Playing Cat and House: Analyzing the Feline’s Influence in Defining Spherical Domains in Victorian Children’s Literature

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Abstract
Preoccupation with felines, simultaneously feared as emissaries of evil and revered as creatures of keen acuity, is present in many literary texts. Straddling the barrier between primitive and domestic, their literary allure makes them the perfect agents to dissect the implications of the spherical domains by which Victorian life was governed. This article focuses on the extension of these conventions into the children’s literature of this time – specifically in Rudyard Kipling’s “The Cat That Walked by Himself,” Joseph Jacobs’s “Whittington and His Cat,” and Walter de la Mare’s “Broomsticks” – and the role this literature played in educating young readers with regard to gender roles during this period. The importance of the cat as a means of indoctrination is particularly noteworthy because of its ubiquitous presence within the Victorian home. Consequently, it reinforced future generations, particularly girls who spent more time within the home, with the values and mores traditionally associated with the Victorian era. However, the function of the feline motif varies between the stories: Kipling utilizes it to establish the genesis of separate spheres, Jacobs employs it in order to promote economic exchange relating to gender roles, and de la Mare develops it as a representation of the struggle faced by unmarried women in the domestic sphere. By analyzing each of these constructs, I demonstrate a unified purpose in the utilization of the cat as a mode of transformation that successfully establishes, evolves, and perpetuates the Victorian standards of public and private spheres for girls.

Preoccupation with felines, simultaneously feared as emissaries of evil and revered as creatures of keen acuity, is present in many literary texts. Because the cat straddles the barrier between the primitive and domestic, these creatures become the perfect agents to dissect the implications of the spherical domains by which Victorian life was governed. This article focuses on the workings of these conventions in the children’s literature of this time – specifically in Rudyard Kipling’s “The Cat That Walked by Himself,” Joseph Jacobs’s “Whittington and His Cat,” and Walter de la Mare’s “Broomsticks” – and the role this literature played in educating young readers about gender roles during this period. The importance of the cat as a means of
indoctrination is particularly noteworthy because of its fluidity: felines were both a ubiquitous presence within the Victorian home and a constant reminder of primitive wildness that can never be entirely tamed. The result is a symbol which reinforces in future generations, particularly in girls who spent more time inside the home, the values and mores traditionally associated with the Victorian era in a manner which is both familiar and cautionary. While the cat serves as a narrative tool in each instance, the function of the feline motif varies between the stories: Kipling utilizes it to establish the genesis of separate spheres; Jacobs employs it in order to promote economic exchange relating to gender roles, and de la Mare develops it as a representation of the struggle faced by unmarried women in the domestic sphere. By analyzing each of these constructs, I demonstrate a unified purpose in the employment of the cat as a mode of transformation that successfully establishes, evolves, and perpetuates the Victorian standards of public and private spheres.

Renowned for his many forays into children's literature, Rudyard Kipling published “The Cat That Walked By Himself” in 1902. The tale operates as a creation myth for the origins of domesticity. The cat in this tale, defined as the “wildest of all the wild animals” (2011), serves as Kipling’s means of establishing the spheres in a narrative guise intended for young readers, with particular focus on the different roles between women and men (p. 133). While the story is presented as a myth centered on the cat, in actuality it conveys Kipling’s narrative of how mankind separated from the primitive and became civilized. To accomplish this, Kipling builds off the contemporary notions of his society regarding the sanctioned places and duties of men and women and applies them in an archaic setting. Consequently, the product, Victorian ideology, is placed at the beginning of this evolution regarding gender structures as if it were the primary, innate component. Chief among these components is the concept of separate spheres, which Kipling uses to frame his narrative. In her book Inside the Victorian Home, Judith Flanders (2003) discusses the idea that “woman's great task [was] the creation of domestic space, with its connotations [being those] of refuge and peace” (p. 210). Kipling promotes this idea by depicting Woman as the first example of a civilized being, stating “Man was wild too. He was dreadfully wild. He didn’t even begin to be tame until he met the Woman” (p. 133). Woman subsequently manages to tame the dog, horse, and cow through cunning and magic. While the ability to domesticate is depicted as an admirable quality in Kipling's narrative, the consequence is that Woman is effectively trapped in the role of domestic goddess, while Man is free and encouraged to enter the world beyond the home. Part of this constraint is due to what Flanders calls the “[formalization of]…social rituals,” which in turn dictate the rules and structure that are to be adhered to (p. 213). In the case of Kipling’s Woman, this structure serves as the basis for what becomes the proper order of society. If the cave serves as the place of sanctuary from the outside world, an allegorical private, then the fact that Woman is never seen leaving the cave is illustrative of Kipling’s adherence to the Victorian ideal. Additionally, when Man is attempting to make a bargain with the cat, he sets out five items: two boots, a little stone axe, a piece of wood, and a hatchet. The use of these items relies on a space outside the domestic sphere, and Kipling makes use
of the phrase “proper men” in order to delineate the expectation that this is indeed where men belong.

The function of the feline in Kipling’s tale is to create a distinct barrier between humankind and the wild, and more emphatically, between women and men. The cat then, through his relationship with both woman and man, becomes the agent by which Kipling expresses the idea that civilization is dependent upon a proper order – an order which is in turn dependent upon the assignment of specific tasks on the basis of gender. Additionally, the cat serves as a gage for how civilized humankind has become since its domesticity. When the Woman tries to banish the cat from the cave, a mouse appears, to her horror; she then “jumped upon the footstool in front of the fire and braided up her hair very quick for fear that the mouse should run up it” (p. 141). The fact that she had domesticated animals much larger and dangerous than a mouse yet displays an inordinate, even irrational, degree of fear toward a harmless rodent demonstrates just how far humankind has come from its primitive origins. The act of Woman braiding her hair further illustrates this idea and emphasizes the female need to tame what is wild and unruly into something structured and orderly. In the end, it is the feline’s ability to seamlessly bridge the barrier between primitive and domestic which unites the two spheres as a whole – a lesson which further promotes the Victorian construct that progress can be achieved only through marriage and fidelity to prescribed gender roles.

The cat’s ability to straddle both wild and domestic settings is the reason Kipling uses the feline motif to frame mankind’s evolution. However, the crux of Kipling’s indoctrination of children reading this tale is demonstrated most effectively by what he does not say. The fact that Kipling’s tale makes no mention of religion implies that spherical ideology, rather than stemming from divine inheritance or religious dogma, is the natural course of humanity’s evolution. The result is a doctrine which asserts that gender roles are biological in origin rather than social constructs. While Kipling’s tale involves both Woman and Man, the story itself appears aimed specifically at the indoctrination of its female readers. This is achieved by two methods: first, through the main action of the story, which centers on Woman with Man coming in and out of the narrative as he pleases and second, through Kipling’s emphasis of Woman’s power to tame what is wild. While in many ways the fact that Woman is able to tame Man and other creatures of the wilderness gives her primary importance in the narrative, Kipling takes this power and transforms it into a burden. Rather than a gift or a choice, it is the duty of females to maintain the tranquility of the domestic space; failure to do so would result in the destruction of both herself and of Man. The correlation of these two ideas instills into children readers, particularly females, the edict that they must remain attached to the domestic sphere, because not to do so is tantamount to opposing society and, more fundamentally, the natural order.

In “Whittington and His Cat” by Joseph Jacobs (1892), the feline moves from the domestic setting and focuses on the public sphere, where it serves as a model for improvement. The story centers on a young orphan, Dick Whittington, and his rise
to Lord Mayor of London. The opening of Jacobs's narrative focuses on the harsh realities of poverty, particularly in regards to orphans. Upon moving to London, a city he naively believes is paved in gold, Whittington faces starvation and verbal abuse. When he is found on the doorstep of Mr. Fitzwarren, the merchant takes him in and employs him beneath his house cook. Despite this kindness, the conditions of his new environment are still poor: "his bed stood in a garret, where there were so many holes in the floor and the walls that every night he was tormented with rats and mice" (p. 2). It is at this time Whittington comes across a girl with a cat and offers to buy it from her for a penny. This economic transaction becomes representative of the relationship between Whittington and his feline companion, the arrangement being that Whittington provides food, and in exchange, the cat ensures his room is free of vermin. However, this relationship comes to an early expiration when Whittington is forced to give Mr. Fitzwarren the cat as a parting gift to take with him on his voyage overseas. Fitzwarren finds himself in Barbary, a place aptly named as the term emphasizes the dominance of British civilization and, by extension, British values. While there, the cat proves a valuable commodity when Fitzwarren gifts it to the King and Queen in order to kill the rats plaguing their otherwise magnificent palace. In exchange for the feline, the monarch gives Fitzwarren and his men gold and riches, which eventually pass into the hands of Dick Whittington, who uses his wealth to secure genteel status before sharing it with those around him. The last line of the story emphasizes Jacobs's objectives:

The figure of Sir Richard Whittington with his cat in his arms, carved in stone, was to be seen till the year 1780 over the archway of the old prison of Newgate, which he built for criminals. (p. 5)

By purposely providing readers with Whittington's contributions to society only after narrating the story of his cat's influence, Jacobs ensures that the feline is viewed as the model for man's obligation in regards to the public sphere. The reference to Newgate, a place where the "vermin" of society are placed in lieu of running free in the streets, only further illustrates this point. Ultimately, Jacobs's motivation in utilizing the cat as a metaphor is to elucidate three issues that plagued the public sphere during this time: ignorance of the actual conditions of poverty, the problem of so-called vermin on the streets, and the British Empire's obligation toward improving the societies of the countries with whom they trade and which they colonized.

This theme of economic exchange serves as the central objective of Jacobs's story. While the story's narrative centers on Dick Whittington, it still plays a significant function in inculcating girls concerning their role in society. The story limits the characters of young girls to two figures: the unnamed girl who sells Whittington the cat and Mr. Fitzwarren's daughter, Alice. Both characters are unified by their equally minimized roles, which are illuminated by the action of exchange. The former relies on a very literal exchange, money for a cat, with the young girl not even provided a name. With Alice, the economic exchange is that of a marriage in which she submits her own person and with it, according to Victorian standards, her
personal and legal autonomy. Alice’s role is minimized because in this exchange she becomes the commodity, passed very literally from father to husband. Additionally, Whittington’s legacy revolves around a successful public career. Consequently, children who read this story are taught that the highest honor for men is to make their mark in the public sphere, whereas for women the highest honor allotted to them is a good marriage. Viewed from this perspective, “Whittington and His Cat” is more than a historical fiction emphasizing morality; it is a story which asks its readers to view the feline as a model for economic exchange – the method of which is dependent upon gender. Whittington’s rise to honorable fame, paired with Alice’s achievement of an ideal marriage, illustrates that to do so will result in success and progress for all levels of society. Consequently, the effect of the story is similar in function to Kipling’s in that it encourages girls not only to fulfill the limited role of a domestic entity, but to praise it as an ideal which will ensure prosperity for both themselves and the British empire.

Walter de le Mare’s “Broomsticks” (2011) is a children’s story which seeks to explore the traditional limitations of the woman’s role in the private sphere when she is incapable of securing a husband. The story revolves around a sixty-five year old spinster, Miss Chauncey, who lives her days in solitude with her cat, Sam. De la Mare goes to great pains in order to delineate Miss Chauncey as proficient in the domestic realm: “she could sew, and cook, and crochet, and make a bed, and read and write and cipher a little. And when she was a girl she used to sing ‘Kathleen Maa Vore Neen’ to the piano” (p. 213). By emphasizing how well-rounded Miss Chauncey is, de la Mare is in effect declaring her spinsterhood as symptomatic of circumstance rather than a comment on her adherence to the expectations of women. However, Flanders’ exploration of the Victorian female in the domestic sphere situates marriage as integral in order for a woman to “become a member of society” (p. 213). Without a husband, Miss Chauncey is delineated as being separate from society and therefore abnormal. De la Mare utilizes the feline as representative of the primitive and uncivilized world in order to contrast Miss Chauncey’s need for society. Living an isolated life, Miss Chauncey believes herself content until one day she begins to notice a disturbing shift in her cat’s conduct. Believing Sam to be in congress with an evil entity with whom he secretly communicates and runs off to meet, Miss Chauncey devises multiple plots to keep him inside the house and under her careful watch. De la Mare’s narrative demonstrates the unnaturalness of spinsterhood in two ways: first, by asserting that women have an inherent capacity to love and care, which when robbed from them by the absence of a husband is instead imparted upon the closest object and second, by showing that remaining locked in solitude with no one to tend to and few responsibilities is unhealthy: literally causing paranoia and delusional symptoms. De la Mare assumes that without the proper order of society to guide and structure Miss Chauncey, a regression into a primitive state is inevitable. The basis of these claims is strengthened with the resolution of the story; after receiving a letter from a cousin, Miss Chauncey goes on an extended visit to stay with family. The situation becomes permanent, when during the stay she sells her house and gardens for a “pitiful sum” (p. 185). De la Mare’s goal in his juxtaposition of
Miss Chauncey and Sam isn’t to demonize the primitive nature of the feline. Rather, he is illustrating that Miss Chauncey is not equipped to live within the same primitive domain as her cat: “She had learned nothing from [Sam]. And even if she had been willing to be taught, it is doubtful if she would ever have proved even a promising pupil” (p.160). De la Mare’s narrative serves to promote a spherical ideology and an adherence to a proper order for the future members of society by operating as a cautionary tale. The cautionary moral is quite literally warning female readers not to avoid marriage, lest they become the crazy old cat lady. The gendered bias of this moral is emphasized in De la Mare’s title “Broomsticks,” which plays off previous historical notions that unmarried women were more than abnormal – they were witches. In the end, the threat of an evil entity proves to be preferable; instead, children reading the tale are taught that the highest aspiration for a spinster is to burden her relations.

In a time when “conformity [and] conventionality were morality,” the importance of educating children to the proper standards of society was of paramount concern (Flanders, p. 18). Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Jacobs, and Walter de la Mare all chose to utilize the enigmatic feline to garner the attention of their young audience. The choice of the feline as the vehicle to illustrate their ideologies is significant because of its appeal to children and especially to girls – what to this audience appears as entertainment serves also to instruct. The cat’s ability to conform to domesticity, while still remaining firmly planted in the primitive, made it the perfect didactic tool to perpetuate the ideology surrounding the separation of spheres. While the authors of these tales are all men, it is important to note that even women writers of the day were not exempt from perpetuating the prescribed gender roles, illustrating the endemic nature of these constructions. These tales prompt a departure from the archaic toward a Victorian ideal, one that is intended to be adopted and propagated by its audience – specifically females – and emphasize the necessity of domestic unity for the success of both individual and nation. The consequence has been a preservation of these established gender structures which continue to undermine British culture in a never-ending game of cat and house.
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References


