

THEATRICAL EFFECTS RECONSIDERED IN HEMINGWAY'S "CAT IN THE RAIN"

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Stage Directions Required

Elusive taciturnity on the part of an omission-oriented author like Ernest Hemingway in some of his short stories inevitably subjects the reader to a whirl of not a few precariously assumptive interpretations, from among which it is virtually impossible to single the one out that can claim unquestionable authenticity. When suggestive hints expected to elucidate intended implications have been so scantily provided, the reader has no choice but to inspire his own imaginative involvement to render his own drama based on his own understanding of the story, just like a dramatic director challenging enough to put in the public eye his own provocative explication and dramaturgy in an effort to give a fresh life to Hamlet.

Water, Water, Every Where

Water pervades the whole of the atmosphere outside the hotel: water stands in pools on the gravel paths, the rain drips from the big palm trees and green benches in the public garden, and the bronze war monument glistens in the rain; the sea breaks in a long line in the rain and slips back in the beach to come up and break again in a long line in the rain. The rain has changed the potentially bustling and hustling public garden into an empty square, a scene that suggests repressed fertility. It should be borne in mind that contradictory images must have been intended to occur by introduction of such primordial elements as water, rain, and sea for the purpose of evoking an atmosphere full of both vaguely sinister symptoms and a faintly promising outlook as a microcosmic setting prepared to contain the seemingly alienated American couple. It is easy, to be sure, to notice that the water/rain/sea surrounding the hotel implies the symbolic meaning of the "prima materia," from which all life proceeds, producing the garden of fertility.¹ Yet, it is also not difficult to recognize another facet in which a combination of water, the rain, and the sea points to a deterrent to potential prolificacy. The war monument glistening in the rain and the public garden containing big palm trees and green tables, in good weather, could attract a lot of people, including Italians coming from a long way off to look up at the memorial and artists who like the way the palm trees grow and the bright

1) See Ad de Vries, *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* (Amsterdam and London: North-Holland Publishing Company, 1974), pp. 406, 493.

colors of the hotels facing the gardens and the sea. What is more, the café is a place where people gather to enjoy hilarity, but now the rain has packed people and motor cars off from the war memorial and the gardens, leaving the empty square and the sea inanimate in a monotonous pulsation and deprivation. All the attractions are now drenched with rain, a circumstance that shows almost all the operations temporarily suspended. A café waiter looking out at the empty square foreshadows the American wife standing at the window looking out. A man in a rubber cape crossing the empty square to the café also foreshadows the big tortoise-shell cat delivered at the close of the story.

Big/Small Contrast

One of the most tantalizing problems repudiating our mediocre efforts to assail them is, no doubt, what the author has planned to render in his description of the peculiarly confounding sensations which the American wife excites inside herself when she, passing the hotel office, sees the hotel-keeper bow from his desk. The passage in question: "Something felt very small and tight inside the girl. The padrone made her feel very small and at the same time really important. She had a momentary feeling of being of supreme importance."² In my earlier article, I ventured to present my own explication: the girl 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 a guardian angel, a fantasy that reveals her hidden desire for pregnancy. The fantasy, I argued, turns a somersault: now she imagines herself to be the baby born of the Holy Mother, a preposterous reverie that implies 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.³ Although I still have something of an attachment to the above explanation, I think I have to acknowledge the advent of the latest elucidation, apparently the most convincing clarification so far of the girl's feelings, displayed by Warren Bennett, who points to the female sexual arousal in conjunction with the masculine qualities which may initiate them. The girl's sensations, Bennett adds, pass through three stages, tight inside, important, and of momentary supreme importance, and these stages reflect a correspondence to the sensations of desire, intercourse, and orgasm.⁴ None of the explications have so far had greater impact on the psychoanalytic dramatization of the story. I would like to pay some more attention to the big/small contrast reflected on the depictions of both the padrone and the girl: (1) She liked his old,

2) Ernest Hemingway, *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, The Finca Vigía Edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1987), p. 130.

3) "Cats in Hemingway's 'Cat in the Rain,'" *Journal of the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Shinshu University*, No. 22 (1988), p. 98.

4) Warren Bennett, "The Poor Kitty and the Padrone and the Tortoise-shell Cat in 'Cat in the Rain,'" *The Hemingway Review*, Vol. VIII, No. 1 (Fall 1988), p. 29.

heavy face and *big* hands; (2) The padrone made her feel very *small* and at the same time really important.⁵ The scene, where the hotel owner with *big* hands made her feel very *small*, necessarily leads us to feel that, despite a rather fair possibility that the padrone's politesse has made the girl feel great deference to him, the odds seem to be in favor of the rather obscurely allusive image of the *small* girl huddled up in the *big* hands of the hotel-keeper, a momentarily evoked reverie that functions as the first of the metonymic hints of importance as to a potent sensuality needed to appease the woman's unfulfilled desires. Still, it should be borne again in mind that, a man of kindness, dignity, and confidence, the hotel owner is an old man, a serious fact that implies little prospect of hurdling the lady's frustration. His old age convinces us of the limit of his capacity to work as her savior or the substitute for her husband, who seems to have renounced his role of husband as a fun-provider. What is more, another vital clue to an understanding of the padrone's role in the story is that, like George, he, too, never moves and gets going himself when he wants to serve the American Signora—he only orders the maid to do the jobs. He can inspire in the wife an erotic dream, but it is far beyond him that he could perform a husband-surrogate operation. Nor is he able to understand and rescue the wife's starved soul. So crucially removed does he stand from the exact realization of the precise reasons why she is so forlorn and uncared for. The glitch is his ignorance of what she really wants to have now: sensual contact with someone, hopefully her husband or a visional baby, or something, tolerably the poor kitty crouched under one of the dripping green tables or any kitty cute enough to sit on her lap and purr when stroked.

The word "big" occurs four times in the story: (1) "big palms" in the public garden; (2) "big hands" the hotel-keeper has, as has been already mentioned earlier; (3) "a big knot" of hair at the back which the wife wants to feel; and (4) "a big tortoise-shell cat" held by the maid. (The word "small" is used only twice in that strange depiction of the woman's feelings.) Due attention may have to be given to the importance of the presentation of the image of "a big knot," which implies that what the wife wants is a sensual fetish to feel, thus leading to the image of another mascot to fondle: a kitty to sit on the lap and respond to her caresses.

Kitty/Cat Contrast

It has been aptly pointed out by John D. Magee that the change of wording concerning the kitty/cat is very important: whereas before the wife says, "I want to have a kitty to sit on my lap and purr when I stroke her," now she says, "Anyway, I want a cat now. If I can't have long hair or any fun, I can have a cat."⁶ I feel no hesitation about agreeing with the assertor, although no clarifying grounds have been supplied. From the viewpoint of stage effects, nothing seems to be more life-and-death than to choose and decide the

5) *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, p. 130. (Emphases added.)

6) John D. Magee, "Hemingway's CAT IN THE RAIN," *Explicator*, XXVI (September 1967), Item 8.

implied symbols that the “kitty” and the “cat” referred to in the quote above are supposed to represent. Oddvar Holmesland maintains that all that can be said about the cat is that it reflects the wife’s need to experience emotional fertility and is not attached to a definable object.⁷ It may be hard to take issue with his precautious indication. My point, however, is that only one of the metaphors or symbols that is likely to produce the most effective dramatic tension should be paid the highest regard to make for an invigorating performance by the couple, and that much more attention should be paid to the gradational change of meanings from the poor kitty in the rain to a kitty on the woman’s lap to a cat she demands to have now, and to the big tortoise-shell cat at the end. In my earlier paper, I contended that if “a kitty” is an appellation for a pet name implying youngness, cuteness, and smallness, “a cat” may be said to have a connotation of relative adulthood, full-grownness, and bigness: assuming that the author’s intent was to focus on the contrast between the great and small sizes of the furry creatures by using the shift of language, the image of “a kitty” would stand for something/someone so small and lovable as to be taken care of and protected: (1) the poor kitty in the rain, (2) a literal kitty as an ordinary pet on the lap, (3) the wife/girl herself, and (4) a baby to be nestled and caressed in a mother’s arms; the picture of “a cat” would represent something/someone more or less expanded, only relatively, that should be supposed to take responsibility or initiative: George, the husband, himself expected to gratify his wife’s feminine hunger for physical contact.⁸

The vividly depicted image of the “kitty,” which she wants to have to sit on her lap and purr when she strokes her, provides an unmistakable picture that never fails to make us feel the urgency of her urge to fondle a little thing cute and cherishable enough to respond to her affection. The problem is which, from among the above-listed options, should be picked up as the best in terms of dramatic dynamics. I would say the best choice would fall on the image of “a baby.” Reasons: (1) “a kitty,” not “*the* kitty,” is very unlikely to sound equal to “*the* poor kitty,” (2) a literal kitty as a pet with no implication would greatly reduce our imaginative involvement to feel the wife’s urgent need for dynamic sensuality through a metonymic way, (3) to accept “a kitty” as identifying with the wife would produce some repellent incoherence in imagery and action, and (4) the image of “a baby” would safely fit in here and give a new dimension of richness in meaning.

As to “a cat” which the girl repeatedly insists on acquiring now, what strikes most is, importunateness and repetition of utterances aside, that the message is so simple and direct with no other pointers suggestive of detailed feelings. Here to decide which should

7) Oddvar Holmesland, “Structuralism and Interpretation: Ernest Hemingway’s ‘Cat in the Rain,’” *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, ed. Jackson J. Benson (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1990), p. 71.

8) *Journal of the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Shinshu University*, No. 22, pp. 99-100.

be the implied message effective enough to attain the momentous culmination of this symbolically mythical drama would be of the greatest importance. The best choice would be offered from among the following possibilities: (1) a literal cat as a pet, (2) "a kitty with which [the wife] can identify," as Warren Bennett suggests,⁹ (3) a baby to cuddle on her lap, and (4) George, the husband. What seems clear as day here is that "a cat" stands for something/someone quite different from what has been meant to represent by "a kitty" referred to before; the four-time repetition of utterances of only "a cat," without any other suggesting adjuncts, can evoke anything but fatuous fondness and dotage out of which a mother, or a wife, is supposed to fondle a baby, or a kitty for that matter, either as a pet or a substitute for herself. I would suggest, with a view to enhancing a stage effect, that the wife's imperative and implacable tone of repeated requests should be interpreted as the most consequential message of her direct call for her husband's initiative in corporeal tangency between man and wife. By saying, "I want a cat *now*. ... I *can* have a cat," she alludes to both desperate pressingness and favorable probability of fulfillment of her wish. She knows before her eyes exists the probability lying on the bed reading. If it were too much to say "a cat" should be considered as "a symbol for her husband," it could be taken for a metaphorical innuendo intended to urge George to get going, to say the least of it. George nevertheless will not take action. Why not? In my earlier article, I have already submitted my answer: impotence. Impotence, rather than either unwillingness or hatred, could give the drama a fresh dimension of fatalism so desperate as is seen in *The Waste Land*.

The Big Tortoise-shell Cat

From the theatrical point of view, three questions concerning the big tortoise-shell cat may have to be settled. Questions: (1) What, if anything, does the big tortoise-shell cat stand for? (2) Is the girl happy or unhappy to see the cat delivered? and (3) How will the couple respond to the cat?

First, Question No. 1. While Oddvar Homesland maintains that the big tortoise-shell cat, with its animal sensuality, ultimately serves as a metaphor for the dynamic sensuality required to reconcile nature to man's desire,¹⁰ a more charmingly detailed explication has been given by Warren Bennett, who contends: "the cat personifies to the maid the padrone himself, in which case she is symbolically giving the padrone away to the girl. Holding the cat 'pressed tight against her' suggests possessiveness, not of the cat, but of the padrone. And holding the cat's body 'down against her body' is an implicitly sexual image. The description strongly implies feelings on the part of the maid toward the padrone which parallel the girl's feelings toward the padrone. The fact that the maid calls the cat a 'this' implies the maid's resentment of what the padrone has asked her to do for

9) *The Hemingway Review*, Vol. VIII, No. 1, p. 33.

10) *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, p. 72.

this 'American girl.' The maid's earlier hostility toward the girl as an outsider is now extended to an acted-out sexual possessiveness."¹¹ Holmesland's explanation may safely be accepted in that the description concerning the big cat gives a strong impression of sensuality both to the reader and the girl. It may be that she gets startled to see the locked embrace in which the cat has been delivered. Again it may be that the scene must have inspired her to conjure up a fantasy of an amorous hug of the padrone by the maid. My higher estimation is inclined to go to Bennett, because, from the dramatic point of view, the image of the maid appearing to stand opposed to the wife as a rival as regards the padrone will add to the sudden boost of dramatic tension just before the fall of the curtain. It is of much interest to regard the big tortoise-shell cat as a symbol for the hotel-keeper, who is eager to serve the Signora, if necessary, yet unable to become a really available her-husband-surrogate because of his old age and limited knowledge of her situation. The important point is that the image of the big cat pressed tight and swung against the maid's body may be, to the girl, more repulsive than enticing. The padrone's good and innocent intent is sure to fail to serve the purpose.

Second, Question No. 2. Is she happy to see the big cat? This is crucial and vital enough to decide the final estimate of the drama. The answer should be no. If yes, the story would be reduced to an episode during the couple's trip to Italy, in which the wife's request for a cat is finally fulfilled in a happy ending. What can make her happy is only George, in the final phase of the story, not a kitty or the big tortoise-shell cat as either a pet or someone's surrogate. And he never shows any actual gesture to give her satisfaction.

Last, Question No. 3. How will the couple respond to the cat? Every reader is entitled to his own imagined scene of the denouement. The wife will utter a loud cry of joy, welcoming the cat with her arms extended. Yet it is certain that a tear or two will trickle down her cheek. George will also be pleased to say, "Great! You've got exactly what you wanted to have." And it is also certain that a cynical smile will hover around his lips. The rain keeps on falling hard in the Garden of Eden. (30/9/1992)

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11) *The Hemingway Review*, Vol. VIII, No. 1, p. 34.