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# Human Identity

An Analysis of Human Self-Identification by Observing the  
Other in Doris Lessing's *On Cats*

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## **Abstract**

The focus of this essay is the process of human self-identification in the human-cat relationship as narrated in *On Cats* by Doris Lessing. The concept of 'narrative', understood in the sense that it assigns meaning by connecting events and experiences, has allowed for an analysis of the meaningful connections in the interaction between the two species. By employing the philosophical term of 'the Other' and determining that the cat is the Other, it has been possible to conclude that the meaning assigned to the actions of the human towards the cat is that of responsibility for the inferior creature. The human is thus a moral agent, the moral faculty being the crucial trait of human identity separating the human from the animal, which can only abide by its nature. The cat belongs to the category of 'Nature' and the human to the category of 'Civilization'. In this essay it has also been shown that the human, in order to preserve Civilization, kills the cat and thus mitigates the intrusion of Nature on the level of comfort that the human associates with Civilization.

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## Introduction

Three stories, *Particularly Cats*, *Rufus the Survivor* and *The Old Age of El Magnifico*, are included in Doris Lessing's *On Cats* (2002). What they have in common is that the narrator in all three of them exclusively narrates her relationships with cats.<sup>1</sup> These are stories about how the human interacts with the cat, and how the cat interacts with the human. Whether or not these novellas are the written recollections of Lessing herself, they will be studied as any other fictional literary work.

When we interpret the behaviour of a cat – attempt to read the cat's mind – it can be understood as Theory of Mind (from here on, ToM) as presented in Lisa Zunshine's work *Why We Read Fiction* (2006). ToM is "our ability to explain people's behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires" (6). An example from the animal world would be seeing a cat curl up on the couch and assuming that it wants to take a nap. Zunshine states: "Attributing states of mind is the default way by which we construct and navigate our social environment, incorrect though our attributions frequently are" (6). Thus, we are constantly interpreting behaviour and communication of both the verbal and the non-verbal kind.

The need for interpretation arises from the fact that the one with whom we communicate is not entirely known to us. In Lessing's text, the desire to understand the cat is expressed. As we will see, it is very difficult to understand an animal. It is, as Jacques Derrida points out, the Other (380). In brief terms, the Other is what is different or alien from one's self or even one's social group, therefore making it difficult to interpret what it wants, desires or feels. Tzvetan Todorov explains that "I can conceive of these others as an abstraction, as an instance of any individual's psychic configuration, as the Other – other in relation to myself, to *me*; or else as a specific social group to which *we* do not belong" (3). It is noteworthy that he does not claim to be able to understand the Other, just conceive of it. He also points out that there is a clear dichotomy between 'us' and 'them' – the Other. This dichotomy is very apparent in the interspecies relationship between humans, 'us', and cats, 'them'. It is in separating what is human from what is cat that we are able to distil what it is to be human, what human identity is: Because it is not cat, it is different from the Other.

In this essay, the otherness of the cat is the vantage point from which human self-identification will be illuminated. Derrida claims to have been able to identify his self when observed by his cat while naked, "I often ask myself, just to see, *who I am* – and who I

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<sup>1</sup> For reasons of simplicity I will refer to the narrator as 'she' throughout the essay, although the gender is never explicitly stated in the text.

am (following) the moment when, caught naked, in silence by the gaze of the animal” (372). In this situation, he is aware of his self because it is different from that of the animal, the Other. The narrator in *On Cats* has similar experiences, which is the reason why the human self becomes an important aspect of this work in particular.

The concept of the Other has been linked to the creation of literature. In her article “Animals and the Question of Literature” Isobel Karremann aims to illustrate how the otherness of the animal permits us to “raise questions about the function and value of literature today” (21). She uses the fictional character Elizabeth Costello from J. M. Coetzee’s novel *Elizabeth Costello* to make two claims. First of all, she asserts that literature is the right medium for “sympathetic imagination” (23). Secondly, she sees in this type of imagination the basis on which humans should ethically treat non-humans. Karremann points out that this idea diverges from the Romantic debate about animal rights, where “speaking for the other” was centre stage and “identification proceeded from an anthropomorphic bias that projected human traits onto animals, rendering them humanlike”. The debate is now focused on speaking “to the other [...] ’sharing the being of another’ that is emphatically nonhuman” (23). Once more borrowing Costello’s words, she determines that the best way to do this is “not try[ing] to find an idea in the animal, that is not about the animal, but is instead [finding] the record of an engagement with him” (23). This is precisely what we find in Lessing’s *On Cats* – stories of engaging with the animal. Karremann concludes her article by stating that one of “the most important uses of literature is its social function [...] to keep raising hard questions about us” (26). How does the human identify itself in the human-cat relationship and what hard questions about us are raised in connection with this process?

In this essay, I aim to show that human self-identification raises questions that are ethical in nature, as well as how the medium of narrative assigns meaning to the events told using the theoretical approach that the cat is the Other, as postulated by Derrida. In the first part of the analysis a close look will be taken at instances of humans killing cats in order to examine the human’s harsh treatment of the Other and how it impacts her self. The question of how the human reacts towards the cat when communication fails will be raised in the second part. This will be done in order to further elaborate on how the human conceives of the Other and thus of her self. In the third and last part there will be an examination of the human as moral agent and an attempt at illuminating how the human assigns the meaning of responsibility to her actions towards the cat.

## **Anthropomorphising, Dehumanization and Meaning-Making**

In order to better understand how the human narrator treats the cat, some definitions of a few core concepts must be provided. First, anthropomorphising is the act of rendering the animal human-like, and when anthropomorphised, the animal is not an “absolute Other” (Derrida, 380). This process is very much linked to the fact that we humans are creatures of ToM, and will inevitably mind-read the cat as we do humans. The way in which the human narrator anthropomorphises the cat will be examined in detail, because not only does the human narrator conceive of the Other, but she also tries to understand it by making the Other more like herself. By analysing this process it is possible to establish how the human narrator defines her own self in the human-cat relationship.

Secondly, dehumanization is the process of rendering a human less human-like. Sowon S. Park defines it as “the ideological construction of Otherness which is dehumanization of the human, the inverse process of anthropomorphism, and more broadly, a refusal to accept that there are common grounds between the self and the other” (159). She raises this point in relation to Derrida’s conclusion that “seeing animals’ existence on human terms is appropriation and domination” (159) in order to argue that this standpoint relies on the “position of disavowing knowledge of the other” (159). Since an animal is not human, dehumanization seems to be impossible to discuss in connection with how the human sees and treats the animal. However, from the fact that the human can make the animal human-like, it should logically follow that the human can also take away that human-like quality from the animal, thus dehumanizing what was previously humanized/anthropomorphized.

Thirdly, the concept of ‘narrative’ is the process of assigning meaning to actions and events. Karremann argues that “meaning only emerges from turning facts into a story” (24). Hanna Meretoja shares this standpoint: “narrative does not merely list what happens, but [...] it brings out or creates meaningful connections between events and experiences, thereby rendering them (at least partly) intelligible” (89). Meretoja looks at narrative in connection with human existence, more precisely our understanding of it as well as how we use narrative as tool to assign meaning and order to experiences lived. What is narrated in *On Cats* is the human-cat relationship. Since the narration assigns meaning, it is important to examine what meaning is expressed in the human-cat relationship.

## When the Human Kills the Cat

*Particularly Cats* begins with the narrator living in Africa, in a farmhouse with domestic cats, but close to nature where there are wild cats. The humans in the house act in a significantly different way towards the domestic cats versus the non-domestic cats. Illustrative of this is a scene in which the narrator kills what she believes to be an ugly, chicken-stealing, wild cat. “We hated wild cats, which spat and clawed and hissed and hated us. This was a wild cat, I shot it” (8), the narrator states. As it turns out, this is not a wild cat, but one of their domestic cats, Minnie, who disappeared two years back and now has a lair with kittens. The narrator’s mother kills the kittens because these are truly wild cats “and human beings were their enemies: our legs and arms were bitten and scratched in proof of it. So we destroyed them” (9). Here, three observations may be worthy of note: 1) the motive behind the killing is the fact that the cats fight the humans by scratching and clawing at them; 2) there is no remorse expressed by the human, who has just killed the cat although she acknowledges that this cat has a name and *is* Minnie; 3) it is the narrator’s mother who “saw that they were destroyed; because some law of the household I did not until much later reflect about made this sort of nasty work hers” (9).

First, then, it is legitimate to kill wild cats because they scratch and claw at the human. This reasoning would not by any measure be considered valid if it had been an annoying neighbour who had, unlikely as it would have been, exhibited the same behaviour. The fact that we treat animals differently from ourselves is not a revolutionary observation by any stretch, but it is a good starting point for discussing the process of identification. Clearly, the narrator assumes that scratching and clawing is behaviour that says ‘we are enemies’. An enemy is an Other with malicious intent who, if allowed, would inflict harm. Thus, the enemy is a threat. But can a cat be a threat? It is precisely by declaring the cat to be an enemy that the narrator anthropomorphises the Other, giving it the human trait of ‘enemy’, a ‘human title’ if you will. Before the question of how a cat is conceived of as a threat can be fully answered, we need to establish exactly how an enemy is the Other, or in other terms: the otherness of the enemy.

To understand what this otherness consists of we must consider the dehumanization of the enemy. We will consider two aspects. First, by denoting us as the enemy of the wild cats, indicating ‘we are enemies’, the narrator anthropomorphises them since an enemy has malicious intent, which is a human faculty. Secondly, the concept of

‘enemy’ inherently dehumanizes the animal, thus completing the animal-human-animal circle. It is thus by assigning the ‘declaration of war’ to the cats that the narrator anthropomorphises the cat into an enemy.

The impossibility of completely understanding the Other, in this case the animal, is at the core of the narrator’s need for interpretation. Park, however, concludes that it is the degree to which we can understand the animal that should be discussed and not the fact that we cannot understand them. She claims that we should focus on what the animal sees when looking at us, thereby switching the focus to the “us-ness in their eyes” (162). Why? Because when one claims complete ‘unknowability’ of the animal or person one also claims the power to ‘Other’ the being in question, which in turn leads to a “currency of unknowability as a psychic strategy of power to dominate and bind together a range of differences between groups” (160). This is important as “[i]n the history of the world, dominated, demonized and exploited groups of people were Othered into primitive, barbarians, brutes, savages and at times glorified and sentimentalized into other Othered categories in which women, children and animals were placed” (159). There is a correlation between the rhetoric on dominating other human groups and actually being prepared to kill these groups that might be perceived as enemies, and that most definitely are perceived as the Other.

The cat, the Other, exhibits behaviour that makes the human-animal dichotomy clear to the narrator when she states that the cats are ugly, that *we* hate them, that they scratch *us*, harm *us*, and steal *our* chickens. The mechanism of dividing ‘us’ from ‘them’ in this way, it could be argued, is the process of ‘Othering’ the cat. The problem with this is that the cat is already an Other. Here is where it becomes clear that the human has first anthropomorphised the cat by interpreting its behaviour as the behaviour of a human. Once more human-like, the cats must thus be separated into a category, which is Othered, namely the category of ‘enemy’. According to this logic, this has to be done in order for the human to be prepared kill them. While the cat might not be a direct threat to the lives of the humans they are a threat to their level of comfort: the scratching cannot kill the human, but hurt him superficially. The cat cannot steal so many chickens that the humans can no longer feed themselves. In short, the cats cannot accomplish any serious lasting harm. As for the African wild cats, they are allowed to live as long as they do not cause any harm to the humans. At the moment when they become unmanageable, when Nature does not know its place, when the cats are too wild, they are killed.

Secondly, a complicating element is the fact that this was not a wild cat, but Minnie, one of the narrator’s domestic cats. Naming a cat turns it into an individual with



unique traits who is knowable, at least to a certain degree – Minnie likes to sleep on the couch; Minnie likes to climb trees; Minnie sleeps next to me at night. Thus, complete unknowability cannot be claimed. If we can assume that, as a domestic cat, Minnie is recognised by the narrator not only as a cat but as an individual, i.e. as a pet, is it not then possible that the narrator should grieve, or feel sad at her loss, or even feel guilty about having killed her?

Humans can grieve the loss of another human, but the loss of a pet, domestic cat, is not something that the narrator in this case grieves. ‘When is the loss of an animal grievable?’ is the question David Redmalm examines, arguing that we must first ask the question “who is included in the very notion ‘we?’” (19).<sup>2</sup> First, he touches upon “the hierarchical dichotomisation between human and other animals” in order to suggest that grieving a pet shows that there is tension in this “human/animal binary” (20). He then clarifies that in Western tradition, humans have “rested on the exclusion of non-human animals and human ‘others’ who have been regarded as soulless machines by those privileged with human status” (21). Without mentioning the process of anthropomorphising, he then argues that pet owners teach pets more “‘civilizing’ practices with the aim to turn them into ‘little humans’” (21). He raises this point to state that a pet stands at the juncture between two categories (humans and animals) and quotes Marc Shell who manages to capture this in an elegant way: “‘Pets stand at the intersection between kin and kind” (21). Hence, while a pet might be treated by its owner like a member of the family, it belongs to a different category. By employing the term “framing” Redmalm is then able to describe when a human is grievable: “a being is framed as grievable when it is given a certain position in relation to the wider norms that circumscribe individual and collective identity” (22). For his part, Redmalm explains that when grievable, the being is “included in our moral community – a shared sense of ‘we’ – whereas life that is framed as ungrievable and thus ‘lose-able’ is excluded from that community” (22). The standpoint that grieving is intertwined with the “very notion of human identity” is challenged by Redmalm who argues that by applying the concept of “framing” we can come to understand how non-human life can be grievable even if grieving is “reserved for ‘normatively human’ subjects” (22). He argues this in order to further his point that grieving a pet contests the collective human identity. Lastly, he raises three ways in which grief manifests itself: (1) the lost one always seems irreplaceable; (2) grief is such a powerful emotion that it is “unpredictable” and incorporates a “transformative effect”; (3) the pain of

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<sup>2</sup> He examines the grievability of non-human life using the conceptualization of grief as outlined by Judith Butler.

the loss is felt physically and this is called “embodied loss”. The concept of “embodied loss” points to the relationship between two aspects: that we rely on others for our identity and that we share a physical susceptibility. (23-29). Redmalm’s findings suggest that pets “have to be framed as grievable to be a part of an interspecies ‘we’” (32) and are not grievable when they do not balance in this intersection. Minnie, then, must be excluded from the narrator’s “interspecies we”, which leaves her as an animal with a name. The only reaction from the narrator is her reluctance to admit that this was not a wild cat: “but something bothered me about this cat. I bent to look at it. [...] I had to admit it. This was no wild cat, it was one of ours” (8). ‘Ours’ does not seem to be referring to an “interspecies we”, but rather to ‘one we took care of’. Taking care of a creature and then killing it must be a hard thing to admit to having done, but this conclusion enters into the realm of speculation and the sense of responsibility will be discussed later on in the essay.

Third, and finally, it is the narrator’s mother who is in charge of killing the kittens, because she is the one who has been tasked with keeping the wild cats at bay. Another scene in which this is commented on is when the mother aims for what she believes to be a snake and pulls the trigger. When it is revealed that it was not a snake but a cat the narrator’s mother is saddened: “It died, while my mother wept and petted it” (11). The story does not tell us whether or not her mother feels an affinity with the dead cat, but the strong emotional response indicates that she is able to grieve although this cat is not a pet of hers. The mother’s reaction is also indicative of what is to come next, for she refuses the duty of killing more cats. The narrator is upset by this:

What was she in fact saying during that year when she would not drown kittens, or have put to death the cats who badly needed it? And finally, why did she go away and leave us two, knowing perfectly well, because she must have known, since it was loudly and frequently threatened, what was going to happen? (14-15)

The narrator points to the difficulty of attributing a state of mind to her mother based on her actions, because her mother must have been aware of the fate of those cats that she refused to kill. As a result the cat population thrives, increasingly threatening the comfort of the humans to the point where something has to be done. The mother still refuses to do anything about the cat infestation and solves her dilemma by leaving the house. “Before she left she said goodbye to her favourite puss, an old tabby who was the mother of them all. She stroked her gently, and cried. That I do remember, my feeling of futility because I could not understand the helplessness of those tears” (15). Again, the narrator seems unable to understand her

mother. Noteworthy is also that her mother, who we can assume knows how the cat-problem has to be solved, says good-bye to only one of the many cats. This cat is special since it is the one that, according to the narrator, has mothered the rest of them. The clear connection between the cat and the older woman is that they are both mothers. It could then be the cross-species mother affinity that makes the narrator's mother bond with that particular cat.

The narrator and her father now have to decide how to kill the cats and go to the vet who suggests that "the least cruel way to kill grown cats was to chloroform them" (16). That method is supposed to be humane and instantaneous, which as it turns out it is not. It is noteworthy that 'humane' here means 'inflicting as little suffering as possible' because killing the cat brutally or for no valid purpose would not be the civilized thing to do. Since the human belongs to the category of civilization he has to kill the cat in a humane/civilized way. The narrator's father then decides that the best option is to use his First World War revolver. The cats are gathered up and locked in a room with him and his gun: "The gun sounded again, again, again. The cats that were still uncaught had sensed their fate and were raging and screaming all over the bush, with people after them" (17-18). Clearly, the narrator is sure that the cats are able to understand and sense what fate awaits them if they are caught. She is thus attributing a state of mind to them. When her father leaves the room he is very pale and throws up. Clearly, he is very upset about what he has had to do. The narrator comments on the cats that escaped: "Some of the cats had escaped – three never came back at all to the murderous household, so they must have gone wild and taken their chances" (18). The conclusion the narrator draws is that the cats now see their home as a house where murder happens. This is confirmed when the narrator's mother returns, surprised to see that they have spared her favourite cat:

My mother had not asked for this cat to be spared, because it was old, and not very well. But she was looking for it; and she sat a long time stroking and talking to it. Then she came out to the verandah. There sat my father and there I sat, murderers, feeling it. She sat down. He was rolling a cigarette. His hands were still shaking. He looked up at her and said: 'That must never happen again.' And I suppose it never did. (18-19)

It is by killing the Other(s) that the human narrator sees herself and her family as murderers, something which they were not before when they were the enemies of the truly wild cats. According to the online Oxford English Dictionary to murder is "[t]o kill (a person) unlawfully, spec. with malice aforethought [...]; to kill (a person) wickedly, inhumanly, or

barbarously” (oed). Being a murderer, then, is to act inhumanly and to kill a person, i.e. a human. A murderer is guilty of a crime, which only moral agents can be. There is a clear difference between the murderer and the enemy, who has a license to kill the Other. By her admission of guilt, the human narrator includes the cats in the same group as ‘persons’/’humans’, hence they are anthropomorphised.

However, not even after what the narrator calls “the holocaust of cats” does she grieve: “I was angry [...] because of its preventable necessity but I don’t remember grieving” (19). Again, this reaction is indicative of the cats being considered lose-able, which means that they are not framed as beings who belong to the same moral community as the humans. Instead she is angry because this could have been prevented if her mother had continued her duty of being the arbitrator between Nature and Man to keep the balance intact. But, then again, denoting the event as “the holocaust” implies a level of inclusion of the cats in the ‘us group’, the one against which you can commit crimes. There are then two levels between which the narrator distinguishes: 1) as moral agents we can admit to murder and to framing the Other as one against whom you can commit crimes; 2) the cats are still lose-able and therefore not included in our moral community. The human narrator’s self belongs to the community of moral agents that can thus commit crimes even against the Other, who is not a moral agent. When the Other is framed as not being a moral agent, the human narrator does not grieve. I would argue that the underlying tone in this division of levels is cynical: ‘We can murder you, but still we do not acknowledge you as belonging to the us group, we had to do it because no one else took responsibility for keeping the balance between civilization and nature.’

The narrator later moves from Africa to London, where cats are killed for very similar reasons to scratching and overpopulating, i.e. threatening the comfort of the human. The first cat to be killed here is the staircase cat. Its neighbourhood is described as uninhabitable for cats, with no back yards and narrow streets. The staircase cat does not have an owner, but desperately wants one: “It would sit waiting until a door opened to let someone in or out, and then miaow, but tentatively, like one who has had many rebuffs. [...] No one asked it to stay. There was the question, as always, of the cat’s dirt” (36). Claiming that the cat wants to be let in, the narrator attributes to the cat the state of mind of wanting to belong to someone, be part of an ‘us’. No one asks it to stay, something which the cat is used to but it cannot possibly understand that it is because they do not like the dirt. His dirt will eventually lead to his demise. When the weather turns cold different people in the building allow the cat in each night. But one night no one opens his door for the cat, that then has to relieve himself

in the staircase as it is too cold outside. Because of this uncivilized behaviour, the caretaker of the building has him put down: “The caretaker said defensively that he had taken it to the R.S.P.C.A<sup>3</sup>. to be killed. [...] The caretaker was not going to put up with *that*, he said. Bad enough clearing up after us lot, he wasn’t going to clean up after cats as well” (39-40). It is again clear that there is a division between the human and the animal, but more importantly, it is still the point where the cat is a threat to the comfort level of the humans that determines if it ‘should’ be killed or not.

It is worth noting that the narrator appears fixed on the fact that a cat wants to belong to someone. From the time when she moved to London she has not owned a cat for twenty-five years because a cat cannot live in peace with a human moving from place to place. The narrator states that “[a] cat needs a place as much as it needs a person to make its own” (23). From this point of view we can draw the conclusion that the staircase cat had found its place but not its human. This reasoning would explain why the narrator assumes that the cat wanted to belong to someone and not just get an easy meal, a warmer bed or fresh water.

The next cats to be killed are kittens, kittens that cannot be taken care of by their mother who is too thin, too exhausted and fragile to handle motherhood. The narrator and her friend make the decision together: “[black cat] was very tired, and gave her mournful Please-help-me cry. Right, we said, that’s it: she can keep these two [kittens] and we’ll get rid of the rest” (140). First, the two humans drink a lot of scotch. They know they have to help the cat, because the cat is asking for it while pushing and licking and taking her last energy to give birth to six kittens. They kill the four kittens and “[i]t was horrible” (140). They then bury them in a field and rage against nature, against each other and against life. Meanwhile, black cat is home, by the fire, purring loud and proud: “there was black cat on a clean blanket, a pretty, proud cat with two kittens – civilization had triumphed again” (141). The narrator goes on to comment on how strong the two kittens already are and how hard it is to imagine them dead, “but they had been chosen by chance at random; and if my hand had picked them up an hour ago [...] these two would now be lying under heavy wet soil in a rainy field” (141). The humans decide to have the cat operated on – no more kittens, no more random selection.

It is nature that decides how many kittens a cat can have, a fact the narrator has commented on before and raged against. She pits nature against civilization, the wild against comfort, the human as a moral agent against the animal as the soulless vehicle of nature’s

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<sup>3</sup>Short for ‘Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals’.

imperfect mechanisms, the self against the Other. We are not uncivilized, because we are not like animals. Being human, we can reflect on the morality of our behaviour. Cats cannot. But nature cannot be tamed, nor bent nor changed, however much the narrator wishes it to be, as is expressed when her black and white cat first becomes pregnant:

[The cat] was half the size of the big waiting tomcats. Much too young, I thought, to get pregnant; but before she was fully grown she was pregnant, and it did her no good to have kittens when she was still one herself. Which brings me to – our old friend nature. Which is supposed to know so well. In a state of nature, does a she-cat become pregnant before she is fully grown? Does she have kittens four, five times a year, six a litter? Of course, a cat is not only an eater of mice and birds; she is also provider of food for the hawks that lie in the air over the trees where she is hidden with her kittens. [...] But then, how inflexible is nature, how unpliant: if cats have been the friends of man for so many centuries, could nature not have adapted itself, just a little, away from the formula: five or six kittens to a litter, four times a year? (27-28)

The cats in London are killed because they threaten the comfort of the humans, and in order for civilization to win – for their species to fit into the human world. Six kittens are too many for the mother to take care of and for the humans to feed, so four of them are killed. The narrator blames the fundamental laws of nature and does not take any pleasure in correcting nature's cruel way by being the arbitrator who keeps the balance, the same role her mother once shouldered in Africa.

## **Where Communication Fails**

ToM is inherently consequential: the cat eats because it is hungry. The linking between behaviour and a state of mind is the same as in creating narrative, which makes meaningful connections between actions, as stated before. I will argue that there are many instances where the narrator aims to make meaningful connections, but admits or does not admit to a gap in the understanding of the cats. The way in which the narrator behaves towards the cats, and I will continuously argue for this, relies heavily on the way she mind-reads them. So when communication fails, how does the human narrator react and why? This is the essential question I will try and answer this section.

Black and white cat is the first cat the narrator owns in London and from the very beginning there are problems. This cat is not independent like the African cats, but it needs human attention: "I was bothered because she waited for people to come home – like a

dog; must be in the same room and be paid attention – like a dog: must have human attendance when she had kittens” (26). This description follows the statement that the narrator does not love this cat: “She was a nice enough beast, but I did not love her; never succumbed; was, in short, protecting myself. I thought her neurotic, overanxious, fussy; but that was unfair, because a town cat’s life is so unnatural that it never learns the independence a farm cat has” (25-26). Firstly, the narrator does not anthropomorphise the cat, but rather compares it to another animal, which is to cement that the cat is the Other and not human-like; secondly, the behaviour expressed by the cat is interpreted as ‘needy’ rather than affectionate. This interpretation becomes blatantly clear when the cat refuses to eat anything other than lightly cooked calves’ liver or boiled whiting: “Where did she get these tastes? I demanded of her ex-owner, who of course did not know. [...] Once I decided to starve her into submission. ‘Ridiculous that a cat should be fed etc., etc., when people in other parts of the world are starving, etc.’” (26). In the end it is the narrator who succumbs and caters to the cat’s desires. Clearly she has tried to communicate ‘eat the food that I put out for you’. But by starving itself for five days, refusing to feed, which is a survival instinct, this cat communicates ‘I will eat the liver or nothing at all!’ The narrator is not able to let the cat die and bows down to these very specific requests.

A similar scene is one where the narrator locks the black and white cat in the kitchen over night, without food and with her kittens in the hope that the cat will recover her natural instinct and hunt the mice thriving there, communicating ‘eat the mice!’ But even though the cat must have been hungry, even though she has had to keep her kittens fed, this is the scene that meets the narrator’s eyes in the morning: “[T]he cat stretched out on the floor, feeding the kittens [...] while a couple of feet away a mouse sat up, disturbed by the light, but not by the cat. The mouse did not even run away, but waited for me to leave” (32-33). Hunger, then, does not seem to be a powerful motivation for this cat that only feeds on liver. But, why does the narrator not take action against the mice infesting her home? “I was unable to bring myself to put down a steel trap for these confiding creatures; I felt, however, that a cat was, so to speak, playing fair” (32). So, the narrator does not take action to ‘control the wild’ or protect her comfort level, in this case her food. This is not the human’s jurisdiction – not the human’s responsibility. At the same time the narrator feels that the cat does not have the same excuse and tries to force it to hunt and feed on the mice. A cat that has never hunted on her own should somehow automatically understand what to do, and recognise living food sources because of inherent instinct? The cat proves the human wrong. The hunter instinct does not appear.

This same cat does something else that the narrator acknowledges as strange in regard to the cat's own survival: "[She] disarmed a rather silly dog from downstairs who, on the point of chasing her, capitulated because she, apparently not knowing that dogs were enemies, wound herself around his legs, purring. He became her friend, and the friend of all her kittens" (33). Does the narrator again count on the cat's instinct to recognise this danger right away? It is clear that she has difficulties communicating with the cat, and attributing a state of mind to it. The dog *should* be a threat, 'we' humans know that cats view them as such, but this cat is either not understanding her own survival instinct, or employing a tactic to disarm the enemy.

The next cat exhibits strange behaviour when it comes to her motherly instincts and is called grey cat. She is a beautiful cat, described as a princess. She demands that the narrator be present during the birth of her first litter, gives birth and then goes downstairs to eat. When the previous owners come around to visit the new mother they find "mamma cat, posed on the bottom of the stairs in profile. Then she ran out of the house, up the tree and back again – several times" (62). The cat does not return to the litter of her own accord. It is as though she has forgotten that the kittens exist upstairs. The humans are shocked: "'You are supposed to be a mother,' [...] 'Why aren't you with your kittens?'" (62). Promptly, the narrator places grey cat with her children but grey cat just leaves the room to sleep in the usual spot in the narrator's bed, leaving the kittens complaining. The narrator makes her go back to them each time this happens, thus communicating 'you must take care of the kittens', and "[s]he understood, by morning, that she was responsible for those kittens. But left to herself, that great Mother, nature, notwithstanding, she would have let them starve" (63). This would indicate that the cat belongs to nature rather than civilization, that her actions are dictated by her own nature rather than by her sense of responsibility. The dichotomy between man and animal as outlined by Redmalm plays a part in this observation made by the human narrator, since stating that this is what nature would have done excludes the element of 'moral agent'. The cat is therefore not to be blamed for her actions. Rather her actions render the human confused because they show that there is no shared sense of responsibility for one's children, which divides 'us' from 'them'. The narrator comes to the following conclusion:

She was not going to be shut away by herself away from company, she had decided; and through the month the kittens were helpless, any one of us, anywhere in the house, would see grey cat trotting into the room with her kittens, tossing them about in her mouth in what seemed to be the most appallingly careless way. At night, whenever I woke, grey cat would



be tucked in at my side, silent, and she stayed silent, hoping I would not notice her. When she knew I had, she purred, hoping I would soften, and licked my face and bit my nose. All no use. I ordered her back, and she went, sulking. (64)

The cat seems to be needing the constant attention of the humans, is what the narrator concludes. Furthermore, it seems that the cat has learnt that the human will force her to be with the kittens, and tries to manipulate her way into getting to stay in the human's bed. The purring and the licking and nose-biting does not soften the human and is thus failed communication, a failed plea, on the cat's part.

There are two cases of communication failure in *Particularly Cats* and one in *The Old Age of El Magnifico*, which both describe visits to the veterinarian. Grey cat is the first one to visit him. The narrator has decided that she should not be a mother, and that she does not want to be one herself. Consequently, the narrator takes grey cat to the veterinarian to have her stripped of the organs needed for pregnancy. For the first time in her life, the cat is locked up in a cage and left at the veterinarian's over night. When the narrator picks her up grey cat looks at her with "enormous dark shocked eyes. She had been betrayed and she knew it. She had been sold out by a friend, the person who fed her, protected her, whose bed she slept on" (79). The narrator cannot meet that gaze and clearly feels as though she has committed the moral crime of betrayal. Communication fails in this instance as the narrator cannot explain why the procedure had to be done. She cannot speak to the cat and tell her 'you will never have to be a mother again, it will be alright now'. The cat later has to be returned to the veterinarian's to have the stitches removed and "[t]his was worse than the first journey, because now she knew the basket, the motions of the car, meant pain and terror. She screamed and struggled in the basket" (80). She would not be petted for a week afterwards and refused to sleep in the same bed as the narrator, communicating 'you have wounded me and I no longer trust you.' There is nothing for the narrator to say or do, nothing to mend fences. The human's reaction towards the animal here is one of 'being at a loss'.

Again, another cat is taken to the clinic for an ear-infection, and when in the diagnosing room, becomes paralyzed with fear. The narrator cannot communicate 'this is for your own good, this will cure you', but states that "she was rigid with fright, her mouth streaming, and she trembled for hours afterwards. But she is a normal cat, with normal instincts" (97-98). What does "normal" mean in this case? The narrator compares the cat's behaviour with what she believes to be normative or prototypical for a cat. Thereby, the narrator provides a means of measuring how cat-like a given cat is. It seems reasonable to

draw the conclusion that the human's reaction in this case is to state that it is normal for the cat to be scared, ergo it is not my fault that she has to be taken to the veterinarian and be scared. The meaning ascribed to the narrator's actions towards the cat in this instance is that of a responsible caretaker who acknowledges that the cat must suffer in order to get well.

The third cat to go to the veterinarian is Butchkin or El Magnifico. He has cancer and his entire front leg is to be removed. He is a vocal cat who lets his feelings be known and he does not like going to the doctor. But the humans like it even less: "The humans went into shock. *This* cat a three-legged cat? Surely he would not endure the ignominy of it" (226). The clue might be in the name he bears: El Magnifico – the magnificent one. To be sure, the humans named him that as if to reflect his personality. To make him three-legged, even if it is in order to save his life, must be a damper on his level of magnificence. This magnificent cat is described by the narrator as "proud, intelligent, the most intuitive cat I've known. But like some people who have never had to fight for their food or place in the world, he has a soft place in him" (227). He is even described as histrionic, "an actor of the old-fashioned kind, all the stops out, to make outrageous emotional scenes" (227), something which the humans find very amusing but they dare not laugh in front of him because, "he would never forgive the insult" (228). Then a scene similar to that featuring grey cat is played out. The humans, the cat's supposed friends, betray him and leave him in an awful place where he has to endure pain. They ignore his screams and pleas: "And now these so-called friends were carrying him upstairs in his own house, the stairs he had been rushing up and down his whole life, and, as if they had not betrayed him, were petting him" (230). The narrator, incapable of communicating 'we saved your life', contests that "acknowledgement of the commonsense of the thing does not diminish the basic guilt: This cat is less of a cat than he was and it is my fault. The long long look, reproach, enquiry 'Why, when you are my friend?'" (233). Again the narrator compares the state of the cat with a 'norm cat', and as with grey cat, admits to guilt. The human's reaction here is one of self-reproach, mirrored in the gaze of the cat. The fact that the cat feels that it has been betrayed means that the human has attributed to the cat the state of mind of recognising that its trust has been breached. By mind-reading the cat from a human perspective, the narrator identifies herself as the guilty party. Her human identity thus incorporates the capability of betraying trust.

In *Rufus the Survivor* the narrator makes explicit her frustrated curiosity brought about by not being able to communicate directly with her pet. She wishes to understand how Rufus has come to be so intelligent:

All people who live with animals have moments when they long to share a language. And this was one. What had happened to him, how had he learned to plan and calculate, how had he become such a thinking cat? All right, so he was born intelligent, but then so was Butchkin, and so was Charles. [And there are very stupid cats.] [sic] All right, so he was born with such and such a nature. But I have never known a cat so capable of thought, or planning his next move, as Rufus. (194)

The narrator seems to be arguing with someone who is claiming that the cat was simply born that way – nature made him smart. But this explanation does not satisfy the narrator who compares his intelligence, that of the survivor, with the two other cats she owns, Charles the scientific cat and Butchkin, also known as the general and El Magnifico, who has intuitive intelligence: “Charles has the scientific intelligence, curious about [...] in particular, our gadgets. [...] You can see him wondering why a disembodied human voice emerges from a box. [...] The general has intuitive intelligence, knowing what you are thinking, and what you are going to do next” (202-203). The cat-cat comparison is notable again, and it is not a stretch to come to the conclusion that when the narrator is at a loss and cannot understand the cat, she employs the method of comparing that cat’s behaviour to other cats that she has known. Her reaction here is inquisitive, curious, as if she wants to reach the cat and truly understand it.

This last point is relevant to the final lines of *The Old Age of El Magnifico*. El Magnifico does not allow the narrator to pet him if she happens to read a book at the same time, for she must show him her undivided attention. In a passage that we will come back to in the next section, she describes moments when she sits close to a cat, petting him, trying to reach the state of cat:

When I do this – and he must be in the right mood too, not in pain or restless – then he subtly lets me know he understands I am trying to reach him, reach cat, essence of cat, finding the best of him. Human and cat, we try to transcend what separates us. (245)

This is the ultimate admission of the impossibility of a complete understanding of each other’s natures. The dichotomy between the two kinds, human and animal, is present here, but what is more prominent is the desire to transcend kind and reach kinship, to exist in the human-cat interspecies ‘we’. For this to happen both parties must understand the Other., because to the cat the human is the Other, and to the human the cat is the Other. What this means is that they must understand what makes the one different from their respective selves.

The narrator acknowledges that they are separated, but by physical contact she tries to breach that separation. The narrator interprets the cat's behaviour as saying that it wants to reach the human. We might belong to different categories, the animal might be the Other to the human - – a way of self-identification by differentiating – but the mutual reaction portrayed here is that the human and the cat both want the other to understand its self.

## **The Human Responsible For the Cat**

As noted many times, the human narrator expresses feelings of guilt and betrayal in relation to the cat, which is indicative of the fact that she feels responsible for the cat and that her actions weigh heavily on her conscience. The human-cat relationship described as an owner-pet relationship entails a power relationship as remarked by Redmalm (21). Pets are almost brought up as “little humans” and “are often considered ‘family’” (21). However, as the examples show, the human narrator takes it upon herself to keep the balance between civilization and nature thus assuming power and, even if it is for the good of the cat, violates the cat's trust by making crucial decisions concerning the physical integrity of the cat. The cat cannot do this. It also seems highly improbable that the cat should kill the human, and therefore we must consider the human overwhelmingly powerful in this relationship.

The claim of responsibility also indicates that only the human is the capable of responsibility. Being different from the animal is a way of identifying the human as Derrida does, if we recall him being watched by his cat while naked. Linking this to the idea of the human as moral agent, and the animal as soulless vehicle, this section will take into account that there is a power division because of these facts. The cat cannot be responsible and is free to follow its own nature, and the human is not.

*Rufus the Survivor* tells the story of Rufus, who has had a hard life before entering the one of the narrator. She is aware of the cat's presence around her house but does not engage with him, for she has two cats at home already. But she notes that “[t]hey want companionship or, if they are shut out by heartless owners, as they often are all day or all night, they appeal for help with the loud insistent demanding miaow that means they are hungry or thirsty or cold” (179). The way the narrator employs “heartless owners” suggests that, in her mind, it is cruel not to feel empathy for the cat that craves companionship. Companionship is quite different from the owner-pet relationship, because two companions are on equal terms. To refuse this companionship with a cat is judged as cruel on an ethical level by the narrator.

Further, she describes Rufus as “present[ing] himself to me when I came in and when I went out, and he was on my conscience” (180). Presenting oneself to another is offering oneself to that person, communicating ‘take me’. And the plea is weighing heavily on the mind of the narrator. The only reason she does not take immediate action is because of the two cats she is already responsible for at home, and letting a third one in the house might just be too many cats in too little space, too much responsibility for the human. Yet, she cannot let the question rest, indicating that she already feels a certain level of responsibility towards Rufus just by hearing him ask for her help and companionship. He is unjustly excluded from the interspecies ‘us’ that exist between the four walls of her home and under her protection as moral agent.

Rufus, who is reluctantly let into the kitchen only to feed, purrs his thanks so loudly that the whole house can hear him. However, Rufus is not well. A life on the streets has left him scared and sick. The narrator concludes that this is a cat that had “had a home, but lost it. He knew what it was to be a house cat, a pet. He wanted to be caressed. His story was a familiar one. He had had a home, human friends who loved him [...] but it was not a good home” (184). It was not a good home because the humans had come and gone at their leisure, not taking into account the cat in need of caring. Clearly, the humans, according to the narrator, ought not to behave on whim and desire – like a cat may – but has to take responsibility for the creature they own. This dilemma is what now faces the narrator who states that “[Rufus] ought to be taken to the vet. But that would mean he was our cat, we would have three cats, and our own were being huffy and wary and offended because of this newcomer who seemed to have rights over us, even if limited ones” (182-183). There are two challenges then; the first caused by the fact that acting to save Rufus by taking him to the veterinarian is admitting ownership; the second, is the impact on the lives of the cats already under their roof that seem to oppose Rufus’s presence. Even if taking on Rufus is ‘unwanted’ by the two other cats, the narrator takes him to the clinic and he becomes their third cat. Taking on ownership is taking full responsibility for the life of the cat. Responsibility is a moral obligation accepted by the moral agent, the human. The cat, soulless or not, only states what it wants and tries to get it by asking. Therefore, it is inevitable that the human takes care of the cat, and not the other way around.

In the last lines of *Rufus the Survivor* the narrator claims to feel sadness and guilt in relation to cats: “Knowing cats, a lifetime of cats, what is left is a sediment of sorrow quite different from that due to humans: compounded of pain for their helplessness, of guilt on behalf of us all” (215). The first thing to consider is that there is collective guilt on the

shoulders of the humans. Cats are portrayed as helpless, indicating that they need us and that we have failed them, collectively. The division between them and us seems to rely on the role of moral agent, a moral agent that constructs civilization and by so doing, commits crimes against nature – the category to which the cat belongs – but the human concludes that they are necessary because Man is a foreseeing creature.

The previous reflection is made by the narrator after contemplating on the dreams Rufus might or might not have when, while sleeping, he makes a sound that kittens and mother cats use to greet each other. Therefore, she draws the conclusion that Rufus might have been dreaming about being a kitten or of the human who had owned him when he was little. What follows is a reflection on Rufus' broken heart:

During all the he had known us, nearly four years [...], he had never really believed he could not lose this home and have to fend for himself, become a cat maddened by thirst and aching with cold. His confidence in someone, his love, had once been so badly betrayed that he could not allow himself to ever love again. (215)

Can a cat be heart-broken? In the eyes of the human narrator the cat can be because the narrator reads the cat by anthropomorphising, relating its reactions to human emotion and human feeling. But this also implies that the human is capable of breaking the heart of a cat. 'Breaking someone's heart' is figurative and would imply in this case that the cat can feel love. That adds on the responsibility of the human who is not only responsible for the physical well-being of the pet, but also of its inner life.

The narrator analyses her own dreams about cats in the last pages of *The Old Age of El Magnifico* stating that they all revolve around a feeling of responsibility. In the previous section it was mentioned how the narrator tries to reach the cat, in that case El Magnifico, and reach the state of cat. But here the process is described in more general terms:

When you sit close to a cat you know well, and put your hand on him, trying to adjust to the rhythms of his life, so different from yours, sometimes he will lift his head and greet you with a soft sound different from all his other sounds, acknowledging that he knows you are trying to enter his existence. He looks at you with those eyes of his that continually adjust to changes in light, you look at him, your hand resting lightly... If a cat has nightmares, then he must also dream as pleasantly and interestingly as we do. Perhaps his dreams could take him to places I know in dreams, but I have never met him there. I dream of cats often, cats and kittens too, and I have responsibilities for them, for dreams of cats are always reminders of duty. The cats need feeding, or need shelter. If our dream worlds are not the

same, cats and humans, or seem not to be, then when he sleeps where does he travel? (243-244)

The human is trying to get in sync with the rhythm of the cat's life and acknowledges that it is utterly different from her own. There is an underlying need for understanding the Other and its perception of life. The cat is recognising the effort the human is making to enter its world, separate from hers. The narrator then commences the discussion of dreams, and maybe in that world they might meet, maybe there is where the common ground is to be found. This conclusion is drawn after having imagined what it is to be a cat. It is also made clear that cats may dream and that they might dream of places and things you, the human, also dream of. But a dream is not reality. In real life, cats need tending. They need the human to be responsible not only for the physical well-being of the cat but of its inner life, the hidden world behind its eyes. However, the last lines echo a desire to know the cat, to know what the cat dreams of, what the cat *is*. When trying to reach its essence, the inevitable impossibility of a complete understanding of the cat stands in the way and this is when communication fails. The only option the human narrator has is to employ imagination to try and understand the Other. Again, this imagination is limited to the human perspective, so that she unavoidably anthropomorphises the cat.

As stated above, the human is captured in a human world-view and the human therefore cannot but anthropomorphise to a certain degree. Narrative is where the meaningful connections between events and actions are made and here is where imagination is vital. Without imagination – sympathetic or not – it is not possible to construct meaning. Connecting the actions taken towards the cat by narration, the human-narrator expresses how she feels responsible. Responsibility entails a moral standpoint that ascribes meaning to the actions we take in relation to the cat. The narrator expresses frustration over being incapable of reaching a complete understanding of the Other but stresses that even if there is no complete understanding, we should not use that as an excuse to mistreat them on an ethical level since we have a moral obligation to take responsibility for them when we 'own' them.

## **Conclusion**

At the beginning of this exploration into the work(s) of Lessing I wanted to examine what hard questions were raised about human self-identification in relation to the human-cat relationship. I was hoping to show that these questions were ethical at their core, and how

narrative rendered it meaningful. Firstly, we found evidence that the narrator considers humans as belonging to a category denoted as ‘civilization’ and the cat to the category ‘nature’. What we found ‘civilization’ to mean was a level of human comfort and the exclusion of dirt. The most prominent aspect of how the human shaped nature to fit into this comfort level and exclude dirt, centred on the human as a moral agent who had to morally justify when nature has to adapt to civilization. What ‘nature’ signified was a way for civilization to be identified: the dirty cat does not fit in, for example, but a domestic cat does. The cat, then, is not a moral agent – does not belong to the concept of civilization, but has to be adapted to it. The cat is driven by its wants and needs, driven by its inherent nature, without a moral compass to guide its actions.

The killings of the cats were performed by humans belonging to civilization as a way to keep the balance between nature and humans, make the cats fit into a society run by humans. The narrator argues that nature should have adapted itself, and that it is unfair that she should now have to be the one adapting nature: kill kittens. But this is a change in attitude from her reaction towards the wild cats that the humans hated. They were killed without remorse, and the narrator is incapable of understanding her mother’s grief towards one of these creatures. There seems to be a clear process of collective self-identification on the narrator’s part: *we* hated *them*. Her mother challenges that self-identification by grieving the one she accidentally killed. The anger the narrator feels when the “holocaust of the cats” takes place is that it was preventable, thus the crime was that it should not have had to happen. At the same time, the narrator acknowledges that it is a crime, with a moral value attached to it, since she calls her and her father murderers. Keeping the balance between civilization and nature then is a necessity, both in Africa and in London, but the narrator cannot circumvent that killing the cats is still morally challenging and an ethical issue.

When the narrator is incapable of understanding the cat, she employs a tactic which compares the cat’s behaviour with a ‘norm cat’s’ behaviour. What this method effectively indicates is that there is something in the narrator’s perception of the world that is a ‘standard’ cat. The black and white cat in London is compared to a dog, when expressing a need for attention. The comparison with another animal excludes the cat from the ‘us’ group. Thus, the narrator places the cat in the category ‘animal’. When this same cat will eat only liver or die, the narrator chooses to cook the liver rather than watch the cat die. This decision indicates that the human does not want it on her conscience that she, by not providing the food desired, kills the cat. The narrator also tries to force grey cat to be a mother and when she fails, she makes the decision to make sure this cat never has kittens again. By taking this



action, she is exerting a power superior to that of the cat, and the cat feels betrayed. Two other cats are taken to the clinic and in all three cases the human cannot say: I did it for your own good. As a moral agent, she has a sound reason for her actions that can never be understood by the cat.

The human becomes responsible for the cat at the point where the human takes ownership of the cat. The responsibility stretches beyond the mere physical well-being of the cat and concerns the inner life of the cat as well. The narrator connects her actions towards the cat with the fact that she is responsible for them, therefore the actions become meaningful. The meaning suggested is that the ethics of our actions matters. The cat, however, cannot take responsibility and is helpless and also free from guilt. The collective identity of 'us' is evident when the narrator communicates that we are superior and we must account for our responsibility towards the animal who is inferior, who cannot deny its nature like we can. The two categories of human and animal try to reach each other in the end, but the primary quality that separates them seems to be that only one party is responsible and only one party carries guilt, namely the human.

Given that the Other can be a human, and given the similarity between the treatment of animals and natives in Africa, for the purposes of further research it would be interesting to do a comparative study between fiction about animal-human interaction and fiction about interactions between different human groups. As we have seen in this essay, the human defines its self as a moral agent sometimes responsible for actions made in defence of civilisation, and it is this aspect that would be interesting to look for in narratives set in the colonial past as compared to narratives set in an environment where humans interact with animals.

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