

# DISCLOSING THE FIRST PERSON NARRATOR IN EDGAR ALLAN POE'S *THE BLACK CAT*

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## Abstract

This research discussed on point of view applied in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Black Cat*. It is a short story that Poe wrote using the first person narrator to tell it. This narrator needs to be explored the position, events of the story, and agenda which he hides. Qualitative research is applied to conduct this research. Edgar V. Roberts' writing on point of view is the guide in conducting this research. The researchers need to read and identify the point of view, position of the narrator, events, and hidden agenda. It also needs to interpret the data found in *The Black Cat* text. The data show the first person narrator of *The Black Cat* put him as the unreliable narrator. It is based on the position in physical, mental, social, and economic circumstances that make the readers, here the researchers disbelieve in his utterances. The short story depicts eighteen events which involve the narrator as the major mover, the subject, and the main character of the story. It can be called that the information is the first hand experience that he wrote in a letter in a cell jail a day before he gets death sentence. This information leads the readers that he needs to get sympathy from his letter's readers.

Keywords: *The Black Cat*, point of view, first person narrator, unreliable

## 1. Background to the Study

Short story is one of literary genre which is included in prose. It has its own characteristics which differ from other any kinds of prose. Short story only exposes one single incident that takes place in one setting. In telling the events, it needs a speaker that can be participant or non-participant in the events.

The person that tells the events in a literary work is called speaker or narrator. The speaker or narrator includes in point of view of story as an intrinsic element. Point of view refers to a work's mode of narration, comprising narrator, language, audience, and perceptions of events and characters, while opinions and beliefs are thoughts and ideas that may or may not have anything to do with narration (Robert: 2003:81). It will affect judgments for the readers, because speaker with various background and intention tells the events. Talking about point of view is similar to telling events or incidents in real life. The speaker can be the major participant of an action or she/he only witnesses the action.

Prose uses point of view to deliver the story. The point of view itself is categorized in three kinds; first-person speaker, second-person speaker, and third-person speaker. Each of them has its characteristics starting from the pronoun used in the text. Besides that, the speaker condition and position will influence how she/he delivers the story, so that hidden agenda will emerge from her/his way telling the story.

The agenda is not mentioned when speaker tells what happened. But, motif and opinion of the speaker will reveal what he/she achieves. They are delivered in narration. It

causes the readers believe or not believe to what the speaker tells about. Authors will use imply author to recount their stories. They can be first person that sometimes misleads the readers, so that the readers infer real author's voice. This often happens in the first person point of view. This uses first person speaker, I. There are some prose written using first person speaker, such as *First Confession* by Frank O'Connor, *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville, and *The Black Cat* by Edgar Allan Poe.

One of short story which causes readers curious is *The Black Cat* written by Edgar Allan Poe. This short story was published on August 19, 1843. Edgar Allan Poe is an American author who was born on January 19, 1809 in Boston, Massachusetts. He did not only write prose, but also poems. His first poem collection entitled *Tamerlane and Other Poems* was published in 1827. Poe also became the editor of *Southern Literary Messenger* in 1835. There are best known stories written by him such as *The Fall of The House of Usher*, *The Tell-Tale Heart*, *The Murders in The Rue Morgue*, and *The Raven*. Those stories made him known as the originator of both horror and detective fiction.

Poe uses first person point of view in *The Black Cat* to tell the events that happened to the main character. The main character is also the narrator of the story, but it is unnamed. *The Black Cat* tells about a man who changes his well-manner person into a cruel one. He and his wife raise a black cat named Pluto. He maltreats Pluto on its eyes. After he hangs the cat, his house gets fire. Another black cat with white spot on chest comes to him. One day, when he and his wife go to the cellar of their new house, the cat follows him. It causes him angry and grabs an axe to hit it. The wife stops it, but the axe gets into her brain. The man tries to hide the corpse. After fourth day, police comes to find his wife, and they find the corpse is walled up. Then, he is arrested and sent into the jail.

Edgar Allan Poe uses horror scene in his narration. He narrates the narrator's cruel deeds. When the narrator is in drunk, Poe recounts detail what the main character feels. It makes the readers thrilled and they distract the focus of the main character's position. Readers move their view into superstition power of the black cat. Then, it turns into the time when he kills his wife using an axe and cemented the wife on to the wall. The author creates the story mixing horror and crime.

## **2. Statements of the Problem**

Conducting this research, it needs to formulate the problems found relating to the first person point of view in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Black Cat*. The problems are:

1. What is the first person speaker position?
2. What events does the first person speaker experience?
3. What is the first person speaker's agenda to write a letter containing his experience?

## **3. Short Story**

Short story is one kind literary work included in prose. Short story is a fiction narrative which consists of 500 into 15.000 words. The intrinsic elements namely character and setting are limited in it. Usually, it only tells one single incident so that it is different from

novel. Today, short story is composed in writing so that it is different from the past. It emerged from oral storytelling tradition in 17<sup>th</sup> century.

#### **4. Point of View**

Prose has intrinsic elements which build the work so that it united. The elements cannot separate each other. One of intrinsic elements which has important role toward readers is point of view. Point of view refers to the speaker, narrator, persona, or voice created to tell stories, present arguments, and express attitudes and judgments (Roberts; 2003:78). Discussing point of view not only finds the speaker or narrator, it is also important to know the position of the speaker or narrator. Readers will depend on the narrator when they read the story.

Position and condition of the narrator or the speaker will affect point of view. The physical situation includes the relation of the narrator to the person told, participation in the events, and his/her privilege knowing the events, and the accuracy and completion his/her reports. Intellectual and emotional positions of the narrator or the speaker also influence the point of view. Position and condition create opinion and beliefs of the narrator or the speaker. It is better to reveal both so that we are going to his/her agenda telling the events.

Besides position and condition of the narrator or the speaker, tense also has important factor for the narrator and the speaker to perceive and report the events. Past tense indicates that the events happened in the past. In other hand, the present tense is also used to show principal time reference. Using this, the story is caused as a virtual drama revealed moment by moment. Mixing tenses can be found in some literary works.

Point of view can be recognized from the grammatical voice found in the works. The grammatical voice identify the category of the point of view divided into three kinds; first person point of view, second person point of view and third person point of view.

##### **4.1 Kinds of Point of View**

There are three kinds of point of view that refer to the speaker, narrator, or voice delivering the narrative. The kinds of it are indicated by grammatical voice used by the author. Subjective pronoun into possessive pronoun reflect person telling the events in narrative.

First person point of view, the author uses first person pronoun; I, me, my, and mine. The narrator or speaker can be named or unnamed. The narrator can be major participant, minor participant, or nonparticipating but identifiable speaker. Second person point of view, the readers will find second person pronoun in the texts. It uses 'you' to mention the narrator or speaker. There are some instances that can be categorized in second person speaker. For example, a physician tells his/her patient, a mother advises her daughter, and an angry man accuses a boy stealing his bike. These instances can be delivered in first person and second person point of views. Otherwise, some narrators use second person pronoun 'you' addressing the listener. Third person point of view, the author applies third person pronouns; he, she, it, and they in the works. This kind point of view has three variants; dramatic or objective, omniscient, and limited omniscient.

##### **4.2 First Person Narrator**

This narrator can be called as the most independent of the author. The author may give the narrator obvious identity or creates it mysteriously. Name, job, and other predicate can be shown to describe a narrator. On the other hand, an author creates him/her without name. The author sometimes does not give clear information about his/her narrator background.

Information comes from first person narrator are various. It depends on the position of the narrator himself/herself. There are five kinds of the information. First, first-hand experience comes from the narrator doing, saying, seeing, hearing, and thinking by himself/herself. Second, first-hand witness is information that witness observes others doing and saying. Third, second-hand testimony and hearsay is information that the narrator gets from others saying to them or communicating to them. Fourth, inferential information is that the narrator infers or deduces the information they found. Fifth, conjectural, imaginative, or intuitive information is guessing what a character or characters might think and act.

First person narrator is tested the reliability. This reliability can be determined from the narrator's position and ability, prejudices or self-interest, and judgment of his/her readers. As readers, we do not always trust to what the narrator tells. Sometimes, we found him/her lack of credibility from his/her information. So, a narrator can be either reliable or unreliable considering some factors mentioned before.

### **5.1 The Position of *The Black Cat*'s Narrator**

A narrator has important role in any stories to influence the readers' opinions. Narrator or speaker is a part of point of view that creates arguments and judgments. The position and interest of the narrator influence him/her conveying the story. It also happens to a short story entitled *The Black Cat* which the story is conveyed by a first person narrator. To make the discussion of the position of the narrator clear, it is important to know the story briefly.

*The Black Cat* written by Edgar Allan Poe tells about a married man who killed his wife in the cellar of his own house. The man wrote a letter in a jail that told his experience until the murder, a day before he got death sentence. At first, he told his childhood which was full of affection to pets until he got married and raised pets including a black cat, named Pluto. Ancient belief put a black cat in an unfortunate position. Society believes it is a bad luck for person meeting or having it. The man's wife believed in that notion, but he disbelieved in it. After years, the man changed in his temper, he became bad temper person. The wife and pets became his victims of his ill temper. Then, in one night when he was drunk he tortured Pluto by cutting one of its eyes. But, in the morning he regretted what he did. After the cat recovered, he hung it consciously in his garden. After that, he got his house burnt. The burn of his house caused him curious and he got to conclusion, he hung the black cat. Because of the burn he lost his property and he moved to a rent house.

In the rent house, he met another black cat, but it had white spot on its breast. He raised it and anticipated to ill use it, because he remembered his deed to Pluto. One day, he fixed some household errand in his old building cellar accompanied by his wife. The cat followed him when he went down stairs. It made him angry and lifted an axe to hit the cat, but it rested on his wife's head. The police knew the murder and sent him into a jail.

Edgar Allan Poe wrote *The Black Cat* applying first person point of view. Here, the story is conveyed directly to the readers by a man who killed his wife and is going to have death sentence. This story uses first person point of view that the narrator includes in the story. The indicator of first person point of view is using first person grammatical voice in the story. The first person subjective, objective, and possessive pronouns are found in the text from the first paragraph into the last paragraph.

The narrator of *The Black Cat* is the subject of every event in the story. In this short story, the narrator tells what he experiences. He reports what he did, heard, said, saw, and thought called first-hand experience. Here, the narrator also includes as the main character. Poe's *The Black Cat* tells about the man's experiences relating to the mysterious events in his house.

Edgar Allan Poe's narrator is unnamed. This narrator is mysterious. There is no information about his identity. Poe mentions that the narrator is a married man without children. He has some pets that he treats badly. Besides the narrator as the subject of the events, the focus of this story comes to his pet, a black cat which he gives name Pluto. This animal has important role in every event in the story. Every event the narrator experiences is related to black cat notion.

Not only physical position of the narrator can affect the narrative, social and mental circumstances also influence it. Social circumstance on black cat notion influences his argument. He puts the notion as the cause of incidents happened in the narrative. He feels frightened to the black cat "This dread was not exactly a dread of physical evil-and yet I should be at a loss how otherwise to define...that the terror and horror with which the animal inspired me...'Every atrocity happens because the black influences him to do. Although at first he stated disbelief in the notion which the wife believes in it, the narrator misuses the notion to cover his crime. Covering his crime by stating ancient notion on black cat can affect the readers' opinion and judgment.

Not only social circumstance of the narrator affects the narrative, mental circumstance also influences *The Black Cat*. Whether he states frankly or not, he describes his mental condition unhealthy. Perverseness becomes his main reason torturing physically and verbally to his wife and pets. He mistreats all the victims consciously and knows the impact of his deeds. Alcohol causes him act brutally. He often drinks alcohol and drowns in wine. Those make him feel uncontrollable, but after sleeping off he realizes what he did.

Then, the economic condition of the narrator can be considered affecting the narrative. After the house gets burn, he goes bankrupt. Leaving his house, then moving into a rent house is the only thing he can do.

All positions of the narrator in Poe's *The Black Cat* should be considered. They affect the narrative so that he conveys the narrative in his way. His argument and judgment reflect his position. From those also can be revealed his motifs telling every event he experiences.

## **5.2 The Events Experienced by the Narrator**

Edgar Allan Poe's *The Black Cat* starts the story from back called flash back plot. The author puts the story when the main character is in a jail. He does not start the story from his childhood that he puts it in the next (second) paragraph. After that, the author flows the

plot into the last circumstance that the police finds the wife's body in the house's wall and sent him into the jail.

There are events linked that tie together. They involve the narrator as the major mover or the subject. The narrative consists of thirty five (35) paragraphs. The paragraphs contain eighteen events. The events move from one place into another place, starting from a jail cell into the narrator's house, and then into a rent house. Not only place changes, times also run from being prisoner into childhood time. Then, time goes back into youth when he gets married with a woman. After that, the time runs into the time when police finds his wife's body.

This short story brings events which the main character or the narrator experiences from the first paragraph into thirty fifth paragraph.

1. The narrator writes a letter telling what he did in a jail cell.
2. He loves pets when he was a child.
3. He gets married early with a woman who also loves pets.
4. They raised pets such as birds, gold fish, dog, rabbit, monkey, and cat.
5. His wife believes the black cat as witch and he does not believe in it.
6. He loves Pluto, his black cat.
7. He changed his personality after several years having friend with Pluto.
8. The man tortured Pluto by cutting one of eyes intoxicated condition, then in the morning he regretted what he did.
9. He hung Pluto in the garden consciously because he knew it is a sin.
10. His house was burnt and lost his all property.
11. Hanging Pluto was suspected as the cause of his house's burn.
12. The man was haunted by Pluto after his house burn.
13. He moved to a rent house and met another black cat when he was drunk.
14. He tried not to torture the cat, but he cannot do it.
15. He killed his wife using an axe when they fixed the cellar.
16. He did not feel guilty and tried to hide the body.
17. The police came to search his wife in the fourth day.
18. The police found his wife's body plastered in the wall.

### **5.3 The Agenda of *The Black Cat's* Narrator**

Each report has its own hidden agenda which makes the reporter seem honest, objective, intelligent, impartial, and thorough. The reporters try to create their reports reliable, so that the readers believe in them. It is similar to condition in real life, when someone tells or shares his/her experiences, he/she has aims to be gained. They will not state their aims explicitly, but their utterances contain implication which the readers should comprehend. Here, it is important for the readers to consider the various interest and situation.

In narrative, an author also has objectives when he/she writes a work. Various objectives lie behind the discourse of the narrator, a person in the narrative tells the story. The narrator is not the representation of the author. The narrator has its own background, so that he/she hides the objectives in the discourse. It also happens in Edgar Allan Poe's short story entitled *The Black Cat*.

Edgar Allan Poe's *The Black Cat* main point is the murder of the wife that sent him into a death sentence. The narrator narrates his story orderly starting from telling his childhood, change of his temperament, into his wife's murder. Those are told using the first person narrator that he experiences all events by himself. Here, the narrator writes a letter in a jail cell. He consciously narrates his experiences relating to his own condition. The narrator tries to attract the readers' attention by stating 'FOR the most wild, yet most homely narrative which I am about to pen, I neither expect nor solicit belief. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, in a case where my very senses reject their own evidence. (page 1)' It is his first statement in opening the narrative. Here, the narrator wants the readers to look him as an honest person telling his experience. He adds the statement with 'Yet, mad am I not —and very surely do I not dream. But tomorrow I die, and to-day I would unburthen my soul. (page 1)' This citation implies that he needs the readers believe that he is healthy and conscious when he writes the letter containing the events in the narrative. He impresses that he does not have any interest writing the letter telling his experiences. It does not need to defend himself in his end of life. Relieving his feeling toward the unpleasant condition is his aim of writing the letter. Those citations found in the opening paragraph express the narrator's wish to be trusted in every event he depicts.

Considering interests and situation is important for the readers to trust the narrator's discourse. Moreover, *The Black Cat* uses first person narrator as the major mover. Some utterances question his discourse. They produce implication behind his statements.

First, situation around the narrator and his wife is one factor that will affect the narrative. There is disagreement between them about the superstition of the black cat. This citation 'In speaking of his intelligence, my wife, who at heart was not a little tinctured with superstition, made frequent allusion to the ancient popular notion, which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise' (page 1) seems to show that his wife believes in traditional belief that is different from him. Normal and thinking logically are impressions he tries to build. It is seen in 'Not that she was ever serious upon this point —and I mention the matter at all for no better reason than that it happens, just now, to be remembered.'(page 1). But, it shows that the narrator and his wife have different opinion on their pet, Pluto the black cat.

The image he tries to build as a normal and logical person is contradictory to what he does after his house burn. 'I am above the weakness of seeking to establish a sequence of cause and effect, between the disaster and the atrocity.' Here, the narrator thinks about the disaster of house burn and the atrocity, hanging the black cat. If he thinks logically, he will investigate the ruins, search some proof that cause the disaster.

Next, the narrator states that his temperament and character change to be worse. He cannot control his temperament, he becomes a cruel person toward his wife and pets. At first, he does not admit that he is alcoholic until he describes torturing his black cat, Pluto. There is unbelievable statement of his 'One night, returning home, much intoxicated, from one of my haunts about town, I fancied that the cat avoided my presence... The fury of a demon instantly possessed me. I knew myself no longer. My original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than fiendish malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fibre of my frame. 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!’(page 2). Intoxicated is a condition that the person will not remember he did because of alcohol. His statement is contradictory that at first “I knew myself no longer” implying he forgot at all, but then he describes every movement to maltreat Pluto in detail. His statement intends to distort the readers’ opinion that a demon controls him to maltreat his black cat. In the next paragraph, he consumes alcohol to stop thinking of it, because he feels guilty in torturing it.

Then, some utterances indicate that he is alcoholic. The narrator is drowned in alcohol to forget some problems. ‘I experienced a sentiment of horror, half of remorse, for the crime of which I had been guilty; but it was, at best, a feeble and equivocal feeling, and the soul remained untouched. I again plunged into excess, and soon drowned in wine all memory of the deed.’ Solving problem by consuming alcohol is one way he tries to do. It also affects his bad behavior treating his wife and pets badly.

His brutal behavior moves up into killing his wife using an axe. Instead of blowing an axe into the black cat, he puts the axe in his wife’s head. ‘But this blow was arrested by the hand of my wife. Goaded, by interference, into a rage more than demoniacal, I withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain...She fell dead upon the spot, without a groan.’ This citation implies that what he did is accident, as though he does not arrange to kill his wife. But, what happens next is so surprising. The next action does not reflect previous action. ‘The hideous murder accomplished, I set myself forthwith, and with entire deliberation, to the task of concealing the body.’ He knows what to do, and considers the effect if someone knows what happened. The contradictive actions make the readers suspect him arranging the murder. His euphoria causes the readers disbelieve in him. ‘The second and the third day passed, and still my tormentor came not. Once again I breathed as a free-man...My happiness was supreme!’. It expresses his happiness after finishing concealing his wife’s body in the wall. Plastering the body in the wall is the best solution, nobody knows about his wife. He feels secure for a while.

The interest and situation above make the narrator seem subjective and dishonest. He wrote details every event he passes with various arguments. His arguments change from disbelieve into believe in the black cat that he shows in his frightening. The situation also creates disbelief toward the narrator, when he wrote the letter telling his experience in his last day of his life. He does not tell before as his testimony in court. Edgar Allan Poe’s first person narrator in *The Black Cat* is unreliable. He has agenda writing a letter about his experience. He wants the readers of his letter give sympathy to him. All accident happened to him, according to him is caused by the black cat that has superstitious power as regarded as the witch.

## **Conclusion**

The researchers draw conclusion from the finding and analysis about point of view in Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Black Cat*. There are three points discussed in this research. They are the position of the narrator, the events in the story, and the agenda of the narrator.

First, in writing a short story entitled *The Black Cat* Edgar Allan Poe applied the first person narrator that information comes from first-hand experience. It means the

narrator is the major mover, the subject, and the main character that what he says, sees, does, hears, and thinks he informs to the readers. Then, his position telling this story is in a jail cell. He does not tell, but he writes a letter in his last day of his life.

Besides the physical position of the narrator, some factors included position such as social, mental and economic circumstances affect the opinion and judgment of the narrator. He is not in a good position with unhealthy mental condition as alcoholic and in poverty. This story is affected by superstition of black cat. People believe that this animal is regarded as a witch that may cause bad luck.

Second, the events as parts of story consist of eighteen events from thirty five paragraphs. Those events involve the narrator as a husband, the wife, and the black cat. There are some main events of the story which may influence plot. They are disagreement of superstition of black cat between the narrator and his wife, the narrator loves black cat, he changes his temperament, he tortures his wife and pets, and he kills his wife.

Third, the narrator of *The Black Cat* has his own agenda writing his experiences in a letter. He has an aim to get sympathy from the readers of his letter. He does not want to be blamed for his wife's death, although he kills her by his own hand. Besides that, he is likely to distort the readers' judgment and opinion on the black cat superstition.

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