

**On Cats, Journeys, and Homes. Feline Portraits in Two Japanese Novels:
Hiraide Takashi's *Neko no Kyaku* (*The Guest Cat*) and Arikawa Hiro's
Tabineko Ripōto (*The Travelling Cat Chronicles*)**

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Abstract: *The aim of the present study is that of analyzing the depictions of cats in two contemporary Japanese novels, namely Hiraide Takashi's (b. 1950) 『猫の客』 (Neko no Kyaku) (first published in 2001; English title: The Guest Cat) and Arikawa Hiro's (b. 1972) 『旅猫レポート』 (Tabineko Ripōto) (first published in 2012; English title: The Travelling Cat Chronicles). I will first present the place of cats in Japanese culture and refer to their various representations in Japanese literature. Then I will investigate how the cat – which, in the case of the above-mentioned two novels, appears as either being on the road to another place or in a specific location – was portrayed in the literary works of Hiraide and Arikawa. In addition, I will take into consideration the human-feline relationships that are illustrated in them, which develop into intimate, spiritual ones, and explore the feline behavior as depicted in the presence of human beings.*

Keywords: *Hiraide Takashi, Arikawa Hiro, Japanese literature, cat, human-feline relationship, intimacy.*

Introduction

“A whole world, that of nature and that of animals, is filled with silence. Nature and animals seem like protuberances of silence” (110), wrote Picard in his work *The World of Silence*. Indeed, when one thinks about animals and their manifestations in one's everyday life, it seems that they act in a wordless way since they do not communicate their feelings or desires by means of terms and idioms used by people; as Steiner states, “Human beings have capitalized on the silence of animals, just as certain human beings have historically imposed silence on certain other human beings” (138). Yet the animal world is expressively rich in literature, especially through animal narrators, which gives human beings access to their inner realm. Interestingly, various cats become one of the objects of study in Mario Ortiz Robles' *Literature and Animal Studies*:

In this book, I take a figurative approach to classification by grouping the most commonly used animal tropes into literary taxa. ... Grouping together the different types of cats that make their way into literature,

the heading “Felids” addresses the otherness of the animal through the elusive and philosophical presence of cats. (24)

In this paper I will analyze the image of the cats that appear in two contemporary Japanese novels: Hiraide Takashi’s (b. 1950) 『猫の客』 *Neko no Kyaku* (Hiraide 2001) (*The Guest Cat*) and Arikawa Hiro’s (b. 1972) 『旅猫リポート』 *Tabineko Ripōto* (Arikawa 2012) (*The Travelling Cat Chronicles*). In order to do so, I will first refer to some representations of cats in Japanese literature. Then I will investigate how the cat – which, in the case of the above-mentioned two novels, appears as either being on the road to another place or in a specific location – was portrayed in the literary works that belong to Hiraide and Arikawa. In addition, I will take into consideration the human-feline relationships that are illustrated in them, which develop into intimate, spiritual ones, and explore the feline behavior as depicted in the presence of human beings.

Representations of cats in Japanese literature

In this section, I will briefly present six depictions of cats in Japanese literature in order to illustrate their relationships with humans and then focus on the previously mentioned novels.

The image of the cat is multifaceted in Japanese literature; for instance, Cucinelli’s study titled “Feline Shadows in the Rising Sun: Cultural Values of Cats in Pre-Modern Japan” (2013) offers numerous examples of works that depict cats and their relationship with people; interestingly, as Cucinelli notes with regard to the different aspects described in them,

[...] the Kyoto court literature has mainly celebrated the cat’s aesthetic qualities and its pet characteristics, in the literary production of the warrior society of the Kamakura period (1185-1333) a strong dreadful and ghostly component is associated with cats (440),

while

The main literary works of the Nara period (710-794) never mention cats, but we find traces of them in folklore: the Japanese fable refers widely to the feline, praising it as a shrewd predator, a funny animal and at times, a real killer who prevails over human beings. (436)

As can be observed, not only positive but also negative aspects were related to cats, which were illustrated in various ways: as pets (in which situation the owners’ emotions towards them may be described) or even as extremely dangerous animals.

Moreover, concerning the presence of cats in Japan, Sarah Archer writes that

it's generally believed that they first appeared in the 6th or 7th century on ships sailing from China. A popular version of this story holds that a mission from the Tang dynasty bringing Buddhist scripture to Japan also brought cats, who ably kept vermin away from the scrolls. (“Japan’s Lucky Cats 日本のラッキーキャッツ”)

One of the first records which present the human-feline relationship is the diary of Emperor Uda (866-931), the 59th emperor of Japan. In an entry called “For the Love of a Cat,” he wrote in his diary – titled 『寛平御記』 *Kanpyō Gyōki* (*Record of the Kanpyō Period* [889-898]) – that

My cat is a foot and a half in length and about six inches in height. When he curls up he is very small, looking like a black millet berry, but when he stretches out he is long, resembling a drawn bow. The pupils of his eyes sparkle, dazzlingly bright like shiny needles flashing with light, while the points of his ears stick straight up, unwaveringly, looking like the bowl of a spoon. When he crouches he becomes a ball without feet, resembling a round jade taken from the depths of a cave. My cat moves silently, making not a single sound, like a black dragon above the clouds. [...]

The former emperor enjoyed the cat for several days and then gave him to me. I have cared for him now for five years. Every morning I give him milk gruel. It is not simply that I am impressed by the cat’s many talents; I have felt particularly keen to lavish the utmost care upon him, however insignificant such a creature may really be, because he was given to me by the former emperor. (Rabinovitch, Minegishi 8)

As can be noticed, there is a strong bond between the emperor and his cat; for example, he demonstrates his interest in the cat’s well-being by acknowledging his great care for his pet and by mentioning its dietary behaviour. In fact, the nutritional practice is only one part of their close relationship, being emphasized by his positive impressions concerning the cat’s moves and physical features, which are described in a detailed way.

Other renowned literary works in which cats are present are Sei Shōnagon’s 『枕草子』 *Makura no Sōshi* (*The Pillow Book*, late 10th century)

and Murasaki Shikibu's¹ 『源氏物語』 *Genji Monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*, early 11th century). Sei Shōnagon²'s book includes a record called “8. The Cat Who Lived in the Palace,” in which the author mentions the cat's high rank: “The cat who lived in the Palace had been awarded the headdress of nobility and was called Lady Myōbu” (30). In another record, she confesses her preferences as regards the chromatic register: “I like a cat whose back is black and all the rest white” (Sei 52). On the other hand, in *Genji Monogatari* another intimate human-feline relationship is illustrated, including different forms of communication – talking, feeding, touching, and meowing:

The cat lay close by him all night, and the first thing he did in the morning was to see to its wants, combing it and feeding it with his own hand. The most unsociable cat, when it finds itself wrapped up in some one's coat and put to sleep upon his bed – stroked, fed and tended with every imaginable care – soon ceases to stand upon its dignity; and when, a little later, Kashiwagi posted himself near the window, where he sat gazing vacantly before him, his new friend soon stole gently to his side and mewed several times as though in the tenderest sympathy. Such advances on the part of a cat are rare indeed, and smiling, he recited to the animal the following verse: “I love and am not loved. But you, who nestle daily in my dear one's arms – what need have you to moan?” He gazed into the cat's eyes as he spoke, and again it began mewling piteously, till he took it up into his lap ... (Murasaki 648)

This excerpt shows a different attitude towards the mentioned cat, who is treated not only as an animal but almost as a person by being interrogated “what need have you to moan?”. As Melson states,

Although dialogue with pets in some ways resembles talk to babies, the distinctive features of “petese” – a term I prefer to the canine-limited “doggerel” – reveal it as an affirmation of the bond between animal and human owner. (47)

Indeed, conversations with animals demonstrate the possibility of making oneself understood by the animal and of understanding the animal's inner world, which represents a form of becoming linguistically and

¹ Murasaki Shikibu 紫式部 (c. 973 - c. 1014/1025) was a Japanese writer and lady-in-waiting at the Imperial Court. She wrote 源氏物語 *Genji Monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*) and 紫式部日記 *Murasaki Shikibu Nikki* (*The Diary of Lady Murasaki*).

² Sei Shōnagon 清少納言 (c. 966–1017) was a Japanese writer and court lady. She wrote 枕草子 *Makura no sōshi* (*The Pillow Book*).

emotionally intimate with the other. Besides, the close relationship between the man called Kashiwagi and the cat is illustrated by the various forms of touching, which may be indirect, realized by means of a distinct object, such as combing, an act which suggests the aesthetic dimension - the cat is perceived as a beautiful presence -, or direct, such as feeding the animal with one's own hand.

In 『更級日記』 *Sarashina Nikki* (*The Sarashina Diary*, ~1060), Sugawara no Takasue no Musume depicts the following episode, which covers the deep attachment between humans and cats:

I was startled to see an incredibly charming cat. When I was looking around to see where it had come from, my elder sister said, “Hush, don't let anyone know. It is such a lovely cat, let's keep it as a pet,” and so we did. The cat got very used to us and would lie down right beside us. Since we wondered if someone might come looking for it, we hid it from the others and did not let it go at all to the servants' quarters. It stayed right with us all the time, and if something unclean was put in front of it to eat, it would turn its head away and refuse to eat it. (118, 120)

This record captures the physical proximity as a form of emotional closeness. The cat, which appears in one of the dreams of the author's sister, and says that it is the reincarnation of “the daughter of the provisional major counselor” (Sugawara no Takasue no Musume 120), intimately belongs to the two sisters, since they hide it in order to ensure its continuous presence. By putting it out of sight, they establish a private relationship with the cat and transform it into their own, secret pet animal.

Coming closer to the 20th century, one discovers Natsume Sōseki's (1867-1916) novel 『吾輩は猫である』 *Wagahai wa Neko de Aru* (*I Am a Cat*; written from 1905 through 1906), in which the Japanese society during the Meiji era (1868-1912) is criticized. Starting with the words “I AM A CAT. As yet I have no name” (Natsume 21), the feline narrator presents its observations of its owner Mr. Kushami (Mr. Sneaze), and his acquaintances' lives, considering itself superior. As Fujii notes, “The narrating-cat signifies the absence of temporality in a work from which genealogical links to the past have been erased” (564). What is more, the nameless cat acknowledges the difficulties encountered in comprehending the human mind:

There is nothing more difficult than understanding human mentality. My master's present mental state is very far from clear; is he feeling angry or lighthearted, or simply seeking solace in the scribblings of some dead philosopher? One just can't tell whether he's mocking the world or yearning to be accepted into its frivolous company, whether

he is getting furious over some piddling little matter or holding himself aloof from worldly things. Compared with such complexities, cats are truly simple. If we want to eat, we eat; if we want to sleep, we sleep; when we are angry, we are angry utterly; when we cry, we cry with all the desperation of extreme commitment to our grief. Thus we never keep things like diaries. ... We live our diaries, and consequently have no need to keep a daily record as a means of maintaining our real characters. Had I the time to keep a diary, I'd use that time to better effect; sleeping on the veranda. (Natsume 61, 62)

The differences between the human, respectively the feline perspectives on life are clearly exposed, and the narrator accentuates the way felines live their lives in comparison with people. This excerpt, when compared to the previously presented ones, highlights the dissimilarities between humans and animals and determines the reader to reflect on the problems that may appear in the human-animal relationship, rather than suggesting the resemblances in attitude and feelings towards the animal, respectively towards the owner.

Another twentieth-century Japanese literary work that sketches the feline life belongs to Tanizaki Jun'ichirō (1886-1965), a writer who was influenced by Western literature³ – the novel 『猫と庄造と二人の女』 *Neko to Shōzō to futari no onna* (*A Cat, a Man, and Two Women*, first published in 1936), which presents the relationships between the male character Shōzō, the female characters Fukuko, his former wife, and Shinako, his actual wife, and his cat Lily, who is the only being that can understand Shōzō's emotional life:

Shozo was aware that both his mother and his wife treated him like a child, a rather backward child who would never be able to make it on his own; and he was very unhappy about it. But he had no friend he could air his grievances to; and as he was forced to keep them bottled up, he came to feel somehow lonely and helpless. This made his love for Lily all the greater. Those lonely feelings that neither Shinako nor Fukuko nor even his mother could understand – it was only Lily, with those sad eyes of hers, who could pierce through to them and offer comfort. And Shozo was sure that he was the only one who could read her sorrow, the unhappiness that the cat had deep within her but couldn't express directly to human beings. (Tanizaki 84)

³ “Regarding the influence of Western literature on *Tanizaki* (谷崎)'s writing, the most acclaimed authors seem to have been Edgar Allan Poe, Oscar Wilde, and Charles Baudelaire” (Gheorghe 174).

As can be observed, the cat is the only presence in Shōzō's life that truly comprehends his inner world, an aspect which is completed by the male character's understanding of the cat's feelings; what is indecipherable to the human mind is figured out by the feline who, on top of that, comforts him. The absence of verbal communication represents in this case no impediment for the human-feline pair, which possesses other internal resources that facilitate the dialogue.

Portrayal of cats in Hiraide Takashi's *Neko no Kyaku* (*The Guest Cat*) and Arikawa Hiro's *Tabineko Ripōto* (*The Travelling Cat Chronicles*)

The cat in Arikawa's literary work begins his story by borrowing the words used by Natsume's cat in the novel *I Am a Cat* – “*I AM A CAT. As yet, I have no name*. There's a famous cat in our country who once made this very statement” (Arikawa 2019: 3) –, thus establishing a parallel with Natsume's renowned writing. Additionally, in both works one remarks a comical way of presenting the negative aspects of human nature, though Arikawa's cat is not that acid. By employing a feline narrator who was once a stray cat and then adopted by the gentle cat lover Satoru, Arikawa's novel is characterized by “the playful or ironic deployment of the animal-talking genre” (Baker 126). Dissatisfied with his female name, Nana (lit. “seven”), the cat who was named so because of the form of his tail, confirms and reinforces his masculinity: “Isn't Nana a girl's name? I'm a fully fledged, hot-blooded male. In what universe does that make sense?” (Arikawa 2019: 11). After spending five years together, Satoru and Nana embark on a journey in a silver van to Satoru's friends and his aunt Noriko, who now live in other parts of Japan. Toward the end of the novel the reader discovers the reason for this very long trip: because of his owner's incurable disease, Nana has to be rehomed.

The novel demonstrates that the feline universe is not deprived of art and sensitivity; as Nana declares, he likes the music of Paul Mauriat, which makes him visualize the following image: “I could picture doves about to fly off, a happy vision from the feline perspective” (Arikawa 2019: 59). Nor is it deprived of good manners, which, as Nana says, are very important in the feline world. It seems that the feline universe resembles the human one in terms of understanding music and the precepts that regulate the interaction between individuals. Indeed, Arikawa's work illustrates an anthropomorphized cat, who seems to possess some human qualities and, moreover, shares strong feelings toward his owner; as Daston and Mitman state, “‘Anthropomorphism’ is the word used to describe the belief that animals are essentially like humans, and it is usually applied as a term of reproach, both intellectual and moral” (Daston, Mitman 2). Although he cannot express his thoughts through verbal communication, the cat becomes a true companion, who understands Satoru's feelings. They are the perfect pair both at home and on the journey and, as the

male character declares with regard to the feline, “‘But he’s quite gentle sometimes too, like Hachi. When I’m feeling depressed or down, he always snuggles up close . . .’” (Arikawa 2019: 38). Clearly enough, theirs is an interspecies relationship, which means that there are differences in approaches to life: while Nana is characterized by his instinct to hunt, his owner, who is influenced by his human side, rejects this activity. Still, the cat resembles a human by having emotions and by behaving like a human being, for example, he understands his owner’s negative feelings; on the other hand, the novel depicts Satoru as a human being who has perfectly comprehended the animal perspective, since, as Nana says, “he was such a good owner he had taken care of my needs first” (Arikawa 2019: 64). Both Nana and Satoru transcend the limits of their species, which implies that they are no more only human and animal, respectively; they have access to a superior understanding which is synonymous with a change in their perspective.

Alternatively, the cat in Hiraide’s novel – “a jewel of a cat” (Hiraide 2014: 11) – has an unclear position as regards her status for although she is the neighbours’ cat, Chibi often visits a childless couple:

In winter she came inside. Little by little, through the crack in the partially opened window, her tendency to visit subtly developed; her appearances were repeated until, as if a silken opening in a fabric had been continuously moistened and stretched, Chibi had entered our lives. (Hiraide 2014: 15)

She begins to belong to the couple as well, who treat her as if she were their own cat. As Lofgren writes, “The cat gives some semblance of meaning to their lives” (Lofgren 59). It can be said that Chibi becomes the center of their existence and even a source of vitality in view of the fact that after she unexpectedly disappears, “The garden just didn’t seem the same. It wasn’t our garden anymore. It had lost all its energy and spirit” (Hiraide 2014: 83). The feline, who has unique attributes – “there was no cat as otherworldly and mysterious as Chibi” (Hiraide 2014: 122) – creates a specific atmosphere and changes the life of the couple. She comes into their lives and brings pure joy, perhaps a not yet experienced form of joy, and dynamizes the economy of their lives. What is more, she may represent a new type of presence for the childless couple, determining the wife to experience maternal instincts for the first time in her life. Nevertheless, in spite of the emotional attachment, Chibi remains a “guest cat” – “‘Odd how you still refer to her as a ‘guest’ despite having become so attached’” (Hiraide 2014: 55), says the woman to her husband, considering Chibi as more than an occasional presence. Although she wishes the cat were theirs, she is aware that this is only a desire. The feline signifies here an interstitial being – neither their cat nor a strange one – who participates

in their individual histories. What is more, Chibi is offered a cardboard box that becomes her “special room” (Hiraide 2014: 35) and includes a towel and a dish, a bowl for milk being positioned beside. The cat seems to belong to the couple and becomes intimate with their house since she moves as she wants – “She would simply stroll through the house in a leisurely fashion” (Hiraide 2014: 32) –, sleeps in various positions and discovers her favorite for taking a nap – “When she began to sleep on the sofa ... a deep sense of happiness arrived, as if the house itself had dreamed this scene” (Hiraide 2014: 14), “Soon she began to sleep wherever she wished, in whatever position she liked” (Hiraide 2014: 32), and “The top shelf of the closet was her favorite place to sleep” (Hiraide 2014: 37), respectively. By doing so, the cat becomes almost a member of their family, feeling comfortable enough to take a nap in the new house and bringing joy to the couple.

The human-feline relationships in the two novels

As noted by John Butler, “Loving animals is one of the things that elevates human beings and endows them with a kind of nobility” (Butler). Indeed, by establishing a close relationship with animals, by loving their existence, humans almost treat animals as human beings; thus people do not behave themselves as superior beings and, what is more, contribute to changing the perception of human-animal relationships, which is characterized in this case by the presence of profound emotions. Animals are no longer used for material aspects – for instance, domestic security, protecting the household against harmful animals, or as a form of nutrition –, but they are part of a spiritual bond that embellishes human nature. For Truss, the above-mentioned love has a special quality: “Arikawa’s powerful emotional agenda, according to which a human’s love for his cat is not delusional but self-fulfilling”. Loving a cat means changing one’s perspective on life and one’s existence as well, and this is a common point with Hiraide’s literary work: “The cat gives some semblance of meaning to their lives, and its death parallels other deaths – the emperor in 1989, and their landlord – that affect the couple emotionally and concretely” (Lofgren 59). Not only the couple’s life, but also Satoru’s life is endowed with meaning: Chibi and Nana transform the three characters in that they bring a new meaning to their lives.

Additionally, for Nana, the cat in Arikawa’s novel, the journey represents a form of discovering the world around him and transcending his feline universe:

Until then, my life had been limited to the modest territory of Satoru’s apartment and a small area around it. A decent-sized territory for a cat, really, but pretty modest compared to the vastness of this world. (Arikawa 2019: 107)

Thus, one understands how enlightening the trip is for a non-human being. For him, the journey leads to extending the feline knowledge about the world – for example, he learns about new shades of red, he sees Mount Fuji, the sea, horses, deer, and old TVs, which are rather like boxes in comparison with the contemporary flat ones, and the northern island Hokkaidō: “Every time he saw trees through the window, Satoru would talk to me about them. ... For the rest of my life, I would remember all the shades of red Satoru mentioned that day” (Arikawa 2019: 175). Their friendship means spending quality time, during which the feline has the possibility of accessing the human perspective on the world. Besides, by being together during their journey, Nana and Satoru consolidate their already close relationship: Satoru visits Nana numerous times in the pet room on the ship, thinking that he may feel lonely; on top of that, neither the owner nor the male cat wants to part with each other after the trip; similarly, the fact that Nana does not remain in any of Satoru’s friends’ houses, but will further live with his gentle owner and, additionally, with Noriko, proves that for both of them, home means where the other is; interestingly, after leaving the house in order to be hospitalized, Satoru creates a home in the hospital by positioning a photograph with the cat next to his bed; what is more, as can be observed, home does not have to be something static, but can be something transitional like a journey as well, since they do enjoy their togetherness by discovering new sides of the other (for instance, the fact that Nana likes Mount Fuji, but not the sea) or by simply being together in the silver van, which, as the cat mentions, will never be the same, as in the times when driven by Satoru. Furthermore, their relationship becomes even more intimate, surpassing the sphere of life and entering the realm of death, since Satoru pays his respects at his parents’ grave in the presence of Nana, who also searches for flowers for the grave. Another important aspect of their bond is touch, which takes various forms: “Claws in and tucking my two front paws beneath my chest, I snuggled up on his knees, and he beamed at me and tickled under my chin with his fingertips” (Arikawa 2019: 181). As Donna Haraway notes,

My premise is that touch ramifies and shapes accountability. Accountability, caring for, being affected, and entering into responsibility are not ethical abstractions ... Touch does not make one small; it peppers its partners with attachment sites for world making. (36)

Touch is synonymous with caring and being cared for, coming into contact with another physical dimension, increasing the degree of intimacy; what Nana feels – “Satoru had big hands and I felt secure and calm whenever he held me” (Arikawa 2019: 169) or “I wanted to lie in his arms for ever”

(Arikawa 2019: 226) – is a sense of reliability; Satoru’s tenderness makes the male cat feel at home everywhere, as long as they are physically connected.

On the other hand, the relationship between Hiraide’s cat and the childless couple does not include more intimate activities such as holding the cat, a fact which demonstrates that the couple does not have a total dermal experience – “She never made a sound. Nor would she allow us to hold her. If you tried to hold her she would let out a barely audible *mew*, bite your hand softly, and then slip out of your arms” (Hiraide 2014: 32) –, but other forms of intimacy are illustrated:

... one night Chibi crept up behind me as I scrubbed away ... So when she came to visit, I made up an absurd little song, which I sang to her as I sat in the bathtub.

Chibi — hot spring

Chibi the cat, the bathhouse attendant

Rinse my back

Run away with your little hands (Hiraide 2014: 92)

By inviting the feline to do so, the woman gives Chibi access to her body, increasing the degree of familiarity and treating Chibi as a family member. Hiraide’s cat is not only a guest (and not the couple’s cat), but it exemplifies the living between spaces – the neighbours’ house and the couple’s house –, making it difficult to linguistically express her status; she negates limits but does not belong (to the couple):

Eating and sleeping as much as she liked, circulating freely between locales, it seemed as if the boundary between the two households had itself come into question. Even the words we used to talk about Chibi had become a mass of confusion: was her coming to our house a return – a homecoming – or was it the other way around? Was home really over there? The whole situation seemed to be in flux. Once, when we had been out for the day, we returned to find Chibi there in the dim light of the entrance to welcome us, seated properly, feet together on the raised wooden floor as if she were a young girl who had been left to care for the house while we were away. (Hiraide 2014: 59-60)

Concluding remarks

The cats in Arikawa and Hiraide’s literary works represent beings that create strong bonds with their owner and their neighbours, respectively – in Hiraide’s case, the childless couple. By meeting them, people either transcend their human nature, starting to acutely understand the feline world as Satoru does,

or have the possibility of building a relationship with an interstitial creature such as Chibi. Not only do human beings transcend their nature, but also the male cat Nana extends his knowledge on the surrounding world through his friendship with Satoru. What is more, both works present how profound and intimate human-feline relationships can become in some cases; in addition, intimacy is present in the form of dermal experiences – touch in the relationship between Nana and Satoru – and spatiality – Chibi sleeps where and how she wishes.

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