

Lafcadio Hearn and Cats

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Abstract

As a self-described cat lover who rescued them, kept them, and wrote about them throughout his life, Lafcadio Hearn's relation to cats and his use of them in his writings offer fresh insights into the mind and creative imagination of this unique author. This paper first collects and interprets the biographical facts and anecdotes concerning actual cats in Hearn's life, from Tennessee to Tokyo, with examples of Hearn's own cat illustrations. It then examines Hearn's interest in the role of cats in Japanese folklore. Finally, it considers Hearn's use of cats in three pieces of writing: "Taxing Cats" and "The Little Red Kitten," both written for newspapers in New Orleans in 1879, and "Pathological," which appeared in *Kotto* in 1902. Ultimately the paper hopes to show that Hearn related to cats as good companions, as fascinating creatures who offered insights into human and cross-cultural behavior, and in fiction as surrogates for himself and his mother, the vehicle he chose to express some of his most personal and painful feelings.

Key words: Lafcadio Hearn, cats, folklore, Meiji Japan

Introduction

"Very much do I love cats," wrote Lafcadio Hearn in "Pathological," an essay from *Kotto* written well into his Japan years that analyzed the unusual behavior of his current feline companion, Tama. In fact, during the course of his life he had almost never lived without one or more cats: "I am a great lover of cats," he told Chamberlain in a letter from Matsue, "having 'raised,' as the Americans say, more than fifty" (*Writings XIV* 159). It is not surprising, then, that he sometimes used them in his writing: throughout his life, he sporadically produced small but significant pieces about cats, dating from his early days as a reporter in New Orleans up until the last few years of his life in Japan. Investigation shows that, more than any other animal, cats played quite a significant role in his life: not only were they good company for a man who often shied away from human companionship, but they were also intriguing to observe, and Hearn seems to have found them unequalled as creatures whose behavior was amusing, thought-provoking, educational, and sometimes even enlightening. They also inspired him to write some of the stories and essays that expressed his most intimate personal feelings. It is true that Hearn was also fond of dogs and fascinated by certain insects, but his deepest affection and artistic attention were always reserved for the beguiling domestic cat.

Biographical information on Hearn's relationships to actual cats may be found in accounts by E. L. Tinker (*Lafcadio Hearn's American Days*), by his wife Setsu (*Reminiscences*), and by his first son Kazuo (*Re-Echo*). There are also valuable insights to be gained from commentaries on Setsu's reminiscences, one by Noguchi Yone (*Lafcadio Hearn in Japan*) and another by Hasegawa Yoji (*A Walk in Kumamoto*). An additional major source of information is, of course, Hearn himself, in his personal correspondence and in a number of published works. The correspondence sheds light, both humorous and serious, on his understanding of and dealings with cats, while the published works show how he used cats as material for his writing. Each of these works uses cats and cat-lore in its own way, and together they reveal an interesting psychological facet of Hearn's mental and artistic profile.

From the somewhat unusual angle of Hearn's attitude to cats, real and imaginary, in his life and art, I hope in this essay to refine our understanding of his mind and literary accomplishment. First, I shall examine the roles cats played at various times in Hearn's life, initially in the United States and then in Japan. Next, I will look at cats in Hearn's works-

as bits of Japanese folk-lore and as the focus of three seldom analyzed pieces: 1) "Taxing Cats," from the *New Orleans Item* of 1879; 2) "The Little Red Kitten," also from the *Item* of the same year; and 3) "Pathological," an essay from *Kotto* (1902) analyzing the unusual behavior of his current cat. Finally, I shall speculate on the significance of his writings about cats and evaluate his achievement in those works.

1. Cats in Hearn's Life

The first feline incident recorded in Hearn's life was almost prototypical in its significance: a kitten is brutally harmed by an act of human cruelty and insensitivity, prefiguring a pattern of innocent victimization that appears in one guise or another in most of his subsequent cat-related works. The incident seems to have occurred while he was marooned for a week in Memphis, Tennessee, on his way from Cincinnati to New Orleans. Having missed the steamer, he was forced to spend a week at a cheap, dreary hotel, waiting for the next one to arrive, his recent troubles with Mattie Foley and the *Cincinnati Enquirer* no doubt still fresh in his mind. According to E. L. Tinker in *Lafcadio Hearn's American Days*, Hearn had grown depressed.

Walking out into the country for relief he saw, ahead of him, a man who hurried along apparently in the grip of a terrible rage. A poor little kitten happened to be in the path of his violent footsteps. Reaching down, he brutally grabbed the defenseless animal, gouged out its eyes with his fingers and slung it to one side. This inhuman cruelty so outraged every fibre of Hearn's being that he dragged the pistol, which he had proudly bought for his journey, out of his pocket and fired at the man several times, but his marksmanship was so bad that no harm was done. (30)

Assuming Tinker's account is not too exaggerated, and it is confirmed by Kazuo in *Father and I* (11), this incident must have been highly significant in shaping Hearn's later use of cats in his writing, for the outrage shown here against gratuitous cruelty, against brutal treatment toward the weak by the strong, the small by the large, for no other reason than supreme selfishness, was to become a recurrent theme in his works. And it may well have been this initial incident that haunted him throughout his life and remained so vivid in his mind that his stories of cats normally portray them as pitiful, innocent victims of someone's or something's brutal indifference to or ignorance of their tiny existence. Indeed, many years later he still recalled the incident with considerably intense vexation: "It has always been one of the regrets of my life that I missed" (XIII 62).¹

In Japan, several incidents involving Hearn and cats appear in Setsu's memoirs to reveal interesting aspects of Hearn's personality, and Setsu's as well. In fact, Setsu's memory of one such incident early in their relationship suggests that a cat had been significantly instrumental in deepening her affection for Hearn and may well have increased his desirability in her eyes as a marriage partner. Here is Hasegawa's translation of her recollection:

... early in the summer of the twenty-fourth year of Meiji, we moved to a part of Matsue called Kitahori to live in a samurai residence where we could have a home of our own. We moved with our maid and a kitten. This is how we happened to take in the kitten. One evening, in the early spring when it was still cold, I was standing under the eaves looking at the evening view of the lake, when I saw four or five mischievous children on the shore, just below the house, torturing a kitten by ducking it up and down in the water. I begged the children to give me the kitten, brought it home, and told Hearn the story. 'Oh, poor kitten!' he said. 'How cruel those children were!' He then clasped the drenched and shivering creature close to his chest to warm it. At that time I felt great admiration for him. (5-6)

Clearly, incidents like this helped to convince Setsu of Hearn's inherent gentleness, a quality that she regarded highly and that Hearn felt was held in higher esteem by Japanese culture than by his own. Indeed, this was one aspect of his adopted culture that seemed to synch perfectly with the natural inclinations of his own heart. In Japan, he felt, due appreciation of the value of human kindness and gentleness was inherent in even the least educated people:

I was thinking just now about the difference between the Japanese *hyakusho* and the English merchant.

My servant girl from Imaichi-who cannot read or write-saw you at Kumamoto and said words to this effect: "He speaks Japanese like a great man. And he is so gentle and kind." Vaguely something of the intellectual and moral

side of you had reached and touched her simple mind. The other day a merchant said of you: “Chamberlain – Oh, yes. Met him at Miyanoshta. Tell you, he’s a gentleman-plays a good game of whist!” There’s appreciation for you. Which is the best soul of the two – my servant girl’s or that merchant’s? (XIV 312)

Hearn is clearly enamored of a society that naturally places tenderness above cleverness, whose least educated citizens, operating on a higher moral level, applaud gentleness of heart as an exalted human virtue. Hearn surely felt a fundamental compatibility with a culture that notices a person’s spirit rather than card-playing ability, and he took this mutually high approbation of gentleness, tenderness, and kindness as a sign that he was at last in a truly better place. Though he never expressed it in so many words, compared to the dog-eat-dog world of the West, the Japan that Hearn loved was virtually a land of kittens.

Another recollection by Setsu, this time while they were living in Tokyo, reaffirms the high value Hearn placed upon the quality of gentleness, especially towards “weaker” beings, whether human or animal. Here is Noguchi Yone’s translation of another cat incident as Setsu remembered it:

He[arn] had no patience even with an animal when it acted improperly, and his mind of love might be wounded. There was no one who loved cats more than he; in fact, we kept one or two of them with us all the time since our Matsue days. It happened when we were living temporarily in Tomihisa Cho of Ichigaya, that our cat bore many kittens; and it was awful, doubtless, that she ate up one of them one evening. However, it is not unusual for a cat. Hearn, on being told about it, grew angry, changing color as he might on such occasion, and had a girl bring the cat before him. And he gave her a long talk, and said: ‘You are bad; and you inherited such a wicked thought from countless generations which went before you. I cannot keep you here with us.’² He was seriously honest in his speech. And he sent our rikisha man away with the cat, telling him to make no delay to throw her out somewhere. I suspected afterward in that night, however, he was crying, thinking of the cat he was obliged to cast off unexpectedly. (Noguchi 68-69)

It is certainly one of the funniest and most fetching portraits we have of Hearn and of their married life. Setsu’s account of his eccentric behavior maintains a fine balance between sympathy and amusement, and it is easy to see how her storytelling ability would have charmed him.³ More importantly, perhaps, the episode shows that Hearn himself could be rather unforgiving when the crime was cruelty to the weak or helpless, and instead of admirable or just, Setsu seems to have found him rather comical and somewhat overbearing in the harshness of his decree. To her, the cat had behaved unusually but completely naturally; it was *Hearn’s* behavior that she had to adjust to. Yet she also knew that Hearn had loved the cat and would be secretly saddened both by Tama’s deed and by her absence.

What made the situation more poignant was the fact that, by all accounts, Tama was Hearn’s favorite cat. Hasegawa provides detailed background information that puts the depth of Hearn’s disappointment with her behavior into sharper perspective.

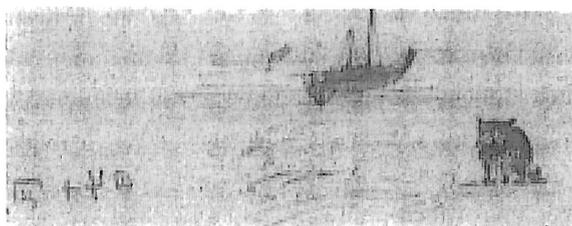
She had been brought to Hearn’s house by the temple as a dirty, wild kitten, but soon grew to be a gentle, clever, and beautiful cat. Hearn . . . made a special pet of her. In winter she never left his warm study where there was a stove installed. She purred on his knees while he was writing, and followed him to the dining-room, a tiny bell tinkling around her neck. She always sat quietly at Hearn’s feet under the table and patiently waited for him to give her morsels of his food. She was sometimes weirdly clever. One day, when changing clothes, Hearn dropped his sash behind a chest of drawers without realizing it. While all the family were looking for the missing sash, Tama suddenly stood up from Hearn’s *zabuton* where she had been lying, went to the chest of drawers and pulled it out with her paw from behind the chest. She grew up to be a cat rich with maternal love. (231)

Tama’s sudden change convinced Hearn that she had irrevocably reverted to her natural, inherently “wicked” hereditary nature, and thus he could no longer keep her. His steadfast belief in the power of ancestry to determine behavior prevented him from seeing her deed as an aberration; instead he took it as both proof of her true inner nature and as a betrayal of his kindness, and in his mind there was no cure for either of these.⁴ He seems to have ignored the fact that she had indeed been for many years a quiet, patient, smart, and affectionate cat, lovely and well behaved. Such was the depth and force of Hearn’s anger at any act of cruelty by the strong against the weak, but in this case it was compounded by the betrayal involved when committed by a mother against her own defenseless baby. Perhaps the wounds of his early abandonment by his own mother were re-opened with the occasion of Tama’s deed, and it may have been himself that

he was crying for that night. Later, the complexity of Hearn's interest in Tama will become clearer when we examine his in-depth portrait of her in "Pathological."

Kazuo's accounts of Hearn and cats as expressed in his own book of reminiscences, *Re-Echo*, paint a somewhat less idiosyncratic picture. To explain some cat illustrations in Hearn's personal notebooks, Kazuo recalls an episode that occurred while they were summering in Yaizu with their cat Hinoko. First, though, he has to inform Western readers how much Japanese cats love fish, especially bonito, and introduces the proverb which says, "To set the cat to keep the dried bonito," and which means, "To set the fox to keep the geese." Now the reader is equipped to understand the charm of the illustration and its caption. Here is his account of the episode:

One day we carried our cat Hinoko (or "Spark") to the seashore with us. Just at that time a fishing boat came back with a heavy hand of bonitos, and there was a great hubbub on the beach; the young pussy Hinoko was staring at them, eyes like live coals, in astonishment. The next day Father drew this picture in his letter to Mother. Hinoko says: "Do-shi-yo," or "What shall I do?" (*Re-Echo*, 147)

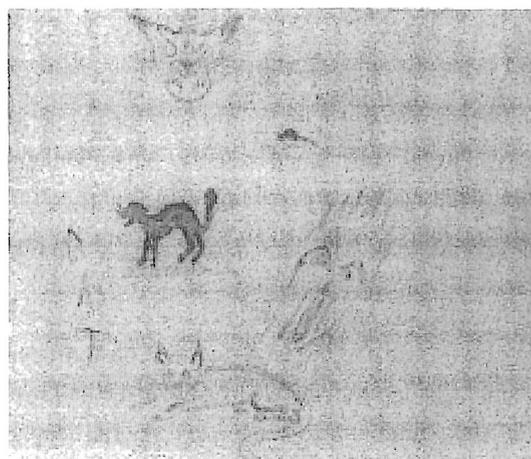


Like Setsu's reminiscences, Kazuo's also paint a loving and amusing portrait of Hearn's relationship to cats. In fact, Kazuo considered this relationship important enough to supply further details of it when explaining other sketches in the notebooks:

Father was so fond of cats that he always kept some cats while he lived or stayed in New Orleans, Saint Pierre, Matsue, Tokyo, and Yaidzu. I heard that in the West Indies he kept many cats to guard against the bad creatures – the centipedes, serpents, poisonous snakes, and vermin.

The face of the black cat might have been drawn when Father was in the French West Indies. I found this sketch in the old memo he used at Saint Pierre.

The other picture was found in a small pocket notebook which he used as a memo at the University of Tokyo. (149)



These sketches may not demonstrate a high level of artistic skill, but they were probably not meant to. They were most likely done, as Kazuo suggests, very rapidly, like a reporter's snapshot designed to capture a fleeting expression or pose, an act in mid-execution, to be recalled later for amusement or possible literary use. At any rate, so far as I know, there are few such illustrations of other domestic animals in Hearn's many notebooks. Although he did also draw a

spider, fly, bat, horse, zebra, deer, elephant, ostrich, dog, etc., to enhance his children's English lessons, these are generally mere shapes. Rarely do they show any emotion or expression in face or body movement. Cats were more captivating. Indeed, observing cats and caring for pets seems to have been one of the chief delights of his later life. As Setsu wrote, "Hearn seems to have looked the happiest at mealtime, watching his children eating and giving treats to his favourite cat Tama and the family dog Shiro"(Hasegawa 231).

In his second book of reminiscences, *Father and I*, Kazuo describes in full detail the adoption of Hinoko into their family (105-13). Again we see the strength of Hearn's sense of pity for abandoned creatures, for soon after rescuing Hinoko he plucked yet another abandoned kitten from the roadside. This provoked an incident that was to remain vividly in Kazuo's memory: When Hinoko used father's best hat for a toilet, he scolded her, but when she teased the new arrival, Hearn apologized – not to the teased kitten but to Hinoko, and blamed himself for thoughtlessly bringing in a rival female cat. Kazuo, however, sympathized with the new kitten and wished to give Hinoko away, or at least punish her, but Hearn would not hear of it. His moral lesson to Kazuo offers unique insight into Hearn's sense of love and loyalty:

Put yourself in Hinoko's position. Animals, unlike human beings, are honest. If a rival arrives to win its master's love, it would do its best to do away with it. Though Hinoko was here, I thoughtlessly picked up the kitten. It was not fair, and I owe an apology to Hinoko.... After Kazuo came Iwao and Kiyoshi, second and third sons. Even so, I did not cease to love Kazuo.... In this world there are men who cast aside their own wives and live with new women for such reasons. They have hearts like the devil's. (112)

Though Hearn no doubt had his own father's behavior in mind, as a child Kazuo was too young to make the connection, and as an adult he was too discrete to mention it. The little kitten was eventually given away to a traveling eel salesman, and Kazuo wept. To soothe him, Hearn sat him down in front of Otokichi's shop in Yaidzu in the shade, put Hinoko in his lap, and told him stories of his "various experiences connected with cats," especially of life in the West Indies with "more than thirty cats [who] kept away the insects and the snakes" (113).

2. Cats in Japanese Folklore

Among the many creatures Hearn encountered in Japan, cats seem to have presented him with uniquely fertile opportunities to indulge in one of his favorite intellectual endeavors: cross-cultural comparison. Early on, he concluded that the cats of Japan looked and acted differently from the European and American variety, and he made considerable efforts to find out more about them and their place in Japanese culture. Soon after arriving in Matsue, he had begun to gather information on them. Some of what he learned appears in a reply to Chamberlain, who wondered if the cats of Izumo were short-tailed like the vast majority of those in the Tokyo area. Hearn, the expert on Matsue, seems glad of the chance to show his knowledge of local feline superstition:

Izumo cats (and I was under the impression until recently that all Japanese cats were alike) are generally born with long tails. But there is a belief that any cat whose tail is not cut off in kittenhood, will become an obake or nekomata, and there are weird stories about cats with long tails dancing at night, with towels tied round their heads. There are stories about petted cats eating their mistress and then assuming the form, features, and voice of the victim. Of course you know the Buddhist tradition that no cat can enter paradise. The cat and snake alone wept not for the death of Buddha. Cats are unpopular in Izumo, but in Hoki I saw that they seemed to exist under more favourable conditions. The real reason for the unpopularity of the cat is its powers of mischief in a Japanese house; – it tears the tatami, the karakami, the shoji, scratches the woodwork, and insists upon carrying its food into the best room to eat it upon the floor. (XIV 159)

Upon further investigation, however, Hearn found out that he had been wrong. Both long-tailed and short-tailed varieties were indigenous to Izumo. Even the seemingly simple subject of cats' tails, he realized, might have hidden dimensions, and he quickly revised the mis-information in his next letter:

As usual, I find I have been too presumptuous in writing offhand about cats' tails. On enquiring, I learn that there are often, born of the same mother, Izumo kittens with short tails, and kittens with long tails. This would show that two distinct species of cats exist here. The long-tailed kittens are always deprived when possible of the larger

part of their caudal appendage. The short tails are spared. If an old cat be seen with a short tail, people say – “this cat is old, but she has a short tail: therefore she is a good cat.” (For the obake cat gets two tails when old, and every wicked cat has a long tail.) I am told that at the recent bon, in Matsue, cats of the evil sort were seen to dance upon the roofs of the houses. (XIV 162)

Chamberlain, in the third edition of *Things Japanese* (John Murray 1898), states that the Japanese strongly prefer short-tailed cats, for “should a litter chance to be born with one long-tailed kitten, somebody will generally take it upon himself to chop the tail off to a respectable shortness”(77). This predilection, he adds, “has doubtless been augmented by the snake-like aspect of a normal cat’s tail when waved from side to side, and by the superstition that there exist cats furnished with one or several long tails, and possessing the power of bewitching human beings after the manner of foxes and badgers”(77). How much of this information was actually owing to Hearn is uncertain, but the probability of at least indirect influence appears to be high. By the third edition, Chamberlain would surely have seen Hearn’s humorous summation of Izumo cat-lore in “In a Japanese Garden”:

For the natural tendency of cats is to become goblins; and this tendency to metamorphosis can be checked only by cutting off their tails in kittenhood. Cats are magicians . . . and have power of making corpses dance. Cats are ungrateful. “Feed a dog for three days,” says a Japanese proverb, “and he will remember your kindness for three years; feed a cat for three years and she will forget your kindness in three days.” Cats are mischievous: they tear the mattings, and make holes in the shoji, and sharpen their claws upon the pillars of the tokonoma. Cats are under a curse: only the cat and the venomous serpent wept not at the death of the Buddha.... For all these reasons, and others too numerous to relate, cats are not much loved in Izumo, and are compelled to pass the greater part of their lives out of doors. (*Glimpses* 369)

In the same essay, Hearn also tells of a stray cat that used to poach in his garden, “a gaunt outlaw, a master thief, which I have made sundry vain attempts to reclaim from bondage” (*Glimpses* 368). This particular cat was considered a “goblin cat” since it was “immoral”(a thief) and possessed a long tail. Apparently Hearn had tried to keep a cat in Matsue but had to get rid of it: “The creature proved too mischievous, and wanted always to eat my uguisu”(XIV 159) says a letter dated August 1891. Two and a half years later (February 1894), Hearn wrote to Chamberlain that he had still not discovered a Japanese cat to his liking: “I have not yet been able to find a civilized cat. There must be some, but they are very rare. Shyness and treachery characterize most of them”(XVI 123). Was Hearn exaggerating, or had even the kitten that Setsu had rescued and brought with them to their new house turned out to be “uncivilized”?

Other cat-lore that Hearn had discovered in Matsue concerned the “primitive” superstition that cats on a boat protected it from sea ghosts (“O-bake”) that reach up and pull people under. This was because cats can, he learned, control the dead: “If a cat be left alone with a corpse, will not the corpse arise and dance?” (*Glimpses* 509). The deft use of a rhetorical question here implies that Japanese sailors consider the preposterous notion basic common sense. The cat-lore continues:

And of all cats, a mike-neko, or cat of three colors, is most prized on this account by sailors. But if they cannot obtain one, – and cats of three colors are rare, – they will take another kind of cat; and nearly every trading junk has a cat; and when the junk comes into port, its cat may generally be seen, – peeping through some little window in the vessel’s side, or squatting in the opening where the great rudder works, – that is, if the weather be fair and the sea still. (509)

Notice how Hearn ends with two markedly visual cat portraits, much like the sketches that appear in the notebooks of Kazuo’s reminiscences. He seems to think that cats, however interesting their folklore, are best enjoyed by observing them, even when they are motionless, in whatever circumstances they place themselves. Here he allows a touch of the cute in his feline description, but he usually did not think of full-grown cats in this way. To Hearn, cats were often interesting rather than pretty; diabolical rather than angelic; sly rather than affectionate. They had multiple quasi-magical attributes that placed them alongside badgers, foxes, and goblins in the Japanese pantheon of creatures to be wary of.

3. Works about Cats

There are three Hearn pieces that focus primarily on cats: the first two, “Taxing Cats” and “The Little Red Kitten,” appeared within a few months of each other in the *New Orleans Item* of 1879; the other, “Pathological,” was published in *Kotto* in 1902.⁵ Each treats cats differently, but together they deepen our insight into Hearn’s emotional make-up.

“Taxing Cats,” a seldom anthologized satire from Hearn’s early years in New Orleans, surely ranks as one of his finest journalistic achievements. Based on a satire that appeared in the *New York Times* some ten days earlier (February 28, 1879), Hearn takes the same basic premise, a city proposal to impose a levy on keeping a cat, applies it to New Orleans, and raises it to a higher level. Combining fact with hearsay, Hearn’s spoof is a masterpiece of tone, satirizing cats, dogs, humans, and city governments alike in a way that is thoroughly amusing but never cruel. Here is a sample that holds its own even against T.S. Eliot’s poetic masterpiece, *Old Possum’s Book of Practical Cats*:

A cat appears to possess a goblin gift of ubiquity. It may seem to be in a dozen different houses at the same time, and yet when looked for it generally becomes invisible. It always comes when it is not wanted; and when wanted no human being can find it. A dog is apt to rush blindly and furiously upon the first tax collector that makes his appearance at the door; a cat is certain to disappear at the same moment. (*Buying Christmas Toys and Other Essays* 45-46)

Enforcing a tax on cats, Hearn argues, necessitates the ability to capture the creatures in cases of non-payment. This, he continues, is certainly financially ruinous, for “even if possible the expense attending the capture of one good healthy cat would pay a collector’s salary for three months” (46). At an average cost of \$100 per cat, enforcing a tax on the estimated 200,000 cats in the city of New Orleans would cost the city some \$20 million.

But expense is not the only detriment. To insure its safety, he says, the cat cleverly chooses to make itself agreeable only to women, for they alone offer truly dependable protection:

It seldom attempts to attach itself to any human being of the sterner sex – excepting of course, with its teeth and toe-nails. You may possibly persuade it by bribery to permit you to stroke its satin dress; but after it has been gratified it will pay no more attention to you. Its affections are only for sale to men; and the degree of the affection is proportioned to the degree of the bribe. Now here is the best evidence of the cunning of the cat. It attaches itself warmly to woman, and generally succeeds in winning her affections. This done, it feels comparatively safer from all danger. The affection of a woman for a cat is an adamant barrier against which the impunity, determination, or brutality of the tax collectors must remain null and void; and every cat or kitten in the city of New Orleans has a woman for a friend, and a good friend, too. Some are young and some are old; some are comely and some homely, – but all are equally well able to defend cats against the wicked greed of tax-gatherers. (47)

Not only does Hearn claim that cats prefer women, but he himself seems to have preferred female cats. In his two other pieces about them, all the cats – weak or strong, young or old, good or bad – are female. Why? First, let us look at a piece he wrote around six months after “Taxing Cats” called “The Little Red Kitten” (*Item*, September 24, 1879), one his best so-called “Fantastics” or short, strange, and sometimes excessively maudlin pieces of fiction.

“The Little Red Kitten” is Hearn’s only treatment of cats that is pure fiction. Its protagonist is a funny-looking kitten, a tiny red lion with “enormous ears” and a crazy diet of “beefsteak and cockroaches, caterpillars and fish, chicken and butterflies, mosquito-hawks and roast mutton, hash and tumble-bugs, beetles and pigs’ feet, crabs and spiders, moths and poached eggs, oysters and earthworms, ham and mice, rats and rice pudding” (II 220). On this diet, Hearn writes, the kitten became the strongest cat in the neighborhood and took under its protective shield a weak, pretty female kitten that was being mercilessly bullied every night. They become inseparable, like a mother and child, sleeping, hunting, and even stealing together. This touch of mischievous tendencies triggers the main turn of the story: One day the red kitten tried to steal a crab from someone’s dinner plate and was put in a closet for the duration of the meal. Meanwhile, the other kitten was accidentally killed when she “unfortunately wandered under a rocking-chair violently agitated by a heavy gentleman who was reading the ‘Bee’” (a rival New Orleans newspaper). Everyone was sorry about it, but the matter was far from closed. When the red kitten was finally allowed out of the closet, she searched in vain for her

companion, “never supposing in its innocent mind that a little speckled body was lying far away upon a heap of garbage and ashes”(221).

From this point, Hearn tries to see the world through the cat’s mind, to think with her thoughts: “It had never seen the great world which rumbled beyond the archway of the old courtyard; perhaps its little sister had wandered out there. So it would go and seek her”(222). However, the world outside proves to be overwhelming in its size, indifference, and hostility. She sees “miles of houses,” countless people, and instinctively fears the “great wicked dogs which murder kittens.”

In spite of her fears, the kitten continues on her search. What eventually does her in, however, is the pitiless indifference of the place to a poor, insignificant little thing like her. Tired and hungry, she meows for help, but in vain. No one notices or cares. Suddenly a fire engine comes speeding down the street, followed by a throng of people running after it. The kitten tries to flee, “but its poor little brain was so confused and there was so much noise and shouting.... Next morning two little bodies lay side by side on the ashes – miles away from the old Creole house. The little tawny kitten had found its speckled sister”(222-23).

Hearn knew this blatant elicitation of pathos was not the benchmark of great literature, but it accomplished his immediate purpose: adding variety to the paper’s offerings to increase circulation. One can almost hear the readers crying, “How cute” or “How sad,” at the appropriate times, as Hearn had intended. The mature Hearn, however, regarded the entire series of “Fantastics” as an embarrassment, as relics of his stylistic immaturity and journalistic youth.

Approximately 18 years later and a world away, Hearn returned to the topic of feline behavior in “Pathological” (*Kotto*, 1898). This time, however, he makes it plain that he is writing about a real cat, named Tama, with a real psychological trauma to deal with: a stillborn litter. His themes are motherhood and memory. At the start of the piece, Tama is asleep beside Hearn, and it is the “soft trilling coo” she utters for her missing kittens that triggers the essay. Unlike “The Little Red Kitten,” the tone is decidedly less humorous and more factual, with Hearn happy to interject what he knows (and has pointed out elsewhere) about Japanese cat superstition. He explains that Tama is a three-colored-cat, an uncommon breed thought to bring good luck and to scare away rats and goblins. Because Tama is more graceful and thinner than most other cats, he even thinks she might have “foreign blood in her veins,” perhaps from a cat on a Dutch or Spanish ship that visited Japan long ago. In habits, however, Tama seems perfectly Japanese: for one thing, Hearn exclaims, “She eats rice!” – a diet that he himself could not sustain.

Tama had come to the Hearn household about two years earlier, a tiny, tortoise-shell kitten, and had since given birth to two litters. With her first litter, Hearn says she was “an excellent mother – devoting all her strength and intelligence to the care of her little ones” (137). It is not what she ate, but what she found for her kittens to play with, that provides Hearn with an opportunity to list: In addition to her tail, she brought her kittens “not only rats and mice, but also frogs, lizards, a bat, and one day a small lamprey.... And one night she brought in ... a big straw sandal for her kittens to play with.” He imagines her carrying it over a tall fence, up the wall of the house, through the kitchen roof, and through the window bars to the stairway, where she and her kittens played with it all night long. “Never was cat more fortunate in her first maternal experience than Tama” (138).

The second experience, however, was as unhappy as the first was happy. Hearn speculates that one night while she was out, some wicked person had abused her. “She came back to us stupid and sick; and her kittens were born dead” (138). As the loss of those kittens continues to trouble her, Hearn introduces his second theme, the nature of animal memory. Her memory of things in her present life is “mercifully brief,” “strangely weak and dim.” But her inherited memory, described by Hearn as the accumulated experience of countless former lives, is “superhumanly vivid,” containing virtually flawless, instinctive knowledge of parenting, of natural enemies, of herbs, of strategies for hunting and fighting. The interaction of these two types of memory has produced in Tama what Hearn terms a poignantly pathological condition. Its description ends the piece:

Tama could not clearly remember that her kittens were dead. She knew that she ought to have had kittens; and she looked everywhere and called everywhere for them, long after they had been buried in the garden. She complained a great deal to her friends; and she made me open all the cupboards and closets – over and over again – to prove to her that the kittens were not in the house. At last she was able to convince herself that it was useless to look for them any more. But she plays with them in dreams, and coos to them, and catches for them small

shadowy things – perhaps even brings to them, through some dim window of memory, a sandal of ghostly straw.... (139)

That Hearn in “Pathological” chose to focus on this particular aspect of his cat perhaps conceals a wish that his own mother had similarly mourned her loss of him after she returned to Greece without him. He was, after all, one of her “lost” offspring, along with his brothers. In light of these biographical facts, Tama may be seen as a surrogate for his mother, and this piece is Hearn’s subconscious expression of a long-held wish that she had missed him terribly and had perhaps even become “pathological” from the thought of never being able to see him again. Tama, however, can also be viewed as a surrogate for Hearn himself: without possessing even a photograph of her face, Lafcadio’s mother existed for him only through a “dim window of memory,” and in his dreams of laughing and playing with her once again.

Although “The Little Red Kitten” and “Pathological” are both cat stories, they differ in several ways: One was written in America, the other in Japan; one is a highly romanticized, maudlin work of fiction, the other a non-fictional attempt at animal psychoanalysis; one is about young sisterhood, the other about motherhood. Nonetheless, they do have certain suggestive points in common: Both are about female cats in caretaker roles, mother figures looking after child figures. Both portray the depth and endurance of animal love. Both depict the heroic ideal as a combination of strength, tenderness, and loyalty. Both explore the nature of memory and the anguish of coping with inexplicable loss. Both depict the tragic consequences of human cruelty in the context of a large, powerful, and uncaring world. Every cat in both stories, older or younger, is an innocent female victim of blind, human insensitivity.

In relating Hearn’s kindness to a kitten she had just rescued, Setsu makes an observation that virtually identifies him with the victimized cats in these stories:

It may sound strange for me to say this, but Hearn was an utterly honest man. He did not have an evil thought in his head. I could even say he was more tender and kind than a woman. However, as he had been tormented and made to cry by malicious people since his childhood, his stubbornness and keen sensitivity were surprising. (‘Reminiscences,’ trans. by Hasegawa Yoji in *A Walk in Kumamoto* 6-7)

Only an extremely tender, kind, femininely sensitive man such as Hearn, who had been “made to cry by malicious people” in his childhood, could have written these cat stories with such sympathy and understanding of their imagined feelings. Only a man who had personally suffered from society’s cruelty to the weak, the small, the infirm, the different, the helpless, the poor, the foreign, the friendless, and the motherless – all of which he himself had experienced at one time or another – could have, or perhaps more importantly, would have written these cat tales.

To sum up, then, Hearn’s imaginative use of cats in his writing seems to have been as surrogates for his mother and himself, and the roles of cats in his works suggest a clear analogy to his own core demons and psychic wounds: the incessant longing of a child for his mother, a mother whom he desperately wanted to meet but could not, at least not in this life; feelings of ambivalence toward a mother who loved him but nevertheless could not protect him from a cruel, brutal world where strength ruled and the weak were easily victimized. It should be noted, however, that the cats Hearn depicts in the role of protector of the weak are never blamed for their failure; they try their best, heroically but in vain, against overwhelming odds.

Hearn, then, related to cats on several levels. On the most superficial level, he felt that they were simply good companions, especially to a fundamentally solitary soul like himself. On a deeper level, he considered them fascinating creatures whose behavior was interesting and instructional to observe. Their actions sometimes furnished him with material for “cross-species” speculation and its human counterpart, “cross-cultural” speculation. However, on another level, he found in feline behavior analogies to his own life’s enduringly painful personal tragedies, and these prompted him to literary creation. Through his pieces on cats, Hearn gave expression, consciously or not, to some of the deepest, most traumatic experiences of his life.

Notes

¹ Anecdote recorded by Elizabeth Bisland Wetmore in her introduction to the Letters (*Writings* XIII 61-62). According to Bisland, Hearn shot at the man four times. How she knows this information is not clear.

- 2 A similar example of Hearn's firm belief in the inalterability of hereditary hard-wiring appears when he confesses to Chamberlain that he had had to break his diet of Japanese food only and gorge on beef, fowl, sausage, etc., in order to regain his health: "I am very much ashamed! But the fault is neither mine nor that of the Japanese: it is the fault of my ancestors – the ferocious, wolfish hereditary instincts and tendencies of boreal mankind. The sins of the father, etc." (XIV 133-34).
- 3 Some readers may be curious to know if Hearn spoke to the cat in Japanese or in English. The elementary level of his conversational ability in Japanese suggests that he probably spoke to the cat in English and later explained it to Setsu in their private version of the Japanese language that they playfully referred to as the "Hearnian dialect."
- 4 Hearn had earlier evicted from his home a kurumaya from Matsue who, like Tama, had betrayed Hearn's kindness and trust, or so Hearn felt: "I had bought him clothes and given him altogether fourteen yen and fifty sen, besides his board and lodging – including five yen to go back with. But he had squandered his little money... I could not help him anymore: for his cunningness and foolishness together made it impossible to keep him a day longer in the house" (Letter to Nishida, December 1891, XIV 178) .
- 5 Another work, "The Boy Who Drew Cats," appeared in 1898, but despite their appearance in the title, cats are not the focus of the story. At the end, the boy's cat drawings appear to have come alive and destroyed an enormous rat-like monster, thus saving the boy's life. But as the story is fundamentally about the boy, not the cats, I do not discuss it here.

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