

# ***Exploration of Androgyny and Moral Allegory in The Black Cat in Terms of Narrative Structure***

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**Abstract:** *The Black Cat* by Edgar Allan Poe is a classic horror novel renowned for incorporating traditional gothic elements, intricate layering of narrative, extensive use of symbolism, free direct quotations, and a narrative structure characterised by unreliable first-person narration. These literary devices collectively create a profound allegory for the human soul, inviting a plethora of diverse interpretations. This paper undertakes a comprehensive analysis of the novel's narrative structure, shedding light on the complex relationship between the protagonist and his wife from an androgynous standpoint, revealing a duality of good and evil within them. It posits that the wife serves as the custodian and voice of the protagonist's soul, embodying the force of good within him. Furthermore, the paper delves into how the novel chronicles the protagonist's soul's response to escalating evil, providing a spiritual exploration of human nature encompassing sin and punishment, harmony and division. Ultimately, it suggests a central theme: the androgynous nature of human beings, where the presence of good necessitates punishment for evil. Even if the force of good is obliterated, the burden of sin remains irremovable. Beyond its apparent horror, *The Black Cat* serves as Poe's poignant dissection of human malevolence and a condemnation of wicked deeds.

**Keywords:** *The Black Cat*, androgyny, soul exploration, moral allegory

## **1. Introduction**

*The Black Cat* is a gothic novel by Allen Poe, published in 1843. Traditional gothic fiction sets the story in waste and isolated scenes such as abysses, castles and tunnels and usually, the plot involves murderous violence. The elements of gothic tradition, such as haunted castles and supernatural beings, gradually became metaphors for the characters' underlying psychological conditions [1]. Having inherited these elements, Poe, with gothic novels, explored the depths unapproachable to other nineteenth-century writers [1]. *The Black Cat* is not only designed to be a horror story with violence, murder, and hiding of corpses but also unfolds the psychological world of the protagonist in depth. The horror of the bizarre plot pervades the novel and is filled with rational elements that reveal the complexity of human nature and the darkness of the soul.

The novel adopts a progressive narrative structure layer by layer [2]. From abusing the cat, killing it, the cat becoming a relief upon the wall, killing his wife and hiding her body, to the second cat surviving by eating the corpse, the story is increasingly violent, together with wave after wave of horror. The shock to the reader intensifies as the reading progresses, which comes from both the sensory stimulation of reading the text and the imagination with a desire to search for truth triggered

by the peculiar way of narration. It is evident that the layer-by-layer narrative structure results in the growing shock in readers.

At the same time, the novel has a blank structure. The blank structure gives the novel a malleability that waits, summons, and calls the reader to intervene [3]. The novel begins with the narrator saying, “some intellect may be found [...] which will perceive [...] much more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects” [4], which shows that Poe invites readers, when experiencing the excitement in reading, to interpret the designed multiple meanings of the fiction by reading between the lines. As McElroy put it. *The Black Cat* has two simultaneous perspectives: the narrative and the authorial” [5]. The reader needs to decipher the narrator’s story and Poe’s intention in writing. One of how the blank structure expresses the gothic atmosphere is the blurred background. The time, place, character images, and social setting in which the story takes place in *The Black Cat* are unclear, thus discouraging the reader from delving deeply into them and, conversely, spurring them on to draw attention only to the novel’s text. So, it is easier to discover the symbolism of the characters and plot developments in the story.

Moreover, the narrative of *The Black Cat* utilises free direct quotations and a first-person inside perspective. Free direct quotations, omitting leading clauses and quotes, reveal the character’s inner world directly and bring the reader face to face with the mental activities of the characters [6]. The utilisation of the first-person point of view enables characters to unveil the internal struggle between good and evil, drawing the reader into closer proximity with the narrator. This approach straightforwardly showcases the protagonist’s intricate thoughts and fleeting emotions [7]. However, as Paul Lewis pointed out in “the first person tales, the variously unreliable narrator”, the narrator produces contradictory and self-deconstructing narrative, making the text present multiple meanings [8].

So far, abundant studies, from perspectives such as corpus stylistics, narrative structure, gothic mood, romanticism, death motifs, racism and psychoanalytic, have enriched the interpretation of the novel and allowed readers to appreciate it on a variety of levels, but few researchers have analysed from a combination of androgynous perspective and moral allegory. This paper will attempt to find the truth lying beneath the story in *The Black Cat* by using the theory of androgyny to reveal that all of the narrator’s narratives show just the flow of the protagonist’s thoughts, so the wife and other characters are imaginary and only live in his mental world. The wife is the caretaker and interlocutor of the hero’s soul, the personification of the power of good in his soul, and the wife and hero are hermaphrodites, as well as good and evil as one. Furthermore, the paper enquires into Edgar Allan Poe’s intention to explore the human soul by analysing the writing style and puts forward one of the novel’s possible themes and moral allegories. The escalation of the protagonist’s evil deeds is, in effect, that of violence against his soul, to which the soul responds with punishment. Though goodness in the soul can be annihilated, penalties will not go away. After the force of good is destroyed, the protagonist changes from an androgynous state to a single temperament [9]. As a consequence, the protagonist suffers a spiritual split and self-betrayal. The novel exhibits Poe’s trial and condemnation of the hero’s stirring up evil and committing crimes.

## 2. The Image of the Wife

The image of the wife is constructed entirely by the narrator’s first-person narrative. The protagonist says that he marries early and, as a congenial couple, they raise pets besides a black cat, about which the wife has mentioned that black cats are witches in disguise. On the night the cat is hanged, their house is on fire, from which the protagonist, his wife and a servant escape successfully. Afterwards, the protagonist brings the second black cat back, and his wife loves it right away and reminds him of the mark of white hair covering its breast as well. The protagonist says that he has an emotional temper, so he hates all things and all humankind, and he falls with each outburst of fury. Nevertheless,

his wife, the most patient of victims, never complains about what has happened. One day, the protagonist nearly stumbles over the second black cat in the cellar; he tries to kill the cat with an axe but fails because his wife stops him by holding his arm. In a rage, he withdraws his arm and wields the axe at his wife, who dies immediately. He builds the corpse into the wall near the fireplace.

All the information about the wife from the narrator's narrative is above. The wife is a quiet person, and she is quiet enough to arouse suspicion. She makes no verbal condemnation and takes no action to stop the crime on the night when the first cat is gouged out one eye, and similarly, while it is recovering from the injury and, in the end, can go about the house with an empty socket, there is no pity or comforting from her side. She seems to have disappeared. The night the protagonist hangs the cat, their house catches fire, and she escapes from disaster with the protagonist and a servant, so she must be on the spot when the cat is hanged and walled up. However, there is no trace of her reaction. It seems that she is there, yet she is not there in the meantime. The next morning, a large crowd look at the relief upon the wall in her garden, making loud comments and exclamations, but she still says and does nothing. Thus, her image differs from a real-life housewife's, which goes against common sense. She expresses herself or behaves according to some other kind of will rather than her initiative, so she is passively dictated when to show up, what to say and what to do. Having been killed, her body, standing upright, is built into the wall, just like the first black cat, waiting to meet the protagonist again on a special occasion.

The wife and other characters are silent and almost speechless, while the protagonist is quite talkative. When the former comes up, what they should do coincides with the protagonist's need for the flow of thought. Before killing his wife, he says, "Evil thoughts became my sole intimates-the darkest and most evil of thought" [4]. He has immersed himself in thoughts and is the only one that is real, while the servant, the dense crowd that gazes at the relief and the police officers who search for evidence are imaginary figures and only exist in his mental activities, which illustrates that they spring into existence on a particular occasion without any reference in advance and when the scene changes, they involve in the rest of the story no more.

When the protagonist needs to be noticed or show his new level of depravity, they come along at the right time. James W. Gargano pointed out, "It is characteristic of this spirit, willfully and with the actor's apparent knowledge" [10]. Like an actor, the protagonist needs an audience to watch his performance, and his behaviour needs to be witnessed by the audience. The audience is gone at the end of each show, and he automatically beckons new viewers over to the next show. The identity of the audience changes with the escalation of his evil deeds. When he plucks out one eye of the black cat, the audience is his wife; when he hangs the cat, the audience is the servant and neighbors; and when he kills his wife, the audience is the police officers. The protagonist is certainly perfectly contented, for countless readers are viewers, too, watching every one of his performances without fail.

The character of the wife, who is throughout the novel and murdered by the protagonist and whose corpse has to be disposed of, lives only in the protagonist's imaginary world, too. The black cats, as described by the wife, are depicted as witches in disguise. This portrayal aims to imply the presence of enigmatic forces within human nature, emphasising that complete mastery of its intricacies remains beyond the reach of any individual. The wife calls the protagonist's attention several times to the mark of white hair, which in his eyes changes gradually into the image of the gallows to indicate that crime may escape punishment in the secular world but must be punished in the world of the human soul. The only two times she speaks, both are about a man's spiritual world. The wife appears only when the protagonist needs to look after his soul, so she is an interlocutor in his inner world.

### **3. Androgynous Relationship Between the Wife and the Protagonist**

Androgyny biologically refers to a mixture of both sexes in body composition. Psychologically, it

means that the same individual has both distinctly male and distinctly female personality traits [11]. The state of androgyny is the ideal state of complete harmony. The wife in *The Black Cat* is the caretaker of the protagonist's soul, and they are two sides of one body. Virginia Woolf has said it is destructive to be purely a man or a woman [12], meaning there are two forces in each soul, one male and the other female. Only when the two sides harmonise and keep spiritual agreement will a man achieve a balanced and normal state. The story in *The Black Cat* shows the couple's progression from harmony to destruction, in other words, the protagonist's process of moving from fullness and harmony to split and self-betrayal in his spiritual world.

In accordance with the original intent, the protagonist highlights the concept of "mere Man" [4]. As an individual, one cannot escape the androgynous nature of humanity, in which good and evil coexist as one. Within humanity's natural disposition, these two forces engage in perpetual competition. The wife loves and protects the cat, so she stands for the force of good, while the protagonist maltreats and kills the cat, so he is the force of evil. When the couple love and raise pets together, the two forces are in harmony, and the protagonist feels happy. When the first cat is gouged out of one eye, the force of good tries to take its flight from the protagonist's body but fails. When the first cat is hanged and later becomes the relief gazed upon by the crowd, that is when the protagonist submits himself to the primal desire, and his fall speeds up; hence, the force of evil defeats the force of good. For the protagonist, the relief is a milestone displaying his abandoning good for evil. The protagonist says he hangs the cat with the tears streaming from his eyes and with the bitterest remorse at his heart[4], which McElroy interpreted as a form of confession because, according to the Christian doctrine, "God will not condemn the penitent for their sins"[5]. However, to him, even with forgiveness from God, the force of evil has not been reduced. Evidently, the force of good does not combat evil directly but tries to evade and withdraw from the competition at this stage.

After the second cat comes to his home, the protagonist first likes it, then hates it, while the wife loves it all the time, and the different attitudes demonstrate the divergence between the two forces in the protagonist. Yu Lei pointed out that in *The Black Cat*, the woman and animals collaborate as a united force against the mechanism of power [13]. By drawing the protagonist's attention to the mark of white hair, the force of good displays the relationship between crime and punishment through the weapon of morality, which scares him so much that he does not dare to kill the second black cat. Therefore, the force of good maintains the balance and slows down the protagonist's depravity. At this stage, the force of good gets brave to check and balance the force of evil.

In the battle rounds between good and evil, the two forces or two sides in the protagonist, as the viscount divided into two halves, with a sword in each hand, fight each other and prove to be evenly matched. The force of good will continue to exist and impede the growth of the force of evil as long as the wife is alive. Finally, to explore the depths of the abyss of sin, the protagonist kills the wife, which means the force of evil destroys the force of good, and the two parts of the soul come apart.

#### 4. Exploration of the Soul

It is urgent and significant for the protagonist to dispose of the corpse after killing his wife. However, he deals with the sticky matter competently and skillfully, in the same way and easiness. Such an arrangement is undoubtedly intended to continue the experiment with the soul, for the narrator is ready to give an account of what will happen after removing one of the forces, with only the force of evil left.

From the novel's beginning, the protagonist probes into the soul and admits that his intention in telling the story is to "unburden his soul" [4]. Apparently, the nature of the soul is very important to him. In his youth, the protagonist follows the happiness principle and draws pleasure from loving and raising pets. That is when he has kindness in his spirit, and the union of kindness and original sin is the marriage of the good and the evil, which makes his complete and happy spiritual life. He maltreats

the rabbits, the monkey and even the dog with no scruple, which hints that the offences to the ceremony, rules and moral values are merely minor negligence or mischief.

The force of evil swells and grows gradually until one night, in a state of drunkenness, the protagonist's hand is inflicted a slight wound by the cat and in a fit of fury, he seizes the black cat, trying to escape. "My original soul, seemed at once to take its flight from my body" [4]. It is not just the black cat that is going to escape from him, but the goodness in his soul, too. Ultimately, he forces the goodness to witness the guilt of plucking out one of the cat's eyes. Thus, the black cat he loves and who has always loved him is harmed seriously. Regaining his senses the next morning, he feels a faint horror and remorse, though the feeling is feeble and uncertain. In contrast to such a feeling, "the soul remained untouched:[4]. His soul gives no response.

When the black cat recovers from the harm and goes about the house again, faced with the daily reminder of the guilt, the soul is unaffected as before, leading to his doubt whether the soul still lives. To solve the mystery of whether the soul exists and is alive since there has been no response from it, the protagonist brings out his view of "the spirit of perverseness" [4] to show the universal tendency to do evil with the knowledge that it should not be and to violate the law with the ability to tell right and wrong. He is to offer violence to the nature of the soul, to "do wrong for the wrong's sake only" [4]. Driven by his test on the soul, the protagonist commits more terrible sins with the force of evil strengthening.

It is a crime to hang the black cat according to his criteria for the crime, which include killing a life that loves him and has never offended him. Moreover, the crime is made public in the form of relief in order to vex the soul and keep it from being saved. The protagonist describes the ensuing sensation as a blend of astonishment, dread, and remorse following the commission of such a profound act of violence upon the soul. However, instead of eliciting a response from the soul, another feeling emerges.

Until the mark of white hair covering the second black cat's breast appears as the image of a gallows, which symbolises punishment for crime, it is exactly a response from the force of good in the soul, but the force of evil in the soul still keeps silent. At this point, the protagonist describes his feelings as disgust, annoyance, hatred and terror.

To dig deeper into the evil of human nature, the protagonist does not stop out of fear; rather, in Poe's writing, he is determined to get rid of penalties. The force of good drives punishment, and removing penalties means eliminating the force of good, for the penalties will continue the nut if the goodness does not survive. In the next step, he carries out more severe violence against the soul and commits a deeper crime: assassinating the wife and concealing the corpse. After the protagonist has put the corpse into the wall, the wall becomes a place where he settles down part of his soul. After that, the protagonist transforms from an androgynous state to a single temperament [9]. Fragmenting has become an important means of leading humankind to reconnect with itself [14]. The protagonist, with the full release of the suppressed evil force, can confront sin and exploit perverseness without the hindrance of goodness. After killing the wife, he is eager to talk to his soul to figure out the soul's reaction to the assassination, but for several days, he lives a peaceful life and does not find any response from the soul. He finds himself able to breathe freely, and it seems that the dreadful monster gets scared off, and the last and most terrible crime helps him out. The protagonist needs to confirm it all.

In the novel's final scene, the police officers find no evidence of murder, for, like other characters in his mental world, they are imaginary characters and have no power to act. Furthermore, the police officers in the secular world cannot detect the evils of a man's inner world, which can only be exposed by the protagonist himself. When the party of police are prepared to depart and even have ascended the steps, they are requested to stay because the protagonist wants them to witness his crime of killing the wife, just like the dense crowd before the relief. Then he raps the wall with a cane both consciously

and unconsciously because, on the one hand, the force of evil deliberately provokes the force of good, and on the other hand, the force of evil is looking for the other half whom it has united. The voice emanating from the tomb, as indicated by the phrase “half of triumph” [4], carries a pronounced sense of irony. This irony stems from its manifestation of the victory achieved by the punishment, an event that disrupts the protagonist’s tranquil slumber and the elation derived from triumph. Even if the force of good in the soul has been destroyed, the punishment for sin cannot be removed, which is always there waiting for the murderer. The punishment inhibits the force of evil in man’s soul.

## 5. The Theme of *The Black Cat*

Just as the police officers pry open the wall to find the corpse, readers have to push aside the atmosphere of horror, designed elaborately by Poe, to discover the novel’s real subject. The protagonist abuses pets, maltreats and hangs the black cat, and kills his wife as the force of evil in his inner world develops and expands. Every time the force of evil develops, his wickedness upgrades to a new level. After each evil conduct, the hero observes and records the reaction and distinguishes between feeling and soul. The protagonist goes as far as to kill his wife because, perhaps, as Italo Calvino wrote in the *Cluven Viscount*, that incompleteness makes the experience profound. The whole novel tells the protagonist’s journey from a vague to a clear understanding of man’s soul.

In the pursuit of comprehending the depths of malevolence within the novel, relentless endeavours have been made. Regrettably, these endeavours have failed to yield a definitive resolution. Diverging from the narrative trajectory in Oscar Wilde’s “The Picture of Dorian Gray,” where the protagonist, Dorian Gray, thrusts a blade into his portrait, resulting in the simultaneous demise of both his virtuous and malevolent aspects, the central character in *The Black Cat* follows a disparate course. Despite the heinous act of slaying his wife and obliterating the benevolent forces within him, the protagonist endures, harbouring solely the remnants of malevolence. However, the novel’s final scene shows that pure evil cannot exist on its own and needs care and dialogue from goodness, so the protagonist eventually disintegrates not unreasonably. If a man’s words and deeds are governed by two forces, a mentally split man is unable to control his words and actions, so it is natural for him to betray himself and go crazy and then destroy himself.

Shen Dan stated that when interpreting Poe’s horror novels, the reader should focus on whether they have moral allegory [7]. In *The Black Cat*, the protagonist is imprisoned in a felon’s cell and will be executed tomorrow, which shows Poe’s attitude to the protagonist, the criminal. The novel’s theme is becoming clear: human nature is androgynous, and the force of good enables punishment; even if the goodness is destroyed, the punishment for sin cannot be removed. The theme reflects the moral allegory of the novel.

## 6. Conclusion

Elements of gothic fiction and Poe’s peculiar narrative techniques make the novel display the human spirit deeply and profoundly explore the relationship between good and evil in man’s soul. The blank structure and two simultaneous perspectives of the narrator and the author allow readers to appreciate the novel from multiple angles. Free direct quotations and a first-person inside perspective create an unreliable narrative which urges readers to find the hidden meaning beneath the words through a well-crafted narrative. The process of reading *The Black Cat* is that of experiencing the thrill of horror and searching for the logical meaning in the uncertainty and ambiguity of the narration.

In this short analysis of *The Black Cat*, the theory of androgyny is applied to analyse the wife and the protagonist, representing the force of good and the force of evil, respectively, in the soul. The protagonist illtreats and hangs the cat and kills his wife as evil controls and eliminates the force of good, which displays the escalation of violence against the soul. The soul’s response is to make him

disintegrate, betray himself and be published, in which Poe's condemnation of sin emerges.

The research in the present paper adds a new perspective to the interpretation of *The Black Cat* and concludes that it serves as a testing ground for Poe to explore the nature of the soul. However, the above analysis cannot interpret completely the significance and effect stemming from the combination of extensive elements in the novel. The essay merely attempts to observe the novel from androgyny and moral allegory. The novel's exploration of human nature is still meaningful to readers today. With horror as its outward form and probing the soul as its core, *The Black Cat* is a gem of world literature.

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