

Characters

Narrator* (M)	-	Barton's inner monologue
Barton (M)	-	The protagonist
Rosalind (F)	-	Barton's Wife
Corpse Rosalind (F)	-	Barton's dead wife
Landlord (M/F)	-	The landlord of a pub
Policeman 1 (M/F)	-	A policeman
Policeman 2 (M/F)	-	A policeman

*The narrator is a voice over - or an actor standing at the side of the stage reading from a large book.

Act 1

Scene 1 – Barton’s house

(Spotlight on Narrator as she/he enters (if an actor is used), stands to the side of the stage with a large book, places it on a lectern and addresses the audience. Lights remain off if Narrator is a voice over)

Narrator: I do not expect you to believe the tale I am about to tell. Mad indeed would I be to expect it, yet, mad I am not – and very surely do I not dream. But tomorrow I die, and today I would unburden my soul.

(Spotlight on Barton as he enters front of tabs dressed in a suit. He stands upstage centre)

Narrator: My immediate purpose is to place before you a series of mere household events. In their consequences, these events have terrified, have tortured, have destroyed me.

(Tabs open to Barton's Study. Lights up. He looks for a book on a shelf in the backdrop as the narrator continues)

Narrator: From my infancy I was noted for the docility and humanity of my disposition. My tenderness of heart was even so conspicuous as to make me the jest of my companions. I was especially fond of animals, and was indulged by my parents with a great variety of pets. With these I spent most of my time.

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(The animals could be projected onto a screen to highlight Barton's pleasant nature but it is not necessary)

Barton: **(Pointing to books)** Rabbits, dogs, mice, guinea pigs. **(To audience)** I never was so happy as when feeding and caressing them. This peculiarity of my character grew with me, and, in my manhood, I derived from it one of my principal sources of pleasure. To those who have had affection for a faithful dog, I hardly need explain the pleasure they bring. The unselfish and self-sacrificing love of these animals goes directly to the heart of he who has occasion to test the paltry friendship and gossamer fidelity of mere Man.

(Rosalind enters in a bridal outfit. Barton goes to meet her and they hug centre stage)

Narrator: I married early, and was happy to find in my wife a disposition not so different to my own. Seeing my love for pets, she brought me those of the most agreeable kind.

Barton: (To audience) We had birds, gold-fish, a fine dog, rabbits, a small monkey, and (pause) a cat.

(Lights off. Large cat's eyes illuminate on the backdrop. Lights up.)

Narrator: The cat was a large, beautiful animal, entirely black, and wise to an astonishing degree.

Rosalind: Have you noted the cat's intelligence Barton?

Barton: Yes. He does seem to possess some degree of wisdom.

Rosalind: You know I am superstitious –

Barton: Yes, and in that matter alone, we disagree. There are no ghosts, bad luck or demons in this world.

Rosalind: You know not of what you speak. There is an ancient popular notion which regards all black cats as witches in disguise.

Barton: You are not serious my good wife?

Rosalind: Not really. But everyone loves a good ghost story don't they? Pluto could never be a witch, I mean, he's such a good cat. A loving animal.

Narrator: Pluto was my favourite pet and playmate. I alone fed him, and he attended me wherever I went about the house. It was even with difficulty that I could prevent him from following me through the streets.

(Rosalind exits)

Barton: (To audience) Our friendship continued in this manner for several years during which my general temperament and character, through the instrumentality of the lack of moderation or restraint had, I blush to confess it, experienced a radical alteration for the worse.

(Lights turn gloomy – red or with a patterned gobo. Barton paces the stage, irritably – slowly at first and becoming more agitated. SFX. Possible use of atmospheric music.)

Narrator: I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, with more disregard of the feelings of others. I suffered myself to use intemperate language to my wife.

Barton: At length, I even offered her personal violence.

Narrator: My pets, of course, were made to feel the change in my disposition. I not only neglected, but ill-used them.

(Lights change to a brighter colour)

Barton: For Pluto, however, I still retained sufficient regard to restrain me from maltreating him, as I made no scruple of maltreating the rabbits, the monkey, or even the dog, when by accident, or through affection, they got in my way. But my disease grew upon me –

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(Lights become moody once more.)

Barton: For what disease is like Alcohol! And at length even Pluto, who was now becoming old, and consequently somewhat peevish; even Pluto began to experience the effects of my ill temper.

(The first pair of cat's eyes fade. A different pair of smaller cats eyes light up on the back drop. Barton staggers to the side of the stage as if drunk)

Narrator: One night, returning home, much intoxicated, from one of my haunts about town, I fancied that the cat avoided my presence.

(Cat's eyes go out and a different pair of eyes illuminate)

Barton: I seized him; when, in his fright at my violence, he inflicted a wound upon my hand with his teeth.

(SFX. Cat's hiss and angry meow. Barton acts picking up an invisible cat which bites him and he drops it, shaking and examining his hand. Illuminated cats eyes turn red.)

Barton: **(Agitated. Becoming angry)** 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. **(takes out a pen knife)** I took from my waistcoat-pocket a pen-knife, opened it, grasped the poor beast by the throat **(he acts this)**, and deliberately cut one of its eyes from the socket!

(Lights off. Barton covers his hands in fake blood in the darkness unseen by the audience. Illuminated Cats eyes burn brighter and then go out as SFX. Loud angry cat wails and screeches. Silence in complete darkness for a moment. Tabs close. Spotlight on Barton upstage centre, front of tabs.)

Barton: **(Showing his blood stained hands to the audience)** I blush, I burn, I shudder, while I recount the damnable atrocity.

(Lights off. Barton exits. Lights rise slowly.)

Narrator: When reason returned with the morning, when I had slept off the fumes of the night's abandonment of moral purity, I experienced a sentiment half of horror, half of remorse, for the crime of which I had been guilty; but it was, at best, a feeble and vague feeling, and the soul remained untouched. I again plunged into excess, and soon drowned in wine all memory of the deed. In the meantime the cat slowly recovered. The socket of the lost eye presented, it is true, a frightful appearance, but he no longer appeared to suffer any pain.

(Barton enters front of tabs with clean hands)

Barton: **(Calmly)** He went about the house as usual, but, as might be expected, fled in extreme terror at my approach. I had so much of my old heart left, as to be at first grieved by this evident dislike on the part of a creature which had once so loved me. **(Irritated)** But this feeling soon gave place to irritation. And then came, as if to my final and unstoppable descent, the spirit of *perverseness*. **(Shouting)** Of this spirit philosophy takes no account. Yet I am not more sure that my soul lives, than I am that perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart. One of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of Man. **(accusingly)** Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a vile action, for no other reason than because he knows he should not? Have we not a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best judgment, to violate that which is Law, merely because we understand it to be such? **(Sullen, pacing the stage)** This spirit of perverseness, I say, came to my final action. It was this unfathomable longing of the soul to vex itself; to offer violence to its own nature; to do wrong for the wrong's sake only; **(becoming angrier)** that urged me to continue and finally to consummate the injury I had inflicted upon the unoffending brute.

(Barton Exits. Lights off. Tabs open.)

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Narrator: One morning, with cool blood, I slipped a noose about the cat's neck and hung it to the limb of a tree.

(Lights up to reveal either a painted backdrop of the hung cat or an actual gibbet with hanging cat. Spotlight on this only.)

Narrator: I hung it with the tears streaming from my eyes, and with the bitterest remorse at my heart. Hung it because I knew that it had loved me, and because I felt it had given me no reason of offence. Hung it because I knew that in so doing I was committing a sin; a deadly sin that would so jeopardise my immortal soul as to place it, if such a thing

were possible, even beyond the reach of the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God.

(Lights off. Tabs closed. Lighting simulates fire. SFX. Sound of fire)

Narrator: On the night of the day on which this cruel deed was done, I was aroused from sleep by the cry of fire. The curtains of my bed were in flames. The whole house was blazing. It was with great difficulty that my wife, a servant, and myself, made our escape from the inferno. The destruction was complete. My house burned to the ground. My entire worldly wealth, swallowed up. I resigned myself thenceforward to despair.

(Barton enters front of tabs. Fire lighting fades. Spotlight on Barton)

Barton: **(Calmly to audience)** I am above the weakness of seeking to establish a sequence of cause and effect, between the disaster and the atrocity. But I am detailing a chain of facts; and wish not to leave even a possible link imperfect.

(Tabs open revealing the backdrop with the hung cat turned round, showing a scorched, fire-damaged wall with an impression of the cat with a rope around its neck)

Barton: On the day succeeding the fire, I visited the ruins of my home. The walls, with one exception, had fallen in. This exception was the one against which the head of my bed had rested. The plastering had here, in great measure, resisted the action of the fire -- a fact which I attributed to the plaster having been recently spread. I approached and saw, as if in ancient Egyptian relief carving upon the white surface, the figure of a gigantic cat. The impression was given with accuracy truly marvellous. There was a rope about the animal's neck.

(Barton stoops and looks both afraid and thoughtful, remorseful almost)

Narrator: When I first beheld this apparition; for I could scarcely regard it as less, my wonder and my terror were extreme. But at length reflection came to my aid. The cat, I remembered, had been hung in a garden adjacent to the house.

(Barton stands and examines the cat)

Narrator: Upon the alarm of fire, this garden had been immediately filled by a crowd - by some one of whom the animal must have been cut from the tree and thrown, through an open window, into my chamber to arouse me from sleep.

Barton: **(nervously)** The falling of other walls had compressed the victim of my cruelty into the substance of the freshly-spread plaster; the lime of which, with the flames, and the ammonia from the carcass, had then accomplished the portraiture as I saw it.

(Barton nods as if dismissing the possibility of witchcraft, although not entirely certain of his explanation. Lights off. Tabs closed. Scenery with the cat is removed.)

Narrator: Although I thus readily accounted to my reason, if not altogether to my conscience, for the startling fact just detailed, it did not the less fail to make a deep impression upon my fancy.

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Scene 2 - Pub

(Tabs open. The stage has a chair stage left and a barrel or keg downstage right, near the backdrop, above which should be cat's eyes which can illuminate to suggest there is a cat on top of the barrel. Downstage should remain gloomily lit to give the best impression that the cat is there. Different large cat's eyes illuminate on the backdrop, one of which is red or gored)

Narrator: For months I could not rid myself of the phantasm of the cat; and, during this period, there came back into my spirit a half-sentiment that seemed, but was not, remorse. I went so far as to regret the loss of the animal.

(Cats eyes fade off)

Narrator: I looked around, among the vile haunts which I now habitually frequented, for another cat of somewhat similar appearance, with which to replace that which I so brutally murdered.

(Barton enters, inebriated, carrying a tankard and sits in the chair)

Barton: One night as I sat in the local tavern, half stupefied, in a den of more than infamy, my attention was suddenly drawn to some black object, reposing upon the head of one of the immense hogsheads of Gin, or of Rum, which constituted the chief furniture of the inn. I had been looking steadily at the top of this hogshead for some minutes, and what now caused me surprise was the fact that I had not sooner perceived the object thereupon.

(The cat's eyes above the barrel illuminate. Barton approaches the cat on the barrel)

Narrator: I approached it, and touched it with my hand. It was a black cat. A very large one. 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 his chest.

Barton: Upon my touching him, he immediately arose, purred loudly, rubbed against my hand, and appeared delighted with my notice. This, then, was the very creature of which I was in search.

(Landlord enters, polishing a glass with a towel)

Barton: This is the very animal which I have been looking for. I wish to purchase it from you!

Landlord: What are you talking about?

Barton: The cat which sits upon the hogshead.

Landlord: (**Glancing at the barrel dismissively**) Not mine. No idea where that came from. But take it – I don't want filthy animals in my pub!

(Landlord exits)

Barton: I continued my caresses, and, when I prepared to go home, the animal showed a disposition to accompany me. I permitted it to do so; occasionally stooping and patting it as I proceeded. When it reached my house, it domesticated itself at once, and became immediately a great favourite with my wife.

(Cats eyes fade. Half tabs close.)

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Barton: (**pacing the stage, agitated**) For my own part, I soon found a dislike to it arising within me. This was just the reverse of what I had anticipated; but – I know not how or why it was. The cat's evident fondness for myself rather disgusted and annoyed me.

(Lights gradually turn gloomy, sombre and menacing. This can be accentuated by music.)

Barton: (**dramatically**) By slow degrees, these feelings of disgust and annoyance rose into the bitterness of hatred. I avoided the creature.

(Cat hanging from the gallows illuminates on the backdrop)

Barton: A certain sense of shame, and the remembrance of my former deed of cruelty, preventing me from physically abusing it.

(Lights off to hide the hanging cat. Spotlight remains on Barton)

Barton: I did not, for some weeks, strike, or otherwise violently ill use the animal; but gradually

(Red cats eyes illuminate on the backdrop)

Barton: Very gradually – I came to look upon it with unutterable loathing, and to flee silently from its odious presence, as from the breath of a pestilence. What added, no doubt, to my hatred of the beast, was the discovery, on the morning after I brought it home, that, like Pluto, it also had been deprived of one of its eyes.

(Rosalind enters)

Rosalind: (joyfully) He's just like our last cat.

Barton: You have always possessed a high degree of humanity.

Rosalind: As did you, once. It was your distinguishing trait; the source of many of your simplest and purest pleasures.

(Rosalind moves upstage right. Barton upstage left)

Barton: (To audience) The more I began to hate and avoid the cat, however, its partiality for me seemed to increase.

(Barton and wife exit on opposite sides. Several of the different cat's eyes light and fade during the next monologue by the narrator to accentuate the tone)

Narrator: It followed my footsteps with a pertinacity which it would be difficult to make you comprehend. Whenever I sat, it would crouch beneath my chair, or spring upon my knees, covering me with its loathsome caresses. If I arose to walk it would get between my feet and thus nearly throw me down, or, fastening its long and sharp claws in my clothes, clamber, in this manner, to my chest. At such times, although I longed to destroy it with a blow, I was yet withheld from so doing, partly by a memory of my former crime, but chiefly - let me confess it at once - by absolute *dread* of the beast.

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(Red cat's eyes illuminate on the backdrop. Foreboding music begins)

Narrator: This dread was not exactly a dread of physical evil, and yet I'm at a loss how otherwise to define it. I am almost ashamed to admit – yes, even in this felon's cell, I am almost ashamed to admit – that the terror and horror with which the animal inspired me, had been heightened by one of the merest chimeras it would be possible to conceive.

(Barton and Rosalind enter from opposite sides)

Rosalind: Has your attention been taken to the difference between the last cat we owned and this?

Barton: I have suffered many differences my good wife.

Rosalind: I speak of course, of the character of the mark of white hair upon its chest. It is the only difference that I can see. Its eye is gone, its manner the same yet this shock of white upon its chest. It is the only difference I can tell.

Barton: Forgive me if I seem a little scatter-brained, but I am certain that although that white patch of fur was large it was originally very indefinite.

Rosalind: To what do you allude?

Barton: It does seem that, by slow degrees, degrees almost imperceptible, and which for a long time my reason struggled to reject as fanciful – it has assumed a rigorous distinctness of outline.

Rosalind: I have not noticed this.

Barton: It has now the representation of an object

Rosalind: You are talking madness my dear.

(Rosalind pats Barton on the arm and exits)

Barton: **(to audience, nervously)** The white fur has indeed assumed a distinct shape. Or an object that I shudder to name. And for this, above all, I loathed, and dreaded, and would have rid myself of the monster had I dared. It was now, I say, the image of a hideous; of a ghastly thing; of the *gallows!*

(Music reaches a crescendo and fades. Cat's eyes fade out.)

Barton: Oh, mournful and terrible engine of Horror and of Crime – of Agony and of Death!

(Lights off. Barton exits)

Narrator: **(Sombre, remorseful)** And now was I indeed wretched beyond the wretchedness of mere Humanity. And a brute beast, whose fellow I had contemptuously destroyed. A brute beast to work out for me, for me a man, fashioned in the image of the High God. So much of insufferable woe! Alas! Neither by day nor by night knew I the blessing of Rest any more!

(Yellow cat's eyes illuminate on the backdrop)

Narrator: During the day the creature left me no moment alone; and, at night –

(Cats eyes turn red)

Narrator: – I awoke, hourly, from dreams of unutterable fear, to find the hot breath of the thing upon my face, and its vast weight, an incarnate Nightmare that I had no power to shake off incumbent eternally upon my heart! With these torments, the feeble remnant of the good within me succumbed. Evil thoughts were all I had, the darkest and most evil of thoughts.

(Cats eyes fade. Tabs close. Lights off)

Narrator: The moodiness of my usual temper increased to hatred of all things and of all mankind; while, from the sudden, frequent, and ungovernable outbursts of a fury to which I now blindly abandoned myself, my uncomplaining wife, alas! Was the most usual and the most patient of sufferers.

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Scene 3 - Cellar

(Scenery of the cellar is now in place which should be in two pieces with the ability to be wheeled or pulled apart to reveal the corpse behind it at the finale. Tabs open. Barton and Rosalind enter.)

Narrator: One day my wife accompanied me, upon some household errand, into the cellar of the old building which our poverty compelled us to inhabit. The cat followed us down the steep stairs, and, nearly throwing me headlong –

(Barton trips)

Narrator: – exasperated me to madness.

(Barton grabs an axe and raises it above his head)

Narrator: Uplifting an axe, and forgetting, in my wrath, the childish dread which had hitherto stayed my hand, I aimed a blow at the animal

(Rosalind grabs Barton's arm and prevents him striking the cat)

Narrator: My wife stopped my vengeance – goaded, by the interference, into a rage more than demoniacal, I withdrew my arm from her grasp and buried the axe in her brain.

(Barton swings the axe towards Rosalind with a scream. Lights out. SFX. Thunder. Lights up to Barton kneeling next to his now dead wife)

Narrator: She fell dead upon the spot, without a groan. This hideous murder accomplished, I set myself forthwith, and with entire deliberation, to the task of concealing the body.

(Barton stands and paces the stage, thinking, reacting to the narrator's monologue)

Narrator: I knew that I could not remove it from the house, either by day or by night, without the risk of being observed by the neighbours. Many projects entered my mind. At one period I thought of cutting the corpse into minute fragments, and destroying them by fire. At another, I resolved to dig a grave for it in the floor of the cellar. Again, I deliberated about casting it into the well in the yard, about packing it in a box, as if merchandise, with the usual arrangements, and so getting a porter to take it from the house.

Barton: Finally I hit upon what I considered a far better expedient than any of these. I determined to wall it up in the cellar; as the monks of the middle ages are recorded to have walled up their victims. **(Touching the backdrop at the point where it would split in two)** The walls are loosely constructed, recently and roughly plastered. I could readily displace the bricks at this point, insert the corpse, and wall the whole up as before, so that no eye could detect anything suspicious.

Narrator: And in this calculation I was not deceived. By means of a crow-bar I easily dislodged the bricks,

(Barton uses a crowbar on the division between the panels which slide apart. He then drags wife behind the panels)

Narrator: And, having carefully deposited the body I re-laid the whole structure as it originally stood. Having procured mortar, sand, and hair, with every possible precaution, I prepared a plaster which could not be distinguished from the old, and with this I very carefully went over the new brick-work.

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(Barton works in front of the gap which slowly closes to conceal his wife)

Barton: When I had finished, I felt satisfied that all was right. The wall did not present the slightest appearance of having been disturbed. The rubbish on the floor was picked up with the minutest care. I looked around triumphantly, and said to myself, here at least, then, my labour has not been in vain.

(Looking around the stage)

Narrator: My next step was to look for the beast which had been the cause of so much wretchedness; for I had, at length, firmly resolved to put it to death. Had I been able to meet with it, at the moment, there could have been no doubt of its fate; but it appeared that the crafty animal had been alarmed at the violence of my previous anger, and forbore to present itself in my present mood. It is impossible to describe, or to imagine, the deep, the blissful sense of relief which the absence of the detested creature occasioned up me.

(Barton looks relieved)

Barton: It did not make its appearance during the night, and thus for one night at least, since its introduction into the house, I soundly and tranquilly slept; aye, slept even with the burden of murder upon my soul! The second and the third day passed, and still my tormentor came not. Once again I breathed as a freeman. The monster, in terror, had fled the premises forever! **(Joyfully)** I should behold it no more! My happiness was supreme! The guilt of my dark deed disturbed me but little.

(SFX. Knock on the door)

Narrator: Upon the fourth day of the assassination, a party of the police came, very unexpectedly, into the house, and proceeded again to make rigorous investigation of the premises.

(Two policemen enter)

Barton: Welcome officers. To what do I owe the pleasure?

Policeman 1: We are still investigating the disappearance of your wife sir.

Barton: Welcome in. Search as you might. Hopefully you will find clues to her disappearance. For I miss her so.

Policeman 2: Will you accompany us in this search?

Barton: **(to audience)** I felt no embarrassment whatever to accompany them.

(Police start to look about the stage. Barton accompanies them)

Narrator: They left no nook or corner unexplored. At length, for the third or fourth time, they descended into the cellar.

(The police move downstage. Barton follows the instructions from the narrator)

Narrator: I quivered not in a muscle. My heart beat calmly as that of one who slumbers in innocence. I walked the cellar from end to end. I folded my arms upon my chest, and roamed easily to and fro. The police were thoroughly satisfied and prepared to depart.

Policeman 1: **(to policeman 2)** There is nothing here

Policeman 2: **(to policeman 1)** I agree. Let us take our leave and perhaps close this case as unsolved.

Narrator: The glee at my heart was too strong to be restrained. I burned to say if but one word, by way of triumph, and to render doubly sure their assurance of my guiltlessness.

(The Policemen make for the exit)

Barton: Gentlemen

(The Policemen stop and turn)

Barton: I delight to have allayed your suspicions. I wish you all health, and a little more courtesy. By the bye, gentlemen, this **(patting the cellar wall at the point they split in two)** this is a very well-constructed house. I may say an excellently well-constructed house. These walls –

(Police look a little confused and decide to ignore Barton. They turn to leave once more)

Barton: – are you going, gentlemen? - Look, these walls are solidly put together

(Barton hits the wall hard with his hand. A moment of silence and then SFX. Muted Cat cries)

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Narrator: No sooner had the reverberation of my blows sunk into silence, than I was answered by a voice from within the tomb! By a cry, at first muffled and broken, like the sobbing of a child and then quickly swelling –

(SFX. Cat cry which morphs into one long, loud, and continuous scream)

Barton: **(over the growing cat cries and screams)** Utterly anomalous and inhuman – a howl – a wailing shriek, half of horror and half of triumph, such as might have arisen only out of hell

(SFX. Loud cat screeching and thunder. Lighting effects to convey the mood.)

Barton: Conjointly from the throats of the damned in their agony and of the demons that exult in the damnation.

(Police run to the wall, push Barton aside and feign pulling the stones away. The walls part. Lights off. Spotlight on the upright corpse of Rosalind – in quite a horrible state so as to shock the audience. On her head is a cat, open mouthed, one burning red eye.

(SFX. Cat cries and squeals. Music builds.)

Narrator: **(with a reverberation effect on the voice)** There on the clotted gore sat the hideous beast whose craft had seduced me into murder, and whose informing voice had consigned me to the hangman. I had walled the monster up within the tomb!

(SFX. Final cat screech and vicious meow. Thunder. Lights flash. Walls slam closed. Lights off. Music ends with a crescendo. Tabs closed.)