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The Descent Into Madness

In Edgar Allan Poe’s short story, “The Black Cat”, the narrator goes through psychological suffering when him and his wife get a few pets in the house. The narrator supposedly likes animals from a young age, but it changes then they get the pets in the house and the narrator can’t help but think about hurting the animals and especially the cat, after all the animals have been mistreated by him from before. The narrator’s wishful impulses eventually get the better of him and it causes him to hurt the cat and ultimately, kill it. His repressed emotions towards the cat are also brought into light when the narrator drinks alcohol. The alcohol catalyzes his descent into madness and makes him give into his desires that were locked away in his unconscious. Due to these psychological reasons, which are mainly analyzed deeper in Freud’s lectures, the narrator is forced to commit these horrible actions in the story. The wishful impulses and his repressed emotion and pleasures are the main reasons for his murders and reaction to these murders in the end of the story.

The narrator’s wishful impulses are one of the main reasons why he killed the black cat in the story. This desire to kill the cat was due to him finding pleasure in torturing animals and outside his mentality, this was due to the alcohol he was drinking. “One night, returning home, much intoxicated, from one of my haunts about town, I fancied that the cat avoided my presence” (Poe 7). The narrator being very drunk, made any excuse to take the cat and hurt it very badly, cutting out its eyeball and wounding the cat very badly. He indulged in his desire to hurt the cat by making the excuse of the cat not paying enough attention to him. These wishful impulses are explained by Freud as desires or wants that are in the mind and they are usually repressed. Most of the time, the person doesn’t really mean to do these things, but there is an emotion or experience in the unconscious mind that makes him/her very tempted to do that thing. “All of these experiences had involved the emergence of a wishful impulse which was in sharp contrast to the subject’s other wishes and which proved incompatible with the ethical and aesthetic standards of his personality” (Freud 2212). What Freud explains about wishful impulses is exactly what happens to the narrator. He finds great pleasure in torturing animals which is the wishful impulse, even if it doesn’t fit into his personality, or it isn’t really the type of person he is. The narrator mental state can no longer hold that impulse in the unconscious and ends up doing these horrible actions that embody his wishful impulses.

The narrator’s repressed emotions and past experiences cause him to commit these murders on both cats and in the process, his wife. Usually, the mind is able to repress the wishful impulses and stop the person from doing things that are deemed unacceptable in society. In the story, the narrator is an alcoholic, which removes that ability to keep his desires and pleasures repressed and tempts him to let his impulses out into the real world. When he hangs the first cat, that murder is repressed in his unconscious which is what temporarily prevents him from killing the second cat. But when the cat accidently bumps into him, making him almost fall, that impulse is let out from the conscious and causes him to finally go crazy and try to kill the cat. His wife is killed in the process which shows how far he has descended into insanity because of what he really desired. “The cat followed me down the steep stairs, and, nearly throwing me headlong, exasperated me to madness” (Poe 23). He completely loses control and the impulse has finally found its chance to escape the repression in the unconscious and manifest itself into reality. This phenomenon is explained by Freud when he describes the relationship between wishful impulses and their repression into the unconscious mind. “But the repressed wishful impulse continues to exist in the unconscious. It is on the look-out for an opportunity of being activated…” (Freud 2215). The impulse is always trying to get out into the conscious mind and are always waiting until the right moment to come out. This is what happened to the narrator when the cat bumps into him. This causes him to go into insanity, which also releases the wishful impulse from the unconscious. This eventually causes him to kill his wife with the axe and later finds out that when he buried his wife in the wall, he also buried the black cat with her without even realizing. It is at that moment that his wishful impulses and desires are finally met, but at the cost of his wife’s life and of two cats. His repressed emotions and experiences, along with his wishful impulses have all been let out into the real world.

The psychological phenomena discussed are the major reasons why the narrator committed these murders. His wishful impulses or desires were to torture the animals and his mind failed to keep them in a repressed state. This inability to keep them repressed in the unconscious mind is due to the alcohol that he would consume, making him weak in the opportunity to fulfill his desire. The cat only has to do one thing that bothers him, and the impulse finds its chance to escape into the conscious mind, making him commit these murders. Even though this may not be part of his personality, when the wishful impulses are released into the conscious mind, it makes it almost unbearable to resist not making them a reality. These are all explained by Freud’s lectures. The narrator’s actions were problems in his psychological state and the alcohol along with the cat’s actions made him fulfill all of the desires and impulses that were locked in his unconscious mind.

Works Cited

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