

THOMAS STEARNS ELLIOT • OLD POSSUM'S BOOK OF PRACTICAL CATS

THE AUTHOR

THOMAS STEARNS ELLIOT



Thomas Stearns Eliot (1888-1965) was born on 26 September 1888 in St Louis, Missouri where he lived during the first eighteen years of his life. He then attended Harvard University in Massachusetts. In 1910, he left the

United States for Paris, where he studied at the Sorbonne University. After a year in Paris, he returned to Harvard to pursue a doctorate in philosophy but returned to Europe and settled in England in 1914. It was in London that Eliot met the poet Ezra Pound, who recognised Eliot's poetic genius at once, and assisted him in the publication of his work in a number of magazines, especially *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* in *Poetry* in 1915, which immediately established him as a leading poet of that period. With the publication of *The Waste Land* in 1922, which was considered one of the most influential poetic works of the 20th century, Eliot's reputation began to grow to nearly mythic proportions; by 1930, and for the next thirty years, he was the most dominant figure in poetry and literary criticism in the English-speaking world. His major later poetry collections include *Ash Wednesday* (1930) and *Four Quartets* (1943); his books of literary and social criticism include *The Sacred Wood* (1920), *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933), *After Strange Gods* (1934), and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1940). Eliot was also an important playwright whose verse dramas include *Murder in the Cathedral*, *The Family Reunion*, and *The Cocktail Party*. T. S. Eliot received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1948. He died in London on January 4, 1965.

THE WORK

OLD POSSUM'S BOOK OF PRACTICAL CATS

Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats is a collection of light poetry about cats that Eliot had originally written for his **godchildren** in the 1930s. It consists of short verse profiles of 15 **lively** cats with **fanciful** names. The lyrics provided excellent material for conversion into songs, as the poet uses repeated catchy phrases, **steady** rhythm and **witty** rhymes. The poem *Macavity the Mystery Cat* is the best known of Eliot's *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, the only book Eliot wrote for young readers. T. S. Eliot loved the Sherlock Holmes stories by Arthur Conan Doyle and the character of Macavity is a literary allusion to Professor Moriarty, the criminal brain in the Sherlock series. It was Andrew Lloyd Webber's determination that took Eliot's creatures to the stage in 1981. Most of the lyrics in the musical *Cats* were taken from *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* with few alterations. Due to the rhythmic nature of Eliot's work, there had been previous **attempts** before the musical *Cats* at setting his poems to music, though none of these attempts had reached critical or commercial success.

CATS, THE MUSICAL

Cats was **staged** in London from 1981 to 2002 and on Broadway from 1982 to 2000. The music was written by Andrew Lloyd Webber, the lyrics were based on T.S. Eliot's book *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. Additional lyrics were written by Trevor Nunn and Richard Stilgoe. As well as the characters found in the book, *Cats* introduces several additional characters, most notably Grizabella. The musical was adapted into a film released on 20 December 2019.

attempt: tentativo
fanciful: fantasioso
godchild: figlioccio
junkyard: discarica
literacy: letterario
lively: vivace

playwright: scrittore di opere teatrali
to pursue: seguire
to settle: stabilirsi
staged: messo in scena
steady: fisso
witty: arguto

Cats is an anthology-style musical that takes place over the course of one night. The Jellicle cats (name probably coming from Eliot's young niece trying to pronounce "dear little cats") gather in a **junkyard** and introduce themselves in song, making the case for why each one is worthy to enter the Heaviside Layer, the cat equivalent of Heaven, to be reborn as a younger cat. The events are overseen by the kind Old

Deuteronomy, although the shadow of the criminal cat, Macavity, is always present. Each song is generally about a cat introducing itself, or a cat telling a story about its life. During the night, an old cat named Grizabella attempts to join the party several times but is rejected. After the cats have their moment in the spotlight, Deuteronomy decides that Grizabella deserves to ascend to the Heaviside Layer, and up she goes.

THE TEXT

MACAVITY, THE MISTERY CAT

1st stanza

Macavity's a Mystery Cat: he's called the Hidden Paw—
For he's the master criminal who can defy the Law.
He's the bafflement of Scotland Yard, the Flying Squad's despair:
For when they reach the scene of crime—
Macavity's not there!

2nd stanza

Macavity, Macavity, there's no one like Macavity,
He's broken every human law, he breaks the law of gravity.
His powers of levitation would make a fakir stare,
And when you reach the scene of crime—
Macavity's not there!
You may seek him in the basement, you may look up in the air—
But I tell you once and once again, Macavity's not there!

3rd stanza

Macavity's a ginger cat, he's very tall and thin;
You would know him if you saw him, for his eyes are sunken in.
His brow is deeply lined with thought, his head is highly domed;
His coat is dusty from neglect, his whiskers are uncombed.
He sways his head from side to side, with movements like a snake;
And when you think he's half asleep, he's always wide awake.

4th stanza

Macavity, Macavity, there's no one like Macavity,
For he's a fiend in feline shape, a monster of depravity.
You may meet him in a by-street, you may see him in the square—
But when a crime's discovered, then Macavity's not there!

Macavity un gatto misterioso, è chiamato la Zampa Nascosta
Perchè lui è un maestro del crimine che può sfidare la legge
E lo sconcerto di Scotland Yard, la disperazione della Squadra Mobile
Perché quando raggiungono la scena del crimine Macavity non è lì!

Macavity, Macavity, non c'è nessuno come Macavity
Ha rotto ogni legge umana, lui rompe la legge di gravità
I suoi poteri di levitazione farebbero sgranare gli occhi ad un fachiro
E quando si raggiunge la scena del crimine Macavity non c'è!
Si può cercarlo in cantina, si può guardare in aria
Ma io vi dico una volta e ancora una volta Macavity non è lì!

Macavity è un gatto fulvo, è molto alto e magro
Lo sapresti riconoscere se lo vedessi perché i suoi occhi sono infossati
La sua fronte è profondamente segnata dai pensieri, la sua testa è come un'alta cupola
Il suo pelo è polveroso da incuria, i suoi baffi sono spettinati
Dondola la testa da un lato all'altro con movimenti come un serpente
E quando pensi che sia mezzo addormentato, lui è sempre ben sveglio

Macavity, Macavity, non c'è nessuno come Macavity
È un demone in forma felina, un mostro di depravazione
Lo puoi incontrare in una stradina, lo puoi vedere in piazza
Ma quando si scopre un crimine, Macavity non c'è!

5th stanza

He's outwardly respectable. (They say he cheats at cards.)
 And his footprints are not found in any file of Scotland Yard's
 And when the larder's looted, or the jewel-case is rifled,
 Or when the milk is missing, or another Peke's been stifled,
 Or the greenhouse glass is broken, and the trellis past repair
 Ay, there's the wonder of the thing! Macavity's not there!

6th stanza

And when the Foreign Office find a Treaty's gone astray,
 Or the Admiralty lose some plans and drawings by the way,
 There may be a scrap of paper in the hall or on the stair-
 But it's useless to investigate—Macavity's not there!
 And when the loss has been disclosed, the Secret Service say:
 'It must have been Macavity!'—but he's a mile away.
 You'll be sure to find him resting, or a-licking of his thumb;
 Or engaged in doing complicated long division sums.

7th stanza

Macavity, Macavity, there's no one like Macavity,
 There never was a Cat of such deceitfulness and suavity.
 He always has an alibi, and one or two to spare:
 At whatever time the deed took place
 —MACAVITY WASN'T THERE!

8th stanza

And they say that all the Cats whose wicked deeds are widely known
 (I might mention Mungojerrie, I might mention Griddlebone)
 Are nothing more than agents for the Cat who all the time
 Just controls their operations: the Napoleon of Crime!

È esteriormente rispettabile, si dice che bari a carte
 E le sue impronte non si trovano in nessun documento di Scotland Yard
 E quando la dispensa è saccheggiata o il portagioielli è rigato
 O quando il latte manca o è stato soffocato un altro Pechinese
 O il vetro della serra è rotto e il pergolato non si può più aggiustare
 Ecco la meraviglia di tutto ciò: Macavity non c'è!

E quando l'Ufficio Esteri scopre che un trattato è andato smarrito
 O L'Ammiragliato perde dei piani e dei disegni lungo il percorso,
 Ci può essere un pezzo di carta nell'ingresso e sulla scala
 Ma è inutile investigare — Macavity non è là
 E quando la perdita viene scoperta, il Servizio Segreto dice:
 "Deve essere stato Macavity" — ma lui è lontano un miglio
 Lo troverai di sicuro mentre si riposa o si lecca una zampa
 O impegnato a fare lunghe e complicate operazioni.

Macavity, Macavity, non c'è nessuno come Macavity
 Non c'è mai stato un gatto di tale inganno e soavità
 Ha sempre un alibi e uno o due di riserva ogni volta che l'atto ha avuto luogo, Macavity non c'era!

E poi si dice che tutti i gatti le cui azioni malvagie sono ampiamente conosciute
 Potrei citare Mungojerrie, potrei citare Griddlebone
 Non sono altro che agenti per il gatto che per tutto il tempo
 controlla solo le operazioni: il Napoleone del crimine!

COMPREHENSION

1  Answer the questions.

1. What is Macavity's nickname (1st stanza)?
2. What law of physics can Macavity break (2nd stanza)?
3. What colour is Macavity (3rd stanza)?
4. How does the author define him in the fourth stanza?
5. Where can you meet Macavity (4th stanza)?
6. What kind of wicked actions could Macavity be accused of (5th stanza)?
7. Where can you find him instead (6th stanza)?
8. What well-known Investigative Agencies are named in the poem (1st and 6th stanza)?
9. Who are Mungojerrie and Griddlebone (8th stanza)?
10. What famous historical character is Macavity compared to (8th stanza)?

2  Read the poem again and complete the table with the physical features of Macavity.

Part of the body	Feature
1. General aspect
2. Eyes
3.	Deeply lined
4. Whiskers
5. Coat
6.	Highly domed

3  Write a description of Macavity using your own words.

ANALYSIS

4  Analyse the poem according to the given elements.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Type of poem 2. Speaker 3. Tone 4. Meaning and comments | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Structure 6. Examples of poetic techniques 7. Connections between the poem and the poet's life |
|---|---|

5  Read the poem aloud and find examples of:

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. rhyming pattern (AA, BB, CC) 2. repetition | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. simile 4. historical allusion. |
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DISCUSSION

6  **GROUP WORK** Surf the net to find more information about T.S. Eliot's work and the production on stage of the musical *Cats*. Then, think about the features of musicals and what types of literary works best fit such a genre.