

## The Qur'anic Connotations in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Black Cat"

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### Abstract

This research paper aims at shedding light on the Qur'anic connotations, implications and meanings contained in Edgar Allan Poe's (1809-1849) short story "The Black Cat" (1843). The title of this research paper has been inspired by the fact that Poe, the American writer, editor and literary critic, is so interested in the Islamic and Qur'anic implications that he has derived some of the titles of his poems from the Holy Qur'an—for example, his poems "Al- Aaraaf," "Israfel" and "The Craven," in which he uses Qur'anic images. "The Black Cat," though characterized by mystery, murder and the supernatural, clearly revolves around the fact that alcohol has negative effects on the life of man, especially drunkards, in so far as it is one of the Satanic means to allure man, make him poor, lead him to his death and finally throw him to the vast abyss. This story tells of how a mild and kind yet innocent man turns into a murderer; he first tortures the black cat he owns and kills it then just for a trivial reason—a murder conducive to making him poor when his house has been burnt and to mistakenly killing his wife. When his final murder is discovered, he is sentenced to death. The story is told by a first-person narrator who is the murderer himself, telling his story while in jail waiting for his inevitable death. Before he commits those crimes, when he is not alcohol-addict, he has been very friendly with his pets and he greatly loves his wife; yet, alcohol leads him to his downfall—a fact clearly explicated in the Holy Qur'an.

الخلاصة

يهدف البحث الى تسليط الضوء على المضامين القرآنية في قصة أذكر ألان بو (١٨٠٩-١٨٤٩) الموسومة "ألقط الأسود". إن عنوان البحث قد استوحى من حقيقة ان الكاتب المذكور له اهتمامات ملحوظة في المضامين القرآنية بحيث انه قد ألف قصيدتين بعنوان "الأعراف" و "إسرافيل"، اللتان استوحى الكاتب عنوانهما من القرآن الكريم. إن قصة "ألقط الأسود"، على الرغم من إتسامها بالغموض والجريمة والخوارق، فإنها تدور وبوضوح تام حول الحقيقة التي تشير الى التأثير السلبي لمعاقرة الخمرة على حياة الانسان، لاسيما مدمن الخمرة، وذلك لان معاقرة الخمرة تعد احدى الوسائل لاغواء الانسان وجعله فقيرا وتقوده الى الموت، وبالتالي ترمي به الى الهاوية في الوادي السحيق من جهنم. تخبرنا قصة "ألقط الأسود" عن كيفية ان رجلا وديعا لطيفا بريئا قد تحول الى انسان قاتل: إذ قام اولا بتعذيب القط الأسود الذي يقتنيه ثم قتله بسبب تافه— وهي الجريمة التي اودت به الى الفقر عندما احترق بيته والتي تسببت في قتل زوجته خطأ. وحكم عليه بالأعدام عندما اكتشفت جريمته الأخيرة. تحكى هذه القصة من وجهة نظر راو وهو المجرم ذاته يروي قصته من السجن منتظرا نهايته المحتومة. لقد كان هذا الرجل قبل ان يرتكب هذه الجرائم في فترة ما قبل الألمان على الخمرة انسانا وديا ووديعا مع الحيوانات التي كان يقتنيها وكان يحب زوجته، إلا ان الخمرة اودت به الى الهلاك— وهي الحقيقة التي جاء بها القرآن الكريم.

## Introduction

It is significant to notice that most of Edgar Allan Poe's poetic and prose writings depend on the Qur'anic implications in so far as he has been so greatly influenced by the Orientalist representations that he relies on the Holy Qur'an when forming the titles of his poems "Al-Aaraaf," "Israfel" and "The Craven." This research paper hypothesizes that Poe has too much relied on the Qur'anic implications when writing his well-known short story entitled "The Black Cat." It is also hypothesized that all the moral implications concerning drunkenness, which are advocated by the Holy Qur'an, are reflected in this story.

For Poe, throughout his experience in life as far as alcohol addiction is concerned, has learned many moral lessons which, he discovers, are conspicuous in the Holy Qur'an, and which he has endeavoured to give them clear-cut representations in his works, especially his short story "The Black Cat." Exploring the Orientalist implications in a selection of Poe's major works which shows that he has relied on Oriental exoticism and Qur'anic imagery—poetic and fictional—Sohaib Kamal Mahmood Al-Kamal (2015: iii) declares that the examination of Poe's literary achievements can rely on Edward Said's book *Orientalism* and other important Arab writers' points of view in this respect, who have all agreed on the idea that "Islam is the locus of any study of Orientalism." To explore the Qur'anic implications in one of Poe's significant works gives full understanding of the work itself and of the great influence of the Islamic culture on great Western writers like Poe and others, which is a fact often diminished and obscured as well by Western literary criteria in order not to confess the significance of Islam for the life of the individual and the nations as a whole—Western and otherwise.

This research paper concentrates on the moral lessons to be obtained from Poe's "The Black Cat," which find their reflections in the Holy Qur'an, and which are much related to Poe's experience with drunkenness with its harms on the human being in every respect related to his body, soul, and social and economic

status. Therefore, this study makes some touches upon the biographical elements concerning Poe's experience with alcohol, his interest in Orientalism, especially the Islamic culture, and his indirect references to the Qur'anic implications concerning the subject matter of this study. For the author's main intention is to show readers how much drunkenness is dangerous to man, which is a fact that has been evidently expressed in the Holy Qur'an.

It is significant to recognize that Poe is the son of Christian-born parents. His actual religion is quiet controversial among critics, for Poe does not mention anything about it. Some believe that he is an atheist, and some say, "he was Christian, but sometimes sounded like a deist or a pantheist" ([hollowverse.com > edgar-allan-poe](http://hollowverse.com/edgar-allan-poe)). Nevertheless, this study postulates the first and foremost hypothesis that Poe has embedded Qur'anic connotations in "The Black Cat." A further significant point which should be realized is the attitudes of both Judaism and Christianity concerning drunkenness.

Throughout having a close look at *The Old Testament*, *The New Testament* and *Torah*, the researcher has concluded that drinking wine is not wholly prohibited by those three authorities, when taken moderately for the sake of comfort and also for the sake of medication and other useful usages. But it is prohibited by all of them when it leads to the loss and control of mind and to committing sins. Therefore, it is not completely prohibited by both Christianity and Judaism. However, drinking alcohol is completely prohibited by Islam, for its disadvantages are much more than its advantages. This can be regarded as the dictum which is further substantiated by Farooq Ataiah (2014), an Egyptian thinker and activist in the field of Islamic culture.

### **Section One: Review of Related Biographical Elements**

It has been pointed out that Poe has a long history of alcohol addiction and that his wife's illness and insanity are the result of his alcoholism; it has been said that his early death is caused by drinking too much alcohol: "Those around



Poe during his final days seem convinced that the author did, indeed, fall into that temptation, drinking himself to death." (score.addicaid.com > edgar-allan-poe-an...). Therefore, it should be noted that there is a close relationship between Poe's personal life as far as the influence of alcohol is concerned and "The Black Cat" which is narrated by means of a first-person narrator who is an alcohol addict and who may stand for Poe himself, for both of them have been destroyed by alcohol or rather they have drunk to death.

### **Section Two: Synopsis of "The Black Cat"**

The narrator is the criminal himself, being a first-person narrator, who finds it necessary to unfold his story to people before his death, so that a moral lesson could be inferred.

"The Black Cat" is a short story illustrating a case study about a murderer who hides his crime, thinking that he would not be doubted or questioned, but he eventually finds himself collapsed and then sentenced to death. He tells of his past life when he used to take care of animals at home, including the title black cat, a large beautiful animal named Pluto. His friendship with Pluto lasts for several years, which comes to an end when the narrator becomes an alcohol addict. When intoxicated, he feels that the cat is indifferent to him, and when trying to catch it, the terrified cat bites him, and thus, under the influence of alcohol, he gouges out one of its eyes. Sometimes, the narrator feels remorseful, and at the same time the cat is terrified at his approach, a fact which has irritated him most, and thus he decides to kill it. One morning, he takes the cat to the garden and ties a piece of rope around its neck, hanging it by means of a gallows until it dies. Suddenly, at the very night, his house catches fire, and the narrator with his wife and servant run away from the house. Later on, he finds a similar cat on whose neck there is an image of the gallows, which terrifies him so much. When the narrator and his wife get into the cellar of the new home, the cat trips him down the stairs. Being very nervous, he takes an ax, trying to kill the cat, but he mistakenly hits his wife to death. To hide the corpse of his wife he makes a hole in the wall in which he

puts it. Then, he feels comfortable. The policemen come to his house to inquire about the absence of his wife and find nothing impeachable. As they start to leave, the narrator draws their attention to the wall, rapping on it by a nearby cane. This event leads to the appearance of a loud animal voice coming from the wall, which unfolds his crime. He says "I had walled the monster up within the tomb" (Poe, 1990: 27)!

### Section Three: Poe's Reflections on Islamic Culture

It is a good start to mention Ralph Waldo Emerson's (1859: 32) quote that the imperialism of the Occident, which has not only consumed the materialistic resources of the colonized countries but also their cultural heritage, is pervasive in most of their significant works of art. To substantiate this observation we can directly quote his words in this regard: "Cold and sea train an imperial Saxon race....All the bloods it shall absorb and domineer" (Ibid.). It is significant to unfold the fact that persistent yet constant interest in the Oriental culture has accompanied the persistent yet constant interest in the colonization of the Orient. Therefore, it is no wonder that the Western culture has tremendously relied on the Orient, and as Malini Johar Schueller (1995: 601) puts it,

Both popular and serious writers in the nineteenth century seized upon the Orient as subject matter. Popular writers of the Near East Orient as William Ware wrote historical romances and John Deforest and Maria Susanna Cummins wrote missionary tales; Emerson, Whitman and Thoreau, on the other hand, marveled at the storehouse of far Eastern knowledge.

Schueller (Ibid.) proceeds to show that Poe's attention has been strongly drawn to the forceful effects of the discourse of the Orient, and he "constantly parodies the culture's use of the Orient," being quite conscious of the ghastly imperialistic colonization of the Orient. It may be suggested that Poe's interest in the works of the Orientalists like William Beckford, Lord Byron, Thomas Moore and other writers has been "a common knowledge" (Travis Montgomery, 2001: 7). Poe validates the world of Islam and the Orient in hopes of writing in a new

tradition, appearing to be unconventional in depicting his respective material. Oriental images figure out in his collection entitled *Poems* as is the case in his poem "Israfil" whose title as he confesses is taken from the Holy Quran. In it, Poe says that Israfil "has the sweetest voice of all God's creatures" (Poe, 1831: p.43). Qur'anic connotations pervade through Poe's poetic and fictional works, a phenomenon which can be interpreted in terms of Poe's profound knowledge of the Qur'anic meanings inferred from the translation of the Holy Qur'an, which was translated by the Orientalist George Sale in 1734 (Alkamal: 1). Furthermore, the Qur'anic meanings and images are not only made conspicuous to Poe, but they are also made clear to other writers who consider the Holy Qur'an a standard reading during the Federalist period, as pointed out by Jeffery Einboden (2009: 2) in the following excerpt:

Qur'anic quotations are to be found diffused throughout the texts of America's literary patriarchs, permeating the public works and private papers of not only Emerson, but also contemporaries, successors and rivals such as Washington Irving (1783-1859) and Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), building an architecture of Islamic allusion within the very foundations of early US letters.

#### Section Four: The Qur'anic Implications in "The Black Cat"

Due to the fact that he is going to be executed, the narrator confesses his past crimes which have destroyed him. He shows that alcohol has destroyed his life, for he becomes a drunkard acting at home in the same way criminals do. After harming and killing the black cat (Pluto), his house for one reason or another gets burned, which is a big loss for him and which requires him to live in a cheaper one then. In a word, he has been impoverished. This fact has frankly been made obvious in the Holy Qur'an: "Satan promises you poverty, and urges you to immorality; but God promises you forgiveness from Himself, and grace. God is Embracing and Knowing" (Al-Baqarah Surah, sign 268). Because he follows the footsteps of Satan, he is to meet his doom, for Satan is a great enemy to

man, always trying to lead him astray, which is a fact declared by the Almighty Allah in the Holy Qur'an: "O you who believe! Enter into submission, wholeheartedly, and do not follow the footsteps of Satan; he is to you an outright enemy" (Al-Baqarah Surah, sign 208). Again, it is significant to notice that the Holy Qur'an has ordered man to wholly avoid all Satanic actions, especially intoxication and drunkenness because they are Satanic practices, which lead man nowhere but to the path of poverty. Man should avoid the path of Satan, so that he/she will prosper in life: "O you who believe! Intoxicants, gambling, idolatry, and divination are abominations of Satan's doing. Avoid them, so that you may prosper" (Al-Maidah Surah, sign 90). The narrator's addiction to alcohol, which is regarded as a social problem, is the real cause for his insanity. His home, which is supposed to be a place of peace, comfort and light, has become a place of darkness, madness and tragic events, which is a theme that comes in line with the following Surah from the Holy Qur'an:

God is the Lord of those who believe; He brings them out of darkness and into light. As for those who disbelieve, their lords are the evil ones; they bring them out of light and into darkness-these are the inmates of the Fire, in which they will abide forever.

(Al-Baqarah Surah, sign: 257)

Thus, following the path of evil, the narrator has been transformed by Satan from light to darkness and is made unable to distinguish the right from the wrong. Besides, he is completely changed from a kind and humane young man believing in the ethic-treatment-animal principle into a terrible and irritable person because of drunkenness. He confesses that he has committed heinous crimes, revealing his transformation from a good person to a villain: he feels that his personality is void of any "good" when committing the crimes. He does not only begin to threaten his pets, but he also begins to threaten his wife whom he once loved before his addiction to alcohol.



What critics consider to be vague and ambiguous in the story can be interpreted and demystified by one single sign from the Holy Qur'an. It remains vague, for instance, as to the reason why the narrator's house has been burnt, and it is further vague as to how the murdered cat comes into his bedroom, and above all, the cry of the second black cat that comes from behind the wall that covers the corpse of his murdered wife remains mysterious. Besides, the authorities represented by policemen suddenly come to inquire about his wife. It is an element of surprise because the reader is not informed how the second cat has been hidden with the corpse until the narrator declares that he might have unconsciously walled it with the corpse.

This is not to deny the importance of ambiguity in the story, for it is this element which makes the story interesting yet excitable. However, Poe does not haphazardly allude to the supernatural elements associated with the image of the second black cat which has uncovered the narrator's secret and leads him to death, working as a supernatural agency. The alleged ambiguity is disambiguated by the Holy Qur'an which advocates that a supernatural agency is always at work on behalf of the innocent murdered in that it helps them punish their executors. Here, the identity of the criminal is unfolded by the authorities with the aid of supernatural agency represented by the second black cat, not to mention the criminal's stupidity. There is then an authority working out its way towards achieving justice as it is unfolded in the Holy Qur'an, and as follows:

And do not kill the soul which God has made sacred, except in the course of justice. If someone is killed unjustly, We have given his next of kin certain authority. But he should not be excessive in killing, for he will be supported.

(Al-Israa Surah, sign 33)

The supernatural agency that converts the innocent narrator into a criminal, perverts his personality and eventually lets him face his end is represented by what he calls as "the instrumentality of the Fiend Intemperance" (Poe, 1990: 20), which can be interpreted in terms of the perverting spirit

represented by Satan that continuously urges him to drink alcohol. To substantiate the idea of the fiend-like creature, the narrator's wife superstitiously regards "all black cats as witches in disguise" (Ibid.). The narrator himself describes his situation, saying, "My Original soul seemed, at once, to take its flight from my body; and a more than *fiendish* [italics mine] malevolence, gin-nurtured, thrilled every fiber of my frame" (Poe, 1990: 21). Thus, he is driven to evil and despair by means of drinking alcohol from the influence of Satan.

The theme of drunkenness is central to the story. Another reason for the narrator's criminality is what he calls as "the spirit of PERVERSENESS," which is once again the spirit of the perverting Satan, and which he says: "...came to ...[his] final overthrow" (Ibid.). The spirit of perverseness or the spirit of licentiousness is considered one part of the human spirit as it is indicated in the Holy Qur'an (Ashams Surah, signs 7-10), and as follows: "And the soul and He who proportioned it (7). And inspired it with its wickedness and its righteousness (8). Successful is he who purifies it (9). Failing is he who corrupts it (10). This indicates that the spirit of man has been inspired of the ingredients of both piety and of perverseness or licentiousness by its own body. He who is able to get rid of evil will win in the end, and he who inclines to perverseness as is the case with the narrator will ultimately commit sins and then be punished.

Throughout using the fiend-like image represented by the black cat (Pluto) Poe seems to allegorically express the moral lesson inferred from the Holy Qur'an, lest he should be accused of violating the Euro-centricism concept which reflects "a tendency to interpret the world in terms of Western and especially European or Anglo-American values and experiences" (Online Merriam-Webster Dictionary). The Almighty Allah has prohibited drinking alcohol and prevented man from following the footsteps of Satan in many instances in the Holy Qur'an: "God commands justice, and goodness, and generosity towards relatives. And He forbids immorality, and injustice, and oppression. He advises you, so that you may take heed" (Al-Nahil Surah, sign 90).

In another instance found in the Holy Qur'an, the Almighty Allah advises human beings not to follow the dictates of Satan: "As for him who was defiant (37). And preferred the life of this world (38). Then Hell is the shelter (39). But as for him who feared the Standing of his Lord, and restrained the self from desires (40). Then Paradise is the shelter (41). (Al-Naziaat Surah, signs 37-41). The narrator calls the dead cat (Pluto) as being an apparition, or a fiend-like creature, so to speak.

It can be suggested then that the black cat is meant to represent the spirit of the Devil which has not died at all, for the second cat which he has brought to his house from the public house is "fully as large as Pluto, and closely resembling him in every respect but one. Pluto had not a white hair upon any portion of his body; but this cat had a large, although indefinite splotch of white, covering nearly the whole region of the breast" (Poe, 1990: 23). Then, the white splotch turns to be the image of the gallows whereby the narrator has killed the former cat (Pluto).

The image of the white gallows and the fact that the second black cat is resembling the former one in everything are not made haphazardly by the author. The narrator has not stopped his evil practices when he has been tortured by poverty—the burning of his house. Here appears another Qur'anic connotation which implies that the Almighty Allah first plights criminals with a lesser torture than is required to give them a chance for a return to His word. It seems that Poe intentionally creates another episode which illustrates the final torture for the narrator because he does not stop drinking alcohol, still following the path of evil: "We will make them taste the lesser torment, prior to the greater torment, so that they may return" (As-Sajdah Surah, sign: 21).

Due to alcoholism, the narrator meets his doom. The moral lesson to be detected from "The Black Cat" is that drinking alcohol or rather alcohol addiction is something Satanic and prohibited by the Almighty Allah for the benefit and the welfare of mankind and the world as a whole. Furthermore, it can



be concluded that Poe has been made fully aware of the Islamic culture throughout his full understanding of the meanings of the Holy Qur'an.

### Conclusion

Due to his awareness of the demerits of alcoholism throughout his own experience in life, Poe comes to the conclusion that alcoholism is something very bad which leads alcohol addicts to nowhere but torture and death, a fact which he has discovered in the Holy Qur'an throughout his readings of its meaning-based translation available in America in his time, and throughout his interest in the Arabic and Islamic culture which lets him have full understanding of the Qur'anic images, connotations and meanings and which makes his literature stand unique among not only his contemporaries but also among the optimum world literary media. It must be concluded, therefore, that "The Black Cat" is a short story which tremendously depends on the Holy Qur'an as far as the moral implications, connotations and meanings concerning alcoholism are concerned.

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