

## Haunted By Halloween

### *Unravelling the Stigmatism Surrounding Black Cats*

Science has taught us that the black cat simply has different genes and hence, a different colour of fur than it's coloured counterparts. Yet, historic societies have brought about, and fostered the idea that black cats are a physical representation of evil. It is my intention to right this wrong through the exploration of this myth's past, present, and future.

#### **The Past**

In order to fully understand the stigmatism that surrounds the black cat, one must first look back to the mid 1400s and delve into the witch hunts- the genocide of those believed to be witches by both the Protestant and Catholic Churches.<sup>8</sup>

These trials used the fear of death to ensure that catholic adherents did not stray from their intended path while simultaneously reinforcing the belief that women were inferior.<sup>3</sup> In the words of St. Clement of Alexandria "every woman should be filled with shame by the thought that she is a woman."<sup>3</sup> Somewhere between fifty and one hundred thousand alleged "witches" were tortured and killed as a result of the judgments made by the Church.<sup>11</sup> Anyone or anything said to be associated with witchcraft was deemed to be a direct association with evil and a blatant form of heresy.<sup>3</sup>

Unfortunately for the black cat, they were included in the common stereotype that defined a witch.<sup>2</sup> Guilty by association, black cats became a symbol of the wicked. If an alleged witch owned a black cat, it was used as evidence against them, and if convicted, the cat would often be burned to death alongside its owner.<sup>2</sup> An animal whose presence was originally accepted as good luck became an affiliate of Satan<sup>2</sup>, and thus dawned an

age of misfortune for the black cat. The fourteenth through nineteenth century was an era in which superstition had a great deal of bearing, and thus the unjustified ideas surrounding the black cat become widely accepted as truth.

In addition to their association with witches these animals were brought down yet another peg when both anarchist and Wiccan (a religion whose teachings revolve around witchcraft) societies deemed the black cat to be a symbol of their faith.<sup>2</sup> While at the time, the symbol was likely not meant to harm their beloved companions, it ultimately had a very negative impact on the way the black cat is viewed and regarded by much of society.<sup>2</sup>

Although we often like to think as society and time progress, we are able to learn from our mistakes and in turn, develop more truthful facts, this is often not the case. Even in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, a mere 26 years ago, the black cat was yet again tied to a negative stigmatism. The Chicago Cubs coincidentally ended a winning streak the day a black cat entered their field and from that point on the black cat became the “alleged Cubs curse.”<sup>2</sup>

## **The Present**

Though it is tempting to believe that the black cat is no longer suffering undue harm, this is in fact not true.<sup>7</sup> As a society, we continue to tie these animals to Halloween and quite often leave them to be the last to be adopted.<sup>7</sup>

The origins of Halloween lay within the Pagan holiday that was once referred to as “All Hallows Eve” or “Samhain”, an annual tradition marking the end of the Celtic calendar.<sup>5</sup> It was both a time to introduce the impending winter months and to honour the

dead.<sup>5</sup> It was believed that on the night of October 31<sup>st</sup> the “veil” separating those on earth from the dead was at thinnest, and allowed the dead to cross.<sup>10</sup>

However, as the tradition evolved, it became less and less about honour and seasonal change and instead focused on fear, costumes and candy.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, many of the celebration’s roots remain the same. Because Halloween is of Pagan heritage, many of its symbols are those tied to witchcraft, leaving the black cat to yet again become a primary target.

The black cat in particular came into the holiday depicted as both the companion of a witch and individually as a symbol of fear.<sup>6</sup> Because the idea that they were evil had been consistently reinforced, they made a perfect addition to the holiday’s propaganda.

Although today many of the black cats that are being portrayed as evil were purchased weeks before at a local Dollarama, the underlying tie between the black cat and evil continues to be facilitated.<sup>6</sup> Some animal shelters have been forced to withhold the adoption of black cats during the period leading up to Halloween in order to save them from a possibly catastrophic future.<sup>6</sup> In the past, owners have adopted them only to be used as living decorations and then once their role was no longer desired, the cats were abandoned.<sup>6</sup> It is incredibly unfortunate that the shelters have been forced into this position because black cats are actually the most in need of adoption. Because of their skewed reputation, they are the least likely to be adopted.<sup>6</sup> According to the ASPCA, each year in the United States approximately 1.4 million cats are euthanized in shelter, and an overwhelming percentage of them happen to be black.<sup>1</sup> Black cats are constantly being killed or left to die a slow death, caged at a shelter, simply because society is

unable to let go of superstitious opinions that are backed by no factual evidence. Plainly stated, “Black cats have the lowest adoption rate and the highest euthanasia rate.”<sup>7</sup>

I recently spent time at my local humane society, and plan to begin volunteering there on a regular basis in the fall. While there, I witnessed first hand the unfair exclusion that these beautiful creatures face. In each of the “cat condos” there were somewhere around 15 cats, typically joined by potential adopters. However, once I took a step back and examined the bigger picture, two things became very apparent. First, an overwhelming majority of the cats at the shelter were in fact black and second, an overwhelming majority of the cats being cuddled and cared for by the visitors were not black.

It was beyond heartbreaking to watch as these cats’ chances of being adopted were slowly chipped away as the clock continued to tick and nobody gave them the time of day. I dedicated much of my time at the shelter to giving these cats the attention that they deserve, as I know how wonderful of an addition they can make to a family. I myself have a black cat that I love dearly and it pains me to think that had we not adopted her, she would have likely been constantly overlooked because people failed to recognize her true value.

### **The Future**

Time and time again, society has banded together and fought the never-ending war against injustice, and it is time we do just that for the black cat. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said “I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood

can never become a reality...I believe that the unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.”<sup>9</sup> His words taught the world that there is no time in which discrimination cannot be overcome by the strength that lies within the goodness of one’s heart. While he spoke about segregation based on colour with regards to mankind, the movement that he intended to ignite can absolutely be applied to the mistreatment of black cats. They are in truth, discriminated against based on colour.

The world has deemed it inappropriate for society to mistreat others due to their genetic predisposition, yet we continue to do so in the case of black cats, creatures with both minds and feelings. As a group, they are unable to speak out against this injustice and for this reason, it is the responsibility of each and every human who encounters a black cat to speak for them, and teach the world that they are just as valuable as any other cat.

As a society we must begin to repair the damage that has been laid upon a creature that has done nothing deserve the reputation it has. Each and every new day we are given an opportunity to change the things that are wrong with the world, and so I must ask you to use this ability to provide the black cat with both a voice, and a fighting chance.

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