

## A Short Article about Cats

For some reason or other, the Cheshire cat made famous by Lewis Carroll's **Alice in Wonderland** has become a favorite image in the popular imagination. Actually such an animal exists in real life and is known as the British short cat, pictures of which can be found online. Should you pick one out at random, easily you can see the comparison<sup>1</sup>. It has a unique smile which embodies the enigmatic character of cats in general. That, in essence, is what this article is about. As for Carroll's version, the Cheshire cat can be interpreted as a guiding spirit for Alice because it directs her toward the March Hare's house. From there the mad tea party eventually leads her to her final destination, the garden. All these details, of course, are well known by aficionados of the book as well as through cinematic versions.

Not unlike most people, I had only cursory knowledge of **Alice in Wonderland**. In other words, it was superficial and nothing more except a short story for children. Then I decided to give it a go in preparation for this article. Like most people, over the years I had seen excerpts from various films, etc, but haven't read the original text. To my delight, the original comes off better than expected because it leaves more to your imagination. Such is the major advantage over a cinematic presentation. When I started reading the book (it took only 3 days), I did so with a certain unease because I felt obliged to plow through something which otherwise I would never have bothered with. However, this self-imposed obligation created its own advantage. It becomes a kind of discipline for reading a text I would otherwise never have picked up. Instead, I would have consulted Wikipedia or something similar. That would provide cursory information minus the full-bodied experience.

And so a less than enthusiastic read carried me through to the part that had personal interest, the Cheshire cat. He's famous for appearing and disappearing which I saw as a take-off point to set down some ideas about cats. Actually I was surprised at the few times this creature appeared in the book. I had the preconceived idea it would be far more and admittedly was disappointed. Hence another personal prejudice bit the dust. Yet for most people the cat remains the most popular character in the book. And so the biggest take-away from **Alice in Wonderland**? People can read into it pretty much what they want and come up with all sorts of fanciful ideas. Perhaps an attraction to this open-endedness of the book has something to do with the article at hand. Yes, the book is the best medium. Besides being the original, it allows you to pause and insert your own ideas into the text.

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1 There's a stone carving of such a cat in an old country church familiar to Carroll, this too being online.

As for the Cheshire cat itself, most images are somewhat disconcerting whether they be from movies, cartoons or pictures including the cutesified ones. Obviously each artist has his own interpretation. In some images the cat borders upon evil while in others, especially those geared for children, it's more cuddly though admittedly not much. The whole goal is to create enough menace, albeit watered down, to keep a young mind on edge. Even the British short hair cat itself can be unsettling by reason of its famous grin. The grin, of course, is everything. Always we find the cat perched on a tree branch with its face fading in and out of existence or after the body has disappeared. That contributes to it being ghost-like. Most representations have the cat with rings around its fairly chubby body which serve to enhance the teeth, often saw-like and sharp. They resemble a buzz-saw poised to rev-up and rip you apart. Just as threatening are the sharp ears which in the real-life breed are relatively small. This makes the face appear larger than usual. With regard to its color, the renditions I've seen vary but usually they settle upon purple or gray, this being enhanced by the usually dark background.

And so the Cheshire is just as spooky as it is whimsical. Because of this dual character it lodges in your brain and becomes difficult to evict, like some kind of ornery, even malevolent, spirit. Such is one reason why this image has had and continues to have an enduring influence. Whether present or not, full-bodied or just the disembodied face, the cat is watching every movement you make even when you're occupied with something else. Supposedly ghosts behave like this. They have the capacity of being present as well as absent. Regardless, always the Cheshire cat is lurking in the background. It's present when grinning at you and absent when fading away, leaving the grin only, not the eyes as we'd suspect. Certainly that image is bound to lodge in your head.

The grin is a disconcerting reminder, a warning of sorts that never are you alone. "Haunting" might come close, but that implies possession by something evil. However, things can get tricky here. We may have an impulse to designate the Cheshire cat as representative of some malevolent spirit by reason of its appearance. We're held back, however, by the fact that the cat is no threat, for it engages Alice in conversation. Some may say that evil spirits do the same in preparation to steal one's soul. And so this eliminates the Cheshire cat as being explicitly evil, and we have to be aware of going in that direction. It's easy to see why though such a predisposition is wrong. As far as the story goes, the cat does nothing harmful to Alice. In fact, she has no problem relating to it. This is an admirable trait throughout the book, for Alice doesn't shy away confronting the various characters nor does she cower before them. Perhaps the Cheshire cat recognized that right from the start before she was aware of him. Should she run into serious trouble as with the queen who wanted to behead everybody who disagreed with her, the cat would rush to intervene.

The Cheshire cat seems to egg Alice on, making her question herself, even her sanity. While all the characters in the book are rushing about, its honesty stands out. The cat is the only one capable of admitting the truth of a topsy-turvy environment: “We’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.” Surely you wouldn’t wish to argue with the certainty of such a creature. It has the distinct advantage of recognizing the true nature of this weird environment. Although the cat may fade out, you never know if and when it will appear with those saw-like teeth and sharply pointed ears. As for the dialogue pertaining to the madness in which Alice finds herself enmeshed, it’s worth quoting in full:

*“In that direction,” the Cat said, waving its right paw round, “lives a Hatter: and in that direction,” waving the other paw, “lives a March Hare. Visit either you like: they’re both mad.”*

*“But I don’t want to go among mad people,” Alice remarked.*

*“Oh, you can’t help that,” said the Cat: “we’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.”*

*“How do you know I’m mad?” said Alice.*

*“You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have come here.”*

*Alice didn’t think that proved it at all; however, she went on “And how do you know that you’re mad?”*

*“To begin with,” said the Cat, “a dog’s not mad. You grant that?”*

*“I suppose so,” said Alice.*

*“Well, then,” the Cat went on, “you see, a dog growls when it’s angry, and wags its tail when it’s pleased. Now I growl when I’m pleased, and wag my tail when I’m angry. Therefore I’m mad.”*

This seems pretty much like nonsense, but it’s nonsense stated eloquently. We’re left in a state of confusion yet somehow feel we’re in the presence of a truth which is difficult to grasp. Such confusion is reminiscent of *aporia*,<sup>1</sup> a tool employed by Socrates to put those with whom he’s speaking into a state of puzzlement or confusion. He does this, borrowing the Cheshire cat’s claim of madness, not to keep his interlocutors in the dark but that they may on their own recognize their ignorance. When Socrates finishes, easily we can imagine

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1 As for *aporia*, it’s comprised of the noun *poros*, a means of passing such as over a river. Tack onto it the alpha privative and you have literally no means of crossing a flowing body of water. You’re stuck on one side as you gaze longingly across the water at the other side where you’d rather be.

him like the Cheshire cat fading away on a branch leaving just his smile or rather, his toothy grin. In fact, Socrates' reputed ugliness—a fat, round face with bulging eyes—isn't far off the mark here. Like the Cheshire cat, we can hear him echoing the cat perched above as he famously claims to be a frog on a log overlooking the Aegean Sea, “We're all mad here. I'm mad. You're mad.” In other words, recognize your madness and move on to resolving it. Such is Socrates' role as a midwife.

As for Socrates' listeners, they are not unlike the characters toward the end of Carroll's book where the queen is running around demanding everyone's head. Here the whole assembly collapses at the same time when Alice has regained her full height and exclaims “You're nothing but a pack of cards!” Immediately afterwards she finds herself laying on the lap of his sister. We can presume that her beloved Dinah is there as well though there's no mention of her. From now on, every time Alice looks at her pet cat, she can't but be reminded of her Cheshire companion, wondering how he is doing in that mad environment. Hopefully some of his spirit had transferred over into Dinah.

Thus *aporia* is a one-on-one dialogue between real persons and all their human flaws. This is fertile ground for Socrates who takes great delight in overturning their dearly held assumptions about life. He just can't resist pinning them down (more like a verbal body slam) with no place to go. In such a situation a person has no other choice. He's forced to suspend any and all judgments. While pinned down, all one can do is watch the Cheshire cat's grin (i.e., that of Socrates) fade in or fade out. This is laid out admirably in the speech of Diotima in Plato's **Symposium** where two documents on this home page discuss the matter.<sup>1</sup>

According to the book, Alice was very fond of her real cat named Dinah, very different from the one she encountered on her adventure. This cannot help but lead to considering cats in general which have a definite mystique...presence...about them. The population is pretty much divided evenly: either love them or hate them. The same goes for dogs. As for other animals such as birds, they form a much smaller group and aren't counted here. So when we hear about this division between cat and dog lovers, it says something about the human character. As for the former (to which I belong and admittedly am prejudiced) a cat is famously independent, that being a common mis-perception. True, they don't fawn

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1. However, permit me to add a kind of sidebar, albeit with no direct bearing on the subject matter. It has to do with the real-life protagonist of Alice in Carroll's story, daughter of Henry Liddell, co-author of the still used famous Greek-English Lexicon. This has been updated throughout the years, and a late edition is sitting on my desk right now, a real necessity. Thus Alice represents a certain attachment to this lexicon which I use on a daily basis. I can almost feel her presence (and that of the Cheshire cat along with Dinah) in that book. I mention it because being aware of a secondary, even insignificant matter, can turn out in its own way to be just as important as any other which may be more direct.

all over you like dogs. Perhaps those who like dogs enjoy being the center of attention. If they can't get it from people, why not dogs?

As for cats, respect for its independence is key to our relating to them. We do this by kind of ignoring them to see what happens. "Kind of" (apart from its annoying current usage) is the key, for it suggests a disinterested type of attention which borders on being half attentive and half not. By doing this you're behaving the same way a cat does. If you favor such indirect attention in the presence of a cat, never interfering it what it may be doing, you're pretty much guaranteed to get its attention. You might say that the cat is testing you to see if you qualify for friendship or not. As for a dog person, don't bother. It isn't in your DNA. In fact, this half of the population would look down on you.

Now we're getting closer to the heart of cat-ness. Most of the time a cat displays a diffused type of attention where it seems focused neither here nor there. When neither occupied nor sleeping, a cat just sits there, slightly turning its head this way and that without seeming to zero in on a particular object. It will do the same even when you pat its head. Yet as soon as a cat spots something unusual, it snaps out of this inattention. The sudden contrast between an animal being completely at ease and turning into a focused predator has a way of making some people uneasy. They don't expect a fluffy little thing to morph all at once into a killing machine (which essentially it is). From there it's one small step to demonize a cat as history tells us. At the same time we know that the ancient Egyptians worshiped cats. I'm not sure about the details, but the Egyptians took our fascination with them to a wholly different level. Apparently the same applies to China where many people claim cats can see things humans cannot. Perhaps that's behind images or statues of cats in Chinese restaurants. Thus throughout the ages people have had a love-hate relationship with them which doesn't seem to apply to dogs.

All this may be reading too much into the Cheshire cat, the original take-off point of this article. However, this fictional beast gives us a certain license to be mad, hence the scattered observations offered here. Cats inhabit an in-between world which we can mistaken as in between light and darkness, hence their demonization as just noted. Besides, cats are small and vulnerable, easy targets. This is enhanced by their preference for night when they go a-hunting. Any cuteness on display during daylight hours vanishes, especially when we see those large bright eyes staring out at us from within a bush. Here a real cat bears its closest resemblance to the fictional one. Part of this may be attributed to both being quite neurotic. Unfortunately I can't recall off hand a recent study which had pointed this out.

When a cat lover observes his pet on the prowl, he can't help but wonder if he were four inches tall and confronted by his beloved pet. Would such a beloved cat eat that person? A

recent article from some researchers in Scotland—and I forgot the exact source but recall it was from that country—claimed that a cat would gobble up its master without hesitation. More accurately, the cat would play with (another word for torture) its owner just as it would with any other small animal that happened to fall in its claws. Such a prospect can be disconcerting. As for dogs, the question doesn't arise though some doubts may remain. According to popular perception, a dog is either 100% for you or 100% against you. Great, but for some reason this seems less than attractive, especially from a cat person's perspective.

Cats don't seem to wander far afield. They are always close by, walking near a wall or the like, never in the open. Also they're always alone, never with other cats. Instead, they head for the nearest bush or elevated location, lurking out of sight in order to do their favorite thing, hunting. Because they are so quiet, we don't hear them approaching, yet another disconcerting characteristic. This can startle us when suddenly we find one right beside us, nice and cute or at least behaving this way in our presence. A non-cat lover would claim it's simply interested in getting something from us such as food. A dog might do the same but often displays a slobberish loyalty which a lot of people seem to like.

Cats are fond of sleeping away a good part of their existence. All in all, they are no bother to have around, are very clean and generally quiet with the exception of crying out at each other, never in a friendly manner. Nevertheless, their inherent quietness can be disconcerting for some folks who'd rather have a dog near them with its wagging tail, a sign of its unswerving loyalty. Easily you can detect a dog approaching even if it didn't have the usual chain around its neck. This is exactly opposite of those who have cats and are fully aware of their independence. Instead of bemoaning it, they take it for granted. In fact, it's their main draw. Being in the presence of a cat (sleeping or awake) creates a certain aura both reassuring and mysterious. When it gets purring, what could be a more comforting sound? One thing is for sure, the atmosphere is different if a cat is in the vicinity. You know you're in the presence of a being which can detect things beyond your grasp. Some would claim this a supernatural power, but that's reading into it too much. Nevertheless, the satisfaction we feel is undeniable.

Overall, a cat offers a unique sense of presence. We may be at a loss for words to describe it, but sure enough, there's nothing like it. No other animal creates such an atmosphere around it. Whether a cat is sleeping, eating or just hanging around, you feel different...more secure and at home wouldn't be off the mark. This isn't a projection on our part but something quite palpable. A dog lacks it completely. Despite their intelligence, in a way they're completely dumb. The question is, if we hang around cats sufficiently long enough, can this aura rub off on us? In other words, can we move through life cat-like? I suspect this is what a lot of cat lovers wish for. Perhaps this has something to do with the

Broadway musical *Cats* though I'm unfamiliar with it except being based on a children's book by T. S. Eliot..

As for imitating a cat, first and foremost is knowing when to withdraw and when to be present. Actually that's what some people don't like about them. Unfriendly, untamed, aloof are the most common adjectives thrown out. All are projections of ourselves. We know this, and to put them forward is natural enough for us humans. You can observe a cat's alteration between the tactics of withdrawal and advancing in its saucer eyes, ever cautious as it makes its way either outdoors or around the house. It will either acknowledge you or ignore any cutesy words you offer. However, pay close attention to a cat's whiskers. They play an important role enabling the cat to navigate around a given area because of their sensitivity to air currents. This makes them ever attuned to the slightest movement as well as vibration. Apparently whiskers function more like radar, perceiving things in the vicinity which other senses don't pick up. The knowledge of the environment a cat receives this way is beyond our comprehension which suggests that a cat can pick up knowledge not so much by processing information but by being present to a given situation, pure and simple. So if there's any imitation of a cat, one that we can approximate, is this sensitivity garnered through its whiskers.

This account of a cat's attributes is based on the almost universal assumption that it's endowed with some mysterious power we humans lack and wish to acquire. Also our tendency to associate them with the supernatural reveals a darker side of human nature, one which we're reluctant to acknowledge. So when we watch a cat going about its business, we can see how much it reveals of ourselves. We can use it as an impetus to access what lies deep within us and thus be more fully present to reality. Cats in real life lack this capacity, of course, but their seemingly impenetrable way of going about (stalking may be a better way to put it) life is highly suggestive. A dog simply doesn't have this ability. So we can ponder a cat's behavior without getting bored even if what we behold defies any attempts at clarification.

So this article began with the Cheshire cat in **Alice in Wonderland** and morphed into Socrates and then onto cats in general, quite a transition. Somehow I find all three connected and felt a desire to put down some thoughts in that regard. On top of it, modern society is so in-your-face that if the Cheshire cat and Socrates were present, they'd be having a blast. Perhaps they are right now, the cat on a branch and Socrates on his log by the Aegean Sea. Although Alice is fortunate to wake up from her underground adventure, somehow the Cheshire cat tags along with her, having escaped that final collapse of all the characters like a house of cards. For that reason we can assume that never again did she look at her faithful Dinah as she had done before. It will now be a silent companion enabling Alice to view with wisdom human behavior in all its folly. And at the end of the

book we see the queen running about as she frantically demands the heads of everybody. Some current pundits have noted that she bears a striking resemblance to a prominent politician. That may be true in virtually every era, hence the timeless nature of Carroll's book. So with the Cheshire cat now assuming the identity of Dinah, Alice can offer striking observations on the current political situation. She can fade in and out at will, taking delight in telling everyone that so many people are outright crazy. However, she doesn't do it in a denigrating way. That would be stooping as low as the ones she's targeting.

Craziness itself isn't the problem. Refusing to admit it is. This is fine theoretically speaking. As for practical application, the way cats comport themselves can offer us a lesson in how to do it by the traits they exhibit which have been outlined briefly. Imitating them one-on-one isn't desirable in itself. However, the way they lurk in the background and move stealthily is something we can imitate and use to our advantage. If this is perceived as subversive or even more extremely, as evil, so be it. That's the problem of someone else, not ours. Using a rather broad, admittedly prejudiced brush, such persons who make that claim are more akin to the opposite of cats as already outlined. Obviously this means dogs. They behave in a straight-forward manner and lack a genuine sense of mystery. Such is how so many people behave. They go about like faithful dogs yet don't know how to access the mystery within. How to actually do this is up to each and everyone of us.

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