Being and Time in Ernest Hemingway’s “Cat in the Rain”

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Like a great majority of writers, Ernest Hemingway used literature to understand what it means to be a human being. His answer was both critical and disillusioned. Perhaps his main discovery was that we are part of time and that the states in which we live never last long. Hemingway was concerned with what could be called the fate of our desires. This article will study the mechanics of desire and identity in a very short story, “Cat in the Rain.” The approach will not be biographical, except for its starting point. The story was written when the writer was staying at the Hotel Splendid in Rapallo, Italy, and steadily becoming estranged from his wife Hadley. Strangely enough, the story portrays a most unsympathetic husband… In fact, Hemingway shows himself highly critical of male traditional complacency. As it is, the story can be read as a fundamental question: what are the implications of this crisis in which a woman starts questioning her desire and her identity. Hemingway will often return to these questions in his fiction. His interrogation will find its culmination with the description of the daring sexual and mental experiments initiated by Catherine Bourne in The Garden of Eden. It seems thus important to look closely at Hemingway’s diagnosis: in what way are desire and identity inextricably bound up with time?

I. Time and Identity

To summarize the diagnosis Hemingway offers in “Cat in the Rain,” it could be said that the problem is: what is identity? The answer is: it is inseparable from desire, and the tool needed to reach the answer is an understanding of our position as social animals.

Unquestionably, the couple is undergoing a crisis, at least from the point of view of the wife. George, the husband, as far as he is concerned, has taken possession of the two pillows and the bed… It could then be said that identity is a question. It is the question we ask ourselves when precisely we understand that our usual sense of identity has only been an illusion. People who are sure of their identity do not ask that type of questions,
which does not mean that they have an identity... The husband doesn’t ask the question. Life for him just goes on. Judging from what the text says, for him, it is only a series of mechanical habits, reading during the day, presumably eating and sleeping. Should we add sex? That seems to be one of the problems facing the two spouses. The “wife,” as for her, suddenly becomes a “girl,” and she symbolically feels compelled to look at herself in the mirror on the dressing table. She cannot identify with what she sees. Hemingway knows that identity is a problem bound up with our imagination. It is an image, a mental fiction which we construct and into which we project ourselves. In the mirror, the girl/wife sees herself the way she would like to look in the future, that is to say with long hair. That image remains, however, extremely tenuous, as if she knew that she is paralysed by her present situation and that she will never be able to reach that state.

3 More specifically, identity is not something that is given once and for all, but it is an unending mental process. As the wife cannot find in herself (or in the mirror for that matter) an image to which she can identify, she mainly tries to construct some sort of self from a number of elements outside her self, first through and outside the window, and secondly through another self. The window is like a screen, or let us say a mental surface, upon which she projects her craving for meaning and identity. The result is a complex identification to a cat she sees outside in the garden trying to find shelter from the rain under a table. She decides that the cat is a “kitty making herself [so] compact,” even though it (she?) is quite a distance away and the light is very poor. The fantasy that the cat is female clearly possesses ambivalent implications: the wife is/has the cat. On the one hand, identity is defined as identification. She craves protection, being looked after, in other words she desires love, just like she imagines that that female cat needs love and recognition. On the other hand, it is also likely she would like to have a kitty, that is a baby, of her own, which would confer upon her a new, fulfilling role: being a mother.

4 The wife also tries to fill up the emptiness that lies at the core of her self by projecting an image upon another person, in her case the hotel owner. She supposes that he possesses a number of specific qualities. These qualities correspond to what she desires: protection, being acknowledged by that elderly man who possibly represents a father figure for her. It is as if she now was the baby. That obviously is only a one-way process. Readers guess that the man is perhaps a good owner, in that he tries to be helpful, but it is unlikely that he feels any sort of affective duty towards his customers.

5 Basically, the American woman is a prisoner of her mind which is made up of a blank where a self—or an image of a self—should be. Mentally, she is also the prisoner of the room, and of a meaningless marriage, which to her boils down to the same predicament. There is no escaping. Yet, what lies outside the window pane is a temptation. There is rain. Should readers conclude that she would like to escape her barren cohabitation with her husband in order to become part of some sort of fertility associated with water? There is also nature outside, or at least green things. Readers, however, know that she will never escape into nature. Human beings cannot do so, even though they sometimes dream that they can in order to break free from constraining social situations. Thirdly, outside, she can see a monument commemorating the dead of the Great War in the middle of the square, whereas, in the room, the woman is cut off from the cycle of life and death, death and life. She tries to leave the room at one point. Immediately an umbrella appears above her head. It is then clear that will never come into contact with the outside world.
II. Time and Society

6 One hypothesis is that nature is a temptation for the wife mainly because she has no place in society, or, at least, that is what she feels in her mind. It is a fact that objectively her social world has shrunk considerably. In the story, it seems to be limited to her husband only and, in addition, there does not seem to be any kind of real relationship between the two spouses. The situation may be explained by cultural reasons. Hemingway knows that individuals do not exist apart from history. The couple in the story is typical of a certain category of Americans in the aftermath of the Great War. We do not learn exactly why this particular couple is in Europe. People used to come over chiefly because life was cheaper than in the States, and also of course because of the availability of alcohol. Many young Americans also objected to the moral sanctimoniousness prevailing at home. All we know is that the wife thinks that at first their life had been “fun.” One may reasonably suppose that it was like being on holiday. The problem, for the wife at least, seems that being on holiday all year round is no longer “fun.” Her world is now limited to a hotel room and, outside the window, she has a glimpse of another society from which she is excluded: “Italians came from a long way off to look up at the war monument.”

7 Indirectly—as always—Hemingway uses his stories to raise essential issues about life and its meaning. Behind “Cat in the Rain,” it is possible to find an underlying question concerning what society is. Hemingway’s answer is always the same. At its most abstract level, it could be summarized in the following way. There are two points of view—society’s and mine—and they have basically nothing to do with one another. The one that matters is society’s, not my own. If I focus on my priorities, I become the victim of perversion, or even madness, or at the very least, neurasthenia, as seems to be the case of the American wife. Society, on the other hand, only wants one thing: its own reproduction. That means that individuals have one sole mission, as it were, that is procreation. Whether they derive some kind of personal pleasure, or “fun,” in the process of producing children is utterly irrelevant. In other words, deep inside their unconscious, individuals are required to accept two systems of differences. First, there should be a difference between generations. There are always three generations: I have a father, then there is my own generation, and then I will become a father myself (if I am a male). Secondly, there is the difference between sexes which is of course essential if our purpose is procreation.

8 It is as if the American couple in the story had been running away. In this respect, they are not much different from the expatriates we encounter in The Sun Also Rises dating from the same period. Jake Barnes is the one exception. He is fully part of his society, he works for a living, and the money he spends is the money he has earned. What is important is that his final decision is the answer Hemingway always gives in his books: accepting our limitations is a necessity. The problem is not, in Jake’s case, that he cannot procreate. That is a physical problem. The real problem is in his mind and it concerns his desire and his identity. He knows that he cannot be united—whatever that means—with Brett Ashley, and that losing oneself in pipedreams is futile. “Isn’t it pretty to think so?”

9 It would appear that in her own way the wife of “Cat in the Rain” feels the same thing. Her mind works in terms of figures of speech, and more especially in terms of synecdoches and metonymies. Not surprisingly, she at first does not resort to metaphor, but to figures that stress connection and a link to established reality. She feels unhappy
with her present condition and her meaningless exile and she knows that she would like
to be once again part of mainstream American society. She expresses that desire through
two figures. First, she thinks in terms of synecdoches when she says: "Don't you think it
would be a good idea if I let my hair grow out? [...] I get so tired of looking like a boy."
Presumably, as was the case with a number of American women after the war, she bobbed
her hair in order to look like a flapper. As a consequence, she now deplores that sexual
difference has been abolished. Secondly, she uses a metonymy: "And I want to eat at a
table with my own silver." The synecdoche and the metonymy follow each other in her
mind. The mind is never still, or, if one prefers, desire is a process. Then, and only then,
thanks to her hair and/or the silver, she would be part of a whole, that is to say society
with its conventions.

III. Time and Desire

Society provides a necessary framework that makes certain types of desire possible. The
American wife's concern about hair and silver is specific of the context of American
society (not Italian...) in the early 1920s. Implications would of course be entirely
different today. (It was different during the war. In *A Farewell to Arms*, Henry is horrified
when Catherine wishes to have her hair cut short). It should be clear that identity is
produced by the imagination. It consists in images, and, more specifically, in object
relationships. That is where the paradox lies: the subject is and is only the sum total of
the objects upon which it invests its cathexes, and these mental cathexes are produced by
figures of speech that consist in as many relationships between the subject and objects.
Without these objects, identity does not exist. It is a blank, and that is what the wife has
more or less consciously discovered. What precisely is then the evolution and the fate of
her desire? If one assumes that Hemingway's short story conveys a lesson, that lesson is
as usual with him extremely pessimistic. Desire is inseparable from time. Time never
stops. In other words, desires never last.

The crisis means that the wife has to reconstruct for herself the history of her
relationship with George, which presumably corresponds to their travels across Europe.
She suddenly becomes conscious of time. She is thus able to distinguish three successive
stages. The first stage is what she calls by means of a kind of hypernym, "fun," and it
belongs to the past. It is in fact a mixture of past and present, or, to put it more precisely,
a construction in the present of a lost state of being of which she was not conscious when
she was experiencing it in the past. "Fun" as it was then implied no awareness of time,
crisis or identity. It is up to readers to imagine what the word covers: love, sexual
fulfillment, to which should probably also be added alcohol, dancing, friends, as well as
discovering exotic countries like Italy.

She then moves on to a second stage which takes her to her present condition. With it,
desire comes to the fore in the text, and the wife attempts to satisfy it by means of these
two figures of speech, metonymy and synecdoche, silver and long hair. If she could take
hold of these two parts, she would then possess (have and be) the whole she desires:
identity, a role, social acceptance, a new image. To a certain extent, this desire in the
present apparently also includes a past dimension. The cathexes the wife produces send
her back into the past in an imaginary regression to the United States from where she
comes. Such, however, is not the case of stage three which is a projection into the future,
into a future that the woman hopes will be immediate.
Stages one and two are seen as irretrievably lost. As a consequence, the wife now turns to a new figure of speech. It is reasonable to assume that the cat is a metaphor. It is not a particular cat she may have owned back at home. It thus does not refer to something she knows or knew, but rather stands for something which she cannot represent. In its way, it is also a kind of hypernym referring to what she unconsciously feels happiness consists in, or, if one prefers, to a sort of fetish supposedly hiding that one thing which would constitute total, unending happiness for her. The cat is her answer to the emptiness she discovers in her life. Like probably all human beings, she literally abhors a vacuum, and for her the cat will hopefully fill up that vacuum. It is in fact impossible to assign a definite meaning to what it may represent: being pregnant? Being cared for by someone? The answer is undecidable. She herself (admittedly speaking, not of the cat, but of the way she imagines the hotel owner is looking at her) expresses her desire by means of an oxymoron: feeling “very small and at the same time really important.” The cat is the expression of that irrational desire which cannot be represented. In other words, readers know that silver and long hair are possible objects for the wife. These objects would make her again part of society. The cat, on the other hand, is a fantasy. It is not part of reality.

Behind the text, Hemingway implies a general theory of desire which readers are meant to discover if they wish to make sense of the story. The theory is made up of two important notions. First, there is no sexual rapport. That is what the wife discovers. That obviously does not mean that sexuality does not exist, though one may presumably ask oneself a few questions in the case of a husband who seems to prefer reading—and the two pillows—to his wife's body. That may be irrelevant, but that at least is what and only what the story shows about their relationship. In any case, sexuality belongs to the realm of the physical, it is about bodies touching and penetrating each other. Rapport, on the other hand, is about the mind. The point here is that there is no relationship between the wife and her husband, that is to say, no symmetry, no communication, let alone no communion. They clearly do not share anything. With the advent of the crisis, the woman has now learnt that human beings live alone with their desires and their limitations. Imagining that it might be otherwise is but an illusion.

The second notion is also about an illusion. Desire has no object. More precisely, when we believe that we know what the object of our desire consists in, that object is in fact a temporary object. Love (if that is the word) with the husband did not last. While it lasted, the wife was not conscious of time. She has now realized that being part of time is inescapable and fundamentally, desire is inseparable from lack. It is a kind of belief that takes us from one object to the next in a process that never stops, or, if it stops, it is because we are dead or because we have become mad, a risk that threatens the American wife. In fact, desire follows a series of displacements, husband, hair, silver, cat, etc. What next? The story stops abruptly and the narrator does not tell us.

It would appear that, to a certain extent, the hotel owner understands the theory of desire. He gives the American woman a cat. In the story, a cat thus refers to two different realities. For the hotel owner, it is a real animal. It is any cat that is at hand, and of course the cat the maid takes to the room is not the cat (the female kitty?) the wife saw sheltering “herself” from the rain in the garden. The owner wants to please his customers, or maybe he is just tired of a foreign guest who is always complaining. For the wife, on the other hand, the cat is a symbol, or, more accurately, a metaphor standing in for her desire of fulfillment and escape from time.
IV. Time and the Story

In the story, Hemingway writes about identity. He also writes about time. He knows that the two notions cannot be separated. What is identity? Is it identity as something that remains identical in/about me? That is an illusion and “Cat in the Rain” makes it perfectly clear. Is it not then identity as identifying to something? The wife keeps trying to do so, but she is unable to find the definitive identity/identification. Yet, for Hemingway, that second conception is, in the end, the only valid conception of identity. It is an open-ended process, it is bound up with time, and it means that, in my mind, I am constantly becoming different from myself. It consists in using figures of speech as well as investing in objects such as hair, silver or a cat. What is important to remember is that no object will stop the process for long. An object is always an illusion that temporarily conceals a gap. At this juncture, it may seem legitimate to ask oneself whether tortoiseshell cats are barren. If that were the case, that undeniably would be Hemingway’s final touch of irony in this story about a woman in quest of fertility...

The link between time and identity will always remain one of the central preoccupations behind Hemingway’s stories and novels. The writer will also retain a deep sympathy for his characters, especially as regards the central question of trying to understand what it means to be a man or a woman. How does one define one’s desire? Is it just a matter of social conventions? Hemingway’s conclusion was always a pessimistic one. Humans are social animals. They cannot remain sane outside a constant interplay with society, which means that desire and identity eventually have to submit to time and our limitations. If that is something we refuse to recognize, the risks we run are very high. The wife in this story, for instance, is mildly hysterical. There is a distinct possibility that she might develop some kind of mental disorder like anorexia or bulimia. In what is probably Hemingway’s last and unfinished attempt at solving the problem, the wife in The Garden of Eden comes very close to madness. Admittedly, the novel is deeply different from “Cat in the Rain,” if only because its male protagonist is different. He works hard as a writer and strongly objects to prolonged idleness. Catherine Bourne, however, reveals a number of similarities with the woman in the short story. “Don’t we have wonderful simple fun?” (10) she asks her husband at the beginning, as they are enjoying themselves on the French Riviera. What is “fun”? One way of reading the novel could consist in focusing on the way Catherine carries out her experiments in order to make that “fun” last as though life was possible outside time, as well as outside generational and sexual differences. Unfortunately, David and Catherine discover that “fun” will not last. Gardens of Eden are always lost sooner or later, and time and change always impose themselves upon humans. As David tries to come to terms with the image he has kept of his father, Catherine refuses to become pregnant. At bottom, it would seem that she tries to go as far as possible in order to escape the laws and customs of society. “When you start to live outside yourself, [...] it’s all dangerous. Maybe I’d better go back into our world” (54). In other words, she seems to have understood that saying “I can do anything and anything and anything” (15) means that in the end one just does nothing. The wife in “Cat in the Rain” would also like to go back. Maybe she will. Catherine Bourne cannot and will not. Where in time is she then? Where in time are we? Hemingway never stopped asking the question.
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NOTES

1. The problem was obviously important for Hemingway. In the same collection, he also raises it in "Out of Season," a story which, as its title implies, is also about time. One day, the crisis comes. We understand that the way we are trying to live is "out of season," and that, for instance, our couple is no longer a couple. More profoundly, time is always out of season, or out of joint. Sooner or later, we realize that that is what human existence consists in.

2. How does one read and interpret a text? One possibility is to look for questions raised directly or indirectly by the text. Such is the approach chosen here: what does "Cat in the Rain" tell us in its own words about time and identity? Another (and complementary) possibility is to find echoes of the text in other texts, whether literary or theoretical. Do the two texts tell the same "story" or, should we say, do they tackle the same problems? That will be the approach used in the footnotes. The footnotes are made to look at a problem from another angle or in another context. The question raised by this article deals with the relationships between time and identity in Hemingway's short story. The footnotes suggest echoes in modern psychoanalysis, especially in Jacques Lacan's reformulation of Sigmund Freud's concepts. That is of course only one critical option. Other theoretical approaches could perfectly have been selected and compared to Hemingway's fiction. The point made is that, if Lacan helps us understand Hemingway, Hemingway conversely helps us understand Lacan.

3. In the same way, modern anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss stipulate that only humans possess one universal law: the prohibition of incest. It means that you are supposed to marry and procreate outside your family or your clan. Sigmund Freud mutatis mutandis maintained the same principle when he developed his theory of Oedipus.

4. The problem concerns the way our minds work, especially when unconscious desire is concerned. In his Interpretation of Dreams, Sigmund Freud posits two operations, displacement and condensation. Jacques Lacan inscribes these operations in his own theory when he explains that they are in fact two figures of speech, metonymy and metaphor. (Cf. "L'Instance de la lettre dans l'inconscient ou la raison depuis Freud" / "The Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud," in Écrits). It should be noted that Lacan uses Roman Jakobson's simplified model in which metonymy covers both metonymy and synecdoche in "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasias Disturbances" (in Fundamentals of Language).

5. What the past and the future possibly represent for the wife who feels that she is unable to acquire any sort of identity in the present is undeniably one of the essential questions raised by the story, as Breuer 2007 shows.

6. In anthropology, a fetish is an object (a stone, a tree...) hiding a god who will one day reveal himself (that is, literally tear the veil). The term is also used by psychoanalysts after Freud's famous 1927 article. It refers to an object (a boot, panties, hair...) supposedly concealing the mother's phallus. A phallus of course has nothing to do with anatomy. If I am sure that my mother (still) has her phallus, that signifies that sexual difference does not exist, that is to say that we can escape from time, and that infinite bliss is a possibility provided that the veil is torn. Of course, people who are not animists or fetishists know best. The veil will never be lifted. There
is no veil. And readers of Hemingway's story, just like the hotel owner, know that a cat is a cat and only a cat.

7. There is no need to return to the old debate that consisted in asking how many cats there are in Hemingway's story, one or two? Lodge 1981, Carter 1982, Stubbs 1983 and Bennett 1988 have all written well-known essays on the subject. The question does not seem to be the right question. Even if we assume that the “cat in the rain” is real, its status in the story is unquestionably not that of a factual object. A more fruitful approach consists in considering that Hemingway’s text is the realm of epistemological uncertainty, as Barton argues very convincingly in his 1994 paper. His article should be read in conjunction with Kikuchi’s extremely perceptive 2008 analysis on the gaze and the perception of space in which he shows with great clarity that the first “cat” is at bottom not a stable object, but a fiction.

8. “Il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel.” Throughout his life, Jacques Lacan kept returning to this formula. Readers interested in its implications and developments are advised to turn to the published version of his Seminar XX, Séminaire XX: “Encore,” (131-132). Lacan adds by way of explanation: “Le rapport sexuel est ce qui ne cesse pas de ne pas s’écrire.” (Sexual rapport is what never stops not writing itself.) There is little doubt that Ernest Hemingway would have heartily approved: he literally never stopped writing about sexual rapport in order to tell us that no such thing will ever take place. There should be no doubt in this respect that what Aristophanes says in Plato’s Symposium is of the order of the illusion: “Love thus seeks to refund our early estate, endeavoring to combine two into one and heal the human sore” (Loeb edition, 141.) We will never discover that other ourselves which Zeus is said to have cut into two halves. Lacan repeatedly warned us: one cannot fuse two into one.

9. Perhaps the clearest exposé of Lacan’s conception of desire as lack is to be found in “La Signification du phallus” / “The Signification of the Phallus” (in Écrits). No object—whether silver, long hair or cat, for instance—will ever fill in that lack which in itself is the trace of a primordial loss forever lost.

10. In this respect, Jacques Lacan offers his well-known trilogy need/demand/desire. (Demand is a poor English translation and the term request would be more accurate). See his Séminaire V: “Les Formations de l’inconscient.” The three notions are interrelated and part of a progression. Humans have needs. They need food and sex, for instance. Needs represent our animal part and they can be satisfied. When a baby wants milk, very quickly, however, that also points to a request/demand for love, which can also be temporarily satisfied by the mother. Adults demand love and recognition too, from a husband or a hotel owner for instance. That is no longer a physical need, but something which is of the order of the symbolic. The third stage is desire. Humans cannot not go one step further. They desire objects which will not bring satisfaction if and when they possess them, even though they believe that this or that object will fulfill their desire. Hemingway’s cat is an excellent example of an object of desire.

11. Ever since Aristotle’s Topics, identity has always been seen as of two types. Admittedly, the Greek philosopher’s concern was with logic. His concepts, however, can be adapted to psychological problems, especially for the purpose of this analysis of “Cat in the Rain.” He distinguished between numerical identity (a thing remains identical with itself although it changes through time: a = a) and qualitative identity (involving a relation between two different things which nonetheless share a number of similarities, such as belonging to the same set, for instance when I say that I am a German Jew in 1933, and/or that I belong to the fans of Cecilia Bartoli, etc. In this case, we are dealing with identity as identification: a = x, y, z,...).

12. A quick search on the internet gives two contradictory answers... Tortoise-shell cats are fertile. Tortoise-shell cats are barren. A suggestion that these animals, which are a genetic aberration, are sterile is probably sufficient in itself for our purpose. The worm is in the fruit.

13. Ernest Hemingway’s attitude to gender has become today an established trend of research. Mark Spilka, Nancy R. Comley and Robert Scholes, as well as Debra A. Moddelmog have published
three especially remarkable studies on the subject. They do not address “Cat in the Rain,” except in passing. By and large, it would appear that their analyses are probably too often overly optimistic. Neither “Cat in the Rain,” nor The Garden of Eden, to limit ourselves to texts discussed here, indicate any sort of final liberation from social conventions. Trying to interpret them points to a deep-seated ambivalence. On the one hand, Hemingway seems to be attracted by women (and men...) who experiment as far as gender positions are concerned. As Catherine puts it in The Garden of Eden, “What’s Normal? Who’s normal?” and “[it’s] not perversion, it’s variety.” (Quoted by Mdddelmog from two passages in the unpublished manuscript, 78, 82). On the other hand, Hemingway always ends up stressing limitations imposed by life in society.

ABSTRACTS

Cet article est une étude détaillée des implications de la nouvelle d’Ernest Hemingway "Cat in the Rain" (publiée dans In Our Time, 1925), qui est vue comme une série d’interrogations philosophiques. Il est fait l’hypothèse que l’écrivain pose la question de l’être (ou identité), laquelle ne saurait être séparée du concept de désir, lui-même lié indissolublement au temps

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