

cat in the rain

Malcolm Coulthard



CAT IN THE RAIN

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There is now a large number of linguistic analyses of literary texts but in the main, the analyses fail to satisfy literary critics — often the linguist confines himself to a demonstration of how the text works and not what it means and far too often, the analyses presented is text-specific. What I hope to do in this article is present an approach which is not text-specific and which will always give the analyst an insight into the way some of the text's meaning is created and conveyed.

Whenever an author of a literary, or non-literary text for that matter, has introduced a character, object or idea into his text, he is then faced with the problem of how to refer to it again. Within sentences there are grammatical rules which prevent certain options, — whereas 1a is acceptable, 1b is not:

1a - John walked across to his chair, sat down and put his head in his hands.

1b - John walked across to John's chair, sat down and put John's head in John's hands.

Across sentence boundaries, these rules are more difficult to state — one prefers 2a, but 2b is certainly acceptable:

2a - John walked across to his chair and sat down.

Mary knelt in front of him and put her head in his hands.

2b - John walked across to his chair and sat down.

Mary knelt in front of John and put her head in his hands.

The question of reference is made more interesting because a writer has not only two options of using a pronoun

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or reiterating the original lexical item, he has a third option of using a different lexical item:

2c - John walked across to his chair and sat down.

Mary knelt in from of { John/her husband } and put her
his wife { him }

head into { his } hands.
{ her husband's }

What I want to exemplify through a discussion of Hemingway's "Cat in the Rain" is that an author's choice of one lexical formulation 'John' rather than 'her husband', is chance or 'elegant variation', but significant and part of the way in which the meaning of the text is created and conveyed.

At this point it would be useful for the reader to read the story and to make a 35 word summary of it in English. I assure you, despite your reluctance, that to do so will radically increase the benefit you will get from reading the rest of this article, though I know most readers will ignore the advice!

In making your summary you will/would (!) have noticed two important points — firstly it is impossible to mention all the characters and secondly, you were/would have been faced with a choice of whether to simply report events or whether to interpret them. You will also almost certainly, have used only one label to refer to the husband, the wife, the cat(s) and the hotel owner, yet in each instance, the text offers at least two. I now want to show how, simply looking at the ways in which the characters are labelled, the reader has access to much of the meaning of the story.

The opening line tells us "there were only two Americans...", in other words, it is their Americaness and not thier marriage, which is the first feature presented as a link between them. It is not until the beginning of

the second paragraph that we realize they are a married couple, and one whose relationship is not going well. The wife bored and unhappy sees a cat outside the window, feels sorry for it and says she is going to fetch it out of the rain. The husband offers from the bed to go in her place but never in fact moves. Obviously the cat is a symbol for something and literary interpretation focuses on it in detail. What we notice from a linguistic viewpoint is that the wife, and only the wife, at times refers to it as Kitty — the associations here are clearly that kittens are soft and playful and can be cuddled and mothered and at those times, when she is emotionally involved with the cat she uses the lexical formulation. It is interesting to note that in American English the pronunciation of 'Kitty' is very close to the pronunciation of 'Kiddy', a young child, which is what most commentators on the story think she basically wants. However, none of the other participants in the story see the wife as wanting a CAT, not a Kitty, and the story ends, ironically for most readers, with the maid bringing "a big tortoise-shell cat" — not a cuddly kitten at all.

However the cat "crouching under one of the dripping green tables" sheltering from the rain is also in a situation analogous to that of the wife — confined by the same rain to the hotel room and, despite the presence of her husband, lonely. Significantly she looks down and sees the cat 'trying to make herself so compact the she would not be dripped on'. Also the cat is formulated as a fellow female.

Most readers assume the couple to be childless and see the kitty as a potential child substitute. Motherhood is one of the symbols of maturity and the 'immaturity' of the wife is reinforced by the fact that once she goes into the rain with the maid, she is referred to as the 'American girl', a designation which is repeated three times and then these non-mature or even asexual implication are reinforced by George noting that her hair is "clipped close like a

boy" and her complaining of 'looking like a boy'.

The immaturity is further emphasized by her relationship with/to the keeper. As she goes downstairs as 'the wife' she passes him and thinks of "the way he wanted to serve her" but when she returns to the hotel as a girl he has become the 'padrone', a word with some overtones of 'padre', and he makes her feel "small and at the same time very important". We notice the difference between the emotional thrill she feels as girl to the padrone and the bored irritability as wife to her husband.

One last change to notice. The story begins with the bored neglected American wife whose husband sits reading and never moves from the bed — our sympathies lie very much with her. However, when she returns to the room it is George who makes a valiant attempt to take an interest in her search and her looks but 'the girl' alternatively ignores and rejects his contributions. For many readers there is a shift in sympathy and it is not insignificant that whereas George began the story as the husband of the American wife, she ends it referred to as 'his wife'. The reader's perspective on the relationship has been subtly shifted.

Focusing in this way on character in any literary text will produce interesting and insightful results, because the lexical formulation always reflects back on the text. Dali (1981) examines D.H. Lawrence's "Odour of Chrysantemums" and notes that in a tense meeting between Elizabeth Bates and her father, the only time he is referred to as 'her father' is when she brought him "a cup of tea and a piece of bread and butter". The rest of the time, when they talk about possible remarriage and her wayward husband, the father is referred to as if he were a stranger, as "the little gray-bearded man" and "the gray-whiskered man" and she as 'the woman'. I could continue with examples, but,

now gentle reader this author would like
to end his disquisition.

ERNEST HEMINGWAY: CAT IN THE RAIN

There were only two Americans stopping at the hotel. They did not know any of the people they passed on the stairs on the way to and from their room. Their room was on the second floor facing the sea. It also faced the public garden and the war monument. There were big palms and green benches in the public garden. In the good weather there was always an artist with his easel. Artists liked the way the palms grew and the bright colours of the hotels facing the gardens and the sea. Italians came from a long way off to look up at the war monument. It was made of bronze and glistened in the rain. It was raining. The rain dripped from the palm trees. Water stood in pools on the gravel paths. The sea broke in a long line in the rain and slipped down the beach to come up and break again in a long line in the rain. Motor cars were gone from the square by the war monument. Across the square in the doorway of the cafe a waiter stood looking out at the empty square. The American wife stood at the window looking out. Outside right under their window a cat was crouched under one of the dripping green tables. The cat was trying to make herself so compact that she would not be dripped on.

"I'm going down and get that kitty," the American wife said.

"I'll do it," her husband offered from the bed.

"No, I'll get it. The poor kitty out trying to keep dry under a table."

The husband went on reading, lying propped up with the pillows at the foot of the bed.

"Don't get wet," he said.

The wife went downstairs and the hotel owner stood up and bowed to her as she passed the office. His desk was at the far end of the office. He was an old man and very tall.

"Il piove," the wife said. She liked the hotel keeper.

"Si, si, Signora, brutto tempo. It's very bad weather."

He stood behind the desk in the far end of the dim room. The wife liked him.

She liked the deadly serious way he received any complaints.

She liked his dignity. She liked the way he wanted to serve her. She liked the way he felt about being a hotel-keeper. She liked his old, heavy face and big hands. Liking him she opened the door and looked out. It was raining harder. A man in a rubber cape was crossing the empty square to the cafe. The cat would be around to the right. Perhaps she could go along under the eaves. As she stood in the doorway an umbrella opened behind her. It was the maid who looked after their room.

"You must not get wet," she smiled, speaking Italian. Of course, the hotel-keeper had sent her.

With the maid holding the umbrella over her, she walked along the gravel path until she was under window. The table was there, washed bright in the rain, but the cat was gone. She was suddenly disappointed. The maid looked up at her.

"Ha perduto qualche cosa, Signora?"

"There was a cat," said the American girl.

"A cat?"

"Si, il gatto,"

"A cat?" the maid laughed. "A cat in the rain?"

"Yes," she said, "under the table." Then, "Oh, I wanted it so much. I wanted a kitty."

When she talked English the maid's face tightened.

"Come, Signora," she said. "We must get back inside. You will be wet."

"I suppose so," said the American girl.

They went back along the gravel path and passed in the door. The maid stayed outside to close the umbrella. As the American girl passed the office, the padrone bowed from his desk. Something felt very small and tight inside the girl. The padrone made her feel very small and at the same time really important. She went on up the stairs. She had a momentary feeling of being of supreme importance. She opened the door of the room. George was on the bed, reading.

"Did you get the cat?" he asked, putting the book down.

"It was gone."

"Wonder where it went to," he said, resting his eyes from reading. She sat down on the bed.

"I wanted it so much," she said. "I don't know why I wanted it so much. I wanted the poor kitty. It isn't any fun to be a poor kitty out in the rain." George was reading again. She went over and went in front of the mirror of the dressing-table, looking at herself with the handglass. She studied her profile, first one side and then the other. Then she studied the back of her head and her neck.

"Don't you think it would be a good idea if I let my hair grow out?" she asked, looking at her profile again. George looked up and saw the back of her neck, clipped close like a boy's.

"I like it the way it is."

"I get so tired of it," she said. "I get so tired of looking like a boy."

George shifted his position in the bed. He hadn't looked away from her since she started to speak.

"You look pretty darned nice", he said.

She laid the mirror down on the dresser and went over to the window and looked out. It was getting dark.

"I want to pull my hair back tight and smooth and make a big knot at the back that I can feel," she said. "I want to have a kitty and I want some new clothes."

"Oh, shut up and get something to read," George said. He was reading again. His wife was looking out of the window. It was quite dark now and still raining in the palm trees.

"Anyway, I want a cat," she said. "I want a cat now. If I can't have long hair or any fun, I can have a cat."

George was not listening. He was reading his book. His wife looked out of the window where the light had come on in the square.

Someone knocked at the door.

"Avanti," George said. He looked up from his book.

In the doorway stood the maid. She held a big tortoise-shell cat pressed tight against her and its swung down against her body.

"Excuse me," she said, "the padrone asked me to bring this for the Signora."

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