

Episode One: Illusions in the Dark  
"Superstitious"  
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Intro:

**\*Reed/Black Cats Intro\***

Prince Setna stole a book from a tomb at the behest of those inhabiting it. Fleeing to Memphis in Egypt, he crosses paths with a beautiful woman attended by a litter of servants. Setna, so overcome with lust for the beauty, inquires about the woman only to discover that her name is Taboubu, and she is the daughter of a priest to Bastet, a goddess with the head of a black cat. Like any man overcome with lust, he pleads with Taboubu; begs her to sleep with him. He'll even pay her. Taboubu sees this as an opportunity and says, yes, she'll consummate a relationship on a few conditions: One, he must come to the Temple of Bastet. Without so much as a thought, Prince Setna happily agrees. But before he can eagerly bed the lady, she abruptly stops him stating that there are other conditions that must first be met. Two, the prince must sign over all of his possessions and property. Three, he must also call his children to the Temple of Bastet, and they too, must agree to sign over all property and possessions. Finally, Setna must murder his children (so they won't be able to re-neg on the earlier signing of this paperwork. Setna, eager to lie with Taboubu, poses no questions and immediately completes the tasks at hand. The time has come, and Taboubu, happy in her achievement, wishes to appease the prince. She chooses a risque, almost sheer dress to display the curves of her body. Prince Setna can no longer hold in his urges, feverishly undresses, and runs to her. It is in this moment that the prince finds himself naked and standing in the middle of the street; his "little Setna" covered by a flower pot. Coincidentally, the pharaoh walks past and quells Setna's fears by telling him that his children are alive, he still owns his property and possessions, and what the prince recently witnessed was an illusion. An illusion set up by the goddess Bastet. In fact, it's rumored that Bastet transformed from cat goddess to Taboubu in order to teach the prince a lesson. It worked. Understanding the error of his ways, Setna returned the stolen book to the tomb from whence it came.

The ancient Egyptians revered cats, and to kill a cat, accidentally or intentionally, could be punishable by death. The cats of ancient Egypt were thought to be protectors, and, saving the Egyptians from potential plague and illness, cats killed off an unwanted rodent and cobra population. But the

cat is also known to be a tender and loving creature. It only makes sense that cat be personified as a god. Bast, also known as, Bastet, became the black cat goddess associated with domesticity and the home, a goddess of women, and keeper of secrets. When the temple of Bastet was excavated in 1887, more than 300,000 mummified cats were discovered, all paid in homage to their beloved defender of the innocent.

And although the ancient Egyptians held special places in their hearts for four-legged felines, across the earth and through time, these lovable creatures would spiral perilously through the realm of the superstitious...

### **\*Superstitious Intro\***

If I ask you your thoughts on cats, you may have various feelings. I generally hear, "Awww," or, "If I see a cat, I'll shoot it," or, something to the effect of, "I like them, but I'm more of a dog person." But, if I ask for your thoughts on *black cats* . . . (Pause.) I'm willing to bet that your minds resort to something dealing with superstition. When I ask my friends, colleagues, students; anyone about their thoughts on black cats, I generally get something to the effect of, "they're the cat of the devil," or, "don't let a black cat cross your path," and sometimes, "black cats are witches." And it's true: all of these things are or have been associated with the black cat.

Whether you're a novice or an expert in the histories depicted in George Lucas's "Star Wars", you've probably heard of the sith. "Star Wars" depicts the sith as an ancient religious sect whose fall from the light sent them on a corkscrewed ride into the darkness. Their lighter foes: The Jedi. But the word 'sith' planted its roots before George Lucas and his "Star Wars".

It is in Celtic folklore where the cait sith ("caught shee") appear. Described as unusually large black cats with supernatural powers, the cait sith were feared by many, and were known to steal the souls of the dead *before* the gods could carry them off to their lives after death. The Scottish Gaelic spelling of sith ("shee")? S.I.T.H. While the Celts of Ireland spelled this word S.I.D.H.E, the meaning and pronunciations are the same. The etymology of the of the word "sith" dates back to the 900s and meant "since". As in, "from then till now" or "between a particular past time and present." One could argue that George Lucas's sith have been a dark order *since* they diverged from the ancient Jedi order. One might also argue that the cait sith ("caught shee") have been in Ireland and Scotland *since* the third century. And with that came the cait sith.

The Celts feared the cait sith, and in a practice called Taghairm (**tah-garam**) cats would be set ablaze in order to call up a demon black cat who would grant the wishes of their torturers. It is also said that during Samhain (**sah-win**), what we now attribute to Halloween, the Celts were to place a saucer of milk outside the home in order to appease the cait sith. Those who left the saucer outside were said to be blessed; those who didn't found their cows cursed and unable to produce milk. The Celts also believed that a witch could transform herself into a cat eight times. If she chose to transform a ninth time, she would remain a cat for the remainder of her days. The myth suggests that perhaps this is why it's said cats have nine lives.

The growing superstition surrounding the black cat found its way into the Catholic Church quickly, and several popes both feared and condemned them. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Pope Gregory IX issued a papal bull entitled *The Vox in Rama* condemning black cats, believing that Lucifer appears to the weak as a dark figure from the corner and "his skin is coarse and covered with fur like a cat" (Pope Gregory IX, 1232). By the late 1400s, Pope Innocent VIII also expressed his loathing toward the cat believing it to be, "the devil's favourite animal," and a deity to witches. In the late 15<sup>th</sup> century it is Edward, Duke of York who confirms the early superstition of the cat with the devil. He says, "[...]if any beast has the devil's spirit in him without doubt it is the cat, both the wild and the tame" (O'Shea, 2017).

But superstitions regarding black cats would really take hold in 1560s England. Legend has it, a man and his son were walking down the street in the dark when a black cat crossed their path. The pair picked up stones and hurled them at the cat, who, now hurt, scurried to hide behind the home of a woman in the village who had often been deemed a witch by the townspeople. At the break of dawn, and with the father and son pair watching and waiting for the black cat, the old maid exited her abode for town. The pair noticed that the woman was limping and bruised. It was at this point obvious: the father and son team injured the cat who shape-shifted back into her natural witch-self. Thus, the witch hysteria would take flight, and witches and their black cat familiars would burn.

It is also during this time, and because the black cat had already been established by the Catholic Church as Lucifer in disguise, the feline was being hunted down and slaughtered at the worst possible time. Plagues ravaged England between 1348 and 1665. It is believed that with the diminishing black

cat population, there were less and less cats to kill off the rats infested with plague filled fleas.

Queen Elizabeth I, daughter of King Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, despised witchcraft as much as she despised cats. On her coronation day in 1558, she celebrated by burning cats in wicker baskets paraded through the streets. It is Elizabeth I whose Witchcraft Act of 1563 also associates the cat with wickedness, and many a cat was burned with his familiar witch.

119 years after the coronation of Elizabeth Tudor the first, Englishman Charles Hatton attended a celebration in honor of the virgin queen. In a letter to his brother dated November 27, 1677, he wrote:

"Last Saturday the coronation of Queen Elizabeth was solemnized in the city with mighty bonfires and the burning of a most costly pope, carried by four persons in divers habits, and the effigies of 2 devils whispering in his ears, his belly filled full of live cats who squawled most hideously as soon as they felt the fire; the common saying all the while, it was the language of the pope and the devil in a dialogue betwixt them," (Hatton, p.159).

English superstitions regarding black cats traveled to America with the witch hysteria and are apparent in the 1692 Salem Witch Trials. Mini-myths started to take hold, and stories of the supernatural black cat became ingrained in local lore. Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Black Cat" made its debut in 1843. The narrator comments, "[...] 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" (Poe, 719). The story continues with the narrator, a drunkard who, in a stupor, cuts out the eye of his black cat named Pluto. For the record, Pluto is the Roman name for the Greek god Hades; you get the picture. Some time passes and in another drunken state, he hangs the cat from a nearby tree, killing the beast. Feeling remorse for his wrongdoings, the narrator picks up another black cat who remarkably resembles the cat he had previously hanged. The new black cat somehow manages to serve the narrator his due judgment.

In the deep south another supernatural story regarding the black cat would appear. "The Black Cat's Message" tells the tale of a hard working man whose wife picks up an orange stray cat. The neighbors frighten her by suggesting that the new family member is either a ghost or a witch. The man goes to work one day, and after a long day of hauling and woodcutting he rushes through the woods toward his home to beat the darkness. On his way he spots a group of black cats, nearly invisible

in the night, standing in the road with a stretcher. One of the cats speaks to him requesting, "Sir, please tell Aunt Kan that Polly Grundy is dead." Several other black cats stop him on his journey toward home, making the same request. Frightened by the clowder of talking cats, the man begins running. He returns home and shares these strange happenings with his wife. Their beloved orange cat, hearing of Polly Grundy's demise jumps up and shouts, "Polly Grundy is dead? Then I am Queen of the Witches!"

We're all aware of the belief that a black cat crossing one's path can be considered bad luck, but the superstitions vary. In Yorkshire, England, it's considered to be lucky to own a black cat, but unlucky if one happens to cross your path. If you dream of a black cat, it may merely be a sign of psychic intuition. If you see a black cat from behind, it may signify a bad omen. If a black cat crosses the path of a funeral procession, it's believed that this foretells the death of another family member.

But not everything black cat related is considered bad luck.

The ancient Romans were cat-less until around the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Having visited the Egyptians numerous times, and falling in love with their obelisks and then stealing them, it only stood to reason that once they fell in love with the cat, they would steal that as well. The cat came to Rome and was quickly domesticated. The Romans saw the cat as a sacred animal and began associating it with the Roman goddess of the hunt, Diana.

According to Scottish lore, a strange black cat sitting on a porch is supposed to bring prosperity to the owner. If you find a white hair on a black cat, that's also considered good luck. In Japan, black cats are also considered lucky and are sought after by single women. In Appalachian folklore it is said that if a person has a sty on his eyelid, he is to rub the sty with the tail of a black cat; the sty will disappear.

The black cat has certainly made an impact across the globe as an influential symbol, be it bad or good. Their legends and truths stick with us, and regardless of your superstition or lack thereof regarding this historical feline, the black cat continues to stir interest. Like the ancient Egyptians, we give a certain respect to this mysterious and beautiful creature, preserving them and their superstitions in history.

"Superstitious" is a bi-weekly podcast seeking to explore superstitions, their origins and places in history, and to seek out what contemporary superstitions are still knocking at our doors.

This episode of "Superstitious" is dedicated to Rowan Cabarrus Community College's 2017 summer American Literature I students. Your enthusiasm was the inspiration for this venture, and I want to thank you all.

If you enjoyed the podcast, please join Superstitious on Facebook @superstitiouspodcast, on Twitter @superstitiouspo, and Instagram @superstitiouspodcast. And if you have any superstitions you would like to share, I'd love to hear from you! E-mail me at: [superstitiouspodcast@gmail.com](mailto:superstitiouspodcast@gmail.com). That's s-u-p-e-r-s-t-i-t-i-o-u-s podcast at gmail.com.

"Superstitious" is available on iTunes and Stitcher, so if you enjoyed the show, make sure to subscribe and rate!

Join me for the next episode of Superstitions on Monday, September 18<sup>th</sup>.

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