

The Literary Encyclopedia

The Cat Inside

Burroughs, William

(1986)

- [Chad Weidner \(Roosevelt Academy \(Utrecht University\)\)](#)

Genre: Essay / Lecture (literary). Country: United States.

The Cat Inside is a late publication by Beat Generation member William Burroughs. The novella is an autobiographical account of living with cats. It explores the ordinary details of cat lives, as well as their joyful triumphs and moving tragedies. Burroughs conveys his message through the use of lucid dream episodes and discussions of the mythological history of felines. Near the end of the narrative, the author contemplates the future of cats and other animal species in a world wrought with environmental problems. Ultimately, the text highlights the importance of cats to continued human existence.

The book was first published as a limited edition by Grenfell Press in 1986. Only a few dozen copies were initially produced. Viking Press released a hardcover version in 1992 and paperback editions became available later. In terms of subject matter *The Cat Inside* differs from Burroughs' earlier confrontational publications. The narrative does not attempt to convey the difficulties of being homosexual at the height of Cold War culture, or the grim struggle that accompanies acute drug addiction. The novella neither obsesses about control systems at length, nor discusses the viral properties of language. Instead, *The Cat Inside* communicates issues more private to the writer – principally his intense need for feline companionship late in his life.

The author uses the text as a vehicle to encourage a positive view of the aesthetic beauty of various animal species. He conjures up incredible and wondrous varieties of cats and other animals, thus making use of his unique ability to integrate dream images into his writing. However, the writer had not become totally biocentric in his attitudes, and this is shown through his anthropomorphic and anthropocentric tendencies. But a number of scenes do reveal how the writer has progressed to a more altruistic position.

One example involves relating the memory of the premature death of a lively badger at the hands of a youth camp counselor, who shot the creature with a handgun. The writer captures the animal's sad moment of death: "the badger rolls down the slope into the stream. I can see the stricken animal, the sad shrinking face, rolling down the slope, bleeding, dying" (14). The author also expresses his deep regret at having witnessed the event.

At another point, Burroughs discusses other animal tragedies, such as the euthanasia of lost cats by animal control officials and animals' accidental separation from their human companions. The author explains how cats have "been abandoned many times over the centuries, left to die in cold city alleys, in hot noon vacant lots, pottery shards, nettles, crumbled mud walls. Many times he has cried for help in vain" (60). But the writer also addresses animals other than cats in the book.

At the same time, he attempts to tackle larger questions in the text. For instance, he examines the moral implications of modern practices of animal control. Burroughs ultimately condemns human society as hypocritical, since in his view animal control officials participate in the capture, confinement, and subsequent killing of stray animals. The writer believes such actions amount to the unnecessary death of sentient creatures. Discussions on the apparent distinctions between humans and animals suggest that the late novelist felt strongly about animal rights; clearly he displayed an awareness of the reciprocal and deeply complex relationship between humans and nonhuman creatures.

Near the end of the narrative, Burroughs discusses animal extinctions caused by increasing human pressure. He articulates his deep concern about the fate of not only his favorite animals (cats and lemurs), but also other animals, including foxes: "I've eulogized the fennec fox, a creature so delicate and timorous in the wild state that he dies of fright if touched by human hands. The red fox, the silver fox, the bat-eared fox of Africa . . . all beautiful beasts" (62). At this point, it becomes clear to the reader that the prototypical postmodern writer moved towards a more biocentric position. The late author showed something a younger Burroughs never really could: that he was capable of seriously considering the needs and concerns of other creatures.

Nonetheless, throughout *The Cat Inside* the writer still reveals his characteristic misanthropy, paranoia and subjectivity. He still adores some animals and hates others, based only on their species. Moreover, the author still universalizes his own experiences and believes they are somehow applicable to the wider world. Overall, however, Burroughs' book on cats remains a powerful prayer to respect our fellow nonhuman creatures as members of a larger moral community.

- [Chad Weidner \(Roosevelt Academy \(Utrecht University\)\)](#)

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