

"cat in the rain": a psychological criticism



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Modern psychology, although a relatively new and largely still-debated scientific field, focuses on not how people do certain things, but why. Most people would agree that modern psychology began with Sigmund Freud in the early 1900s. Freud's most important work involves his belief in the subconscious mind—a place that, although we are not aware of the impact, secretly plays a role in the things we say, do, and even dream. Since then, psychology has continued to grow and develop thanks to B. F. Skinner, Pavlov, Maslow, and other contributors that have continued to evolve Freud's initial thoughts and develop major strides towards figuring out why humans act and react in certain ways. Freud asserted that literature itself was a type of "day-dream" and that the author could be psychoanalyzed based upon their writings (Lynn 200). According to Lynn, the critic must "go beyond biological facts to expose the underlying motivation" (200). Furthermore, a critic could also psychoanalyze a character within the text to try to bring to the surface what the character's true motives are, which can also give some insight into the author. In order to effectively perform a psychological criticism in terms of a character within a text, the critic must be both creative and have a general knowledge of psychological terms in order to "diagnose" the character, which will ultimately bring the motives of the character into the foreground. For the purposes of psychological criticism, the short fiction of modernist Ernest Hemingway—particularly his relationship-oriented narrative "Cat in the Rain"—is especially instructive. Ernest Hemingway's short story "Cat in the Rain" tells the tale of a young American couple traveling in Italy after the war. The married couple is the only Americans at a small hotel near the ocean. It is raining, so they are

stuck together in their small hotel room, and the wife is looking out the window when she notices a cat hunkered under a table trying to keep dry. The wife tells her husband, " It's no fun to be a kitty out in the rain" (Hemingway 93). The wife goes out to rescue the cat, but when she goes around the building, the cat is gone. The wife returns to the hotel room, where her husband George is still reading. He continues to ignore her as she tells him about all the things she wants: a cat, long hair, silver, a table, and new clothes (Hemingway 94). George tells her to shut up. At the end of the story, the maid at the hotel brings a cat to the room, although it is unclear whether or not it is the same cat from outside. The American woman manages to give many aspects of her psyche to analyze, despite the story being only three pages long. There is evidence of both isolation and displacement, both of which are coping mechanisms that the woman uses to deal with the fact that she is being ignored by her husband and longs for a stable, more domestic life. Ultimately, the cat in the rain become a symbol for what the woman really wants—a domestic life—and the woman's isolation and displacement.

Throughout the course of the story, the American woman is ignored repeatedly by her husband George. The first instance occurs when the woman first says she wants to go out and help the kitty. Her husband does offer to go get it for her, but he never looks up from his book or makes any sort of motion to get up (Hemingway 91). The woman says she wants to go and ventures into the rain to retrieve the cat. Upon seeing the cat is no longer there, the woman returns to her hotel room, where her husband is still reading in bed. He does ask if she found it, but returns to reading before she

answers him. When she muses about letting her hair grow out, he simply says that he likes it the way it is (Hemingway 95). The wife then goes on and on about all of the things that she wants: " 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" (Hemingway 96). George's response is simply, " Oh, shut up and get something to read" (Hemingway 96). The wife resumes insisting that she wants a cat, but Hemingway makes it apparent that the husband is not listening to her musings. It is apparent in this story that the marriage is clearly lacking something and that the wife is not dealing with it in a mentally sound and healthy way. Despite being repeatedly ignored and even once insulted, the wife never seems to directly react to her husband's mistreatment. Psychologically, this is known as isolation, which is " understanding that something should be upsetting but failing to react to it" (Lynn 205). The fact that the wife fails to react to the rudeness of her husband implies that she is perhaps immune to this behavior, which means it is a common occurrence. In " We Are All Cats in the Rain", White describes the husband's behavior as "[refusing to indulge] her the child in her" (White 253). The wife should call out her husband's behavior or at the very least, show some physical sign of annoyance. Instead, though, she never even reacts at all. However, her lack of reaction is enough evidence to show that she is using isolation as a coping mechanism. She is clearly unhappy in her marriage and seems to be accustomed to his behavior.

Another coping mechanism we see the American wife employ several times is displacement, which according to Lynn is " shifting an emotion from the

real target to a different one" (203). The woman practices this defense mechanism in two instances. The first one is with the cat itself. She becomes fixated on wanting the cat she sees out in the rain. In fact, she mentions wanting the cat verbally ten times in the three-page story. The cat becomes a symbol for what she really deeply wants: something to care for. Many past critics have surmised that the cat represents a baby, but I remain unconvinced. The woman simply wants something to care for and something to receive affection from. The other instance occurs with the hotel owner at the beginning of the story. She likes him a lot—a concerning amount—when all he does is his job. The text repeats the redundancy used with the cat: "She liked the deadly serious way he received complaints. She liked his dignity. She liked the way he wanted to serve her.... She liked.... She liked.... She liked... (Hemingway 92). It is his job to make sure she has a pleasant stay, but rather than acknowledging he is doing a good job, she over-reacts to his service, mistaking it for affection. She misplaces his attention because she is starved for affection and just wants to be heard and treated as though she is important. Ultimately, the key symbol of the story is the cat. The cat triggers in her the idea that she could have something to take care of and receive affection from and that idea clearly resonates with her. She longs for stability—for her table and her long hair, things she associates with a domestic lifestyle. Hemingway's Theatre of Masculinity describes her obsession with the cat as a result of "the lack of physical and emotional support from George" (Strychaz 67). She identifies with the cat because she too is a cat in the rain—trapped in a small space that she does not want to be in.

"Cat in the Rain" thus gives us a glimpse into the marriage of a young, American couple traveling Europe after the war. The wife is feeling neglected to the point where she no longer reacts. She yearns for a stable, domestic life in which she can grow out her hair, have her own fancy mirror and silverware, and perhaps even a baby. She wants to feel affection and wants something to take care of. It is clear, brief as this glimpse into these lives is, that this is an unhappy marriage that may ultimately end in failure. This can be implied into the life of Hemingway himself: an unhappy marriage, a neglected wife, a cat, and the strife of a baby. He has written it over and over again. Perhaps Freud is correct: we truly are looking into Hemingway's day-dreams when we read his stories. Maybe Hemingway's wife is the true cat in the rain.

Works Cited

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