

SUPERSTITIONS: BLACK CATS

Songs, poems, movies, and numerous last-minute Halloween costumes have been devoted to the timeless superstition that if a black cat crosses your path, it is bad luck.

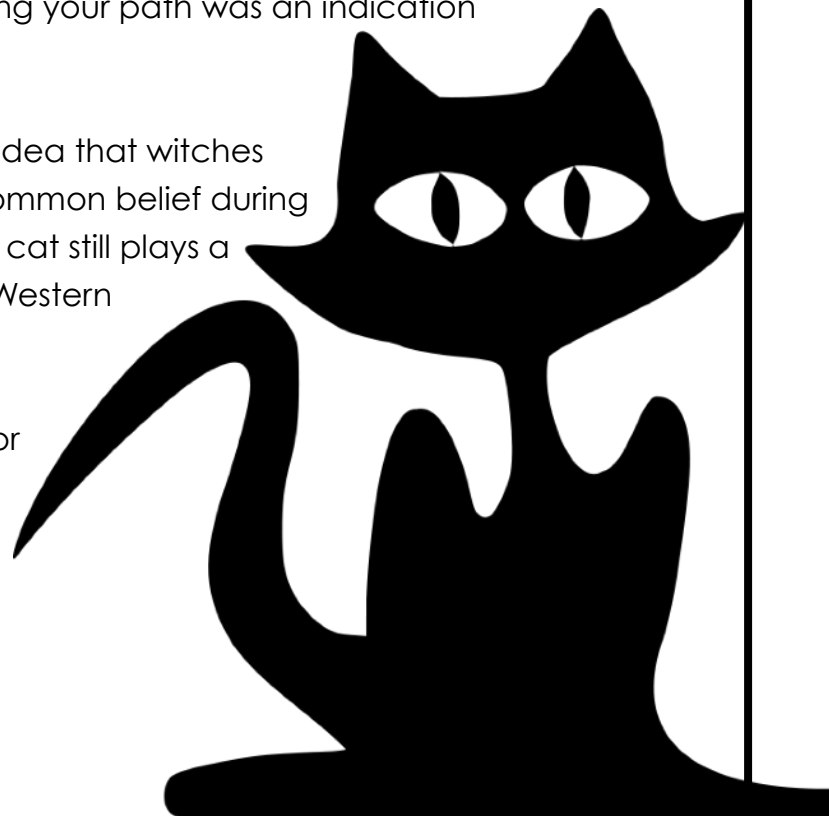
Black cats weren't always feared or considered bad luck. In fact, in Egyptian times, cats were held in high esteem, and to kill one was a crime. It wasn't until the European middle-ages that black cats began to lose their esteem as they became associated with witches.

The hysteria of witches and magic had started to play a prominent role in Europe, and cats were often cared for and fed by old woman living in poverty. These women were often accused of witchery and, unfortunately, their cats were also deemed guilty by association.

Folklore tells a story of a father and son traveling when a black cat crossed their path and dove for cover. They threw rocks at the cat, and the injured animal scurried out into a woman's house who was suspected of being a witch. The next day the father and son saw the old woman, who was now bruised and limping. They believed this to be more than a coincidence. It was this story that led to the idea that a black cat walking in your path could possibly be a witch in disguise. An alternative belief from this time was that after seven years of service to a witch, a black cat would then turn into a witch themselves. Consequently, a black cat crossing your path was an indication of bad luck, as the devil was watching you.

This belief made its way to America, and the idea that witches could transform into black cats became a common belief during the Salem Witch Trials. Even today, the black cat still plays a central role in Halloween celebrations in the Western world, and it is seen as a bad omen.

It is important to mention that this is not true for all countries. In some cultures, the black cat is still seen as a symbol of good luck. For example, the Scottish believe that a black cat visiting your home is a sign of prosperity.



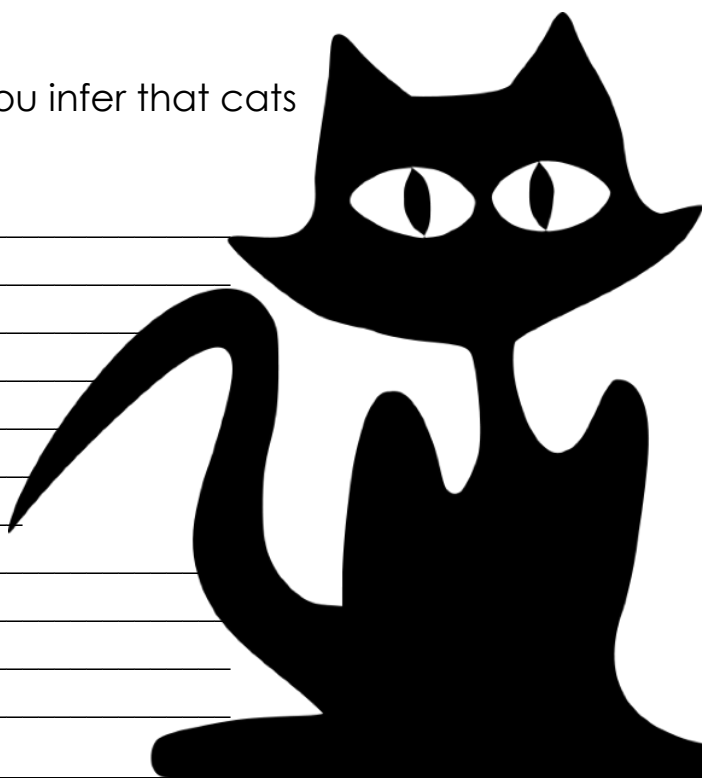
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Answer the questions in complete sentences using information from the reading.

1. Discuss the two countries from the reading that view cats in a positive light.

2. How did the superstition of cats being bad luck start? How did the belief travel to North America?

3. Based on the folkloric story, how can you infer that cats are witches in disguise?



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TEACHER ANSWER KEY

1. Discuss the two countries from the reading that view cats in a positive light.

The two countries from the reading that viewed cats in a positive light were Egypt and Scotland. In early Egyptian times, cats were held in high esteem and to kill one was actually a crime. In Scotland, people believe that a black cat visiting your home is a sign of prosperity.

2. How did the superstition of cats being bad luck start? How did the belief travel to North America?

It wasn't until the European middle-ages that black cats began to lose their esteem as they became associated with witches. Old women living in poverty, who people thought were witches, would take care of stray cats and the cats were deemed guilty by association. The belief that black cats could transform into witches made its way to America during the Salem Witch Trials. Since that time, the black cat has played a central role in Halloween celebrations in the Western world and is seen as a bad omen.

3. Based on the folkloric story, how can you infer that cats are witches in disguise?

The story from the reading says that after a father and son threw rocks at a cat, it ran into a house of someone suspected of being a witch. The next day the old woman was bruised and limping. This infers the possibility that the old woman took the form of the cat and was limping/bruised because of the injuries sustained by the rocks that were thrown.

