

## TEACHING CATS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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### ABSTRACT

**Aim.** The aim of the research is the comparative study of literary cat characters in Children's Literature texts in Greek and Spanish and their instructive function in the transmission of social stereotypes.

**Methods.** The research subscribes to the field of Literary Animal Studies based on the theory of Children's Literature (Lukens, 1999) and through the intercultural perspective of Comparative Children's Literature (O'Sullivan, 2005). Published children's books from Greece, Spain and Spanish-speaking America were compared using textual analysis methods of Imagology (Beller & Leersen, 2007). Stereotyped variants were identified and organised in categories related to name, physical appearance, gender, behaviour, and function of literary cat characters.

**Results.** After examining a corpus of 37 books, 23 in Greek and 17 in Spanish (Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Spain), textual analysis findings were compared, organised, and classified by language, country and readers' age groups to locate that literary cat characters are usually pets or feral, and they remain consistently stereotyped as anthropomorphic and subversive. Cats with seven lives and magical powers are common perceptions, dominating in both cultural contexts, stereotypes extended to strong superstitions about black cats.

**Conclusions.** In Children's Literature texts, cats are linguistically, literally, and socially defined literary constructs, can have usually human-like features, intercultural influences, and are potentially shaped by intertextual relations. They serve also as a narrative motif for the transmission of social values about non-human animals and the textual familiarisation of nonadult readers with society's cultural stereotypes.

**Key words:** Cat, Comparative Children's Literature, Animal Studies, social stereotypes

### INTRODUCTION

Cats have always fascinated storytellers, poets, painters, and great writers; apart from T.S. Eliot, also Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire and many more. The most exhaustive study of cats in folklore, everyday life, literature,



and art perhaps remains to the day Carl van Vechten's *The Tiger in the House*, first published in 1922. The present article studies the cat's literary representation from an intercultural perspective as a contribution to the research field of Literary Animal Studies. A comparative study of literary cats was constructed in a corpus of Children's Literature in Greek and Spanish (Xouplidis, 2018). Literary cats were examined based on the theory of Children's Literature (Lukens, 1999) and through the intercultural perspective of Comparative Children's Literature (O'Sullivan, 2005). Literary texts of published children's books with literary cat characters from Greece, Spain and Spanish-speaking America were compared to locate stereotypes that organise literary representations and define possible reader's perception of literary cats in texts for non-adult readers. Using textual analysis methods of Imagology (Beller & Leersen, 2007) dominant social stereotypes in Greek, Spanish and Spanish-speaking societies were identified to present complete and substantiated conclusions concerning the popular, although mysterious, pet.

The usefulness of research is based on the focus shift for literary studies related to animal characters from the limited perspective of literary characters' analysis to the broader comparative study perspective, focusing on the cat's literary image, investigating its cultural values and intercultural dimensions in Children's Literature from Greece, Spain and Spanish speaking America. At the same time, it aspires to introduce the interdisciplinary view of Literary Animal Studies into Children's Literature by approaching critically a non-human animal's literary representation of a particular species and detecting social stereotypes attached to this living being transmitted to generations of young people through fiction. Consequently, the research constitutes an approach to cat literary representations in texts of Children's Literature addressed to young readers through literary cat characters in Greek and Spanish.

#### APPROACHING LITERARY CATS: RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHOD

The research question is how the literary cat transmits through the linguistic function and literary expression in Children's Literature texts, perceptions, prejudices, and stereotypes that reflect the relationship between animal and society. The main axis of the methodology followed the theory of Children's Literature. In particular, the methodology for the study of the literary character was used in the context of the comparative approach of Children's Literature in Spanish and Greek. A body of 37 Greek, Spanish and Spanish-American Children's Literature published books was set up and compared after the application of specific criteria in the search carried out in databases showing publications of Children's Literature books in Greece, Spain and Spanish-speaking America. The research methodology followed the applied theory of Children's Literature (Lukens, 1999) for literary characters through the intercultural perspective of Comparative Children's Literature (O'Sullivan,

2005). Published children's books in Modern Greek and Spanish were compared using textual analysis methods of Imagology (Beller & Leersen, 2007). Stereotyped variants were identified and organised in categories related to name, physical appearance, gender, behaviour, and function of literary cat characters.

## CATS

The domestic cat (*Felis catus* or *Felis silvestris catus*) is a small size, usually hairy, carnivorous mammal. (Kingdom: Animalia, Phylum: Chordata, Class: Mammalia, Order: Carnivora, Family: Felidae, Genus: Felis, Species: Felis Catus) (Wozencraft, 2005, pp. 534-535). Cats have anatomical characteristics like those of other felines, with a strong and flexible body, quick reflexes, sharp claws, and teeth suitable for hunting small-sized prey. A cat's sensory organs are adapted to the animal's night-time hunting activity, it has acute hearing, night vision and sensitive smell (Taylor, 1989, p. 26).

Cats have appeared in History since the early days of mankind. According to studies, cats as domestic animals were first recorded in 6.000 B.C., in Egypt and are first documented in history text passages in 1.600 B.C (Van Vechten, 2000, p. 47). The enigmatic nature of cats has always fascinated writers, poets, and fairy-tale authors, therefore, through these texts, cats entered the symbolic realm, shaping in this way a unique cultural significance on a multitude of cultures from antiquity to the present day.

The origin of the English word *cat*, Old English *catt*, is thought to be the Late Latin word *cattus*, which was first used at the beginning of the 6th century. Old English *catt*, *catte*, of Germanic origin; related to Dutch *kat* and German *Katze*; reinforced in Middle English by forms from late Latin *cattus* (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2020). By an extraordinary coincidence, Northrop Frye (1957) uses the word *cat* in English as an example for the definition of a "sign",

[...]the verbal symbol "cat" is a group of black marks on a page representing a sequence of noises representing an image or memory representing a sense experience representing an animal that says meow.[...] It is impossible to read the word "cat" in a context without some representational flash of the animal so named; it is impossible to see the bare sign "cat" without wondering what context it belongs to (pp. 73-74).

In modern societies, keeping a pet cat appears to be a remarkable relationship between humans and animals, for cats are often allowed into personal spaces, live in physical proximity with their owners, often enjoy luxury food and are decorated with special accessories, while nothing is asked from them but to provide companionship (Walker-Meikle, 2012, p. IX), serving as a form of social support. In modern cities there are thousands of pet cats while modern economy includes a vast service industry that provides veterinary care, food, breeding, and assorted accessories. Anthropomorphic thinking enables a cat's social behaviour to be construed in human terms, as humans not only attribute various mental states to one another but generalise these attributions to

pet cats and other animals, while evolutionary selection pressure defines animals' appearance, anatomy, and behaviour (Best, 2009, p. 14). Furthermore, feral cats, escaping animal control and social conventions, are considered non-human animals on the borderline of human society thus considered wild or marginal. The human ability to attribute meaning to certain animal behaviour and physical appearance, especially in the case of pet or feral cat seems to condition their conception at all levels. For Pamela T. Asquith (1984, p. 138), anthropomorphism in the context of animal behaviour means, "the ascription of human mental experiences to animals". The distinctive mark of the animal is self-locomotion; they are not just one symbol system out of many, for Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman 2005, p. 13), "they are symbols with a life on their own." Normally an animal, with certain physical and behavioural characteristics, must be singled out as a promising prospect for anthropomorphism. For Maria Nicolajeva (2009),

Without extensive statistics, however, I would claim that cats are by far the most popular figures in all kinds of stories. [...] 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 (p. 266).

Humans use cats to symbolise and dramatise aspects of their social experience and individual fantasies, because they can simplify narratives to produce effective allegorical meaning.

### CATS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Animal characters in children's books, even in realistic narratives, usually appear with human-like features (Lukens, 1999, p. 314); they can talk and behave as humans, fall in love, give birth, paint, play and are members of human families: children, parents or elder people. In Children's Literature texts, cats are literary constructs linguistically, literally, and socially defined, gaining intercultural dimension, and potentially shaped by intertextual influences. The fact that many authors choose cats as their main literary characters, constitutes an exceptional intercultural phenomenon. According to Mario Ortiz Robles (2016) "animals as we know them are a literary invention" (p. 2). Literary cats transmit through linguistic function and literary expression concepts and stereotypes that outline animal-society relationships. As a narrative motif they achieve literary goals, serving the transmission of social values and the textual familiarisation of non-adult readers with the cultural reality of society. Particularly in the case of cats, but also of pets in general, the role reserved for them by human society in relation to dominant perceptions and common social practices determines both the perception and biology of these animal species through processes such as breeding, selective reproduction and trade. Undoubtedly, there is an interaction between biological reality and literary cat characters that shape literary animals, and, moreover, literary cats may

have certain characteristics that transcend the animal's biological existence and physical properties, for representation constitutes a distorted image of the represented. Literary cats are human inventions, a tamed textual myth to reside in book pages and live in the library with the other book heroes as our culture becomes its nature.

In Children's Literature the term character corresponds to emotional and social traits of a fictional person, often an anthropomorphic animal or object (Lukens, 1999, p. 80). Literary characters provide readers the means of connecting between patterns as static elements of narrative in an evolving plot. At the same time, through the reader's emotional engagement, they address him to identify himself and imply aspects of the collective imaginary that dominate cultural interactions. The usual practice the reader of children's literature enables for classifying a literary character largely obeys prefabricated social stereotypes as a result of influences related to literary and social factors (Maass & Arcuri, 1996, p.194), defined by collective or individual ideological concepts related to childhood and the implied child reader. Anthropomorphic animal figures are particularly appealing to narratives for younger children as they are easy for them to identify with and their characteristics, such as size, impulsiveness and need for affection (Zebrowitz, 1996, p. 105). Usual narrative practice involves anthropomorphic animals adopting human social behaviour and lifestyles of specific types of characters while maintaining their animal characteristics. One of the most prominent prototypes of this literary practice is "Master Cat, or The Booted Cat" commonly known in English as "Puss in Boots" is a European literary fairy tale written in French by Charles Perrault, published in 1697 in *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*. It is about an anthropomorphic cat, a qualified trickster who succeeds to gain power, wealth, and the hand of a princess in marriage for his low-class and poor master. The *trickster* (Meriam Webster, 2020), in mythology and in the study of folklore, is a character -human or anthropomorphic - in a story, which exhibits a great degree of intellect to use in playing tricks and skipping normal rules and conventional behaviour. For Jack D. Zipes (1991), "the cat character is the epitome of the educated bourgeois secretary who serves his master with complete devotion and diligence" (p. 25). Its name "The Booted Cat" describes the hybrid nature of this character, half human (boots) and half feline (claws). In fact, names are what turns non-human animals into pets, distinct persons with alleged personalities, into family members, in other words in forms tangible to the reader, suitable for anthropomorphic object projections. As Mary T. Phillips, notes (1994),

We create biographical data for some animals that we name: pets, racehorses, show bulls, Bambi. As we give a name to an animal and use it to talk about it, we immediately construct a narrative about a person with unique characteristics, in a specific historical context, and we endow this narrative with a logical meaning (p. 120).

A cat is not a pet by nature because non-human life forms cannot be defined this way naturally. "Pets," or groups of non-human animals categorised as such, are exclusively products of human conception and respond to specific

ideological perceptions of the relationship between non-human life forms and human needs (Sheppard, 2003, p. 511). In other cases, animals meet other types of needs, e.g. pigs are food, or cows are milk production machines and worms are bait on hooks for catching fish for food. Pet cats cover complex human needs; from traditional, mouse exterminators, to more complex, providing social support to lonely individuals. Due to their physical characteristics are assessed high in the classification of candidates for anthropomorphism they are not prompt to be exploited for other purposes; therefore, in modern societies, as pets, perform complex and sensitive roles in living with humans (Albert & Bulcroft, 1988, p. 550). Cats seem to satisfy three out of five human senses: 1) vision, with their beauty and colour, 2) touch, with the texture of their fur and 3) hearing, with characteristic sounds they produce, such as meowing and purring.

### GREEK, SPANISH AND SPANISH-AMERICAN LITERARY CATS

Pet status, both in the Greek-speaking and Spanish-speaking texts analysed, supplies a focal point for literary cats and usually takes a central place in the evolution of the plot. From the data analysis of the texts it can be concluded that for humans the natural status for cats is that of a domestic animal, while adoption of stray cats is proposed as a positive pattern of behaviour to young readers. Adoption is promoted as a good practice for the acquisition of pet cats and serves as role model attitude in Children's Literature. There is no purchase of domestic cats from a pet shop for probably two reasons: a) author's opinion about pet trade or b) normal social practice in author's social context incorporated in the text. Although adoption is undoubtedly a positive practice for the protection of stray animals, it is still a human-centred ownership approach to cats. From a more objective point of view, it could be considered as capturing a wild animal under the excuse of rescue, as the cat survives but lives in a human home under owners' supervision and rules. From textual evidence, domestic cats appear to be evaluated positively, while strays are usually evaluated negatively. This distinction extends even to a biological level in cases of Greek texts adopting the characteristic term "keramidogatos" or "roof cat", as a cat breed. The linguistic term of modern Greek is etymologically attributed meaning "tomcat", thus includes a specific definition of gender and status. The correlation of the term to breed is not mainly a reference to a specific status, but to a non-purebred origin. It essentially connects a cat to an unknown blood lineage and thus imply discrimination based upon low origin from a stray, apparently the father. In this case, "roof cats" are associated to the roof - usual habitat or possible reference to specific fur colour - thus, to the outdoor space in which stray cats roam and freely reproduce, beyond human control. The corresponding category in the Spanish-speaking texts is defined by the term "gato callejero", meaning "street cat". This designation determines in principle a male cat living on the streets of human urban areas. Both characterisations

are determined by specific patterns of behaviour related to gendered roles and human stereotyped personality or/and lifestyle, as stray street cats are, according to texts analysed, brawling, and exhibiting rampant reproductive sexual behaviour. It is therefore a model representing cat's feral nature, but, at the same time, stigmatises lack of human control over it. This association of anthropomorphic "roof cats" or "street cats" with stereotyped human characters attributes certain social stereotypes to literary cats through naming or behaviour descriptions. Cases, groups of stray-cats exhibit characteristics that link them to street gang stereotypes of the American continent. Nicknames, duels, neighbourhoods, and survival in conditions of wandering and constant war for territorial sovereignty reflect upon literary cats, social realities on the streets of Argentina and Mexico. For Greek texts, black furred stray cats incorporate all stereotypical elements that make up the image of marginal anti-heroes that live on the street and symbolise misfortune. Moreover, in the texts, the living conditions of strays are evaluated negatively although they appear socially acceptable, while any pet cat's escape from human environment is considered an adventure to be completed when returning to their owners' home. Finally, cat figures featuring contrasts between pet and stray form ambiguous literary cat characters as they represent semi-wild animals living in natural proximity with humans. Interior space of human homes is mainly the natural habitat for literary domestic cats in Greek texts, while in Spanish texts cats are not limited to it. Any domestic cat's movement from inside to outside space is not described as an escape but it is perceived as wandering or disappearing, as outdoor space is seen as a stray cat's natural habitat. The reverse movement from the outside to the interior, the human dwelling, is tantamount to rescuing the stray cat and upgrading it to pet status. The cat's transition from human to natural environment is presented as unnatural for the animal, as from pet-domesticated turns to stray-wild. Also, the contrast of pet-domesticated vs. stray-wild is projected in particular texts, outlining the cat's dual status as a not tamed animal labelled as pet that goes around with the same comfort in both human homes and outside environment. In the whole corpus of texts, literary cats move in all environments and in all places without restrictions and difficulties. In the corpus of texts, friendship and love cultivated between humans and cats is presented extensively. Especially children and old ladies appear to worship cats, in some cases, developing relationships interpreted as emotional dependences, where pet cats appear as objects of psychological transfer, social support, surrogate children or family members (Mullin, 1999, p. 215-216). In certain cases, literary pet cats act as alternative identities (alter ego) for child protagonists. In other cases, cats, as magic assistants, follow, aid and support child protagonists in exploring mysteries and winning against magical powers of Evil.

Literary cat texts for non-adult readers serve as medium to an initiation process in the modern social environment which organises a degree of familiarity with them for the young reader, giving them attractive characteristics, and taking advantage of their playful nature. They mark a process of rendering

positive connotations to a mysterious archetypal cultural artifact (Watts, 1981, p. 19), with mythical origins and enigmatic nature, through a narrative process of domestication by literary means. The beginning-end sequence of the story in the texts leads cats to safety, victory, adulthood, and happy-ends, returning home after facing adversities, since either defeated evil or imposed on Nature. Literary cat stories usually begin and end by confirming that cats belong to the human family environment, as writers seem to use them for instructive purposes towards young readers. Dominant stereotypes emerge from all the texts as literary cats may be categorised either as domesticated or feral, a life form fully defined by classifications applied to animals living with human beings. Pet cats are positively presented as privileged but have peculiar behaviour, while stray cats are depicted as underprivileged, but free. As far as gender is concerned, female cats are preferred for pets, while male cats are usually street cats, echoing patriarchal gender stereotypes about female and male vital space, interior vs. exterior. Friendship and love relationships are described in anthropomorphic terms reflecting the intense emotional attraction that cats exert on humans (Sanders, 1990, pp. 662-668). At the same time, incidents of abuse and extermination reflect extreme practices of dominance and human control over cat species. Overall, literary cats' conception emerges as an expression of basic contrasts: domesticated vs. wild, Culture vs. Nature. At the same time, however, the ability to change from pet to stray attributes elements of polymorphism to literary cats. Literary cats' transformation ability constitutes an important factor in the choice of narrative characters and plot, as literary cats can transform themselves in texts or from text to text, retaining basic intertextual characteristics which make them recognisable to young readers.

Motifs as described, are related to authors' personal objectives and ideology while reflecting aspects of the collective imaginary about cats. In the texts analysed, literary cat characters are recognised as common cats with positive traits which respond to a variety of stereotyped literary characteristics. Usually subversive, literary cat characters remain consistent in their ambiguity. Therefore, literary cats are not composed as fixed stereotypes, although they remain consistently stereotyped. They are multifaceted stereotypes that manage to incorporate a wide variety of author's choices in an effective way. Literary cats in texts in both languages present obvious characteristics that highlight the stereotype of the cat's supernatural entity through widespread cultural beliefs (Walker-Meikle, 2012, p. 13). Cats with seven lives and magical powers are common perceptions, dominating in both cultural contexts, stereotypes extended to strong superstitions about black cats, especially Spanish cats are clearly more connected to magic and witches. Literary cats can become subversive, as for the collective imaginary cats are unpredictable and mysterious, can be transformed and fool anyone, according to cat myths in both Greek, Spanish and Spanish-American cultures. These transformations take place in narratives forming a structural pattern for the cat's perception by readers. It is based on cultural substrates consisting of an anthropomorphic nucleus that interconnects fertility and nocturnal lifestyle, building upon constant oscillations



between pet and stray status. They incorporate unpredictable reproductive behaviour and supernatural abilities into trickster literary characters which finally define literary cats as subversive stereotypes. These collective imaginary reflections are speculated to derive from Ancient Greece and Medieval Spain, where pagan fertility deities and superstitions associate women and cats, witches, and cat familiars. In both cases, cats combine sexuality and metaphysics, body and soul, Love and Death, complementary concepts of human culture. The woman's transformation into a cat and then into a demon familiar inevitably leads to the mysterious pagan cult of Nature, where fertility is interpreted as mysterious, and magical. Cats' fertile nature and nocturnal lifestyle, being not fully tamed pets, dominates literary cats, as authors' fertile imagination makes up these unpredictable, dark and subversive entities capable of expressing with their playful diversity a variety of social stereotypes from the core of the collective imaginary.

### TEACHING CATS

Literary cats play an important role in the interpretation of Nature, exclusively through human culture, as, ultimately, young readers interpret their biological status in ontological terms based on anthropological standards. Overall, anthropomorphic cats in Children's Literature texts seem to be causally linked to effective social stereotypes as they are constituted by cultural elements, appearing as utilitarian types of animals, either as mouse predators or as pets. Connecting cats to human domestic environment identifies them as potential persons, suitable for cohabitation with humans, and vice versa, cohabitation with humans makes cats anthropomorphic. Cat figures are depicted in texts as representations of the human condition, balancing between animal instincts and culture, embodying stereotypes of modern society in this literary endeavour. Various writers decided to take advantage of the feline's unique ability to combine charm, freedom, subversion, and survival alongside esotericism, sexuality, and unpredictable playful situations. No other living creature can achieve such a difficult task; in a unique way, cats remain the greatest transformers of human culture, capable of deceiving and devouring any conventional character. Cats have been members of human families and have formed part of human cultures since Ancient Egypt. Inside our homes and on our streets, cat communities continue their course, as people try to enclose some of their inexplicable magic on word and picture books for generations to come.

### CONCLUSIONS

Anthropomorphic literary cat characters in the context of mythological narratives are a common human practice from Antiquity until today, proved by the existence of animal allegory in various human traditions. This practice reflects a cat-related collective imaginary that has, among other things, didac-

tic-pedagogical dimensions. In narratives, cats have specific stereotypical characteristics that serve instructive goals while, at the same time, specific cat characteristics are attributed to human personality types, as in other similar animal cases (Mackie, Hamilton, Susskind, & Rosselli, 1996, p. 60). The literary cat reader's conception consolidates anthropomorphic perceptions about cats and zoomorphic perceptions of human characters based on cat features. In the texts examined, there are numerous examples of cats speaking in human languages and behaving like human beings. The familiarisation to anthropomorphic literary cats broadens anthropocentric perceptions on cat personality through the projection of stereotypes about it, linking it to human character types (Zebrowitz, 1996, p. 104). Young readers are initiated into social interaction practices by anthropomorphic cats, therefore acquainted with patterns of social behaviour and guided in the acceptance of stereotypical anthropocentric perceptions about cats. They also are instructed to accept stereotypes about their social environment through literary cat characters.

After examining a corpus of 37 books, 23 in Greek and 17 in Spanish (Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Spain), textual analysis findings were compared, organised, and classified by language, country and readers' age groups to locate that literary cat characters are usually pets or feral, and they remain consistently stereotyped as anthropomorphic and subversive. Cats with seven lives and magical powers are common perceptions, dominating in both cultural contexts, stereotypes extended to strong superstitions about black cats. Literary cats are narrative motifs towards the achievement of literary objectives, there is an interaction between biological reality and the stereotypical view of literary cats that shape the social status of the animals as their images of the cat may bear characteristics that go beyond their biological existence and its properties. Further research is necessary to be able to examine the young readers' response to literary cat characters and the effect of stereotyped literary cat characteristics on children's conception of real cats in Greek and Spanish speaking cultural contexts.

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