Germer A, Yoshioka S.

Romantic Love and the 'Housewife Trap': A Gendered Reading of The Cat Returns.

Japanese Studies (2017)

DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/10371397.2017.1333886

Copyright:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Japanese Studies on 03/07/2017, available online: https://doi.org/10.1080/10371397.2017.1333886

Date deposited:

25/05/2017

Embargo release date:

03 January 2019

This work is licensed under a

Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International licence
Title: Romantic Love and the ‘Housewife Trap’: A Gendered Reading of The Cat Returns

Authors:

Andrea Germer, Institute for Modern Japan, Düsseldorf University, Düsseldorf, Germany
Shiro Yoshioka, School of Modern Languages, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

Abstract:

Gender, particularly the figure of the shōjo, plays a crucial role in the creation of heroes and the development of plots in Japanese popular texts. This paper focuses on The Cat Returns (Neko no ongaeshi) (2002, Dir. Morita Hiroyuki), one of the lesser-known films produced by Studio Ghibli. A socio-political reading and gender-sensitive analysis reveals that this film offers a deep and critical commentary on the gender order in contemporary Japan. Moreover, with its teenage girl protagonist Haru, it presents an exceptional case of a shōjo-centred anime that does not fit conventional genre characteristics. Through Haru’s refusal to become a wife in the Cat Kingdom the film criticises the expectation for young women to prioritise the pursuit of romantic relationships (ren’ai), and it rejects the ideal of the Japanese housewife (shufu) as an existence of dependence in a semi-feudal social gender order. This paper views Haru’s coming-of-age story through major gender theories, and interprets the plot as a critique of what Ueno Chizuko and Nobuta Sayoko (2004) called the ‘Marriage Empire’ in Japan. We argue that the anime reflects shifting ideas on gender and at the same time presents an exceptional treatment of the need for young women to confront the social changes and gender role expectations of contemporary Japanese society.

Keywords: gender, hegemonic femininity; datsu ren’ai, shōjo, anime, Neko no ongaeshi
Introduction

The anime film *The Cat Returns (Neko no ongaeshi;* Dir. Morita Hiroyuki) was released in Japan in mid-2002, and although it grossed 6.4 billion yen and became the most successful Japanese film of the year, it received rather a lukewarm critical reception.\(^1\) While praised for its stylistic and technical craftsmanship, and its fine details and rich devices of composition in anime production, the storyline has been viewed as shallow and the main character, 17-year-old high school girl Haru, as flat, overly shy and unappealing.\(^2\) Compared to other Ghibli production *shōjo* heroines, Haru is for the most part the anti-hero, the ultimately normal, if not to say boring main character of the plot. Thomas Lamarre has noted that anime in general is often ‘treated as a textual object that does not or cannot pose any difficult textual questions’\(^3\), and this film in particular has been judged to ‘lack […] much of the subtlety and thematic weight underpinning Ghibli’s more lauded productions’.\(^4\) At best, it has been called a fun production for the whole family to enjoy, ‘a light and frothy film’\(^5\), or, in the words of reviewer Carlo Santos, ‘just pure, unbridled fun’.\(^6\) The filmic plot, which includes fantasy, adventure, suspense, wild chases and a happy ending, is simple to follow: Haru saves a cat who incidentally is the prince in a kingdom of cats. In return, she receives a number of unwanted presents from the prince’s father, the king, including the prospect of becoming the wife of the king’s son in the Cat Kingdom. When seeking help and receiving advice from the so-called Cat Bureau, run by a male cat sculpture that has come to life and calls himself the Baron, she is abducted to the Cat Kingdom where she gradually turns into a cat while being prepared for the role of the prince’s bride. The Baron and his helpers, however, come to rescue Haru and eventually help her to escape and return to human shape.

---

\(^1\) See for example, Odell & Le Blanc, *Studio Ghibli*, 122. The film was released on 20 July 2002. In international comparison, the revenue was far smaller than that of the most successful film of the year, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (20.3 billion yen) (‘02 nen Nihon no eiga toppu 10 ga happyō!’)

\(^2\) One blog entry calls her ‘a clichéd character’ of an insecure teenager. See Lady Geek Girl and Friends (2013).

\(^3\) Lamarre, *The Anime Machine*, x

\(^4\) Odell & Le Blanc, *Studio Ghibli*, 122

\(^5\) Ibid.; in the same vein, one blog entry notes that the film is ‘just a bit simpler, just a bit sillier, and just a bit shoddier than the rest of the [Ghibli] films’ (Rathke 2015).

\(^6\) Santos, ‘The Cat Returns DVD Review’; see also Luther, ‘Katherine Luther’s Top 7’.
In this paper, we offer a perspective on the storyline that challenges the above noted judgement of lack of subtlety and thematic weight as we interpret the plot and its characters within the matrix of gender in contemporary Japanese society. Our approach combines the reading of anime as textual object with philosophical, cultural and sociological theories of gender and within the context of contemporary gender discourses in Japan. In order to examine the gender structure within the film, we engage some of the major theories on the construction of femininity and masculinity, with particular recourse to Carole Pateman’s research on gender and contract theory. Our feminist reading of the film’s narrative combines textual analysis with cultural theory, and explores the thematic weight and depth as well as social relevance of this particular oeuvre.

*The Cat Returns* is based on the *shōjo* manga *The Cat Baron (Baron: Neko no danshaku)* by Hiiragi Aoi (1990) who is also the author of *Whisper of the Heart (Mimi o sumaseba)*, another manga on which a Ghibli film of the same title is based. While both these manga and the anime adaptation of *Whisper of the Heart* share the important elements of characters, mise en scène and plot development with *The Cat Returns*, they are very different in one crucial aspect: they do not challenge conventional gender roles; furthermore, in the case of *Whisper of the Heart*, there is a specific emphasis on the meaning of romantic love as it relates to the maturing of the female lead character. In stark contrast, *The Cat Returns* is a coming-of-age story that wrestles with a particular gendered, sexed and ethnicised role dominant in postwar Japanese society: the normative idea that it is ‘normal’ for young women to pursue romantic heterosexual relationships (*ren’ai*) that eventually result in marriage and life as a Japanese housewife (*shufu*).

---

8 Pateman, *The Sexual Contract*. 
Since the 2000s, the preconditions for becoming a housewife, namely the ideology of ‘romantic love’ and the institution of ‘marriage’ have been scrutinised by a number of feminist writers and researchers in Japan,\(^9\) some of whom provocatively speak of an oppressive ‘Marriage Empire’ and its ‘refugees’,\(^10\) of unmarried older women seen as ‘loser dogs’ (makeinu),\(^11\) or of the coming of an ‘unmarried era’ (hikon jidai).\(^12\) It is these pressing social and gender issues surrounding the ideological and institutional makeup of marriage and family at the turn of the millennium that form the major backdrop for the anime *The Cat Returns*. We argue that through metaphoric narrative, the film subtly but critically and radically comments on love, marriage and the prescribed hegemonic femininity of the housewife in postwar Japan’s gender order as stripping women of individual agency.

Some scholars argue that visual representation of women in anime is far removed from the actual status of women in contemporary Japanese society. For example, Saitō Tamaki, an author who analyses so called ‘fighting girls’ in Japanese popular culture, especially in anime, stresses that relating this trope to contemporary Japanese society naively presumes that fiction is a direct reflection of reality.\(^13\) However, while it is true that we should not accept visual representation in anime, manga and video games as direct reflections of reality, we should also not completely dismiss these media as emanations from and comments on particular discourses in contemporary Japanese society. Saitō Kumiko, another anime scholar, focuses on the genre of ‘magical girls’ and notes the ‘gaps between Japanese women and female characters in Japanese popular culture’.\(^14\) She states:

> The difficulty of approaching […] new venues of popular culture [such as anime, manga and videogame] lies in their art of “misrepresentation,” that is, flat and

---


\(^11\) Sakai, *Makeinu no tōboe*.

\(^12\) Ueno and Minashita, *Hikon desuga*, 4.

\(^13\) See Saitō Tamaki, *Beautiful Fighting Girl*, 158; his discussion of ‘fighting girls’ places central emphasis on so-called *otaku* and their sexuality as well as their view of fiction and reality.

exaggerated visual styles, fantastic storylines, and most importantly, their general disjunction from real-life women in Japanese society.\(^{15}\)

However, her research into developments of the ‘magical girl’ genre in conjunction with popular discourse, technological changes in the media industry, and the gendered implications of macro-economic trends in Japanese society since the 1960s, leads her to conclude that the ‘magical girl’ genre in Japan ‘has closely reflected shifting ideas of gender roles in society’.\(^{16}\) Saitō is critical of the notion that the phenomenon or ‘code’ of fighting and magical girls in Japanese popular texts would undermine or subvert fixed gender norms, a possibility that Susan Napier and Kotani Mari suggest.\(^{17}\) Notwithstanding the polysemic reception of the genre by a range of spectators divided by age, gender and social position, she concludes that the genre as a whole, despite and perhaps including its mixed and sometimes contradictory gender messages, is complicit with ‘the larger social mechanism that generates and reconfirms conventional gender norms’.\(^{18}\) Not so *The Cat Returns*. While acknowledging the contradictory trajectory of the *shōjo* figure in Japan’s media culture, we argue that *The Cat Returns* presents an exceptional case that offers critical and clear messages about gender role expectations to women in contemporary Japan.

**Hegemonic Masculinity – Hegemonic Femininity?**

According to character descriptions in the film’s official program, Haru’s family does not have a father, although the reason for his absence is not specified in the program or the film itself.\(^{19}\) Haru’s mother is not a typical Japanese housewife – she brought up Haru by herself and makes a living by selling her own artwork (quilting/patchwork). Whereas absent fathers

---

15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 161.
19 *Neko no ongaeshi*, unpaginated
or the absence of parents are not unusual in literature and other cultural products directed at young people, it is noteworthy that in *The Cat Returns* both parents thus diverge from the ideologically dominant salaryman/housewife model. Having said that, even though (human) men seem to play a minor role in *The Cat Returns*, masculinity nevertheless forms the unspoken and invisible foil for the story’s setting, a foil that is eventually challenged in the Cat Kingdom. In semiotic approaches, masculinity and femininity have been seen as oppositional and relational terms in which ‘masculinity is the unmarked term, the place of symbolic authority’. Building on Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, R.W. Connell has proposed the gendered role model of ‘hegemonic masculinity’, a concept whose various social, sexual, cultural and class dimensions have since been further elaborated by a number of sociologists and historians of gender. In postwar Japan, this concept has been said to be embodied by the Japanese ‘salaryman’ as the corporate warrior; a hegemonic ideology that maintains its power despite its crumbling social sustainability. According to Connell, hegemonic masculinity emerges as a normative programming of male gender through education and other institutions of public and political authority. This programming takes place under the ideological lead of actors with privileged access to capital, and is formed through the subordination of other masculinities and women, its main norms comprising heterosexuality and the capacity to fulfil the function of the breadwinner.

In *The Cat Returns*, (human) men make only a few and very brief appearances, but they are always associated with this role model. The corporate male breadwinner/warrior role appears conspicuously in a variety of situations. For example, when Haru is late and hurrying

---

21 The film shows Haru’s mother as a professional and at the same time as a woman working from home, thereby bridging or perhaps also veiling the divide between the roles of housewife/mother on the one hand and professional on the other. The dominant model of the housewife certainly has many variations and relativizations. For a discussion of the political activism of housewives see LeBlanc, *Bicycle Citizens*.
22 Connell, *Masculinities*, 70.
23 Connell, *Gender and Power*; Connell, *Masculinities*. The various ways in which Connell’s work has been received are too numerous to mention here. For an overview see Tosh (2004) and for a structured response to the various applications and qualifications of the concept see Connell and Messerschmidt (2005).
to school and a group of men designated for such a role – members of a university baseball club on their routine training – is shown jogging and chanting in sync like an army troupe and blocking her way. It also appears when the male teacher is humiliating Haru for being late; when, a man who appears to be a P.E. teacher scolds Haru who enters school followed by a herd of cats; and when Tsuge, the boyfriend of Haru’s friend Hiromi, is shown winning in a table tennis match. All these men are shown in a hierarchical position that builds on the subordination of other masculinities and women. In this setting, Haru’s classmate Machida-kun is portrayed as a metrosexual *ikemen*, a ‘cool’ and handsome young man who is the target of girls’ romantic desires and plays the role of a champion of heterosexual attraction.

That romantic attraction and love ideology are historical and socially contingent has been elaborated in several social and anthropological studies on the history of sexual/love relations in Japan.\(^{25}\) Citing Japanese ethnographic studies, Ueno Chizuko (1995) in particular traces patterns of sexual behaviour from rural institutionalised premarital promiscuity (*yobai*) to arranged marriages (*miai kekkon*) to so-called love marriages (*ren’ai kekkon*). The latter of these shows a strong pattern of social endogamy which does not diverge significantly from arranged marriages by parents and suggests the internalisation of marriage norms that override or significantly shape the feelings of ‘romantic love’.\(^{26}\) As Bourdieu argued in his framework of masculine domination,\(^{27}\) female gender role expectations are inculcated and embodied below the level of consciousness and will, and produce those gendered ‘dispositions’\(^{28}\) which work to prioritise romantic heterosexual relationships (*ren’ai*) over other pursuits in life. This is precisely what *The Cat Returns* seeks to criticise. In this setting, Machida-kun as the ideal partner, for romantic love represents another important example of hegemonic masculinity in this film, one that Haru first adores but then rejects in the end.

---


\(^{26}\) Ueno ‘Ren’ai kekkon no tanjō’, 78.

\(^{27}\) Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 39–41.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 39.
To this manifestation of hegemonic masculinity we would like to relate its female counterpart in the form of ‘hegemonic femininity’ as the female destined for ren’ai (heterosexual romance) and for becoming the Japanese housewife as its result. As Beauvoir,30 Bourdieu31 and others have observed, there is a particular self-interest in women’s inclinations to romantic love and marriage as it also offers them a route to upward mobility. For contemporary Japan, Ueno and Nobuta point out that ‘marrying up’ is a gendered prerogative that leaves over 90% of men in the lower wage brackets unmarried beyond their thirties.32 Hegemonic femininity can be conceived as the necessary complement to the heterosexual breadwinner model, the wife whose status, although subordinated to the breadwinner upon whom she depends, is equally brought forth and ideologically supported by systems of state apparatus, media, education, and a moral consensus of what constitutes an ideal woman. *The Cat Returns*, however, resists this model by emphasising the female lead character’s quest for autonomy and independence, particularly in the form of a dramaturgical rejection of romantic love and marriage.

**Immanence and Transcendence, or: datsu ren’ai**

Haru is introduced as an adolescent who is in a sense *not really there*. She is regularly late for school, does not know where she is heading in life, and does not have any particular interests or passion, neither in terms of hobbies nor for school. Feminist existentialist Simone de

---

29 In relation to R.W. Connell’s much cited concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’, we discuss the Japanese housewife’s central ideological role as the bearer of a ‘hegemonic femininity’ in postwar Japan. Originally termed hegemonic femininity in tandem with hegemonic masculinity, Connell (1987) renamed this concept as ‘emphasized femininity’ in order to stress the asymmetrical relation between masculinities and femininities in the patriarchal gender order (Connell and Messerschmidt, 848). In Japan, the role model of the fulltime housewife (*sengyō shufu*) certainly emphasizes femininity but because it also constructs and reconfirms a decidedly ethnicized idea of ‘Japanese’ housewives, and furthermore forcefully creates hierarchical divisions between different women and femininities, we deem the term ‘hegemonic femininity’ to be more appropriate. Japanese housewives have been the focus of a number of historical and sociological studies (e.g., Ueno 1982; Inoue 2009; LeBlanc 1999; Koyama 2013), yet theoretically grounded treatment of this role model as ‘hegemonic femininity’ as well as of its role in reifying dominant ethnic notions of Japaneseness are a desideratum.

31 Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 66
32 Ueno and Nobuta, *Kekkon teikoku*, 34–35
Beauvoir called the urge, passion and opportunity to manifest oneself through works and activities of intellect, arts or crafts ‘transcendence’, something that for ideological reasons is highly constrained for women and girls. In Haru’s case, it is this lack of ‘transcendence’ that makes for the flatness, the anti-hero quality and the boredom that her character exudes to anime fans. One might say that she is the ultimate “normal girl”. She has a crush on one of the boys in her class (Machida-kun) but is too shy to even pursue him. She seems to have no purpose in life and no drive to manifest herself through activities of intellect, arts or sports. In Haru’s first appearance she is asleep, then she oversleeps, and when awake, she seems to be locked in her daydreams that only offer what is typically left for women excluded from the realm of transcendence: the hope for romance. This, in Beauvoir’s analysis, signifies the state of passive ‘immanence’: romance, subsequent marriage and being restricted to domesticity and reproduction.

Haru only once rises above this detached and passive mode of existence and ‘transcends’ herself in an ‘act’ when, in an instantaneous reaction, she has the courage to save a cat from being run over by a truck. One may even go so far as to interpret the lacrosse stick that Haru uses to save the cat as a phallic symbol in Beauvoir’s sense: as a sign for activity, action, human resolve and thus transcendence. As Alexandra Juhasz notes in her analysis of late 1990s feminist cinema, ‘[a]ny person can have the phallus when she does something that deserves it, when she wields power through principle.’ In this decisive moment, Haru is the saviour, the hero who wields power through the principle of saving another life. This is a moment that marks the start of her adventure unfolding as a coming-of-age test, an initiation rite to full adulthood that forms a process with trials and tribulations in the development of

---

33 Beauvoir, The Second Sex.
34 To be sure, Beauvoir criticises the overlapping identification of the phallus with the biological penis on the one hand and with symbolic meaning on the other (Beauvoir, The Second Sex: Chapter 2).
35 Juhasz, ‘The Phallus UnFetished’, 219. In Lacanian psychoanalysis, and in studies of symbolism, the semiotic approach has been employed to define masculinity and femininity through a system of symbolic difference. In this system, the phallus is a master-signifier whereas femininity is symbolically defined by lack. We share Bourdieu’s implicit critique of psychoanalysis that links the differences between the sexes to biological or psychological nature (Bourdieu, Masculine Domination).
her subjectivity. This subjectivity, according to Beauvoir, is only fully developed when women leave the realm of immanence and transcend themselves in an ‘active’ creative life. One of the most important messages of the anime lies in the significance of such active decisions that also indicate the escape from what Bourdieu called *amor fati*, the love of one’s own social destiny which keeps women in their subordinated positions.36

Morita Hiroyuki, the director of the anime, used the term *datsu ren’ai* (escape from romantic relationships), and Miyazaki Hayao, who appointed Morita as the director of the film, mentioned the term as well.37 The notion of *datsu ren’ai* echoes with Ueno’s and Nobuta’s provocative term ‘refugees from the Marriage Empire’ (*kekkon teikoku no nanmin*) that describes the troubles of married and unmarried people bound by the compulsory ideology of marriage in Japanese society.38 What *datsu ren’ai* means, in essence, is to stop prioritising heterosexual relationships (*ren’ai*) over everything, to the degree of letting them dominate one’s life. Through her adventure in the Cat Kingdom, Haru accomplishes *datsu-ren’ai* and succeeds in ‘transcending’ herself by making active choices and choosing to live life on her own terms, thereby rejecting the option of becoming a wife along the model of hegemonic femininity.

**The Social and the Sexual Contract**

The cat that Haru saves is able to speak human languages and to be a prince in a Cat Kingdom, a member of another world. A procession of cats approaches Haru’s house at night in order to convey the gratitude of the prince’s father, and through their performance it becomes clear that this other world is governed by feudal rituals and rules. Far removed from Haru’s world, the procession of cats nevertheless connects the feudal procession/world to the sphere of the home in which Haru lives. Submitting a letter and promise of great returns for her brave

37 Morita, ‘Staff Interview’, 60.
38 Ueno and Nobuta, *Kekkon teikoku*. 
action, the procession, featuring the King, his Secretary-cum-Advisor and pageantry, performs the ceremony of a contractual promise. That the cat procession and the feudal time warp it indicates was not a dream of Haru’s becomes clear to her when she finds all kinds of promised ‘returns’ the next morning: the lacrosse stick that had been broken in the act of saving the cat is replaced by a whole load of sticks blocking the hallway; Haru’s locker at school is filled with mice in small present boxes; and she is followed by the cats in her neighbourhood because she exudes the odour of catnip. All of these returns make sense for cats but not for human beings. The last ‘return’, Haru being invited to become the wife of the cat prince, is the ultimate glitch in both parties’ expectations. The invitation to marry the prince, to become a princess and live happily ever after is part of the general fairy tale script. The subversion of this well-known script thus highlights its folly and thereby rejects it as a possibility even in the human world.

The Cat Kingdom, the place to which Haru is abducted in order for her to marry and become a wife, is depicted as a feudal realm. Political theorist Carole Pateman’s concept of the sexual contract, by which she means the marriage contract, is a useful tool in interpreting this feudal setting of the Cat Kingdom. In Pateman’s assessment of nineteenth-century social contract theorists, the social contract is one that has been concluded among sons upon the defeat of the rule of fathers, by the bourgeois class upon defeat of feudal rule, and is based on the free will of male citizens. Although based upon the defeat of feudal rule, this social contract nevertheless includes a sexual contract, namely the marriage contract, that is not part of the public, democratic sphere of equal men, but is relegated to nature and, one might say, governed by feudal principles that pose familial organicist relations in the gendered form of dependent females and children to a male breadwinner and household head. As Pateman argues, within the marriage contract and between the genders, feudal relations remain the norm.

The way in which the cat servant explains to Haru how easy, agreeable and free of worries life as a cat would be, brings to mind the Japanese saying ‘three meals and a nap’ (*sanshoku hirune tsuki*); this saying stereotypically depicts a housewife’s life as idle and carefree. At this moment, Haru pauses in her resistance to the cat’s proposal, the moment of her hesitation being visually underscored by the insertion of a scene of fragile flowers swaying in the breeze. It is after this exchange that the servant disappears with the assertion that the cats will come later to take her to the Cat Kingdom. The deal is sealed not by a signature but by the failure of Haru’s active resistance to it.

The sexual/marriage contract that is offered to Haru implies becoming both a wife and an animal in a feudal world; more precisely, by becoming a wife she is becoming an animal – just as the realm of ‘animals’ is traditionally framed as part of a ‘nature’ distinct from the human social sphere, so too the sexual contract establishes the family as part of ‘nature’ and the ‘natural heterosexual’ human condition of the wife, and is framed as distinct from the public and social contract of free men. In contrast to the social contract, the marriage contract is not one between two equals but between two essentially different and dependent agents. As Pateman notes, all the classic theorists ‘insist that, in civil society, women not only can but must enter into the marriage contract’. The wife is expected to enter this contract as part of her natural destiny, what we may call the destiny of hegemonic femininity. Thus, Haru does not ‘sign’ the contract but is half-seduced into entering the feudal Cat Kingdom, half-caught in a moment of letting down her guard, and finally taken by force to the Cat Kingdom. That this contract is negotiated using seduction and promises accounts for the vacillating, vague and ambivalent attitude of Haru. The prospect of an easy life, the lure of the unknown, the adventure of a fairy-tale castle, and the enjoyment of dressing up for the royal ball present all

---

40 Swaying flowers are reminiscent of Honda Masuko’s famous concept of *hirahira* (fluttering) as a literary style of the resistant *shōjo*. This concept implies a state of liminal sensuality in which ‘the border of “everyday reality” and “the world of illusion” becomes blurry. See Honda’s original essay ‘“Hirahira” no keifu’, 165. Honda’s literary explorations of girls’ culture and her presentation of a genealogy of girls’ novels (*shōjo shōsetsu*) are deemed as starting points of *shōjo* discourses in the 1980s. Nobuoka, “‘Hana monogatari’ to katareru *shōjo*’, 82–83.

the ingredients of castle romance marriages (including the wardrobe that allows women to dress in feudal attire) and lets Haru slide deeper and deeper into the Cat Kingdom/marriage/housewife trap.

In the feudal order of the Cat Kingdom, the cat king is the patriarchal ruler/despot who chooses the wife for his son, and who punishes others at his whim. In the course of the plot, however, he is eventually stripped of his power by his son who chooses another bride, by Haru who yells at him, actively resists him and manages to escape, and by the Baron who defeats him by shattering the King’s jewel in a sword duel. Carole Pateman reminds us that the social contract comes into being by the sons defeating the fathers and patriarchy, but that it leaves intact the sexual contract that in itself contains feudal/naturalised/gendered relations. In the anime, we see how the Cat Kingdom changes with the defeat of the King and the retiring of his Secretary who, clothed to imitate a Chinese Confucian scholar, also references feudal relations. The son rebels against his father and the Cat Kingdom changes to a less despotic system, but it does not collapse altogether. As the King’s son now chooses his very feminine cat bride on his own for what can be called a love marriage, the law of the Father is broken and perhaps a new social contract enacted but what is nevertheless left intact is a sexual/marriage contract within the Cat Kingdom. And this, as the film makes clear, ‘is not the place where [Haru] belongs.’ The place where she does belong is indicated by the places she returns to in the human world: the school where she receives her education, and the space that she shares with her independent mother.

Subordinated Masculinities, Feminist Men, and What Is ‘Cool’

Who and what saves Haru? The anime film presents a rejection of the housewife model for women but it is not a total rejection of romance, masculinity or heterosexual attraction per se. The male (animal) figures who are instrumental in saving Haru from her fate of cat/housewife are the rebel cat Muta, a male sculpture crow named Toto and a male toy cat by the name of
Baron Humbert von Sickingen. Toto and the Baron both come to life when Haru approaches them for help. One might infer that the rebel cat Muta epitomises one of the subordinated masculinities because of his rough behaviour and the fact that he was a notorious thief and a wanted criminal in the Cat Kingdom. He represents an undomesticated, physically strong, individualistic and positive masculinity that is appreciative of strong women. R. W. Connell reminds us that the concept of hegemonic masculinity produces subordinated masculinities, and that there are feminist men who are countering gender hegemony as well as men who have historically cooperated and driven forward the agenda of gender justice.\(^\text{42}\) In the anime, when Haru yells at the Cat King upon his proposal, the rebel cat Muta jumps up in support of Haru’s outburst saying: ‘I admire a woman with a mind of her own.’

The Baron states that he as well as the black bird Toto came to life by the enthusiasm, spirit and ideals of their makers; they are therefore the embodiments of spiritual qualities and ideals. They represent freedom and enlightenment as qualities that are aristocratic in the sense of refined and superior modes of existence. The Baron’s garments, those of an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century European gentleman, and the contemporary European city scene and architecture of the Cat Bureau where Haru seeks advice, further convey the image of the historical Enlightenment. Despite an array of research that attests to the paradoxical gender politics of the Enlightenment with its promise for emancipation and at the same time relegation of the female to the private sphere and the realm of nature,\(^\text{43}\) the scriptwriter of The Cat Returns lets the heroine turn to this image of the Enlightenment for help to stay human. Just before Haru is kidnapped, the Baron admonishes her to be true to herself in whatever she does. When Haru dances with the Baron, who has come to the Cat King’s ball to rescue her in disguise, she enjoys the dance so much that we can hear her thoughts in the voiceover saying, ‘I’m starting to like this. It might not be the worst thing to become a cat after all’. It is right in this moment that the Baron reminds her of his words, ‘Haru, remember what I said. Stay true

\(^{42}\) Connell, ‘Change among the Gatekeepers’.

\(^{43}\) Scott, Only Paradoxes to Offer; Klinger, ‘Die Ordnung der Geschlechter’.
to yourself!" By this, he reveals himself to her as the Baron, and it is the enlightened ideal he represents that can be interpreted as reminding Haru: do not become a cat, do not relinquish your human existence, do not submit to the life of a housewife and dependent!

Furthermore, the Baron continues, saying, ‘You must live your own time (jibun no jikan o ikirunda)’. The rebel cat Muta had in a previous scene characterised the Cat Kingdom as a place for those who cannot live their own time. Immediately after that, the Baron also suggests to Haru that she, together with himself and others, think about how she can live her own time and if she could do that, there would be nothing to worry about; that is, there would be no worry about becoming a cat’s wife. Yoshida Reiko, scriptwriter of the film, calls the appeal to ‘live your own time’ one thematic core of the film. Director Morita suggested that these lines be removed because he found them difficult to understand, but Yoshida insisted that they remain. We interpret this trope as signifying a process in which a drifting and floating Haru is becoming active and independent, thereby also becoming rooted in reality and in her time and thus capable of living her own life.

With the solidarity of her male (animal) helpers, Haru herself actively contributes to her own escape. She is the one who recognizes the tricking devices in the maze that they must pass in order to find the exit from the Cat Kingdom. The descent from the sky that marks Haru’s escape and return to her world signifies her rooting in reality. The bird Toto, the third male helper who aids in her rescue, and the others in their free fall from the sky, epitomise the freedom won through the escape in the ability to fly. He also stands for a gentle masculinity and for solidarity, as the rescue is completed through his appeal to other crows that form a flying staircase from the sky. In the chain of actions that lead to the successful escape, Haru is neither a passive victim and damsel in distress, nor is she a superwoman who, like an inverted

---

44 This dance scene, as well as the scene in which Haru changes her clothes, do not exist in the manga version. As a whole, the manga version seems to have little interest in the issue of ‘living one’s own time’ (mentioned only once) and gender in general. Rather, the Cat Kingdom is a place for cats that can no longer live in the human world, and its residents can enjoy eternal life (Hiiragi, Baron, 74, 180). The story ends with the epigraph that reads ‘For your friends whom you lost in the past’ (ibid., 210).
45 Yoshida, Staff Interview, 73.
46 Morita, ‘Staff Interview’, 59.
superman, would fight and overcome danger on her own. The rescue is a collaborative effort that involves and builds on the intellectual, social and physical capabilities of all actors.

We need to note that the male figures, especially the Baron, are not presented as potential substitutes for Machida-kun, or subjects of heterosexual romance; nor are they presented as breadwinner males (teachers, husbands, fathers) who might try to integrate or push Haru into an existing order. In other words, while the relationships of parents and teachers are interest-laden, institutional or blood-related, the relationship to the Cat Bureau protagonists is idealistic: it marks friendship. Friendship is presented as an alternative when *ren'ai* is impossible, as is the case between Haru, the human being, and the Baron, the anthropomorphised animal toy cat.

‘Coolness’ is an important term and characteristic in *The Cat Returns* that allows us to trace the logic of romantic love and desire on the level of embodied ideology. In the film’s beginning, Haru describes Machida-kun as ‘cool’ (*kakkoii*). Next, the cat servant praises the Cat Prince Lune as ‘cool’, which makes Haru pause in her resistance. When Haru meets the Baron for the first time, she murmurs to herself that he is ‘cool’. While each of these male figures exhibits very different characteristics, they are labelled using the same term that marks them as objects of attraction and desire for Haru. Eventually, at the end of the film, Haru herself feels that she has become ‘cool’ by becoming decisive and independent in the escape from the Cat Kingdom, where she exclaims ‘We look really cool! (*Watashi tachi kakko ii kamo*)’. This exclamation can be read as signifying the eureka moment: Haru and her helpers fought against the dominant gender role model and managed to overcome it. Moreover, they escaped the trap on a level that surpasses the cognitive and includes the bodily, the unconscious and the emotional dimensions that entail what we find cool, desirable and attractive. What Bourdieu most thoroughly and decisively problematised was the emancipation and liberation of women on levels that lie beyond the cognitive and legal structures; precisely the dimension of what attracts them on the subconscious level of bodily
dispositions (blushing) and feelings of attraction to hegemonic masculinity that they cannot easily and cognitively control – in other words, of what they find to be desirable, or ‘cool’. In Haru’s case, it is Machida-kun’s coolness (and then that of Prince Lune) that sparks Haru’s desire to slip into the role of hegemonic femininity through romantic love. This coolness is firstly transferred to the Baron, the principle of enlightenment and action, and in the end to herself as someone who escaped the love and marriage trap.

**The Crossroads, or, Was It Wrong to Save a Cat?**

Beyond the critical metaphoric depiction of a certain gender role model such as that of the housewife, the level of conceptual complexity in the film is further heightened to also include a thoughtful interrogation of the elements that are seen as part of this role model’s required emotional outfit. Haru repeatedly asks herself whether it was wrong to have saved a cat: when she is showered with presents that mean all kinds of trouble for her; when she is led to the Cat Kingdom against her will; and when she finds that her feeding a starving cat when she was a little girl was ultimately connected to her trapped situation in the Cat Kingdom. Her question can be reformulated as: was it wrong to be kind-hearted, to show compassion, human emotion, to be gentle and care for others in need? After all, this is what seems to have brought her into this situation in which she is trapped. The viewer is prompted to think about these issues considering the chain of events and in the end to see through the gender trap associated with these human qualities. That these emotional qualities are associated with the female gender and the nurturing qualities of the housewife/mother leads to the question of whether or not these qualities in themselves create problems for the person who possesses and acts on them, and whether or not they inadvertently lead her to, and trap her in, the gender role assigned to her by society. The answer that the anime gives through Haru is: no. When, near the end of

---

47 Bourdieu emphasises the historical aspect of the unconscious and of feelings as the product of an incessant labour of construction within a framework of masculine domination that eternalises the social – and women’s subordination in particular – to appear natural (Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 54).
the film, Haru reflects on her experience of saving the cat and all the difficulties she went through, she concludes that nothing she did was wrong. Noting that it was ‘all precious time of my own’, she affirms that she indeed ‘lived her own time’.

Unlike a wide range of *shōjo* heroines in Ghibli productions whose witchcraft or, more broadly speaking, supernatural power pushes forward the plot and determines its outcome,\(^{48}\) the skills and resources of protagonist Haru in *The Cat Returns* are not ‘magical’ but rather draw from the unlimited resources of the human world: human wit, intelligence and the ability to create and draw on networks. They are intellectual and, importantly, human and social skills. For example, the location of the exit from the Cat Kingdom is taught to Haru by the female cat whose life she saved when she was a little girl. This cat’s information and support thus signifies a ‘return’ of Haru’s own help and kindness, a reciprocal social relationship originally founded on Haru’s humanity and compassion. Through her adventure, Haru not only rejects the (housewife) trap, but at the same time she affirms that it was not wrong to have saved a cat, and to show gentleness, respect and care for others. It was the right thing and the human thing to do. What the anime thereby asserts is that these qualities are precious in themselves but can become a prison when a person is trapped into them within a gender role model and system that allows for nothing else. In the film, the only male figures who display such qualities are the animal helpers from the fantastic world of the Cat Bureau. We read this as an implicit critique of the one-sided and biased gender model in contemporary Japanese society in which men are kept from developing their capacities for these caring and human emotions.

The interpretation of *The Cat Returns* as an elaboration and radical rejection of the housewife model as a trap is perhaps most strongly suggested in the last few scenes after Haru’s rescue. Haru, now a young woman with short hair, up early in the morning, having prepared her own and her mother’s breakfast, reads the newspaper and surprises her mother

---

\(^{48}\) Sugawa, *Shōjo to mahō*. 
with her self-purporting, self-sufficient and determined attitude. After the first fantastic metamorphosis halfway into a cat and back into human shape again, this second ‘real’ metamorphosis signifies Haru’s emotional growth and coming-of-age transformation. This is not the Haru of the film’s beginning. This young woman is fully there and ‘living her own time’, she is informed and informs herself, she knows where she is going. She is not the oversleeping latecomer any more but ahead of (her) time, knowing and saying that she has ‘no time to lose/waste’. At a shopping street called ‘The Crossroads (Jūjigai)’ where she had earlier met her first helper/informant, the rebel cat Muta, she now meets up with her friend Hiromi, who breaks the news that Haru’s ‘crush’ Machida-kun has broken up with his girlfriend, suggesting that Haru might have a chance for romance now. But Haru is shown to be completely disinterested in her earlier crush. Her loss of interest indicates that she has successfully escaped from ren’ai ideology and its accompanying dispositions and is now ready to make her own decisions rather than prioritising romance over everything else, and falling into the housewife trap. As both young women reach an intersection, they stop for two women with little children in strollers who pass from right to left in front of them. The crossroad, of course, signifies a conceptual one, where the path of two housewives/mothers crosses the path of the two young women. The young women stop to let the housewives pass, and they then continue their own way in their own direction. We only know that Haru and her friend will be going to the cinema, which may be a self-referential device of the filmmakers pointing to a life full of stories, endless possibilities and creativity but denoting no practical clear alternative as to where the young women will be going in life. Recued and strengthened by principles, rooted in reality, and ‘living their own time’, they pursue their own goals.

**Concluding Remarks: Beyond Shōjo, Magic and Metamorphosis**

Lastly, we place our reading of The Cat Returns within the broader discussion on gender and ‘shōjo, magic and metamorphosis’ as common features not only in Ghibli productions but in
wider texts of Japanese popular culture. Saitō Minako critiqued the depiction of gender roles in manga and anime in her Kō itten ron (A Discussion on a Splash of Crimson). According to her, anime can be divided into ‘Boys’ Land’ and ‘Girls’ Land’ plots, depending on the target audience. In Boys’ Land, it is always a group of male characters who fight against an evil that threatens human beings as a whole and there is usually only one female character (a splash of crimson) who is expected to look after the male characters when they are not fighting. In Girls’ Land, on the other hand, the protagonist is usually a girl in her low to mid-teens, who often uses supernatural power, especially magic, and transforms into a different form, such as a mature woman or a magical girl, driven by heterosexual desire and romance. Haru does not fit this scheme, as she resists physical transformation and ultimately rejects romance. Nor does The Cat Returns fit the dichotomy between Boys’ and Girls’ Lands as is evident from our outline of the characters and plot above.

The Cat Returns does share a centrality of metamorphosis in the storyline with Girls’ and Boys’ Lands settings, but here as well, it stands apart in the way metamorphosis is framed and filled with meaning. In Girls’ Land, metamorphosis is presented as the heroine wearing makeup and changing into overtly feminine attire such as a ‘short skirt exposing legs, leotard with a very low neckline, flappy and annoying ribbons and scarf, and glittering accessories’. Saitō Minako notes that the nature of metamorphosis in Girls’ Land is in line with the trope of Cinderella: a girl in shabby clothes is presented with a beautiful costume thanks to the power of magic and, against all odds, wins the position of a princess in the end. In The Cat Returns, this is exactly the opportunity that Haru is given by the Cat King as a return for her saving his son. As mentioned above, she does change into gorgeous feminine dress at the castle banquet,

---

49 For an overview of the magical girls’ genre by this title, see Saitō Kumiko, ‘Magic, Shōjo, and Metamorphosis’.
50 Saitō Minako, Kō itten ron.
51 Ibid., 18–34.
52 Ibid., 31. These ‘flappy ribbons’ are precisely what Honda Masuko (Ibunka) appreciates in her concept of hirahira. While for Honda, this aesthetic symbolizes an oppositional element to patriarchal oppression, for Saito it becomes the symbol of a femininity under the spell of male desire and domination.
53 Ibid., 14–15.
and almost succumbs to the allure of being a (cat) princess. However, she eventually refuses the opportunity and chooses to stay human.\textsuperscript{54}

In analysing the role of metamorphosis and its implications for gender roles in \textit{The Cat Returns}, Saitō Kumiko’s lucid discussion and genealogy of the magical girl genre which we mentioned in the introduction of this paper help clarify how Haru and \textit{The Cat Returns} differ from other conventional anime.\textsuperscript{55} In her analysis of the magical girls anime, extant from the 1960s to the present, Saitō states that ‘the classic magical girl’s dilemma – magic as power and liberation on the one hand, and domestic duties on the other – stemmed from women’s split life across the turning point prior to marriage’.\textsuperscript{56} Moreover, in the magical girls shows produced in the 1960s and 70s the heroines had magical power in as far as it was ‘merely an interim period for enjoying \textit{shōjo}-ness before undertaking female duties’.\textsuperscript{57} Metamorphosis in the genre was associated with growing up while retaining dominant gender norms, but signifying some form of social or sexual empowerment.\textsuperscript{58} The understanding of \textit{shōjo} as a moratorium or postponement of the social and reproductive responsibilities of a female is also highlighted by others.\textsuperscript{59} From the 1980s however, the new magical girls’ ‘true goal becomes the eternal deferral of growth, and their task, to be just cute and young’.\textsuperscript{60} Metamorphosis lost its association with growing up. Instead, staying \textit{shōjo} forever became a strength for the magical girls and romance became ‘the essence of magical girls’ everyday school life’.\textsuperscript{61}

In the case of \textit{The Cat Returns}, Haru is obviously portrayed as a \textit{shōjo}. However, her \textit{shōjo}-ness and the metamorphosis she undergoes are decidedly different from that of her virtual sisters. In the film, Haru is characterised as honest and pure (\textit{sunao}) rather than cute

\textsuperscript{54} It is also interesting that while the half-cat, half-human appearance of Haru, especially her cat ears, can be regarded as what Azuma Hiroki calls \textit{moe} elements, that is visual and personal characteristics that make the character more attractive for \textit{otaku} audiences (Azuma, \textit{Otaku}, 42–47), in the case of Haru, the ears, together with all of the other physical features of a cat, are presented as negative signs that she is becoming an animal.\textsuperscript{55} Saitō Kumiko, ‘Magic, \textit{Shōjo}, and Metamorphosis’.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 154.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 151.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 137.
\textsuperscript{59} Orbaugh, ‘Busty Battlin’ Babes’.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 157.
(kawaiî), the prominent trademark of the magical girl genre. Moreover, whereas in the precursor *Whisper of the Heart*, the evolving romantic relationship between a talented boy and a girl becomes the driving force in the girl’s maturation, in *The Cat Returns*, the view of romance and marriage is complex and fraught with the danger of losing oneself. Therefore, the film sends a critical message about prioritising romance and falling into the housewife trap.

In *The Cat Returns*, the status of shōjo is neither emphasised nor denounced, nor held onto and eternalised. The fantastic or magical metamorphosis (into a cat) is depicted as a sign of Haru losing not her shōjo status, but her humanity and herself; it is associated with a struggle that she needs to win in order to live her own life free from limiting social gender norms. Instead of yearning for Machida-kun, Haru learns through her experience in the Cat Kingdom about the importance of ‘living her own time’, and that to do so is what is truly ‘cool’. ‘Living her own time’ for Haru does not mean what Saitō Kumiko called being the ‘cute and carefree student’, an image of shōjo maximised in the 1990s that symbolically functions as ‘the transience that lasts forever’. On the contrary, it means to grow up, to think critically and act decisively; Haru learned this in the Cat Kingdom and emerged as a self-certain, responsible young woman.

The anime *The Cat Returns* is a production of the 2000s as much as other shōjo-centred films, manga and video games of the past decade or so. Against the backdrop of an aging society, low birth rate and declining marriage rates, the societal discourse on these deeply consequential social developments has greatly increased. The burst of the bubble

---

62 The culture of cuteness, a pervasive concept crossing genres and genders and adorning private and public spheres, is associated with femininity, passivity and childlike innocence, and has been framed as passive resistance and counterweight to the uniformed and male enterprise society (McVeigh 2000; Allison 2006). The dichotomy of these spheres, however, as well as the appropriation of the symbolism of cuteness in the business and political world, rather than subverting existing power structures, needs to be seen as systemically stabilizing the dominant relationships of power between social actors (for the magical girls genre, see also Saitō Kumiko, ‘Magic, Shōjo, and Metamorphosis’, 161). For the most recent elaborations on cuteness, see the special issue of the *East Asian Journal of Popular Culture* (2016) on ‘kawaiî’ concepts).
64 Ibid., 155.
economy in the 1990s, and the subsequent neo-liberalisation of the labour market have brought about the decline of the corporate breadwinner salaryman model as a realistic option for the majority of young men, despite the tenacity by which this ideal still forms the core of aspirations to hegemonic masculinity in Japan. Correspondingly, one survey suggests that one third of young women wish to become fulltime housewives. As a common trend, however, a poll by the Cabinet Office in 2015 shows a dwindling interest in romance and that over 30% of young women feel that marriage is no longer a predetermined choice. Considered in light of this societal context, The Cat Returns, this ‘light and frothy film’ is at once reflecting shifting ideas on gender and at the same time further and subtly subverting what Ueno and Nobuta called the ideological ‘Marriage Empire’ in Japan. The film presents an exceptional treatment of the need for young women to confront these social changes and gender role expectations.

References

65 ‘1 in 3 Japanese women’
66 According to the survey, 39.1% of single women in their 20s and 30s, and 37.6 % of single men in the same age bracket do not wish to have a romantic relationship (koibito). Among single women in their 20s this rate is 40.1% (Naikakufu, Kekkon, kazoku keisei ni kansuru ishiki chōsa, 68). Of all women in this age bracket, regardless of whether they are in a relationship, married or not, 31% stated that marriage is not necessary (muri shite shinakutemo yoi/ shinakutemo yoi) (Ibid., 70).
67 Odell & LeBlanc, Studio Ghibli, 122.
68 Ueno and Nobuta, Kekkon teikoku.


Luther, Katherine (undated): Katherine Luther’s Top 7 family anime [accessed 9 Feb 2013].


Naikakufu, ‘Kekkon, kazoku keisei ni kansuru ishiki chōsa [Opinion Poll Regarding Marriage and Family Formation]’. Koramu [Column]


*Neko no ongaeshi* (Program of the film), 2002.


