

CATS IN HEMINGWAY'S "CAT IN THE RAIN"

Hiroshi TAKAHASHI

Cat in the Rain wasnt about Hadley. I know that you and Zelda always thought it was. When I wrote that we were at Rapallo but Hadley was 4 months pregnant with Bumby. The Inn Keeper was the one at Cortina D'Ampezzo and the man and the girl were a harvard kid and his wife that I'd met at Genoa. Hadley never made a speech in her life about wanting a baby because she had been told various things by her doctor and I'd—no use going into all that.

The only story in which Hadley figures is Out of Season which was an almost literal transcription of what happened.¹⁾

Hemingway's letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald dated c. 24 December 1924 provides a few hints vital to a fundamental understanding of his allegedly best made short story, "Cat in the Rain," although his biographers are both suspicious of the validity of the statement, declaring that the story is, along with "Out of Season" and "Cross-Country Snow," about the disintegration of his marriage to Hadley, his first wife.²⁾ First, Hemingway wished to suggest, by pointing out that "Hadley was 4 months pregnant," that, while the author and his wife had succeeded in having a baby, the couple in "Cat in the Rain" were unable to do so, a basic situation of the story that made the American wife behave like a cat on hot bricks. Second, there is a possibility that "a harvard kid and his wife" may have been Mr. and Mrs. Chard Powers Smith, who were satirized in "Mr. and Mrs. Elliot," he as impotent and she as lesbian. Smith was one of the expatriates hanging about the Latin Quarter, who had studied at Yale and at Harvard Law School.³⁾ Assuming that the husband in the story was intended to be impotent like Mr. Elliot, his seemingly callous indifference to the jitters of his wife would be given an illuminating explanation which has hitherto been ignored. Third, that "Hadley never made a speech in her life about wanting

1) Carlos Baker (ed.), *Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters, 1917-1961* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1981), p.180.

2) Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), pp.107 & 580.

Jeffrey Meyers, *Hemingway: A Biography* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1985), pp.144 & 153.

3) Meyers, *Hemingway: A Biography*, p.144.

a baby” means, conversely speaking, that the heroine in the story is making a speech about wanting a baby. In fact, however, the American wife makes a speech not about wanting “a baby,” but about wanting “a kitty.” That is, “a kitty,” the author intended, stands for an implicit symbol for “a baby.” Which occasions no surprise, for it has already been pointed out by several critics.⁴⁾ All I would like to stress here is that the author himself has long since made it clear.

“Cat in the Rain” should be regarded as the same buoyant caricature of a young couple poor at having a baby as “Mr. and Mrs. Elliot,” not as a depressingly realistic picture of the author’s disintegrating marriage to Hadley like “Out of Season,” in which he put forth “an almost literal transcription of what happened.” It is worthy of notice, however, that, compared with the narrative style of a filthy gossip in “Mr. and Mrs. Elliot,” the coolly descriptive form of irony in “Cat in the Rain” can be said to have crystallized into a first-rate one-act tragi-comedy, enacted in a symbolical and mythical microcosm, where “[e]very detail of speech and gesture carries a full weight of meaning,” as John V. Hagopian puts it.⁵⁾

To realize how the two cats have come to figure in the story, we have to recall the following two biographical facts. Around February 1923, during their stay at Rapallo, a seaside resort in the north of Italy, Carlos Baker writes, Hemingway watched the antics of a pair of cats on a green table in the hotel garden. The scene reminded him of T.S. Eliot’s newly published poem, *The Waste Land*, which Ezra Pound had lent him, and urged him to write a fragment: “The big cat gets on the small cat. Sweeney gets on Mrs. Porter.” He began to make some notes for a short story, which would be completed as “Cat in the Rain” in Paris by August 1924.⁶⁾ The unexpected ending of the story, where a big cat is offered to the wife, may have been drawn from the fact that a large cat was presented to the Hemingways in Paris around April 1924 by Kitty Cannell, a beautiful professional dancer. The dancer often

4) John V. Hagopian, “Symmetry in ‘Cat in the Rain,’” in *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway: Critical Essays*, ed. Jackson J. Benson (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1975), p.232.

Ramesh Srivastava, “Hemingway’s ‘Cat in the Rain’: An Interpretation,” *The Literary Criterion* (Mysore), IX (Summer 1970), p.80.

John D. Magee, “Hemingway’s CAT IN THE RAIN,” *Explicator*, XXVI (September 1967), Item 8.

5) Hagopian, “Symmetry in ‘Cat in the Rain,’” p.230.

6) Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story*, pp.107 & 580.

Gerald B. Nelson & Glory Jones, *Hemingway: Life and Works* (New York: Facts On File Publications, 1984), p.37.

lent a helping hand to Hadley, who was forced to "live an unnecessarily poverty-stricken life in well-worn clothes and a dingy flat," as Baker puts it. When she knew that the author resented this, she "took a defiant pleasure in setting 'a bad example to a submissive wife.'"⁷⁾ Something of an emotional tension between Hemingway and Kitty Cannell might shed some light on the deus-ex-machina style finale of "Cat in the Rain," where the big cat is not so much a blessing as a tit for tat to the recipient.

In short, Hemingway's intention must have been to get "Mrs. Porter" so frustrated by "Sweeney's" impuissance as to reiterate desperately futile requests for the impossible and, to invite her attention, to throw "the small cat" out in the rain unattended to be replaced, oddly enough, by "the big cat" in the end.

Although the image of a kitty may be accepted as a symbol, it never follows that all can be explained just by the only equation: a kitty is equal to a baby. In the story two real cats appear at the beginning and end, and at five instances the heroine refers to a cat or kitty which she wants or wanted to have. It deserves our careful attention that these cats or kitties may have a variety of implications which differ delicately from one another. We have to perform autopsies on these cats or kitties with the maximum of boldness as well as with the greatest possible care. What is more, the wife's idle fancies conjured up by the hotel-keeper's obeisance should also be thrown a fresh light on in order to detect the ingeniously covered secret of the author's skill in providing implicit subtleties in metaphorical revelation by means of slight changes of wording and imagery.

For a starter, the cat trying to make herself so compact under one of the dripping green tables stands, in the eye of the wife, for exactly what she is like—lonely and uncared for. Trying to rescue the cat in the rain is a substitute for salvation of herself intended to demonstrate to her husband her wish for some fun. (Back in the room she laments to George, "It isn't any fun to be a poor kitty out in the rain.") That seems to be doomed to failure. For one thing, the husband will not take action. (Eve can produce nothing unless Adam takes the initiative.) For another, against his advice she refuses to adopt any practical means to keep off rain with. Just before her eyes a man crossing the empty square to the café is wearing a rubber cape. Two reasons for her rejection of devices: repulsion toward her husband and tacit reliance on prompt and gratuitous service expected from the hotel-keeper. The hotel owner is, as it were, a sort of guardian angel paying unremitting attention to her to

7) Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story*, p.124.

offer services whenever needed. An umbrella is offered, "of course," when she stands in the doorway looking out. What is important here, however, is that, despite the "big hands" that he has, the padrone is anything but an almighty agent capable of making all her wishes satisfied, with the extent of perception and aid rather limited. At this stage, all he knows is that what she needs now is an umbrella, and it is beyond the reach of his understanding that what she really wishes to have is a cat in the rain. Such a limited comprehension of the padrone provides a basic situation which leads effectively to the unexpected presentation of Pandora's box at the close of the drama.

Disappointed to learn that the cat is gone, the American wife suddenly turns into "the American girl," thus wifely dignity giving way to childish willfulness. As she is laughed at by the maid who has found the American girl trying to catch just a cat in the rain, she gets hurt and storms in English at the Italian maid, insisting that she wanted a kitty so much. Like a small pet animal which has abruptly fled away from the hand, the poor kitty now seems to her of unproportionately enormous importance. That is the first step toward a gradual change in the symbolic meaning of the kitty.

When the American girl passes the office on her way back to the room, the padrone bows to her from his desk. At the moment "[s]omething felt very small and tight inside the girl." She has now a momentary feeling of having a most improbable delusion materialized by the padrone; she feels as if she had been blessed with an immaculate conception like the Virgin Mary through the intermediation of the guardian angel, a fantasy that reveals her hidden desire for pregnancy. The fantasy turns a somersault: "The padrone made her feel very small and at the same time really important. She had a momentary feeling of being of supreme importance." Now she imagines herself to be the baby born of the Holy Mother, a preposterous reverie that suggests her covered wish to be embraced in the arms of a devoted mother with love and respect adequate to the child of the Supreme Being. To sum up, the above two descriptions concerning the girl's feeling instigated by the padrone show her double desire: a desire for conception of a baby and a desire to be nestled in a parent's arms as a baby.

Back in the room in a recovered coolness, she gives George a summarizing explanation of her behavior, suggesting that he try to give her some fun. The image of "a poor kitty" is used as a reminder of her forlorn plight. Sitting in front of the mirror of the dressing table, she tries to bring her husband's attention to the effect expected from the growth of her hair, a one-man demonstration of her wish to be loved and respected as a woman/wife. He does not seem interested in the plan. She goes over to the window and looks out,

devising the next step. Again she expresses her wish for the growth of her hair, whose big knot at the back she can feel. The word "feel" is a key word that helps create the image of a kitty which sits on her lap and purrs when she "strokes" it. At this stage, "a kitty" begins to contain in it a symbolic meaning suggestive of "a baby." It may also be accepted that behind the kitty symbol lurks her own feminine desire to be stroked and caressed.

George's lukewarm response prompts her to add to the list of items required, a panorama of all of her wishes unleashed. She does not forget to include "a kitty" among the number. Here, too, "a kitty" can be said to be an implicit symbol for "a baby," but it is not so much a baby stroked and cuddled in her arms as an infant who is no more than one piece of furniture embellishing her fancied home in which her wifely/womanly/motherly pride, dignity, and integration could be gratified. She now tries to urge her husband to assume the responsibilities of husbandhood/manhood/parenthood.

After giving a flat refusal, Adam creeps into his own cave again to pursue his self-sufficient interest. Eve seems to have lost the day. There seems to be nothing she can do but wait and see. The fact is, Adam is unable, not unwilling, to get going. Eve looks out of the window where it is quite dark now and still raining in the palm trees, circumstances suggestive of sterility or suppressed productivity. Now she decides to single out from the six demanded items the most imperative that she expects would be perfectly possible—"a cat." She says, "I want a cat. I want a cat now. If I can't have long hair or any fun, I can have a cat." It is observable that the denomination of the fluffy creature has suggestively changed from "a kitty" to "a cat." John D. Magee has aptly, but not deeply enough, it seems to me, noted that the change of wording is very important here.⁸⁾ If "a kitty" is an appellative used as a pet name which implies youngness, cuteness, and smallness, "a cat" may be said to have an implication of relative adulthood, full-grownness, and bigness. Assuming that the author has intended to put some emphasis on the contrast between great and small size in the pet animals by that change of wording, then it may follow that the image of "a kitty" hitherto used by the American wife/girl stands for something/someone so small and lovable as to need care and protection: the afterimage of the small cat mounted by the big cat on the green table in the garden of a Rapallo hotel, the poor kitty trying to keep dry under a dripping green table, the American wife/girl herself utterly alienated and bereft, or "a baby" nestled and stroked in a mother's arms, while the picture of "a cat" viewed from the wife's standpoint represents something/someone abruptly expanded, a paterfamilias who should be in charge: the

8) Magee, "Hemingway's CAT IN THE RAIN," Item 8.

afterimage of the big cat getting on the small cat on the garden table in a Rapallo hotel, or the husband himself expected to satisfy his wife's feminine hunger for caresses. It is none other than her own husband that the American wife wants now. She resorts to quite a simple symbol whose implication is sure to be understood on the spot by him, although such a claim may be too humiliating for her to utter. Adam refuses to listen, however, thus entrenching himself even more defensively in a silent niche for his own intellectual pursuit. Eve looks out of the window where the light has come on in the square. Will the light come on in the darkness of her heart?

Knocks at the door. The maid appears with a big tortoise-shell cat held in her arms. The big cat swung down against her body does not give an agreeable image of a pet cat, such as the wife would like to have to sit on her lap and purr when she strokes it. Nor does it give a pitiable image of the poor kitty crouched under the dripping green table. It must be an arrogantly satiated cat, unlikely to excite her sympathy. The padrone, again as her guardian angel, has extended his helping hand, but his goodwill is always destined to miss the mark; his ability to understand the situations is so fatally limited, as was the case with the scene where he offered her an umbrella. In this case, there is a triple vital misconception on the part of the padrone: (1) He never knows that it is the forlorn plight of the poor kitty in the rain that induced the wife to try to rescue it; (2) He never knows that it is "a baby" that she is implying when she began to refer to "a kitty" which she hoped would purr on her lap when stroked; and, (3) He never knows that when the big tortoise-shell cat arrived she had already played her hole card: she had claimed to have her husband in action, not a real cat, much less the big cat pressed tight and swung down against the maid's body. To sum up the story, just when Eve's desire for the cat in the rain has changed and swollen into a desire for Adam himself, the replacement for that desired cat is belatedly sent to Eve by her guardian angel despite the prospect of failure in serving the purpose.

The curtain has now fallen upon the big cat's arrival. Yet, there seems to be something left to nurture our imagination. We are entitled to imagine freely how the American couple will respond to the intruding cat. The American wife will utter a cry of joy, welcoming it with her hands extended. Only, it is certain that a tear will trickle down her cheek. George will also be pleased to say, "Congratulations. You've got exactly what you wished to have." And it is also certain that a cynical smile will hover around his mouth. It will not stop raining in the Garden of Eden.

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