

Trauma in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat"

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze trauma in short story "The Black Cat" (1843) by Edgar Allan Poe. Trauma in a way can be described as a recollecting memory of unpleasant events that may harm the mind of the one who suffers it. Studies on trauma in Poe's story are mentioned in Journal *The Edgar Allan Poe Review* (2019) as part of its further study on Poe's works. To fill the gaps in the research on "The Black Cat", this study aims to analyze the construction of trauma in the story and its effect on the story in narrative form. The data is analyzed using textual analysis through close reading activity. The data then is interpreted using Caruth's (1996) model on analyzing trauma in literature. The results show that (1) trauma is suffered through narrator's attachment with the cat, (2) narrator's regret of his wrongful violence, (3) through the repeating appearance of the cat, the trauma is reconstructed in the story, and (4) through trauma the character suffer mental deteriorations. The research concludes that trauma patterns based on Caruth's (1996) study appear in the story and it may help further study narrative in trauma study.

Keywords: *Trauma, Edgar Allan Poe, Cathy Caruth, The Black Cat, Narrative*

INTRODUCTION

The opening paragraph of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat" introduces an unnamed narrator recounting his terrifying experience in his household. The narrator then tells his journey on how he becomes paranoid about seeing a black cat in his household. Throughout the story, the narrator shows a gradual deterioration as the cat appears. Though it seems that it is the cat's fault, it actually he who makes himself traumatized by the appearance of that black cat.

First published in 1843, "The Black Cat", like many of Poe's tales, relies on an emotionally unstable character in which it becomes fragile by dreadful external sources (Fisher, 2008). This may be Poe's strategies as mentioned by Fisher (p. 24) to create "terror that was rooted in the soul". Several studies have tried to analyse the decay of the narrator's mental. Hester and Segir (2014) argue that the portrait of the cat decays his mental and amplifies his psychopath trait. Contrasting that study, Elswick (2016) argues that while it seems the narrator has no problem in killing and violence, he does so in an attempt to avoid

madness due to the cat's affection toward him. It is undeniable that the narrator of the tale brings enigmatic focus to be analysed, not for his action but more on his state of mentality affected by the black cat. Again, the cat seems to play a major role in making the narrator "crazy" or "mad".

Related to the psychological research on Poe's tales, several studies also refer to the perspective of trauma. In the last issue of *The Edgar Allan Poe Review*, several of its members examined trauma in Poe's gothic tales (2019, p. 169). In Weinstock's article (2019), Poe's angelic dialogues are analysed to discuss trauma in Poe's works. Băniceru (2018) argues that Poe's gothic fictions are guises re-enactment of his traumatized childhood life. Grimstad (2019) and Kopsley (2019) also challenge the relation between Poe's works and his childhood life. While it seems that those studies revolve around trauma in Poe's stories, the focuses are Poe's life rather than the narratives itself.

Trauma in literary theory first developed in the 1990s and relied on Freudian theory. Drawing from Freudian psychoanalytic theory, Cathy

Caruth (1996) argues how trauma is drawn out by the unconscious recollection memory of someone to the traumatic past he experienced. These events may include violence that hurting the physical body or losing someone right in front of him/her. The events are so unpleasant that it needs to be forgotten; however, when accidentally or intentionally, the recollection of the memory occurs through anything which resembles the event, the trauma may haunt back. It is more like a repetition of what the person has experienced. Caruth says that trauma “seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available.” (p. 4). Caruth argues that the events in the past and the recollection of memory of that past are what make a person traumatized. In her analysis toward film *Hiroshima mon amour*, she analyzes the character dealing with trauma by rejecting the sight of Hiroshima as it is too painful and similar to her experience back in Never, France. By trying hard to

remember and attempting to forget such burdens the main character suffers the burden of her traumatic past life (pp. 25-33).

Using Caruth’s approach in trauma, Yamamoto (2017) analyses *Barefoot Gen* with trauma. He makes several notices on the repeating appearance of certain characters to indicate trauma for several of its characters. Yamamoto relates the experience of Hiroshima bombing in World War II as the cause of the character’s trauma even though he survives the incident. Branach-Kallas (2016) studies similar issue on World War I Novels. In her analysis, she argues that in the silence of the main protagonist in the novel *Zennor in Darkness* exists a struggling effort to fight traumatic experience to forget the loss of her love. Her study is pretty much similar to Caruth's analysis where the main character deals with trauma by loss. What appears to be similar in both studies is that both have the same issue in dealing with trauma. The main characters in both studies have different situations and solutions but both are affected by the traumatic past they want to forget. In

Yamamoto's study, it's the character's attitude which makes him rebellious toward the authority while in Branach-Kallas's study it is the instability of the main character's mental state that is affected by her trauma. It can be drawn from those studies that trauma affects and deals damage to the character's mental state or characterization.

As mentioned above, Poe's tales rely on decaying soul of the character in its narrative including the tale of "The Black Cat". The narrator in "The Black Cat" experiences it in a relatively long time. He experiences the haunt from the black cat and suffers from its existence which leads to an unfortunate event in his household. The cat plays a major role in the narrator's deteriorating state and the narrative. In an attempt to fill the gap of study on "The Black Cat", this research tries to broaden the view by analysing it in the perspective of trauma and how it affects the narrator in the tale. It may reveal a perspective yet to be seen in Poe's narratives. Thus, this study aims to see how the narrative in Poe's work may construct trauma in "The Black Cat" and how

effective it is in the story to affect the narrator's mental state or character.

Inspired by Caruth's research in trauma, the analysis on "The Black Cat" will focus on two following points: first, how the narrator experience trauma, and second, how that trauma is constructed in the story. Also, the study will try to reflect the impact of trauma on the character and how the construction of trauma in narrative may help understand trauma in general.

METHODOLOGY

To produce a thorough analysis of how the narrative constructs trauma and how it affects the narrator, this study uses a qualitative form with a textual analysis approach. This method is chosen since the findings will appear in the form of narratives rather than in the form of numbers. Textual analysis is an approach that collects information on how people make sense of the world (McKee, 2003). Furthermore, the data in this study will be analysed using qualitative analysis. The essential feature in qualitative analysis is that it treats text as the main focus (Kuckartz, 2013). By using

qualitative analysis, the function of the text may differ among other researchers depending on the goal of the study. The first possibility is a text serves a function as a medium to see how people behave in society, like how they behave or think. The second possibility is that a text serves as an outcome that has an abstract interpretation which means there is no absolute wrong or false interpretation. In this study, the story is viewed as the medium to learn how people behave, in this case, it is interpreted in the perspective of trauma theory. The method involves the process of presenting data, interpreting, and indicating the potential outcomes of the study.

The data of this study is a short story by Edgar Allan Poe titled "The Black Cat". The story begins with the character pronouncing his terrifying events in his household before facing his death. The narrator then tells his experience beginning with his satisfied collection of pets including a black cat named Pluto. Soon the narrator becomes aggressive and the animals are affected by his aggression. One night, in a drunken state, the narrator

stabs the cat's eye, damaging it permanently. In the horror of the appearance of the cat, the narrator grows ill toward it. In his final disgust, the narrator hangs the cat and later that night, his house is burnt to the ground leaving a single wall with the portrait of a hung cat on it. Not long after that, the narrator adopts a similar cat with Pluto in his redemption. However, the look on the cat makes the character hates it. The cat also acts similarly like his previous cat. One day, the cat makes the narrator stumbles on a stair which enrages his already-fuelled-hatred toward the cat. He swings an axe to kill it but it landed on his wife instead. He hides the body in the wall but soon it is found along with a cat on top of the body. This concludes the story and explains why the narrator at the beginning of the story facing a death sentence.

The short story is chosen for its interesting relation between the narrator and the cat. On the surface, the narrator likely has some mental problems; however, when seeing it thoroughly the theme trauma may be the major theme in the short story. The cat affects the narrator's mental health

and probably causes a traumatic experience for the narrator which affects his mental state.

The data in this study will be collected by using two steps. The first step is doing a close reading activity. The data comes in the form of narrative, so close reading is important for the researcher to grasp the message of the story precisely. The second step is highlighting the important events that indicate the trauma of the narrator. The important events that serve as textual evidence related to trauma will be focused on the plot, characters, and settings. Highlighting the important plot, characters, and settings help the researcher collect the data and organize the findings.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Attachment and Regret

From the beginning of the story, the narrator states his burdened soul from the events in his household. In his word, "these events have terrified—have tortured—have destroyed" (p. 3) the narrator. The theme of trauma has been represented in the story by the terrified, tortured narrator. In Caruth's argument, "trauma is understood as a

wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind" (p. 3). It is already shown how the narrator is wounded mentally by the events. The causes and how he copes up the trauma are important in the narrative to see how trauma plays a major role in the tale. The research found that it is through attachment and regret that the narrator experience trauma.

The attachment toward the cat plays a major role in the narrator's suffering from trauma. The cat is his favourite pet among other pets. The attachment of the narrator to the cat is important in his later regret for his action and its affection is evident in the text:

**"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."** (p. 4)

The attachment of the cat toward the narrator is also a major event in the story. The cat's behaviour, like following him around, is the cause of the narrator's rage later in the story. In Caruth's analysis (1996) of film

Hiroshima mon amour, the major cause of the trauma is the loss of the main character's lover. It shows that the loss of something attached to the character may cause trauma. In this case, the source attachment of the narrator is the cat.

The narrator has a moody trait and his worsening-ill-tempered toward the animal makes Pluto also feel irritated toward the character. This makes the narrator plucks one of the cat's eyes while he is drunk. This action makes the character regret what he has done to the cat.

“When reason returned with the morning ... I experienced a sentiment **half of horror, half of remorse**, for the crime of which **I had been guilty**” (p. 5)

The expression of remorse and horror of what he has done shows that he regrets his action. The act not only damages the cat but also the mind of the narrator.

The damaged cat day by day avoids the narrator, terrified. It makes the narrator feels grieved; however, soon that grieved turns to dislike as the narrator thinks that the cat once loved him and now hates him (p. 5). Later on,

as the cat is hung on a tree by the narrator, the signs of attachment and how he suffers from the loss of love by the cat are shown.

“One morning, in cold blood, I slipped a noose about its 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 offence;**” (p. 6)

In the act of horrific violence toward the cat, the narrator burst out his feeling and justifies his action as a result of losing the cat's attachment. The cat once loved him and now it moves away from him. The attachment is still there but he can't keep up with losing the attachment and turns to violence.

This act, however, is a mistake, for after months of losing his cat and his house he finally admits that he needs the cat.

“For months I could not rid myself of the phantasm of the cat; ... I went so far as to regret the loss of the animal, and to look about me, 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." (pp. 7-8)

The text shows how the narrator still feels attached to the cat. It is shown in his statement that he "could not rid" himself the picture of the cat. It is the attachment of the cat that furthermore doubles his regret. Moreover, it is also "haunt" him which in some way becomes a habit. This passage shows how he needs the existence of the cat. It indicates that another similar cat may lift the burden of his experience.

His regret indicates his attempt to cope up with his trauma of losing an attachment that is the cat. In Caruth's (pp. 27-30) analysis, the feeling of regret is shown through the betrayal of the main character's feeling toward his lover. Caruth shows how regret helps her lift the burden of traumatic past. In "The Black Cat", the regret comes when the narrator admits that he needs the cat to simply remove the feeling of losing attachment that is the source of his trauma.

The Repeating Cat

Caruth's (1996) analysis on Freud reconstructs the causal of traumatic experience. She suggests that story in

narrative form is rather reconstructing traumatic memory rather than the cause of it. In this sense, any narrative telling that stimulates memory to recollect events from a traumatic past may cause harm to someone's mind. The cause is rather varying. It may come from surviving deathly incident, seeing someone die, or any events that harm the mind not just the body. The key here is repeating/recollecting memory of traumatic events, by then, trauma is experienced. In this analysis, it is found the appearance of the cat ignites the narrator's memory of his woeful act toward the cat.

The cat is mentioned early at the beginning of the story and it remained the focus of the story. At first, the cat is being loved by the narrator, personally feed it and caress it. However, soon after his aggression increase day by day with the influence of alcohol, he begins maltreating the cat. As mentioned in the previous section, his violent act toward the cat harms his mind as it makes the cat lose its attachment toward the narrator. It is shown further in the text how the appearance of the cat causes harm to his mental state. The damaged eye of

the cat gives “a frightful appearance” (p. 5) as the narrator describes it.

Further evidence in the text shows how the appearance of the cat recollects his trauma memory of the cat. In one moment where he tries to find the causal of his burnt house, many people crowded at a single wall shouting word "strange!", "singular!". The narrator then examines it himself only to find a portrait of a hung cat in the burnt wall.

“I approached and saw, as if graven in *bas-relief* upon the white surface, the figure of a gigantic *cat*. The impression was given with an accuracy truly marvellous. There was a rope about the animal’s neck.

When I first beheld this apparition—for I could scarcely regard it as less—**my wonder and my terror were extreme.**” (p. 7)

In addition to his remark of the portrait for its “extreme apparition”, he recollects the memory when he was awoken by the fire in the next passage. His reasoning and remembrance of his wrongful act to the cat.

“But at length reflection came to my aid. The cat, I remembered, had been hung in a garden adjacent to the house. ... **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 portraiture as I saw it.” (p. 7)

The portrait of the cat in the wall indicates his recollection of his actions toward the cat. Furthermore, other fallen walls have been subjected as the fault of his "cruelty", hinting further expression of his regret for the fallen of his house turn him into despair (p. 6). This event also haunts the narrator as he “could not rid myself of the phantasm of the cat” (p. 8).

Pluto, the black cat, and the narrator’s act to him further increase his trauma experience even when the cat has already died. He meets a similar black cat when he is in his usual 'den', drinking. The cat, though similar, has a white fur in its breast and the first time he sees it, there is nothing peculiar. The narrator decides to take it home and soon it is domesticated well, even becoming his wife’s favourite. For the narrator, it is a terrible experience.

“For my own part, I soon found a dislike to it arising

within me. This was just the reverse of what I had anticipated; but—I know not how or why it was—its evident fondness for myself rather disgusted and annoyed me. 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, preventing 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.” (p. 9)

The cat's appearance re-enacts his memory of Pluto, the previous cat. It is shown how he attempts to harm the cat but due to his shame feeling, he avoids to do so. The narrator's explicit description of his feeling toward the cat shows how he is troubled by the appearance of the cat. The word

"disgusted", "annoyed" appear frequently. Eventually, those feelings turn into "bitterness of hatred". In addition to that, the narrator also mentions how he avoids the cat out of feeling "ashamed". This is evidence that shows the cat makes him recollect the memory of his former deed to the cat, shaming him which in a sense traumatized him.

What is interesting then, while the hatred of the narrator grows, the cat's affection also grows toward the narrator. This further makes the narrator's recollection of his terrible act frequent. The narrator remarks how the cat's behaviour "would be difficult to make the reader comprehend" (p. 9), indicating how he is infuriated by the cat's affection. He could've done the cat harm but again he remembrance of "the memory of his former crime" avoids him to do so. Even he says that it is mainly because of "absolute *dread*" of the cat (which he refers to as 'beast'), yet he doesn't know why.

“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 one of the merest chimeras it would be possible to conceive.” (p. 10)

This text is proof that even the slightest appearance of the cat haunts him to the point that it terrified him. It is indicated that what he has done to the previous cat affect him so much to the point it also affects his feeling toward a similar cat. Caruth (1996) describes that the repetition of painful flashbacks is understood as an "inability of the mind to avoid an unpleasurable event" (p. 59). In a way, the narrator's inability to describe the dreadful of the cat is an indication that his mind in some way is wounded as the result of his traumatic experience with the cat.

His terrifying experience with the cat is further explored by the narrator in the next passage. The cat (either supernaturally or in the mind of the narrator) gradually change its physical features to resembles his previous cat. The narrator's description is rather proof enough how terrified he is with the cat; calling it "a ghastly

thing—of the GALLOWS!—oh, mournful and terrible engine of Horror and of Crime—of Agony and of Death!" (p. 10). The depiction of the cat that gives the narrator the chill of "horror" shows how the cat gradually terrorizing him every time it shows up to him. Even in his sleep the cat keeps bugging him and lets the narrator having a restless night and day.

In this sense, the repeating appearance of the cat haunts the narrator. As explained before in the previous finding, the cat's affection and its attachment loss toward the narrator traumatized him. The moment the narrator knows that Pluto loses his affection toward him can be seen as an unpleasant event and with the repeating appearance of the cat, he recollects that memory, suffering him more.

Decaying Soul

As Fisher has mentioned, Poe's identic tale relies on "the terrorize soul" of the narrator. In "The Black Cat", the case is similar. However, it is in the cause of his decaying soul is from his traumatic experience with the cat. At the beginning of the tale, the narrator claims that he is an animal lover, a trait

which he indicates as peculiar in his age (p. 3). In the aftermath of his traumatic experience with the cat, his mind begins to show decay.

“And then came, as if to my final and irrevocable overthrow, the spirit of PERVERSENESS. Of this spirit philosophy takes no account. ... This spirit of perverseness, I say, came to my final overthrow. It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself—to offer violence to its own nature—to do wrong for the wrong's sake only—that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute.” (pp. 5-6)

The passage happens right after he notices that Pluto avoids him in terror after he plucks Pluto's eye out. It shows how his trauma in losing affection and attachment of the cat starting to affect his soul. In the further traumatic experience by the appearance of the cat, he starting to give himself to evil thought where he even hates not just the cat but also his wife (p. 11).

In the final sequence of his unpleasurable event, he accidentally kills his wife after the cat's behaviours almost makes him fall from the stairs. He hides his wife's body in a stood wall. However, the police eventually find the body along with the cat on top of the body's head, frightening him. The end sequence of the story completes the unpleasant events he describes at the beginning of the story. It was the cat that traumatized him and it was the cat that makes him done terrible things to the cat, to his wife, and himself

Discussion

This article has been focused on trauma in Poe's "The Black Cat". The finding shows that the theme of trauma exists in the story. Relating to Caruth's (1996) analysis, trauma exists in the memory of an individual who suffers an unpleasant event in his life. In the finding, it is shown how the loss of affection can be identified as an unpleasant event for the narrator. The finding also shows he suffers trauma by regretting his woeful act to the cat. The reenactment memory of the cat is also constantly appearing by the narrator's encounter with the cat. Thus,

the cat represents trauma and in its repeating appearance reconstruct trauma for the narrator. Following up from that, this trauma gradually decays the narrator's already falling mental due to alcohol submitting himself to commit an evil act of crime. Those findings show a similar pattern with other studies related to trauma.

The similar pattern that appears in the finding to other trauma studies is the repeating appearance of the subject that reform the memory of trauma. Yamamoto's (2017) study on *Barefoot Gen* finds that the repeating appearance of surviving members in Hiroshima A-bomb makes certain characters suffer trauma. This 'repeating' appearance of a traumatic catalyst also is found in Lee's (2016) analysis of Amélie Nothomb's works. Lee finds that there is an act of trying to repeat trauma memory in the narrative. These "repeating" patterns somehow become an important element in analyzing trauma, especially in narrative storytelling. However, both studies show that the repeating pattern is used as a device toward its side character. The studies show that trauma in the narratives

serves only a relation of the story to real-life events rather than used as a device to drive the narration.

In the narrative form, the theme trauma has shown how effective it is in affecting the narrator's mental. In line with several studies on "The Black Cat", the focus is still on its character's mental state. Wells's (2016) analysis of novel *La isla y los demonios* explores the theme of trauma in the form of love. The study finds that "being in love" is a form of emotional trauma and shows how it affects the main character's psyche. The study has shown how trauma may damage a character's mind. This is similar to the finding in "The Black Cat" where the narrator's suffering of trauma affects his mental health which soon drives him mad.

CONCLUSION

The theme of trauma in narrative storytelling may vary in terms of its pattern. The cause and the effect may differ from stories to stories. However, the analysis of the story shows similarities to several studies regarding trauma in literature. It shows

how the main character suffers from trauma and how he/she deals with it. The focus in trauma study based on Caruth's analysis is still on its reconstruction of trauma through a reenactment of unpleasant memory. This indicates that trauma in narrative relies on the element of reforming memory of unpleasant experiences.

In terms of trauma research, Băniceru (2019) has stated that the reenactment of trauma experience is one of the ways in an attempt to heal trauma. This is also what Caruth (1995) has challenged in trauma research that it is about how to heal suffering and how to understand the suffering. Furthermore, Băniceru (2019) also argues that the reenactment of trauma in Poe's stories may be an attempt for Poe to relieve his traumatic childhood. This article, however, doesn't concern about that topic.

The limitation of the article relies only on the text to help to understand the theme of trauma in narrative. Unlike other studies in trauma which brings a wider perspective on how narrative story links to the author. However, Caruth

(1996) has said that trauma may be transmitted to people who don't exactly experience a specific event like the ones who experience it. This article shows how trauma patterns may exist in the narrative form which can be related to some people.

Finally, this study has shown how trauma may be experienced in a simple thing such as cat/animal. However, future research may be needed to understand how trauma themes in narrative form may help to understand better about the suffering in trauma as it is what has been challenged by Caruth in trauma studies.

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