

WORKING WITH ELIOT

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THE NAMING OF CATS

BY
T. S. ELIOT

METRICAL ANALYSIS AND COMMENTS

BY
FERRICK GRAY

A NOTE TO THE READER

For those of whom do not already know, I am great admirer of T. S. Eliot. I rank him as the greatest poet, dramatist, critic and perhaps even philosopher of the twentieth century, and now. Many things have been written about him, some true, some not so true but that happens with great people. I do not agree with everything he has to say, but that does not mean he is right or I am wrong. There is a lot to do with personal opinion in many facets of poetry, drama, critique and philosophy. You may ask: Who would dare criticize one of the greats? It is easy to be critical, especially when the one you may criticize is no longer living, they have no chance to respond. However, I believe we are allowed to provided we are respectful. Let's face it, none of us are going to achieve what Eliot achieved living or dead. Admittedly, he would likely think some of this is a total waste of time, but nevertheless it is interesting, even if just for me.

THE METRICAL ANALYSIS OF: THE NAMING OF CATS

This metrical analysis of Eliot's **The Naming of Cats** demonstrates his keenness for traditional meter, but stepping away from the stricter iambic pentameter. We must also realize that this and other poems were written for children, so it is expected that the meter will reflect the mood of the poem. For convenience, I have split the poem into quatrains for analysis. For most in the original, lines were indented to follow the rime scheme.

VERSES 1-4

Thě Nāmíng | ǒf Cāts | ís ǎ díf | fícułt | máttěr
 Ít Isn't | júst ǒne | ǒf yǒur hǒl | ídǎy gāmes
 Yǒu māy | thínk ǎt fírst | Í'm ǎs mād | ǎs ǎ | háttěr
 Whěn Í tēll | yǒu ǎ cāt | múst háve THRĒĒ | DĪFFĒR | ĚNT NĀMES

What is noticeable is that line lengths are not consistent. The fact is that this is not an issue in such a poem. We also notice that the verse construction is not consistent. Again, not an issue. There is a wonderful smattering of anapests which are responsible for the distinctive rhythm. Amphibrachs, iambs and trochees add their touch to alter the rhythm of some verses.

Some may disagree with the scansion of verses 1 and 3 in which I have indicated a promoted metrical accent. If you read these lines carefully, there is a slight more emphasis at those points albeit very close to the preceding syllable.

VERSES 5-8

Fírst ǒf ǎll | thěre's thě nāme | thăt thě fām | ílǎ ūse | dǎílǎ
 Sūch ǎs | Pětěr | Āgūstūs | Ālǒnzǒ | ǒr Jāmes
 Sūch ǎs | Víctǒr ǒr | Jǒnǎthǎn | GĒorge ǒr BÍll | Bǎílǎy
 Āll ǒf thēm | sēnsíblĒ | ēverǎ | dǎy nāmes

Again the anapest makes its presence know, but so too the dactyl which occurs to amplify expression and also the names.

VERSES 9-12

Thēre āre | fānciēr | nāmes if yōu | thīnk thēy sōund | swēētēr
 Sōme fōr thē | gēntlēmēn | sōme fōr | thē dāmes
 Sūch ās | Plātō | Ādmētūs | Ēlēctrā | Dēmētēr
 Būt āll | ōf thēm | sēnsīblē | ēvery | dāy nāmes

Anapests and dactyls dominant these verses, but the amphibrach makes its presence known with some of the names.

VERSES 13-16

Būt Ī | tēll yōu | ā cāt nēeds | ā nāme thāt's | pārticulār
 Ā nāme | thāt's pē | cūliār | ānd mōre | dignīfied
 Ēlse hōw | cān hē kēep | ūp hīs tāil | pērpēn | dīcūlār
 Ōr sprēad ōut | hīs whīskērs | ōr chērīsh | hīs prīde

VERSES 17-20

Ōf nāmes | ōf thīs kīnd | Ī cān gīve | yōu ā | qūrūrūm
 Sūch ās | Mūnkūstrāp | Qūoxō | ōr Cōrī | ōpāt
 Sūch ās | Bōmbā | lūrīnā | ōr ēlse Jēl | lylōrūrūm
 Nāmes thāt | nēvēr | bēlōng | tō mōre | thān ōne cāt

Verses 13 to 20 are very typical of an iambic rhythm or what I may call a pentameter-pace. Notice the various metrical substitutions.

VERSES 21-24

Būt ābōve | ānd bēyōnd | thēre's stīll ōne | nāme lēft | ōvēr
 Ānd thāt | īs thē nāme | thāt yōu nēv | ēr wīll gūess
 Thē nāme thāt | nō hūmān | rēsēarch cān | dīscōvēr
 Būt THĒ CĀT | HĪMSĒLF KNŌWS | ānd wīll nēv | ēr cōnfēss

These verses illustrate more of the tetrameter characteristics with their rhythm. Again there are many metrical substitutions, mainly the anapest which gives these verses a pleasant sound.

VERSES 25-28

Whēn yōū nō | tīce ā cāt | īn prōfōund | mēdī | tātīōn
 Thē rēasōn | Ī tēll yōū | īs ālwāys | thē sāmē
 His mīnd īs | ēngāged | īn ā rāpt | cōntēm | plātīōn
 Ōf thē thōught | Ōf thē thōught | Ōf thē thōught | ōf hīs nāme

A similar pattern emerges from verses 13 to 28, mainly in terms of the anapest creating a melodic flow. The whole has become quite musical.

VERSES 29-31

His īn | ēffāblē | ēffāblē
 Ēffānīn | ēffāblē
 Dēep ānd īn | scrūtāblē | sīngū | lār Nāme

In these last three verses the dactyls take charge and give a much faster rhythm. Effanineffable is an interesting word, but I am sure that you can work that one out. A little naughty.

I have read in a rather poor review of this poem stating that it was a whimsical poem written in iambic tetrameter. I cannot even see how this would be possible (the iambic tetrameter) or why it is whimsical. They produced no reason for either statement. However, depending on your reading there may be four stronger speech stresses which at best you might say is tetrameter, but this would require the introduction of some very uncommon metrical substitutions which would make it very wrong. Many poems of this form will make use of dactyl, amphibrach and mostly anapestic feet which are valid substitutions for the iamb. The best you could say here is loose iambic pentameter as an iambic rhythm can be detected in some verses. The reason is from the three-syllable feet and metrical accent promotion or demotion which sits well with speech stress. Around ten verses possess the tetrameter rhythm, but most lean toward the pentameter with the occasional verse of lesser feet at the end. However, there is no requirement to classify an entire poem as being composed of regular, specific feet.

INTERESTING FACTS

- The Naming of Cats originally appeared in a letter to Eliot's godson Tom Faber dated January 7, 1936. View the [first page here](#), and the [second page here](#). The name Augustus does not appear in the original version of the letter at verse 6. The letter contains the verse:

Such as Victor, Alonzo, or Betty or James

- Note that Augustus is not the full name of Gus the Theatre Cat. His name was Asparagus.
- Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical Cats is based on Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats by Eliot. His wife Valerie, gave permission to change some poems for musical interpretation and to add others. [Listen to the cast](#) reciting The Naming of Cats. There is something quite eerie to it, and then [listen to Eliot](#) himself.
- Old Possum was Ezra Pound's nickname for Eliot.
- Eliot won Tony Awards for Best Book of a Musical and Best Musical Score (posthumous awards).