



Vol. 10, No. 1

CLRI February  
2023

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# Folkloric and Psychological Implications of Animal Characters in the Works of Edgar Allan Poe

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**Abstract:** While humanity has eternally been foregrounded as the primary subject of fiction, the place of non-human characters has not necessarily dwindled into oblivion. Time and again they have resurfaced, have made their presence felt in an assortment of ways, and have waged a war to exert their dominion over the intricate workings of the reader's consciousness. Their purpose in certain narratives, as this paper will attempt to elucidate, is two-fold. In that, while on the one hand, authors often employ these entities whose existence is rooted in the annals of folktales and legends, on the other their actual repercussions on any given text borders heavily on the domain of the psychological. In the course of such narratives these two strands---folkloric and psychological, merge inextricably as the non-human entity comes alive on the pages of literature with an almost preternatural vitality. In order to explicate this aspect of such characters, this paper will attempt to analyze certain works of Edgar Allan Poe from a folkloric and psychological perspective, works which bear testimony to the enduring lure of the supernatural that still remains in this modern world.

**Keywords:** Non-Human characters, folklore, psychology, consciousness.

## Introduction

For centuries the pages of literature have been silent witnesses to the burning wheel of fortune that govern the lives and destinies of its human subjects, shaping their fates

and foreordaining the trajectory of events that heralds the rise and fall of empires. Being perceptive onlookers of the general drama of human existence, they tend to anticipate the eventual fates that might befall the characters who are then left at the mercy of the erratic vagaries of authors and readers---omnipotent figures who are at liberty to initiate into the narrative their own set of interpretations, ideals and prejudices.

Such stability, balance and consistency of thought processes are, however, rendered inefficacious when in the presence of non-human characters, the reader loses both his bearing and a sense of foundation owing to the disincarnate and cryptic nature of those entities that inhabit the fringes of the human world as subtle echoes of the abstract and powerful forces that lurk in the dark, eternally beckoning with its shadowy arms the faint whispers of the otherworld.

It is this obvious abstruseness of their presence that imparts into the narrative, not just a sense of mystery and uncertainty, but also ensures that the story falls open to a multitude of disparate interpretations that challenge the conventionally accepted notions and ideals of both literature and human nature. For these entities are not to be found amidst the unceasing tumult of the human world, as more often than not these are creatures whose existence stand rooted in the lap of legends and lores, in the midst of some outlandish fable, lost to time and eternally entangled in the unchanging annals of traditions and myths.

## Animal Characters in Fiction

Non-human characters, particularly animals have always held a position of utmost importance within the scope of literature, primarily children's literature. From the vibrancy, color and animation of characters such as Bagheera, Baloo and Shere Khan in Kipling's timeless classic *The Jungle Book*, to the bewitching secrets of Aslan, Mr. Beaver and Reepicheep in Lewis' fantastic tales of adventure, magic and mystery in *The Chronicles of Narnia*, authors have time and again corroborated the essential indispensability of these non-human characters in conveying enduring human values. While on the one hand literature more often delves into the bizarre and wondrous aspects of these entities as reinforced by the quintessential inconceivability of talking animals or enchanted beasts such as the Cheshire Cat, the White Rabbit, Hedwig or Nagini, literary criticism has gone a step further in linking such characters with the cultural milieu of a number of societies. Integrated into the fabric of these non-human animalistic entities are to be found, not just archetypal categories of a variety of human characters, thereby mirroring in its own way, the nuances and subtleties of the human world, but also the very foundation of the plethora of folk traditions, lores and legends associated with a handful of these animals who dwell in the midst of humanity as muted residents who hold a sway over the so called superior human race in their own ferine ways.

In elucidating this and also whilst juxtaposing it with the folktales and superstitions associated with these animal

characters, I will be referring to two short stories and a poem by Edgar Allan Poe, namely---The Black Cat, Metzengerstein and The Raven.

## **The Black Cat**

The common strand that connects the aforementioned narratives is the foregrounded non-human entities' underlying relevance in the domain of folklore, superstition and mysticism. In this regard, the place of black cats in the overarching realm of superstitions and folk beliefs is particularly notorious since a multitude of legends, both good and bad, have time and again been associated with them, primarily the notion that such creatures are familiars of witches and demons or even in certain cases shape shifting witches themselves leaving misfortune and bad luck in their wake (thesprucepets.com). In Poe's story, the unnamed narrator's wife talks about this very association. Additionally, and perhaps more prominently, the narrator's infamous cat, named Pluto is named after the Greek god of the underworld Hades with his obvious relatedness with the dead and the spirit world. Furthermore, as Maria Bylund notes, both Pluto and his apparently resurrected counterpart bear similarities with the Norse god Odin who had not just blinded himself in one eye to gain the knowledge of the "depth", but had also hanged himself for nine days to attain "the wisdom of the occult", following which he was referred to as the "Lord of the Gallows" (Bylund 14, 15). Both the image of the gallows and the one eye are referred to at several points in Poe's narrative, which along with the use of the doppelganger motif, yet

another supposedly paranormal phenomenon bringing bad luck, sets up a pattern which reinstates over and over again, the ostensible sway of the supernatural in this "tale of mystery and the macabre."

But as in the case of all such beliefs "folkloristic, mythological or historical- serves in the first place to demonstrate the uniformity of psychic events in space and time", as Carl Jung had observed. Thus, while on the one hand the story may be assigned to the register of the supernatural, on the other it might also be interpreted as a purely psychological incident, especially given the fact that at some point or the other, owing to the unnamed narrator's unreliable musings, the reader becomes aware of how he projects the evil inherent in his character onto the faultless figure of the black cat, thereby setting in motion the series of lores and legends associated with such creatures. Consequently, the cat becomes symbolic of perversion of the narrator's temperament, a metaphoric mirror that reflects the two sides of his disposition--- the one repressed, purely undiluted evil side and the other he projects before the world, and it is not long afterwards that the two sides irrevocably merge in the climactic murder of his wife. In the course of these episodes, the narrator as he himself acknowledges, loses his "immortal soul", the only thing that distinguishes him from animals (Bylund 5), and metamorphoses into a brute, all the while his unreliable narration coercing the readers to identify those nefarious qualities that lie in him with the ominous figure of the black cat that looms large on the backdrop as an untameable personification of evil that clings onto the narrator, strips him

of his "soul" and ultimately drives him insane. Thus, the ending remains uncertain and the readers are left pondering whether or not the sinister figure of the black cat was merely an innocent victim of depraved humanity or whether it was a tangible manifestation of the curse of Bastet, the Egyptian cat goddess, the sole guardian of the underworld!

## **Metzengerstein**

In a similar vein, Poe's first published story "Metzengerstein" yet again deals with the motif of the transmigration of souls, known as metempsychosis, from the body of the old, enraged and vengeful Count Berlifitzing following his accidental death in a fire at his stables into the ominous figure of a phantasmal horse, a creature shrouded in the mysteries of the occult. Since time immemorial, horses have been a recurrent presence in myths and folk beliefs of a number of ancient cultures. From pagan tales of the Celtic goddess Epona and stories of the early western Slavic tribes using horses as tools of divination, these majestic creatures have made their way not just onto the hallowed pages of the Bible in the form of the portentous horsemen of the Apocalypse, but have also made a foray into the vast secrets of the tarot as the eldritch bearer of the Grim Reaper himself ([learnreligion.com](http://learnreligion.com)). Stories of resurrection or suicidal horses are thus not uncommon in folktales or legends. But as regards Poe's story, a suitable parallel from the realm of lores is the Scottish shape-shifting water spirit, Kelpie, which takes the form of a black horse and drags unsuspecting victims into the depths of some water body after it has lured them into touching their sticky coat, or

as Grace P Smith notes the story of the hellish horse Erion “which disappeared with its master Adrastos in a hill devoted to the chthonian powers” (Smith 358). Thus, right from the moment when the preternatural figure of the “unnatural” horse is introduced in Poe’s story, it becomes exceeding apparent that the “demon-like”, red-eyed horse, which continually “wore an energetic and human expression” (Poe 11), is an entity straight out of the domain of the dead, an otherworldly presence come to visit the “heartless, self-willed and impetuous” (Poe 5) Baron Metzengerstein from world of a faded tapestry which carried with it the faint whispers of “an ancient prophecy” that now stood on the brink of fulfilment. As the story progresses and the baron in the grip of an untold bewitchment eventually loses his mind in his obsessive affinity with the “fiery” human-like horse, the readers realize how by virtue of a trick of science or of sorcery, the supposedly discontent soul of old Count Berlifitzing has covertly passed into figure of the spectral horse which ultimately enacts its vengeance and fulfils the prophecy by plummeting headlong into infernal flames of the burning chateau, with the distraught baron as its ill-fated rider. Much like Poe’s other stories, the ambiguity with respect to the identity of the fiendish horse remains unexplained. Whether it was the avenging spirit of the dead baron, a demonic familiar or simply a distorted albeit tangible manifestation of the malice inherent in the Count’s nature still remains to be pondered upon by the reader.



## The Raven

Caught amidst the fathomless gyre of anguish and despair, with the unceasing tumult of his mind as his sole companion, the distressed narrator in Poe's "The Raven" hovers over the precincts of life and death as one whose soul is eternally fettered to the shadow haunted chamber where the phantoms of the past roam unshackled and free. Thus, it is only fitting that the one vising this frenzied being should be a most potent messenger from the otherworld, the "ancient" raven from the "saintly days of yore." The raven as a symbol and an entity from the spirit world is not uncommon in either literature or folklore. This forbidding bird almost always comes with a formidable reputation as being the mighty Celtic war gods who took the form of ravens in order to feast on the bodies of the dead, shape-shifting banshees, or prophets and witches in disguise ([hanfordreachwildlife.com](http://hanfordreachwildlife.com)). Needless to say, Poe's poem addresses almost all these cryptic aspects of this portentous bird, who in the poem is also the sole witness to the narrator's slow descent into the darkness of insanity, as he quietly sits and reads ancient books of "forgotten lore" by the dying hearth whilst the whispers of something ominous looms large on the backdrop. That the narrator looks upon the raven as some kind of a messenger bearing news of his "lost Lenore" is pretty apparent. And yet all his questions about his dead lover or his enfeebled hopes of finding her again are "purposefully self-deprecating" and only serves to exacerbate his deep sense of loss ([Wikipedia.org](http://Wikipedia.org)). Consequently, all his epithets about the raven being "a thing of evil" or a "prophet"

from the “Plutonic shores” sent by “the tempter” himself appears to lose some of its impact (Poe 68-74). Nonetheless, the time of the year, namely December when all evil forces are said to have full sway, together with the narrator’s description of the bird as a symbol of “mournful and never-ending remembrance” swiftly brings into focus the myth of the Norse god Odin and his two companion ravens--- Huginn, meaning “thought” and Muninn meaning “memory” (treesforlife.org), thus obliquely connecting the narrator’s tumultuous thoughts about his lost love and her memory which continues to linger in darkening recesses of his consciousness and cause him anguish. Thus, the poem itself appears to hover over this world and the next, as the raven ultimately becomes a timeless symbol of lost love as elucidated also in Ovid’s *Metamorphosis* where the formerly white raven cursed by Apollo for delivering a message of a lover’s unfaithfulness was damned to bear sable wings for all of eternity. By the end of Poe’s poem, it is no longer clear whether the narrator is awake or asleep or whether or not he has fallen headlong into the vast oblivion of death as the memory of lost Lenore much like the raven itself continues to haunt his immortal soul with its unceasing whispers of “Nevermore!”

## Conclusion

As is evident, the non-human character’s dominance in any kind of fiction almost always brings with it a certain sense of ambiguity, the faint tremors of some inexplicable mystery that precludes the certainty and assurance of any tangible resolution, so much so, that by the end of the tale the readers

are left with a baffling sense of uncertainty, as the story is made to go beyond the perceptible domain of the physical to an imperceptible realm of the supernatural where the habitual structures of meaning and interpretation falls apart. However, it is also worth mentioning that Poe's tales "of mystery and the macabre" carries this ambiguity further, in the sense that it is never entirely clear whether or not he consciously employs folktales and legends with a recognizable purpose in mind or if his animal characters are merely extensions of a quotidian human world. Nonetheless, his choice of specific non-human entities and their conspicuous presence in the domain of folklore seems to suggest otherwise.

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