In her study of fantastic literature, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, Christine Brooke-Rose offers a reading of Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Black Cat” (1843), where the narrative is presented to us as an example of the pure fantastic.¹ After this exemplary, but rather brief *explication de texte*, a more thoroughgoing reading of Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), covering more than a hundred pages, supplements and corroborates the theoretical and narratological points Christine Brooke-Rose has arrived at in the former analysis.²

Brooke-Rose’s approach to Poe’s “The Black Cat” is clearly informed by the terminology and methodology of French structuralism, and the role of the encoded reader is emphasized in her *exposé*. Furthermore, Brooke-Rose focuses on the hermeneutic code of the text³ and reads the narrative in the light of a series of enigmas, some of which are left unsolved, focusing in particular on the beginning and the ending of the story.

What is still left undecided at the end of the narrative is in the first place the riddle of the cats (is there one or are there two cats?) and secondly the question of the natural or supernatural character of the key-events of the narrative – thus “The Black Cat” corresponds very well with Todorov’s emphasis on the structural element of hesitation *vis-à-vis* a natural or a supernatural explanation or interpretation in a

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¹ All references to Poe’s works are to *Collected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, III (*Tales and Sketches*), given in parentheses in the text (see Chapter 5, n.2).
² Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, 117-24 (on “The Black Cat”) and 128-229 (on *The Turn of the Screw*).
Christine Brooke-Rose’s two unsolved enigmas relating to the plot of “The Black Cat” are not the only hermeneutical problems or riddles presented to the reader in Poe’s narrative. However, even though these two enigmas play an essential role in the text – being explicitly pointed out at the beginning and, more indirectly, at the end of the story – it is my contention that other enigmas are equally important, in structural terms, in Poe’s tale. Quite a few of these enigmas are, in one way or another, linked up with the notion of writing as well as with the protagonist-narrator’s attempts to come to semiotic terms with his surroundings, to read the signs of the times.

What is thematized over and over again in “The Black Cat” is a hermeneutical crisis, where the protagonist tries in vain to find hidden clues and secret messages, transmitted to him from the external world. In this connection it remains highly questionable whether his way of decoding his surroundings is adequate or correct – whether the signs are actually there or exist only in his imagination, and whether he has succeeded in grasping their true meaning. This whole emphasis on code-breaking and on semiotic undecidability is clearly in accordance with Todorov’s classic theory of the fantastic as well as with later attempts to modify and elaborate on the French-Bulgarian critic’s narratological scheme.

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4 Todorov, *The Fantastic*, 25: “The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (my emphasis); Todorov, *Introduction*, 29: “Le fantastique, c’est l’hésitation éprouvée par un être qui ne connaît que les lois naturelles, face à un événement en apparence surnaturel.”