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Old Possum Of Practical Cats

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Introduction: The Enduring Magic of T.S. Eliot's Feline Masterpiece

When we speak of literary works that have transcended their original medium to become global cultural phenomena, few stories are as unexpected or as charming as that of **Old Possum of Practical Cats**. The curious title refers to T.S. Eliot's beloved 1939 collection of whimsical poetry, *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. Though Eliot himself never intended these verses to be anything more than playful letters to his godchildren, they later became the inspiration for Andrew Lloyd Webber's record-breaking musical *Cats*. This article explores the origins, structure, characters, and lasting legacy of the book, examining why these feline portraits continue to captivate readers and audiences more than eight decades after their first publication.

The phrase "Old Possum" was Eliot's affectionate nickname among friends—a nod to his mischievous, elusive nature. By writing about cats with distinct personalities, Eliot created a miniature society that reflected human foibles and virtues. The poems are deceptively simple: they are not just about cats, but about identity, mystery, and the joy of naming. This article will guide you through the history, key characters, poetic techniques, and cultural impact of **Old Possum of Practical Cats**, offering fresh insights for both longtime fans and new readers.

Origins of the Poems: From Private Letters to Published Collection

T.S. Eliot began writing lighthearted cat poems in the 1930s for his young godchildren, particularly for the children of his friend and publisher Geoffrey Faber. These poems were collected and published by Faber and Faber in 1939 under the title *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*. The book consisted of 15 poems, each introducing a different feline character. Eliot's preface explained that the poems were meant to be "practical" – that is, they offered advice on how to handle cats, though the advice was humorous and tongue-in-cheek.

The collection stands in stark contrast to Eliot's more famous works such as *The Waste Land* or *Four Quartets*. Where those poems grapple with despair, faith, and time, **Old Possum of Practical Cats**is playful, rhythmic, and full of nonsense. Yet the same masterful use of language is evident. Eliot employs varied meter, internal rhyme, and a rich vocabulary that delights children and adults alike. The poems also reveal Eliot's deep affection for cats—he was known to own several, including a black cat named Jellicle (which gave rise to the term "Jellicle cats").

The Jellicle Tribe and Eliot's Fictional Cat World

One of the most important contributions of the book is the invention of the "Jellicle cats." The word appears in the poem "The Song of the Jellicles," where Eliot describes them as small, black-and-white cats who gather by moonlight to dance and sing. The name "Jellicle" likely derives from Eliot's own cat Jellicle, combined with "gelatinous" or whimsical syllables. In the book, Jellicle cats are a distinct tribe—mysterious and joyful. This concept became the foundation for the musical *Cats*, which revolves around the Jellicle Ball, where cats gather to choose one to ascend to the Heaviside Layer.

Eliot's world is not just a collection of random cat portraits; it is a structured society with different classes and personalities. There are dignified cats like Bustopher Jones (the "cat about town"), mischievous cats like the infamous Macavity, and romantic cats like Skimbleshanks the Railway Cat. Each poem functions as a character sketch, offering a moral or a lesson about human behavior. For example, "The Old Gumbie Cat" Jennyanydots sits all day but works at night to organize mice and cockroaches—teaching the value of hidden industriousness.

Key Characters in Old Possum of Practical Cats

The richness of **Old Possum of Practical Cats**stems from its unforgettable character gallery. Below are some of the most famous feline personalities, each with unique traits and memorable lines.

Macavity: The Mystery Cat

Macavity is perhaps the most famous character from the book, partly due to his central role in the musical. He is a criminal mastermind who always escapes the scene of the crime. Eliot describes him as tall, thin, and with a "sunken" eye. He is the Napoleon of Crime among cats—a reference to Sherlock Holmes's Moriarty. The poem "Macavity: The Mystery Cat" is written in a parody of detective fiction, and the line "Macavity's not there!" became iconic. His character embodies the allure of rebellion and the fear of lawlessness.

Bustopher Jones: The Cat About Town

Bustopher Jones is the epitome of a dignified, well-fed gentleman. He frequents top-tier clubs and restaurants in London, and his shining coat reflects his gourmet lifestyle. Eliot uses him to satirize upper-class leisure. Bustopher's multiple chins and his love for fine dining make him a comic figure, but he receives respect from other cats. The poem praises his "influence and weight," both literally and metaphorically.

Grizabella: The Glamour Cat

Grizabella does not appear in Eliot's original 1939 collection; she was introduced later in a poem titled "Grizabella the Glamour Cat," published separately after the book. She is a once-beautiful cat now shunned by the Jellicle tribe because of her faded appearance. Her story of loneliness and redemption became the emotional core of the musical, immortalized in the song "Memory." Grizabella represents themes of aging, loss, and the possibility of forgiveness.

Skimbleshanks: The Railway Cat

Skimbleshanks is the cheerful, helpful cat who lives on the Night Mail train. He ensures that everything runs smoothly—keeping the mice away from the mailbags and entertaining passengers. The poem is full of train imagery and onomatopoeia, mimicking the rhythm of wheels on tracks. Skimbleshanks embodies dependability and community spirit. Children especially love this poem because it turns a mundane setting into an adventure.

Poetic Techniques and Style in Old Possum of Practical Cats

Eliot's genius in this collection lies in his mastery of **nonsense poetry** and **light verse**. He follows the tradition of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, but adds his own modernist sophistication. The poems use irregular rhyming schemes, shifting meters, and invented words (e.g., "practical cats," "Jellicle," "rum tum tugger"). This makes the text highly rhythmic and suitable for reading aloud. In fact, Eliot often performed these poems for children and adults.

Another key technique is the use of **cataloguing**—listing the many names, habits, and possessions of each cat. This creates a sense of richness and depth. For instance, the poem "The Naming of Cats" explains that every cat must have three names: an everyday name, a fancy name, and a secret, ineffable name known only to the cat itself. This philosophical snippet touches on the mystery of identity, a recurring theme in Eliot's serious work.

The humor is gentle and satirical, never cruel. Eliot pokes fun at human pretensions through cat behavior. For example, “The Rum Tum Tugger” is a contrary cat who always wants what he cannot have—a reflection of human rebelliousness. The poems are accessible but reward re-reading because of their layered meanings.

From Page to Stage: The Legacy of the Musical Cats

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of **Old Possum of Practical Cats** is its transformation into Andrew Lloyd Webber’s musical *Cats*, which premiered in 1981 in London. Initially, Val Eliot, T.S. Eliot’s widow, gave permission to Webber to set the poems to music. The composer selected several poems and added music, but the storyline was thin. The breakthrough came when Webber discovered Eliot’s unpublished fragment about Grizabella. That fragment became the lyrics for “Memory,” one of the most famous songs in musical theater history.

The musical follows the Jellicle cats gathering for the annual Jellicle Ball, where Old Deuteronomy decides which cat will ascend to the Heaviside Layer to be reborn. The show’s lack of a traditional plot was initially considered risky, but its spectacular costumes, choreography, and songs made it a phenomenon. It ran for 18 years on Broadway and 21 years in London’s West End. The show introduced millions to Eliot’s poems, often prompting viewers to seek out the original book.

The success of *Cats* also renewed interest in the poetry itself. New editions were published, and the poems were translated into many languages. The crossover between high literature and popular entertainment is rare, and **Old Possum of Practical Cats**stands as a prime example. The book and musical together have shaped how we imagine cats in culture—as mysterious, independent, and deeply individual.

Cultural Impact and Enduring Relevance

Over 85 years after its first publication, **Old Possum of Practical Cats**remains a staple of children’s literature and a beloved classic for all ages. It has been adapted into audiobooks, animated films (including a 1998 video version of the musical), and stage productions worldwide. Its influence extends beyond literature: the term “Jellicle” has entered common parlance among cat lovers, and cat-themed events often draw from Eliot’s poems.

The book also holds a special place in English education. It is frequently used in schools to teach poetry, rhythm, and character analysis. The poems are short enough to be memorized, making them ideal for recitation. Teachers often ask students to create their own “practical cat” poem, applying Eliot’s formula of a distinct name, appearance, and trait.

Moreover, the poems continue to resonate with adult readers because they deal with universal themes: the search for identity (The Naming of Cats), the consequences of criminal behavior (Macavity), the pain of aging (Grizabella), and the joy of belonging (the Jellicle Ball). Eliot’s lighthearted tone does not diminish the depth; it invites reflection.

Conclusion: A Timeless Celebration of Feline Individuality

Old Possum of Practical Catsis far more than a quaint collection of poems. It is a masterclass in wordplay, character creation, and the celebration of uniqueness. T.S. Eliot’s decision to write for children allowed him to tap into a playful side that his more serious work rarely revealed. The result is a book that has delighted generations and inspired one of the most successful musicals in history.

Whether you are meeting these cats for the first time or revisiting them after years, the poems remind us that every creature—human or feline—has a story, a secret name, and a place in the moonlit dance of life. The legacy of Old Possum’s practical cats is secure: they will continue to prowl, purr, and perform for readers and

audiences around the world, as long as there are cats to watch and words to sing.

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