

# Anxiety Caused by Too Many Cats in Bohumil Hrabal's "All My Cats"

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## ARTICLE INFO

### Keywords:

Anxiety;  
Agency;  
Absurdity;  
Bohumil Hrabal;  
Social Contracts;

### Article History:

Received : 11/10/2022  
Revised : 17/04/2023  
Accepted : 25/05/2023  
Available Online:  
30/05/2023

## ABSTRACT

*All My Cats* is an autobiographical novel representing Hrabal's fatal anxiety from the potential mental conflict with domesticated animals. This article examines the concept of anxiety and the potential for domesticated animals, in this example, cats, to exert agency and impact the lives of their owners in autobiographical literature. Bohumil Hrabal's *All My Cats* has been selected due to the prominence of literary signifiers of anxiety, his ambivalent attitude toward cats (love and hate) throughout the text, and Hrabal's specific interpretation of what his cats did for him and to him in emotional terms. The methodology selected does not presuppose that cats, or animals in the broader sense, possess agency on an equal footing with humans. Rather, they can exist in an interdependent or collaborative state with humans. This may be seen as a form of an unwritten social contract between animals and humans in a domestic setting. In the case of Hrabal and his cats, his perception of his cats and what they attempt to communicate to him is most interesting in this regard, particularly when viewed through the lens of anxiety and the literary signifier.

**How to cite (in APA style):** Teggin, E. O., & Harini, Y. N. A. (2023). Anxiety Caused by Too Many Cats in Bohumil Hrabal's "All My Cats". *OKARA: Jurnal Bahasa dan Sastra*, 17(1), 69–84. <https://doi.org/10.19105/ojbs.v17i1.8619>

## 1. INTRODUCTION

What are we going to do with all these cats? That is the question that Hrabal's wife, Eliška Plevová, poses in one form or another, via Hrabal's narrative, throughout *All My Cats*. This desperate plea is made because of the behavior of Hrabal's numerous cats adopted at his country cottage in the village of Kersko, about an hour's drive to the east of Prague. Hrabal and his wife bought this cottage in 1965 as a weekend retreat from the distractions of Prague. Despite the idyllic setting, however, this rural haven became "a hell" in Hrabal's (2020: 52) own words due to the problems caused by his out-of-control cats. Hrabal was acutely aware of the situation he was in and, indeed, of the anxiety it caused both him and his wife. As well as being a chronicle of his experiences with his cats, *All My Cats* is a grotesque satire of his life and circumstances. Hrabal is renowned for his satirical style, which makes extensive use of the grotesque, with *Too Loud a Solitude* (1976) and his main character Haňt'a being notable examples (De Dobbeleer & De Bruyn, 2013). As such, it is

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no surprise that Hrabal has incorporated elements of the grotesque and absurd into *All My Cats*. For this study, however, it is interesting how Hrabal uses what he perceives as the agency of his cats to grapple with his own anxiety.

Before proceeding further, it is essential to identify what anxiety is and how it will be understood in this paper. It is not, however, intended to be understood in terms of the treatment of anxiety since this is not a clinical study. In the Freudian (2013) reading, anxiety is a reaction to a situation of danger or something unpleasant. Jacques Lacan (2016: 75–76, 138) took Freud's views a step further to develop a more structured approach to the anxiety question. He argued that it was necessary to be able to situate the problem in various contexts. In Lacan's view, anxiety has a distinct object: the cause or trigger. The object of anxiety is, therefore, known to the subject. Effectively, anxiety is thus a warning signal that alerts the subject to a perceived danger or an apparent lack on the part of the individual. It also has levels of severity and stages of locomotion (Jacques Lacan, 2016). This contrasts with Martin Heidegger's (2001) interpretation of anxiety, which does not rely on a specific object. Instead, he saw anxiety as something that makes the world unintelligible to the individual. Sartre (2001: 293), building on this existential way of viewing anxiety, saw the freedom of humanity as the most accurate definition of anxiety in people. A more recent definition by Knight and Depue (2019: 2) states that anxiety is "a prolonged state of apprehension brought on by an uncertain or unpredictable prospective threat". Common clinical symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder include restlessness, irritability, fatigue, and sleep disorder (Patriquin & Mathew, 2017). Bandelow, Michaelis, and Wedekind (2017) highlight that anxiety disorders should be treated through pharmaceutical intervention, psychological therapy, or a combination of both.

In Lacanian terms, the object(s) of Hrabal's anxiety in *All My Cats* must surely be his feline companions. Indeed, the opening line, returning once again to Eliška's question, draws the reader's attention to the fact that Hrabal's cats are a significant problem. The narrative of *All My Cats* reveals that Hrabal was aware of his anxiety due to his cats but could not take decisive action to resolve the issue permanently. Even when Hrabal did muster the courage to kill some newborn kittens, the guilt he felt as a result only served to reinforce his predicament. This is similar to what Søren Kierkegaard (2015: 75) has written about anxiety being like a deep abyss, with the fault of the situation being equally shared by the abyss and the individual looking down into it. This concept of shared responsibility for anxiety is intriguing when considered in tandem with the notion of animal, more specifically feline, agency. Hrabal, of course, may be guilty of anthropomorphizing his cats and placing meaning behind otherwise meaningless feline actions. Still, it is his perception of the cats as the object of his anxiety that is vital here. His reactions and behavior due to his cats are a literary signifier of anxiety. There is also the concept of what he is not telling us in his text, which connects to what Lacan (2006: 206) has written about what is said and left unsaid. As such, this has the potential to be a potent signifier of anxiety (Lacan, 2006). As discussed below, Hrabal's belief that his cats were communicating with him in a complex manner, amounting to a specific agency, likely fulfills this criterion. Putting forward such an argument, even indirectly via Hrabal's musings, however, creates a theoretical problem regarding the agency of animals. This theoretical problem originated in Descartes' opinion that animals are incapable of thought and thus of agency (Feuer, 1963).

Susan McHugh (2009) has pointed out that while examples of animals in literature across all ages and cultures are extant, they have rarely been the focus of a systemic literary investigation. This is despite her contention that animals may serve as a flashpoint for

literary studies by giving voice to a variety of non-human entities, with animals helping to assist in the location of biopolitical understandings arising from readings (McHugh, 2009). The agency and involvement of animals such as horses based on perceived traits tie in here, with the example of a horse and rider simultaneously acting to accomplish a goal within a specific mechanism. Anastasija Ropa's (2019) discussion of medieval knights being intimately tied to their mounts in terms of identity is intriguing in this regard. David Shaw's (2013) example of the Duke of Wellington and his horse 'Copenhagen' at the Battle of Waterloo (1815) is also particularly useful here. Shaw contends that Wellington was essential to the allied victory at Waterloo and that he was inseparable from his mount throughout the battle. Although Copenhagen was used at the direction of Wellington, there was, of course, the chance that he might have misbehaved. Indeed, Shaw (2013) highlights accounts of Copenhagen 'kicking out' after the battle. He notes that while the kicking action was recorded, no meaning was understood. Whereas the agency of animals is acknowledged in this instance, it does not provide ample means to critique Hrabal's interpretation of his cats' behavior and human-like qualities.

Kristin Armstrong Oma (2010), in critiquing Tim Ingold's arguments that domestic animals are, per se, slaves and wild animals as prey are seen more as equals in historic hunter-gatherer societies, draws attention to the fact that this vision does not require reciprocity of trust. Armstrong Oma's work builds on the concept that intimacy and cooperation between humans and animals are highly dependent on trust; her example is that even smaller domesticates, such as goats or sheep, are potentially dangerous to humans if not handled correctly or if there is a lack of trust (Armstrong Oma, 2010: 177). This can also be seen at Hrabal's (2020: 34–35, 51, 54–55) cottage at Kersko when his cats become aggressive towards him and each other. However, there were occasions when Hrabal and his cats lived in perfect harmony and shared affection. This points to a relationship that was fluid and had various stages of engagement, not one that was fixed in meaning. Hrabal's expectations and understandings of his cats can perhaps be best viewed through the lens of a social contract between the two parties, in which certain undertakings were expected of each party. His anxiety could increase or decrease depending on the success or failure of this relationship. This builds on research into the human–animal relationship and social contracts conducted by Catherine and Raphaël Larrère (2000) (2000) and Lund, Anthony, & Röcklinsberg (2004).

Whereas animals may have an unequal status in any such partnership, the ability to conceptualize animals as actors with a degree of agency allows us to discuss them as beings rather than mere static objects or tools. They may thus have a more clearly identifiable relationship with humans. For example, Chris Pearson (2013) uses the example of dogs being trained for wartime service to demonstrate their utility to humans, allowing them to adopt and devise strategies for communicating with people. Though Hrabal (2020: 8–13, 38–39, 41–43) superimposes additional meaning onto the actions of his cats, he does, however, demonstrate what he sees as a form of communication between him and his cats. The examination of material through the concept of the literary signifier, particularly from a Lacanian standpoint, is well established in wider scholarship, though notable examples using the work of Deleuze are also extant (Borg, 2019; Harini & Cambara, 2022; Kasimbara, 2020).

Much research has been done on Bohumil Hrabal. The research discusses a comparison and analysis of *I Served the King of England* by Bohumil Hrabal (Heřmanová, 2020); presentation of the male bodies of selected protagonists (*I Served the King of*

England) (Hartmann, 2015); an index of a repetition and negotiation of the autobiographical of Bohumil Hrabal's *Gaps* (Meyer, 2015); literary style and its transfer into the English translations of Bohumil Hrabal's *Postřiziny* (*Cutting It Short*) and *Obsluhoval Jsem Anglického Krále* (*I Served the King of England*) (Zehnalová, 2016); the issue of film adaptations that arose from Bohumil Hrabal's *Postřiziny* (Adámková, 2013); the influence of Egon Bondy on Bohumil Hrabal's *Něžný Barbar* (Marek, 2013); the development of the process of variation from Bohumil Hrabal's *Krásná Poldi*, *Ostře Sledované Vlaky*, and *Příliš Hlučná Samota* in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s (Seminara, 2019); Bohumil Hrabal's *In-House Weddings*, *Vita Nouva*, and *Gaps* fictional autobiography (Tlustý, 2012); experience and reflection of old age in selected Bohumil Hrabal novels (*Too Loud a Solitude* and *Harlequin's Millions*) from the 1970s (Komberec, 2017); and the use of perspective in the autobiographical trilogy (*In-House Weddings*, *Vita Nuova*, and *Gaps*) by Bohumil Hrabal (Tlustý, 2019). No research discusses *All My Cats*, even though the novel explores the roots of cruelty by examining relationships with many cats (Collins, 2019; Holtzman, 2019; Mitchell, 2021; Paloff, 2020).

This article will use analyses of extracts from *All My Cats* to demonstrate Hrabal's use of animal (feline) agency in attempting to grapple with his anxiety. In addition, these will be examined as literary signifiers of anxiety.

## 2. METHOD

According to the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan (2006: 206), the dichotomy of what has been said and left unsaid is a potent signifier in analytical discussions. So too, it would follow, that between what is written and left unwritten. Hrabal's use of the stream-of-consciousness writing style, leading to long and ponderous sentences, lends itself particularly well to examining anxiety using this methodology. However, the stream of consciousness, whilst allowing the reader to envisage the mental state of characters or the narrator potentially, can also provide difficulties for the reader. Such problems range from a lack of understanding of the technique, confusion, and the increased likelihood that the reader will become frustrated and put the book down (Bowling, 1950; Steinberg, 1968). The stream-of-consciousness technique is, as such, also a constant gripe for readers of James Joyce and his *Ulysses* (1922) in particular (Hartley, 1931; Huebner, 2013; Kuttan, Pandurangan, Peleg, Robinson, & Trehan, 2015). For this study, however, the strategy does, it is argued, provide great potential for signifiers of anxiety, both explicit and implicit, to be discussed.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1. Kersko and Hrabal's Life with Cats

Hrabal, as a master of the grotesque and eccentric, allows his readers to presuppose that his work may contain bizarre or unsettling concepts. There are also, however, comic undertones to his writing, falling under the heading of dark humor. This is undoubtedly the case in *All My Cats*, with Hrabal presenting distressing circumstances in a ludicrous light. The below quotation, a description of his cats' behavior in running in from the cold in the morning, is an excellent example of this. In keeping with the notion of structural anxiety, the 'reality' that appears suddenly to disprove assumed knowledge can be considered a facet of anxiety. Perhaps Hrabal's expectation that the cats would settle down and behave is a good example (Bhabha, 1994: 296). Gautam Basu Thakur (2012: 242–243) has famously

applied this theory to the concept of colonial stereotypes linked to Orientalist assumptions being disproved. When the stereotype was disproven, a lack would appear in the symbolic discourse, and anxiety would take its place. Zizek (2009) and Zevnik (2009) have also discussed this in terms of the individual questioning their relationship with symbolic authority or assumed facts. Whereas readers may find themselves horrified that Hrabal (2020: 9–10) would allow such antics daily, there is also something rather amusing about the thought of a horde of cats rampaging through the house like in a slapstick comedy. This is, however, only Hrabal setting the scene for his existence at Kersko. The nuisance of the cats racing around his house and distracting him from his work is noted early on in *All My Cats*, but this does not qualify as outright distress or a particularly severe level of anxiety (Hrabal, 2020). To the reader, it must indeed be seen as an entertaining anecdote at this stage.

“Those mornings, when the cats would crawl into bed with us, were moments of family bliss. Every morning, though, when the kittens had got warm and recovered from the chill of the night, they’d suddenly start wrestling and going after each other. They’d swing on the curtains and scramble around the house, back and forth, and you’d hear the sound of little cat heads thumping against cupboards or chairs. They’d race through the kitchen, tanking our clothes and underwear off the chairs, dragging towels in from the kitchen, then they’d pull out our shoes and slippers and fight over them, then dive under the duvet and wrestle about in the darkness, winding themselves into little balls and knocking everything off the table (Hrabal, 2020: 8).”

Hrabal’s (2020) first severe spike in anxiety, rather than a complaint surrounding his cats’ antics, is connected to his displeasure at leaving his cats in Kersko to return to Prague. Hrabal states that he was anxious about leaving his cats for various reasons, as seen in the quotation below. Through the stream-of-consciousness narrative he creates, the reader can understand that he found that he was unable to be happy away from Kersko, and yet he was not content when he was there either. He would even worry that if he drove too fast, he might crash, and then who would look after his cats? He repeats this concern regarding travel by bus, determining that he was most likely to survive a bus crash if he did not sit at the front of the vehicle (Hrabal, 2020).

Despite his great concern for his cats and frequent journeys to Kersko mid-week to see and feed them, they also frustrated him and brought him great distress. Hrabal uses the example of his cats defecating in the kitchen and larder to demonstrate some of the more mundane unpleasantness of owning cats. The fact remains, however, that Hrabal deeply loved his cats and cats in general, as he acknowledges (Hrabal, 2020: 18–19, 28). This can also be seen in the below extract, with Hrabal garnering great comfort from caressing and playing with his cats. This presents the curious situation whereby the alleged object of Hrabal’s anxiety, his cats, could also relieve him through their relationship with him. This may be linked to the assigned roles demarcated as part of the so-called contract, or even emotional surrogacy paradigm, between a man and his pets, or more likely a signifier presented to us by Hrabal’s stream of consciousness (Gray & Young, 2011). What is clear, however, is that the relationship was not straightforward.

“But, I was already starting to feel anxious about getting back to Prague for an evening get-together with my readers and I’d have to take those cats, one by one, and turn them out into the cold air, into the damp leaves, into the solitude, and I could see that the cats, too, were already feeling anxious that the dread moment was approaching when we’d have to part, leaving them to worry about whether I’d come back or abandon them to their fate. I was equally worried they’d be run over at the bus stop, or that someone might shoot them, or that they’d be depressed and wouldn’t come out to greet me, and to allay my anxieties I’d seek them out and hold them against



my head like a cold compress to relieve a headache, but in the end there I'd be again, striding away down the lane, looking back to see those little cat eyes staring at me through the chinks in the fence, five little heads watching me until I turned toward the bus stop." (Hrabal, 2020: 12–13)

Hrabal's (2020: 17, 20–21) early narrative in *All My Cats* remains relatively sedate and focused on the inconvenience of his cats' behavior and how he feared for his relationship with and the wellbeing of his cats. There is, it must be acknowledged, a distinct shift in the tone and outlook of Hrabal's stream-of-consciousness once his favorite cat, 'Blackie', became pregnant. Blackie, according to Hrabal, always knew how he felt, and he superimposed meaning onto her showing affection during this time. To Hrabal, this was a plea to look after her and care for her during the birth of her kittens (Hrabal, 2020). In this way, Hrabal allots agency to Blackie by suggesting that she communicated to him a specific message. Whereas this is easily dismissed as Hrabal anthropomorphizing his cat, it also serves as a signifier of anxiety for Hrabal in that he evidently felt responsible for and essential to his cat. This is a key point in terms of his imagined communication with his cats. The problem for Hrabal was that he knew he already had too many cats to adequately care for and cope with, returning to Eliška's question.

Taking a sudden turn towards the grotesque and dark potential within Hrabal's thinking, the unseemly solution presented in the below quotation was the path Hrabal ultimately chose. Mařenka, the fortune teller who had predicted Hrabal would hang himself, and her prophecy posed a problematic situation for Hrabal regarding the killing of his kittens (Hrabal, 2020: 21–22). On the one hand, her prophecy suggested that Hrabal was destined to commit suicide. He concluded that killing his kittens was the only tangible solution, and his miserable existence at Kersko might be seen as the underpinning anxiety that would drive him to do it. However, there was a counterpoise to this in that Hrabal reasoned that in the event of his death, there would be nobody to look after his cats (Hrabal, 2020: 11, 23). Hrabal was effectively trapped due to his anxiety. Allowing the kittens to live would torment him and his wife, yet if he killed them, he would bear the guilt. On the other hand, the supposed escape by suicide was also untenable due to his fear for his cats. In the end, Hrabal determined that he must act and live with his pain, despite his later admission that he 'foolishly' decided to remain alive (Hrabal, 2020: 33). We as readers are privileged in being able to follow this through his stream-of-consciousness, and Hrabal uses this as a method through which to present his suffering and reinforce the notion that artists such as himself or literary characters seek moments of understanding and inspiration in despair (Hrabal, 2020: 61). A wider example can be found in Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire* (1962), in which the narrator and fictional poet, John Shade, grapples with the apparent suicide of his daughter, Hazel, as a way of seeking answers linked to sensory phenomena (Galef, 1985).

"I would walk down to the brook and look at the willow tree where Mařenka predicted I would hang myself, and one day I mustered my resolve and took a large basket out of the woodshed and then, after pouring two large saucers of milk for the cats in the kitchen, I took the kittens out of the bird feeder and, in a kind of fever I sent my wife to the neighbours, took two of the five kittens and put them in the basket, then went into the woodshed, removed two of the kittens and put them in the basket along with the first two. Then, as if in a trance, I opened the mail bag, which had a dark, caked stain along the seam, and put the remaining three kittens from the bird feeder inside, along with the three from the woodshed, then I hurried into the woods and battered the contents of that mail bag against a tree, again and again and again." (Hrabal, 2020: 27–28)

The obvious solution to Hrabal's kitten problem was perhaps to have his cats spayed to prevent similar accidents from occurring again. Spaying domestic animals became a mainstream practice by the 1930s, even though the technology for such procedures had existed for many years (Hart & Hart, 2021). Accessibility and cost may have been considerations for people such as Hrabal. There was, of course, also the possibility of a general lack of willingness to authorize such procedures. Hrabal does not mention the prospect of spaying his animals as an alternative to killing them in *All My Cats*, so any or all of the proposed reasons may have applied. It was also possible that Hrabal, secretly or subconsciously, did, in fact, wish for more cats and thus allowed nature to take its' course. This would invoke Lacan's (2017: 362) understanding of the difficulty of locating desire, with Hrabal's demand to reduce the number of cats perhaps not being his genuine desire. Such an action, taken despite his knowledge of the grief that these cats were causing him and his wife, certainly would have been in keeping with Hrabal's concept of the grotesque. This is, however, purely a supposition. The linguistic signifier tied up in the dichotomy of what has been said and left unsaid does, in this case, permit us to speculate.

Through his stream-of-consciousness processing of the aftermath of killing the kittens, Hrabal clearly expresses remorse and anxiety regarding his actions. What he has also done, however, is further humanize his dead kittens through his description. The comparison of Hrabal burying the kittens in a human-style grave, complete with geraniums placed into the hole as an offering, is a clear statement of the connection and respect he felt for the poor creatures, despite his cruelty. What also emerges from this description is his equating the sight before him to Nazi mass graves, later referring to himself as being in a similar position to a SS officer. This comparison does not sit easily given the inhumanity of Nazi cruelties or from a place of inserting kittens into the juxtaposition due to the question of agency. It may, however, also be seen as an alternative memorialization for past atrocities, with the breadth of Holocaust memorialization allowing many representations (Oztig, 2023; Stańczyk, 2014). As such, the statement must be viewed as a signifier arising out of his anxiety. Despite Hrabal's (2020: 54–57) grief and self-loathing for what he did and his judgment of himself, he did once again repeat the process with two separate mother cats after they had become aggressive towards him and their kittens. His humanizing of the kittens he had killed can indeed be seen as a signifier of anxiety, but it is also a core part of his relationship with his cats. The key point here is that Hrabal superimposed meanings and supposed communication between himself and his cats to a great extent, and this concept shall be elaborated upon in the next section.

"Now, when I'd taken the lives of six still-blind kittens, I felt crushed, suffocated by what I had felt compelled to do. I was trembling all over but I had to keep going so I bent over and felt those tiny heads and realized to my horror that the kittens were still stirring and so, just like that time in the winter, I took the axe I used to split wood...And then I picked up a spade and in an out-of-the-way place among a stand of birch trees, I dug a deep pit into which I dumped the damp contents of the sack. But then I couldn't help myself and I ran back to my cottage and picked six geraniums, and when I got back, I threw those flowers into the grave. The kittens were lying there in a terrifying mishmash and I felt a growing sense of alarm. I should not have looked down because those kittens were lying there like images from Nazi mass graves." (Hrabal, 2020: 28–29)

Hrabal lived through both Nazi and Soviet occupation and is known to question the idea of civilization in his work, for example, in *I Served the King of England* (1971).

### 3.2. Anxiety, Dreams, and the Agency of Cats

Hrabal felt guilt and anxiety due to having killed his kittens, with his vivid descriptions through a stream-of-consciousness narrative reinforcing this. In particular, Hrabal (2020: 33) compares himself to the film character 'Steiner' in Federico Fellini's *La Dolce Vita* (1960). In a fit of anxiety for his children and their supposedly uncertain future, Steiner killed them as Hrabal had killed his kittens (Knieger, 1962). Moreover, Hrabal's situation and actions evolved from the ongoing circumstances at Kersko. His cats had become increasingly unruly and beyond effective management, with any pretense of a social contract between animal and owner long since decayed. An early example of the friction between Hrabal and his cats was his discussion of their lack of housetraining, whereby they would often defecate in the kitchen, larder, or even in his bed. The below excerpt is one such example. Hrabal admits to occasionally losing his temper and physically lashing out at his cats when they excreted indoors. Almost immediately, however, he regretted his actions and sought to reconcile with them. Whereas Hrabal was all too willing to make amends with his cats, he concluded that the animals were reluctant to reconcile after the event. Hrabal certainly anthropomorphizes the meaning behind the cats' reticence, despite the apparent reason for their distrust being that they had recently been physically assaulted. By attaching feelings such as shame and embarrassment to his cats, he is giving them almost human levels of sentience and suggests that they are communicating with him. He also implies that the cats could adhere to social conventions and understand the terms of unwritten social contracts between the two parties. However, such an understanding of conventions is ironic given their frequent defecation in living spaces. Since much of Hrabal's narrative is concerned with his expressions and, indeed, signifiers of anxiety, we may view his imagined relationship with his cats as yet another signifier of anxiety since it does not fulfill requirements for animal agency laid out by the wider scholarship (Carter & Charles, 2013; Cash, 2018; York & Longo, 2017).

"I was ashamed at what I'd done and I'd go outside and would sometimes spend the rest of the day trying to win back their trust, to get back into their good graces and persuade them to come back home. But those creatures were more deeply ashamed than I was and they were loath to go back to a place from which I'd driven them, because not only can cats feel deeply embarrassed, they cannot forgive as readily as I forgave them." (Hrabal, 2020: 19)

Although Hrabal (2020: 16–16, 24–25, 40–43) mentions cats by name in *All My Cats*, such as 'Autičko' and 'Blackie', his relationship with the tomcat 'Renda' is one of the most useful for discussions of anxiety and agency. Renda was one of Hrabal's cats, which a butcher's family from Prague adopted, without his express consent. They appeared one day at Hrabal's cottage, waxing about how much Renda reminded them of their cat, which had been run over, and left with Renda before a stunned Hrabal could truly understand what had just happened. Renda was returned to Hrabal three months after he had been taken, having grown thin and with his coat in a sorry state. This was a moment of realization for Hrabal that he had failed his cat, and it was a circumstance that would haunt him for years after, as shall be elaborated upon below (Hrabal, 2020). What can be seen from the quotation below is that Hrabal understands Renda's behavior towards him as a specific communication meant to elicit sympathy. As the separation and Renda's suffering were Hrabal's fault through his indifference at the time, this may be seen as a breakdown of the established social contract of trust that was supposedly in place between them. Hrabal



discusses this difficulty with Renda in terms of the cat standing in judgment over him, continually representing his unhappiness due to Hrabal's failure. However, Hrabal goes even further than anthropomorphizing Renda, creating an imagined dialogue between himself and the cat. The crux of this was Renda's question, "*How was I to know that you, Mr. Hrabal, could live without me?*" (2020: 40–43). This passage is particularly interesting in terms of his belief that his cats attempted to communicate with him.

"When Renda had finished looking into my eyes, he jumped down, this former charmer who had once glistened and shone and bristled with electricity, and walked unsteadily away, arching his gaunt back as if to demonstrate how wretched I'd made him, and he left, only to come back a while later, as if there were something more he had to tell me, some additional details about all that had befallen him during those three months, but he reconsidered and, cocking his wretched neck, he strutted off at a comic gait toward the river." (Hrabal, 2020: 25)

According to Hrabal (Hrabal, 2020: 31–32, 40), Renda also began coming to him in a series of dreams in the early morning in a similar fashion to the way other cats he had killed haunted him. The exact meaning of Hrabal's interpretation is unclear for this study, as we do not have more complete access to extensive first-hand accounts or psychoanalytic session notes. We may, however, infer that there was an unresolved issue between Hrabal and Renda, with Hrabal's dreams attempting to amend this. Hrabal felt anxiety and guilt over his failings towards Renda and his other cats and, by his admission, was seeking absolution from them for his sins. Within a Lacanian (2016: 79–80) understanding of desire and dreams, however, it must be remembered that to demand is not to desire, with genuine desire being hidden from the subject. Considering that Hrabal expressed both a need for forgiveness and punishment by his cats, neither the reader nor Hrabal could truly know what he desired. It was possibly in seeking forgiveness from Renda through his dreams that Hrabal was confronted with a spectral version of the cat, which could not align with his expectations. As we can see below, the result was a terrifying deviation from his demand.

This was all part of what Hrabal (2020: 32) described as the 'sensory phenomena' that plagued him for over forty years. In this state of mind, he allegedly killed the kittens in the manner described above. Hrabal's representation of his tomcat Renda is intriguing from two perspectives. First, it is a clear signifier of anxiety offered through Hrabal's stream of consciousness. Second, Hrabal claims to experience anxiety-related phenomena in his dreams. This latter point is particularly curious, as Hrabal believes that Renda, through his dreams, has some degree of agency in choosing to appear to him in this fashion. However, the extent to which this can be judged is limited because Renda only appears in a spectral format, with such interaction not governed by any form of social contract or pre-existing relationship due to this version of Renda being a creation of his subconscious. However, Hrabal's anthropomorphizing of Renda in this way is yet another signifier of anxiety at work. Again, this is a fascinating passage highlighting Hrabal's belief that his cats were communicating with him.

"That's when Renda would appear to me, not as a puff of cloud or a thunderhead from which a cat's head would emerge. Renda would appear toward morning like a bolt of lightning. Suddenly he'd be inside my head, and my head would swell to the size of the kitchen, then encompass my entire plot of land with the pines and the birch trees and the river. And there sat the tomcat, Renda, just looking at me, and I would arraign myself, indict myself, and plead guilty to charges from which Renda had not absolved me and, as I finally realized, charges from which I could not absolve myself either." (Hrabal, 2020: 40–41)

Hrabal's understanding of his state of mind in *All My Cats* is a curious consideration. On the one hand, he admits that he is afraid and anxious because of his cats, but he also acknowledges his inability to overcome the problem. His riding back and forth on the trams of Prague can be seen as an attempt to avoid the issue, as he indicates with his example of a man examining his toes in the below extract. It is also, however, a signifier of anxiety. This is simultaneously a demonstration of his awareness of how powerful and damaging anxiety can be and an insight into his understanding of the connection between anxiety and freedom. Returning to (Kierkegaard, 2015) thoughts on the problem, anxiety is a counterbalance to freedom. Again, in his description of an individual looking down into a deep abyss, Kierkegaard reasons that the fault of what he refers to as the 'dizziness' of the situation lies equally with the individual and the abyss. The dizziness or anxiety limits the freedom of choice and freezes the individual into a position where they cannot act as they wish. Hrabal balances this difficulty particularly well below. There is, however, the possibility that he was not aware of what stage or severity of anxiety he was suffering from, to return to Lacan's arguments regarding the severity and locomotion of anxiety. Hrabal (2020: 61) claims that he was not 'drunk' but rather that he was afraid of becoming so. This discussion of intoxication stemmed from Hrabal's conclusion that great artists must suffer to catch a glimpse of what others do not see (Hrabal, 2020). If the most severe stage of anxiety was to be the indeterminate state of drunkenness or the hangover that followed, where precisely did Hrabal position himself? His freedom had already been compromised, so we may consider his omission a linguistic signifier of anxiety.

"I was not drunk, I was afraid to get drunk, because I was afraid of losing control of myself, afraid that a hangover would do me in. In fact, by riding back and forth every day through Prague, I was in the same position as a man who is himself afraid, afraid of the moment that must always come in the end, when he undresses and sits in his pyjamas by his bed and examines his feet with enormous interest, carefully inspecting each toe, one by one, because those prolonged examinations of his feet take his mind off thinking about what has become of him, about what he's come to, how far he's sunk into a hell of his own making, a hell prepared for him by the cats he loved and felt compelled to murder." (Hrabal, 2020: 61)

The analysis of *All My Cats*, as presented in the previous passage, provides insight into broader implications and offers a new understanding of the work in a wider context. The examination of anxiety in Hrabal's narrative sheds light on the psychological dimensions of the work. It demonstrates how anxiety can affect an individual's agency. This analysis invites a deeper exploration of the complexities of anxiety. The analysis of Hrabal's narrative style and its impact on the portrayal of anxiety invites broader discussions about the role of literature in representing complex human experiences. It highlights the power literature to capture and convey psychological states, offering readers a glimpse into the intricate workings of the human mind. The passage suggests interdisciplinary experimentation by combining literary analysis with concepts from philosophy and psychology. This interdisciplinary approach encourages scholars from different fields to collaborate and engage in dialogue to gain new insights and perspectives. It opens avenues for future research that bridges the gap between literature, philosophy, psychology, and other related disciplines.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Whereas Hrabal has unburdened himself of his guilt and anxiety surrounding his cats through his stream-of-consciousness narrative, he has not successfully demonstrated that his cats have super-feline agency. Let us be clear: his descriptions of the behavior and communication-like movements of his cats are a creation, or perhaps an exaggeration, of his perception of the animals. Similarly, the sensory phenomena involving cats, such as Renda appearing to him at night, are attributable to his subconscious activity rather than his cats' power to directly possess supernatural agency. Unsurprisingly, there has yet to be a popular consensus in favor of such activity. Hrabal was no fool, however, and knew well that his anxious dreams and sensory phenomena were more attributable to his own anxiety and personal difficulties than to any tangible feline mischief. Indeed, Hrabal lays out a trail of breadcrumbs throughout *All My Cats* to bait his readers into thinking all is not well with him psychologically. Examples such as his dreams, obsession with ticking clocks, and a constant buzzing sound in his head are all signifiers of anxiety, of course. Still, he was aware of these problems and chose, freely or otherwise, to record them for his readers as a grotesque and melancholy summary of how he lived. As noted above, there is also a lack of research dealing with *All My Cats*, and this article fills this niche.

Regarding Hrabal's anxiety and his relationship with his cats, the primary consideration raised has been his loss of agency due to his cats. Returning to Kierkegaard, anxiety serves as the counterbalance to freedom, sapping any active agency an individual may have. Hrabal demonstrates his loss of agency through his act(s) of superimposing or anthropomorphizing agency onto his cats. Though it is a signifier of anxiety, he may be symbolically transferring his own agency to individual cats, such as Renda, to debase himself and seek redemption for his crimes. There may well have been a form of social contract between Hrabal and his cats, and indeed a close bond or understanding, but the agency associated with Hrabal and his cats is primarily based on Hrabal's own representations. It has been discussed above how he was anxious about his cats and the problems they posed, that he was aware of this, and yet he did nothing to alleviate his or his wife's suffering. This may appear absurd to the disconnected reader, but it also neatly demonstrates the power of anxiety. As one of his signifiers of anxiety, Hrabal was frozen into lethargy and indecisiveness. This can be seen in his inability to take reasonable steps to control his cats' breeding and in allowing Renda to be taken from him. As we have seen, however, Hrabal's signifiers of anxiety could also spike and present as extreme and mechanical acts of violence. This we saw when Hrabal beat the sack full of kittens against the trunk of a tree.

This increase and corresponding decrease in anxiety are best understood through the concept that anxiety is not a singular, indivisible whole. It has stages of locomotion and intensity that lead to the full effect. Hrabal's inactivity did, as noted, suddenly increase to a phase of violent acting out in the killing of the kittens. This underscores the theory of Lacan's anxiety matrix. Hrabal's stream-of-consciousness method has, as we have seen, provided a significant number of literary signifiers for examination in this discussion. There are, it must be acknowledged, many more examples and passages in *All My Cats* that might have been deployed to the same effect. Many texts that do not use such an open or loose writing style would, perhaps, not be quite as amenable to the current approach. What is crucial, however, is that this methodology has shown how practical a structural approach to literature can be, particularly when dealing with subjects that lend themselves to

constructing a matrix for understanding. The philosophical discussion of anxiety, instead of its clinical epidemiological debate, has been the key topic here and deserves further interdisciplinary experimentation. The practical application of this methodology is that it provides a roadmap for future studies to interrogate literary sources using the signifier of anxiety in connection with wider theoretical subjects, such as the imagined agency of animals.

**Acknowledgment**

Not Applicable

**Availability of Data and Materials**

Not Applicable

**Competing Interests**

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

**Funding**

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

**Authors' Contribution**

Edward Owen Teggin worked the project and the main conceptual ideas, wrote the manuscript. Yostiani Noor Asmi Harini worked the previous research.

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