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## **THE MANX CAT IN *A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN***

**Abstract:** The article focuses on the Manx cat as a zoometaphor and subject in Virginia Woolf's essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929). As suggested by Woolf, both cats and women occupy a subordinate position in the hierarchy ruled by the masculine-coded human. The story of the Manx cat is an allegory of the exclusion of women from the systems of education and the history of literature, but in the essay cats are also depicted as subjects in their own right, victimized by humans. The analogy established between cats and women can be read as a reflection on Darwin's theory of evolution, which effectively erased the differences between humans and animals. The unusual physical appearance of the Manx cat, characteristically lacking a tail, also reminds the narrator of the Great War that still required working through in Woolf's post-war society.

**Key words:** Manx cat, the Great War, shell-shock, *A Room of One's Own*, theory of evolution

### **Introduction**

**“Cats do not go to heaven. Women cannot write the plays of Shakespeare.”**

***A Room of One's Own* (1929)**

Among the many animals that appear in the work of Virginia Woolf, cats stand out as symbols of disorder, disobedience, and a type of subversion which could be read as typically female, if we consider the author's feminist ideas. One of the most well-known of Woolf's feline creatures appears in her essay *A Room of One's Own* (1929), in which she deals with the role of women in the world of education and literature. The cat which she introduces early on in the text is a Manx cat, an unusual breed which descends from the Isle of Man, born without a tail due to genetic mutation. While the Manx cat, being different from other cats due to its genetic make-up, is

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comparable in status to women, who are genetically different from men, the other cats mentioned in the essay are comparable to women for other reasons. For Woolf, the similarity between cats and women lies in the fact that both have historically been regarded as deficient and inferior to the masculine-coded human. Typically for Virginia Woolf, the field of reference of the cat as zoometaphor breaks the bounds of her feminist concerns and expands to include a commentary on wider political affairs, crucial for the British society after the Great War. The image of the cat evokes a sense of loss that cannot be fully grasped by the narrator, after which she proceeds to compare the animal to women in a critique of both patriarchy and anthropocentrism.

### **The Truncated Animal and the Great War**

In *A Room of One's Own*, one of the most well-known of Woolf's feminist essays, the female narrator of the piece is taking a walk around "Oxbridge" grounds, contemplating the historical exclusion of women from the systems of education. Later on, during a luncheon party held at the university building, the female speaker suddenly gets distracted by an unusual cat that catches her eye while the narrator is looking out of the window. The cat in question lacks a tail, and the sight of it suddenly seems to change the atmosphere of the party:

The sight of that abrupt and truncated animal padding softly across the quadrangle changed by some fluke of the subconscious intelligence the emotional light for me. It was as if someone had let fall a shade. Perhaps the excellent hock was relinquishing its hold. Certainly, as I watched the Manx cat pause in the middle of the lawn as if it too questioned the universe, something seemed lacking, something seemed different. But what was lacking, what was different, I asked myself, listening to the talk?<sup>2</sup>

To discover what had changed, the narrator had to go back in past to an imagined, similar luncheon party before the war. What was different between these two parties concerns the poetry of Alfred Tennyson and Christina Rossetti that was, as the narrator imagined, "hummed" by the men and women during the party before the war. These poems could not be hummed, spoken, or

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<sup>2</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: HarperCollins, 2003), 16.

sung with the same passion and emotions today, she concludes. It is still hard to pin down exactly why that is so:

But why (...) have we stopped humming under our breath at luncheon parties?

Why has Alfred ceased to sing

*he is coming, my dove, my dear.*

Why has Christina ceased to respond

*My heart is gladder than all these*

*Because my love is come to me?*<sup>3</sup>

Thinking about the change in the ways in which we read these lines today, belonging to Tennyson's "Maud" (1855) and Rossetti's "A Birthday" (1861) respectively, the narrator provides an answer herself, which still remains inconclusive:

Shall we lay the blame on the war? When the guns fired in August 1914, did the faces of men and women show so plain in each other's eyes that romance was killed? Certainly it was a shock (to women in particular with their illusions about education, and so on) to see the faces of our rulers in the light of shell-fire. So ugly they looked - German, English, French - so stupid. But lay the blame where one will, on whom one will, the illusion which inspired Tennyson and Christina Rossetti to sing so passionately about the coming of their loves is far rarer now than then.<sup>4</sup>

The central reason why we cannot read these lines in the same way is the nature of war itself, which forever changed our perception of literature and art. We cannot read poetry by Tennyson and Rossetti in the same way because those who survived the war do not share the same emotions that inspired the poets to write these poems. The general public could just not share the same optimism due to the utter break with the past initiated by the war. The deaths of many people during the Great War meant that the readers of Tennyson and Rossetti could not identify with a hopeful waiting at the centre of these love poems, because the war had taken away from them someone who would never come back, and something that could never be restored.

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<sup>3</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 19.

<sup>4</sup> Woolf, 19-20.

The Manx cat characteristically lacking a tail therefore alludes to something very specific. Its “truncated” appearance indicates a sense of lack, and at times an elusive loss which the post-war society had to deal with. For Virginia Woolf, the Great War was a watershed of her time, forever separating the past from the present. She referred to it in a number of her novels, starting with *Jacob’s Room* (1922), her first mature work in which the eponymous protagonist dies in the trenches of Flanders. In *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Woolf again tackles the war which unveils in the background of the story, and occupies the middle section of the novel, dividing the lives of the fictional characters, the Ramsay family and their friends, in two parts. The plot of her last novel *Between the Acts* (1941) occupies the interwar period, with the action taking place only several weeks before the onset of World War II. Still, the horrors of the war were something she rarely wrote about explicitly, but only hinted at, using narrative anachronies such as ellipsis to avoid having to depict the event itself. As a traumatic event that has not been yet worked through at the time when Woolf wrote her major works, the Great War operates as a historical trauma. Trying to define what the term encompasses, Laub and Feldman describe it as a past event that is in fact not yet “over,” since its consequences can still be felt in the realms of politics, culture and art, which we study, in which we write, and on which we draw while trying to learn and educate others.<sup>5</sup> The post-war society of Virginia Woolf had to confront the past if it were to heal itself.

The Manx cat, whose appearance had changed the “tone” of the luncheon party for the narrator of the essay, evoked in her the feelings of absence and loss. The tailless cat therefore points to an important issue that had to be dealt with after the war – the presence of the war veterans, including amputees and those suffering from psychological trauma. The term “shell-shock,” indicating the psychological condition today known as PTSD, was introduced in medical terminology as late as 1915, and treated with limited success. According to Jay Winter, as much as one fourth of all men in the British army were declared psychologically unfit by 1917, and their dire medical condition posed a challenge for the physicians, therapists and psychologists. In addition to being treated by unsuitable methods which were sometimes as extreme as electrical shock therapy, the shell-shocked soldiers were often accused of defecting, or regarded as behaving cowardly.<sup>6</sup> The experience of those suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder encapsulates an entirely different memory of the war, which was not easily assimilated into the

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<sup>5</sup> Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, “Foreword,” in: *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, eds. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (New York, London: Routledge, 1992), XIV.

<sup>6</sup> Jay Winter, *Remembering War. The Great War Between Historical Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2006).

national discourses of the event. Many of the soldiers who survived the war failed to embody the narratives of heroism that were, as Claire Buck points out, prevalent not only in public discourses, but also much of the writing of the period. More specifically, the general public favored combatant experience, particularly in the trenches on the Western Front, as the only authentic account of the war.<sup>7</sup> Those who did not experience the war first-hand, such as women, and those who failed to affirm the national myth of the heroic, suffering soldier, were given limited space in public narratives of the event. Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) features one of such people, the war veteran Septimus Smith, who suffers from PTSD. Upon returning from the war, Septimus keeps reliving the death of his friend and comrade Evans in the form of hallucinations, disrupting the harmony of the society that tries to ignore the consequences of war. To go back to Woolf's essay, the narrator of *A Room of One's Own* draws attention to another group of individuals that remained marginalized in wartime by revealing the inequality of women when it comes to decision-making in war. As the female speaker points out, in wartime women were left with no other choice but to watch in shock the horrors of war set off by male leaders of all nationalities, who regardless of their education, seem to have made the stupidest decisions.<sup>8</sup> In the continuation of the essay, Woolf comments on yet another historical exclusion of women, the one from the history of literature. Based on their subordination in patriarchal societies, Woolf compares the position of women to the unfavorable position of cats in the world of humans.

### **Cats Do Not Go to Heaven**

The Manx cat referred to in the essay *A Room of One's Own* sets off a chain of different associations. In addition to providing a reference to the loss experienced by the Great War, the cat operates as a zoosymbol, linked to the idea of female subversion and disobedience. More specifically, the Manx cat spotted by the narrator was caught walking around the same turf from which the narrator herself was previously driven off by a Beadle. Since only the “fellows and scholars”<sup>9</sup> were allowed onto the university grass, the female speaker had to return to the gravel path. The anecdotal appearance of the cat could therefore be read as a commentary on female exclusion from the institutions of education, with the Manx cat breaking the patriarchal norm.

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<sup>7</sup> Claire Buck, “British Women's Writing of the Great War,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of the First World War*, ed. Vincent Sherry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 87.

<sup>8</sup> Woolf, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 10.

Still, the tailless creature is not the only cat in the essay. Other cats feature in the continuation of the text, where the link between the feline animal and women is established more explicitly.

Roaming about in the British Museum in London, the narrator of the essay, who is preparing a text on women and fiction, concludes that the place of women in literature is largely restricted to them being its subject matter. Overwhelmed by the multitude of books written about women, but few or none by women, the narrator exclaims:

Have you any notion of how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men? Are you aware that you are, perhaps, the most discussed animal in the universe?<sup>10</sup>

The following statement brings together women and animals by commenting on the scientific, academic, and literary hierarchy in which women occupy the position of the object of study. The link between women and animals is reinforced in the continuation of the essay in which the narrator, thinking about the absence of women from the history of literature, comments on the idea of their supposed inferiority in creating art. The female speaker recalls a bishop famous for his belief in the essential inability of women to write literature of the same quality as that of Shakespeare. The same person argued in favour of the inferiority of cats when it comes to humans by claiming that cats are not granted entry into heaven:

He also told a lady who applied to him for information that cats do not as a matter of fact go to heaven, though they have, he added, souls of a sort. How much thinking those old gentlemen used to save one! How the borders of ignorance shrank back at their approach! Cats do not go to heaven. Women cannot write the plays of Shakespeare.<sup>11</sup>

According to the bishop, the idea that women could write as well as Shakespeare is as absurd as the belief that cats could share heaven with humans. Woolf ironically remarks that the bishop might in fact be right, and imagines the destiny of Judith Shakespeare, a fictional sister of the Renaissance playwright. Trying to overcome the restrictions to education, material resources, and theatre that are based on her gender, the sister of Shakespeare fails in her efforts although she is equally talented, and ultimately takes her own life. The history of literature from which women are absent is therefore not based on “genius,” in which women are supposedly

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<sup>10</sup> Woolf, 31.

<sup>11</sup> Woolf, 52.

lacking, but on a set of material conditions which restricted women to the sphere of the domestic, preventing their talent from developing.

When it comes to the animals in the world of humans, their position largely mirrors the place women have occupied historically in patriarchal structures. As objects of academic and scientific study, they have often been constructed as inferior to humans in terms of emotions, intellect, or qualities such as “character” or a “soul.” The analogy between cats and women could be regarded as resulting from the scientific discourse of Darwin’s theory of evolution, the popularity of which continued in the period of Modernism. As many other Modernists, Virginia Woolf was fascinated by animals, not only as a staple of literary imagery, but also as subjects in their own right, as demonstrated in her novel *Flush* (1933), which is written from the perspective of a cocker spaniel.

It is a widely known fact that Darwin’s ideas on the descent of man proved central in dethroning humans from their privileged status. Gillian Beer sums up the political, scientific and religious repercussions of Darwin’s theory by pointing out that, due to Darwin’s ideas, humans were no longer regarded as excluded from nature and the animal kingdom. Rather than being a pinnacle of evolutionary progress, humans are now seen as animals themselves. Furthermore, Darwin’s theory challenged the idea that humans are created in the image of God, or as part of a divine purpose, which made their rule on Earth even less legitimate.<sup>12</sup> The discourse of Darwin’s theory is reflected in the literature of the period in the frequent anthropomorphic metaphors and analogies between human and animal behavior. The narrowing of the gap between humans and animals, prompted by Darwinian discourse, is reflected in Woolf’s writing as well. Woolf’s ironic commentary on the limitations of human knowledge about animals, reflected in the bishop’s commentary on the spiritual and religious inferiority of cats, entails an underdeveloped critique of anthropocentrism. The supposed inferiority of animals for centuries provided legitimacy to their exploitation and abuse.

In addition to other forms of entertainment which involved animal cruelty, such as bull and bear baiting, Renaissance people enjoyed a peculiar sadistic game involving cats. T. F. Thiselton-Dyer comments on the extreme form of entertainment by drawing on Shakespeare’s play *Much Ado about Nothing* (1623), which alludes to it. The game involved putting the cat in a barrel of soot, with people trying to break the barrel by beating it, without making themselves

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<sup>12</sup> Gillian Beer, *Darwin’s Plots. Evolutionary Narrative in Darwin, George Elliot, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 7-9.

dirty.<sup>13</sup> In *Much Ado About Nothing* Benedick mentions the game by saying: “Hang me in a bottle like a cat and shoot at me.”<sup>14</sup> The animal who survived the breaking of the barrel would in most cases not be allowed to escape, but rather tortured to death.<sup>15</sup> Historically, cats have been victimized, burnt and killed due to superstitious beliefs based on the idea that they are somehow associated with witches and evil forces. James Frazer describes the rituals involving burning cats, and other animals, in spring and midsummer bonfires due to this irrational belief. Since they embody evil forces, the suffering of the animals had to be as great as possible.<sup>16</sup> The idea that cats are endowed with unholy powers is not far from the bishop’s view in Woolf’s essay. The argument that animals are inferior to humans was reinforced by religion, which established humans as creatures who have dominion on Earth, and legitimate power over the animal world. The idea was effectively challenged by Darwin’s theory.

Though we could argue that the Enlightenment brought an end to such irrational beliefs and practices, by affirming reason as crucial in expanding our understanding of the world, cruelty over animals has prevailed. Today, it is performed in the name of education, science, and progress that are based on the same rationality that once banished witchcraft and the burning at the stake from history.

The similarity in the status of women and animals, reinforced in *A Room of One’s Own* by Woolf, is part of her discussion of the books on the supposed inferiority or superiority of women that were written predominantly by men. The female speaker focuses particularly on those that attempt to prove “the mental, moral, and physical inferiority”<sup>17</sup> of women, pointing out a paradox. The way women are depicted in literature subverts the claims of female inferiority. According to Woolf:

Indeed, if woman had no existence save in the fiction written by men, one would imagine her a person of the utmost importance; very various; heroic and mean; splendid and sordid; infinitely beautiful and hideous in the extreme; as great as a man, some think even greater.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> T. F. Thiselton-Dyer, *Folk-lore of Shakespeare* (1883), 162. Accessed Dec 14, 2019, <http://www.sacred-texts.com/sks/flos/flos09.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing* (Washington Square Press, 2018), 21.

<sup>15</sup> Thiselton-Dyer, 163.

<sup>16</sup> James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough. A Study of Magic and Religion* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1925), 656-657.

<sup>17</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 34.

<sup>18</sup> Woolf, 49.

Literature not only challenges the pseudo-scientific theories of the inferiority of the female sex through which the narrator rummages in the British Museum, but also deconstructs the differences between women and men. In literature women are described as complex beings, unique mixtures of both “male” and “female” characteristics that cannot be reduced to pure binaries. The line of argumentation could be expanded to include animals too.

## **Final Remarks**

Humans who have written about cats, such as Charles Baudelaire, T.S. Eliot, Rainer Maria Rilke, Mark Twain, or Charles Dickens, portray cats as complex creatures. They are depicted as loyal friends, superior in intelligence and honesty to humans, mysterious and elegant, cunning and opportunistic. The issue of anthropomorphism, and of animals used as no more than zoosymbols or zoometaphors remains a contentious one. Still, the reference to animals in literature does not necessarily preclude ethics.

As a linguistic construct that is largely based on the polyphony of meaning and absence of limits when it comes to signification, literature necessarily transforms everything that is included in it into a potential symbol, metaphor, or allegory. The mere fact that animals are regarded as worthy of aesthetic appreciation is a statement on their worth, especially in the case of the unconventional Manx cat that features in *A Room of One's Own*, whom Woolf herself has described as “queer,” and “quaint rather than beautiful.”<sup>19</sup> In the same way in which Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* reconstructed the history of female exclusion from the world of literature by analyzing the material conditions that reproduce inequality, the history of animal abuse could be written by looking into all the differences constructed between animals and humans. For many of the Modernists, Darwin's theory of evolution provided a starting point for a literary reevaluation of the place of animals in the human world, in which they are no longer regarded as subordinate to humans. Providing a scientific alternative to the idea of animal inferiority, Darwin's theory contributed to an increase in interest in the subjectivity of animals. In the same way in which Woolf in her essay hoped that one day we will live in a world in which the sisters of Shakespeare will no longer be fiction, we can only hope that humanity will follow the path trodden by the natural sciences and Darwin until all forms of animal cruelty are abolished, and

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<sup>19</sup> Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 17.

the complexity of animals, already recognized and praised in fiction, is acknowledged as something that makes animals equal in their status and rights to humans.

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