

Devils, demons, familiars, friends: Toward a semiotics of literary cats.

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## Devils, Demons, Familiars, Friends: Toward a Semiotics of Literary Cats

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### Abstract

This article traces the portrayal of cats in folklore and literature from ancient Egypt to the present. Cats have always been popular nonhuman characters in all kinds of stories, and their attraction must be ascribed to their enigmatic nature, reflected in the various beliefs and prejudices. Cats are portrayed in a vast spectrum of roles, from nature stories, where they are endowed with minimal human intellect and emotions, to fully anthropomorphized figures. A subtle balance of these two polarities produces the most fascinating results. While many folktales and stories feature cats as ingenious helpers to protagonists, a few contemporary authors have employed cats as complex human characters in disguise.

MARIA NIKOLAJEVA

## Devils, Demons, Familiars, Friends: Toward a Semiotics of Literary Cats

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.  
—T. S. Eliot, "The Naming of Cats"

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In this famous poem T. S. Eliot captures the very essence of human perception of the feline: its enigmatic nature. As known from myth and folklore, possession of a name gives power over its bearer, and the cat's ability to conceal its true name is indeed prominent in many narratives. Cats have always fascinated storytellers, verse makers, painters, and great writers; apart from Eliot, also Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Baudelaire, Doris Lessing, and Mikhail Bulgakov. The most exhaustive study of cats in folklore, everyday life, literature, and art is perhaps Carl van Vechten's *The Tiger in the House*, first published in 1920. Without even attempting to be comprehensive, in this article I will illustrate the various uses and functions of feline characters by a discussion of some famous and less-known literary cats. These characters are employed for various purposes and play more or less prominent roles in the narratives, from peripheral figures used as decorative details to protagonists and plot engines. Their portrayal depends on the view of cats at different historical periods, from divine in ancient Egypt to evil during the Middle Ages in Europe, from enigmatic and exotic to sweet and friendly. Their nature reflects feline as well as human traits, and the most challenging images combine the two. Although no clear chronological development can be traced, and many contemporary stories still

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