When you notice a cat in profound meditation,
The reason, I tell you, is always the same:
His mind is engaged in a rapt contemplation
Of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his name:
His ineffable effable
Effanineffable
Deep and inscrutable singular Name.
—T. S. Eliot, "The Naming of Cats"

In this famous poem T. S. Eliot captures the very essence of human perception of the feline: its enigmatic nature. As known from myth and folklore, possession of a name gives power over its bearer, and the cat’s ability to conceal its true name is indeed prominent in many narratives. Cats have always fascinated storytellers, verse makers, painters, and great writers; apart from Eliot, also Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, Doris Lessing, and Mikhail Bulgakov. The most exhaustive study of cats in folklore, everyday life, literature, and art is perhaps Carl van Vechten’s *The Tiger in the House*, first published in 1920. Without even attempting to be comprehensive, in this article I will illustrate the various uses and functions of feline characters by a discussion of some famous and less-known literary cats. These characters are employed for various purposes and play more or less prominent roles in the narratives, from peripheral figures used as decorative details to protagonists and plot engines. Their portrayal depends on the view of cats at different historical periods, from divine in ancient Egypt to evil during the Middle Ages in Europe, from enigmatic and exotic to sweet and friendly. Their nature reflects feline as well as human traits, and the most challenging images combine the two. Although no clear chronological development can be traced, and many contemporary stories still
feature cats as harmless pets, the figure has recently become more complex; yet it doubtless goes back to the ancient beliefs and prejudices. In this essay cats are perceived as semiotic signs rather than realistic animals, even though some anchoring in the historical context is inevitable. The idea for the essay grew out of my entry for *The Greenwood Encyclopedia of Folktales and Fairy Tales* (Haase).

**The Cat's Emergence on the Historical and Literary Scene**

Rudyard Kipling's etiologic story "The Cat Who Walked by Himself" from *Just So Stories* (1902) presents a fascinating version of how wildcats might have been domesticated. It depicts the nature of cats as unreliable and independent as opposed to dogs as man's true friends. The cat is, in his own words, "not a friend, and . . . not a servant"; he is "the Cat who walks by himself, and all places are alike to him" (Kipling). The bargain between the cat and the humans, according to this story, includes the cat's obligation to keep the house free from mice, to be nice to babies just as long as they do not pull his tail too hard. For this, the Cat is allowed to be inside the house when he pleases, sit by the fire, and "drink the warm white milk three times a day for always and always" (Kipling).

In this story the cat's everyday characteristics are emphasized. By contrast, four thousand years earlier cats were featured in myths and folktales as representations of the highest deities, such as the Egyptian goddess Bast. Temples devoted to Bast were found all around ancient Egypt, and cats had their sanctuary there. The cult of Bast was connected with joy and merrymaking, and this role is reflected in later lore of most cultures. For instance, the cat's proximity to gods is accentuated in Norse mythology, where Freya, the goddess of love, is carried in a chariot drawn by cats.

Parallel to Bast, the cat was featured in Egyptian mythology as one of the many incarnations of the solar god, Ra, who struggles against and kills an evil serpent. The amalgamation of the cat and the dragonslayer has left traces in Oriental as well as European folklore, where the motif often got inverted and the cat, especially a black cat, became one of the many transformations of the antagonist, while the hero can also in some situations metamorphose into a cat. This ambiguity results in the twofold status of cats in folklore, where they feature both as benevolent and evil. Yet most frequently cats were ascribed mystical and magical powers, such as healing and fortune-telling—for instance, in Chinese folktales. Before cats were commonplace in Europe, they often appeared in stories as mythical creatures, alongside dragons, unicorns, and basilisks (Holmgren 104–14; Briggs). Until the late eighteenth century, the generic origin of cats was unclear; they were believed to be related to reptiles and birds.
The practical uses of domestic cats as mousers contributed to their positive reputation, and in this capacity they were carried over the world on conquerors' and merchants' vessels, which is reflected in the British folk- and chapbook tale of Dick Whittington. Dick is an orphan and a kitchen boy in the house of a rich London merchant. He has to endure all kinds of hardships, including hordes of mice in the attic where he sleeps. With his last and only penny he buys a cat from a street girl and can thus sleep calmly. However, the merchant soon demands that, as the custom prescribes, everyone in the household send an item with his ship. Dick has only his cat to send, and this makes his fortune. The ship ends up in Africa, where a local king pays the highest price for the wonderful animal who can deliver his country from rodents.

The story, first appearing in the seventeenth century, printed repeatedly as a popular chapbook, and included in Joseph Jacobs's English Fairy Tales in 1890, is anything but true. Yet we do know that Sir Richard Whittington became the mayor of London in 1392, and there was an image of him with his cat at Newgate, which is apparently metaphorical, since the cat presumably never returned from its voyage. Moreover, according to some theories, the cat was actually not an animal, but a boat. In any case, what the story tells us, however, is that the nature of cats as mousers was well known at the time the events are supposed to take place. When Dick offers a street girl a penny for her cat, the girl assures him that the cat is much more expensive since it is an excellent mouser. Observe, however, that the cat never gets a name, and Dick obviously has no sentiments toward it; the cat has a solely pragmatic purpose. When the cat is taken away from him, Dick does not lack his companion, but merely laments that he will once again be troubled by vermin. Apparently, the story reflects the time when it was written down rather than the time it happened, and the unsentimental attitude toward cats is highly understandable.

During the Middle Ages in Europe, cats became connected with evil powers, which was based partly on the popular beliefs about cats' lewdness, partly on their Christian association with Satan. In the European tradition of the Last Supper painting, a cat may represent Judas (see, e.g., Zuffi 80–89). Such attitudes led to cats' connection with witches; indeed, black cats, together with ravens, frequently appear in folktales as witches' familiars (such as Grimalkin, a cat from Celtic lore, also featured in Macbeth), and witches also turn into cats, a fact reflected in the Harry Potter books when Professor McGonagall occasionally takes the shape of a cat. An evil cat monster appears in King Arthur stories. Bayun-Cat in Slavic folklore is a giant hostile black cat who imposes irresistible sleepiness on people, often by telling tales or singing songs. However, this image is ambivalent, since it portrays the cat as creative and wise, which was later reflected in literature such as E. T. A. Hoffmann's The Life and

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Opinions of Tomcat Murr (1820–1822). The view of cats as evil led to incredible cruelties toward them, including the Great Cat Massacre in France in the 1730s (Darnton 75–106). During witch hunts, cats were burned together with their mistresses.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the cat’s repute was exculpated and cats became popular pets in upper- and middle-class families, which is, among other things, manifest in numerous nursery rhymes—for instance, “Pussycat, pussycat, where have you been.” This very simple rhyme tells us something essential about one of our favorite pets—not about their true nature, but rather about how we perceive cats. The versed animal can talk and recall his adventures; he can walk about as he wishes, including to Her Majesty’s chambers; but he has no respect for the high and mighty, seeing the world from his own perspective. In another nursery rhyme, “Hey, diddle-diddle / The cat and the fiddle,” the cat shows a different, more human skill: he can stand upright and apparently is a musician (actually, the rhyme comes from a mistranslation from the French “le chat fidèle,” a faithful cat). The three little kittens who lost their mittens obviously are not satisfied with their own fur. These cute images of humanized felines present a remarkable contrast to the earlier portrayal of cats as demons and witches’ familiars.

Cats are also widely featured in fables—for instance, “The Mouse Who Put the Bell on the Cat”—and ironic exemplums, such as J. J. Granville’s “The Love Adventures of a French Cat.” Eventually they enter numerous cartoons, children’s stories, and picturebooks. Cats became benign and often sweet characters, adapted to children’s and family reading. Beatrix Potter’s The Tale of Tom Kitten (1907), Wanda Gag’s Millions of Cats (1928), and Kathleen Hale’s Orlando the Marmalade Cat (1938) are good examples. Most modern cat stories are picturebooks portraying anthropomorphic cats, representing humans. The shape is arbitrary and interchangeable: the figures could just as well be bears, rabbits, mice, or blotches of color. It is hardly worth mentioning the abundant felines rubbing against their owners’ feet or purring on their laps merely to create an atmosphere. In hundreds of books a child gets a kitten for pet. Occasionally, a black cat may prompt the idea, often erroneously, that its owner is a witch. In the Harry Potter books, a sneaky she-cat belongs to the likewise devious janitor at Hogwarts, while Hermione’s familiar is quite appropriately an orange tomatc.

In James Joyce’s only children’s book, The Cat and the Devil (1936; published 1965), the cat seemingly plays a minor role. Yet on closer consideration, the story appears a parodic play with the Faust myth, where a cat, rather than a woman, is presented as sacrificial; besides, the cat’s action is not voluntary and is therefore less sublime. The Devil claims “the first person who crosses
the bridge," but, as in many folktales, he is outwitted. Had he said "the first human being," the Lord Mayor would have to offer him one of his subjects. Instead, the cunning man sends a cat across the bridge, which presumably makes no difference, as cats are supposed to have no souls and thus have nothing to fear from the Devil. In the 1980 edition of the book, illustrated by Roger Blachon, the last double spread shows the cat joyfully playing with the tip of the Devil's tail, much to the latter's annoyance. Yet the story certainly accentuates the association between the Devil and the cat, even though Blachon chooses to depict the cat as white rather than black.

Fairy-Tale Cats

Of greater interest are those texts in which specific feline traits are featured in combination with certain human traits, most often intelligence and speech. These abilities create the hybrid human-animal character in which both aspects are amplified. Cats appear in a number of well-known animal tales, such as "The Bremen Town Musicians" or "The Cat and the Mouse in Partnership"; in tales involving helpful animals; and in tales based on the magical bride/bridegroom motif, including the Irish story of Cuculin/Cuchulainn. A cat is featured in "The Story of the Grandmother," an early version of "Little Red Riding Hood," as the voice of conscience, accusing the girl of eating her granny's flesh and drinking her blood. Taking into account the conventional connection between old women and their cats, this peripheral character may be the murdered grandmother's soul (or totem), similar to the bird in some versions of "Cinderella." A rather enigmatic British tale is "The King of the Cats," which suggests cats having a secret realm of their own; in a Scandinavian version of the tale, the cat is a disguised troll. A reminiscence of this tale can be found in children's literature—for instance, Carbonel (1955) by Barbara Sleigh. Cats in these stories are depicted as nocturnal characters, secretive, mysterious; half animal, half divine. This puts them in a superior position toward humans.

The most famous fairy-tale cat is undoubtedly Puss-in-Boots, a trickster figure featured in Charles Perrault's collection (1697) but also known in other cultures, where the same role is occasionally played by other animals—for instance, a fox in Slavic folktales. Puss-in-Boots is the only animal story in Perrault's volume and, unlike most of his other tales, features a male protagonist. The story has strong Oedipal undertones. The young man must symbolically kill his father, represented by the ogre, to reclaim his inheritance, stolen from him by his brothers. The animal helper's role, as in all similar stories, is to assist his master by cunning and wit. The young man, cheated by his brothers, does not see the potentials of his lot, pondering that the only thing left for him to do is
to eat up the cat and sew a muff from his skin. The cat surprises his master by being able to talk. Further, the remarkable Puss immediately shows another ability that puts him closer to human beings: he can walk upright. He also asks his master for a pair of boots. This is an unusual request, especially since the cat’s explanation is “that I may scamper through the dirt and the brambles” (Perrault). Obviously, the reason is quite different: clothes make the person, and human clothes turn the animal into a human. Indeed, with this seemingly simple transformation, Puss is empowered beyond imagination, even though, or perhaps exactly because, he retains his feline cunning, agility, and hunting skills. Notably, he kills the ogre who has taken the shape of a mouse—that is, using his natural animalistic skills rather than human skills. All of this underscores the mysterious double nature of the cat. At the end, when Puss has become a great lord alongside his master, we are told that he “never ran after mice anymore but only for his diversion” (Perrault). This ironic commentary shows that there is still an animal behind the fine gentleman in rich clothes.

Perrault’s “Puss in Boots” is by far the most popular version of the tale, reappearing in picturebooks, fractured stories, movies, cartoons, and stage plays. Yet this version is predated by more than two centuries by Giovan Francesco Strapparola (“Constantino Fortunato” 1533), over a century by Giambattista Basile (“Gagliuso” 1634), and also appears in Madame d’Aulnoy’s The White Cat (published in Contes Nouveaux ou Les Fées à la Mode, 1698). Unlike Perrault, in these versions the cat is female and an enchanted princess, who follows her own goals in making her master rich and socially established. It is not accidental that Perrault has changed the gender of his magical helper. A tomcat is expected to be adventurous and mischievous. She-cats are, as earlier mentioned, connected to feminine witchcraft, shape-shifting, mystery, and sexuality. Marie-Louise von Franz has devoted her psychoanalytical study The Cat: A Tale of Feminine Redemption (1999) to this fascinating aspect.

**Cat as Trickster**

The male trickster cat has, however, remained in the focus of writers’ attention up to the present. It is featured, for instance, in the famous Czech writer and illustrator Josef Lada’s animal picaresque Purrkin, the Talking Cat (1934). Lloyd Alexander’s collection The Town Cats and Other Tales (1977) is another good example. Here we meet cats who assist humans against malevolent intruders, cats as confidants of maidens in distress, cats who challenge powerful rulers, cats who manage daily chores for their owners, cats who assist great painters (including the use of their tails for brushes), and a cat who proves unfit for his apprenticeship precisely because of his feline traits. In all the stories the
margin between cat and human is emphasized by clothes. Like Puss-in-Boots, Pescato the town cat gains power by dressing up as the mayor and stages a true carnival by letting cats perform as people and vice versa. Once again, the dual nature of cats is played upon. The motif is, incidentally, also popular in art, such as the seventeenth-century Flemish David Teniers’s painting At the Cats’ Hairdresser.

Because of their trickster nature, cats can be easily employed as carnival figures, turning order into chaos and interrogating higher authorities. The most famous American cat is the figure created by Dr. Seuss, The Cat in the Hat (1957), who incorporates both the trickster and the magical helper aspect of the folklore cat. In this brilliant, hilarious, marvelously dynamic story, chaos invades the everyday order, all rules are abolished, and the whole house is literally turned upside down. This is carnival in its purest form: wild, uncontrolled, and nonsensical.

The Cat can be interpreted as the child’s playful imagination set free as soon as the adults leave the house. The Cat interrogates all the norms of the adult order. He can do the impossible balancing acts. His use of language is intricate, yet he does not play with sheer logic. Instead, he demonstrates the arbitrary nature of language, which is one of the main instruments of power that adults employ to oppress children. For instance, the Cat promises to show the children two things. The word “thing” is a so-called linguistic shifter—that is, an expression the content of which can only be determined by the situation (“a thing” can denote almost anything, although most often an inanimate object). However, on turning the page, the word acquires a concrete and tangible signified, as it refers to two living creatures. The word “thing” ceases to be a shifter and becomes a regular signifier, while the signified, Thing One and Thing Two, are portrayed in the picture, thus visualizing the concretized abstraction. Not least, the Cat and the two Things intrude into the Holiest, the mother’s bedroom, where the children most likely are not allowed to be, and turn it upside down, too—a perfect symbol for the attack on parental authority.

Typically, the adult world is present and tries to supervise and prevent the chaotic invasion, in the form of the fish. Perhaps the fish can also be seen as the voice of the children’s conscience, their adult rationality, as he says: “You should not be here / when our mother is not” (emphasis added). Yet this adult presence seems too weak to stop the wild games; the fish is literally dethroned as the Cat drops him, he falls down and gets stuck in a teapot. However, as soon as the mother is once again in sight, the Cat and all the consequences of his breathtaking capers disappear as if they had never existed. But this is not the same device as waking up from a dream. In fact, the child becomes aware of the danger and suppresses his own imagination, literally, by catching the
two Things in a net. He then gives order to the Cat: “Now you do as I say. / You pack up those Things / and you take them away!” And the Cat not only does this but also brings everything else back to order. This is the child’s acknowledgment of adult power, of the ordered adult world, where there is no place for the Cat or the two wild Things. Although the revolt is sanctioned (mother did leave the children alone to play) and thoroughly channeled, it has an emancipating effect. “And Sally and I did not know / what to say. / Should we tell her / the things that went on there that day?” By having secrets from the mother, a secret world of their own, the children have seriously subverted the mother’s authority.

**Mimetic and Symbolic**

Literary cats have many different functions, from dumb beasts, as in the Dick Whittington story, to magical helpers, to heroes in their own rights. Thus, mimetic images represent animals as animals, demonstrating typical animal behavior and only occasionally ascribing them intelligence that is comparable with that of human beings, or even less frequently, human emotions. An early forerunner of this line was the Canadian writer and wildlife scholar Ernest Thompson Seton, who in his collection *Animal Heroes* (1905) includes the poignant story “The Slum Cat.” Seton writes in the preface: “A hero is an individual of unusual gifts and achievements. Whether it be man or animal, this definition applies; and it is the histories of such that appeal to the imagination and to the hearts of those who hear them. In this volume every one of the stories [. . .] is founded on the actual life of a veritable animal hero.”

A much later and perhaps better known example of the same genre is Sheila Burnford’s *The Incredible Journey* (1960), in which a cat plays a secondary role alongside the two dogs; yet the cat’s alleged ability to find its home is accentuated, as it also is in “The Slum Cat.” In both stories, animals are used as focalizers in the sense that it is their perspective the narrative follows, but they are never ascribed any human traits, and their innate behavior is depicted quite accurately. Narrative estrangement is employed to pinpoint the perspective, as, for instance, a train is described through the cat’s perception without being explicitly mentioned.

Characteristically, the Slum Cat has no name, although her owners would be expected to give her one; yet the author underscores her point of view by referring to her merely as the generic Pussy or Kitty. He also tries to speculate on what emotions a cat may experience in certain situations, translating them into human terms. Thus, with her first litter of kittens, the little Slum Cat “felt all the elation an animal mother can feel, all the delight, and she loved them
and licked them with a tenderness that must have been a surprise to herself, had she had the power to think of such things” (Seton). Further, he attempts to convey her awareness of sight, sound, touch, and especially smell in a way that is felt as authentic as an author can get to the interior of a fictional character, animal or human. He exemplifies cats’ asserted independence and love of freedom by dwelling on the Slum Cat’s longing as she is pampered in a rich home:

She had all the food she wanted, but still she was not happy. She was hankering for many things, she scarcely knew what. She had everything—yes, but she wanted something else. Plenty to eat and drink—yes, but milk does not taste the same when you can go and drink all you want from a saucer; it has to be stolen out of a tin pail when you are belly-pinched with hunger and thirst, or it does not have the tang—it isn’t milk.

The quote can of course be interpreted allegorically, as applicable to human beings; yet considering the author and the context, it is more likely to be a genuine attempt to penetrate the animal nature. In his chapter on characters in Aspects of the Novel, E. M. Forster claims that “actors in a story are usually human” and continues, “Other animals have been introduced, but with limited success, for we know too little so far about their psychology” (43). Apparently, Forster has overlooked the achievements of Seton and his followers. Michael Morpurgo’s The Nine Lives of Montezuma (1980) similarly focalizes the title character.

Quite a different use of cat images is metaphoric, symbolic, allegorical—that is, various forms of nonmimetic representation. Eugene Trivizas’s The Last Black Cat (2001), one of the relatively rare cat stories employing first-person perspective, is an allegory of the Holocaust. On an unnamed island, a secret society decides to exterminate all black cats. The reasons are conventional: superstitions about black cats bringing bad luck; yet the significance is transparent and may, naturally, even be applied to other genocides and racial discrimination. When all black cats are murdered, the next step is to decimate all gray cats, then all cats with black spots, and finally every single cat on the island. Having miraculously survived, the feline narrator tells his story as a warning to the coming generations. Although it can be argued that cats are interchangeable with any other species in this novel, it is cats’ alleged connection with evil, their otherness, and people’s prejudice against them that make the story plausible. Naturally, the novel can also be read as plain adventure, about love and friendship, loyalty and betrayal, yet its ideological intentions are obvious.

Domestic cats are conspicuously absent in C. S. Lewis’s Narnia stories, on the good as well as the evil side. No cats are created by Aslan on the first day of Narnia. The wicked enchantress Jadis, appearing in The Lion, the Witch, and the
Wardrobe (1950) as the White Witch, might be expected to have a cat as a familiar, yet this is not the case. However, in The Last Battle (1956), Ginger the cat becomes a traitor who takes the side of the usurper Ape and even outwits him. Ginger is, from his own point of view, clever and conniving; he understands that new winds are blowing. The Ape serves, unknowingly, the evil spirit Tash, and it seems natural that a cat would assist him, among other things, spreading false rumors. Ginger's color, orange, can be associated with fire and further with hell. Consequently, he receives his due punishment, by losing intelligence and speech and transforming into a dumb beast; he is never seen again and does not appear at Aslan's Last Judgment.

**Cats In and Outside of Dreamworlds**

One of the most famous literary felines is without doubt the Cheshire Cat in Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland (1865). Much has been written about this character, yet less about its connection with Alice's world outside Wonderland. Little Alice has a pet cat, Dinah, in her real world (who in its turn had a prototype in Dr. Dodgson's reality). We do not know much about this figure apart from her being a good mouser, which leads to a conflict between Alice and the Mouse in Wonderland. As Alice is ordered about by the White Rabbit, she wonders whether she will one day be ordered about by Dinah and what the grown-ups would think about it. She also has a vision of herself and Dinah walking hand in hand, Alice seeking an answer to her absurd question: “Do cats eat bats?” Dinah is Alice's playmate, upon whom the girl bestows intelligence and the ability to walk upright. In Alice's imagination Dinah is a liminal figure, both cat and human, and a most tangible link between the strange Wonderland and the secure home. Incidentally, in the sequel, Through the Looking Glass (1872), one of Dinah's kittens is transformed into a chess queen in the looking-glass world.

If Wonderland, as sometimes suggested, is Alice's mindscape, or, as the more conventional interpretation goes, her dream, it would be natural that the projection of the real, familiar cat into the alternative world should retain its gender. The hypothetical cat of Alice's dreamworld would, in such a construction, turn out to be her Old Wise Woman, the Progenitrix guiding the protagonist through the rite of passage. All other symbols of initiation are present in the story: denigration in the form of a physical fall, dark passages, sinister woods, closed doors to force open, trials by alien food, uncontrolled bodily transformations, meeting with a row of monsters, symbolic dismembering (“Off with her head!”), and final resurrection and emergence from the literal underground, presumably as a whole self. Yet instead of a Wise Old Woman in feline shape we meet a trickster more suitable for a masculine, patricidal story.
Naturally, Alice in Wonderland is in many respects a far from traditional novel in which the author is free to break conventional patterns. It has been pointed out that Alice can be interpreted as the author’s Anima, and thus the whole story is a kind of self-therapeutic confession. It is equally possible to see the Cheshire Cat as a self-portrait, a benevolent companion that acts as Alice’s protector in an unfamiliar and bizarre world. The Cheshire Cat does indeed have, similarly to Humpty-Dumpty in Through the Looking-Glass, the function of the mythical guide, telling Alice at least a few necessary facts about the place she had involuntarily come to:

“[W]e are all mad here. I’m mad. You are mad.”
“How do you know I’m mad?” said Alice.
“You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have come here.”
(Carroll 65)

The Cat explains the rules of the game, or rather the absence thereof; yet he also comforts Alice, who need not feel she is the only one gone crazy. At the croquet ground, she is genuinely glad to see someone she knows to talk to, as if indeed she and the Cat were the only sane people present.

The Cheshire Cat, as well as his counterpart in the looking-glass country, practices verbal equilibristic with Alice, making her—and the reader—contemplate the conventionality of language and the illogical nature of logic:

“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to walk from here?”
“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.
“I don’t much care where—” said Alice.
“Then it doesn’t matter which way you walk,” said the Cat.
“—so long as I get somewhere,” Alice added as an explanation.
“Oh, you’re sure to do that,” said the Cat, “if you only walk long enough.” (Carroll 64–65, emphasis in the original)

As road directions, whether literal or metaphorical, this is certainly not much help, and at this point the guru’s instructions might seem confusing rather than enlightening. It would almost appear that the Cat mocks and humiliates Alice, just as all the other creatures do. Yet for one thing, the Cat here is testing Alice’s logical capacity, strongly impeded by her experience of Wonderland; he is further offering his ward spiritual guidance that is not to be neglected: you are sure to get somewhere if you only walk long enough. Thus, among the Cat’s endless puns and wordplay, great wisdom is hidden, and he is the only

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one in Wonderland who is nice to Alice. By the end of the book, Alice has had so much practice and become so bold that she can easily switch in the middle of a sentence from being rude about the Queen to praising her, and she talks back, explaining that a cat may look at a king, a set phrase that she, quite appropriately, interprets literally. In other words, she has learned her lesson from the Cat, at least concerning linguistic skills.

Moreover, the Cheshire Cat, just as Humpty Dumpty, is himself a figure of speech ("to grin like a Cheshire Cat," where Cheshire cat ostensibly refers to a head of cheese). Taken out of the set phrase, it becomes a signifier without a signified. Subsequently, the Cheshire Cat lacks a physical body. True, when Alice first meets him in the Duchess's house, he seems an ordinary cat, apart from his grin. He is described as large, but not exceptionally large, and he sits on the hearth, like any cat. But outside the house, he is suddenly rather like an oversized image projected on a screen and still more so as he appears on the sky over the croquet ground, a mirage that fades and reappears at will. If he is Carroll's self-portrait, in these scenes he is an image of an image, as distant and mysterious as dreams themselves. The executioner's argument that you could not cut off a head unless there is a body to cut it off from is certainly among the most sensible things anybody ever says in the book, and it shows how well the Cat has adapted to the absurd life in Wonderland. The famous "grin without a Cat" is just one of the many paradoxes in the book, presumably reflecting the mathematician Dodgson's tribute to pure mathematical abstraction.

Interestingly enough, the Cat is removed from the plot and has no role in Alice's final ascension and return home, unlike, for instance, the black kitten in *Through the Looking-Glass*. In Alice's sister's pondering about her little sister's curious dream, when she tries to connect the events of the dream with the movements and sounds around her, the Cheshire Cat is not featured. He dissolves without a trace, as a true spiritual guide must do when initiation is over.

Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* (2002) is in every respect a dialogical response to *Alice in Wonderland*, with every indication of postmodern literature present. In this novel, we meet, similarly to *Alice*, doors and keys, mirrors, pretty gardens, murky passages, and bizarre creatures. While *Alice* may be considered dark, *Coraline* is darker, and while Alice comfortably wakes up from her nightmare, nightmare pursues Coraline into her reality. Alice encounters her symbolic evil (step)mothers, the Queen of Hearts, and the chess Queen, but how these might reflect her real mother-daughter conflict remains to guess and is perhaps of little significance. For Coraline, the other mother is a perfect reflection of her real mother, but a reflection in a sinister mirror. The other world is not merely absurd, but virtually terrifying; and while Alice in all her vulnerability is not exposed to moral choices, Coraline's life is wholly dependent on the
right decisions. Yet not even then can she feel safe and secure. Who in this story is the figure providing the guidance such as offered to Alice by the Cheshire Cat? The patron figure is introduced in the very first chapter as Coraline moves into a new house: “There was also a haughty black cat, who sat on the walls and tree stumps and watched her” (Gaiman 5). The cat's elevated position is reminiscent of the Cheshire Cat as well as Humpty Dumpty. Further, the cat belongs to both worlds, the real and the mirrored, created by Coraline's evil other mother. Unlike the other inhabitants of the other world, but like Coraline herself, the cat is not a reflected double; he can, in fact, move between worlds: “I'm not the other anything. I'm me. . . . You people are spread all over the place. Cats, on the other hand, keep ourselves together” (36). Upon Coraline's inquiry, the cat explains that cats do not have names, commenting further: “you people have names. That's because you don't know who you are. We know who we are, so we don't need names” (37; emphasis in the original). The integrity of the cat is contrasted to Coraline's identity confusion, as she, much like Alice again, “did not know where she was; she was not entirely sure who she was” (67; emphasis in the original). Not unexpectedly, the cat can talk in the other world, but not in the real one, although Coraline wonders “whether cats could talk where she came from and just chose not to” (38). The cat's natural skills prove advantageous when he kills an evil rat. Although black, he is not the witch mother's familiar and does assist Coraline, even though he initially, like the Cheshire Cat, is vague about locations:

“Please, what is this place?
The cat glanced around briefly. “It's here,” he said.
“I can see that. Well, how did you get here?”
“Like you did. I walked,” said the cat. (37)

Thus the cat may seem quite a conventional liminal character, but this first impression proves wrong. As the passages back to reality are closed by the other mother's will, the cat is rendered helpless, and eventually it is Coraline who saves them both. Yet in this novel, as in many others, the ability of cats to breach fluctuant boundaries between alternative worlds is masterly exploited.

Helpers and Guides

In modern fairy tales and fantasy, cats are widely featured as magical helpers and bearers of magical powers, especially assisting the hero in transportation between the everyday and the magical realm. Among authors who are especially fond of feline characters, Lloyd Alexander and Diana Wynne Jones can be named. For instance, in Alexander's Prydain Chronicles, based on the
Mabinogion, the giant female cat Llyan joins the companions in their quest and saves the lives of each of them.

The saying about cats having nine lives is used imaginatively by Alexander. His Time Cat (1963) suggests that a cat may travel into nine different historical periods, which the black cat Gareth does, taking Jason, the boy protagonist, with him. Time travel is deliberate: Gareth takes Jason on nine time-shift adventures, naturally to the times when cats were important, such as ancient Egypt, Roman Britain, early Christian Ireland, Japan, medieval Europe with witch hunts, and so on. Cats even witness the creation of the first painting by Leonardo da Vinci, the cat acting as an ample model. Most episodes focus on the events introducing domestic cats in a particular culture, such as first cats in Peru during the Spanish Conquest. Almost everywhere, the cats' practical skill as mousers is emphasized, but also the superstitions against cats are brought forward:

There's no kind of wortriment or wickedness they won't put on cat. . . . Cats bring on hail storms, they say, and winds. Cats have an evil eye, to bewitch whatever they look at. They can turn themselves invisible or fly through the air. They take the shape of a witch, and the witch takes the shape of a cat. (Time Cat, 152)

The novel becomes a short handbook in cat history, but it also demonstrates the special mystic powers that cats possess, such as their remarkable ability to disappear and reappear. At the same time, typical fantasy devices are ascribed to the magical helper: Jason has always adequate clothing wherever he arrives; he is also able to understand any language: "Perhaps this was all a part of the cat's strange powers" (13). As a character, the boy is rather flat, used merely as the recipient of knowledge, alongside the reader. For instance, his explicit inference is: "If the days in Egypt had been the greatest times for a cat . . . the days in the [medieval] village must be the worst" (156). The cat is employed as a magical agent, which could just as well be a magic wand. He does, however, take active part in the adventures and occasionally seems to have changed the flow of history, yet he warns the boy: "You'd be on your own, you wouldn't have any kind of protection. . . . What happens, happens. And you couldn't change your mind in the middle" (9). Jason becomes, indeed, involved in many dangerous adventures, but finally the cat brings him safely home. A rational dream explanation is offered, yet there is, as in many fantasy novels, a little indication that the time travel has been true after all.

Plurality of cat lives is cleverly echoed in the title of Jones's The Lives of Christopher Chant (1988). One of the ideas that is recurrent in Jones's fantasy novels is heterotopia, the infinite multitude of alternative worlds, separate worlds that may recall our own but are different—sometimes slightly, some-
times substantially—depending on the development of each particular world. The point of departure is that sometime, during an early period in history, the worlds grew apart; no world is thus more “real” than any other world. The difference between worlds implies that in some of them magic is a common trait. Although the mechanism of travel between worlds in *The Lives of Christopher Chant* seems more or less obvious and, not unexpectedly, reserved for the child, it soon becomes apparent that a cat plays a significant role in the magical transportations. Christopher's evil uncle uses his magical ability to transport valuable merchandise from other worlds, such as dragon blood, mermaid flesh, hallucinogenic mushrooms, but also deadly weapons that are absent in his own world. At one point Uncle Ralph sends Christopher to bring a sacred cat from the Temple of Asheth, a goddess worshipped in one of the parallel worlds (and obviously inspired by the Oriental cat deities). Christopher, in his child innocence and naiveté, believes that his magician uncle merely experiments with transposing objects and living beings between worlds; however, it soon becomes clear that Uncle Ralph has other pursuits: magicians in his world will pay fortunes for intestines, claws, or eyes of Asheth's cats. The ginger cat Throgmorten escapes and later reappears in the story, becoming not only Christopher's companion in his quite lonely existence in Chrestomanci castle, but eventually also turning out to be a powerful magician in his own right. Typically for Jones, the cat is initially depicted as vicious and bad-tempered, while the real villain is amiable and generous; that appearances are deceptive is just one of many lessons the protagonist learns. Christopher has nine lives, a quality granted only to the highest order of magicians. Throgmorten, who obviously also has nine lives, is thus equal not only to Christopher but to Chrestomanci himself. Yet in some mysterious way Throgmorten seems to be involved each time Christopher loses a life, so his true nature is more complex than can be described in terms of good and evil. After all, he is the cat of Asheth, the goddess of vengeance.

Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995–2000) offers a more subtle view on animals as helpers and familiaris. In Lyra's world, human souls are projected on the outside assuming the form of animals, who, supposedly, reveal the true nature of their masters. Until puberty, children's daemons are constantly shifting shape, reflecting the potentials and choices of the child. Pullman's invention is certainly highly original in a literary work, yet the idea of human beings having as part of them a particular animal goes back to archaic beliefs (rather than the Classic Greek philosophy, as Pullman claims). The concept of totem animals, inherent in all known cultures, shows people not merely shifting shape but also being animal and human at once, not necessarily in appearance, but in the first place, in nature. Thus, a cat-woman in African folklore would be clever, agile, and unreliable, and she would show
herself to other people in a continuum of shapes from purely feline to purely feminine. She may appear as a woman but hide her tail in her skirts; or she might have catlike yellow eyes with vertical slits for pupils; somehow she will reveal her true nature. At night she may put herself in a trance, leave behind her human body, and go hunting in a cat shape. All of this is part of sacred shamanistic rituals (cf. Watkins 109–11). One of the most powerful images of a cat-woman appears in George MacDonald’s romance Lilith (1895).

In Pullman’s epic, Lyra’s daemon Pantalaimon is sometimes a moth, sometimes a bird, sometimes a mouse, an ermine, a lion, or even a hedgehog, depending on her mood and the situations they find themselves in; but often he takes the shape of a cat, which perhaps best reflects her untamed nature. The fact that daemons are always of the opposite gender invites Jungian interpretations. Pan is the masculine part of Lyra’s self, her Animus, a part she needs to recognize, get to know, and incorporate back into herself in order to be whole and grow up. In an intense scene in which Lyra is to enter the realm of death and must leave Pan behind, we see clearly that the daemon is an integral part of herself. Yet to begin with, Pan is merely a playmate; he can almost be seen as Lyra’s imaginary companion, someone to talk to, to ask for advice, and to cuddle like a teddy bear. Daemons cannot get far away from their humans, and Lyra, an archetypal orphan, never experiences loneliness in Pan’s company. As they get on with their adventures, Lyra successively becomes braver and more resolute than her cautious daemon; she makes decisions he discourages her from, and the relationship becomes less harmonious. Still, the threat of being severed from her daemon feels worse than death to Lyra, and her parents’ participation in this hideous maiming opens Lyra’s eyes.

One would expect Lyra’s daemon to finally settle as a cat, indicating her magical, feminine-mystical qualities, which have been demonstrated all along in her ability to read the aletheometer. Instead, Pan becomes a marten, but instead Wills daemon ends up as a cat, which perhaps signifies that part of Lyra’s soul has been incorporated in him.

Confused Teenagers

We have now arrived at the most complex images of cats, the images in which animal and human traits are amalgamated to the extent that challenges simple categorization. The last few years have witnessed a conspicuous trend in novels about feline communities, from Sonya Hartnett’s poignant Forest: Journey from the Wild (2001) to S. F. Said’s tragicomic Varjak Paw (2003) and, not least, the captivating mixture of feral-child novel and mystical fantasy by Erin W. Hunter, Warrior Cats, starting with Into the Wild (2001). The series can also be read as an allegory, or rather metaphor, following the typical story line of an
adolescent gang novel, such as S. E. Hinton's The Outsiders (1967). The master plot ads up to the following: A young man from a respectable family dreams about the freedom and independence of street life. He encounters some youngsters from a street gang who live by stealing and fighting other gangs. Without much consideration, our hero exchanges his carefree and secure life for the romance and sexual liberty that gang life has in store. At first, he is bullied and treated as an outsider, but soon learns the ways and the jargon of the gang; he gains some friends and one enemy, and the wise leader of the gang is on his side. In a decisive confrontation with a rival gang, he shows himself worthy and is fully accepted into the new community.

To counterbalance the harsh social realism, in Warrior Cats strong elements of the occult are woven into the story, such as adoration of the celestial ancestors, an eventful journey to an ancient cult place, divine trance, and the figure of a shaman ("medicine cat"). These features, frequently found in high fantasy, would scarcely be displayed in a realistic gang story, but they pay tribute to the blend of genres common in contemporary literature. The hero, initially called Rusty but adopted by the wildcat community and given the name Firepaw (the naming also an archetypal element), has few psychological traits. He feels no remorse about leaving home and never regrets it. He is the sole focalizer of the novel, but occasionally the reader is allowed to make inferences before the character. He is intelligent and he does have some inner argument concerning loyalty and honor, yet his considerations are markedly focused on actions. From a mimetic viewpoint, it is ludicrous to expect cats to have a rich spiritual life, yet with the general premises of the novel—that is, its allegorical dimension—the character could have been rounder to encourage empathy. On the other hand, flat orientation of the character is a norm rather than an exception in a gang novel, so young Firepaw is far from unique. In fact, he continues the long row of archetypal heroes that have to go through initiation to be accepted into a given community. Both the setting and the quest are glorified without questioning. The deviations, or rather the specifics of employing cats rather than human beings, lie in detail. Instead of stealing, cats go mousing; they use claws and teeth rather than knives and guns. The young tom's castration fears are not pursued further after the wildcats explain the consequences, yet they may be translated into an adolescent's restricted sexuality within the family's constraint. Otherwise, battles for territory, rivalry, loyalty and treachery, strict hierarchy within the clan, honor codes, and rewards and punishments are highly reminiscent of the numerous novels with human protagonists. The book is an example of (ab)using cats as a disguise for human beings, since the feline appearance is apparently not inherent to the plot. It certainly adds excitement and, not least, novelty to the well-trodden narrative, appealing to cat lovers and adventure lovers equally. Yet it necessarily alienates the
reader by the exterior and life conditions of the characters, which may be attractive as well as repelling.

By contrast, *Forest*, while superficially similar to *Warrior Cats*, signals the decisive difference already in the title: Fireclaw's journey is into the wild; Kian's is from the wild. Kian's loyalty lies wholly with the domesticated world, and his quest, against all odds, is to return home. Thus the character is doubly othered, first as an animal, then as an animal betraying his nature. By describing the human world through a smart animal's mind—a distinctive case of estrangement—the narrator allows the reader, who is familiar with this world, to circumvent Kian's perception and infer that the cats' owner is dead and that no welcome awaits them when they return to the house they once called home. This shift in subject position by no means impedes the reader's empathy, but, paradoxically, amplifies it. The readers realize that the protagonist has no chance in the fictive universe of the novel; unlike the young kittens he is in charge of, he will not be able to adapt to life in the wild, not so much because he is used to comfort, but because of his firm convictions. Significantly, Kian dies shot by a human, his end coming from the same agency toward which he had shown unconditional loyalty. The character's totally unexpected death, portrayed with a heart-piercing detachment, inevitably shifts the point of view for the few remaining pages of the novel, further alienating the reader; yet the new, neutral, or omniscient, perspective is never established either. Even though the readers earlier felt compelled to share the protagonist's subjectivity, by the end they are expected to view him from aside and literally leave him behind as his more fortunate companions make their way toward the forest. The matter-of-fact closure casts a retrospective shadow on the construction of the whole text, magnifying the nonidentification effect without encroaching on empathy.

*Forest* is a rare example of the use of cats in fiction where a perfect balance is achieved between zoomorphization of the human and anthropomorphization of the beast. The novel is neither an allegory nor a simple transposition of the human world into an animal one. The human/animal equilibrium further contributes exactly to the right proportion of estrangement and empathy so that a strong independent subject position is incited.

It may seem from the texts discussed above that as literary characters cats hardly differ from any other animals in their narrative form or in their textual significance. Without extensive statistics, however, I would claim that cats are by far the most popular figures in all kinds of stories. The reason can be the unquestionable appeal of the felines originating in their mystical nature, their independence and cunning, and the peculiar combination of devotion and treachery. Anonymous storytellers and contemporary authors employ cats for
various purposes, but doubtless counting on the addressee's engagement. Numerous testimonies of famous people's cats, not least writers' cats, support the feline myth. Obvious intertextual links between texts featuring cats add to the attraction. The literary cat has thus gained the status of a cultural icon.

Works Cited