

The Abnormal Psychology and Moral Metaphors in Edgar Allan Poe's The Black Cat

--A Perspective from Criminal Psychology

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Abstract

Edgar Allan Poe, a controversial and enigmatic American writer, has long been labeled as "dark", "decadent", "sick" and even "insane". However, Poe's works do not blindly pursue pure interest regardless of the transmission of truth, goodness and beauty. Taking Poe's The Black Cat as an example, under the guidance of the theory of "Frustration-Attack" in criminal psychology, this paper analyzes the social and personal factors that cause the hero's change from being good to evil, and explores the moral metaphor hidden in the novel through the description of color, emotion and temperature. By revealing the existential and spiritual dilemmas faced by human beings, it arouses people's attention to the living state and inner complexity of average person.

Keywords

Criminal Psychology, "Frustration-Attack" Theory, Moral Metaphor, Alienation of human nature.

1. Introduction

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) led a tumultuous life, marked by a series of personal tragedies. His father abandoned the family, his mother died when he was young, his foster mother passed away, and his foster father disowned him. Later, his wife died of illness. These successive blows and continual losses left a profound impact on Poe, shaping his dark and somber worldview. He transformed his pain and imagination into his writing, making significant contributions to short stories, poetry, and literary theory.

For over two centuries, Poe's works, especially his short stories, have captivated both readers and critics. His personal experiences and his theory of the "unity of effect" have led his works to often exhibit dark, mysterious, and eerie characteristics. Consequently, some critics have harshly labeled his works as "decadent," "morbid," and even "insane."

However, what was Poe's true purpose in his writing? Was it, as some critics and scholars suggest, merely to create an atmosphere and evoke emotions to entertain readers, disregarding reason, ethics, and morality?

As time progresses, scholars continue to explore Edgar Allan Poe and his works from diverse perspectives. In contemporary academia, research often focuses on Poe's depiction of beauty, terror, and human nature. Some scholars employ Freudian psychoanalysis to delve into the psychological states of both Poe and the protagonists in his works. However, few have examined Poe's crime stories from the perspective of criminal psychology, specifically analyzing the psychological portrayals and underlying moral concerns.

This paper focuses on analyzing Poe's novel The Black Cat through the lens of the "frustration-aggression" theory to examine the social and personal factors contributing to the protagonist's

criminal psychology. Additionally, it explores the moral metaphors embedded in the narrative through Poe's use of color, emotion, and temperature, thereby uncovering the enduring appeal of his work.

2. The Blossoms of Evil: Crime and Abnormal Psychology

In the 18th and 19th centuries, although some legal treatises had emerged, such as Cesare Beccaria's *On Crimes and Punishments* and Jeremy Bentham's *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, the systematic study of criminology and psychology had yet to begin. Edgar Allan Poe's crime fiction, created during this period, remains profound in its exploration of human psychological struggles and the factors leading to personality disintegration.

In the novel *The Black Cat*, Poe masterfully employs a rise-and-fall technique, depicting the protagonist's transformation from goodness to anger, anger to evil, and ultimately to self-destruction. Through detailed descriptions of social environments and personal emotional shifts, Poe illustrates the dehumanization and downfall of the protagonist. The intense internal conflict between good and evil, culminating in a chilling indifference to life, evokes deep feelings of sorrow and horror in the reader.

The "frustration-aggression" theory, one of the most influential concepts in modern criminal psychology, offers a unique perspective for analyzing the psychological causes of criminal behavior. Applying this theory to *The Black Cat* allows us to clearly understand the reasons behind the protagonist's descent from virtue to vice.

2.1. The Mutation of Goodness: Frustration

The "frustration-aggression" theory posits that when an individual experiences frustration—when their progress towards a goal is blocked, their objectives unmet, and their motives unfulfilled—it inevitably leads to aggression towards the source of frustration. This aggression can be explicit, manifesting in physical or verbal attacks, or implicit, such as through fantasies [1].

As the renowned writer Lu Xun said, "Tragedy portrays the destruction of what is valuable in life." In the oppressive feeling caused by the destruction of valuable things, Poe creates a sense of fear induced by the external environment: fear of frustration, helplessness, malice, and destruction.

The protagonist in *The Black Cat* possesses a docile and tender-hearted disposition from a young age. However, this kindness makes him a subject of mockery among his peers, which lead to his isolation. During the process of growth, he experienced repeated deceit and betrayal, resulting in a deep-seated sense of failure and an inability to find sense of belonging. This frustration drove him away from people, finding solace and joy in the company of pets, particularly a loyal, selfless, and intelligent black cat.

According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, fundamental human requirements include physiological needs (food and clothing), safety (job security), social needs (friendship), esteem, and self-actualization. Throughout their development, individuals strive to progress from lower to higher levels of need, from failure to success, from inferiority to superiority and perfection. This drive is a universal and fundamental human behavior, starting in childhood and continuing throughout life [2]. Frustration resulting from the deprivation of these basic needs can lead to many unpleasant consequences.

In a society where values were distorted, ugliness prevailed, and goodness was bullied, the gentle and timid protagonist was mocked and ostracized by his peers from a young age. As an adult, he found himself in an even more complex social environment but remained powerless to change his situation. The accumulated frustration and inner repression became a fertile

ground for the transformation of his nature from pure goodness to increasingly erratic, irritable, and insensitive behavior.

Through human empathy, Poe projects the protagonist's loneliness, sadness, and anger into the reader's heart, eliciting both resonance and deep reflection on the complex relationships between social environment, value systems, and personal growth.

2.2. The Aberration of Anger: Attack

When encountering injustice or suffering harm, people often experience feelings of anger. Anger, as a defensive emotion, is a normal physiological response. However, if anger accumulates and reaches an exceptionally intense level, it can easily lead to a desire for aggression and deviant behavior, potentially resulting in crimes of passion [3]. Western criminology posits that crimes of passion generally stem from the frustration-aggression theory [4].

In the story *The Black Cat*, while the protagonist's transition from kindness to anger is understandable, allowing anger to escalate uncontrollably and harm others' lives is utterly unforgivable.

Initially, despite the protagonist's efforts to remain rational and restrained, malice occasionally slips through: he subjected his wife to foul language and physical violence, and even abused the household pets. One day, his rationality collapsed: the black cat's slight resistance to the protagonist's brutality caused his reason to flee from his body, and cruel malevolence pervaded his every fiber, leading him to deliberately gouge out one of its eyes.

The protagonist's interpersonal indifference and lack of essential emotional communication, combined with his constant frustrations, left him with no outlet for his emotions and resentment, which eroded his rationality and distorts his humanity.

In the days that followed, the one-eyed black cat evoked guilt in the protagonist; its disfigurement stood as an indictment of his cruelty. The failed and negative emotional interactions exacerbated his dark and unhealthy psychological state. Anger replaced the sadness caused by abusing the cat, and he once again became a slave to his perverse desires. His desire to do wrong for the sake of wrong led to the hanging of his former companion.

Yet, the nightmare did not cease. When the white patch on the chest of the second black cat was presented to the protagonist in the form of a gallows, the immense psychological terror obliterates the last vestige of his goodness. When his wife attempted to prevent him from killing the black cat, an evil axe struck the head of the gentle and kind woman who had always stood by his side.

The intricate psychological progression, delicate emotional descriptions, and the protagonist's calm demeanor amidst his malevolent actions are chilling. Just as the protagonist's definition of the black cat shifts from friend to beast, Poe subtly suggests that the protagonist himself transforms from a compassionate and rational person into a savage and frenzied beast.

2.3. The Aberration of Human Nature: Annihilation

Enclosed spaces such as cellars and tombs are Edgar Allan Poe's preferred settings for his crime stories. He allows fear and evil to coexist in these eerie spaces, with darkness spreading, human nature eroding, and conscience decaying. These spaces serve as both the origin and the terminus of evil.

In the story, the successful strangulation of the first black cat led the protagonist to become indifferent to pain and death. After impulsively murdering his wife, he was completely devoid of conscience, exhibiting no remorse as he calmly and meticulously contemplated various gruesome methods of concealing her body. He felt no hesitation and even proud of his ingenuity. Without moral constraints, he experienced profound and tranquil sleep and felt supremely blissful. Affection turns into indifference, and healthy human relationships transform into

chilling acts of murder. The grotesque metamorphosis of human nature creates a profoundly shocking effect: we witness a once compassionate and tender-hearted young man now haunting the world like a malevolent specter.

The protagonist's act of hiding his wife's corpse in the dark cellar symbolizes the engulfment of his humanity and conscience by darkness. Ultimately, the protagonist's darkened mental state collapses when faced with the judgment of justice.

Edgar Allan Poe did not study modern psychology, yet we cannot help but marvel at his precise grasp of character psychology. The story is narrated in the first person, with the protagonist providing a detailed psychological monologue that accurately describes the minutiae of his violent acts. This narration presents the perversion and distortion of human nature post-aberration to the reader, and his act of self-revealing his crimes suggests that punishment is the ultimate relief for the criminal.

Poe shows the protagonist's path to self-destruction by explicit narrative, and his unique writing style draws readers deeply into the story. Through the protagonist's experiences, readers begin to reflect on the social ecosystems that lead to the distortion and aberration of human nature.

3. The Metaphor of Virtue

As an outstanding representative of Aestheticism, Edgar Allan Poe's classic works combine exquisite imagination with meticulous analysis. His pursuit of beauty is intertwined with death, coexisting with terror and grotesque.

In his crime psychology novels, protagonists often wandering between dream and reality, reason and madness, accompanied by intense psychological turmoil and meticulous criminal planning. Under Poe's "unity of effect" theory and his "art for art's sake" creative philosophy, many believe Poe pursued beauty for the sake of beauty, terror for the sake of terror, and crime for the sake of crime, with his works having no connection to morality, justice, or law. However, Poe despised straightforward didacticism. The carefully crafted, implicit undercurrents are the true essence of Poe's artistry.

As a form of social consciousness, morality is abstract and often requires metaphors to be perceived and understood through the senses. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) argue that humans understand and recognize abstract concepts through concrete and familiar objects or concepts, a cognitive method known as metaphor [5].

In recent years, scholars at home and abroad have explored moral metaphors from aspects such as color, emotion, temperature, cleanliness, weight, and vertical space.

Combining these metaphorical representations, we can find the moral implications hidden in the colors, emotions, and temperature representations under Poe's ingenious design.

3.1. Color: The Black and White Metaphor

Color is a crucial domain through which humans perceive the world. In various cultures, the concepts of black and white are metaphorically linked to moral concepts: typically, when black and white colors are associated with moral categories, they metaphorically connect to the concepts of evil and virtue, respectively.

In many cultures, black signifies darkness and evil, while white symbolizes purity and holiness. Black cats are traditionally regarded as embodiments of darkness and evil. The novel, centered on the black cat, initially establishes a dark tone in the reader's mind. However, to enhance the story's dramatic tension and artistic effect, the black cat named Pluto (also the God of the Underworld) is endowed with qualities of beauty and goodness: for years, it accompanies the protagonist, dispelling his inner loneliness and bringing him joy. This contradiction between

black and white also reflects the protagonist's internal conflict between reason and irrationality, morality and immorality, exacerbated by alcohol.

Furthermore, on the night the black cat was killed, a fire broke out, plunging the protagonist into despair. Fortunately, a "white" partition wall at the head of his bed remained standing, sparing him from injury. On this white wall was a faint figure of a gigantic cat with a rope around its neck. Here, the white wall clearly represents the forces of justice and morality, while the rope and the gallows-shaped white patch on the second black cat's chest accuse the immoral protagonist, foreshadowing the price he must pay for his descent into darkness and self-destruction.

3.2. Emotion: The Metaphor of Moral Emotions

The social intuitionist model posits that emotions are decisive factors in moral judgment, allowing for quicker assessments of events [6]. Emotions, as subjective experiences of individuals, accompany the process of moral cognition and judgment and are difficult to separate from the process of moral metaphor processing [7].

Moral emotions refer to the feelings individuals experience when evaluating their own or others' behaviors according to social norms or standards, which relate to personal or societal welfare. When behaviors violate social norms and harm others, individuals experience negative moral emotions such as guilt and shame. Conversely, when behaviors align with social norms and benefit others, individuals experience positive moral emotions such as pride and gratitude [8].

At the beginning of *The Black Cat*, the protagonist spoke to the reader in the tone of a guilty man, confessing that his evil behavior had always caused him dread, torment and horror. Later, as he became increasingly addicted to alcohol, he was progressively controlled by negative emotions such as irritability and moodiness. After gouging out the cat's eye, he felt fear and regret, and when he hung the cat, he was filled with agonizing guilt. The second black cat evoked fear in him, as the gallows-shaped white patch on its chest weighed heavily upon his heart, causing painful oppression. These descriptions of a series of negative moral emotions metaphorically reveal the protagonist's inner struggle between moral principles and evil impulses, simultaneously foreshadowing the psychological and legal punishments he would face for his crimes of cat torture and wife murder.

3.3. Temperature: The Metaphor of Warmth and Coldness

Temperature perception can influence moral judgment and behavior, and moral contexts can similarly affect temperature perception. Warmth can enhance feelings of closeness and cooperative behavior, especially under threat. Conversely, when individuals feel cold, they seek social warmth, and social warmth can reduce the sensation of physical cold. This indicates an intrinsic metaphorical connection between temperature perception and moral cognition [9].

In the text, the author does not directly describe the physical perception of environmental temperature. However, he presents the warmth and coldness of human interactions and society from different perspectives. Throughout the story, we find that human presence is minimal in this human society. In just a few instances, Poe depicts a cold society for the reader: at the beginning, the protagonist sought friendship and warmth from animals because he had been chilled by the hollow friendship and untrustworthiness, which marks the beginning of the story and the start of evil. After the fire, those indifferent onlookers, the notorious low-end tavern owner and the police as enforcers of punishment, none of them really had connection with him. Throughout the mundane and tumultuous life, no one offers friendship, comfort, or warmth. Though there are people in the world, few have close relationships with the protagonist. The coldness of society and the psychological chill evoke his need for warmth. Despite the presence of pets and a gentle and loving wife who brings some light and warmth to his life, these cannot

fulfill his needs for a happy and stable life, friendship, respect, and self-actualization. It seems he has nothing but the intense emotions and inner fire that burn within. Life's setbacks and interpersonal coldness interwoven with various factors make it difficult for reason to suppress the almost instinctual tendency toward evil behavior [10].

The narrative does not depict and extol beauty and virtue directly but rather presents moral significance inversely through ugliness and evil. Poe, using artistic techniques and through the exploration and presentation of the multifaceted nature of human beings, unveils a gloomy world where everything seems to be going wrong [11]. This reflects the modern individual's confusion, loneliness, anxiety, fear, struggle, and helplessness, and prophetically foresees the spiritual crisis that future society may face. Amidst the intense conflicts of good and evil, reason and madness in the novel, Poe elevates a horrifying psychological crime story to a contemplation of human nature and life through metaphor.

4. Conclusion

Edgar Allan Poe's short life was spent in an absurd world, yet he dared to reveal the truth of life. He depicted crime to call for reason through its unusual horror; he portrayed the alienation of good people to expose social ills, reflect the psychology of individuals, and demonstrate humanistic concern. In *The Black Cat*, the intricate interplay between impulse and reason, and the continuous confrontation of good and evil, beauty and ugliness, aim to make people know that human nature and society are not simply a black-and-white dichotomy, but rather, contradiction and complexity are their essence.

This work contains profound philosophical reflections and explores themes such as human nature, morality, crime, and redemption, offering multiple insights to the reader. This novel is not merely a literary piece but a mirror, reflecting the existential and spiritual dilemmas faced by humanity in today's technologically advanced society, while also awakening attention to the more complex social ecosystem.

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