ABSTRACT

FEMALE FELINE METAPHORS IN VICTORIAN NOVELS

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The Victorian era witnessed pivotal transformations, with a notable shift towards institutionalizing the care of domestic pets. A crucial milestone in this evolution was the enactment of the 1835 Protection of Animals Act. This legislative measure played a central role in influencing societal perspectives on animal treatment, representing a significant stride towards acknowledging and safeguarding the welfare of animals.

Throughout the Victorian epoch, treating cats and other animals varied widely depending on socio-economic factors, cultural attitudes, and individual beliefs. However, the Victorian era changed how some people viewed and treated their pets, including cats. A cat had actively earned for herself a higher position, ‘[s]he has wound her subtle way into our confidence and twined herself round our affections to such a degree that her usefulness as a servant is merged into her value as a fireside friend’ [1].

Cats were frequently used as symbols in Victorian literature. They could represent various qualities, such as mystery, independence, or unpredictability. Authors used these symbolic representations to enhance the themes and messages of their works. Victorian texts ‘speak to the centrality of the domestic pet to negotiations of gender, power, and sexuality within the home that both reify and challenge the imaginary structure known as the natural family in the Victorian period’ [2].

Using feline metaphors to describe female characters in Victorian literature was a standard literary device. Cats were often employed as symbolic representations of various traits and characteristics associated with women. Some of the critical characteristics represented by feline metaphors in describing female characters include:

1. Innocence, naivety. An example of this metaphor is the repeated comparison of childishly naive, incapable of profound feelings, dreamy Hetty with a kitten:

   ‘[...] this kitten-like Hetty, who till a few months ago had never felt any other grief than that of envying Mary Burge a new ribbon’ [3].

   It is a beauty like that of kittens, or very small downy ducks making gentle rippling noises with their soft bills, or babies just beginning to toddle and to engage in conscious mischief - a beauty with which you can never be angry [3].
2. Elegance and Grace:

[...] it was like the contrast between a rough, dark, overgrown puppy and a white kitten [4].

Her movements had the supple softness, the velvet grace of a kitten [5].

I could walk the matted floor as softly as a cat [6].

Behold madame, in shawl, wrapping-gown and slippers, softly descending the steps, and stealing like a cat round the garden [5].

3. Playfulness:

[...] those kitten-like glances and movements are just what one wants to make one's hearth a paradise [3].

[...] she put up her round cheek against his, like a kitten [3].

She was like a kitten, and had the same distractingly pretty looks [3].

4. Independence and Self-Reliance.

These qualities, which are traditionally symbolized by the image of a cat in European culture, are characteristic of late Victorian heroines:

Her play with young Crossjay resembled a return of the lady to the cat [7].

She fled at him like a cat [8].

In Thomas Hardy's work, the heroine's comparison to a cat is employed in an unconventional context. This technique serves to create not only a visual but also a tactile image of the heroine:

Having been lying down in her clothes she was warm as a sunned cat [9].

Metaphors employing the terms "tigress" and "lioness" symbolize the intensity of emotions and the absence of restraint:

'There's a tigress!' exclaimed Mrs. Linton, setting her free [10].

[...] her eyes flashing like the eyes of a young lioness [4].

In conclusion, using feline metaphors in Victorian literature provides a rich and nuanced means of conveying various qualities and characteristics associated with female characters. The authors harness the symbolism embedded in these metaphors, delving into themes of innocence, sensuality, independence, and emotional intensity. Feline metaphors contribute to the visual representation of characters and establish tactile and emotional dimensions, offering readers a multifaceted understanding of the women portrayed.

References: