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"A jaguar is an awful cat". Animals and Animal Metaphors in James M. Cain's Novels

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> "Cats are cats, ain't they?".
> "Not exactly. Some are big and some are little. Mine are big. I don't think a pet farm would do very well with that lion we've got. Or the tigers. Or the puma. Or the three jaguars. They're the worst. A jaguar is an awful cat".
> James M. Cain, *The Postman Always Rings Twice*

1. Introduction: James M. Cain as a 'Noir' author

James M. Cain is an American writer usually associated with the hard-boiled tradition. The themes and forms he develops in his novels, however, are quite different from those of hard-boiled writers like Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler (see Rzepka 2005, chapter 6). In particular, he seldom uses detectives as protagonists of his novels and in his books we do not witness many murders and shootings. In this perspective, Cain's novels should be more precisely defined as noir novels, since the atmosphere of his books closely recalls pictures from the film noir era starting in the Forties [1]. The Library of America, in fact, has called 'noir' a current of crime fiction which proceeds parallelly with hard-boiled literature. In Robert Polito's words, this subgenre explores "themes of crime, guilt, deception, obsessive passion, murder, and the disintegrating psyche, all elements that we can find in Cain's novels" (2003, 983). For his part,

[1] Marling (1995) uses "Roman Noir" to define James Cain's novels.

Cain steadfastly refused any label, saying he did not belong to any schools, and that they existed mainly in the critics' mind [2].

Cain's best known and most successful works appeared in the 1930s and the 1940s and were often adapted for the screen and the stage. They are set against the background of the America of the 1930s and the Great Depression with particular focus on California. In their *James M. Cain: Hard-Boiled Mythmaker* (2011), David Madden and Kristopher Mecholsky have tried to determine with precision the main themes in Cain's novels, identifying some recurring 'pure elements': sex, religion, food, money and violence. What dominates and connects them is the theme of fate: in Cain's works, in fact, every uncontrolled passion is fatal. But it is the author himself who reveals the central theme of his whole production: a dream that comes true and then turns into a nightmare (see Fine 1992, 55).

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the role of animals and animal metaphors and similes that can be found in some of Cain's novels, by investigating their symbolic function. In some cases, Cain introduces actual animals, with a very specific function in the development of his stories: they can appear briefly in the description of a place or an event or have a symbolic meaning. In other cases, however, Cain uses animals in metaphors or similes in order to describe certain features of his characters. It is interesting to observe that certain elements are frequently recurring in Cain's novels and, therefore, particularly important. For example, judging from the iteration of certain images and from their crucial role in his works, Cain certainly seems to be very fond of felines.

Cain wrote a massive number of novels, but it was mainly in the first part of his career that he was most acclaimed by the critics (Forter 1996). Hence, only three of Cain's earliest and most successful works will be taken into consideration for the purpose of this essay: *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Serenade* and *Mildred Pierce*.

2. *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934)

The Postman Always Rings Twice is Cain's first and most famous novel. At the center of the plot is the passion between the young and charming Cora Smith and Frank Chambers, a rash and restless drifter. Cora is the unhappy wife of

[2] The most accurate biography on James Cain is Hoopes 1982.

Nick Papadakis, a Greek immigrant owner of a gas station diner. Cora and Frank's fatal meeting takes place when he is hired by Nick. Very soon, a great passion – violent and somewhat animal – grows between them. This will lead to their first attempt to kill Nick by knocking him unconscious with a blunt object and drowning him in his bathtub. The attempt, however, fails because of a short circuit, so Frank decides to leave. But later, meeting him by chance, Nick brings Frank back. This seals Nick's fate because Frank and Cora finally manage to kill him by faking a car accident.

Cora and Frank get away with Nick's murder thanks to the dirty subterfuges of a corrupt lawyer, even if they turn against each other during the trial. When they are finally free, the two lovers painfully try to get back to their life together, even if the faith in their relationship has been undermined by the shadow of the sin they committed. One day, while Cora is away to assist her dying mother, Frank cannot resist the temptation of leaving with Madge Allen, a breeder of wild animals, going back home only a week later. When Cora finds out Frank's adventure, she flies into a rage but tells Frank she is pregnant and their love seems stronger than ever. After a definitive test of mutual loyalty, the two lovers seem finally happy. Unfortunately, Cora dies in a car accident and Frank, who was at the wheel, is charged with killing her. The story ends in a prison, where Frank is waiting for his death sentence hoping that Cora, in the moment of her death, did not think he wanted to kill her.

2.1. Animals and animal metaphors in The Postman Always Rings Twice

A cat plays an active role in the unfolding of the story: it is thanks to it, in fact, that Cora and Frank manage to dodge the accusation after their first attempt of murder. The cat appears in chapter four, when Frank and Cora first try to kill Nick by drowning him in his bathtub. While Cora is in the bathroom ready to hit her husband, Frank is on watch in a car parked outside the house, ready to honk his horn in case anyone shows up. And here comes the cat:

> Then, all of a sudden, I saw something move, back by the porch. I almost hit the horn, but then I saw it was a cat. It was just a gray cat, but it shook me up. A cat was the last thing I wanted to see then. I couldn't see it for a minute, and then there it was again, smelling around the stepladder. I didn't want to blow the horn, because it wasn't anything but a cat, but I didn't want it around that stepladder. I got out of the car, went back there, and shooed it away. (16)

Madden and Mecholsky observe: "We think the cat is introduced as a cliché interruption of the action, to promote suspense; but then it 'blows a fuse' and wrecks the murder attempt" (2011, 126). In fact, soon after Frank sees the cat, a policeman, unaware of what is happening, stops outside the diner and, talking to Frank, notes the cat and says: "I love a cat. They're always up to something" (17). He does not know that, shortly afterwards, the same cat will thwart the two lovers' plan by making the power fail, thus preventing Cora from carrying out the murder. Frank and Cora, together with the policeman, will find that out only when they come back from the hospital – where Nick, after escaping death, was admitted – and find the cat dead: "There was the cat, laying on its back with all four feet in the air" (21). After the discovery, there is a dialogue between Frank and the policeman:

> [The policeman] "Stepped right off the ladder on to the fuse box. Well, that's the way it goes. Them poor dumb things, they can't get it through their head about electricity, can they? No sir, it's too much for them".
> "Tough, all right".
> "That's what it is, it's tough. Killed her deader than hell. Pretty cat, too. Remember, how she looked when she was creeping up that ladder? I never seen a cuter cat than she was".
> "And pretty color". (22)

This dialogue marks the end of chapter four. Chapter five, then, opens with another dialogue, this time between Frank and Cora. It is interesting to note that Cora, feeling guilty for what happened, says: "Next time I'll listen to you, Frank. You're smart. You're not dumb like I am" (22), once more using *dumb*, the same adjective the policeman used in reference to cats. Actually the comparison between Cora and an infernal cat recurs throughout the novel and in each of Cain's books women have something of a feline, but I am going to examine this issue later on.

The cat is not the only feline appearing in *The Postman*. In the last chapters of the novel, in fact, Cain also introduces a puma. This choice seems the result of the writer's personal experience and, particularly, of his frequent visits to Goebel's Lion Farm, a breeding farm for lions that were trained to appear in Hollywood movies (see Hoopes 1982, chapter 2). It all begins in chapter thirteen, when Cora is at the bedside of her dying mother and Frank meets Madge Allen, a widow, restaurant owner and breeder of lions, tigers, pumas and jaguars. Frank and Madge decide to go south and they come back only one week later, after travelling to Nicaragua to hunt for pumas in the forests. Some

time later, Madge goes to Cora's diner to tell her everything and she brings Frank a puma cub to remind him of their adventure. When Cora goes berserk, Frank says:

> [Cora] went out, and I heard her go in my room. When she came back she had a kitten with her, but a kitten that was bigger than a cat. It was gray, with spots on it. She put it on the table in front of me and it began to meow. "The puma had little ones while you were gone, and she brought you one to remember her by". She leaned back against the wall and began to laugh again, a wild, crazy laugh. "And the cat came back! It stepped on the fuse box and got killed, but here it is back! Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! Ain't that funny, how unlucky cats are for you?". (96)

This last sentence uttered by Cora introduces us to a parallelism. The two lovers killed Nick, but when Cora tells Frank about her pregnancy she says: "I thought about it. What it would mean to us. Because we took a life, didn't we? And now we're going to give one back" (99). The baby, thus, represents a second chance for Frank and Cora, an opportunity of achieving redemption and giving a new life in return for the one they took. In the same way, the cat, electrocuted during Cora and Frank's first attempt at murdering Nick, seems to come back as a puma that Cora and Frank decide to adopt: also in this case a life was taken – even if accidentally – and the puma represents the possibility of redemption. This theory seems to find confirmation in the fact that, when Nick dies, he is compared to a cat (a comparison that in Cain's novels usually refers to women): "He crumpled up and curled on the seat like a cat on a sofa" (39), says Frank. Another confirmation of the theory is to be found towards the end of the novel, when Cora dies in a car accident and Frank is charged with murder. Cain, in fact, makes the puma come back at the trial: "It had grown, but it hadn't been taken care of right, so it was mangy and sick looking […]. It was an awful looking thing, and it didn't do me any good, believe me" (104), says Frank. These fatal substitutions explain the message of the title, of the postman who always rings twice: in both cases there is a second possibility, and in both cases it fades because, in the logic framework of the novel, you cannot escape your destiny.

In *The Postman Always Ring Twice*, felines are often used also in metaphors and similes. Nick, for example, sees in Cora all the characteristics of the ideal wife: pretty, tame and levelheaded, devoted to her work and her family. Talking about her, he says: "She is my little white bird. She is my little white dove" (7). The tame dove Cora, however, hides a very different nature, a seductive and dangerous charm. And when she asks Frank: "God, do I look like a little white bird?", his answer is: "To me, you look more like a hell cat" (13). It

is this side of Cora that irresistibly attracts Frank, a side that she shows when she suggests killing Nick. On that occasion, Frank tells her: "You must be a hell cat, though. You couldn't make me feel like this if you weren't". After their first night of violent passion, then, Frank shows again how Cora's bestial side excites him by comparing her to another feline: "She was snarling like a cougar. I liked her like that" (13-5), he says [3].

In Cain's novels, male characters can often be divided into two Manichean categories: the winners and the defeated (see Fine 1992). Among the defeated, there certainly is *The Postman Always Ring Twice*'s Nick Papadakis: he is completely unaware of his destiny and, most of all, of the role of his apparently ideal wife in it. For this reason, Cain chooses to compare him to an animal that, in the collective imagination, is considered clumsy, naïve or not so intelligent. "He was as pleased as a gorilla that seen his face in the mirror" (38) says Cain describing Nick, who listens with pleasure to the echo of his voice in the mountains a moment before being killed. Naïve and carefree, he does not know that, shortly afterwards, he will be crumpled and curled up on the seat of the car like a cat on a sofa.

Frank Chambers, instead, seems to be one of the winners – at least at the beginning of the novel, because in the end his tragic destiny will lead him to death. Frank is subjugated by passion and this gets him involved in an insane murder. Thus, it is no coincidence that, during the trial where he is convicted to death, Frank is compared to a mad dog. Frank himself says: "Sackett said I was a mad dog", and, a little later, "the judge said he would give me exactly the same consideration he would show any other mad dog" (103-4). Ultimately, the only winning character in the end of the novel is a man of power: Sackett, the prosecutor in Frank's trial. In fact, he is associated to a predator when Frank says: "Sackett had started howling for blood" (73).

3. *Serenade* (1937)

Serenade is Cain's second novel and it was very controversial in the past because of its presentation of the theme of bisexuality. The story's protagonist is John Howard Sharp, an opera singer who fell into disgrace because of an unmentionable secret: his voice lost its strength when he fell in love with another man. The

[3] For a detailed study on felineness and femininity see Rodriguez 2009.

plot begins in a bar in Tupinamba, Mexico, where the protagonist meets Juana, a beautiful and enticing prostitute – uneducated but intelligent –, and he takes a fancy to her. Sharp has just failed his last attempt at singing in the opera and is disheartened and without money. From the beginning, Juana becomes aware of the protagonist's latent homosexuality because of the changes in his voice when he sings. She decides to bring him with her to Acapulco where, counting on a local politician to help her, she plans to open and manage a brothel. While on their way, Juana and Sharp find refuge from a storm in a country church, where Sharp's irresistible attraction for Juana turns into violence: he assaults her and the two have sex. Thanks to this event, the singer seems to get his voice back [4]. After enraging the politician who was supposed to help them, then, Sharp and Juana run away to the United States on the ship of Captain Conners, a music aficionado who soon becomes a loyal friend to the couple.

In Los Angeles, Sharp becomes a film celebrity and, after some time, he moves to New York, where he has the opportunity to sing at the Metropolitan Opera House. The situation, however, turns sour when conductor Winston Hawes, Sharp's former lover, comes back into his life. Hawes is a sly man, willing to do anything to reach his goals and, thanks to his money, he makes Sharp's life hell. Juana, already aware of Sharp's bisexuality, kills Hawes and manages to run away to Mexico with Captain Conners' help. Sharp decides to follow her to Mexico. But he is known there, and if he wants to prevent her from being recognized and arrested he will not be able to sing again. Juana and Sharp become distant and more and more suspicious of each other. Juana decides to leave Sharp but he, meeting her by chance, gets his revenge by singing in front of a large crowd of people in a bar. Thus, Juana is recognized and killed.

3.1. Animals and animal metaphors in Serenade

Of the three novels taken into consideration, *Serenade* is certainly the one presenting the highest number of animals, even if they do not play any specific role in the unfolding of the story – they simply enrich and vivify the places in which characters live. In this regard, we can find an interesting example at the beginning of chapter four, when Sharp and Juana find refuge from a storm in a country church. Here, Sharp describes the lizards inhabiting the Mexican

[4] For a detailed study on the 'loss of virility' in the American Crime Novel see Forter 2000.

landscape as fantastic animals halfway between reptiles and birds, lizards that could suddenly start flying.

> When we got to the church the rocks back of it were alive with lizards. […] They levelled out with their tail, somehow, so they went over the rocks in a straight line, and almost seemed to fly. Looking at them you could believe it all right, that they turned into birds just by letting their scales grow into feathers. You could almost believe that they were half bird already. (95)

Immediately after another exotic animal – the iguana – appears, Juana screams: "Iguana! Iguana! Look, look, big iguana!" (*ibid.*). Then, Sharp says:

> I looked, and couldn't see anything. Then, still as the rock it was lying on, and just about the color of it, I saw the evilest-looking thing I ever laid eyes on. It looked like some prehistoric monster you see in the encyclopedia, between two and three feet long, with a scruff of spines that started at its head and went clear down its back, and a look in its eye like something in a nightmare. (*Ibid.*)

Also the iguana is described as a fantastic being, even monstrous. Like two hungry predators, Sharp and Juana catch the animal and cook it alive in boiling water to eat it. Juana is the first to pounce on the animal, leaving Sharp openmouthed. But it is he who traps the iguana with bestial ferocity and devises the best way to eat it. The iguana seems to stir something primitive in Sharp, that primitive instinct that is found in every man and that Sharp, differently from Juana, hides behind an appearance of civility and education. Here too, the theme of the conflict between appearance and reality seems central, as well as the border between beauty and monstrosity.

Other animals complement the descriptions of the colorful Mexican landscape in *Serenade*. In chapter three, for example, Cain describes Juana's hometown, populated by dogs and *burros* that greet the woman when she comes back home. In the following chapter, there is also a description of a chaotic street of Acapulco full of animals: "The street was so narrow, and so choked with burros, pigs, goats, *mariachis*, and people, that even when you met a car you had to saw by, and a turn was impossible" (95-6). In addition, there are many references to corridas and bulls in the novel.

Cain uses different animal metaphors to describe Juana. Her simplicity is well represented by an image Sharp uses in chapter two, when he says: "She had a way of dozing off like that, between the talk, like some kitten that falls asleep as soon as you stop playing with it" (47). This positive image of Juana sharply contrasts with the one used to describe the evilness of Sharp's

colleagues. In fact, when Juana arrives in the new world of Hollywood with her faltering English and old-fashioned clothes, she attracts the scornful comments of the rich actresses working with him and, talking about one of them, Sharp says: "when she saw Juana the grin froze on her face and her eyes looked like a snake's" (155).

In the beginning, Juana – a simple and poorly educated woman grown up in a Mexican village and forced to become a prostitute in order to make ends meet – possesses a primitive and wild side which has not been repressed by American society's social conventions and strict moralism. Soon, however, she is forced to adapt to the society where she lives. Her inner change is reflected on the outside and is evident in the following description: "When I still sat there, she jumped at me like a tiger, shook me till I could feel my teeth rattling, and then ran in to the telephone", says Sharp in chapter ten. The kitten now has turned into a tiger. Again, what awakes the tiger inside Juana is love, the same love that will lead her to kill Hawes in order to free Sharp from his torments.

Later, Juana is also compared to a snake, or rather her voice is compared to a rattlesnake's hiss when, after Hawes's return to New York, she questions Sharp about his relationship with the music director.

Cain uses some animal metaphors and similes also in relation to Sharp's bisexuality. To explain that Sharp's voice loses its strength when he loves a man, in fact, Juana makes use of powerful images. Expounding her bizarre theory, she says: "Hoaney, these man who love other man, they can do much, very clever. But no can sing. Have no *toro* in high voice, no *grrr* that frighten little *muchacha*, make heart beat fast. Sound like old woman, like cow, like priest". Later, she also adds: "Tonight I know. I make no mistake. When you love Juana, you sing nice, much *toro*". Here is Sharp's secret: when he loves a woman, his voice is powerful, he is as strong as a bull; when he loves a man, instead, all his strength disappears, his voice is like a priest's, like a cow's bellow. The cow and the bull are the opposites clashing inside him.

4. *Mildred Pierce* (1941)

Mildred Pierce is Cain's third novel and a singular work in his production, mostly because the author prefers an omniscient narrator to the usual first-person narration and because the protagonist is a woman. Mildred Pierce is a strong and ambitious woman who has to fight to obtain what she wants in the

miserable and corrupt world of the Thirties. The novel begins with the end of her marriage with Bert, a good but irresponsible and childish man who, after making a fortune, loses everything during the years of the Great Depression. On the contrary, Mildred is determined and, when she remains by herself, she fights to sustain herself and her daughters and fulfil her secret dream of seeing her daughter Veda making the most of her musical talent. Thus, she puts her pride aside and accepts to work as a waitress in a diner. Thanks to her willpower and her cooking skills, she soon becomes an entrepreneur and opens her own restaurant (and later two more successful restaurants). In the meantime, Mildred has an affair with Monty Beragon, a rich and fascinating polo player. She has an almost sick attachment to her daughter Veda, to the point that when her younger daughter dies because of a sudden ailment Mildred is deep down assaulted by a "guilty, lapin joy that it had been the other child who was taken from her, and not Veda" (76).

When Veda's dream of being a great pianist fails, she begins to hang out with the wrong crowd and even pretends to be pregnant in order to blackmail a rich young man. After this happens, despite her obsessive love for Veda, Mildred throws her out. Six months later, when Veda unexpectedly makes it big in the music world thanks to her soprano voice, Mildred does everything she can to get closer to her again. Hence, she decides to marry Monty – Veda's only friend – despite the fact that he humiliated her and treated her badly. The plan works and the rich Mildred manages to get her daughter back, but Veda continuously plays with her mother's feelings, taking advantage of her sense of guilt and doing all she can to hurt her. In the meantime, Mildred's business empire collapses. When she finds out her daughter has a relationship with Monty, then, the world she built with the sweat of her brow is destroyed. The story ends as it began: Mildred, without money, marries Bert again. Apparently, he is the one who has always loved her.

4.1. Animals and animal metaphors in Mildred Pierce

In *Mildred Pierce*, we can find different animal metaphors and similes. The snake reappears: Veda, in fact, is compared to the animal by her singing teacher, Mr. Treviso, who suggests that her mother Mildred stays away from her by saying:

> You go to a zoo, hey? See little snake? Is come from India, is all red, yellow, black, ver' pretty little snake. You take 'home, hey? Make a little pet, like puppy dog?

> No – you got more sense. I tell you, is same wit' dees Veda. You buy ticket, you look at a little snake, but you no take home. No. (467)

Many have noticed how Mildred, to a certain degree, resembles her daughter – more than she wants to admit (e.g., see Welsh 1983). Thus, the fact that Mildred is also compared to a snake in the end of the novel is not surprising. "While Veda still stood coldly smiling, Mildred began to talk, her tongue licking her lips with quick, dry motions like the motions of a snake's tongue" (516), writes Cain when Mildred finds out the last of Veda's innumerable deceits and finally has the guts to turn her away forever.

Mildred is an ambitious woman as well, willing to do anything to obtain what she wants. For example, she does not hesitate to cynically take advantage of Monty in order to reconnect with her daughter. On that occasion, she turns into a lovely kitten: "She snuggled up to him, tried to be kittenish" (477). At other times, instead, Mildred looks more like a tiger: "Her face screwed up into the squint, and the glittering tears made her eyes look hard, cold, and feline" (387).

When Mildred finds out about the relationship between Monty and Veda, Cain uses these words to describe her reaction: "Mildred's breathing became heavier, as though she were an animal, and had run a distance, and was panting". Mildred turns into a violent and ferocious beast, seizing her daughter and wringing her throat almost to the point of suffocation. Cain, here, uses another animal metaphor to describe Veda, saying: "this athlete crumpled like a jellyfish", while Mildred "clutched for the throat of the naked girl beneath her, and squeezed hard" (511).

The inconclusive Monty, instead, is compared to a dog more than once. After losing his wealth and social status during the years of the Great Depression, Monty prefers to sponge off Mildred just to be able to preserve the lifestyle he was used to in the past. When Mildred claims the money she has lent him, he accuses her of not being a true lady for showing such an interest towards money and tells her: "you, before I had even fifty bucks out of you, you had to make a chauffeur out of me, didn't you? To get your money's worth? A lackey, a poodle dog" (414). Without the money he had in the past, in fact, Monty is really just like a pet totally depending on Mildred. When she comes back to him with the intention of getting married in order to get closer to Veda, he "was thin and lined, and had a brooding, hangdog look that was very different from the jaunty air he had once had" (474).

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this essay was to trace and catalog the presence of animals and the use of animal metaphors and similes in three of James M. Cain's novels and reflect on their symbolic value and on the role they play in the narration. As already said, it was necessary to choose only a restricted number out of the vast quantity of Cain's works – his first novels *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Serenade* and *Mildred Pierce*. The choice fell on them because of their content and their style: Cain's later works, in fact, are characterized by a flat and repetitive style or by unoriginal contents.

What emerged from this work is that, in Cain's novels, actual animals can play an active role in the unfolding of the plot and that, in most cases, they carry a symbolic meaning that is often connected to crucial themes in the story. In addition, in this study I tried to highlight the recurrence of animal metaphors and similes in the books noting how they are related to certain aspects of the characters' personality and behavior. One interesting aspect is the fact that usually Cain uses distinct categories of animals depending on whether he is talking about men or women.

It would be certainly interesting to further deepen this analysis. This kind of work, for example, could be extended to Cain's short stories or minor novels. The results could be very interesting, if we consider that a short story like *The Baby in the Icebox* features a tiger among its protagonists. Another possibility, then, is offered by the many movies based on Cain's works, where the animal motif is frequently omitted. The reasons behind this kind of choice could become the object of an in-depth research. Similarly, it would be interesting to analyze the Italian translations of Cain's novels, where translators often decided to leave out the animal metaphors and similes used by the author.

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Abstract

James M. Cain is often linked with hard-boiled writers such as Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler. Actually, he wrote a different kind of novels, where there are no 'private eye' detectives and very few murders. Robert Polito describes them as Noir Novels, using a term normally associated with the famous Hollywood genre, because of their particular emphasis on psyche and drama issues – distinctive elements of the Film Noir Era.