



## REVIEW OF RESEARCH

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### SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE OF CAT IN EARNEST HEMINGWAY'S 'CAT IN THE RAIN'

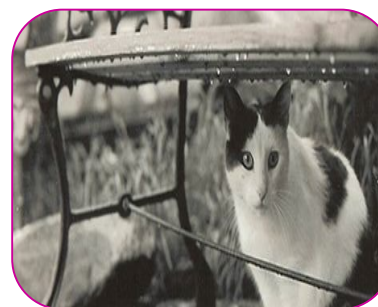
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#### ABSTRACT

*It is often seen in life as well as literature that the woman's status in society is secondary. Her status in marital relationship is not different. She is peripheral and is expected to look at her husband as a centre around which she has to move. The story 'Cat in the Rain' by Ernest Hemingway presents the American couple as emotionally barren, isolated by their own self-absorption. The husband is completely unconcerned with his wife's feelings and aspirations. He remains passive not only in the story but in her life too. He never rises from his supine position on the bed, and even gets angry when she attempts to express her desires. The paper aims at drawing the symbolic significance of the cat in the present story. The woman's desire for the cat signifies her hollow state of mind, her unfulfilled desires and her worthless, nameless identity as a human being.*



**KEY WORDS:** *emotional needs, desires, loneliness.*

#### INTRODUCTION

Ernest Hemingway's 'Cat in the Rain' is a story of a restless American woman. It deals with an American tourist couple staying in a sleepy Italian village on a rainy day. It is set in a hotel on the Italian coast and takes place on a rainy day as an American couple hangs out in their hotel room. The story is about a woman who spots a cat in the rain. Hemingway does not articulate the feelings and frustration directly but whatever happens in the story makes us feel the unspoken tensions between the husband and wife. Hemingway has made a brilliant use of the image of a cat to portray the feelings of hollowness and existential meaninglessness experienced by the woman. In a way the cat is the most significant character in the story.

The story is narrated in the third person by an unnamed narrator. Hemingway effectively employs minimalistic aesthetic to convey the various themes pertaining to human nature. The use of short, simple sentences, mostly without descriptive language, is a distinctive element of minimalism which helps to emphasize the theme of loneliness in the story.

It is often seen in life as well as literature that the woman's status in society is secondary. Her status in marital relationship is not different. She is peripheral and is expected to look at her husband as a centre around whom she has to move. She is conditioned to believe that husband is a sheltering tree. Commenting on the woman's role as conceived by the husband in the marital relationship, Simon de Beauvoir says:

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*A husband regards none of his wife's good qualities as particularly meritorious, they are implied by the institution of marriage itself.... he is still more ignorant of her dreams, her fancies, her nostalgic yearnings, of the emotional climate in which she spends her days.*

The above description by Simone de Beauvoir holds true about the woman in the story. The story presents the American couple as emotionally barren, isolated by their own self-absorption. The husband is completely unconcerned with his wife's feelings and aspirations. He remains passive not only in the story but in her life too. He never rises from his supine position on the bed, and even gets angry when she attempts to express her desires. The wife is nameless in the story. Her namelessness itself defines her identity. The nameless wife is like the "poor kitty out in the rain."

The paper aims at drawing the symbolic significance of the cat in the present story. The woman's desire for the cat signifies her hollow state of mind, her unfulfilled desires and her worthless, nameless identity as a human being.

The story takes place in a hotel on the Italian coast on a rainy day. The husband is reading and the wife is looking out of the window. She sees a cat outside, huddling under a table in the rain and decides to go out and get it. There is a war monument outside the window but the wife ignores it and catches hold of the cat. This suggests that she identifies herself with the animal's vulnerability and loneliness. Her husband tells her not to go and gets back to his reading. However, she goes down to get the cat and saw the hotel owner.

The narrator's comment that the American wife likes the behaviour of the hotel keeper suggests that the American wife lacks such attention and consideration from her husband. The narrator describes her feelings for the hotel owner as:

*He stood behind his desk in the far end of the dim room. The wife 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.*

The wife feels as lonely as the lonely cat. She wants her husband to take care of her emotional needs as she intends to take care of the cat she finds. However, the lack of attention and consideration on her husband's part, results in her liking for the hotel-keeper.

When she goes outside, she doesn't find the cat. Her feelings as she passes by the hotel keeper's office highlight her frustration at the loss of the cat. She feels as vulnerable as the cat. She returns to her room. Her husband is still reading. Not knowing what to do now, she sits in front of the mirror. The husband makes a comment on her appearance by saying, 'I like it the way it is.' He is more interested in his wife's physical appearance; the way she looks and not to the way she feels. The wife who is looking for emotional fulfilment in her marriage is desperate and wanders restlessly in its pursuit. Unable to understand how to get it, she searches for it helplessly. The husband likes her look but she is tired of it and intends to change her look. She tries to get it by means of objects like 'a big knot at the back that she can feel', a kitty and new clothes. Thus there is an apparent contrast in the way they think.

The wife's observation of herself in the mirror suggests that she is re-examining herself and is trying to find out the solution to her emptiness within. This self introspection seems to be triggered by the loss of the cat. The desires that she shares with her husband suggest a dissatisfaction that pervades her life. Especially her desire for the cat implies her deep yearning for love and warmth in her marriage.

When we compare the wife's description of the hotel owner and the conversation between the wife and the husband, we see a remarkable difference in the wife's responses. When she sees the hotel owner she is sure about what she likes and thus what she wants from her relationship with her husband. On the other hand, in the conversation with her husband she looks confused, not sure about what she is really searching for. It is quite evident from the conversation that there is a rift in their relationship. While the husband is cold and unmoved, the wife is restless. She is clearly searching for some means to escape from the routine. She is searching for a new identity. The hotel-keeper is apparently more sympathetic than her husband. The search for the cat serves to rejuvenate her and break the monotony of her married life in which she is trapped.

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In the end of the story the maid in the hotel arrives with a gift from the hotel-keeper to the wife- a cat. Thus the story ends without clearly telling whether this is the same cat the wife was looking for. Thus there is no clue whether the wife's is fulfilled or not. On the other hand the other hand we cannot surely say that the wife wanted the cat. It is also possible that as she is not happy in her marital life, she is trying to find fulfilment in something outside. In that case she must be happy when she receives the gift from the hotel-keeper. However, the writer has not mentioned her reaction in the story. And it can be concluded that her desire for the cat implies her desire for consideration and love from her husband. As the husband is unable to understand her emotional needs, she finds vicarious pleasure in the hotel-keeper's responses.

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