

MACAVITY: THE MYSTERY CAT

T. S. Eliot

THOMAS STEARNS ELIOT (1888- 1965) was born in St. Louis, Missouri, U.S.A. but eventually settled in England. A classicist in literature, an Anglo-catholic in religion, and a royalist in politics, he rose to become one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century. He was also a distinguished critic and a dramatist. He was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1948. His best known poems are *The Waste Land*, *Ash Wednesday* and *Four Quartets*. As a poet and spokesman for his age he truly represents the intellectual, social and philosophical moods of the twentieth century. The present poem 'Macavity: The Mystery Cat' is from his collection called *Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*, which was made into a very successful music on stage by the great composer Sir Andrew Lloyd Weber. It is a light poem in the mock heroic vein. It does not need any solemn or detailed analysis; its charm comes from its neat rhymes and galloping rhythm as well as the comic effect of a monster- criminal who is in fact a cat.



A. Work in small groups and discuss the following:

1. The Pet Animals
2. Superstitions related to cats

MACAVITY: THE MYSTERY CAT

Macavity's a Mystery Cat: he's called the Hidden Paw-
For he's the master criminal who can **defy** the Law.
He's the **bafflement** of Scotland yard, the Flying Squad's despair:
For when they reach the scene of crime – *Macavity's not there!*

Macavity, Macavity, there's no one like Macavity,

He's broken every human law, he breaks the law of gravity.
His powers of **levitation** would make a **fakir** stare,
And when you reach the scene of crime – *Macavity's not there!*
You may seek him in the basement, you may look up in the air –
But I tell you once and once again, *Macavity's not there!* 10

Macavity's a **ginger** cat; he's very tall and thin;
You would know him if you saw him, for his eyes are sunken in.
His brow is deeply lined with thoughts, his head is highly **domed**;
His coat is dusty from neglect, his whiskers are uncombed.
He sways his head from side to side, with movement like a snake; 15
And when you think he's half asleep, he's always wide awake.

Macavity, Macavity, there's no one like Macavity,
For he's **fiend** in **feline** shape, a monster of **depravity**.
You may meet him in a by-street, you may see him in the square -
But when a crime's discovered, then *Macavity's not there!* 20

He's outwardly respectable. (They say he cheats at cards.)
And his footprints are not found in any file of Scotland Yard's.
And when the **larder's** looted, or the jewel-case is **rifled**,
Or when the milk is missing, or another Peke's been **stifled**,
Or the greenhouse glass is broken, and the **trellis** past repair
Ay, there's the wonder of the thing! *Macavity's not there!*



And when the foreign Office find a **Treaty's gone astray**,
Or the Admiralty lose some plans and drawings by the way,
There may be a scrap of paper in the hall or on the stair -
But it's useless to investigate, - *Macavity's not there!*
And when the loss has been **disclosed**, the Secret Service say:
'It *must* have been Macavity!' but he's a mile away.
You'll be sure to find him resting, or **a-licking of his thumbs**,
Or engaged in doing complicated long division sums. 30

Macavity, Macavity, there's no one like Macavity, 35
There never was a Cat of such **deceitfulness** and **suavity**.
He always has an **alibi**, and one or two to spare:
At whatever time the deed took place -
MACAVITY WASN'T THERE!

And they say that all the Cats whose
wicked deeds are widely known
(I might mention Mungojerrie, I might mention Griddlebone)
Are nothing more than agents for the Cat who all the time
Just controls their operations: the Napoleon of Crime!

B.1. 1. Read the following sentences and write 'T' for true and 'F' for false statements:

- a) Macavity is an ordinary cat.
- b) Macavity is an outlaw.
- c) Macavity is always there on the scene of crime.
- d) Macavity can be found in the basement.
- e) The poet finds Macavity lazy and half-asleep.
- f) It can be seen in the by-street.
- g) Mungojerrie and Griddlebone are also cats.
- h) The poet is really angry with Macavity.
- i) The poet compares Macavity to Napoleon.

B.1. 2. Answer the following questions briefly:

- 1) Why does the poet call Macavity, a mystery cat?
- 2) What are the adjectives that have been used to describe Macavity's character?
- 3) Why is Macavity termed a 'criminal'?
- 4) What is suggested by the phrase 'powers of levitation'?
- 5) What would you do if a cat enters your kitchen? Would you keep a cat as pet?

GLOSSARY AND NOTES

defy (v): flout, disobey, challenge

bafflement (n): bewilderment, perplexity

Scotland Yard : headquarters of London Police

levitation (n): capacity to rise and float in air (esp. by magic)

fakir (n): a holy man who lives by begging

ginger (adj): tall and thin

domed (adj): shaped like a dome

fiend(v): an evil spirit

feline (adj / n): (of or like) an animal of the cat family

depravity (n): corruption, wickedness

larder (n): a cupboard used for storing food

rifled (v): searched thoroughly

stifled (v): suffocated, strangled

trellis (n): framework to support climbing plants

Treaty's gone astray: agreement contravened or violated

disclosed (v): revealed, made known

a-licking of thumbs : evaluation of success of one's deed

deceitfulness (n): fraudulence, dishonesty

suavity(n): treachery; he is deceitful but conceals it with great skill and elegance

alibi (n): excuse, defence

C. 1. LONG ANSWER QUESTIONS

1. Discuss the poet's impression of Macavity, the mystery cat. Why does he call it mysterious?
2. 'Macavity is never there.' Elaborate.
3. Why does the poet call Macavity 'outwardly respectable'? Discuss.
4. There are other cats like Mungojerrie and Griddlebone, but 'there's no one like Macavity'. Explain.
5. Make a list of crimes Macavity is capable of.
6. What would you do to tame Macavity?
7. Do you find the poem humorous? Give your comments on the poem.

C. 2. GROUP DISCUSSION

Discuss the following in **groups** or **pairs**:

1. Should animals be caged?
2. Cruelty to animals.

C. 3. COMPOSITION

Write a short essay in about 150 words on the following:

- a. Your favourite pet
- b. Animals in prison

D. WORD STUDY

D.1. Dictionary Use

Ex. 1. Look up a dictionary and write two meanings of each of the following words – the one in which it is used in the lesson and the other which is more common

ginger	loot	alibi	coat
master	pulse	repair	

D.2. Word-formation

Read the following line carefully:

*His powers of **levitation** would make a fakir stare...*

*For he's fiend in feline shape, a monster of **depravity**.*

In the first line given above '**levitation**', which is a noun, is derived from 'levity' which is also a noun by adding a suffix 'ation' to it. In the second line, '**depravity**', a noun, is derived from a verb 'deprave' by adding a suffix 'ity' to it.

Form words from the following nouns and verbs by adding a suffix to them:

gravity	baffle	national	profound	jovial	celebrate
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D.3. Word-meaning

Ex. 1. Match the words in **Column A** with their meaning in **Column B**:

Column A

paw
stare
dusty
depravity
astray
suavity
alibi

Column B

away from the correct path
covered with dust
having an elegant manner
excuse
foot of an animal
look sternly
room below the ground level

E. GRAMMAR

Ex. 1. Fill in the blanks selecting suitable words given in the bracket against each sentence:

- If youto him, he would help you. (go, went)
- Their footprints seen there. (was, were)
- When you..... here, I will help you. (reach, will reach)
- The boy father lives here is my friend. (whom, whose)
- Manoj is the boy can do anything. (who, whom)
- Sita is engaged some important work today. (in, with)
- He is more a poet. (than, but)

- viii. She herself even in a critical situation. (control, controls)
- ix. He has every human law. (broke, broken)
- x. There may be point of discussion. (a, the)

F. ACTIVITIES

Ex.1. The poet calls Macavity 'the Napoleon of Crime'. He compares Macavity to the great French General without using 'like' or 'as'. This type of comparison is called 'metaphor'. Had he used 'like' or 'as' it would have been a 'simile'. Point out at least two other metaphors and a simile from the poem. Write them down and explain the comparison.

Ex.2. Go to the veterinary hospital in your locality, talk to the doctors and write a report on the 'treatment of animals'.

