



Who is in the Rain? A Metaphorical Probe into the Cat-Woman Identity Dilemma in Ernest Hemingway's Short Story 'Cat in the Rain'

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to investigate semantically and metaphorically the cat-woman identity dilemma projected in the short story from a comparison of the plight of the cat and the American wife in their respective roles. The American wife's husband remains glued to his book while the cat's owners are busy with cleanliness issues during rain. Hemingway creatively demonstrates how their frustration as a pet and a guest in the hotel respectively, merges them into a unique psychological oneness. The rainy weather rouses in both a sensation desperately seeking care and caress with nobody around to respond to it. They both miss what they need in their physical and psychological constitutions although the chilly atmosphere is conducive for many sensational adventures. Hemingway's creativity in representing their pathetic condition precipitated by the conflicts within them is tremendously powerful. While identifying the metaphors he has used in presenting this portrait of psychological loneliness, an attempt is made here to assess their semantic and symbolic impact. As the paper is designed for study purposes, Hemingway's trajectory is followed by systematically analysing the achievements he makes at every juncture in his narration. Accordingly, the discussion under the twelve themes: 1) cat-woman metaphors; 2) the cat and the American wife; 3) The Hotel Riviera, Rapallo, Italy; 4) setting; 5) cat rescue mission; 6) the hotelier's courtesies; 7) cat search; 8) disappointment; 9) self-realization; 10) self-search; 11) cat solution to frustration; and 12) godsend of a cat, aims at a coherent and thorough understanding of the short story.

KEYWORDS: Hemingway, 'Cat in the Rain', self-pity, self-search, self-realization, paraphernalia, identity dilemma; sexual desire

INTRODUCTION

American novelist and short-story writer Ernest Miller Hemingway (1899-1961) won the hearts of many readers all over the world. During World War I, not yet 19 years old, he operated as an ambulance driver for the American Red Cross. On July 8, 1918, he was injured on the Austro-Italian front at Fossalta di Piave. While at the hospital, he fell in love with a Red Cross nurse, Agnes von Kurowsky, who declined to marry him. These were some of his experiences he was never to forget. Instead of hating humanity for various debacles he had as such, he managed to turn all the negative energy he gathered thereby, into great pieces of literature. His great works such as *The Sun Never Rises*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Farewell to Arms*, and *Homage to Catalonia* had a seminal influence on American and British fiction in the 20th century. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954 for his novella *The Old Man and the Sea*, being noted both for the intense masculinity of his tone, the unblemished sincerity of his imagery, and the unchallenged precision of his prose style. Throughout his life, he made ruthless probes into the

complex realities he had to wrestle with. His short story 'Cat in the Rain' exemplifies his perception of the human problems of his time.

CAT-WOMAN METAPHORS IN SOCIAL DISCOURSE

Today, the synonym for 'cat', 'pussy' which means in slang 'vagina' (or perhaps more precisely, vulva) is used to call a woman to mean a "soft, warm, furry thing". It also has become a term of endearment for girls, women, and even effeminate men. According to etymologists, it can be traced back to the Old Norse *puss* meaning "pouch" or "pocket" which compares with the etymology of 'vagina' derived from the Latin *vagina* meaning "sheath" or "scabbard" (Langour.US). Accordingly, the word *pussy* has both positive and negative connotations. The cat is observed to be agile and nimble, able to move with silence and stealth ... fiercely independent, choosing to live on its own terms ... and not content to be controlled or tamed. A cat is also a creature that is not easily deterred, able to adapt to any situation and thrive. ... Finally, when life is identified with cat energy, it is observed to be a life led with a sense of curiosity, always engaged in exploring



and trying new things. Despite the agony of being pushed outside of one's comfort zone, with cat energy, one is always up for a challenge, with a view to an adventure, and always looking for new experiences. (Crystal: 2023) The American wife in Hemingway's 'Cat in the Rain' demonstrates some of these qualities.

The correlative use of cat and woman metaphors in defining different personalities in society is common in many cultures. While "a metaphor is an imaginative way of describing something by referring to something else which is the same in a particular way" (collinsdictionary.com), there has been for thousands of years a tendency in many cultures, in both oral and written discourse, to draw similarities between feline and feminine character traits (Merek, 2023) particular to various individuals. These observations made from a female perspective help establish cat-woman mixed metaphors like the one that is used to characterizing the woman Catlin who is misidentified as a cat throughout the short story 'The Cat' by Subramaniam (1964). The positive characteristics of the cat: "active, agile, graceful, athletic, quick, nimble, smart, resourceful, cunning, and independent," as well as the negative ones: "aloof, unforgiving, overly curious, vain, and spaz" enumerated by Crystal (2023) emerge in the portrait of Catlin. It is evident in Merek's (2023) claim that while felines figure prominently in world mythologies, in the pantheon of gods and deities, the majestic feline has reigned supreme for over 30,000 years. Thus, the cat-human relationship has evolved over time into an ever-expanding mutual connection and appreciation (Boehringer Ingelheim International, 2023).

THE CAT AND THE AMERICAN WIFE IN THE SHORT STORY

From the above cultural and etymological representation of 'cat' in social discourse, it should be clear that, by the year 1925 when the short story 'Cat in the Rain' was published, the tendency to allude to a woman like a cat had become thoroughly established in society. Tearle (2023) reports that 'Cat in the Rain' was supposedly inspired by a specific event in 1923 when, while staying at the home of Ezra Pound (a famous cat-lover) in Rapallo, Italy, Hemingway's wife Hadley befriended a stray kitten. So, Hemingway recalls in the short story how, while they were living in Paris, Hadley felt when she was compelled to forget her dream of having a cat because of poverty.

The cat in the rain is not just a cat: she clearly symbolizes something more to the wife, who wishes to rescue her from the rain and, in doing so, rescue a part of herself. She, too, wants to escape the rain, as her reference to spring (which hasn't yet arrived) towards the end of the story demonstrates. (Tearle, 2023)

Hemingway does not use a definite or an indefinite article before his object in the title to mean whether it is a particular cat or a cat that appeared by accident. Therefore,

it can be surmised that he uses the character of the cat as alive metaphor to represent the loneliness, helplessness, and frustration of the American woman concerned. In metaphorical terms, be they inside or outside the hotel, in this situation of Mediterranean rainy weather, they both remain in the same plight. While the cat struggles physically to survive the cold weather, the woman seems to struggle psychologically to cope with her sexual desire.

LOCATION: HOTEL RIVIERA, RAPALLO, ITALY

The official website of The Hotel Riviera (hotelrivierarapallo.com) indicates that it is a small *Art Nouveau-style* building located on the promenade of Rapallo dating from the early 900 CE that offers an enchanting view of the Gulf of Tigullio. The central location ensures that customers can quickly reach the historic centre, the railway station, and the landing of boats. It highlights in terms of the advantages of occupying the hotel, the easy access it allows its clients to the monuments and locations around. Accordingly, Rapallo combines history and architectural treasures, with the suggestion of a landscape of a pleasant town, where the monumental riches are not only in the beautiful old town but also scattered in the villages. Genova, the biggest historical Centre of Europe, with its villas, palaces, castles, forts, aqueducts, theatres, and museums, ushers the tourists into the mysterious and fascinating world of its streets which contain many valuable testimonies of a glorious past. The hills and rivers around are also part of the territory. The small seaside village of Portofino is famous in the world for its scenic beauty, its "Piazzetta", the Church of San Giorgio, the Castle "Brown", the lighthouse, the Church of "Divo Martino", and the numerous chic boutiques around. The waters of San Fruttuoso, the marine protected area of Portofino, attract recognition for keeping the remains of the Croesus, a British steamship used during the Crimean War. And, finally, Cinque Terre, the 18 km long rocky coastline full of bays and beaches, dominated by a chain of mountains, a natural heritage of great variety, connects five villages overlooking the sea: Monterosso al Mare, Vernazza, Corniglia, Manarola and Riomaggiore. The tourist attractions in the environment, are generally meant to fascinate the occupants of the hotel. But Hemingway sounds economical in the plain style he has adopted as his focus is on the loneliness and frustration of the American wife who is confined to the hotel due to the rainy weather.

LONELY SETTING IN THE HOTEL

For a writer of the calibre of Hemingway, there is much to say about the location, but he limits it to an account of its condition during the rain. He talks only about the two Americans' stay over there. Being the only two of their nationality, the American wife and her husband feel like strangers in this place. They meet a lot of people inside the hotel but do not have any affinity with them as maybe they do not speak English. While occupying a room on the second floor, they can enjoy the scenery with the public

garden, the war monument, and the Mediterranean Sea on the horizon. Hemingway comments on the scenic beauty of the place through the responses it receives from artists with their easels, admiring the elegant palm trees and the hotels painted in bright colors. He creates irony by considering good weather as a lacuna on the occasion in consideration. The other plain details about the location just present what is there and what it looks like, but do not play upon the emotions. Details such as the Italians visiting the war monument in their numbers, the bronze war monument glistening in the rain, the rainwater dripping from the palm trees, the puddles of rainwater swelling on the gravel paths, the sea waves splashing on the beach, the motor cars leaving, and the square looking empty in pouring rain, gather together to suggest how the American woman would feel with nobody around to care for her.

MISSION TO RESCUE A CAT IN THE RAIN

On seeing through her window, a cat “crouched under one of the dripping green tables” in the hotel garden, the American wife walks out of her room to rescue it from the rain. “The cat was trying to make herself so compact that she would not be dripped on,” Hemingway (1925) comments on the strategic value of the cat’s survival effort as if to mean that the American wife’s move is obviously extravagant. In other words, the cat knows what to do when it rains and does not need another person’s intervention as such.

Wife: ‘I’m going down and get that kitty.’

Husband: ‘I’ll do it.’

Wife: ‘No, I’ll get it. The poor kitty out trying to keep dry under a table.’

Husband: ‘Don’t get wet.’ (Adapted from Hemingway, 1925)

Her announcement of her move to her husband conveys her determination to go down and bring the cat in. The husband is engrossed in a book while there is no possibility of sightseeing in the rainy weather. Yet, being gentle to her, he offers to go out for the cat, and she expresses her determination to do it herself. The husband’s warning against her getting wet in the rain only suggests that he has no option here other than allowing her to go ahead with her plan. She uses the epithet “poor” in describing the cat in a struggle to keep dry. This implies her pathetic state resulting from her husband’s noncommittal attitude to her sexual needs. His cooperativeness conveyed in his offer to go out for the cat and his concern for her conveyed in his friendly warning alone do not satiate her emotional hunger. Based on these observations, it can be surmised that she is on a mission to rescue herself from the agonies of inattention she suffers, about which her rational husband has no knowledge at all.

ENCHANTED BY COURTESIES

The American wife’s confrontation with the Italian who keeps the hotel suggests a way out of her frustration. “He was an

old man and very tall,” Hemingway laconically describes the attractiveness of the hotel keeper as a man of physical elegance and intellectual maturity. Even from a long distance, he effectively articulates his politeness to her by standing up and bowing to her as she passes his office.

Wife: ‘Il piove...’

Hotel Keeper: ‘Si, Si, Signora, brutto tempo. It is very bad weather.’ (Adapted from Hemingway, 1925)

She reciprocates his courtesy by talking to him in Italian. The short exchanges in the conversation between the two suggest enthusiasm on the part of the hotel keeper. In respect of her, he answers in Italian and continues to provide an English translation of his utterance. Hemingway depicts the inner workings of her mind in terms of her admiration of his personality as a man of stature, his deportment as a manager, his dignity as a respectable social being, his quality standards as a service provider, his professional attitude as a hotel keeper, his countenance of maturity as a consultant, his serious expression as a willing source of help, and his big hands as a reliable protector. Hemingway uses the action word “like” eight times in different inflexions while going into detail about her close observation of the man before formulating an opinion of him. It seems that, although there is a considerable age gap between him and her, he looks to her as an epitome of all that she expects from a man in both public and private.

SEARCH FOR THE CAT

Hemingway in the short sentence, “Liking him she opened the door and looked out,” suggests the dominant impact the hotel keeper has already managed to have on the American wife’s mood while she is moving out of the hotel in search of the cat. “It was raining harder.” He adds another sentence to the narration to mean the weather is getting conducive for them to be alone under the eave. Suddenly, Hemingway provides a distraction in the sentence, “A man in a rubber cape was crossing the empty square to the café.” Whether there is any deliberate purpose to add this detail to the scene is a question that arises while reading the text carefully. It can be decided that this may serve as a precise excuse for the hotel keeper for not joining her in her cat search. Casually suggesting that “Perhaps she could go along under the eaves”, Hemingway cleverly establishes that she would not need an umbrella to walk to the spot where the cat was seen. Unable to join her himself, due to a client’s visit, he sends the room maid with an umbrella to accompany her. ‘You must not get wet,’ the American woman hears from the maid as a message from the hotel keeper. This is simply a repetition of the same warning she heard from her husband while she was leaving the room. It is implied that she realizes from his gesture that the hotel keeper is personally concerned about her welfare.

DISAPPOINTMENT WITH FAILURE

The support the hotel keeper has sent through the room maid does not fulfil her mission in the cat rescue operation.

"With the maid holding the umbrella over her, she walked along the gravel path until she was under their window," Hemingway achieves a paradox through the American wife's sudden disappointment with her failure in finding the cat, especially in the company of the hotel keeper's assistant who has no notion about her emotional hunger and who is not capable of compensating her frustration. To signify the futility of her effort, Hemingway frantically relates what she encounters there, "The table was there, washed bright green in the rain, but the cat was gone." The language barrier that prevails in the communication between her and the maid symbolizes their failure to understand each other. 'A cat?' the maid laughed. 'A cat in the rain?' In the maid's sarcasm about the American wife's concern about a stray cat, Hemingway presents how the worldview contrasts with her frustration that has been bottled out in her response to the cat she saw a while ago. Ironically, it aggravates her self-pity. Her desperate insistence on having a cat, any cat for that matter, draws the sympathy of the maid. Considering her helplessness, the maid warns that they should get back to the hotel to avoid getting wet. Already a power matrix has evolved between them, placing the maid in a commanding position. Hemingway demonstrates thus, his sensitivity to humanity while being economical in diction.

SELF-REALISATION

During her interaction with the room maid, who is at her disposal under the instructions of her benefactor, the hotel keeper, she realizes that she has never been so cared for by her husband George. "As the American girl passed the office, the padrone bowed from his desk." It is not inadvertently that at this juncture Hemingway alludes to her as "the American girl". The identity dilemma that arises in her before the hotel keeper's courtesies reduces her to nobody. "Something felt very small and tight inside the girl." The transformation she thus undergoes culminates with her adoption of "a momentary feeling of being of supreme importance". Hemingway conveys the hotel keeper's achievement on her in a powerful antithesis: "The padrone made her feel very small and at the same time really important." Smallness and importance, the qualities she perceives in her reinforce her new outlook as a woman. She makes it clear in the short conversation she has with George, who is in the middle of his reading, inside the room.

Husband: 'Did you get the cat?'

Wife: 'It was gone.'

Husband: 'Wonder where it went to...'

Wife: 'I wanted it so much ... I don't know why I wanted it so much. I wanted that poor kitty. It isn't any fun to be a poor kitty out in the rain.' (Adapted from Hemingway, 1925)

The dramatic dialogue she has with her husband on her return from the cat search ends in a protest that applies

to herself as much as the cat in the rain. The innuendo she formulates out of the referent, "a poor kitty out in the rain", is vertically levelled at George who has remained so long naïve about his romantic obligations to his wife, who is solely his responsibility, while in an unknown territory far away from home. Hemingway projects thus the defiant spirit of independence she has already cultivated during her cat search which ends up as a failure.

FROM CAT SEARCH TO SELF-SEARCH

From what she does, looking at herself in the mirror of the dressing table and the hand glass, it is perceived that her cat search has already turned into a self-search. After she studies her profile in the mirror, side by side, she contemplates the back of her head and her neck. On realizing that her present haircut has changed her natural look, she checks her husband's view about letting her hair grow.

Wife: 'Don't you think it would be a good idea if I let my hair grow out?'

Husband: 'I like it the way it is.'

Wife: 'I get so tired of it ... I get so tired of looking like a boy.'

Husband: 'You look pretty darn nice.'

Wife: 'I want to pull my hair back tight and smooth and make a big knot at the back that I can feel.' (Adapted from Hemingway, 1925)

While she protests that her haircut gives her a boyish look, her husband tries to pacify her by commenting on it positively. He does not mind the repetition of her complaint about being tired of it either. However, she emphatically conveys her determination to implement her plan for her hair. The idea is to regain her natural look which has many implications for her independence as a woman.

CAT AS A SOLUTION TO FRUSTRATION

Totally unrealistic about the circumstances they must put up with at the moment, she presents a list of wants she is concerned about.

Wife: 'I want to have a kitty to sit on my lap and purr when I stroke her.'

Husband: 'Yeah?'

Wife: 'And I want to eat at a table with my own silver and I want candles. And I want it to be spring and I want to brush my hair out in front of a mirror, and I want a kitty and I want some new clothes.'

Husband: 'Oh, shut up and get something to read...'

Wife: 'Anyway, I want a cat, ... I want a cat. I want a cat now. If I can't have long hair or any fun, I can have a cat.' (Adapted from Hemingway, 1925)

A discourse analysis of this stretch of conversation reveals

the disparity between the husband and wife. Her list of wants suggests several aspects of their present lifestyle. Other than the company of a cat to respond to her emotions, she has several wants: a fully furnished and equipped dining table to establish her class status; spring weather to have outdoor fun; long hair to resuscitate her youthful feminine look; and some new clothes to look fashionable. The cat emerges again and again in her list of paraphernalia as compensation for the absence of all the other things she wants. She repeats "I want a cat" and "I want a kitty" interchangeably altogether six times. The last line, 'If I can't have long hair or any fun, I can have a cat,' suggests that a cat is supposed to resolve most of her emotional issues.

"Research suggests that humans are often strongly attached to their pets and sometimes report even stronger attachments to pets than to human family members. Thus, recent research increasingly focused on the relationship between emotional attachment to pets and mental health. However, the current evidence does not confirm the hypothesis that a strong emotional attachment to pets is associated with better mental health" (LassHennemann et al., 2022).

That means there is no scientific basis for her desperate need for a cat during travel, and therefore it can be inferred that she only tries to see her sexual desire is satisfied. A comment on *Thérèse Dreaming* by Balthasar Klossowski (1938) reveals that his contemporaries typically placed cats in scenes with women or girls in their paintings because by that time cats have been known to represent specifically female sexuality and lust (covenantarthistory.blogspot.com, 2015)

Accordingly, Hemingway exploits the erotic symbolism of the cat imagery in portraying the American wife's frustration. 'Oh, shut up and get something to read...' The husband's proposition though conveyed maybe in harsh terms provides a rational and intellectual solution to her problem. Yet there is no room for him to dictate terms as such as his wife is not of the same wavelength about wants and needs in life. Through their conversation, Hemingway reveals that frustration is only an ideological or cultural issue. One can dispense with all that in her list of wants if one resists the waves of temptation arising under various circumstances. Hemingway levels here an attack on materialism through the conflict between George and his wife over some fancies.

GODSEND OF A CAT

Being an intellectually oriented rationalist, George remains unexcited each time his wife, like an immature kid, hysterically mutters about her wants and needs. He keeps on reading his book while his wife keeps on looking out of the window. Suddenly, he hears a knock on the door and shouts 'Avanti!'. Then the door opens. The maid appears as usual. But this time she is holding "a big tortoiseshell cat pressed tight against her." The cat swings "down against her body". "Excuse

me, ... the padrone asked me to bring this for the Signora.' The announcement relieves him of the frequent complaints his wife has been making. But he does not know for how long. The cat appears to be a godsend for both. The cat is supposed to cheer up the wife to the consolation of both.

CONCLUSION

The spatiotemporal relationship of the short story 'Cat in The Rain' helps us perceive that Hemingway is an exponent in using time and space to the maximum in his narratives. The characters move within a hotel compound only for a period of less than an hour, but they together elaborate on a complex socio-psychological reality that has a universal appeal. The protagonist is the American wife whose attention is drawn to a cat struggling to escape from a shower of rain. First, she moves out with sympathy for the cat, and later she develops an urgent necessity for a cat as compensation for several things she misses in life. The antagonist is her American husband who is engrossed in his reading throughout the story with no attention to her complaints. He is not a macho but takes her for granted. Maybe he thinks all that she says is childish. The hotel keeper's role is reasonable as they are both his clients. His sympathetic behaviour is a necessity for the story to continue, but quite unconsciously he ends up being a rival against the husband by winning the confidence of the wife. The maid represents only the worldview through her surprise over the wife's fancy for a cat. The wife's response to the cat sent by the hotel keeper is not indicated as Hemingway deliberately avoids a conclusion to the story. His plain style allows so much freedom for the characters to behave on their own as well as for the readers to perceive the action on their own. The twelve-part discussion of the story attempts to observe closely how the protagonist struggles with an identity dilemma ignited by a cat who manages to develop an affiliation with the latter by simulating her plight in her own manner within a spectrum of circumstances particular to her.

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