

## The Cat in the House: Marechera Reads Hemingway

Alan Ramón Ward  
University of British Columbia

As early critics have noted with some disapproval, Dambudzo Marechera's style in *The House of Hunger* seems more informed by the individualistic, self-tortured narratives of modern western writing than an organically African tradition. Anna-Leena Toivanen remarks that "Marechera was accused of being too European" in his aesthetic ("Writer" 184), and that he was "too westernized and individualistic, lacking 'serious commitment' to the anti-colonial struggle" ("Receiving" 16). Juliet Okonkwo called him "decadent" (91); Mbulelo Mzamane accused him of cynicism and disillusionment (224); Dan Wylie criticized his focus on an "individual and rampantly esoteric sensibility" (60). Thankfully, the suggestion that Marechera is somehow anti-African has been variously and convincingly discredited (see, for instance, Toivanen, "Writer"; Pattison). Yet it must not be forgotten that Marechera counts European writers among his strongest literary influences.

Ernest Hemingway's name appears explicitly in most of Marechera's collections. The mention is usually tiny and inconsequential, as in *Scrapiron Blues*: "Hemingway was a writer who shot himself in the head (dead) with a very big, a very ugly rifle" (244); or characteristically cryptic, as in *Black Sunlight*: "the big and Hemingway fish that was the mote in his eye" (74). And yet Hemingway's brief mention in *Mindblast*, in which Marechera describes himself as following "the myth of the hard-drinking novelist, trying to out-Hemingway Ernest Hemingway in seedy whorehouse bars in Zimbabwe" (123), suggests to me the worthwhile exploration of a notional correspondence that I always felt connected Marechera's work with Hemingway's.

In this article, I examine the title story of *The House of Hunger* in relation to Hemingway's "Cat in the Rain." Both stories deal with the difficulties of communication in circumstances of intimacy, and both do so by establishing the significance of the material environment for their characters. In particular, both stories exist in relation to a symbolic register that they either use, or are obviously unable to use, to engage with the world around them. In the case of Hemingway's characters, interpersonal and other problems are easily restaged in symbolic terms.

For Hemingway, one's most pressing concerns, including issues of belonging, love and identification, can subliminate and be rehearsed as relations between things, such as candles or silver or long hair, or a cat. As Clarence Lindsay remarks, "the cat is clearly a substitute for

[the wife's] needs" (24), as the husband and wife in Hemingway's story do not confront their marital problems directly. They engage with each other instead through a rehearsed vocabulary of wants and desires that *stand in* for the problems in their lives. Hemingway's characters thus demonstrate a confidence in their physical environment; they feel safe enough to appropriate it symbolically for themselves.

By contrast, Marechera does not allow his characters access to a persistent symbolic distance that insulates them from other people. In many ways, "The House of Hunger" can be read as the delimitation of a physical space that cannot be symbolically appropriated by its inhabitants. The House of Hunger is cold and unsafe, and its residents must deal with their lives and tribulations and crises directly, without barrier. The problems that arise for Marechera's characters are not easily shifted symbolically onto aspects of their environment, chiefly because this environment is too forbidding. It cannot be appropriated; it does not belong to them at a basic level. There is a symbolic world in the House of Hunger with which the characters engage, but it is not used or controlled by them. It exists instead without tangible referents as an oppressive dreamscape.

By setting up specific thematic comparisons between these two stories, this article posits this difference as pivotal to reading "The House of Hunger" as a *retelling* of "Cat in the Rain." In "The House of Hunger," Marechera works through the radical gulf he encounters between the realities in which he and Hemingway wrote, delimiting a specific and substantial difference in setting that Marechera had to cross as a reader in order to appreciate Hemingway. This article thus attempts at bearing witness to Marechera's specific *engagement* with the western literature that perhaps most influenced him. As I show, Marechera reveals more than a stylistic connection to Hemingway.

By retelling elements of Hemingway's story, transposed onto the House of Hunger, Marechera succeeds in representing what is missing from the latter thematically. In fact, I believe that Marechera's most famous story can be read as a direct sociological *answer* to Hemingway's work, and to "Cat in the Rain" in particular. Though Marechera does try to out-Hemingway Hemingway through a reimagining of similar characters, he ends up departing radically from his object, discovering instead the *difference* that arises inevitably through the retelling.

"Cat in the Rain" is the story of an American couple spending a rainy day in their hotel room on the Italian coast. The wife is uncomfortable where she is, and longs for a number of changes to quell her inquietude; the husband reads his book, paying little attention to his wife and what she wants. She says she wants her own silver and candles and new clothes, and for it to be spring and to brush her hair and to have fun (109). The wife sees a cat in the rain and wants to bring it inside. She decides that she now wants this cat more than anything, and goes out to find it, only to return disappointed. She continues complaining to her husband about various aspects of her situation, to which he responds with either arrogance or indifference.

At the end of the story, the hotel manager, knowing that the wife had gone looking for a cat, sends a cat to the couple's room.

We feel that the whole scene, from the list of desires the wife enumerates to the lazy dismissals she receives from her husband, is charged and underhanded on both sides. The wife will not say what she wants – though possibly she herself does not know what this is – and in dismissing her, the husband is not simply reminding his wife to compose herself, but cruelly putting her down. Significantly, the couple is unable to find the words to communicate. They fail at the level of language.

The cat is presented to the story as a symbol of the wife's desire, everything that the husband cannot provide because he does not understand her. Warren Bennett locates "the tragic figure in 'Cat in the Rain' [as] the girl, the wife. She is cut off from meaning and fulfillment both inside her marriage and outside" (256). She wants to let her hair grow, against her husband's wishes. He counters this challenge directly – "I like it the way it is," he says. She moves on, avoiding direct confrontation: "If I can't have long hair or any fun, I can have a cat," she says (109). The tensions raised in the exchange between husband and wife centre around an unspoken impasse. They are not open with each other and, as Thomas Strychacz puts it, "they are condemned to near-paralysis" (78). The story is therefore a commentary on marriage, and perhaps more generally on the inherent incommunicability of an individual's feelings and thoughts.

As if answering Hemingway's observations, Marechera continues the exchange between man and woman, only within the fraught realities of the Rhodesian township and beyond the expectations of middle-class decorum. "The House of Hunger" takes the reader through a series of disjointed experiences in the township where the narrator has lived and is about to leave. There is little obvious structure to the story but its disorienting shifts seem to illustrate the frenetic and unreliable experience of township life while focusing the reader on the individual memories that are recounted. Through this, the setting of a man and woman locked in a conflicted romantic attachment is preserved. We can see immediately, however, that theirs is not an incommunicability brought on by decorum or politeness or even the immutable gap between man and woman. In Marechera's world, the problem between them is transparent. They have had sexual relations, but she is his brother's wife and so neither of them feels the relationship can continue.

We are thus presented with the *material* blocks that prevent a solution, contrasting Hemingway's couple, for whom there is no obvious basis for the frustration described. Hemingway's couple is simply unhappy – the wife's mind races through options while clearly not knowing what she wants enough to settle on a single demand. For her and her husband, the possibilities of life, like their freedom itself, loom almost oppressively before them.

This difference in the manner in which the stories maintain a dramatic tension between characters illustrates a broader difference in the kind of personal discord being explored by each story. The basic

coordinates of these differing incommunicabilities reveal an opposition between an *internal* block in the case of Hemingway's characters – that is, a block originating within the characters themselves – and a persistently *external*, or material, block in the case of Marechera's.

Hemingway's story provides a characteristic snapshot of a moment that would be mundane were it not made the subject of a story. As with much of Hemingway, it is the focus brought about by the existence of the story itself that elevates certain aspects of the setting to an emotional drama and astute human commentary. He freezes the husband in an incapacity to act. Though the wife stews by pacing and embarking on a failed search for the cat, the husband keeps to his space on the bed, moving only enough to shift the book in his hands. The husband lives his impotence in connecting with his wife as a sort of polite, stylized inactivity.

By contrast, the cat that appears in the domestic scene between Marechera's narrator and the woman, Immaculate, does so less delicately than in Hemingway's story. This cat belongs to the narrator, and has just been bludgeoned to death and set on fire. It is thrown from the street by its unknown assailants; its bloody corpse hits the narrator in the face. The tension in this scene is clear and brutal, just as their forbidden love and the reasons for its impossibility are open and easily articulable. The situation is straightforward.

As if to punctuate the transparency of a very different situation, Marechera's narrator does what the husband in Hemingway could never do: he kicks the cat straight out the door onto the street. Action is easy in this world, and feelings and situations are understood and related often without the need for the obfuscating effect of words.

Perhaps the narrator's actions in Marechera's story also answer the futility experienced by the wife in Hemingway, by presenting an equally futile predicament. The wife does not really want the cat and Marechera's narrator does not really want it gone. They are both acting out. But whereas the wife's frustrations are limited by the expectations of a decorum that she must obey, the narrator's are limited only by the walls, his fists and his poverty.

Although the limits of decorum provide the wife with the right to access and use the cat as a symbolic substitution for her unarticulated desire, in "Cat in the Rain," the cat is simply a lost companion for Marechera's narrator. In the first case, the wife appropriates the cat that she does not really want in order to console and distract herself; in the latter, the narrator kicks out what he did not want to lose, only because he has already lost it – as his cat was killed on the street – and he must accept and confront his reality directly.

The particular restrictions confronted by characters in Marechera's world are almost too transparent, so much so that what is obvious need not be said since it is so clearly understood. Love, for instance, is impossible, not because people cannot understand each other, but due to a discrete tangible impediment that interrupts in every case. In the narrator's relationship with Immaculate, the impediment is his brother who is married to her; in the case of his white girlfriend, Patricia, it is the racist mob that keeps them apart; for his parents (as

for Marechera's own parents), it is the train that ran over his father (20; 72; 45; see also Habila).

The House of Hunger comprises a number of lives lived in parallel, intersecting without connecting even at a basic level. This predicament is illustrated in part by using the overly intellectual narrator to describe and reflect on the events as he sees them. His thoughts isolate him from those around him in the House of Hunger. The complex emotions that exist between characters in Hemingway seem to exist for Marechera's narrator at an individual level. Perhaps the emotions exist for others also in this way, but they are so foreign to the common space that they are not even tangentially expressed.

These emotions do not cause problems in communication in the House of Hunger, they do not create pockets of common understanding that cannot be spoken. Instead, they are simply not outwardly represented, giving way to the anxiety and fear in people's faces, and the existential pangs of the narrator's otherness. A deeply personal embarrassment constantly strikes him, crinkling the "tinfoil of [his] soul" (Marechera, "House" 17). His interactions with people do not revolve around misunderstandings and what must remain unspoken, but radical rejection: "something in her gaze seemed to stab into me like a pitchfork, to stab and to pierce into my guts until she suddenly drew back and it seemed dragged out of my entrails" (Marechera, "House" 12).

The House of Hunger comprises a world of solitude in the frenetic midst of people. The narrator's greatest ambition is simply to leave the House of Hunger, and though the story is itself presented as a long lingering stream of thoughts produced retrospectively as he does leave, we are sure that he and the House will never be far apart. As we learn in later stories set in Oxford, the manner of his approach, his crisp, removed outlook, continues to make relations with other people impossible.

The way that people relate to one another in "The House of Hunger" is especially informative when read against Hemingway's story. Lives are lived in parallel in both cases, but a distinction becomes apparent between the material impossibility of communication being staged in Marechera, and the intense difficulty of communication, lodged in the structures of language itself, being explored in Hemingway.

This is not to suggest, of course, that "The House of Hunger" simply exposes Hemingway for not giving his privileged, middle-class characters any "real" problems. But "The House of Hunger" does mount its exploration of a persistent and externally imposed confusion that afflicts people against the backdrop of an internal, linguistically structured confusion. This distinction in "The House of Hunger" provides a lens through which to examine Hemingway's story.

Husband and wife are pushed apart in "Cat in the Rain" by their own gendered identifications. Each has a particular role to play, an image with which to identify that restricts the register in which they are able to communicate. Certain sensitivities or vulnerabilities cannot be exposed; certain behaviours are off limits.

We are presented with what seems at first a subtle hierarchy of sexual dominance. The husband gruffly gives orders while lying in bed. He is comfortable there and does not move from his domain for the length of the story. It is a hierarchy echoed in the world beyond as well. The male hotel owner repeats the husband's instructions, "don't get wet" (107), by sending a maid out to tell the wife: "you must not get wet" (108). She is out of place, shifting between male-dominated spaces, uncomfortable and under a man's care. The wife's exclusion and status as an outsider are felt throughout Hemingway's descriptions. He gives the husband a name, "George" whereas she is described as "his wife" or "the American girl."

Moreover, as Oddvar Holmesland observes, we are actually being told the story from the husband's perspective. This is most evident in the final arrival of the cat at the door. We assume *with the husband* that it is indeed the same cat the wife had seen from the window to conclude our reading without ambiguity. Though the wife would know differently, we are not given this information. We cannot know that this is the cat and that the wife will be satisfied: "the fact that it is only seen from the husband's perspective accounts for this ambiguity" (Holmesland 66).

Finally, a pervasive female oppression is highlighted in Hemingway's story by the wife being scolded by her husband: "Oh, shut up and get something to read," he says ("Cat" 109). "The House of Hunger" takes this treatment to an almost unbelievable extreme, and in so doing emphasizes a sexualized dynamics of power at work between husband and wife. Marechera recounts an anecdote of a husband brutalizing his wife in public, showing signs of a radical insecurity and the need to dominate women in general to assuage it. An argument ends "with the husband actually fucking – raping – his wife right there in the thick of the excited crowd. He was cursing all women to hell as he did so" ("House" 50). Marechera portrays this violent assault as the product of a long-standing masculinist violence embedded in the culture, where it is "still believed that if one did not beat up one's wife it meant that one did not love her at all" (49-50).

Sexuality pervades the House of Hunger, shaping relationships between lovers and would-be lovers but also between siblings, parents and children, and friends. The narrator's brother Peter is most prevalently known for the way he treats his wife, Immaculate, the sometime love interest of the narrator as well; the narrator's father is known "only as the character who occasionally screw[s] mother and who pa[ys] the rent, beat[s him] up, and [is] cuckolded on the sly by various persons" (77); and despite himself the narrator is often judged on the basis of his sexual adventures, especially in the case of his white girlfriend (47).

Sexuality is expressed aggressively in Marechera's world as a statement of possession. As Dobrota Pucherová remarks, "sex is devoid of love and pleasure [in the House of Hunger]; instead, it is an instrument of violence ... and power" (77). Peter, for instance, is introduced beating Immaculate, and then forcing the narrator to watch him having sex with her in the kitchen (Marechera, "House" 4; 27).

The relationship between the narrator and Peter seems founded on the way that Peter asserts himself over Immaculate.

Marechera's male characters are anxious to establish their sexual identities. The narrator's brother, Peter, for instance, is preoccupied with displaying his virility to the world. It seems moreover that wherever Peter goes, he is identified with his sexuality. He masturbates publicly for the boys in the township, "to prove to us infants that he had actually become capable of making girls – any girls – pregnant" (48). The theatrical aspect of the performance does not escape the narrator: "it was a solemn occasion ... He had bathed and oiled himself all over. He was lean and strong and handsome. The size of his organ astonished us..." (48-49). The narrator's friend, Harry, too, seems completely obsessed with performing his sexuality for himself and everyone else. His preoccupation with race is also channeled through sex. Marechera gives us a view of Harry's psyche in another story in which Harry chases his next conquest: "Harry desperately wanted not so much to make it with Ada – it could have been any other girl – but ... a woman like Ada who had made it with all sorts of white hard-ons would give him the receptacle [for] satisfaction" ("Transformation" 88).

Marechera's stories are filled with men who, like the women around them, have difficulty moving beyond the sexualized terms of their world. They seem unable to communicate anything more than the performance of certain drives and desires. They themselves become caught within their roles, lost in their own attempts to understand them.

Though again the extent of Marechera's descriptions make them difficult to compare with Hemingway's seemingly sedate setting, reading one against the other emphasizes thematic power relations behind the husband's approach to his wife in "Cat in the Rain." Though the story explicitly concerns itself wholly with what the wife wants and needs, a more basic driving force for the story may rather be the husband's need and desire to dominate his wife to assuage his own identificatory insecurities.

Certain cues alert us to possible parallels between this quiet husband and other Hemingway men. There is a single-mindedness to the way he reads on the bed, to his disengagement with family life in favour of the quiet life of the mind. For him, his chattering wife is a reality to be endured. He deals with her thoughtlessly and then aggressively when her interruptions annoy him sufficiently.

This type of male protagonist recurs in Hemingway's work, and we receive a better insight into his character in other examples from the Stories. The husband in "Snows of Kilimanjaro" appears to have a similar outlook to the husband in "Cat in the Rain," even if it is for a different reason. Neither man can be tender toward his wife, and we suspect that neither husband is entirely happy with his choice of wife; in "Snows," the regret is more pronounced.

The husband in "Snows" feels he has forsaken his talent as a writer, sold his authenticity, and betrayed himself for taking a rich woman he no longer loves as his wife. He had grown into the habit of ignoring love in favour of the comforts that rich women can bring.

Now, dying during a safari in Kenya, he recognizes that his marriage to this woman was a sort of con that deceived them both. He had talent, he remembers, but “instead of using it, he had traded on it. ... He had traded it for security, for comfort too” (412-13).

The husband’s fluctuating mood toward his wife in “Snows of Kilimanjaro” reminds us of a similar situation in “Cat in the Rain.” In “Snows,” the husband’s moods change toward his wife, from anger – “‘You bitch,’ he said. ‘You rich bitch’” (410) – to a recognition of his unfairness toward her: “‘You’re a fine woman,’ he said. ‘Don’t pay any attention to me’” (417). We see the husband in “Cat in the Rain” swing less dramatically, but also by turns he orders her to “shut up” (109), and offers to go out into the rain to save her from getting wet (107). Both men carry on ambivalent relationships with their wives, endured quietly for the most part but surging every so often in sharp reproaches and hostile treatment.

The husband’s reactions in “Snows” represent an annoyed indifference to life, issuing from a past personal choice. Another reading of his attitude, however, and of the husband’s attitude in “Cat in the Rain,” is of a generalized and inevitable incapacity to relate to women. The hero of “Snows” believes that searching for love rather than marrying for money would have saved him from his current disappointed fate, but we might wonder whether his disappointed situation in relation to the women in his life is not a consequence of his approach to femininity in general. Perhaps his own inadequate, overly restricted orientation toward women is to blame.

The wife in “Cat in the Rain” is also restricted in the way she communicates with her husband. Though she does not directly promote her sexuality to garner attention and control (as some of Hemingway’s other heroines do – Mrs. Macomber comes to mind), there are accepted protocols that she must follow. We see her shifting ambivalently between attempts to express herself. What is missing from her marriage and her life can be variously coded. She runs through a number of options: “I want to eat at a table with my own silver and I want candles. And I want it to be spring and I want to brush my hair out in front of a mirror and I want a kitty and I want some new clothes” (109). The changing face of what she wants is no longer represented simply as a misunderstanding between her and her husband; it has been internalized as a way of insulating herself. Consequently, her husband is unable to grasp what it is she actually wants and he, too, retreats inwardly.

The appearance of the cat in Hemingway’s story thus becomes particularly significant as a materialization of the couple’s internal turmoil. Hemingway’s “Cat in the Rain” is certainly a story exploring the gap in understanding between husband and wife, but it also describes what can emerge from this gap. One can detect through the story the detailed creation of the cat as an object metaphor that stands in for a particular element in the couple’s happiness.

One possible explanation is that it stands in for pregnancy. Jeffrey Meyers and Clarence Lindsay both read the story this way (Meyers 153; Lindsay 24) and it has been suggested more generally by many



critics such as Strychacz that the cat may hint at a longing for a “maternal role” and a substitute for “the lack of a child” (77). Certainly, the cat acts as a symbolic expression of a lack that gapes in the couple’s marital life.

It appears where it is not expected. As cats avoid water, it is a surprise to see this one in the rain. The maid reacts appropriately when she is told: “‘A cat?’ the maid laughed. ‘A cat in the rain?’” (Hemingway, “Cat” 108). The maid is surprised and amused by the very notion, but seeing that the report is serious, she turns away from the idea as though uneasy of what she has come across: “the maid’s face tightened. ‘Come Signora,’ she said. ‘We must get inside’” (108). She acts as though she has become an inadvertent witness to the couple’s marital discord, which at a symbolic level she has.

The symbolic importance of the cat is even signaled by the attention we are expected to pay to the war monument at the beginning of the story. Our focus is fixed on this object of significance by a surprisingly long description, “made of bronze and glisten[ing] in the rain” (107; see also Neel). People come from around the country to see it. When the wife looks out toward the war monument, however, she sees only the cat. The story begins with the cat, but only after our focus has been trained to recognize an object of significance. The cat immediately upstages the monument, but in the same terms, as a symbolic artifact.

The cat is an object carrying not so much a timeless symbolism, but representing the living, fluctuating, and unexpected nature of the couple’s current crisis. We should read Hemingway’s “Cat in the Rain” the way that Marechera does, as providing the specific context for the wet cat in the House of Hunger, not wet from rain but from its own blood, as it is delivered to the room where would-be lovers face each other.

We might begin by asking whether Hemingway’s cat could exist at all in Marechera’s House of Hunger as a symbolic outcome of the intractabilities between two people. Could such a thing materialize symbolically between Marechera’s narrator and Immaculate to distract them and alleviate the tension they feel? As if to give a definitive answer that Hemingway’s cat is impossible there, we are shown the narrator kicking his cat’s corpse from the room shortly after it enters it, perhaps giving – as I have previously suggested – a frustrated response to the final entry of the cat in Hemingway’s story.

But there is more to this difference: the House of Hunger is wracked with ghosts that also cannot be symbolized, and thereby also cannot be laid to rest. These ghosts, the “black heroes,” for instance, are a persistent presence unable to pass into a dead or objective history of the space. “Black heroes” are a living mythology without specific referent that influences the narrator’s life. Like the “soul hunger” that the narrator feels as an existential angst that seems to cry out within him for a purpose in life, the narrator’s haunting by black heroes looms like an answer to what this purpose should be. It is described by Anna-Leena Toivanen as standing “for a dream of delivering both the past and the future from the yoke of colonialism” (“Grotesque” 44).

Of course, he never gets any closer to pinpointing the meaning of these figures, or even finding their symbolic representation: "I was no nearer to discovering the authentic black heroes who haunted my dreams in a far-off golden age of Black Arcadia" (24). Even when he finds that he has first-hand knowledge of a guerilla fiercely fighting Smith's security forces, an old classmate of his who was quiet and reticent at school but who ultimately gave his life for the cause, the narrator feels no closer to them. Edmund is presented as a stoical, honest young man with a good heart who in the past liked the narrator despite the latter's nastiness toward him. Significantly, while everyone else around the narrator was satisfied pursuing their "student armchair politics," Edmund "had, it seemed, doggedly lived out his tortured dreams in the face of humiliation" (60-61). If anyone in the story deserves the accolade black hero, it is Edmund. And yet the notion of black heroes, used at least eight times throughout the story, is markedly absent in passages about Edmund.

Instead, the black heroes appear for the narrator in the face of the lecherous bartender, "thoughtfully reducing [Julia] to a stain on a sheet. A true hero of our time. Reducing everything to shit" (41). The black heroes appear when he is most confused and despondent with the world he inhabits. The image serves to stabilize him as he loses touch with the things around him. On one occasion he puts his head out a "window" in an attempt at escape. We realize that it is not a window but a set of mirrors and he sees "thousands of black heads ... sticking out of thousands of windows" (38). Without the ability to offload his field of desire onto the objects in his physical environment, his physical environment begins to impinge on his psychic perception. It represents to him his own self-objectification (see Ward 80). Occasionally, he lives his nightmares. As the vision of a thousand black heads escapes him, he thinks of Zimbabwe and sighs: "those black heroes..." (Marechera, "House" 39).

The "black heroes" in their schizophrenic, shifting imagery are his companion through the House of Hunger. And the narrator is not alone in acknowledging this. The repeated line: "what else is there," spoken by so many in the story, also seems to recur as a nod toward the futility suggested by the haunting of black heroes. Immaculate asks, "what else is there?", as a plea to take her away from their township. The narrator refuses her while thinking to himself of "those heroes, those black heroes of our time" (12).

It is not until late in the story that we fully understand the hope, nurtured by the narrator, for a politically revolutionary meaning of the question, "what else is there?" It is not until the question is spoken by Edmund, echoing its previous repetitions, as he stands up against Stephen in a fight that he will surely lose (65). In response to an injustice, Edmund challenges Stephen to a fight. Stephen, who seems to model himself on an African dictator (though he often quotes and uses the words of black African liberators and revolutionaries), beats Edmund until the latter is gibbering incoherently, unable to lift himself out of a pool of his own blood (66). We already know of Edmund's future. He will become a captured guerilla fighter against Smith; he

alone will answer the call for black heroes. It is in this context that Toivanen suggests that the question “articulates an elusive, almost disbelieving hope for something else or something new that is incongruent with the masculinist anti-colonial independence ambitions” (“Grotesque” 40).

“What else is there?” is in every case a rhetorical question, suggesting that there is nothing else. But for Edmund, this realization is enough to make him act. Yet his action cannot give black heroes a true referent; it cannot realize the narrator’s hope. Very few will sacrifice themselves for a higher purpose, or order their lives by it. What tangible focus are they left with? The answer, as we follow the narrator through the story, is *none*. For Harry, the pressure he feels pushes him toward a racially inflected obsession with women. He asks, “what else is there?”, locating his desire for white women as an answer to “the panorama of barbed wire, whitewashed houses, drunks, prostitutes, the angelic choirs of god-created flies, and the dust that erupted into little clouds” (Marechera, “House” 11). In these surroundings, he finds nothing, he says, except the nameless, faceless and intangible “white chick”: “I think I saw his point,” the narrator reflects (12); Harry’s obsession represents his confused response to his surroundings.

It may also be that the narrator sees Harry’s point because the narrator, and Marechera through him, identifies with Harry’s abandon. Brendon Nicholls observes that “Harry’s sexuality accords with [what Nicholls argues is] Marechera’s own preference for sexual relationships with white women,” and that like Harry, Marechera may himself have been a police informant while he was a student at the University of Rhodesia (Nicholls 8; see also Veit-Wild 148). Perhaps Marechera knows first-hand the pressures of “soul hunger,” having himself suffered the direct and unmitigated confrontation with the House of Hunger’s material realities. Certainly, his narrator remains friends with Harry despite knowing so well that the latter is working with the police: as Harry talks, “his handcuffs once more rattled into view. There was a dead silence for exactly seven seconds” (“House” 20); and later, it is confirmed that Harry has indeed been collecting “photographs of [the narrator and his] friends and little notes about what [they] do” (82).

That the narrator should accept so readily being surrounded by police spies masquerading as friends indicates the deep disillusionment and even defeatism that perpetually separates him from the black heroes. The narrator, like Immaculate, simply wants to leave at all costs, but remains viscerally exposed to feelings of guilt and regret for existing in that permanent state of not doing more.

We are shown that these feelings precipitate a personal turn inward for the inhabitants of the House of Hunger. The narrator tells how he “created for [him]self a labyrinthine personal world which would merely enmesh [him] within its crude mythology,” but leaves him permanently distanced from everyone around him (7). He recreates what he hears, what he witnesses, in his own personal

language. Consequently, he writes, “I found the idea of humanity, the concept of mankind, more attractive than actual beings” (7).

The ultimate result of this external, outward focus is an isolation in stark contrast to the isolation described by Hemingway. Rather than failing to connect with the people in front of him, Marechera’s narrator cannot even attempt closeness. He is left with an abstract mythology that he conjures and that oppresses him. Whereas the cat in Hemingway can act as a focal point for attention that relieves the need for interaction between husband and wife, the external focus in Marechera is tied inherently back into the reason for not being able to connect with people in the first place. It is an ironic twist in which Marechera’s story indulges: could it be that even a willfully deceptive symbolic substitution, sublimating a personal affect as a fetishistic material desire, would alleviate the existential angst, the “soul hunger,” that his characters feel?

The husband and wife in Hemingway do not ostensibly focus on each other but on the cat; the characters in Marechera lose all focus for the omnipresence of a mythology of black heroes that is at once nothing and everywhere. It is the persistence of, and their preoccupation with, the mythology of black heroes that prevents them from connecting with each other. The narrator feels empty without even symbolic access to the ineffable life of black heroism. Without a way to connect with this singular effort, he does not feel whole enough to relate. He is a “stain” and is surrounded only by “stains”: “that’s what a human being means. Insides. Entrails. ... The augury of life-steaming entrails” (46). The mythology represents what could fill him in as a person and thus acts as a permanent reminder of his incompleteness.

Hemingway’s story, on the other hand, reads like a snapshot of domestic turmoil, momentarily distracted by the appearance of a random object focus for the couple. The cat is chosen as an object to draw their attention. And in many ways, the cat completes them as a trio when it is brought to them at the end of the story. We feel that something more is needed between them, and almost in response the desired cat arrives in need of warmth and affection. We feel that they might keep it, as they would a baby. This final scene where the maid presents the couple with a small living bundle in their bedroom suggests a new beginning, like childbirth, even as it hints retrospectively at a further reason for a disappointment between them. Perhaps the central vision of this reading is that the possibility of such a new beginning is propped up entirely by a symbolic register that separately structures impossibility.

In this context, Marechera’s story restages our feelings of disappointment regarding the need for husband and wife to communicate symbolically. The tragedy of Hemingway’s story, that husband and wife must relate to one another indirectly, is dramatically belied by Marechera’s depictions of a world screaming out for a chance to relate indirectly, for a chance to relate to one another symbolically. Marechera’s story reevaluates the married couple’s problems from this new perspective.

If indeed the maid's arrival with the cat at the end of "Cat in the Rain" suggests the impossibility of bearing children, for instance, then "The House of Hunger" presents in opposition a scenario in which fertility is only too evident. Immaculate is pregnant, and there appear to be not one, but two fathers for her baby in the same family. The narrator "almost ask[s his brother] cruelly who he thought was really the father of his baby" (8). And again, we are confronted with the same difference separating Hemingway's cat from Marechera's. There is a baby in the House of Hunger, but like the people around it, like the cat, it is redundant to life there. Like the cat, everyone is bloodied and finally kicked from the house without ceremony.

We realize that the central thematic difference between Hemingway's and Marechera's stories is an existential one for the characters involved. While for Hemingway, the incommunicability of the situation is the result of a problem specific to the couple in question and the manner in which they interact, Marechera's House of Hunger constitutively inhibits its people long before they could arrive at the scene in Hemingway's story, where incommunicability and infertility are the worst problems being confronted.

We realize the importance and luxury of distance, of how dangerous transparency can be, of the need for a symbolic register to structure desire and facilitate the appropriation of one's physical environment. People survive by the symbolic reshaping of their material context to suit themselves and their position in the world. Marechera's insight is that by removing this possibility, by removing a person's trust in their material environment, one removes access to a symbolic register, and kills not only the mind, but the soul, and escape becomes the only option.

#### Works Cited

- Bennett, Warren. "The Poor Kitty and the Padrone and the Tortoise-shell Cat in 'Cat in the Rain.'" *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*. Ed. Jackson J. Benson. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1990. 245-256.
- Habila, Helon. "On Dambudzo Marechera." *The Virginia Quarterly Review* 82.1 (2006). <http://lion.chadwyck.co.uk>. Accessed 14 October 2015.
- Hemingway, Ernest. "The Cat in the Rain." *The Collected Stories*. London: Everyman's Library, 1995. 107-110.
- . "The Snows of Kilimanjaro." *The Collected Stories*. London: Everyman's Library, 1995. 405-425.
- Holmesland, Oddvar. "Structuralism and Interpretation: Ernest Hemingway's 'Cat in the Rain.'" *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*. Ed. Jackson J. Benson. Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1990. 58-72.
- Lindsay, Clarence. "Risking Nothing: American Romantics in 'Cat in the Rain.'" *The Hemingway Review* 17.1 (1997): 15-27.
- Marechera, Dambudzo. *Black Sunlight*. London: Heinemann, 1980.

- . "The House of Hunger." *The House of Hunger*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1993. 1-82.
- . *Mindblast, Or, The Definitive Buddy*. Harare: College P, 1984.
- . *Scrapiron Blues*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World P, 1999.
- . "The Transformation of Harry." *The House of Hunger*. Oxford: Heinemann, 1993. 88-92.
- Meyers, Jeffrey. *Hemingway: A Biography*. New York: Harper and Row, 1985.
- Mzamane, Mbuelo. "New Writing from Zimbabwe: Dambudzo Marechera's *The House of Hunger*." *African Literature Today* 13 (1983): 201-25.
- Neel, Hildy Coleman. "The War Monument in 'Cat in the Rain': Then and Now." *The Hemingway Review* 19.2 (2000): 102-04.
- Nicholls, Brendon. "Postcolonial Narcissism, Cryptopolitics, and Hypnocritique: Dambudzo Marechera's *The House of Hunger*." *Postcolonial Text* 8.2 (2013): 1-22.
- Okonkwo, Juliet. "Dambudzo Marechera, *The House of Hunger*." *Okike* 18 (1981): 87-91.
- Pattison, David. "Call No Man Happy: Inside the Black Insider, Marechera's Journey to Become a Writer?" *Journal of Southern African Studies* 20.2 (1994): 221-39.
- Pucherová, Dobrota. *The Ethics of Dissident Desire in Southern African Writing*. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2011.
- Strychacz, Thomas. "In Our Time, Out of Season." *The Cambridge Companion to Hemingway*. Ed. Scott Donaldson. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 1996. 87-108.
- Toivanen, Anna-Leena. "'At the Receiving End of Severe Misunderstanding': Dambudzo Marechera's Representation of Authorship." *Research in African Literatures* 42.1 (2011): 14-31.
- . "Grotesque Intimacies: Embodiment and the Spirit of Violence in 'House of Hunger.'" *Reading Marechera*. Ed. Grant Hamilton. Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer/James Currey, 2013. 38-56.
- . "Writer-Fighter Dambudzo Marechera: Rejecting Ethnic and National Labels?" Ed. Veera Rautavuoma, Urpo Kovala, Eeva Haverinen. *Cult, Community, Identity*. Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä P, 2009. 181-196.
- Veit-Wild, Flora, ed. *Dambudzo Marechera: A Source Book on his Life and Work*. London: Hans Zell Publishers, 1992.
- Ward, Alan Ramón. "The Embrace of Exclusion: the Existential and the Subversive in Dambudzo Marechera's 'House of Hunger.'" *English Studies in Africa* 56.2 (2013): 73-83.
- Wylie, Dan. "Language Thieves: English Language Strategies in Two Zimbabwean Novellas." *English in Africa* 18.2 (1991): 39-61.