When you look away: “Reality” and Hemingway’s Verbal Imagination

Shigeo Kikuchi
Few literary texts have been as widely discussed as Hemingway's “Cat in the Rain.” Among the notable literary critics and linguists who have joined in the discussion are David Lodge, Ronald Carter, and Michael Stubbs. Applying the assertion of Mick Short that “in well-constructed dramatic dialogue, everything is meant by the playwright” (Short 178), I shall examine the effects produced by the use of specific verbal details in Hemingway's story and the author's underlying ethical message. In this story, an American couple are staying at an Italian hotel, where they seem to be the only guests. The woman is seen standing at the window of their second-floor room looking out at the empty square below. She makes out a cat crouched small under a dripping table, sheltering itself from the rain. The woman wants the “kitty” and goes down to get it. Once in the square, however, she realizes that the cat has gone away. When she goes back to her room, she finds her husband still reading on the bed. Eventually the maid knocks at the door and comes in with a big tortoise-shell cat for her.

One can wonder why the American woman should look down at a cat hiding from the rain in the square below, from the second-floor room and not from the first or the third floor. Other questions may be asked: why are this cat and the one the maid brought up to the room made difficult to identify as one and the same animal? Why is the cat’s identity questionable, while George’s identity as the woman’s husband is not? These stylistic and narrative elements are considered in this study as purposeful strategies used by the writer. The conclusion one can draw from the standpoint of stylistic and narrative technique can be stated as follows: George’s identity is never questioned because the author places him in the immediate presence of the American woman, and emphasizes his reality by referring to him by name, while “the cat in the rain” is only a linguistically created fiction. The animal is seen only through the American woman’s eyes, and it is neither perceived by the husband, nor objectively presented to the reader by the narrator.
Though Hemingway learned as a professional reporter how to report facts as they were, he felt that there was a limit to representing reality. This is what he conveys through “Cat in the Rain.” Given this difficulty of reporting reality, two discourse analysts, Ronald Carter and Michael Stubbs, were misled by Hemingway’s verbal technique that makes the cat appear “small.” They both consider the cat in the rain and the one the hotel maid brought up to be different because the latter appears bigger than the former.

Indeed, in his analysis of this short story, Ronald Carter denies the identity of the cat that the maid brought up as the one in the rain: “I do not see a correlation here between ‘cat’ and ‘kitty.’ To me, this is a grotesque outcome to the kind of associations aroused in me by the word ‘kitty.’” (Carter 76). Michael Stubbs draws the same conclusion in his discourse analysis of this short story, arguing that the maid’s is “a different cat”: “My interpretation is therefore that Hemingway implicates that it is not the same cat. He does this by inserting information which is otherwise irrelevant: that the maid brings a big tortoise-shell cat. Informally, we might say that there is no reason to mention what kind of cat it is, unless this is significant, and unless we are expected to draw our own conclusion” (Stubbs 209). These two discourse analysts are misled to this conclusion about the cat brought by the maid, on account of the stylistic and narrative devices that make the cat in the rain appear “small,” making it thus impossible to identify the two cats as one and the same.

Why does the American woman see a cat from a room on the second floor of the hotel? This question can be answered by considering what effects would have been produced if the room were on the first floor. The woman, or the reader through her eyes, would see the cat very close and could recognize specific details. At the end of the story, the maid appears at the door of the room with a specific “big tortoise-shell cat,” which the reader sees this time through the husband’s eyes. Its appearance is unexpected, because the cat is depicted with the two new epithets “big” and “tortoise-shell.” For this to be “unexpected,” the woman must neither see the cat from the first floor, where she could make it out clearly, nor from the third floor which is evidently too distant as a viewpoint. The second floor is, therefore, suitably distant from the cat for the author’s purpose to make it appear small, while actually leaving it unidentifiable by its size.¹

The second device which reinforces the apparent smallness of the cat due to the relatively distant location of the room, appears in the following passage:

The American wife stood at the window looking out. Outside right under their window a cat was crouched under one of the dripping green tables. The cat was trying to make herself so compact that she would not be dripped on.

“I’m going down and get that kitty,” the American wife said. (167, italics mine)

The second device consists in the use of two words: the past participle “crouched” and the adjective “compact.” The cat could actually be small, but with these two words, we find ourselves facing a cat verbally made to appear small. And even at this early stage, the woman’s implicit presentation of the cat’s size when she uses the expression “kitty” is not reliable. “Crouched” and “compact” help make us feel it is quite natural for the woman to refer to the cat as “kitty,” it being a realization of what she wishes the cat to be like: “‘Yes,’ she said, ‘under the table.’ Then, ‘Oh, I wanted it so much. I wanted a kitty’” (168).
These two techniques, the moderately distant location of the room and the two words suggestive of the cat’s size, have the effect of concealing from the reader the cat’s true size and sort. Besides, the woman’s use of the affectionate expression “kitty” further makes the reader believe that the cat is actually small. And this effect lasts till the final scene of the story, when the reader is brought face-to-face with a big tortoise-shell cat. By carefully employing these verbal devices to make the cat appear small, the narrator skillfully created this effect of frustrated expectation. To sum up, these two devices, the location of the American tourists’ hotel room and the use of the two words discussed above, serve to make it impossible to identify the “cat in the rain.”

Another device that makes the cat’s identification difficult lies in the specific position of the husband lying on the bed, reading a book. In this setting, it is not unnatural for the man not to go to the window to look at the cat. Had the husband been sitting on a chair, he might have gone to the window to have a look at “the cat” as a natural course of action. To eliminate this possibility, the narrator had him lying on the bed, creating thus a limited situation in which the husband only sees the cat brought up by the maid towards the end of the story. Hence, the cat in the rain is equated with the fragile reality reported solely by the wife. The narrator apparently made the cat ambiguous by making it exist only through subjective reporting.

To enhance the function of the three devices which produce the effect of unidentifiability (the location of the room, the two discussed words, and single witnessing), the woman takes her eyes off the cat when she goes downstairs to get it and thus she loses certainty of the cat’s identity. It is particularly noteworthy that the woman’s aversion of her eyes from the cat is carefully paired with single witnessing. When she looks away from the cat, it becomes impossible to restore the certainty of identity. In this way, by this carefully created setting and these stylistic techniques, the cat is made impossible to identify. The cat is an unidentifiable cat, effectively named “Cat in the rain” without an article, as justifiably pointed out in David Lodge’s and Ronald Carter’s aforementioned analyses of the story.

Unlike the cat, George is endowed with ample means of identification in the story. The first specification of George comes from the fact he is immediately present in the room with the woman. Because of this presence in the same room, his wife sees his existential reality. Secondly, he is identified by being depicted lying on the same bed and remaining in the same posture before and after his wife goes downstairs. When the American woman goes downstairs she obviously takes her eyes off George. Though she looks away from him, the constancy of the stage setting helps ensure George’s identity. The husband, whom we can identify as “George” lying “on the bed, reading,” retains the situational sameness. The same posture increases a sense of sureness of his identity. This sameness is particularly important since our attention is focused on the identity of the man and his posture, not on the “identity” of a vase or a carpet!

At the level of what Mick Short calls the character–character dimension of discourse, the husband’s sameness of posture symbolizes the woman’s feeling of boredom with him; while, at the narrator–narratee level of discourse, it helps convey greater probability in regard to the stability of the man’s identity.

The story begins with a reference to the two Americans and a description of the general setting, then shifts to the viewpoint of the woman. Reference to the man is from the woman’s perspective. After the woman returns from downstairs, “empathy” (Kuno) is
transferred to the man. Even when empathy was with the woman, she was referred to only by the common nouns “wife” and “girl.” After her return, the man is referred to by a proper noun, “George,” one of the highest degrees of empathy (E [George] > E [a wife, a girl]) (Kuno 203–270). From the following excerpt, one can see that the wife is feeling more empathy for her husband than vice versa, because the husband does not identify the woman using a proper noun, i.e. her first name: “She opened the door of the room. George was on the bed, reading” (169).

The direction of specification is from less specified to more specified, as we see in the reference to the man as “husband” before she goes downstairs, and “George” after she comes back. This follows the same natural course of specification as that which Tuen van Dijk calls “normal ordering of state descriptions” (van Dijk 106) (general → specific, or whole → part / component). This “general to specific” reference does not appear in the sequence from “a cat,” in the early part of the story, to “a big tortoise-shell cat”, at the end, because the initial cat, as I have discussed so far, is not specified as “small” or “big,” “tortoise-shell” or not. Greater specification of a referent is possible only when it has been introduced with less specification.

Yukio Mishima, a Japanese writer who committed ritual suicide in 1970, argues in his last essay that words are able to “shake” reality by giving form to “ghosts,” i.e. words, expressing hence his ideal of the unity of word and deed:

[...] The novel is a genre that originally sprang from a requirement for “verisimilitude”; so it must possess such fundamental power as that which, by making reality tremble, causes the “ghosts” (namely, words) depicted in Tono Monogatari [Tales from Tono] to materialize [...]. Those who seek only confessions in a novel disregard the inner experiences that linguistic expressions impose upon people. (Mishima 79–81, my translation)

In his reference to this collection of folk-tales, Yukio Mishima is emphasizing J. L. Austin’s “perlocutionary force” in language (Austin), the actual effect an utterance with illocutionary intent has on the addressee. Mishima contends that an author, in the act of writing something, should intend not only to convey a meaning but also to evoke a response from the reader. Hemingway and Mishima, one fatally using a gun and the other a sword, both had obsessive feelings about the relationship between words and reality, even if Mishima wanted to make reality “tremble” thanks to a sharp use of words, while Hemingway was well aware that the actual and direct experience was beyond words.

Thus, what Hemingway conveys to us through “Cat in the Rain” is his obsessive feelings about existential reality. And the sureness of his existence in the world of reality, material and palpable, is what he looked for throughout his world-traveling, big-game hunting, marlin fishing..., and which was always beyond the words he created. To symbolize this slippery nature of reality beyond words, Hemingway created a linguistic fiction in the guise of a “cat in the rain,” using the above discussed stylistic and narrative devices. This is most evident when the cat is compared with George. Though set within the diegetic world of the story, George’s identity is never questioned because he is placed in the immediate presence of the American woman. The existence of the cat in the rain, in contrast, is questioned because it lacks this immediacy.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. Dr. Hisashi Takahashi, Professor Emeritus at Hiroshima University, has suggested that all the hotel rooms are situated on the second floor or above. To the device of distant location, as Yoshifumi Saito (1996) points out, we can add the effect of rain that obscures the cat’s real size.

ABSTRACTS

This article discusses Hemingway’s “Cat in the Rain” by examining the effects produced in the text thanks to the specific stylistic and narrative choices made by Hemingway. Why does an American woman look down from the second-floor room at a cat in the rain, and not from the first-floor window? Why can the cat’s identity be questioned, and not George’s, the woman’s husband? The stylistic and narrative technique used in the story, shows in fact how the writer perceives the relation between language and reality, which, Hemingway suggests, cannot be verbally represented.

Cet article étudie “Cat in the Rain” de Hemingway en analysant les effets produits dans le texte eu égard aux choix stylistiques et narratifs spécifiques faits par Hemingway. Pourquoi une femme américaine regarde-t-elle d’une fenêtre située au deuxième étage un chat sous la pluie, et pas d’une fenêtre située au premier ? Pourquoi l’identité du chat peut-elle être mise en doute, et pas celle de George, le mari de la femme ? La technique narrative et stylistique telle qu’utilisée dans la nouvelle, montre comment l’écrivain perçoit la relation entre le langage et la réalité, laquelle réalité ne peut être représentée verbalement.

AUTHORS

SHIGEO KIKUCHI

Shigeo Kikuchi is Professor of English linguistics at Osaka International University, Japan. As a Fulbright Visiting Scholar 1998–1999, he studied discourse grammar at the Department of Linguistics at the University of Harvard. He is a member of the Board of Trustees, Modern English Association (Headquarters: Aoyama Gakuin University, Tokyo). His selected publications include Essays on English Literary Discourse: Medieval and Modern, Taishukan’s Unabridged Genius English-Japanese Dictionary (co-author), and Sanseido’s Dictionary of Present-day English Usage (co-author). He has also written various essays and articles on stylistics and semiotics.