

An analysis of cat in the rain by ernest hemingway



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The short story *Cat in the rain* by Ernest Hemingway is one of my favorite pieces of short fiction written by an American writer. I read the story for the first time in my second year at the university and, ever since then, whenever I met people who shared my passion for literature, I bring up *Cat in the rain*. What puzzles me most is the uncertainty that I have regarding the cat. Is the cat that the American woman saw in the rain the same one with the cat that the innkeeper gave her at the end of the short story?

Synopsis

The short story *Cat in the Rain* was written in the 1920's. It is about an American couple who spends their holidays in an Italian hotel. It is a rainy day and the American woman sees a cat in the rain, which she wants to protect from the raindrops. When she goes out of the hotel, which is kept by an old Italian (who seems to do everything to please the woman), and wants to get the cat, it is gone. Upon returning to the hotel room, she starts a conversation with her husband George, who has been reading all this time, and tells him how much she wants to have a cat (and other things). Her husband seems to be annoyed by what she says and is not interested at all. At the end of the story there is a knock on the door and a maid comes, holding in her hands a cat for the American woman.

Point of view

This is an intriguing story, one of relatively few in Hemingway's writings told from the point of view of a woman. It is important to mention that, as a writer, Hemingway was obsessed with masculinity, violence and death.

Although the point of view is third-person omniscient, our sympathies as readers lie with the female protagonist, referred to only as “ the American wife.” The story works its way through her consciousness as she spies a stray cat huddled under a dripping table outside an Italian hotel and her attempt to rescue it.

Rising action

The beginning of the story stands for the rising action: the background, the characters, and the setting are clearly presented. First there is a description of the environment: good weather, which means spring or summer, then a description of the situation in the rain. This description creates an atmosphere that is sad, cold and unfriendly. To create this atmosphere, Hemingway uses words and expressions such as “ empty” and “ the motorcars were gone”. By analyzing the relationship of the two Americans, we understand that this description foreshadows the state of the couple’s relationship: at first it was a nice one, the spring-time of their love, but now there is only rain; their relationship has become cold and unfriendly. Another symbolic hint in the introduction is the war monument, which is mentioned three times. This is maybe done to tell us that a conflict is to be expected.

Hemingway’s characters are mostly men. A cat in the rain is thought to be an exception from that rule, as the main role is played by a woman. This woman’s story, who feels trapped in a relation, is a good proof of Hemingway’s philosophy. He believed that people are isolated, lonely and not able to establish happy relationships. The writer himself was a perfect example when, in 1961, his depression led him to suicide.

Of significant importance is the author's attitude towards the main characters. Hemingway's attitude towards the wife, the innkeeper, and the husband influence the reader's perception of these characters. The wife is the central character in the story and the reader feels a great deal of sympathy for her. Hemingway chooses not to include any negative details about the woman's personality. In fact, the wife is a relatively flat character. The reader learns that she is unsatisfied in many aspects of her marriage life, and that she enjoys the flattery of the innkeeper. Otherwise, the reader does not discover any other information about the unhappy wife.

Hemingway's lack of details encourages the reader to view the woman as an unfortunate, neglected character. The writer's portrayal of the innkeeper transforms him from a minor character, to one of great significance. This character provides the lonely wife the only source of encouragement.

The protagonist

The protagonist of the story is the American wife / girl. The woman's spontaneous reaction after she had seen that cat stands for the conflict of the story. Usually only children want to protect cats or dogs from the rain, as a grown-up knows that rain does not do any harm to animals living on the street. The woman wants to protect the little cat, which now stands for something innocent and vulnerable, like a baby. This is the behaviour of an adult. But on the other hand she acts like a child by having this wish for a cat. It is extremely meaningful that the woman is referred to as " girl" in the following paragraph, not as " wife" like before.

The sequence in which we get to know that she likes the hotelkeeper a lot follows next. She likes the way he wants to serve her. Why? Because it makes her feel like a grown-up woman, treated like a real lady. But the other reasons for liking him originate from a more childish mentality: she likes him because of “ his old, heavy face and big hands”. When she talks about the cat she does not say “ cat” but “ kitty,” which is usually a childish expression.

The two parts of her personality can be noticed in the way she perceives the innkeeper: “ The padrone made her feel very small and at the same time very important. She had a momentary feeling of being of great importance.” The child in her feels very timid because of the presence of this tall, old, serious man, but the woman in her feels flattered by the way he cares for her. She seems to be like a girl of about fourteen, still a child but one who slowly discovers the woman inside her.

The crisis of the short story is when the woman realizes that the cat is gone. What follows next is the falling action. She comes back to the hotel room without the cat, where her husband is still reading. She tells her husband that she does not know why she wanted that cat so much, but the reader understands why: she feels the need for something to care for, to be responsible for. George does not need all that anymore, because he already is a grown-up man, shown in his more serious behaviour. George does not understand his wife’s problem and therefore the problem of their relationship: when she tells him about her desire to let her hair grow (to become more feminine), he just tells her with disinterest that he likes it the way it is.

But her wish for longer hair is only the beginning. She tells him that she wants her own silver to eat with, candles, and that cat. Without really realizing it herself, these wishes correspond with her desire to be, at last, an adult. And that is why she is now referred to as “ wife”.

The fact that she wants it to be spring again stands for her huge desire for a new spring in her relationship. In the end she gets a cat, given to her by the maid at the padrone’s instruction. Maybe it is not important if it is the same cat she saw in the street, what matters most is that she finally gets something to take responsibility for.

The antagonist

The American wife in Ernest Hemingway’s *Cat in the Rain* is an obvious victim of marital neglect. While vacationing in Italy, the romance capital of the world, George’s control and carelessness cause the wife to focus on a stray cat for fulfillment. Although the couple is on a romantic vacation, George proceeds to neglect his wife. This is evident not only in his mannerisms but also in his lack of involvement in her want for the cat. When the wife says that she wants to get the cat, George makes a poor attempt at offering to help. Unmoving and still in the same position on the bed, he remains focused on his book, but offers a half-hearted “ I’ll get it”.

Even though George is a neglectful husband, his controlling nature is of the sort that denies her many of her wants, needs, and desires. Many things in the American wife’s life are not as she wishes them to be. She would like to have longer hair, as well new clothes, silver cutlery, and candles. Some would suggest that these needs are just superficial material needs, that they

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hold no relevance to the fact that she is ignored. On the contrary, her inability to obtain these things or to be allowed these things reflect George's domineering traits.

A reason for George not to allow his wife to grow her hair when she confesses that she is "so tired of looking like a boy" is because he wants her to look as though she is not truly a woman, more of an immature object whom he has control over. As she continues to describe her longing to look like a woman, with long hair and with "a big knot at the back that I can feel," and her desires for "a kitty and some new clothes," George simply orders her to "shut up and get something to read". George just doesn't want to hear it.

The inn keeper

Since she is not looked after by her husband, she takes comfort in the fact that the innkeeper takes a liking to her and a concern to her well-being. Often times, women who are neglected need to seek outside attention, whether it is negative or positive. The fact that the innkeeper gave the American wife a feeling of importance reflects the lack of attention (or even affection) she receives from George. The American wife's extreme need for notice is a direct result of George's inability to pay her the attention which she needs.

The cat

When women, or anybody for that matter are neglected, they turn to animals or objects for a sort of therapy. The wife describes the cat as "a poor kitty

out in the rain” which she wants so much. She sees herself in the cat, as though she is also stuck in the rain, having no fun. She identifies with the poor kitty and wants to care for it. The whole idea of rescuing the cat from the rain reflects her own desire to be rescued. On her way to do so, the pardone happens to be there to help and thus makes her feel important.

Ending

We might be inclined to say that this short story has a “ happy ending” because the American woman finally got a cat. But the cat will give her pleasure just for a short while. When she will wake up from the dream world she might fall in, she will soon realize that she is still married to an uncaring husband.