



A Battle with Demons

The life and stories of Edgar Allan Poe

Edgar Allan Poe is celebrated as the father of the detective story, a major horror writer and poet. But he was also a man torn by tragic circumstances¹. His life was as bleak² and dramatic as some of his works.

Tragic life story

Born in Boston in 1809, Edgar Poe had become an **orphan**³ by the time he was three years old. He was **taken in**⁴ by the wealthy Allan family and even took the surname of his **foster parents**⁵ as his own middle name. In 1827 he showed his literary talents when he published his first book of poems *Tamerlane and Other Poems* **at his own expense**⁶. Afterwards he continued publishing poems and short stories and soon became an editor of literary magazines in Baltimore, Philadelphia, and then in New York. In fact, Poe was one of the first American writers to try making a career out of writing alone. Sometimes he had trouble finding and keeping a job and **coped with**⁷ stress by drinking. In 1836 he married his 13-year-old cousin Virginia Clemm, who became his life-long inspiration. The character of a beautiful cousin reappears in his poetry and short stories. Her sudden death from tuberculosis at the age of 24 **reinforced**⁸ Poe's drinking habit.

Poe was one of the first professional American writers.

In October 1849 he was found **unconscious**⁹ on the street in Baltimore and died in hospital a few days later. Biographers speculate whether it was a result of his alcoholism, a murder or a suicide, but we'll never know.

Tales of horror, adventure and love

Throughout the 1830s and early 1840s a great variety of Poe's stories were published in magazines and later included in the collections *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque* (1840) and *The Black Cat and Other Stories* (1843). Besides Poe's **signature**¹⁰ horror stories such as "The Fall of the House of Usher" he also produced adventure stories such as "Manuscript Found in a Bottle", or a love story "Eleanora" and the first known detective story "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" with the French detective C. Auguste Dupin.

Poe's horror stories contain a lot of **supernatural elements**¹¹ and the line between reality and the fantastic is very thin. One of the most famous, "The Black Cat" (1845), is told from the point of view of a man who gradually loses his **sanity**¹² and commits a terrible crime. Poe was very much **preoccupied**¹³ with the state of the human mind in his works.

As for Poe's poetry, his most famous poem "The Raven" is a classic in American literature. It deals with the loss of a loved woman and death. Formally, it stands out because of its rhyme.

Jacy Meyer (USA)



The Black Cat

Read the excerpts from the story "The Black Cat" and try to answer the questions below. The story starts in prison where the narrator recounts his crime.

The narrator

I have always been a kind and loving person – everyone will tell you this. They will also tell you that I have always loved animals more than anything. When I was a little boy, my family always had many different animals round the house. As I grew up, I spent most of my time with them, giving them their food and cleaning them. I married when I was very young, and I was happy to find that my wife loved all of our animal friends as much as I did. We had all sorts of birds, goldfish, a fine dog and a cat.

The cat

Pluto – this was the cat's name – was my favourite. It was always I who gave him food, and he followed me everywhere. I often had to stop him from following me through the streets! For years, he and I lived happily together, the best of friends. But during those years I was slowly changing. It was the evil enemy of Man called Drink who was changing me. I was not the kind, loving person people knew before. I grew more and more selfish. I was often suddenly angry about unimportant things. I began to use bad language, most of all with my wife. I even hit her sometimes. And by that time, of course, I was doing horrible things to our animals. I hit all of them – but never Pluto.

The incident

I remember the night very well. I came home late, full of drink again. I could not understand why Pluto was not pleased to see me. The cat was staying away from me. My Pluto did not want to come near me! I caught him and picked him up, holding him strongly. He was afraid of me and bit my hand.

Suddenly, I was not myself any more. Someone else was in my body: someone evil, and mad with drink! I took my knife from my pocket, held the poor animal by his neck and cut out one of his eyes... Slowly the cat got better. Soon he felt no more pain... I knew he did not love me any more... I had to do it – I could not stop myself. I did it with a terrible sadness in my heart – because I knew it was evil. What did I do? I caught the cat and hung him by his neck from a tree until he was dead.



The appearance of the second cat

One night, as I sat in a dark and dirty drinking house, I noticed a black object on top of a cupboard, near some bottles of wine... I got up and went to see what it was. I put my hand up, touched and found that it was a black cat – a very large one, as large as Pluto too – in every way but one: Pluto did not have a white hair anywhere on his body; this cat had a large white shape on his front.

The excerpts were taken from the Penguin Reader, *The Black Cat and Other Stories*.

SMS competition

Find in the text what causes the change in the narrator's behaviour. The answer is one word.

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DISCUSS

- 1 What do you think about the narrator's relationships with people and animals?
- 2 What is the significance of the cat and its name Pluto?



The main character gradually goes more insane. Listen to the rest of the story on our website.

VOCABULARY

- 1 **circumstance** ['sə:kəmst(ə)ns] – okolnost
- 2 **bleak** [bli:k] – deprimující
- 3 **orphan** ['ɔ:f(ə)n] – sirotek
- 4 **to take in** – ujmout se
- 5 **foster parents** ['fɒstə] – pěstouni
- 6 **at his own expense** – na vlastní náklady
- 7 **to cope with** [kəʊp] – vyrovnávat se s
- 8 **to reinforce** [ri:'i:n'fɔ:s] – zesílit
- 9 **unconscious** [ʌn'kɒnʃəs] – v bezvědomí
- 10 **signature** – typický
- 11 **supernatural elements** – nadpřirozené prvky
- 12 **sanity** ['sænitɪ] – zdravá mysl
- 13 **to be preoccupied with sth** [pri:'ɒkjʊpaɪd] – zabývat se něčím