

A Dog is a Dog from 'The Ad-Dressing of Cats' by T. S. Eliot Feline to Feminine: An Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The present study undertakes to analyse a short extract 'A Dog is a Dog' from Eliot's poem 'The Ad-Dressing of Cats'. Dogs in the poem are only the apparent subject, the cats real. Forming one of the cat poems of Eliot, the text remains neglected as a jocular children's poem. But in depth analysis reveals that as an animal fable the poem is not without its significance. Published in 1939, it aims at directing the victims of war to outgrow their ennui and go in for 'an effortful life'. This analysis incidentally inspires to reassert Eliot's cat poems afresh.

KEYWORDS

Eliot: Animal Fable.

Now Dogs pretend they like to fight;
They often bark, more seldom bite;
But yet a Dog is on the whole,
What you would call a simple soul.
Of course I'm not including Pokes,
And such fantastic canine freaks.
The usual Dog about the Town
Is much inclined to play the clown,
And far from showing too much
pride
Is frequently undignified.
He's very easily taken in --
Just chuck him underneath the chin
Or slap his back or shake his paw,
And he will gambol and guffaw.
He's such an easy-going lout,
He'll answer any hail or shout.

Again I must remind you that
A Dog's a Dog – A CAT'S A CAT.

A dog is a Dog' is a short extract of 18 verses from T. S. Eliot's poem 'Ad-Dressing of Cats'. The title chosen by the anthologist to the extract promises an argument to substantiate the nature of a dog. The second reference to it – 'Dog' with a capitalization of the first letter suggests that the poet personifies it as if it is a proper name. Again, expressions like, 'a dog about the town,' 'much inclined to play the clown,' and 'such an easy going lout' are deviances of ordinary human traits attributed to the dog by way of personification.

However, the generic nouns 'Dogs' (l.1), 'a Dog' (l.3) and 'the usual Dog' (l.7) and the pronouns they(l.2) and he(l.11) as reference markers lead a reader to think that the poet speaks of dogs in general than of any specific dog. The poet also spells out the exceptions – he excludes the Pekinese and other freakish dogs from his account.

So the exceptive proposition directs to the common qualities of the majority of dogs. Even here the use of hedging – ‘often’, ‘seldom’ (l.2), ‘on the whole’ (l.3), ‘usual’ (l.7), and ‘frequently’ (l.10) -- reduces the assertiveness of his utterance.

The first two lines state the negative quality of dogs – they pretend to fight – endorsed by traditional wisdom (proverb) ‘barking dogs seldom bite’. This widely accepted view is countered by the conjunction ‘But yet’ signalling the rebuttal and a series of general statements that substantiate how ‘they are more fooled against than their fooling’. The writer holds the brief for the dog that he is innocent. He has no pride or dignity. He is inclined to play the fool (‘clown’ – to rhyme with ‘town’) i.e., make others happy by his speech and action. He is easily cheated or fooled by a human being, by his small courtesies – ‘chuck his chin’, ‘slap his back’, ‘shake his paw’, ‘hail’ or ‘shout’. For such courtesies, he responds with his gambol and guffaw.

The first word in the extract, ‘now’ constitutes a discourse linker that the speaker is digressing from what he has been discussing, and at the end of the digression he reverts to his original topic with ‘again’. The parallel structure in the last line, A Dog is a Dog – A CAT’S A CAT, with graph logical foregrounding of the cat part – completely in capitalization – confirms at once that the cat is the real topic of discussion, and the dog the nominal, introduced as a contrast.

The writer’s special pleading for the innocence of the dog in the extract makes a reader infer that the cat is of a different nature. Possibly, it is full of pride and dignity and not amenable to human courtesies. The original title to the whole poem, ‘Ad-Dressing a Cat’ confirms the inference that the cat is less communicative, and is amenable to any possible human address only through the mediation of ‘dressed’ food. This can be corroborated by inter-textual reading. In

his poem ‘Bustopher Jones – the cat about town’, Eliot writes about the cat referred to in the title: "When he’s seen in a hurry there’s possibly curry / At the Siamese – or at the Glutton: / If he looks full of gloom then he’s lunched at the Tomb / On cabbage, rice pudding and mutton. "

When Eliot writes, ‘A Dog is ... a simple soul’, the implied contrast is ‘A cat is a great soul’. This adds a spiritual dimension to the mystery that surrounds the cat, ‘reflecting the feline’s inward nature compared to the socialized canine.’ From feline to feminine is an easy step, as the spiritual custodian of humanity, though the majority of Eliot’s feline protagonists are masculine. Such is Eliot’s ambiguity and intermix of the sublime and ridiculous!

As a matter of fact, Eliot has written on cats a number of anthologies like ‘Old Possum’s book of practical cats’. Most of them were rejected by many critics as a kind of light nonsense verse though, in fact, charmingly produced (Spender). J.C.C. Mays ‘takes the cat poems as a joke’ in the Cambridge Companion to T. S. Eliot (1994). Hardly three lines refer to it in the MLA manual ‘Approaches to Teaching Eliot’s Poetry and Plays’. George Williamson classified the books on cats into Eliot’s “Minor Poems” in his ‘Reader’s Guide to T.S. Eliot’ (1953, reprint 1998). Some others looked upon the cat poems as children’s verses. However, the cat poems seem to be more serious than what these assessments concede. The fact remains that they are highly readable but they are fathomless.

They share the moral implication of any other animal fable. In Baudelaire and La Fontaine, Eliot found the models for cat fables. As it has been brought out in the analysis, the text speaks of more than one type of animal – at least cats and dogs – with their diversified natures and responses to situations. Composed in 1939 the poems present, ‘symbolic cats representing the revived victims of war.’

The lower position of the personified animals makes the reader appreciate the necessity to outgrow the ennui and become committed to the task of rebuilding, if not to be degraded to a simple animal in everyday life. As Noriko Takeda observes in his article 'T.S. Eliot's Playful Catharsis: Cats as the Rejuvenated Human', 'the task of the fables ... is to push the reader to an effortful life.

That the cat poems are not to be taken lightly is evident from their reception study. Eliot's Cats Book enjoyed the repeated readings by the author

himself and musical rendering by professional performers like John Gielgud and Irene Worth. They were also videotaped and widely circulated. It was recast as a popular play CATS by Andrew Lloyd Webber in 1981. Fifty million people are reported to have viewed it. Far from being a children's book, it constitutes a classic of its kind. Scope exists for a thorough and systematic study of Eliot's cat poems.

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