

## The Decadentism in the Symbols of *The Black Cat*

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### Abstract

Adgar Allan Poe, as a pioneer of propelling the development of symbolism, a literature ideological trend prevailing in the early 20th century, has always been a popular study object in the literary world. Throughout his whole life, he created numerous literary works in which he took advantage of symbolism to achieve certain writing purposes by means of symbols with different connotation, among which *The Black Cat* is considered as the one characterized by its impressive symbols. In order to have a better perception of the connotation hidden behind these symbols and the reasons accounting for the usage of them, this paper gives emphasis to the decadentism in the four eye-catching symbols of this short story which carry disparate meanings.

### Keywords

Literary symbols; Original symbols; *The Black Cat*; Decadentism; Gothic short story.

### 1. Introduction

Simply defined, a literary symbol is something that stands for something else, or in other words, something beyond its literary meaning. It can be any word, object, action, character or even an event that embodies a wide range of additional meaning and significance[1]. According to Tindall who specialized in studying this terminology in his book, "The literary symbol is an analogy for something unstated, consists of an articulation of verbal elements that, going beyond reference and the limits of discourse, embodies and offers a complex of feeling and thought"[2].

Literary symbols can be classified into two broad types: the conventional ones and the original ones. Certain symbols become conventional symbols as they possess widely accepted and relatively fixed symbolic meaning, for instance, the moon symbolizes a feeling of nostalgia; spring symbolizes life, and winter death; roses symbolizes heartfelt love. There is no denying that these conventional symbols are easy to recognize. However, writers often create their own symbols in the course of writing with the intention of conveying certain specific meanings. These symbols acquire their connotations not only from the qualities which are embedded in themselves but also from the way in which they are used in a given work or context[1].

As for Decadentism, it originates from the Latin word *decadentia*. In the second half of the 19th century, it was a reflection of the depression and hesitation caused by the European bourgeois intellectuals' dissatisfaction with the society and their inability to resist. It was first expressed in the works of French poet Baudelaire and symbolist Mallarmé, so later generations often regard symbolism and decadence as one[3].

In the light of that there are several original symbols which are worth further studying and full of the elements of Decadentism in *The Black Cat*, including the protagonist's wife, a cat called Pluto and another cat which is quite similar to Pluto in appearance and the eyes of the two black cats, this paper will perform in-depth analysis concerning them from the perspective of their connotation and the roles they play respectively and illustrate the elements about Decadentism

one by one. For better understanding, the necessary background information concerning Adgar Allan Poe and *The Black Cat* will also be included in this paper.

## 2. Adgar Allan Poe and *The Black Cat*

### 2.1. Adgar Allan Poe

*The Black Cat* is a well-known short story written by Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), an American novelist, poet and literary critic who played a big role in the American Romantic Movement. Hailed as one of the three titans of American horror novelists, Edgar Allan Poe is noted for his mysterious and macabre tales. What's more, he even exerts a profound influence on American literature on account of that he is not only considered as the inventor of the detective fiction, but also credited with making contributions to science fiction, an emerging literary genre[4]. In terms of his writing theories, there are two principal ones. The first one is his writing theory concerning short story, which refers to that he attaches great importance to the brevity and clarity of a short story. To be more exact, from his perspective, a short story is supposed to be read at one setting with no excessive words that have nothing to do with the pre-established design of it and all the plots should be designed potent and logic enough. As for his theory about poetry, he underscores the succinctness, aesthetic, rhythm, metrical flow and the purity in a poem rather than a poem's function of moralization. Love, beauty, death, terror, neurotic disorder and negative thought of science are the themes Edgar Allan Poe always depicts in his works.

### 2.2. *The Black Cat*

*The Black Cat* was created by Edgar Allan Poe in the 1840s in America. At that time, with the development of Industrial Revolution, the economic disparity between the South and the North became growingly bigger, directly leading to the outbreak of the Civil War. What came with it were the increasingly turbulent society and numerous irreconcilable social contradictions, thus a large number of writers generated a sense of hatred for the capitalist civilization of the society, resulting in a pervasive spiritual crisis. They were overwhelmed with a pessimistic and world-weary mood. It was during this period of time that the Decadentism, a school of literature which advocates the writers to seek for the creative inspiration from morbid or abnormal human emotions and anything else related to death and terror. In *The Black Cat*, the protagonist was once a tender and kind pet-lover who raised many pets with his wife, among which a large and beautiful black cat named Pluto was his favorite, however, he gouged out the cat's eye and hung it to death, killed another cat which resembled Pluto and even his wife after he became pathological for his addiction to alcohol, which apparently displays the typical writing style of Decadentism at that time.

In the light of that Edgar Allan Poe excels in creating original symbols which carry multiple connotative meanings in his works and there are countless elements of Decadentism involved in the words utilized to shape these symbols, this paper will perform in-depth analysis concerning the main symbols involved in *The Black Cat* by going into details about their connotation, the roles they play and the elements of Decadentism included.

## 3. The Decadentism in the Symbols

### 3.1. The First Cat Pluto

According to the descriptive words in the opening part of the short story, it is by no means difficult to generalize the features of Pluto: Pluto is a remarkably beautiful, sagacious and docile black cat that can give pleasure to the protagonist and his wife. There is no denying that there is a big difference between Pluto and the black cat that is doomed to herald misfortune. Although there is distinction between Pluto and the conventional image of black cat, on thinking

of that Pluto is also the name of a god in Roman mythology who embodies the viciousness and death, the majority of readers will still have a sense of uneasiness that something imminent will happen under the influence of inertial thinking. Therefore, the black cat Pluto, first of all, symbolizes a paradox that possesses both the good and evil quality, which can not only pique readers' interest to explore the destiny of it, but also draw the foreshadowing of Pluto's conversion.

What's more, the black cat Pluto also stands for a person's sin which is destined to incur a series of irreversible consequences. To be more exact, it is the protagonist's brutal and inhumane behavior of hurting the poor Pluto, for instance, cutting out one of Pluto's eyes merely because of his misconception that Pluto was trying to stay out of his way when he was as drunk as a sow and hanging Pluto to death that directly led to Pluto's series of "retaliatory acts", which include setting a sudden fire engulfing the house and then transforming into another cat that is almost identical with itself for further stimulating the protagonist and exposing all the crimes the protagonist has committed by letting out a piteous and horrible cry to lead the police to find out the place where the protagonist buried his wife's body. Thus, in this aspect, except for making the plot more unexpected, horrific and grotesque, pandering to the readers' need of reading a Gothic short story, the sufferings of Pluto the leading symbol in the short story, can also tell people a profound truth that "harm set, harm get".

The classic descriptive objects of Decadentism in a literary work are the dead or moribund, the horrid, the ugly or the mysterious ones. Pluto, by and large, still symbolized a terrific creature which can incur doom in terms of its traditional meaning, naturally making it a typical descriptive object of Decadentism.

Considering that what is advanced by decadents is that the writers should be bold enough to break the fetter of ingrained aesthetic conception of literary tradition and disclose the dark side of the society and the ugliness in the world[5]. In *The Black Cat*, Pluto, a docile animal who has once brought great happiness to the protagonist, was killed by his beloved master, which demonstrates that even the good things may be hurt without any reason. In this sense, Pluto, as a symbol, is used to directly reveal the ugly side of human nature, undoubtedly showing the elements of Decadentism.

Besides, there was once a prevailing trend that the advocates of Decadentism began to express their dissatisfaction with American society with the help of abstract anti-traditional means of expression in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when *The Black Cat* was created: With economy and society developing by leaps and bounds, the inflation of population and the progress of urbanization made it ineluctable for many people to change their past living style. Those who were hurried to give up the farming life in rural areas swarmed into the cities and ended up falling victim to cunning cheaters and vile merchants. Also, there were a large number of unemployed people in cities who didn't have competitive working skills and capacity, leading to social miscellaneous problems like poverty, vagrancy and crime. By contrast, the bourgeois were relishing the cosy and extravagant life. The society and the people there have changed so much that almost no one could stop and recall the good memories about the society and the people[6]. In *The Black Cat*, Poe actually makes the most of Pluto the symbol to express his dissatisfaction with the society. To be more exact, Pluto, is compared to the marvelous social scene before Capitalism stepped into the stage of monopoly. The things the protagonist has done to Pluto is equivalent to the ignominious things the bourgeois in American society have done to American people. Poe dexterously expressed his dissatisfaction with the society and resentment towards the bourgeois by designing a plot that the protagonist eventually took the consequence of his crimes. Thus, the creation of Pluto an original symbol echos the trend of Decadentism at that time.

### 3.2. The Second Cat

As mentioned before, it is no exaggeration to say that the second cat is the splitting image of Pluto since the only difference between them lies in that there is an indefinite splotch of white covering nearly the whole region of the second cat's breast which looks like the gallows. Hence, having found the similarities between the cat he brought home and Pluto, the protagonist holds a complicated attitude towards it.

On the one hand, the protagonist likes the submissive posture of the cat that looks like Pluto on account of that it appeases him to a large extent after he saw the appalling image of a cat on the white wall and suffered from an unexpected fire (All of these things seems to be the prelude of Pluto's revenge) and thus generates an illusion that Pluto has forgiven him and everything will go like before.

On the other hand, on thinking of his former deeds of cruelty, he feels a certain sense of shame and even absolute dread. With the passing of time, he found that the outline of the splotch has turned into the one of gallows, a ghastly thing that has something to do with death and agony, making him have nightmares constantly. Apart from this splotch, it is, to all intents and purposes, the yawning gap between the protagonist himself and the cat resembling Pluto in terms of the distinct way they adopted to treat each other that stimulate the protagonist to convert into a dye-in-the-wood morbid person who is totally indifferent to the so-called humanity since he came to realize a naked truth that he has become such a cold-blooded person that even a brutal beast is far more humane than him, which is also the dominant reason why the protagonist killed his wife with a rage who defended the cat when he was about to poleaxe the cat to death.

Considering that the splotch whose shape is similar to the gallows a device utilized to punish the guilt man and that the protagonist is indeed about to be sanctioned by the law, the appearance of this cat, to some degree, symbolizes the the trial of the protagonist's crime.

The highly similarity between the second cat and Pluto makes it quite natural for the majority of readers to suspect that Pluto was revived and became the second cat for revenge, which adds to the novelty and horror of the short story. Besides, once the readers perceive the connotative meaning carried by the second cat, namely, the trial on the protagonist's crime, the ending of the short story will unfold in front of them in this kind of ingenious way since the connotation hidden behind the second cat is actually a clue which implies that the protagonist is doomed to pay the price for the brutal acts that he has done.

On the basis of the words above, Poe's purpose of creating the second cat lies in that it can be the media of avenging on the protagonist as the substitute of Pluto, which implicates that Pluto didn't put down its hatred for its protagonist easily. Both avenge and hatred are the preferred themes in Decadentism. So, from the reason why Poe created this symbol, the obvious elements about Decadentism can be founded in a flash.

According to Baudelaire, the representative of Decadentism, Decadentism reflected the theory of beauty as relation, which refers to that there is a correlation between beauty and subjectivity instead of objectivity. What really counts in the course of acquiring the sense of beauty is the subjects' subtle sense toward the object which can evokes the sense of beauty instead of the object itself, not to mention its beautiful nature or ugly nature. Usually, all the things that occur in the literary works reflecting Decadentism are prone to be ugly in nature, which is aimed to create a kind of sensory stimuli to the readers and trigger a subtle sense[5]. Without doubt, this opinion is contradictory to the one that held by the traditional one in literary works. In these literary works which follow the traditional theory of writing, all the things, especially the ending, are inclined to be happy, good and desirable, for instance, the ending of a classic novel *Wuthering Heights* displays that the hared will disappear with the action of love and salvation. However, in *The Black Cat*, the ending that the presence and retaliation of the second cat which

eventually leads to the exposure of the protagonist's crimes is totally different from the happy ending, coinciding with the ideas of Decadentism.

### 3.3. The Eyes of the Two Black Cats

In Poe's literary works, eyes is indeed a ubiquitous symbol, especially in another short story called *The Tell-tale Heart*. In *The Black Cat*, Poe mentioned the eyes of the two black cats for many times. As follows, a further explanation about the appearance of this kind of symbol will be displayed.

For the first time, the protagonist gorged one eye of Pluto after heavy drinking, which implies that the demon hidden behind the protagonist can not be festered any more with the action of alcohol. It also lays a foundation for the later series of ruthless acts he has done to another cat and his wife, giving readers a kind of cue to have a reasonable guess about the following plots. Thus, the eye of Pluto, to some extent, symbolizes a Pandora's box with ills of humanity. Once the protagonist gorged this eye, the ills in the box swarmed in no time.

After the protagonist adopted the second cat, he was too frightened to look at its eye since the similarity between Pluto and this cat constantly reminded him of the previous crime he committed. It makes the eye of the second cat tantamount to a symbol representing the condemnation and punishment of the protagonist's evil conscience. Therefore, this symbol functions as the catalyst of the breakdown of his psychological defenses which directly leads to the death of the cat. At that time, the dark side of the protagonist was totally transpired and a horrid feeling of excitement brought by doing inhumane acts even welled in him and he was totally out of control.

At the end of this story, when the police found the body of the protagonist's wife, the second cat was glazing at the protagonist with its sole eye. At that moment, the protagonist was extremely frightened and he was eventually dragged into the real world where there is law and code of morality to restrict the behavior of human beings. The sole eye of this cat symbolizes the trial of law and code of morality, subliming the theme of this short but educational story.

Decadentism is famous for its painstaking attention to details and the sensory experience which people can naturally gain with the aid of the horrible atmosphere created in pertinent works. By doing so, people's primitive inner experience of thrill can be perfectly satisfied[7]. In *the Black Cat*, Poe puts a lot of work in depicting the eyes of these two cats via well-designed scenes. All the words concerning the eyes are detailed description, which creates an atmosphere of terror. "I took from my waistcoat-pocket a pen-knife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket!"[7] This sentence uses the prepositional phrase "from the socket" to show what a cruel means that the protagonist adopted to hurt this cat, which can definitely be regarded as a detail that let readers scared and get the heart-wrenching anguish. In addition, the socket of the lost eye was mentioned when Pluto appeared with a truly frightful appearance in face of the protagonist who did harm to it, evincing that the image of the protagonist is rather hideous in its mind. The most impressive scene about the eyes must be the one in the ending part: "Upon its head, with red extended mouth and solitary eye of fire, sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman." [7] The eye here is compared to fire, which denotes that Pluto and the second cat totally hit the ceiling and that the protagonist is doomed to pay the price for his monstrous crimes in this horrid scene, bringing visual and psychological impact to readers.

### 3.4. The Protagonist's Wife

When it comes to a symbol, what comes to people's mind may be certain objects, settings, events that convey a special meaning beyond their literal meanings. However, the characters



involved in the literary works can also become the symbols. In *The Black Cat*, the protagonist's wife can be considered as a symbol that also plays a crucial role in this short story.

Based on the content of this short story, a safe conclusion can be made that the protagonist's wife displays her good qualities in human nature from the beginning to the end. She is a tender, kind and warmhearted pet-lover. She showed great sympathy for the second cat and saved this cat at the price of her own life as she has a strong sense of morality and she can distinguish between right and wrong. Without doubt, the image of the protagonist's wife contrasts starkly with that of the protagonist. Nevertheless, regarding that the protagonist and his wife were once the birds of a feather, the protagonist's wife, in fact, embodies the bright or idealized side of the protagonist[8].

By comparing the protagonist with his wife, readers can have a better understanding of both of the characters. Except for this, the death of the protagonist's wife propels the development of the plots and rationalizes the following plots owing to the fact that it was the disappearance of his wife that brought the police into notice and let them discover the protagonist's crime by finding out the decayed corpse of his wife.

In Decadentism, disclosing the ugliness in the world is not the only one purpose. Baudelaire once put forward a viewpoint that these ugly objects possess both the characteristics of authenticity and richness. Moreover, he presented that the vices themselves are seductive; we should depict it as what it is like and it always comes with moral diseases and pains that also needs depicting; we should research all the pains as doctors in hospital. People can directly face these vices which reflect the weakness in humanity in related literary works. The existence of vices in these literary works have special aesthetic value and moral richness that can cover the shortage of traditional moral outlook, having a positive impact on treating human's pains and depression[5]. In *The Black Cat*, the death of the protagonist's beloved wife indicates that the vices of the protagonist are thoroughly exposed and out of control. Only from this angle, what readers can feel is how ugly the human nature is and how vulnerable the man is when confronting his vices. However, the discovery of the dead body of the poor woman in the ending part, or in other words the discovery of the ironclad proof of the fragrant crime the protagonist committed enables readers to realize there is still hope for curing the sick society in which people, especially the bourgeoisie show the dark side of human nature without any sense of shame with the help of the harsh law, bringing solace to readers.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper puts emphasis on analyzing the four impressive symbols involved in Adgar Allan Poe's *The Black Cat* by means of mining the connotative meaning of them, figuring out the reasons why Poe created these symbols, or in other words, the functions of these original symbols and illustrating the elements of Decadentism step by step. Based on the explanation above, there is a sharp difference in the extended meaning carried by these four symbols: the black cat Pluto symbolizes a paradox that possesses both the good and evil quality and a person's sin which is destined to incur a series of irreversible consequences; the second cat that resembles Pluto symbolizes the the trial of the protagonist's crime; the eye of Pluto is a symbol of a pandora's box with ills of humanity; the eye of the second cat is not only a symbol representing the condemnation and punishment of the protagonist's evil conscience but also the avatar of the trial of law and code of morality; the protagonist's wife is the bright side of the protagonist.

However, all of these symbols have the function of portraying the image of disparate characters, propelling the development of the plots which have a strong bearing on the connotative meaning of these symbols and conveying something beyond the theme of this short story, such

as pinpointing the significance of a man's self-restriction, some rules a man must obey and the irretrievable consequences of doing something wrong and immoral.

In the second place, they all have obvious elements of Decadentism: Pluto functions as a typical descriptive object of Decadentism to reveal the dark side of human nature and express people's dissatisfaction with the society at that time; the second cat plays a big role in creating sensory stimuli and an unconventional ending which are advocated by Decadentism; the atmosphere of terror formed with the appearance of the eyes of the two black cats; the experience of the protagonist's wife displays the vices of human nature and the ending part about the protagonist's wife makes readers gradually realize the real society is not totally irredeemable, bringing comfort to the readers. It echoes a feature of Decadentism that leading people to find the existence of beauty by depicting ugliness or vices here instead of directly criticizing the sick society.

In a nutshell, the big hit of *The Black Cat* has an inextricable correlation with the four crucial symbols above on account of that all of them play a significant role in different aspects. No one can deny that Edgar Allan Poe is a master of creating all kinds of symbols to efficiently achieve different writing purposes in his works. Once the readers are willing to delve into the implied meaning of these well-designed symbols, they are quite likely to gain more than the better understanding of the characters, the plot, the theme and better reading experience. It is also in all probability for them to realize certain irrefutable truth after reading the experience of the protagonist and benefit a lot from it, such as the time-honored saying that goes, "harm set, harm get".

Thanks to Poe's great efforts of creating these four symbols, readers can also get a precious chance to evaluate Decadentism which is always considered as a good-for-nothing thing for its portrait of ugliness. By exploring the elements of Decadentism in these symbols, people are more likely to realize that the true purpose of portraying ugly things in Decadentism is not only expressing the dissatisfaction with the society but also creating novel reading experience and means of literary creation and encouraging people to be brave enough to acknowledge the existence of the ugliness and perceive them from various angles.

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