

How were adapted the poems from the book "*Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*" by T.S.Eliot, to the musical "*Cats*" by Andrew Lloyd Webber.

FROM THE BOOK TO THE STAGE



<http://www.catsthemusical.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/tseliot.png>

Subject: Poesía inglesa de los siglos XX y XXI / **Group:** A / **Lecturer:** Miguel Teruel Pozas. **Student:** Carmen Cócera Hernández

1. INTRODUCTION:

It may sound strange and surprising how a serious and prestigious author who rose to fame by poems like *The Waste Land* and received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1948 for his great contribution to modern poetry, could write poems about cats; but T.S.Eliot did it. As a great lover of cats he was, he used to write letters and poems about his cat to his godson Thomas Faber and also to his friends during the 1930s. The poems have an ironic and sarcastic air; they are completely humorous, an aspect so far not known of the author since they have nothing to do with the most dramatic and intellectual stage of his life during his marriage to Vivienne Haigh-Wood. In 1939, these poems were collected into a book called *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* and published. The book starts with a poem which describes the three different names that a cat must have; after that, every poem talks about the different features and characteristics of a series of certain cats that live in a commune where they are known by the "*Jellicles*". The book was popular especially among children; and the composer of musical theatre, Andrew Lloyd Webber was one of these children who read it in his childhood. *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* was one of his favourite books so that as soon as he had the opportunity he decided to adapt some of T.S.Eliot's poems and to create songs that could be interpreted in a musical. In 1980, his songs were presented for the first time in the festival of Sydmonton; the widow of T.S.Eliot, Valerie was there and she was so amazed with the compositions that she gave him her permission to use them in a musical. The birth of "*Cats*" took place a year later, in 1981, in New London Theatre in the West End. Its originality to accompany verses recited with music, where almost there are no dialogues, and where all the dances share a unique scenery, a dump; without forgetting the fact that actors are dressed and made up as felines. All of this provoked that it was welcomed with great enthusiasm among the spectators and it reaped a worldwide fame that continues today. It is clear that we will never know the opinion of T.S.Eliot about bringing his poems about kittens on stage since he died in 1965, but what we do know is that some of his poems were written with the intention of being accompanied with music. For instance, he agreed that the composer Alan Rawsthorne created a specific music for six of his poems which would allow them to be recited with an orchestra.

2. ANALYSIS OF SOME OF THE POEMS BY T.S.ELIOT THAT WERE ADAPTED FOR THE MUSICAL “CATS”

Thirteen poems are those that have been adapted for the musical of which will be analyzed four: “*The Naming of Cats*”, “*Of The Aweful Battle of the Pokes and the Pollicles*”, “*The Song of the Jellicles*” and “*Rhapsody on a Windy Night*”. The choice of these poems is mainly due to their value when they are being introduced on stage, without them the main story would be meaningless.

2.1. THE NAMING OF CATS

The naming of cats is a difficult matter

It isn't just one of your holiday games

You may think at first I'm mad as a hatter

When I tell you a cat must have THREE DIFFERENT NAMES.

First of all, there's the name that the family use daily,

Such as Peter, Augustus, Alonzo or James,

Such as Victor or Jonathan, George or Bill Bailey

All of them sensible, everyday names.

There are fancier names if you think they sound sweeter,

Some for the gentlemen, some for the dames:

Such as Plato, Admetus, Electra, Demeter—

But all of them sensible everyday names.

But I tell you, a cat needs a name that's particular,

A name that's peculiar, and more dignified,

Else how can he keep up his tail perpendicular,

Or spread out his whiskers, or cherish his pride?

Of names of this kind, I can give you a quorum,

Such as Munkustrap, Quaxo or Coricopat,

Such as Bombalurina, or else Jellylorum —

Names that never belong to more than one cat

But above and beyond there's still one name left over,

And that is the name that you never will guess;

The name that no human research can discover —

But THE CAT HIMSELF KNOWS, and will never confess.

When you notice a cat in profound meditation,

The reason, I tell you, is always the same:

His mind is engaged in a rapt contemplation,

Of the thought, of the thought, of the thought of his name:

His ineffable, effable,

effanineffable

Deep and inscrutable singular Name.

The Naming of Cats is composed in anapaestic tetrameter, with variations. Regarding the literal meaning of the poem, it begins by explaining that there are a variety of names that a cat has. Exactly, they must have three different types of names although it may seem crazy, in fact, the author says: “*You may think at first I’m as mad as a hatter*”, because it is something important. This “*mad as a hatter*” is an allusion to the fantastic

book *“Alice in Wonderland”* we know that, because the Mad Hatter is one of the most important characters of the Lewis Carroll’s book. The expression *“mad as a hatter”*, that means being completely mad, appeared for the first time in 1835 when some hatters started to use mercury in the manufacturing of hats. It was discovered lately that a long exposition of mercury could provoke poisoning which could affect the mood in a bad way, for instance: it could generate aggressiveness. We also can say that the author is using a simile which is contained in the expression because he is comparing himself with a hatter. Then, he describes and lists the types of names that cats used; some of these names refer to philosophers of ancient Greece and mythological gods among others. But if we focus on reading between the lines, we can see that cats are personified and therefore we can be identified with them because we feel that they are treated like people. Those names are actually the name by which we are born, the name by which we know others as a nickname and the last one is for which we would like to be known or remembered but only we know it and nobody can guess. But how the poem is transmitted in the musical *Cats*? In the musical the poem is recited in unison by all the actors who playing the different cats that appear in the poems of T.S.Eliot. All of them are in front of the stage and they are using a hypnotic and melodious voice, at the same time they respect the rhythm of the poem. The only change from the original version is the end of the poem, in the musical the actors repeat the word *“Name”* several times until they disappeared from the stage while other cat is going on. This addition is necessary to introduce the dance of the Victoria’s cat in a natural way.

2.2. OF THE AWFUL BATTLE OF THE PEKES AND THE POLLICLES

T. S. Eliot, 1939

TOGETHER WITH SOME ACCOUNT

OF THE PARTICIPATION

OF THE PUGS AND THE POMS, AND THE

INTERVENTION OF THE GREAT RUMPUSCAT

The Pokes and the Pollicles, everyone knows,
Are proud and implacable passionate foes;
It is always the same, wherever one goes.
And the Pugs and the Poms, although most people say

That they do not like fighting, will often display
Every symptom of wanting to join in the fray.
And they

Bark bark bark bark
Bark bark BARK BARK
Until you can hear them all over the Park.

Now on the occasion of which I shall speak
Almost nothing had happened for nearly a week
(And that's a long time for a Pol or a Peke).
The big Police Dog was away from his beat -
I don't know the reason, but most people think
He'd slipped into the Bricklayer's Arms for a drink -
And no one at all was about on the street
When a Peke and a Pollicle happened to meet.
They did not advance, or exactly retreat,
But they glared at each other and scraped their hind feet,
And started to

Bark bark bark bark
Bark bark BARK BARK
Until you could hear them all over the Park.

Now the Peke, although people may say what they please,
Is no British Dog, but a Heathen Chinese.
And so all the Pekes, when they heard the uproar,
Some came to the window, some came to the door;
There were surely a dozen, more likely a score.
And together they started to grumble and wheeze
In their huffery-snuffery Heathen Chinese.
But a terrible din is what Pollicles like,
For your Pollicle Dog is a dour Yorkshire tyke,
And his braw Scottish cousins are snappers and biters,
And every dog-jack of them notable fighters;
And so they stepped out, with their pipers in order,
Playing When the Blue Bonnets Came Over the Border.
Then the Pugs and the Poms held no longer aloof,
But some from the balcony, some from the roof,
Joined in
To the din
With a

Bark bark bark bark
Bark bark BARK BARK
Until you could hear them all over the Park.

Now when these bold heroes together assembled,
The traffic all stopped, and the Underground trembled,
And some of the neighbours were so much afraid
That they started to ring up the Fire Brigade.
When suddenly, up from a small basement flat,
Why who should stalk out but the GREAT RUMPUSCAT.
His eyes were like fireballs fearfully blazing,
He gave a great yawn, and his jaws were amazing;

And when he looked out through the bars of the area,
You never saw anything fiercer or hairier.
And what with the glare of his eyes and his yawning,
The Pokes and the Pollicles quickly took warning.
He looked at the sky and he gave a great leap -
And they every last one of them scattered like sheep.

And when the Police Dog returned to his beat,
There wasn't a single one left in the street.

The poem, in which is used three-line rhymes, talks about the fight in the park of two dogs belonging to two different clans that of Pokes and the Pollicles. The dispute attracts more dogs filling the park a lot of barking. Finally, the great Rumpus Cat appears and intervenes in the fight thus ending the dispute. In the musical, the cats decide to organize a little performance which is about how the Rumpus Cat stopped the fight among dogs mentioned before. Rumpus Cat is a kind of superhero for the others. Here, the narrator is Munkustrap and with the other Jellicle Cats, which are dressed like dogs, entertain the Old Deuteronomy with the story. Munkustrap introduces the story adding something that does not appear in the poem:

“Jellicle Cats meet once a year
On the night we make the Jellicle Choice
And now that the Jellicle Leader is here,
Jellicle Cats can all rejoice!”

During the dialogue, the cats who play the Pollicles sing something that is also not in the poem:

“That my name is little Tom Pollicle
And you better not do it again!”

But in general, we can say that this poem does not suffer too many changes in comparison with others from which only an excerpt is shown or it is changed the third person plural for the second person plural and even the story telling in the past is told in the present such as in “*mungojerrie and rumpleteazer*”.

2.3. THE SONG OF THE JELLICLES

Jellicle Cats come out tonight,
Jellicle Cats come one come all:
The Jellicle Moon is shining bright—
Jellicles come to the Jellicle Ball.

Jellicle Cats are black and white,
Jellicle Cats are rather small;
Jellicle Cats are merry and bright,
And pleasant to hear when they caterwaul.
Jellicle Cats have cheerful faces,
Jellicle Cats have bright black eyes;
They like to practise their airs and graces
And wait for the Jellicle Moon to rise.

Jellicle Cats develop slowly,
Jellicle Cats are not too big;
Jellicle Cats are roly-poly,
They know how to dance a gavotte and a jig.
Until the Jellicle Moon appears
They make their toilette and take their repose:
Jellicles wash behind their ears,
Jellicles dry between their toes.

Jellicle Cats are white and black,
Jellicle Cats are of moderate size;
Jellicles jump like a jumping-jack,
Jellicle Cats have moonlit eyes.
They're quiet enough in the morning hours,
They're quiet enough in the afternoon,
Reserving their terpsichorean powers
To dance by the light of the Jellicle Moon.

Jellicle Cats are black and white,
Jellicle Cats (as I said) are small;
If it happens to be a stormy night
They will practise a caper or two in the hall.
If it happens the sun is shining bright
You would say they had nothing to do at all:
They are resting and saving themselves to be right
For the Jellicle Moon and the Jellicle Ball.

In this poem the reader will recognize that some of the cats behaviours described are not only characteristic of the felines but rather they have to do with human traits and attitudes. Moreover, the author uses a humorous tone when he seems to compare the cats with the upper strata of society:

“Jellicle Cats are black and white,
Jellicle Cats (as I said) are small;
If it happens to be a stormy night
They will practise a caper or two in the hall.
If it happens the sun is shining bright
You would say they had nothing to do at all:
They are resting and saving themselves to be right
For the Jellicle Moon and the Jellicle Ball.”

In the musical, the Jellicles are not only black and white, they possess different types of coat-patterns, but it is at night and if we compare with people, especially the wealthy when they went out during the night to assist to a ball, then many times they used to wear a black and white suit. Furthermore, the author says that they care about being safe before to go to the ball. In the 19th century as in the 20th century, it was very important among wealthy families to rest enough and to be healthy when a ball was close because it was their way to socialize with other important families.

As for the name “*Jellicles*”, it is mentioned for the first time in other poem of T.S.Elliot, which was unpublished, called “*Pollicle Dogs and Jellicle Cats*”. This poem was written in a letter to his godson Thomas Faber in his fourth birthday, and it was compiled in a book with other letters many years later. The book was edited by Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden. His title is “*The Letters of T. S. Eliot Volume 5: 1930-1931*”. Here follows the transcription of the letter:

FABER & FABER
Limited
PUBLISHERS

24 RUSSELL SQUARE
LONDON, W.C.1

Easter 1931.

Dear Tom,

I believe that you are to have a Birthday soon, and I think that you will then be Four Years Old (I am not Clever at Arithmetic) but that is a Great Age, so I thought we might send out this

INVITATION
TO ALL POLLICLE DOGS & JELLICLE CATS
TO COME TO THE BIRTHDAY OF
THOMAS FABER.

Pollicle Dogs and Jellicle Cats!
Come from your Kennels & Houses & Flats;
Pollicle Dogs & Cats, draw near;
Jellicle Cats & Dogs, Appear;
Come with your Ears & your Whiskers & Tails
Over the Mountains & Valleys of Wales.
This is your ONLY CHANCE THIS YEAR,
Your ONLY CHANCE to - what do you spouse? -
Brush Up your Coats and Turn out your Toes,
And come with a Hop & a Skip & a Dance -
Because, for this year, it's your ONLY CHANCE
To come with your Whiskers & Tails & Hair on
To
Ty Glyn Aeron
Ciliau Aeron -
Because your are INVITED to Come
With a Flute & a Fife & a Fiddle & Drum,
With a Fiddle, a Fife, & a Drum & a Tabor (A Musicle Instrument that makes a Joyful Noise)
To the Birthday Party of
THOMAS ERLE FABER!

Oh But P.S. we mustn't send out this Invitation after All, Because, if ALL the Pollicle Dogs & Jellicle Cats came (and of course they would come) then all the roads would be blocked up, and what's more, they would track Muddy Feet into the House, and your Mother wouldn't Like that at All, and what's More Still, you would have to give them All a Piece of your Birthday Cake, and there would be so Many that there wouldn't be any Cake left for you, and that would be Dreadful, so we won't send out this Invitation, so no more for the Present from your

Silly Uncle

Tom.

Finally, Elliot found his inspiration in the letter and wrote "*The song of the Jellicles*". In *Cats*, a chorus sings only a fragment of the poem at the beginning of the story but before the emergence of Grizabella who sings "*Memory*", the poem is sung completely. The only changes that the poem suffers are related to the possessive pronouns instead of saying "their", the actors say "ours".

2.4. RHAPSODY ON A WINDY NIGHT

Twelve o'clock.
Along the reaches of the street
Held in a lunar synthesis,
Whispering lunar incantations
Dissolve the floors of memory
And all its clear relations,
Its divisions and precisions,
Every street lamp that I pass
Beats like a fatalistic drum,
And through the spaces of the dark
Midnight shakes the memory
As a madman shakes a dead geranium.

Half-past one,
The street lamp sputtered,
The street lamp muttered,
The street lamp said, "Regard that woman
Who hesitates towards you in the light of the door
Which opens on her like a grin.
You see the border of her dress
Is torn and stained with sand,
And you see the corner of her eye
Twists like a crooked pin."

The memory throws up high and dry
A crowd of twisted things;
A twisted branch upon the beach
Eaten smooth, and polished
As if the world gave up
The secret of its skeleton,
Stiff and white.
A broken spring in a factory yard,
Rust that clings to the form that the strength has left
Hard and curled and ready to snap.

Half-past two,
The street lamp said,
"Remark the cat which flattens itself in the gutter,
Slips out its tongue
And devours a morsel of rancid butter."
So the hand of a child, automatic,
Slipped out and pocketed a toy that was running along the quay.
I could see nothing behind that child's eye.
I have seen eyes in the street
Trying to peer through lighted shutters,
And a crab one afternoon in a pool,
An old crab with barnacles on his back,
Gripped the end of a stick which I held him.

Half-past three,

The lamp sputtered,
The lamp muttered in the dark.

The lamp hummed:
"Regard the moon,
La lune ne garde aucune rancune,
She winks a feeble eye,
She smiles into corners.
She smoothes the hair of the grass.
The moon has lost her memory.
A washed-out smallpox cracks her face,
Her hand twists a paper rose,
That smells of dust and old Cologne,
She is alone
With all the old nocturnal smells
That cross and cross across her brain."
The reminiscence comes
Of sunless dry geraniums
And dust in crevices,
Smells of chestnuts in the streets,
And female smells in shuttered rooms,
And cigarettes in corridors
And cocktail smells in bars."

The lamp said,
"Four o'clock,
Here is the number on the door.
Memory!
You have the key,
The little lamp spreads a ring on the stair,
Mount.
The bed is open; the tooth-brush hangs on the wall,
Put your shoes at the door, sleep, prepare for life."

The last twist of the knife.

"Rhapsody on a Windy Night" was published in 1917 in the book *"Prufrock and Other Observations."* It was one of the first poems of T.S.Eliot. The poem is about a young man who is walking alone in the middle of the night through the deserted streets accompanied only by the dim moonlight and their thoughts, back home. The vision of the streetlights, while he is walking, will make him evoke a series of memories which are confused and disorganized like in a lunatic mind. To create that sense of sordid and miserable life that is shared with the reader through fragmented images; Eliot was inspired by the French Symbolists and on the novel by Charles-Louis Philippe, *"Babu Montparnasse"* (1898). It is also based on a musical idea; if we pay attention to the title,

we can observe how the first word is "*rhapsody*" which in music is referred to an instrumental composition.

The aim of Eliot was to evoke the passing of time as if it was something horrible, lonely and full of memories that cannot be changed, almost like in a nightmare. In this nightmare appears the memory of a woman. In the musical, that woman is Grizabella whose name in turn is taken from another poem unpublished that Eliot wrote to his godson. It was titled "*Grizabella the Glamour Cat*". At first he wanted to include the poem about Grizabella to the finished version of "*Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*", but his widow Valerie considered it too sad for children; so, finally, it was not included. However, when in 1980 Valerie Eliot went to the concert of Andrew Lloyd Webber in Sydmonon, she thought that, the fragment about Grizabella could be included in the plot of the show; for that reason she gave the fragment to Webber; and he included it. He created one of the most memorable characters in *Cats* and one of the most important because part of the plot revolves around her. At the end and after being rejected by all Jellicle Cats, as many years before, she left the tribe; Grizabella is chosen by Old Deuteronomy to ascend to The Heaviside Layer thus having a chance to live a new Jellicle life. The first time that a little fragment of the poem appears on stage is the first time that Grizabella appears and starts to sing:

"Remark the cat
Who hesitates toward you in the light of the door
Which opens on her like a grin.
You see the border of her coat
Is torn and stained with sand,
And you see the corner of her eye
Twists like a crooked pin."

However, the most important interpretation of Grizabella is when she sings "*Memory*", a song wrote by Trevor Nunn for *Cats*, it was created from the poem "*Rhapsody on a Windy Night*". Some of the phrases that were adapted for the song are as follows:

Original:

The moon has lost her memory
Every street lamp that I pass

Adaptation:

Has the moon lost her memory?
Every street lamp seems to

Beats like a fatalistic drum

beat a fatalistic warning

Memory!

All alone with the memory

Sleep, prepare for life

Look, a new day has begun

If we compare the poem with the song, it is clear that Grizabella is not only the remembrance of a "woman" with a bad reputation for the young man who is walking through the streets at midnight; she is who is walking alone, a solitary cat which is trying to go home. A cat which no one takes care about it; she is just a cat lost in her memory, in the days when she was glamorous and respected.

3. CONCLUSION:

To sum up, "*Old Possum's Book of practical Cats*" is a book that was written and published with a juvenile audience in mind and it is spectacular how Andrew Lloyd Webber and Trevor Nunn have managed to bring the poems to the stage masterfully, turning the work of Eliot not only in a children's book but in a story for all public where the metaphysical components such as death, time and love that Eliot shaped with great ingenuity in his poems, not only in the "*Old Possum's Book*", but in many others, is reflected in "*Cats*" with an ineffable grace and beauty that touches the heart of those who do not hold dear the cats, and therefore they prefer dogs more.

One of the models for T.S.Eliot to follow in his work was Dante and it can be seen part of the essence of the "*Divine Comedy*" in "*Cats*". Webber presents us with an ascent to heaven using a term that Eliot used in one of his own family reunions the "Heavyside Layer". Thereby, if we go further, I dare to say that both Webber and Nunn introduced to evil (Satan) and the good (Christ) on one side, in the figure of Macavity, a rogue cat who kidnaps Old Deuteronomy and leaves everyone cats subjected to darkness by cutting the light; on the other hand, in Mr. Mistoffelees who saves the community to restore the Old Deuteronomy.

As I said before, the story revolves around an ascent, one of the cats will be chosen to go to the "Heavyside Layer"; and that's where the children's play of Eliot and the comedy of Webber takes a dramatic turn that appears with the character of Grizabella, a

miserable cat who lives with memories and who is worthy of compassion which she receives at the end. I can only say that, only a group of real "Cataholics" could create something so extraordinary and with so much respect for the author's work.

Although, the *Old Possum* (the nickname that Eliot used amongst his friends such as Ezra Pound) died fifteen years before "*Cats*" hits the stage, we can feel that his work and his name is alive every time that we watch the musical.

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