him and picked him up, holding him strongly. He was afraid of me and bit my hand” (Poe 1845, p. 2)

The object-libido of the narrator was directed towards Pluto. When the narrator noticed that Pluto was staying away from him, he felt that his love for the cat is no longer reciprocated and this causes the flow of libido to stop and flows back to the ego once again.

“I knew he didn't love me any more. At first I was sad. Then, slowly, I started to feel angry, and I did another terrible thing . . .” (Poe 1845, p. 3)

“I had to do it — I could not stop myself. I did it with a terrible sadness in my heart — because I knew it was evil. And that was why I did it — yes! I did it because I knew it was evil. What did I do? I caught the cat and hung him by his neck from a tree until he was dead.” (Poe 1845, p. 3)

The narrator's libidinal energy towards Pluto was blocked when he felt that Pluto no longer loves him. As a result, he focused on self-preservation which he manifested by hurting Pluto. He knew that Pluto has no love towards him and he might hurt him again. Afraid of being hurt, he chose to kill the cat instead.

"Probably, someone cut the dead cat from the tree and threw it through the window — to try and wake me. The falling walls pressed the animal's body into the fresh plaster. The cat burned completely, leaving the black shape in the new plaster. Yes, I was sure that was what happened."
(Poe 1845, p. 5)

Paranoid delusion is one of the effects of secondary narcissism. Due to the narrator's fear of being caught for what he did to his cat, he created an unimaginable story trying to explain why there was a black shape of a large cat in a fresh plaster on the wall.

"I no longer knew the meaning of happiness, or rest. During the day, the animal never left me. At night he woke me up nearly every hour. I remember waking from terrible dreams and feeling him sitting next to my face, his heavy body pressing down on my heart!" (Poe 1845, p. 7)

The narrator developed fear and anxiety towards the cat. He became paranoid that he started having nightmares about the cat. It might also be due to him feeling guilty for what he did to Pluto.

"One day she came down into the cellar with me to cut some wood (we were now too poor to have a servant). Of course, the cat followed me down the stairs and nearly made me fall. This made me so angry, that I took the axe and tried to cut the animal in two. But as I brought the axe down, my wife stopped my arm with her hand. This made me even more angry, and I pulled her hand away from my wrist, lifted the tool again, brought it down hard and buried it in the top of her head."
(Poe 1845, pp. 7-9)

Secondary narcissism can lead to megalomania wherein a person becomes obsessed in exercising power and showing that they dominate others. This is shown when the narrator tried to kill the cat because it almost made him fall down the stairs. To display that he is powerful, he became eager to kill the cat and when his wife stopped him, he also killed her portraying that he is powerful and no one can stop him from killing the cat, not even his loving wife.

Based on the presented characteristics of the Narrator, he clearly shows that he possesses Narcissistic characteristics. One of the noticeable signs of Narcissism is being short-tempered. According to Kohut's *The Analysis of the Self* (1971), individuals with narcissism experience impulsive behaviors that result in being short-tempered, aggression and other impulsivity. In the text, the Narrator in his impulsivity cut one of the eyes of his beloved cat, Pluto. Many readers would argue that it is because he is drunk that is why he did that horrible thing to his cat, but, this interpretation is not convincing, being drunk is not enough reason for him to be impulsive and hurt his favorite cat. Clearly, the reason for his action is deeper than being drunk, he has narcissistic disorder.

When he feels that his beloved cat does not love him anymore, his narcissistic tendencies have been triggered; *"Suddenly, I was not myself any more. Someone else was in my body: someone evil, and mad with drink! I took my knife from my pocket, held the poor animal by his neck and cut out one of his eyes."* It is clear that the narrator is not blaming himself for being drunk, he said he was not himself anymore, someone else was in his body, he called it "Someone evil" and lastly he added "Mad with drink". It must be noted that his drunkenness was the last of the reasons for hurting his beloved cat, so, logically, it is not alcoholism that made him do it, it is something else, it is Narcissism. That "Someone evil" is himself, his narcissistic self.

According to Ronningstam (2005), Narcissism accompanies impulsivity and recklessness. Since the individuals who have narcissism characteristics often have struggles with their impulsive actions and decisions which lead to being aggressive, they often regret their impulsive actions. This is exactly what happened to the Narrator; *"The next morning, my mind was full of pain and horror when I woke up. I was deeply sorry. I could not understand how I could do such an evil thing."* It is clear that the Narrator expressed his deep regrets for hurting his favorite pet, he was deeply sorry and he did not even understand the reason for doing such an evil thing. This is not about alcoholism, it is not the Narrator who has a hangover for being drunk last night, these regrets are

deeper, his mind was full of pain and horror, it is the Narrator who has narcissistic disorder.

In the story, Pluto passed away, and the Narrator felt deep sadness for losing his favorite cat. He said he could not forget the shape of his cat, he even felt that Pluto was still living in the house. This description clearly tackles the regret of the Narrator for being impulsive. With this, it can be concluded that since regrets from impulsive actions is a tendency for Narcissism, the Narrator is indeed a narcissist.

It presents in-depth yet comprehensive analysis of the Narrator's psychological behavior using Sigmund Freud's concepts of Narcissism. To prove that the Narrator is a narcissist, the researchers start with Primary Narcissism or Normal Narcissism. To prove this, it is clearly written that the narrator, when he was a child, was adored and favored by the people around him. This shows that he was able to fulfill his ego-libido as a child, which is the first stage of Narcissism.

To make a strong argument that the Narrator is a narcissist, the researchers supported their claim in providing clear texts that will prove that the Narrator's mental condition is not alcoholism but Narcissism. According to Freud (1957), the Primary Narcissism is a total contrast of Secondary Narcissism which is considered as an extreme manifestation of Primary Narcissism where being extremely aggressive and impulsive may occur. The given texts above clearly present the Narrator's characteristics of having Secondary Narcissism.

4. Conclusion

This paper concludes that the narrator is a narcissist based on the idea of Narcissism by Sigmund Freud. It proves that the narrator exhibits distinct characteristics of narcissism, as defined by psychological theories and frameworks. The recurring motifs of violence and denial in the narrative not only highlights the destructive nature of narcissism but also illustrates the profound impact it has on relationships and moral judgment. This paper proves whether the narrator in the story "The Black Cat" is a narcissist or not. Based on the textual analysis done in the story, it is concluded that the narrator is a narcissist. Alcoholism and biographical criticism must not only be the only explanation of the character's hideous actions. Using textual analysis, it is seen that the narrator possesses narcissistic characteristics aligned with Sigmund Freud's idea of Narcissism.

With these findings, it is now clear that it is not only alcoholism that pushes the narrator in the story to do such actions. These findings are a fresh perspective for the future researchers in understanding the reason behind the actions of the narrator in the story "The Black Cat". Since this paper is a fresh perspective about the story, this can be a starting point for other researchers to examine the story using the lens of Psychoanalysis. This paper can be a guide to students who are studying literature in understanding the story in a deeper meaning. This is not only meant for students who study literature; people who are fond of literary works can also benefit from this. There are not enough research studies that view this story in the lens of Psychoanalysis in explaining and understanding the actions of the narrator in the story, that is why, this paper is a good stepping stone to conducting an in-depth analysis of the story using the lens of Psychoanalysis.

This paper will also serve a guide to Literature teachers who wish to give a fresh interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Black Cat* in a new approach using Psychoanalysis. Teachers will be able to teach Psychoanalytic literary approach to their students with a concrete example using this paper. This paper recommends to the future researchers to have an in-depth analysis of the narrator's characteristics and actions. However, this paper focused mainly on narcissism, the researchers recommend conducting an analysis about the narrator in the story using other areas of Psychoanalysis.

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