

**Zeitschrift:** Asiatische Studien : Zeitschrift der Schweizerischen Asiengesellschaft = Études asiatiques : revue de la Société Suisse-Asie  
**Herausgeber:** Schweizerische Asiengesellschaft  
**Band:** 65 (2011)  
**Heft:** 2

**Artikel:** The symbolism of the cat in Aoneko by Hagiwara Sakutar?  
**Autor:** Melanowicz, Mikolaj  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-170109>

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# THE SYMBOLISM OF THE CAT IN *AONEKO* BY HAGIWARA SAKUTARŌ

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## *Abstract*

This article discusses the role of cats in the poetry of Hagiwara Sakutarō. It first touches on the fact that cats became a literary topic in *Wagahai wa neko de aru* by Natsume Sōseki, followed by an analysis of the second-most-famous cat in Japanese literature, appearing in two poetry collections of Hagiwara Sakutarō, *Tsuki ni hoeru* (*Howling at the Moon*, 1917) and *Aoneko* (*The Blue Cat*, 1923). I argue that Hagiwara uses cats to convey the emotions of a man affected by prostration and weakness, living alone in utter solitude. The cat symbolizes a world of illusion and suffering. Although it is not possible to closely define the meaning of Hagiwara's "blue cat", as this was a concept born within the passive ennui and the feeling of a man who is disillusioned and solitary.

## Introduction

What is the meaning of a study on the roles of the "cat" in literature and culture? Is it meaningful for literary or cultural studies to consider the many different animals that appear throughout literature? Although I am not entirely certain of the intrinsic value of such investigations, I will, nevertheless, make several observations on the roles of cats in poetry and prose. For this paper, I posit that a study of cats in literature might be of value for the new interdisciplinary cross-gender studies. In order to study the phenomenon, I will concentrate on the poetry of Hagiwara Sakutarō (1886–1942), the author of *Tsuki ni hoeru* (*Howling at the Moon*, 1917), *Aoneko* (*The Blue Cat*, 1923), *Hyōtō* (*Icy Island*, 1934), *Junjō shōkyokushū* (*Collection of Innocent-Hearted Small Pieces*, 1925) as well as essay collections such as *Shi no genri* (*Principles of Poetry*, 1928), *Kyoshū no shijin Yosa Buson* (*The Nostalgic Poet Yosa Buson*, 1936), and *Nihon e no kaiki* (*Return to Japan*, 1938).

A pervasive atmosphere of melancholy prevails in Hagiwara's works, expressed in sorrow and sadness, and with wild illusions in a world of mental and physical sufferings. His hero (to be more precise, lyrical hero) lives in a solitary decaying world, a place where nothing positive would ever seem to happen.

Time seems to have been stopped and has transformed into a state of painful loneliness. Somewhere, not far from the hero, yet unattainable, there exists a different kind of life that is beautiful and perhaps even happy. The gloomy world vision of the hero is sometimes brightened by a fleeting sense of longing and of happiness, of feelings that the hero might have experienced once, long ago. Even so, he is a tragic hero, who seems to be heading towards nothingness. His passivity is not merely biological, but conditioned by fatalism, by the negation of will and of a personal freedom that is severely limited by external factors. Consequently – and this appears especially from the poems of *Icy Island* – the hero adopts the philosophy of resignation, as the only possible strategy in this world of illusion, in a world devoid of any value.<sup>1</sup>

The state of mind of the lyrical hero and the world thus created in the poems bring to the forefront the enigmatic appearance of “cats” (here distinguished from the actual, biological animal) as an object of narration and as a narrating subject. Let us look at this phenomenon more closely.

## The cat in modern Japanese literature

First of all, we may ascertain that cats became a literary topic in Japanese novels of the twentieth century and took on new roles, such as the narrator in poetry and in novels, appearing even in the titles of many works.<sup>2</sup> Among many appearances of cats, the most widely known example was undoubtedly created by Natsume Sōseki. His seminal novel encouraged other authors to relegate descriptions of human social problems to the perceptive powers of a cat, or to filter their criticism of contemporary family and social life in Japan through the observations of a cat.

Although I cannot claim any personal fondness for cats, I decided, nonetheless, to investigate several cases where the cat plays important roles, especially in the titles of literary texts. The word “cat” in Japanese literature is first of all associated with the narrator of *Wagahai wa neko de aru* (*I am a Cat*, 1905) by Natsume Sōseki, as a being that could enter any place in order to eavesdrop on people and who seldom talks to other cats, especially in the first seven chapters. This cat acts as the ears of a narrator who moves around continuously. Often it

1 See MELANOWICZ, 1974: 67–68.

2 See HIDAKA et al., 1982.



sneaks up on the main character, Professor Kushami, and into his room, the kitchen, and others' gardens. From the seventh chapter onwards, the main roles of the novel are played by the cats and its eyes. Thanks to this ingenious method of composition, the world of the novel appears to the reader as an auditory illusion: the narrator (that is, the author) listens, and although he says nothing, hears everything as phrases overheard by a cat. Formally, the cat makes critical remarks while observing the members of the Kushami family, their behavior and their relationships with the outside world. Thus the role of the narrator becomes confused as to whether he is speaking as a cat, as an author or maybe as one of the participants of a party, such as Meitei. In the novel, the cat knows as much as the people in Kushami's house, a situation that enables it to report its observations with a sense of humor and with insightful criticism. Significantly, the cat is not an indifferent and unemotional observer of the behavior of the humans surrounding it.<sup>3</sup>

A second famous cat in twentieth century Japanese literature was created by the poet Hagiwara Sakutarō, generally considered to have established modern colloquial poetry in Japan. This poet is often acclaimed for his extraordinary and brilliant free-style poems. In the following sections, I will focus on the cats that appear in his poem collection *Aoneko* (*The Blue Cat*, 1923); poems in which he displays both his mastery of diction as well as his pessimistic vision of a life where melancholy dominates. In this poetry collection, included in the chapter *Maboroshi no shindai* (A Phantom Bed), there is a poem entitled *Aoneko*. Additionally the word *aoneko* "blue cat" appears in the second chapter *Sabishii aoneko* (Lonely Blue Cat). This title is preceded with the distinctive phrase:

*Koko ni wa ippiki aoneko ga iru. Sōshite yanagi wa kaze ni fukare, hakaba ni tsuki ga nobotte iru* <sup>4</sup>

Here is a solitary blue cat. And willows swinging in the wind, and the moon rising over the cemetery.

This phrase anticipates several topics and images that reoccur in the poems, such as *aoneko* ("blue cat"), *hakaba* ("cemetery"), *namamekashii* ("alluring"), *neko-yanagi* ("cat's willow, sallow"). For example, in the poem *Namamekashii hakaba* (Alluring Cemetery) a lady, or rather, her shadow (*kage*) is defined by a negation: "she is not a shellfish, nor a pheasant, nor a cat." Using the word

3 See MELANOWICZ, 2006: 26; NATSUME, 2006 (1977); NATSUME, 1986.

4 HAGIWARA, 1959, I: 155.

“shadow” Hagiwara reminds us that the sun, an important symbol of Japan, can not only give light but can also cast shadows.

The word “cat” is repeated in only a few places: within the fifty-five poems of *The Blue Cat* anthology, we encounter the word twice in titles and only a few times in the texts. However, for some unknown reason Hagiwara places the cat in the very title of the collection. For that reason the image of cat might be important in understanding the entire collection. Granted, it is not known today, whether the title was the result of careful consideration by the author; I would, however, argue that this problem has now become immaterial. Simply stated, this is because the monumental collection of poems, *The Blue Cat*, (and the cat with it) have now become trademarks of the poet Hagiwara Sakutarō.

Hagiwara was also the author of *Tsuki ni hoeru*, a collection that incidentally uses a dog as its fundamental metaphor. This collection was his first publication and contains a poem about black cats on a roof:

<i>Makkuroke no neko ga ni hiki</i>	Two jet-black cats
<i>Nayamashii yoru no yane no ue de</i>	On a melancholy night roof:
<i>Pinto tateta shippo no saki kara</i>	From the tips of their taut tails
<i>Ito no yō na mikazuki ga kasunde iru</i>	A threadlike crescent moon hangs in a haze
“Owaa, konbanwa”	“Owaa, good evening.”
“Owaa, konbanwa”	“Owaa, good evening.”
“Ogyaa, ogyaa, ogyaa”	“Waa, owaa, waa.”
“Owaa, koko no ie no shujin wa byōki desu”	“Owaa, the master of this house is sick.” <sup>5</sup>

Hagiwara returned to the theme of the cat twelve years later when he wrote the short story *Nekomachi – sanbunshifū na shōsetsu / roman* (*Cat Town – A Fantasy in the Manner of a Prose Poem*, 1935), which described a Japanese city from the 1930s. In the story, the narrator visualizes another universe from the fourth dimension. Bewitched by a fox, the narrator became able to see another world situated behind the present. Cats appear only at the end of the text, but play an important role within it. The hero of this modernistic short story arrives in a hot spring resort in the Echigo region of northern Japan, and pursues a daily ritual of walking alone along the mountain roads. One day he decides to cross a mountain ridge, and while watching the clouds he is reminded of an old folk tale in which inhabitants of one village became possessed by dog spirits while another village became possessed by cat spirits. While indulging these memories the hero loses his way and suddenly finds a marvelous town with Western style houses.

5 KEENE, 1986: 268–269.



[... A] strange and horrifying sight appeared before me. Great packs of cats materialized everywhere, filling all roads around me! Cats, cats, cats, cats, cats, cats, and more cats! Everywhere I looked there was nothing but cats! Whiskered cat faces rose in the windows of all the houses, filling the panes like pictures in frames. [...]

Once my mind cleared, I understood everything. I had foolishly allowed myself to succumb again to my perceptual malady, to my disturbance of the semicircular canals. [...] As popular parlance would have it, I had been “bewitched by a fox”.<sup>6</sup>

## Hagiwara Sakutarō – a symbolist

The relativistic nature of truth as refracted through the lenses of human perception and the power of the imagination are of course typical of the modernist movement. Although Hagiwara Sakutarō was not classified as “modernist” (*modanisuto*), but rather as symbolist or neo-romanticist due to his brilliant free-style poems, he is considered to have established modern colloquial poetry in Japan. He used language that appealed to his musical sense, and presented his readers with a rich and ambiguous world. In *The Blue Cat* he displayed his mastery of diction, skepticism, and pessimistic visions of life, typical to the decadent symbolists of the time. From this period onwards, the faltering sense of inescapable melancholy dominates in his works.

From his school days Hagiwara read Poe and symbolist poets, such as Baudelaire, whose poetry was being translated into Japanese by Mori Ōgai, Ueda Bin and others in the 1890s. Hagiwara had read *Flowers of Evil*, so he should have been familiar with the poem *Cat*, and the famous “decadent cat” from this poem could have left its traces in his imagination.

In the beginning of the 1920s, he could not have read *Cats* by T. S. Eliot, whose poetry first was translated into Japanese during the 1930s. In Eliot’s poems, we see a literary development of the complicated nature of cats, that is, an exploration into their mysterious personalities. (It is of course well known that A. L. Webber made a remarkably successful musical based on Eliot’s poems.)

Hagiwara’s cats, however, are rather enigmatic creatures. In the beginning of the 1920s Hagiwara wrote the poetry that he later collected in his *The Blue Cat*, in which he used the motif of the cat in a symbolic way. With the exception of the two talkative cats on a roof in *Howling at the Moon*, no feline activities

6 TYLER, 2008: 551. See also HAGIWARA, 1948.

are described in *The Blue Cat*. In fact, readers are free to create their own images of the “blue cat” in the title.

## The meaning of cats

### 1. *Meaning of “cat” in poem titles*

As mentioned above, the title of the book *The Blue Cat* comes from a similarly titled poem in the collection. Does the poem then introduce the reader into the cat’s world? If so, what kind of world might this be? And what kind of imagination does this cat develop? What images might the cat of the title suggest? What, indeed, might the reader expect from such a title? And what collective memory might it evoke? Here we should remember that in the semiotic space shared by Hagiwara and his readers, narratives dealing with learned cats such as *I am a Cat* (1905) and the *Lebensansichten des Katers Murr* (1821) by E.T.A. Hoffmann<sup>7</sup> (the latter mentioned by Natsume Sōseki) already existed.

Whether the poet read *Cat In Boots* (*Le chat botté*), or *The Cat that Walked by Himself* (1902) by Rudyard Kipling is not clear, but perhaps this is of lesser importance, as no traces are detectable in *The Blue Cat*. However, these narratives might belong to the collective memory of the Japanese readers at this time.<sup>8</sup>

### 2. *The cat in Japanese proverbs*

Proverbs are also important in forming the collective memory. For example, the word *nekojita* (“cat’s tongue”) is used as a metonymy in everyday discourse, to describe somebody with a tongue that is sensitive to hot drinks and food. There are also proverbs based on the “cat’s tongue”, such as *nekojita no nagaburo iri* (“long bath of cat’s tongue”) that describes people who do not like hot baths. Other proverbs emphasize the physical features of cats, such as their way of

7 Translated by Akiyama Rokurōbei as *Osuneko Muru no jinseikan* (AKIYAMA, 1935).

8 Titles that were known at this time include: *Neko no akubi* (1917) by Sakai Toshihiko, *Neko no kubitsuri* (1918) and *Neko no hyakunichi* (1919) by Kurahara Shinjirō, *Nekohachi* (1919) by Iwano Hōmei.



walking, their faces, and cold noses. Or they may describe imagined psychological traits, such as vindictiveness or greed. For instance:

<i>Neko aruki</i>	“walking cats”
<i>Neko omote</i>	“face of cats”
<i>Neko ga cha o fuku</i>	“humorous face of cats”
<i>Neko konjō</i>	“disposition of cats”
<i>Neko no kourami</i>	“vindictive nature of cats”
<i>Neko no hana to keisei no kokoro wa tsumetai</i>	“frigidity of cat noses and courtesan hearts”
<i>Neko no mae no koban (neko ni koban)</i>	“pearls cast before swine”
<i>Neko no ou yori katsuobushi o kakuse</i>	“instead of chasing cats, better to hide away the dried bonito”

The word “cat” is also used with many different meanings, for instance “lover” (*jōjin*, *irootoko*) in the *sharebon* (books of wit and fashion) from the Kansai region, or as “somebody foolish,” or “humbug”. The word was also used in secret languages (*ingo*) where they signaled friends of thieves or policemen. Some images of the cat are related to their functions in domesticated settings, that is, as mousetraps, as pets, or as the cat fur that was used for creating a *samisen* resonance box. With such multiple connections and allusions, the word “cat” could, for example, become a nickname for a *samisen*-playing geisha, as the instrument was partly made with cat fur.

### 3. *Meaning of “blue cat”*

The above proverbs might provide hints for understanding the cat as the main theme of the poem collection *The Blue Cat*. Of course, we could also expect depictions of cats as lovely pets or nasty beasts. But in Hagiwara’s poems we do not find narration by cats or cat topics. Therefore, it might be more important for the reader to think of a special kind of cat, called by Hagiwara *aoi* (“green, blue”) or *ao* (“green, blue”) here used as a prefix. What indeed is the meaning of *ao*, a noun created from the adjective *aoi*, which is explained in dictionaries as “green” or “blue”?<sup>9</sup>

In proverbs, the words *ao* and *aoi* (both as noun and adjective) are used mainly to mean “new”, “unripe”, or “inexperienced.” In some idioms *aoi* means

9 *Ao wa ai yori idete ai yori aoshi* (“Blue originates from blue, but is more green than blue”) explains the *Shinseiki bijuaru daijiten* (*Visual Encyclopedia of the New Millennium*, 1998). “Blue” contains 42 colors ranging from light blue to almost black blue.



ill health, for instance in the phrase *aobyōtan o miru yō* (“look like a green gourd”), suggesting a pale, sick face. Would it then be correct to say that Hagiwara’s cats are green, blue, or sick?

In English, the word “aoi” is translated as “blue,” “azure,” “green,” “unripe,” and “pale” or “pallid” depending on various contexts.<sup>10</sup> May we then say that the cat of the poems collection *The Blue Cat* are green, blue or sick? And what would a “green cat,” for instance, mean? In order to decide on a translation into a European language, we would first have to read the poems in the collection and interpret the words *neko* and *aoneko* in a broader context. On a closer reading of the poems we may state, that the pervasive feeling is that of solitude. And we should also remember that a cat is a rather lonely creature.

In the poem *Kodoku* (“Solitude”) from the poem collection *Howling at the Moon*, the poet describes a striking image of an emaciated horse that is shown standing on a country road and gaping at the dry grass. The poet writes that the “heart of weary horse” is *gaping*, thus suggesting that the “heart of horse” should be identified with the soul (*tamashii*) of the hero (that is, the poet). Five years later, Hagiwara returned to the image of the weary horse in the poem *Aozameta uma* (“pale / pallid Horse”) in the *Ishi to mummyō* (“Will and Ignorance”) section of *The Blue Cat*. Within this poem the cloudy winter sky deepens the melancholy in a scenery that could be interpreted as a symbol of fate and solitude.

The feeling of solitude expressed in *The Blue Cat* is associated with weariness, boredom and inertia. The repeating epithets and multiplication of qualifiers, for example, the five attributes given to the horse, where the horse is used as a qualifier for shadow and thus becomes important in the creation of a certain mood. To intensify such feelings the poet uses forms of uncertain future (*ikō*, *shiyō*, *iyō*).

In another example, the poem *Hae no shōka* (“Song of Housefly”) from *The Blue Cat* starts with the description of a scenery, complete with the phrases “scent of cherry blossom”, “children cries”, and “white floating clouds”. Here the soul and the life of the hero are compared to a weak insect sitting on a windowpane. The fly here becomes a symbol of the hero’s weakness and of his aimless wandering through life.

10 KENKYŪSHA, 1974: 33.

### The poem *The Blue Cat*

In the poem *The Blue Cat* Hagiwara expresses his love for the big city, that is, for Tokyo, as a place described as an attractive alternative to the poor provincial town of Maebashi where the poet used to live. Here lights glow even late at night, so that only cats can fall asleep.

*Aa kono ōkina tokai no yoru ni nemureru mono wa  
Tada ippiki no aoi neko no kage da*  
Ah, the only thing that can sleep at night in this huge city  
Is the shadow of one blue cat

The shadow of this blue cat then narrates the pathetic story of mankind.

*Kanashii jinrui no rekishi o kataru neko no kage da.  
Ware no motomete yamazaru kōfuku no aoi kage da.*  
The blue shadow of a cat that tells the sad history of mankind,  
The blue shadow of the happiness we are ever seeking.<sup>11</sup>

In these passages it is interesting to note that the emphasis is placed on shadows (*kage*). The shadow is initially described as the shadow of the blue cat (*aoi neko*), succeeded by the shadow of the narrating cat (*rekishi o kataru neko*), and finally by the blue shadow of happiness (*kōfuku no aoi kage*). In these cases only shadows of a cat appear, denoting the reflection of reality, that is, an imagined unreal world. It seems that the exact color of the cat – whether blue or green – is of lesser importance, as there are no contextual associations with color. However, by taking into consideration the symbolic aspect of *aoi* and *ao* from the title of the poem collection, where sadness, melancholy and nostalgia predominate, we can say that the meaning of “blue cat” is similar to that of “sad cat” since the words express the state of the hero’s mind. Using this interpretation, we can now understand why Hagiwara felt the need to create a new word. As Hagiwara wrote:

I have frequently been asked about the meaning of the title of the book, *The Blue Cat*. I intended by the word ‘blue’ the English word: that is, I used it to embrace the meanings of “hopeless”, “melancholy” and so on ... The meaning of the title is, in other words, “a melancholy-looking cat”. Another meaning, also found in the title-poem “The Blue Cat”,

11 KEENE, 1984: 271.



was the result of imagining that the bluish-white sparks from electric lines reflected on the sky over a big city were a huge blue cat. This meaning conveyed the intense yearning I felt for the city while writing these poems in the country. In addition, I was infatuated with Schopenhauer when I compiled the collection, and a world-weary, passive ennui based on his philosophy of the negation of the will, together with the Hinayana Buddhist pessimism of bliss through annihilation, inevitably lurked beneath the sentiments in the poem.<sup>12</sup>

It seems in the poet's imagination the cat was associated with melancholy. In my opinion, the cat is a melancholic animal and a very amorous and coquettish beast.

*Makoto ni "neko" wa yūtsu na dōbutsu de ari, sō shite mata namamekashii ikimono de mo aru.*<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

In the poetry collections *Howling at the Moon* and *The Blue Cat* Hagiwara uses cats as conveyors of his feelings, that is, the feelings of a man who is affected by prostration and weakness, hampered by a lack of initiative, and living alone in utter solitude. The cat symbolizes a world of illusion shaped under Schopenhauer, an important influence for Hagiwara and his poetry at this time. His early writings reflect Schopenhauer's philosophy that focused on human suffering and the negation of the will and, indeed, this is what we see reflected in the poems.

The cat in Natsume's novel *I am a Cat* is presented as an intelligent observer, as well as the main narrator of the story. In effect, this cat creates a realistic tale about the human and feline worlds around it, as seen through its eyes.

In contrast, Hagiwara's cats are rather taciturn. We could say that they are a silent lot, although his cat does "relate [the] history of mankind" – as stated in *The Blue Cat*. The cat relates its story without words and without moving: a lonely creature. Rather than a physical cat, a mere shadow of a cat rouses numerous rich associations for the reader. For Hagiwara, the cat gleams with reflections that fill the poet with sadness. Sometimes the image even reminds him of the sparkling sky above the large city.

12 KEENE, 1984: 270–271.

13 See: FUKUDA / IJIMA, 1989 (1967): 126.



In conclusion, it is not possible to define closely the meaning of Hagiwara's "blue cat," as this was a concept born within the imagination of the poet. It has survived until today, especially in online portals and in dictionaries of the Japanese language, as Hagiwara's own creation. Both the word and image of the blue cat express a passive ennui and the feelings of a man who is disillusioned and solitary, replete with self-negation, and steadfastly progressing towards nothingness.

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