

# Does That Cat Fascinate You? Here Is Why:

## The Prosodic Features of “Macavity: The Mystery Cat” by T.S. Eliot

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*Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* has long been ignored by T.S. Eliot's critics. Especially, little attention has been paid to the relationship between sound and sense. This paper analyzes one of Eliot's cat poems, “Macavity: The Mystery Cat.” By closely listening to the poem I explore the missing link between our aural impressions and the poem's semantic expressions. The prosodic analysis illustrates Eliot's brilliant sound technique. It suggests that the children's poetry composed by the remarkable poet needs to be carefully listened and physically voiced by the readers.

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### 1. Introduction

Every cat lover's heart would be captivated by Old Possum's invitation to the world of whimsical cats. *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* was first published in 1939. This book written by T.S. Eliot contains fourteen poems (later version added one more) and is known that the poems were originally composed for his godchildren. However, despite the poet's grand popularity, this book had experienced some degree of neglect from Eliot's critics. Hart's peculiar expression represents this alienation: “For years critics pooh-poohed *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats* as if it were—in the words of the Eliot scholar Burton Raffel—little more than ‘pleasant, inoffensive and unremarkable’ light or nonsense verse” (Hart 2012, 382). Campbell and Reesman (1986) note that “Discussions of Eliot's poetry either ignore *Practical Cats* or dismiss it as ‘just’ nonsense verse or children's poetry. [...] and it is hard for critics to see how *Practical Cats* fits in with Eliot's other work” (26). While these dismissals remain, several critics have accumulated their studies on the book addressing

a variety of topics and matters and also elaborating their arguments. Tinsley (1975) dug into Eliot's satiric aspect, Hodge (1978) argued religious matters, Kirk (1988) explored *practical cats*' music and dance, Linderman (1989) worked on ritualistic elements and Lambert (1990) closely studied Eliot's naming of cats. Hart (2012) tried to interpret the book reflecting upon Eliot's biography, especially focusing on his marriage life. Robbins (2013) studied Eliot's perspectives on British culture, society and geography to analyze his onomastic choices.

Yet, it should be mentioned that little attention has been paid to the prosodic features of Eliot's cat poems. The critics who had realized the necessity of studying the poems analyzed the book in-depth from various perspectives, and their contributions have been remarkable and important; however, the musicality of the poems has tended to remain rather untouched. Generally, nonsense verse or children's poetry is considered genuinely musical, whimsical and playful. Some critics thus might have regarded the sound of Eliot's cat poems as: “whimsical,” “playful,” and just “less serious.” It could have been this kind of pre-judgment that kept this book from being thoroughly and critically “listened.” It would be interesting to point out that analyses on *Practical Cats* would not be found in Thomas Rees' book, *The Technique of T.S. Eliot* (1974), though he dedicated his entire book to analyzing the techniques of Eliot's metric styles. If Eliot chose to use the form of children's poetry, wouldn't there be a specific rhyme or reason to it? The very important half of poetry, namely its sound aspect, might be providing new insights into Eliot's

cat poems.

This study will highlight the importance of poetic sound by investigating prosodic features found in Eliot's poetry. To begin with, I shall briefly review prosody in poetry. In their book *The Prosody Handbook: A Guide to Poetic Form*, Beum and Shapiro (1965) state the importance of studying prosody:

A poem yields up its meaning, and makes that meaning an experience, in two ways: (1) through the semantic content of words as these are organized in sequences of images, ideas, and logical or conventional connections; and (2) through the "music," the purely physical qualities of the medium itself, such as sound color, pitch, stress, line length, tempo. Either study proves to be inexhaustible—the more or so, since the matter and the metric are ultimately inseparable. Because the domain of prosody includes all that remains after the semantic content has as far as possible been excluded, *every* physical detail and aspect of a poem stands open to analysis. (Beum and Shapiro 4)

By closely listening to Old Possum's narrative focusing on its prosodic features, this paper attempts to describe the musicality of a poem. In conducting this process, I will demonstrate how to attentively and physically listen to the sound of poetry and explore the relationship between sound and meaning. In order to show Eliot's skillful manipulations of poetic sounds and to reveal that they actually support the meaning of his poetry, this paper will set out to analyze the prosodic features of "Macavity: The Mystery Cat." Macavity's mysterious nature is well expressed semantically with carefully selected diction and also prosodically with carefully chosen metric styles, rhymes, and other sound components.

Interestingly, two distinct qualities are embedded in this poem: (1) Macavity's magical, polished trait and (2) his dark, cruel side. Macavity is mysterious because he is a sophisticated creature yet simultaneously "a monster of depravity." The cat's sophistication and his dark, deceitful nature are intermingled and these characteristics coexist in one bundle of written lines. Macavity's intriguing existence is remarkably narrated by Old Possum. How does T.S. Eliot

portray the fascinating secrets of the cat? And how could we, readers reveal the secrets?

## 2. Musicality of Macavity's Suavity

### 2.1. Secrets of Meter

"Suavity" is one of Macavity's traits. ("There never was a cat of such deceitfulness and suavity" (36).) He is a debonaire and at the same time a ruthless criminal. His suave nature is expressed by the poem's accentual rhythm with a relatively consistent beat. Although the poem's lines might be scanned in several ways, the dominant style appears to be loose heptameter, containing seven heavy or medium stresses. It is interesting to note that the lines containing six stresses often come right in-between seven-stress lines. This alternation would provide an oscillating effect to the overall rhythm. There are other scanning possibilities. Douglass (1983), for instance, claims that we might find four stresses in lines. Along with the basic 6-7 stresses, the underline beat could be counted as four stresses, which would make us pick up speed and be mesmerized by the beat. The quick tempo created by the beat comes like a hypnotic pattern; thus, it sucks us into Macavity's mysterious power, "His power of levitation." Old Possum's relentless whisper oscillates us and draws us into Macavity's magic. All the crimes, which shoot us with the rapid-fire tempo in the stanzas 5 and 6, seem to be somewhat spectacular and sophisticated though those crimes are hideous. The basic accentual rhythm makes us read this poem quickly and smoothly, corresponding with the refined nature of the cat, "Macavity."

Although we do not stumble upon any unusual change of the basic rhythm, some sudden tight iambic feet catch our attention and make the sections emphatic:

~ / ~ / ~ / ~ /  
 For when you reach the scene of crime — *Macavity's not there.*

This tight iambic pattern strikes our inner ear and makes us pay attention to this verse: "*Macavity's not there.*" When we reach the last line of each stanza, we would probably realize that we are waiting for the passage to come to our lips—"*Macavity's not there!*" And this repetition seems to fascinate us as if he was special or a hero of some sort. Regarding this phrase, Douglass (1983) makes a point in saying "Eliot's refrains seem always to be exclamatory, always drawing attention to themselves. He finds a phrase

and leans on it until it becomes a game, and sometimes until it seems the ritual has become a spasmodic dance [...]” (121). Moreover, Macavity seems to govern our breathing. The little pause created by a dash placed after “crime” provides us with a split second, making us inhale and get ready for the special name, “Macavity.” Literally, “Macavity” controls our reading operations with his suave rhythmic manipulation.

## 2.2. Secrets of Rhyme

The smooth operation of our reading is supported by Eliot’s selection of sounds. 26 lines out of 42 lines end with open-mouth sounds: /i:/, /éi/ (in “Macavity,” “gravity,” “astray,” “way,” “say,” “away,” and “suavity”), /ɛə/or /ɛə/ (in “despair,” “there,” “air,” “square,” “repair,” “stair,” and “spare”), and /ɑ:/ or /ɔ:/ (in “Paw,” “Law”). When we produce these sounds, we do not seal our lips, for we do not have to make a friction for pronouncing them. Our pronunciation would sound softer and lower —like a cat’s purring. The sounds of these 26 line-ends are liquids, so they would linger in our ears, and particularly, they can glide and fly into the air. Furthermore, Eliot uses polysyllabic rhymes (“Macavity”/“gravity,” “Macavity” / “depravity”). Consequently, the end sounds become much weaker, for they do not finish their lines with stressed syllables. This suggests that these rhymes could even control the volume of our reading. Thus, it could be said that Macavity’s magical power exists in the flow of frictionless continuation generated by the soft sounding line-endings, volume control, and repetitions.

In contrast, the third stanza has interesting peculiarities:

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.

This stanza describes Macavity’s appearance, even though nobody had any time to observe him, and of course, we

would never be able to see him. The affricate phoneme /dʒ/ in “ginger cat” appears here for the first time in this poem. This sound gives the readers an unexpected surprise. When we pronounce the consonant, we would have to make a rounded shape with lips for it (Roach, 2009). As a consequence, the readers need to produce a different-sounding voice and thus the color of this line would change drastically. In this way, the sound /dʒɪndʒə/ could make us lilt a little, which draws us more into Macavity’s world. Then the next tripping comes with a change of metric pattern:

˘ ˘ / ˘ ˘ ˘ / ˘ ˘ ˘ / ˘ ˘ ˘ / ˘ ˘ ˘  
 You would know him if you saw him, for his eyes are sunken in.

This line might not strictly be trochaic; however, this pattern is inserted so that the line would sound different from others. The readers would be lightly thwacked experiencing the difference. This thwack makes us pay extra attention to what Macavity looks like, the clear image of the tall and thin cat.

This six-lined stanza contains four lines of tight iambic heptameter. Here is the third line (line 13):

˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ /  
 His brow is deeply lined with thought, his head is highly domed;

The four lines (lines 13,14,15, and 16) in the third stanza contain fricative line-endings. The use of /n/, /d/, and /k/ creates a clear contour to the lines, similarly, it could be said that these fricative consonants are making a clear contour to the actual image of Macavity. The contrast between these sharp fricative rhymes and the gliding-into-the-air rhymes modulates the tone of this poem in a very interesting way. The mysterious cat exists because our ears can create the clear-cut image of him, but the cat does not exist because our eyes cannot see him — “*Macavity’s not there.*”

In addition, this stanza’s alliteration and medial repetitions might be reinforcing the description of what Macavity looks like. Furthermore, several critics have discussed Eliot’s borrowing from Conan Doyle. Pricilla Preston (1959) elucidates detailed evidence in her study. It is worth mentioning that the borrowed phrases are “very often emphasized by their rhyme-position” (399). Eliot’s manipulation of the line-ending sounds and the added Professor Moriarty shades would make us feel more obsessed with the mysterious cat and his suavity.

### 3. Musicality of Macavity's Depravity

#### 3.1. Secrets of Articulation

The other side of Macavity is dark, sneaky and perfidious. When we talk about something dark and shady to someone, we might squint our eyes and lower our voice. Actually, we could hear Old Possum talk like that. Eliot's manipulation of vowels brings out the cat's dark disposition. As we have seen previously, 26 lines out of 42 lines end with open-mouth sounds: /i:/, /éi/ (in "Macavity," "gravity," "astray," "way," "say," "away," and "suavity"), /εə/ or εə/ (in "despair," "there," "air," "square," "repair," "stair," and "spare") and /a:/ or /ɔ:/ (in "Paw," "Law"). When we pronounce these long vowels, we would have to spread our lips a little, contract the vocal cavity, and press the tongue downward. The place of articulation plays an important role here. Our voice would become softer and drop to a whisper because we do not open the mouth widely. Therefore, naturally, the dark side of Macavity would be enhanced by our own production of the dark and lingering long vowels. It is through pronouncing the sounds that the readers could gain aural impressions and physically feel Old Possum's narrative.

#### 3.2. Secrets of the Name

The names of Eliot's cats often become a focus of discussion, and "Macavity" is no exception. In this poem, we hear Eliot's ingenious wordplay. The word "Macavity" is used 19 times in the poem (20 times, including the title). The word stress of four-syllable "Macavity" is placed on -ca /kæ/. Since the consonant /k/ is a velar fricative, the vowel /æ/ would become produced relatively close to the glottis, which means that the upper area of glottis would be narrowed as the air passes through. Usually, a voiceless glottal fricative is not very distinct from a whispered vowel. Hence, the sound would become closer to a whisper. In calling his name, "Macavity," our voice would naturally drop to a sharp front vowel whisper, get lower in pitch and then glide quietly into the air. The word "Macavity" itself could be one of the causes for eye-squinting and voice-lowering. Also, we cannot ignore the fact that his name Macavity contains *cavity* (Does Macavity hold us in the hollow of his hand?). By having us say his name repeatedly, and having us move the vocal cavity, Old Possum's narrative is effectively transmitting the secret nature of the deceitful, menace cat.

### 4. Conclusion

The prosodic analysis in this paper has illustrated Eliot's brilliant technique. This study has shown that the metric patterns, rhymes, and individual consonants and vowels used in the poem are conveying Macavity's magical nature. Especially, this analysis has displayed Eliot's remarkable manipulation of sounds. It would be highly likely that his ingenious rhythm pulls us into Macavity's magical world. Eliot was a cat person (Booth, 2010). He must have observed cats very closely. I would like to suggest that he did not just randomly pick children's poetry to write about cats. He probably needed to write specifically in this form to have himself and readers communicate with the cats. Campbell and Reesman conclude that "Eliot allows his characters freedom: 'evil' cats can be good, and 'good' cats can be evil. Nonsense verse may contain strange mysteries, and 'practical cats' may be anything but 'practical'" (33). This book should not be described simply as "pleasant, inoffensive, and unremarkable" (Raffel, 146), for *Practical Cats* is a collection of Eliot's seriously-played poems. Macavity's freedom becomes actualized by the carefully placed diction and the "music" we play for reading the poem.

Additionally, his metric choice might explain how intentional this manipulation of rhythm in "Macavity" was to Eliot. As I mentioned in the previous chapter 2. 2, the use of tight iambic heptameter was worthy of attention. The lines below are from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" and of tight iambic heptameter (Rees, 1974). Readers would find it interesting to spot the significant difference between the speed and voice quality of "Prufrock" and those of "Macavity," even though they share the same metric pattern:

The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the Window-panes  
 The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the Window-panes

This could be a clear proof that his rhythm is not just "whimsical" or "less serious." Notably, he used the same septenary in his poem "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," which is one of Eliot's "serious" poems. As he did in "Prufrock," it is highly likely that he intentionally chose the aforementioned sound patterns and more to compose his poems and created his own rhythms for *Old*

*Poosum's Book of Practical Cats.*

Finally, although this study needs further close investigation and elaboration, it has shown that through using our aural impression and oral articulation, we could link the sounds with the written text. Our aural sensibility plays an important role in connecting the poem's sound and meaning. As Gross and McDowell (1996) say: "The function of prosody is to image, in a rich and complex way, human process as it moves in time. On the lower level, prosody can be a direct representation of physical activity" (12). Children tend to read poems out loud. It would be possible that Eliot orchestrated the poetic sounds to have the readers read "Macavity" out loud. He might have known the importance of physical activities in reading and valued those acoustic experiences. As this paper demonstrated, prosody would be an important key to further understanding and interpretation. Eliot gives us intriguing music notes. It is through our physical experience, using our lips, tongue, oral cavity, glottis, vocal cords and breathing, that we are able to fully appreciate the mysterious Macavity's fascinating, non-existent existence.

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