The following essay is an attempt at approaching Edgar Allen Poe’s short story “The Black Cat” from a psychoanalytical point of view.

A Psychoanalysis of Edgar Allan Poe’s Black Cat

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The morbid literary style of Edgar Allan Poe permeates the short story of the Black Cat. The absurd nature of the narrator’s character leaves the reader perplexed and disturbed by the illogical reasoning behind his behaviour. Using a psychoanalysis approach, we can examine the narrator’s character development in the story in regards to Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of human personalities: the id, the ego and the superego.

In short, the tale of the Black Cat is a confession of a complex murderer claiming to be a good person; a tale of transcendentalism. There is no doubt that the character portrays a level of intricacy behind his logic, yet his narration is unreliable in the sense that he descends into alcoholism. In context, this could be regarded as a reflection of Poe’s descent with alcohol in his later years.

The narrator in the text demands unconditional love from his wife and cat despite his inability to give and receive love. Even though he states at the beginning: “From my infancy, I was noted for the docility and humanity of my disposition”. Here, the narrator recollects his childhood memories of how he was once indulged by his parents with variety of pets which flourished his love for animals. However, this fondness for animals diminishes and the influence of his surrounding could be argued as the cause of this decline which has altered the narrator’s desires and attitudes. It is this alteration, that we see the id component of the narrator come to light.

According to Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, the id is the inherited, “primitive and instinctual component of personality”. In other words, id is the “dark, inaccessible part of our personality” that responds directly to the instincts. These instincts include the sexual instinct—the Eros, and the aggression instinct—the Thanatos. The id acts upon a pleasure principle in a selfish manner that simultaneously, does not comply with reality. (Freud, 1920) Instead, it engages with illogical and irrational side of the psyche which is inherently expressed through the narrator in the Black Cat, as he resorts to unnatural behaviours.

For instance, when the narrator came home intoxicated, Pluto is frightened by him and avoids him—much to the narrator’s annoyance as he states: “I seized him…the fury of the demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body’. Here, we can see the unconscious side of the narrator’s psyche being brought to light that conforms to Thanatos instinct. However, even though the narrator’s ego is aware that he does not recognise himself, he does not comprehend nor acknowledge his reasoning behind his impulsive and violent decisions. Instead, he accuses the ‘demon’ of possessing his soul as a justification for his abuse towards the cat. Of course, the narrator’s
intoxicated state does somewhat rationalise his violent behaviour; yet, his id acts upon the pleasure principle, with that pleasure being violence and the torture of animals.

Unlike the id, the ego is “that part of the id which has been modified by the direct influence of the external world” (Freud, 1933). In other words, the ego is the component of the personality that is responsible with dealing with the reality. This component is exemplified through the narrator’s hesitation to mistreat the second black cat as he states: “at such time, although I longed to destroy it with a blow, I was yet withheld from so doing, partly by a memory of a former crime”. The ego of the narrator has acknowledged his crime for killing the first black cat; however, there is a perversion in his actions as this guilt has quickly diminished along with his affection for second black cat. His id’s desires for pleasure has led the second black cat to the same tragic fate as Pluto.

The superego operates as a “moral conscience that incorporates the values of society” (Freud, 1933) and its main function is to control id’s impulses. This component can the punish through causing feelings of culpability if the ego gives into the id demands. The superego in this regard is motioned in the narrator’s psyche as the feelings of guilt from his first killing withholds him from hurting the second black cat. However, as the second black cat end up with a tragic fate; it is apparent that the narrator’s id and its urges for pleasurable satisfaction have surpassed the ego and the superego.

To summarize, the narrator’s id overruled the two other component of his personality: the ego and the superego. The narrator’s desires and demands needed to be attained and his id component was adamant that they were met regardless of his ways in doing so and whomever it hurt. It is clear that his id conforms to the pleasure principle as the narrator’s desire to hurt and torture animals increases pleasure with every attack and that alcohol ignited this perversion of events.

References:
Freud, S (1933) New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis

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