

ANALYSIS

“Cat in the Rain” (1925)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

The vignette preceding the story is a prelude to a bullfight, just as the opening of the story is the prelude to a domestic “fight.” The horse of a picador has been gored by a bull and is spilling its guts. The wife in the story resembles the picador on the white horse and her husband is analogous to the bull that “could not make up its mind to charge.” The exaggerated contrast between the violent scene in the bullring and the scene in the hotel room makes the complaints of the woman seem trivial and petty as seen by the man, whereas the goring of the horse is the *objective correlative* for the feelings of the girl. If we recognize the analogy it intensifies and better evokes what she feels. The horse is gored before the vignette begins. By analogy, when the story begins we may infer that the husband has hurt his wife’s feelings in some way. Unlike the bull, he probably did not intend the hurt, since he is portrayed as sensitive to his wife—up to a point. In contrast to the bull in the vignette, the husband is lying down.

“Cat in the Rain” is one of Hemingway’s most egalitarian stories contradicting the macho stereotype. An American couple is staying among strangers in a hotel in Europe, unfamiliar with their environment. They do not seem to know each other very well either. Their room faces the sea and gardens containing a war monument that is mentioned three times in the first paragraph. A garden is a traditional metaphor of the heart. There is conflict if not a war going on in the hearts of the couple, figuratively expressed by the rain falling in the gardens that makes them an unpleasant place to be. Repetition in the style suggests that their conflict is ongoing like the waves that “broke in a long line in the rain and slipped back down the beach to come up and break again in a long line in the rain.”

The wife asserts her intention to go out and get a cat huddled under a table in the rain, prompting her husband to offer to get it for her. “No I’ll get it,” she insists. Gender stereotypes are reversed as the girl is going out after something while the man is lying down. The reversal is emphasized by the fact that he is reversed on the bed, with his head “propped up with the two pillows at the foot of the bed.” His being propped up, his passive reading, and the softness of two pillows associate him with femininity and with the traditional position of women in the Victorian paradigm. At the same time the “girl”—she is not mature--asserts her masculine side by declaring her independence and capability. She goes down to get the cat, but she misses it because she talks about it too much, hesitates, and waits for the shelter of an umbrella. If she had been more assertive and simply gone directly out after the cat she might have gotten what she was after. In contrast the cat has left its shelter and must have gotten wet going out into the rain.

The European is at a distance from her “in the far end” of his office. “She liked his dignity. She liked the way he wanted to serve her.” But she would not like the traditional role of a European wife, since she has asserted her desire for independence. She would not let her husband serve her by going after the cat out in the rain. She is in an egalitarian marriage and is wearing her hair “clipped close like a boy’s.” When the European bows to her, “something felt very small and tight inside the girl.” Feeling something “small and tight” inside her is an image of the cat huddled under the table. Paradoxically, “The padrone made her feel very small and at the same time really important. She had a momentary feeling of being of supreme importance.” She does not feel as important being an equal. The story dramatizes the problematic transition from the Victorian paradigm, still dominant in Europe in the 1920s, to the modern paradigm of gender roles and relations between the sexes.

Back in her room, she continues to identify with the cat: “It isn’t any fun to be a poor kitty out in the rain.” She projects her self-pity onto the cat and it becomes an image of the self that escapes her, a psychological wholeness represented by the cat, because it has both masculine independence and the feminine characteristics of cats. She picks up a mirror and studies the two sides of her profile. She decides that she wants to let her hair grow longer and in conversation with her husband she becomes more

feminine. The two men in the story correspond to the two sides of her psychological profile, the European who treats her in a traditional way that makes her feel of “supreme importance” versus her American husband George, who is inclined to treat her as an equal.

Throughout the story, George is reclining on the bed reading while his wife is up and after something. She is striving so much to develop her masculine side that her femininity is deprived. When she asks him if he would like her to let her hair grow long, he says “I like it the way it is”—their lifestyle as well as her hair. He likes not having to serve her. But she feels incomplete, and when she complains, “I get so tired of looking like a boy,” he adapts a little: “George shifted his position in the bed.” As if shifting positions for sexual intercourse. He becomes more attentive, up to a point: “He hadn’t looked away from her since she started to speak.” When she appeals to him for more attention, he cannot respond satisfactorily because his sensitivity, his feminine side, is undeveloped. The best the American man can do is say “You look pretty darn nice.” We may be sure that the European gentleman could do much better than that in catering to her feelings with sweet words, sentiments and romantic gestures. Equality kills romance. Worse, the wife and the husband are equally arrested in psychological development by an egalitarian American marriage based on masculine independence that excludes femininity.

She goes to the window and looks out into the rain. “It was getting dark.” The darkness evokes her deeper self, her unconscious, the horse in the vignette. In dreams and visions, horses are common symbols of unconscious forces, as in *Black Elk Speaks*. When her husband says “I like it the way it is,” she is hurt because it means he wants to continue to treat her as an equal, which takes a lot less time than being romantic. His simple statement of how he feels affects her deepest feelings for him like the goring of the horse in the vignette. Now she spills her guts. She goes on and on about how she wants to feel and about the things she wants, running on and on: “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.” Imagine the old fisherman Santiago whining “I want a fish, I want a big fish, I want a really big fish and I want it to be spring and I want a new boat.”

This couple has probably been through variations of this scene before. The husband knows that he cannot satisfy his wife, that she wants what she does not have and that he cannot give her. Everything she specifies that she wants and does not have is a reproach to him. She is a picky girl who picked him in the first place and now is picking at him like the picador in the vignette jabbing the bull with a pic. She may be essentially innocent like the white horse, but she is also the rider. Her husband in the role of the bull is so provoked he finally charges: ““Oh, shut up and get something to read,” George said. He was reading again.” Treating her as an equal, he tells her to do what he is doing.

At the end, a maid brings a cat to the wife, but it is not the same cat as the one out in the rain. This cat is not wet. It is “big” whereas the cat outside was “small.” This is not the cat she wants. What she wants cannot be given to her, which is what frustrates George about her demands. The cat the maid brings to her just as she brought the umbrella is a “tortoise-shell” cat, suggesting that like the tortoise in the fable, an inside cat is a winner in a long slow race with a vulnerable cat out in the rain.

Some critics suggest that what the wife needs is a baby, but that would make pointless the contrast between her two profiles evoked in the mirror and by the two men. A baby would not fulfill her need for independent masculine expression represented by the cat outside, in contrast to the cat given to her inside. To get what she wants she will have to go out after it on her own, which may require that she leave the shelter of her marriage and get wet, just as the cat leaves the shelter of the table. Although she wants to settle down, she also wants to have “fun,” as she indicates repeatedly in the story. Rather than a baby, it is more likely she will go out catting and have an affair with a European.

Hemingway began “Cat in the Rain” while staying at a hotel in Italy with his first wife Hadley. The story originated from a rainy day with Hadley. As it turned out eventually, they both had affairs. He continued to love Hadley but they were incompatible in a longterm marriage. Then in succession he married three independent professional women—all writers—one of whom was so independent as a war correspondent they rarely saw each other. The ideal woman in his fiction is both a career woman and feminine, capable of true love—Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms*. In his androgynous experiments

with his last wife Mary, Hemingway called himself Catherine—or Cat. “She loves me to be her girls, which I love to be,” he said. Androgyny is a subject dramatized in his last unfinished novel *The Garden of Eden*—which got censored by Feminists. The main woman character, Catherine, is depicted as a liberated modern woman who has degenerated from the heroic wartime nurse Catherine of *A Farewell to Arms* into a narcissistic hedonist who wants to do nothing but have fun.

Michael Hollister (2012)