This thesis examines Cecilia Beaux’s painting *Sita and Sarita* (1893-1894) as it expresses the conflicts of the women’s rights movement, changing gender roles, and shifts in the perception of female sexuality and intellectualism in the late nineteenth century. The argument hinges on the quality of the woman’s gaze and the anthropomorphic nature of the cat, which encompass growing interests in and fears of female mental capacity, sexuality, and animality. Examining how the portrait functions within three major traditions—depictions of young women in white dresses; women lost in thought or in reverie; and portraits of people with their pets, specifically women with cats—helps to illuminate the significance of the sitter’s gaze and the cat. Locating the painting within the legacy of the Aesthetic movement’s “white paintings” serves to illustrate how *Sita and Sarita* borrows this visual language. A brief history of the development of pet-keeping practices illustrates how pets took on new roles within the domestic realm. Discussion of Edouard Manet’s *Olympia* as a source for the cat in *Sita and Sarita* identifies concerns about sexual self-possession. Referencing nineteenth-century Egyptomania, the thesis argues that the black cat alludes to Cleopatra as a figure of sex, power, and female ambition, and to the goddess Bastet, a mother and protector, thus creating a tension between the female and the feline as threatening seductress and
natural caretaker. Examining popular literature of the nineteenth century, namely Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland series, and Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Black Cat” illuminates the implications of the sitter’s reverie and the symbolic power of the cat. Beaux’s life and writings support this new interpretation of Sita and Sarita, as she was an independent, unmarried career-person who broke many boundaries as a woman while maintaining the view from an early age that women and men were ultimately equal.
DEDICATION

For my parents, Nancy and Jeff Hayes, and for my grandmother, Glenda Short, who instilled in me an unfaltering confidence in the abilities, intelligence, and equality of women.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to my advisor and committee chair, Dr. Jessica Dallow, for her unending patience, brutal honesty, and consistent support throughout the process of writing this thesis and for agreeing to let me take on the project in such a short time frame. I greatly appreciated how quickly she returned my chapters with her comments, allowing me to complete the thesis in just over one month. I would also like to thank Dr. Heather McPherson for her helpful knowledge and guidance when I entered the program as a transfer student, and for sitting on my committee. Dr. Tanja Jones bravely agreed to sit on my committee without ever having had me as a student, for which I thank her. Her comments were incredibly thoughtful and delicately-delivered. Mark Griffio, Chase Cooper, and Kristi McMillan deserve my deepest gratitude for being my support system over the last year and for their unfaltering encouragement at every turn. Lastly, I would like to thank my parents who showed their utmost confidence in my ability to successfully write and defend my thesis by retreating to the Appalachian Trail where they were unreachable for the entire time I spent working on it.
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INTRODUCTION

This thesis will examine Cecilia Beaux’s *Sita and Sarita* (1893-94; Figure 1) as an image that encompasses the struggles and conflicts of the women’s rights movement, changing gender roles, and female sexuality and intellectualism in the late nineteenth century. I will address the painting as a dual portrait, a representation of the appearance and an impression of the personality of both the young female sitter and her feline companion. The anthropomorphic quality of the cat, combined with its prominent placement in the picture plane, suggests that this is a portrait of the animal as much as the woman, so close attention will be paid to them both in the interpretation of the painting. I hope to tease out the many ways that *Sita and Sarita* voices the concerns of the specific time period and culture in which it was produced, particularly in relation to the “New Woman,” a type that emerged in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

As a term, the “New Woman” is quite vague, referring to a wide array of female or feminine types both established and emerging in the nineteenth century in America as well as Europe. Generally-speaking, the New Woman applied to any woman who broke with tradition, which in most cases involved actively pursuing an education or a career. The New Woman presented a threat to the social and natural orders, as she chose to pursue her own direction and interests, rejecting traditional roles of motherhood while calling into question gender roles in general.¹ Historian Martha H. Patterson explains:

> Signifying at once a character type and a cultural phenomenon, the term New Woman described women more broadly than suffragist or settlement worker, ¹ Lyn Pykett, *The “Improper” Feminine: The Women’s Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge Press, 1992), 140.
while connoting a distinctly modern ideal of self-refashioning. Not simply shorthand for a commitment to greater female liberation, the term could signal multiple and contradictory positions on the most pressing issues of the day.²

The most important words out of Patterson’s definition of the New Woman are “multiple” and “contradictory,” as they open perceptions of women to include a wide spectrum of types instead of simply one thing or its opposite, like the “Madonna/Whore” complex where women are forced into being seen as virtuous and pure or degraded and sexually objectified. The New Woman called for a reconsideration of how society defined women’s roles, potentials, and limits through women pushing or completely breaking through those boundaries. These independent, strong-willed women were seen as a destructive force to established civilization, and during that conflict and amidst those fears and hopes surrounding the New Woman, Beaux created *Sita and Sarita*.

The elements that are most significant to this investigation are the implications of women in reverie, the connection between pet-keeping and gender roles, and the threat of female sexuality and animality as expressed through the black cat’s ties to Egyptomania, hysteria, and witches. This thesis will establish new connections between the painting and literature of the period, including Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* series (1865/1871), the fascination with the Egyptian Other, the Aesthetic Movement, and the personal life of the artist to show how important this work is as a cross-section of its culture, as a tool to better understand a particular historical moment.

Eliza-Cecilia Beaux, called “Leilie” for short by close family and friends but “Cecilia” professionally, was born in 1855 to a middle-class family in Philadelphia. Her

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father, Jean Adolphe Beaux, was a businessman who opened a branch of his family’s silk company in Philadelphia in 1848, and her mother, Cecilia Kent Leavitt, was a governess prior to marrying Jean. Her mother came from a middle-class Puritan family, the members of which helped raise Beaux when her mother died twelve days after giving birth and her father returned to France, incapable of bearing his grief. Beaux and her two older sisters, Alice and Aimee, the latter nicknamed Etta, were left with their grandmother Cecilia Kent Leavitt, her three sons, and her two remaining daughters. Jean returned to Philadelphia for a short time before sailing again to France in 1861, leaving his daughters’ education to the Leavitt family. Beaux took drawing lessons in the early 1860s, but her art education really began in 1868, when her aunts took her to museums, local galleries, and private collections. In 1869, Beaux attended the Lyman School, a private girls’ school for middle and upper-class students, but she did not pursue art lessons there. In the 1870s, she took formal lessons from Catherine Ann Drinker, a cousin of the family, and by 1874 she taught art in school, offered private lessons, and published her first work, *The Brighton Cats*, a lithograph. Beaux took classes at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts from 1876 until 1878.

Beaux’s professional artistic career began in 1879, not from oil painting, but from painting portraits on porcelain. That same year, she began showing work in exhibitions. Beaux may have shifted from painting on porcelain to painting in oils as an effort to elevate her work, moving from a somewhat sentimental, decorative medium to the grander materials used for centuries by the greatest historical artists. In 1885, Beaux exhibited her first major oil painting, *Les derniers jours d’enfance* (1885; Figure 2),
undoubtedly influenced by James Abbott McNeill Whistler’s *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1: Portrait of the Artist’s Mother* (1871; Figure 3), which Beaux would have seen in 1881 at the Pennsylvania Academy’s exhibition of American artists. *Les derniers jours d’enfance* received very favorable reviews and even earned an award at its debut in 1885. Following her positive reception, Beaux began earning commissions for portraits and continued to exhibit with good reviews. After *Les derniers jours d’enfance* was not only accepted but well-placed in the 1887 Paris Salon, Beaux started planning an extended trip to Europe to study art. Beaux was abroad from 1888 to 1889, during which time she visited France, England, and Italy, involving herself in the American artistic communities there. After her return to Philadelphia, she continued to create paintings, submit to exhibitions, and win awards including the Dodge Prize for the best picture by a woman artist at the National Academy of Design in 1892 and a gold medal from the Art Club of Philadelphia in 1893. Beaux’s success increased over the next twenty years, earning her more commissions as well as awards, and she began teaching at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1908. She also began sitting on juries for exhibitions, continued to lecture at the Academy, and guest lectured at colleges and institutions on the East coast, earning a number of honorary degrees in the process. It is not until 1924 that Beaux’s productivity began to slow due to such health issues as a broken hip, diminishing eyesight, and pain her hand. She completed her last painting in 1928, showed her last work in 1934, and died in her sleep in 1942.³

³ For detailed timeline of Beaux’s life and awards see: Sylvia Yount, et al., *Cecilia Beaux: American Figure Painter* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).
As a woman, Beaux broke many boundaries. She never married or had children, but she made significant gains that were often firsts for women. In 1887, Beaux was one of two women chosen to serve on the Jury of Selection for an annual exhibition at the Pennsylvania Academy, the first women to do so. In 1897, she was the only woman to be elected to the jury at the Carnegie Institute’s Second Annual Exhibition, and similarly, in 1899 was the only woman appointed to the 1900 Exposition Universelle’s American jury in Paris. In 1908, she became the first female faculty member at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Another major accomplishment came in 1923, when Beaux was the only artist among the League of Women Voters’s “America’s Twelve Greatest Living Women,” taking her place alongside greats like novelist Edith Wharton and Helen Keller, and later, in 1926, she became the first painter to ever receive a gold medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. While these awards stand out because of her unique status in receiving them, she also earned many medals and placements in exhibitions throughout her long lifetime, an accomplishment in itself even if she was not breaking any gender or artistic boundaries in earning them.

Starting in her early adulthood, Beaux endeared herself to strong figures both male and female in the art world. Her first close interaction with a female artist was with Catherine Drinker, a painter and author, with whom she studied in the 1870s. In the 1880s, Beaux met Helena de Kay and her husband Richard Watson Gilder, who remained life-long friends of hers. Helena was an artist and Richard was a poet. Both were great patrons of the arts, offering Beaux the opportunity to explore their established and extensive social network that included Winslow Homer, John La Farge, Albert Pinkham
Ryder, Auguste Saint-Gaudens, and many others. The Gilders actively promoted the arts in New York City and encouraged female artists to exhibit their work in shows sponsored by the Society of American Artists, an organization that Helena co-founded. Beaux benefited from befriending the Gilders in gaining models as their daughters Dorothea and Francesca appeared many times in Beaux’s paintings. They also facilitated commissions including those to paint such famous figures as Henry James and President Theodore Roosevelt. When Beaux visited England on her European trip in the late 1880s, she was reunited with Maud DuPuy, who she knew from Philadelphia. By that time, DuPuy had married George Darwin, one of Charles Darwin’s children. The DuPuy and Darwin families greatly influenced Beaux as a developing artist, introducing her to the local intelligentsia during her time in England and earning her numerous commissions. She stayed with them for extended periods of time during her trip, using an old mill on their property as a studio and creating portraits of the many extended family members.

It was around this time that Beaux developed her strong opinions on portraiture, voicing her disappointment when people only put value on the likeness of the image to the sitter. Almost twenty years later, in a lecture at Simmons College, Beaux delineated exactly what portraiture meant to her. She began by discussing how vague the term

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4 Ibid., 16.
5 Beaux’s painting *After the Meeting*, depicting Dorothea Gilder at a suffragist gathering, was positively reviewed when it was exhibited in 1914 and can be seen as the artist’s support of the suffragist cause. While it is currently unknown whether Beaux actively supported the suffragist movement, she was publicly involved in a number of organizations that helped families and individuals suffering after World War I. She did not, as other artists did, stay out of the political arena when it came to certain types of advocacy.
6 Yount, et al., *American Figure Painter*, 30.
7 Ibid., 32.
“portraiture” actually is, as it includes all manner of art forms, of varying value, that depict the human subject. The portraiture she considered art was not merely reproductive in the sense of capturing the visual appearance of a person, but was enlivened by “Imaginative Insight and Design,” which made the artwork:

Powerful—magnetic enough to make us linger over a simple reserved rendering of an aspect of a person we do not know,—have never seen and perhaps would not have noticed if we had seen.8

She claimed that this imaginative insight allowed artists to see deeper and present more about each new subject, probing into the soul of that person and thus into humanity itself. With her own words in mind, it is impossible to see any of her portraits as mere likenesses of the sitters or as a random accumulation of objects. Instead, we must read them as both subtle and profound insights into these individuals, their souls and their connections to the world around them, since Beaux did not see her own art as purely aesthetic or mechanical in representation so to do so would be to sell her short.

Although Beaux has never publicly and explicitly identified herself as a feminist or an advocate for women’s rights, she was the embodiment of the New Woman as she actively pursued a career, her own independence, and financial stability. While it is true that her father abandoned her with his family shortly after the death of her mother, many scholars make a false claim that Beaux was raised only by women. Her uncle, in her own words, came in second only to her grandmother as the most influential and important person her life.9 He was primarily responsible for encouraging her to pursue art, while


9 Beaux, Background with Figures, 65.
her grandmother and aunts gave her the financial support to develop it into a career. In the throes of the instability and confusion of youth, Beaux concluded:

Although all sorts of intangibilities and uncertainties hovered about my existence, there was one rock-bottom reality. I must become independent. My grandmother’s house was my home, and in it I was the youngest born, but I wished to earn my living and to be perhaps some day a contributor to the family expenses.  

From a twenty-first century perspective, Beaux’s commitment to supporting herself and her family seems radical for the nineteenth century, but in actuality she was one of the many women at the forefront of the wave of change that emerged after the Civil War, flowing into the twentieth century, where it grew into a massive movement after the World Wars when so many men were away or dead that women stepped in to keep the world turning. Beaux did become successful enough to aid her aunts in supporting their family financially, despite her disadvantage as a female artist.

Beaux never married, which many take as a sign of her enduring independence; however, she was not, as some women’s rights advocates were and still are, an opponent of marriage. In her autobiography, she writes that she was “by no means set against marriage and no glimmering vision of another sort of future.” As a teenager she thought she was “a seemly girl and would probably marry” but as her art education progressed, she saw the paths diverge between practicing Art and marrying a life of

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10 Ibid., 84.

11 In her book *Cecilia Beaux: A Modern Painter in the Gilded Age*, Alice Carter argues at length that she believes Beaux had a romantic, sexual relationship with a much younger woman, and that due to her preference for women, Beaux never married. Accusations of lesbianism were not uncommon towards the “New Woman” as she represented subverted gender roles and was perceived as “unnatural.” Susan M. Cruea, “Changing Ideals of Womanhood during the Nineteenth-century Woman Movement,” *The American Transcendental Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (September 2005): 203.

12 Beaux, *Background with Figures*, 86.
domesticity or maternity. In fact, when she looked back on that time in her life, that remarkable pivot point, she referred to the decision to be an artist instead of a wife as a “very sharp corner [she] had turned, into a new world which was to be continuously [hers],” a world in which she controlled her own schedule while pursuing a career as a portraitist and a lecturer.

The artist herself was a powerful, impressive presence, commanding attention without being loud or overbearing. She had a notable air of self-possession and confidence, lacking any of the coy sweetness or timidity of other Victorian women. In his memoirs, Hamlin Garland describes his impression of Beaux:

I met Cecilia Beaux, who even at that time was considered one of the best of our painters -- I will not say “women painters,” for that would limit her. She was a tall, clear-sighted, and thoughtful woman . . . a most interesting personality. ‘Her work, while not precisely masculine, is not feminine. She paints in masterly, forthright fashion, and her speech, like her brushwork, is clear, vigorous, and direct. Strength and clarity are her leading characteristics,’ was the judgment which I set down at the time.

She was neither overly dramatic nor controversial, with none of her works causing the scandals known to her contemporaries such as Eakins, Whistler, Sargent, and of course, Manet. This does not, however, imply that she did not take risks. Certainly, *Sita and Sarita*, while it seemed to befuddle or mystify her viewers, was in some ways a risk as it directly referenced the scandalous *Olympia* while merging aspects of the exotic, sexual, macabre, and domestic. Famously, in a speech at Barnard College in 1915, Beaux uttered

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13 Ibid., 87.

14 Ibid., 88.

the following words that shed light on her perspective on women, art, and gender equality:

I have as it were, leaned upon my boundaries, for I have really very little to say on the subject of Woman in Art or the point of view of women in Art. I very earnestly believe in the value of the text, which is that there is and should be no sex in Art. That is that there is and should be neither advantage nor disadvantage in being either a man or a woman. I am pointing, I know, to a millenium [sic] at least in the woman’s view if I predict an hour when the term Women in Art will be as strange sounding a topic as the title “Men in Art” would be now.16

With her strong opinion in mind, we can see new depths in her work. Instead of dismissing her portraits as nothing but a portrait, they offer so much more when Beaux’s life, knowledge, and strong perspectives on sexual equality are included.

While Beaux primarily painted commissioned portraits, a significant portion of her oeuvre features portraits of the family and friends she invited to sit for her, which allowed her greater freedom to experiment and be creative. The art historian Sylvia Yount explains:

Beaux was a portrait painter living in an era of portrait painters, but it was already clear to her that commissioned work neither fully satisfied her artistic longings nor met her professional needs. . . . She was more likely to transcend the genre, to produce ‘a picture’ as opposed to ‘a mere portrait,’ . . . when she worked outside the commission structure, with its complicated dynamics and need to satisfy paying customers. . . . So it was through Beaux’s noncommissioned portraits of family friends that she stimulated her own artistic growth in the early 1890s and ensured that she always had interesting pictures, appealing in their formal and thematic complexity.17

These informal, non-commissioned portraits have received the most attention from art historians, likely because of Beaux’s exploration into more interesting subjects, dynamic

16 Beaux’s personal script for “Barnard College Anniversary Lecture,” page 1, accessed online from the Smithsonian American Art Archives. www.aaa.si.edu.

17 Yount, et al., American Figure Painter, 69.
compositions, and deeper layers of meaning. One such “family picture” is *Sita and Sarita*, in which the artist’s cousin, Sarah Allibone Leavitt, is depicted seated on a blue and white, likely Asian-inspired, patterned couch with a black cat perched on her shoulder. The young woman gazes out past the picture plane, seemingly lost in thought as she strokes the coat of the cat with a claw-like hand. The woman and animal are bonded not only by touch, but in the blending of their hair, which makes them visually inseparable. The cat makes direct eye contact with the viewer, anthropomorphized as a sentient being, the source for the slightly unsettling effect of the double portrait.

Upon seeing *Sita and Sarita* in the 1895 exhibition at the Society of American Artists, a visitor remarked, “I don’t see how even Mr. Sargent could paint a portrait with more distinction than that of the woman with a black cat by Miss Beaux.” While this statement is often cited in the literature that addresses *Sita and Sarita*, scholars rarely elaborate upon the words, choosing instead to simply present the quote and move on. The visitor was referring to John Singer Sargent, one of the most successful American portraitists of the nineteenth century, yet what is more interesting than the comparison of Beaux to Sargent is the visitor’s use of the word “distinction.” Although the painting was well-received during Beaux’s lifetime, it has garnered little attention from art

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18 Mrs. Walter Turle, 1868-1930. Depicted in *Sita and Sarita* at age twenty-five. I was unable to find much about the sitter. No letters survive between Leavitt and Beaux, and there is no mention of Sarah in Beaux’s autobiography, so they were probably not very close friends despite their family ties.

19 Tara Leigh Tappert, *Cecilia Beaux and the Art of Portraiture* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 32. The quote is also often shortened in the literature on this painting to “I don’t see how even Mr. Sargent would paint a portrait of more distinction.”

historians. I believe this double portrait merits a closer examination due to its captivating, “distinctive” quality.

My interpretation of the painting hinges on the presence and depiction of the black cat. Since the painting was not commissioned, the inclusion of the animal was entirely Beaux’s choice. Because she had that freedom to experiment without the restrictions of pleasing her sitter, I believe that the cat holds great significance, drawing together a variety of connotations related to the women’s rights movement in the nineteenth century. Certainly the animal is only one part of the portrait, but because it holds such a prominent place in the composition and is a black cat, a complex symbol with a long tradition of use in art, it merits deep consideration as it offers many layers of meaning for Beaux’s *Sita and Sarita*.

The bulk of the scholarship written specifically on *Sita and Sarita* frequently relates the painting to Edouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863; Figure 4) or uses it to discuss Beaux’s career. While these are productive avenues of analysis, they only scratch the surface of this enigmatic work.21 *Sita and Sarita* was one of many portraits produced during a significant and productive time in Beaux’s artistic career, just before she accepted a teaching position at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, so scholars such as Sarah Burns, Nancy Mowll Mathews, Lynne Moss Perricelli, and Jeanette M.

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Toohey use it to address her success as well as the gender bias that she experienced, especially in comparing her work to Sargent.22

As scholars have noted, there is a direct visual connection between *Olympia* and *Sita and Sarita* in the pose of the black cat and the placement of the woman’s hand over her groin.23 The slight arching of the cat’s back, along with the serpentine tail, are clearly similar in both paintings; however, scholars overlook the subtleties that differentiate the cats’ poses and thus overlook the differences in meaning, assuming instead that the poses and meanings are the same. In *Olympia*, the cat seems to arch its back in a defensive or aggressive mode, as if the animal feels threatened by the woman, the viewer, or something beyond the picture plane.24 In *Sita and Sarita*, however, the cat seems to arch its back in response to the pleasurable strokes of the woman, rather than in response to a threat. The women’s hands, firmly placed in their laps over their groins, echo each other in a protective gesture. Some looser connections between the two paintings are the predominance of white in the foreground, the flower-motif textiles, and the dark flat background behind the sitters’ heads.

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23 Yount, et al., *American Figure Painter*; Frances Pohl, *Framing America: A Social History of American Art* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2012); Cash, ed., *American Paintings* and others.

24 This is made clear by the fluffing of the base of the tail, consistent with a cat raising its hackles to make itself look larger and thus more intimidating to a threatening presence. While it is admittedly hard to distinguish from the dark background of the painting in *Sita and Sarita*, the cat’s tail does not seem be fluffed out.
The primary arguments behind the meaning of *Sita and Sarita* focus on the references it contains to *Olympia* or the sexual tension of the painting. Jennifer Wingate, for example, suggests that, “By quoting from *Olympia*, Beaux may have been commenting on nineteenth-century American sexual mores in addition to signaling her familiarity with French art,” but does not go into further detail about what those comments on sexual mores may be. Frances Pohl’s analysis of the paintings and their similarities concluded with her argument that “Beaux’s painting subtly works against the denial of sexual feelings in ‘‘respectable’ women,’’ a response to the artist’s grandmother’s Puritan beliefs as much as societal discourse on female sexuality. Alice Carter fails to mention the reference to *Olympia* at all, acknowledging only that the painting “was considered atypical and mysterious” for the “subject matter,” without elaborating upon what that subject matter might be and why it was considered unusual. Beaux was very familiar with Manet and his work, particularly after studying in Paris, so she would have known this painting as well as the controversy surrounding it. Certainly the similarities between the cats and hand positions are striking and intentional, but I believe there is a great deal more to both than imitation of *Olympia*.

Women’s studies professor and author Katharine Rogers offers a perspective on *Sita and Sarita* that differs from other scholars’ arguments. She refers to the painting, particularly the pose and demeanor of the young woman, as “austere,” “grave,”

25 Cash, ed., *American Paintings*, 230. Wingate also suggests that Beaux’s decision to give the painting to the Musée de Luxembourg in Paris in 1921 solidifies the artist’s intention of connecting the paintings, as the museum also holds *Olympia*. The painting later entered the permanent collection of the Musée d’Orsay, where it currently resides.

26 Pohl, *Framing America*, 279.

“reserved,” and “detached,” in contrast to the cat, which she deems a kitten. Rogers interprets the kitten as an expression of the woman’s inner feelings, which at first seems accurate; however, she argues that these feelings are “eager, youthful curiosity and demonstrative sociability rather than sexuality.” Further, she suggests that the caress of the woman demonstrates “a tenderness and liveliness concealed under the woman’s grave appearance.” This, combined with the rest of her argument, reveals her somewhat incomplete visual analysis of the painting, as the animal seems more skeptical than curious due to its slanting eyes and the young woman seems more preoccupied than grave, as she sits with a slight “Mona Lisa smile” rather than a frown or sad expression. She also ignores the placement of Sarah’s right hand over her lap, which is undeniably related to sexuality, and the direct references to Olympia. There is little visual evidence in the painting to support her interpretation that the cat acts as a representation of the woman’s inner feelings of “youthful curiosity and demonstrative sociability,” as the cat seems neither particularly curious nor sociable and inviting. This is another example of scholars overlooking or dismissing the layered meanings of the portrait.

Instead of focusing narrowly on the stylistic elements of this painting or the aesthetic connections to Olympia, I will also focus on the broader significance of the painting as a “cross-section” of the culture in which it was created and a representation of the particular moment when domesticity, pet-keeping, and the changing role of women

29 Ibid., 175.
30 Ibid., 176.
31 Ibid., 175.
intersected at the end of the nineteenth century. While its references to *Olympia* are indeed important, so too are the painting’s broader artistic, literary, and cultural contexts, like the effects of the Aesthetic movement, changes in depictions of pets, interests in the power of the female and fears of the inner animality of women.

Beaux made six preliminary sketches before deciding upon the final composition for *Sita and Sarita* (Undated; Figures 5A-F). In all of the sketches, the cat stands on the sitter’s left shoulder. The drawings are hard to make out, but the primary differences are whether the young woman is standing or seated and which direction her head is turned. In half of the sketches, the young woman looks to the right and in the other half, she looks to the left, including the final version. Sketches A and B are very similar, with the young woman looking to the right, the cat on her left shoulder, and she seems to be seated. Both of her arms seem to be down in these two sketches, while in sketches C and D, her arms appear to be up. While she may be seated or standing in sketch D, she is definitely standing in sketch C, with one hand next to the cat, and the other seeming to touch her chin or shoulder. Sketches E and F are nearly identical, and are most similar to the final portrait, in that the sitter, seated, looks to the left, with her right arm resting in her lap and her left arm touching the cat. The most noticeable change is the cat. In sketch E, the cat seems to look the opposite direction from the woman, to the right, whereas the sitter looks to the left. Sketch F, the sketch used for the final portrait, depicts the cat with its head closer to the woman’s than in Sketch E, either looking the same direction as the sitter or looking directly at the viewer. We can assume that sketch F is the final sketch because of its close similarity to the final portrait, the dark background
and couch cushion are blocked in, and the dress is more detailed than in the other sketches.

The changes in the sketches are significant, as they illustrate the artist’s thinking process about the intended effect of the portrait. In sketches A, B, and D, the young woman seems to look towards the cat, as her face is turned towards the right, where the cat stands on her shoulder. This creates a very close intimacy between the animal and woman, and while it is unclear exactly where the cat is looking, the portrait seems sweet and affectionate. Sketch C is the only drawing in which the woman is clearly standing, making her more of an imposing presence since the pose is an active one versus the more passive seated pose of the other drawings. With the standing portrait, the cat on the woman’s shoulder seems a bit odd. It is not unheard of for a cat to rest on an owner’s shoulder in that way, but the seated pose is more practical for the inclusion of the cat, while also making the woman more approachable for the viewer, as her seated form is less active. Beaux’s final sketch depicts the pose and composition seen in the painting, with the woman seated looking off to the side of the picture plane as the cat makes direct eye contact with the viewer while it stands on her shoulder, protecting her from the possessive nature of the presumed male gaze.

Sarah sat for the painting in a converted barn in New Jersey. While Beaux never discussed the presence or meaning of the black cat in the painting, her sister dismissed the cat’s inclusion as completely arbitrary when numerous people sent inquiries about the animal. The animal was in the barn during the initial sitting and it was suggested that the
cat perch on Sarah’s shoulder for the portrait.\textsuperscript{32} While certainly there are elements in paintings that may be genuinely arbitrary or random, the inclusion of a cat, particularly a black cat, in such a prominent position in the painting seems meaningful when we consider Beaux’s views on portraiture and how animals have been used for thousands of years as symbols. Artists are often in tune with undercurrents of society, so it is not unusual or surprising that an artist may include something such as a black cat that holds meaning without explaining in depth what that image encompasses. In this thesis, I treat the black cat as a significant part of the portrait, since I believe it holds a vast amount of meaning and functions within a long history of representations of cats in art, people with their pets, and the association of the feline with the feminine. 

\textit{Sita and Sarita} possesses a notable sexual tension created by the sitter’s caress of the cat and placement of her other hand in her lap. Citing poor reproduction quality, Beaux voiced concerns about reproducing the painting in a catalogue for the 1895 exhibition.\textsuperscript{33} While Tara Tappert mentions Beaux’s objection in her book \textit{Cecilia Beaux and the Art of Portraiture}, the author does not discuss in depth the possible motives beyond the artist’s complaint of quality issues in reproductions. Beaux may have felt some discomfort about publishing the reproduction fearing that the sitter, the artist’s proper, middle-class cousin, would be aligned with Manet’s overtly sexual \textit{Olympia}, the

\textsuperscript{32} Carter, \textit{Cecilia Beaux}, 114. It is not known who suggested the inclusion of the animal or how reliable this account is. The sketches suggest that the cat was intentionally included in the portrait from its inception, but it is also possible that Beaux made a number of sketches without the cat that were lost or destroyed. Based on the sketches that survive, Beaux’s inclusion of the cat in each drawing, and the fact that the painting was not a commission, I believe the cat’s inclusion was intentional from the start of the planning of the picture.

\textsuperscript{33} Yount, et al., \textit{American Figure Painter}, 34. While Beaux said that she was worried the reproduction would accentuate the “defects” in the painting, Yount and I agree that this reason is disingenuous, not only because Beaux regarded this painting as one of her best works, but also because her choice of titles that protect the sitter’s identity, suggesting a concern that the painting may harm her cousin’s reputation.
threat of female sexuality, and the black cat’s many negative or risqué connotations.

Even without the connection to *Olympia*, she may have been concerned simply because of the portrait’s implicit sexuality, created by the stroking of the cat, which suggests both intimacy and sensuality, and the woman sitting with her hand in her lap. The painting was originally exhibited with the title “The Black Cat,” likely as an effort to protect her cousin’s identity from any negative repercussions. The current title, *Sita and Sarita*, maintains the anonymity of the sitter by using “Sarita,” the Spanish name for Sarah. 

Two versions of this painting exist. The original, painted in 1893, remained in the artist’s personal collection until she donated it to Paris’s Musée de Luxembourg in 1921. That same year, she painted a copy (1921; Figure 6) of *Sita and Sarita* for herself, “not wanting to lose it forever.” Despite being painted by the same hand, the paintings are not identical. In fact, Beaux even said she tried to “improve on the original” but what she meant by that is not clear. A comparison of the paintings reveals only subtle changes in palette and contrast. The copy is lighter and pinker in tone, whereas the original appears darker by comparison, with more blues and purples, particularly in the

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34 Ibid., 34.

35 Ibid., 33. “Sita” is Spanish for “little one,” and presumably refers to the black cat. “Little one” could reference the cat as Sarita/Sarah’s mystical familiar or totemic animal, thus implying a closer connection between woman and cat than simply owner and pet. The choice of Spanish names likely stems from an interest in Spanish painters like Diego Velázquez, which her contemporaries, especially Sargent, emulated.

36 Originally, she gifted it to Musée de Luxembourg but the painting exchanged hands a number of times before ending up in its current home, the Musée d’Orsay.

37 Cash, ed., *American Paintings*, 230. “In a letter to the museum’s director, the artist explained that she made the second painting for ‘her own satisfaction when the original went to France for good.’ She expected to keep it, but after some persuading, the Grand Central Galleries secured her consent to sell *Sita and Sarita* when it was exhibited at the Corcoran in 1923.”

skin-tone. Additionally, the level of contrast in the face is more pronounced in the original than in the copy, with the copy appearing softer and sweeter by the lack of the shadows that appear in the 1893 version. Likewise, the shadows of the sitter’s left hand are softened in the copy, reducing the claw-like appearance of the appendage.

Despite the differences in the two paintings, both were framed in the same way. The copy and the original hang in Dutch-style frames, accentuating the contrast of light and dark between the foreground and the background of the painting while emphasizing the black coat of the cat. These frames have:

A flat ‘plate’ profile overlaid with crosseted corners, gadrooned interior moldings, and outlining in both wave and ripple moldings. . . . A black or dark brown stain allows the grain of the oak carcass to show through as a subtle textural element.

Scholar Mark Bockrath claims that Beaux’s choice of a Dutch frame instead of the popular elaborate gilded frames of the time is daring, but does not elaborate further. The simplicity of the frame’s design as well as its dark color likely appealed to her because it does not distract from the painting. Instead, the dark frame allows the viewer to focus more fully on the painting, in addition to bringing out the contrast of the image. Beaux framed her paintings in a wide variety of styles, but chose more subdued, non-gilded frames for two of her “white paintings”—Sita and Sarita and Man with the Cat (Henry Sturgis Drinker)—both of which bear striking similarities discussed later in this thesis.

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39 I realize that reproductions can sometimes be misleading as colors can vary according to printers, image editing, and monitor settings. Despite that, I do feel that these changes are not the result of reproduction errors.

40 Yount, et al., American Figure Painter, 92.

41 Ibid., 92.
Organized thematically with an interdisciplinary approach, the chapters address the significant issues surrounding women’s roles in the nineteenth century that the painting encompasses. Chapter One will locate the portrait within the artistic legacy of the Impressionist and Aesthetic movements by examining some of Beaux’s predecessors and contemporaries to discuss the significance of the white dress and the implications of the young woman depicted in reverie. Without the black cat, Beaux’s painting naturally fits into the history of “white paintings,” made famous by James McNeill Whistler, which functioned as challenges for artists as well as Aesthetic attempts at visual harmony. *Sita and Sarita* also emerges out of an established artistic tradition of depicting women at leisure within domestic interiors, often not making eye contact with the viewer. The chapter will identify the implications of representations of reverie according to changing views of female intellectual capacity. I argue that *Sita and Sarita* references these traditions but also breaks from them, as the *cat* returns the *gaze* for the woman.

Chapter One will also introduce sources from fictional literature to enhance the painting’s connections to shifting perceptions of female intellectualism and imagination, including the works of Lewis Carroll and Charlotte Gilman’s short story, “The Yellow Wall-Paper” (1892), to tease out what the emotional response was to those changes, particularly when the very notion of an active feminine mind was viewed as threatening. While these fictional stories have not previously been tied to Beaux’s portrait, I believe they offer significant insights into the culture in which she lived and worked. Specifically, the nature of the female literary character in Carroll’s novels and the consequences of forced inactivity and stifled imagination of women in Gilman’s short
story will deepen my reading of *Sita and Sarita* as it functions within the tradition of the woman in reverie. The timing of the short story’s publishing in 1892, just before Beaux began working on *Sita and Sarita*, strengthens my confidence in the connections between the content of “The Yellow Wall-Paper” and the painting.

Chapter Two will examine portraits of people with their cats to demonstrate how the cat in *Sita and Sarita* is an anthropomorphized character with sentience, not a mere accessory or attribute. In an effort to address the unsettling feelings or “mystical” impression of the feline’s presence, pose, and direct gaze in *Sita and Sarita*, the dual portrait will be discussed alongside contemporary paintings of women with cats. The tradition of pet portraits shifted in the nineteenth century, as people embraced changes in pet-keeping that developed out of animal rights movements. Women in particular became associated with this move for better ethics in relation to the treatment of animals, and with that association came a certain maternal tone. In the propaganda for this movement, animals were often correlated with children, leading to a shift in pet-keeping that encouraged the treatment of household pets as children. Pets were treated as surrogate children for those who were childless, and for households with families they were used as tools to teach children how to care for another, similar to how dolls function for little girls. With that mind, the chapter will illustrate similarities between *Sita and Sarita* and mother and child portraits to determine how the painting signifies the

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42 Ibid., 33. “Mystical,” “witchery,” “disquieting smile” of the young woman.”

43 Kathleen Kete, *The Beast in the Boudoir: Petkeeping in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 15-17. Women were involved in these movements since the mid-nineteenth century, but became most prominent as leaders in the 1880s.
“surrogate child” relationship and the connections between pets and children that developed during animal rights movements in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Chapter Three will address the cat as it embodies the threat of women as their roles changed in the nineteenth century, primarily focusing on the animal’s association with female sexuality and animality, power over men, and the supernatural through analysis of Manet’s *Olympia*, the influence of Egyptomania, and popular American fiction. *Sita and Sarita’s* reference to Manet’s *Olympia* is intentional, illustrated by her knowledge of the painting, the inclusion of the black cat, and Beaux’s original title as it relates to the nicknames critics gave to Manet’s painting. The domestic cat, long-associated with ancient Egypt, has ties to both Cleopatra, a potent symbol of sex, death, and power, and Bastet, the protector goddess of maternity. These figures enhance my reading of *Sita and Sarita* in the connotations that surround them, nineteenth-century perceptions of them, and visual connections in their artistic representations. The timing of the institutionalization in America of this “mania” over Egypt supports my arguments that Cleopatra and Bastet are connected in some ways to *Sita and Sarita* as universities, museums, and other organizations actively collected objects while expanding knowledge about that ancient culture in the 1890s, when Beaux painted this enigmatic portrait. In addition to a brief discussion of Egyptomania in the nineteenth century and related literary and artistic sources, this chapter will also look at fictional narratives that center around conflicts over female intellectualism, creativity, animality, and power. These literary works include Catherine Golden’s perspective on Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” which emphasizes the feline behavior of the narrator as she demonstrates the
fears of feminine animality in the nineteenth century; Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Black Cat” (1843), a short story focused on male violence, a vengeful feline, and the victimization of women and pets; and a story about the Salem witch trials, published in 1892 in *New England Magazine* alongside “The Yellow Wall-Paper” the year before Beaux began *Sita and Sarita*, which demonstrates the power of women to control men and destroy society by manipulating the justice system through fear and drama. These fictional tales will help illuminate how Sita in Beaux’s portrait ties together established myths of female hysteria, superstition, and witchcraft.

Beaux was an intelligent and educated woman, well-read and well-rounded; she would have known about the images, feelings, and connotations the black cat would recall in *Sita and Sarita*. With that in mind, it is impossible to see the inclusion of Sita as anything but intentioned to deepen the impact and potential meanings of the painting. This thesis will establish a solid context for the dual portrait both within and beyond art history to argue for a new evaluation of *Sita and Sarita* as more than a tribute to Manet and a pretty portrait of Beaux’s cousin. Instead, the painting should be seen for its value as an intentional commentary on the changing status of women in the nineteenth century. To build the framework for this argument, I will first establish how *Sita and Sarita* emerged out of an established visual legacy: the “white paintings” of young women in the nineteenth century.
CHAPTER ONE

WORKING WITHIN TRADITION

This chapter situates *Sita and Sarita* within traditional representations of women in the nineteenth century. The painting exists within three important traditions in Western portraiture: depictions of young women in white dresses, or “white paintings”; women lost in thought or in reverie; and portraits of people with their pets, specifically women with cats. In this chapter, I will examine the visual language Beaux borrows from the first two traditions, how that language operates within the portrait *Sita and Sarita*, and what it offers for gleaning meaning from the painting. The tradition of painting portraits of women with cats will be discussed in Chapter Two.

The tradition of “white paintings,” depicting young women in pale palettes wearing flowing gowns, emerged out of the Aesthetic Movement in England in the mid-nineteenth century. The Aesthetic Movement was embraced by a loose group of European and expatriate American artists striving towards similar goals of “art for art’s sake,” producing beautiful images, often of the female form and without narratives, in compositions based around harmonizing colors.\(^44\) One of the central leaders of this movement was James McNeill Whistler, an American expatriate who spent most of his life moving between London and Paris. When he began his career as a painter in England, Whistler took up with the Pre-Raphaelites, who formed as a cohesive “brotherhood” to elevate artistic craftsmanship, reverence of nature, and moral narratives.

\(^{44}\) Margaret F. MacDonald, et al., *Whistler, Women, and Fashion* (New York: The Frick Collection, 2003), 95.
or truths. The Pre-Raphaelites recalled imagery, stories, and characters of the romantic Medieval past, dressing the women in their paintings in flowing, draping costumes inspired by that time period. He was influenced by this group, even developing a friendship with one of the brotherhood’s major figures, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, though Whistler eventually split from the Pre-Raphaelites, wanting art to be less about moral truth and more about beauty and aesthetic harmony. The Aesthetic Movement emerged out of this interest in beauty and design, expanding beyond England and Whistler:

Aestheticism quickly spread from its origins in literature and the fine arts to the applied arts as well: the elevation of design to high art led to the creation of artistic objects, including dresses, and dress design became recognized, in the words of a contemporary writer, ‘as a legitimate area of concern for the artist.’

The “white dresses” became a signature of English Aestheticism in art as well as in American fashion, pushing for a change in women’s clothing away from restrictive corsets and superfluous bustles to a simpler form of dress that embraced the natural form of a woman’s body. Sita and Sarita emerges out of this legacy, as we see the female sitter comfortably wearing a white dress of a style consistent with the Aesthetic Movement.

The tradition of depicting women at leisure, often within the domestic interior, developed during the Pre-Raphaelite and English Aesthetic Movements. In particular, these artists enjoyed painting women sleeping, reading, and at their toilettes when they

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47 Ibid., 95.

were not engaged in reenactments of Shakespearean or Arthurian tales. In the late 1870s and 1880s, images increased within and beyond these movements of women “never engaged in any apparently meaningful activity, not even domestic.”49 A large group of American artists, including Beaux, William Merritt Chase, Thomas Dewing, and Abbott Thayer, trained in Paris, adopted many of the painterly styles and palettes of the Impressionists, and returned to the States to produce these decorative images of women that encompass the Pre-Raphaelite attention to beauty, the English Aesthetic interest in white paintings and harmonious color, and the French Impressionist palette of broad, quick brushstrokes and pastels.50 Thus, the American art world was flooded with these portraits of women apparently doing nothing, simply sitting around staring off into space:

Indeed the 1890s and thereafter saw the creation of a number of paintings . . . of women in aesthetic interiors. . . . The paintings deny vitality to the subjects who read or play the guitar or simply pose. The women hover on the borderline between being merely beautiful objects in elegant . . . displays and being lonely human beings, lost in thought and isolated in space. . . . The aestheticizing of the female sitter in these images functioned to deny publicly the control that women were exercising over their own lives.51

In this way, women were seen as purely decorative, as the sitters were passive and still. However, as the New Woman demanded greater access to schools and universities, an

49 Pohl, *Framing America*, 269.

50 Ibid., 269-72. Examples include Thomas Dewing’s *The Lute* (1903; Figure 7) and *Lady in White* (1910; Figure 8) in which women sit, staring into space, but they seem lethargic instead of still, vapid instead of lost in thought. Their expressions seem blank, particularly in comparison to the entrancing gaze of Sarah in *Sita and Sarita*. Further, Dewing’s women blend into their environment almost seamlessly, as if they are a part of the landscape or are figures in a still life, whereas Beaux offsets Sarah from the background through the use of high contrast with the light of her dress and the dark of the wall behind her. The gesture of Sarah’s left hand directs the viewer to her eyes, encouraging the viewer to focus on the subtleties of her expression and to wonder what she must be thinking about.

increasing amount of women entered the work force, the public eye, and the political arena in striving for greater freedom, rights, and protection.\footnote{Cruea, “Changing Ideals of Womanhood,” 187.}

I believe the tradition of painting women like this changed and a level of intellectualism was added in the intensity of the gaze. Instead of simply doing nothing, they were seen as lost in thought, or lost in reverie.\footnote{Yount, et al., \textit{American Figure Painter}, 28. Women lost in thought was an especially popular theme in the 1880s, particularly among European-trained Americans.} While this kind of approach to painting continues to perpetuate the notion that women are passive and should be prevented from doing work or exploring outside the home, it also allows for women to seem mentally active, as if they are pondering something instead of doing nothing. Implying something about the sitter’s unique personality and mental activity is a challenge for artists, revealing superior skills of rendering emotional and intellectual subtleties. Although they submit to the male gaze by not directly confronting it, they are still \textit{unavailable} to the viewer, preoccupied with their thoughts and paying no attention to anyone outside of their own minds.

Certainly the increase of depictions of women reading for pleasure in the nineteenth century by the Pre-Raphaelites, Aesthetic artists, and Impressionists signaled a turning point in the perception of women’s ability to pursue and gain knowledge, in addition to offering an outlet for escapism, but reverie takes this intellectualism one step further, proposing that women are capable of abstract thoughts and vivid imaginations. Beaux suggests deeper thought in the expression of the woman in \textit{Sita and Sarita}, as if she is thinking, exploring her own mental capacity. I raise questions about the
vulnerability of these girls in white, of the detachment of reverie versus submission to the male gaze, and the power of directly confronting the viewer.

At the end of the chapter, I bring in Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland (Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, published in 1865, and Through the Looking-Glass, published in 1871) series, as it illustrates perhaps more clearly this definite shift of perception in relation to women’s mental capacity, combining this view of women’s minds as childlike with an elaborate imagination on par with men’s mental capacities. The books are explorations of Alice’s dreamworld, created completely in her own mind, thus demonstrating the limitlessness of the female imagination in a way that was not previously addressed or considered.

Women in White

The predominantly white composition of Sita and Sarita is both a demonstration of exceptional artistic skill and a tribute to the history of paintings of women in white, made into an international movement by Whistler. A virtuoso series of this type was not uncommon for young artists as they struggled to attract the attention of the larger art world, so it is not surprising that Beaux would experiment with this popular genre.54 American scholar Sylvia Yount supports this argument, writing that, “Beaux clearly intended these challenging pictures to display her technical proficiency,” as painting in white was considered one of the most challenging palettes.55 While Beaux likely did not

55 Yount, et al., American Figure Painter, 32. Beaux made a series of “white paintings” in the 1890s, including Sita and Sarita.
know Whistler personally, she was certainly influenced by him.\textsuperscript{56} First introduced to his work in 1881 at the Pennsylvania Academy’s exhibition of American artists, she perhaps saw Whistler’s \textit{Symphony in White No. 1: The White Girl} (1862; Figure 9) in person or read about it in the newspaper as the portrait was nearby in New York in 1881.\textsuperscript{57} By the time it came to New York, \textit{The White Girl} was already well-known in the art world, both in Europe and America, after it was shown alongside Edouard Manet’s scandalous \textit{Déjeuner sur L’Herbe} (1862-1863) in the Salon des Refusés, an exhibition organized for paintings rejected by the 1863 Paris Salon. Beaux embraced the trend of the white girl paintings, but injected a more lively use of color among all the white in her portraits, like the intense blues seen in \textit{Sita and Sarita} in the shadows of the dress and sofa. Her use of color, as well as her cropped compositions and broad brushstrokes, emerged during her time in Paris, when she was exposed to the work of the Impressionists.\textsuperscript{58}

Because Whistler’s \textit{White Girl} was so well-known during the latter half of the nineteenth century, a comparison between the “original” white girl painting and \textit{Sita and Sarita} is helpful to understanding how Beaux’s painting references that legacy. Whistler’s \textit{White Girl} is a full-length portrait of a Jo Hiffernan, the artist’s red-headed

\textsuperscript{56} Deanna Marohn Bendix, \textit{Diabolical Designs: Paintings, Interiors, and Exhibitions of James McNeill Whistler} (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995). Whistler was well-known in art circles and more broadly by the 1870s because of his public trial with the art critic John Ruskin of November 1878.

\textsuperscript{57} Linda Merrill, et al., \textit{After Whistler: The Artist and His Influence on American Painting} (Atlanta: High Museum of Art, 2003), 17-18, 100-1. Merrill writes that “Whistler rash” took hold in the 1880s, as portraits of women in white increased in America following the exhibition of \textit{The White Girl} in New York. I intend to discuss Whistler’s \textit{Symphony in White No. 2: The Little White Girl} (1864/1865) but I am leaving out Whistler’s third white painting, \textit{Symphony in White No. 3} (1865-1867) because I want to focus on portraits with just one woman instead of a pair or group.

\textsuperscript{58} Beaux’s pastel drawing \textit{Helen Biddle Griscom} (1893; Figure 10) exemplifies the impact of Impressionism on her work in the choice of medium, made popular by Edgar Degas; her use of purples, greens, and yellows; and the seeming lack of finish, allowing the strokes of color to show instead of blending them.
mistress and model, who stands, centered in the picture plane, in a long white gown with a wolf-skin rug under her feet.\textsuperscript{59} Her arms loose at her side, one of her hands has dropped the flowers it once held. She seems exhausted, meeting the viewer’s gaze with a slight sadness instead of defiance.\textsuperscript{60} The dresses in \textit{Sita and Sarita} and \textit{The White Girl} are consistent with Aesthetic garments, more flowing than constricting, wrapping or hanging loosely from the body allowing for more comfort for the wearer in contrast to the restrictive corsets and over-the-top bustles of the popular nineteenth-century fashions.\textsuperscript{61} The white dresses are similar in \textit{Sita and Sarita} and Whistler’s \textit{The White Girl}, although they do differ from each other in details such as the type of waist tie, the sleeve constructions, and the collars. These wrap-dresses and “tea” and “morning” gowns were initially worn only inside the home, within the protected domestic sphere, although they were increasingly worn outside the home by more daring women towards the end of the century.\textsuperscript{62} There were a number of ready-made designs available, including the Mother Hubbard, one of the most popular styles, a belted version of which Sarah may be wearing in \textit{Sita and Sarita}. The ruffled collar, lace yolk, billowing sleeves, and belted—not corseted—waist all fit with a dress of the Aesthetic movement.

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\item \textsuperscript{59} The animal-skin rug is referred to as both a wolf-skin and a bear-skin rug by scholars. I believe it more closely resembles a wolf, so I will refer to it as such.
\item \textsuperscript{60} Lois Marie Fink, \textit{American Art at the Nineteenth-Century Paris Salons} (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 1990), 80-81. Contemporary viewers had a wide range of responses to the portrait, ranging from very negative toeing the line of scandalized to fairly positive and flattering.
\item \textsuperscript{61} Patricia A. Cunningham, \textit{Reforming Women’s Fashion, 1850-1920: Politics, Health, and Art} (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2003), 146. Corsets prevented proper breathing while forcing a woman’s body into an unnatural shape at best, and at worst they compressed organs and broke ribs, sometimes causing permanent damage to the wearer especially if worn over prolonged periods of time.
\item \textsuperscript{62} MacDonald, et al., \textit{Whistler, Women, and Fashion}, 32-35, 44.
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While the white palette, Aesthetic dress, and the young woman portrait are the obvious similarities between *The White Girl* and *Sita and Sarita*, there are also more subtle ties as well as distinctive differences. Yount draws a comparison between the “animal presence” in both paintings, connecting the wolf-skin rug to the black cat.\(^6\) This comparison is unhelpful, however, as the animals function very differently despite both of them making eye contact with the viewer. The wolf-skin rug is marginalized, forced into the bottom right corner of the picture, submissive to the woman standing on it in addition to being quite obviously dead. Sita, the black cat in *Sita and Sarita*, on the other hand, is not only centralized in the composition but is dominant not just over the woman she stands on but also over the viewer as the animal looks slightly down upon us whereas the wolf-skin rug looks up at us. Both animals, however, create a threatening undercurrent in Sita’s expression, the implied violence of skinning an animal, and the bared fangs of the wolf.

Significantly, the gazes of the women differ between the paintings. I believe the gaze is the most powerful element within any portrait, as it determines the relationship of the viewer to the sitter, thus dramatically controlling how the viewer perceives the sitter. Direct gazes can be confrontational, if the sitter seems unhappy about receiving the viewer’s gaze; however, they can also be inviting, charming, or even seductive. Avoiding the viewer’s gaze is often interpreted, particularly when the viewer is presumed to be male or to look with a possessive eye, as a signal of submission, though I believe it can also be seen as a sign of defiance, particularly if the sitter is actively ignoring the

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\(^6\) Yount, et al., *American Figure Painter*, 33.
viewer’s presence or simply too preoccupied to notice any gaze directed at them.\textsuperscript{64} For example, while Hiffernan makes direct eye contact with the viewer, she is neither confrontational nor inviting. Instead, her expression seems apathetic to the gaze directed at her, perhaps related to the subject feeling powerless to prevent the viewer’s consumption of her.\textsuperscript{65} Where Hiffernan engages the viewer through eye contact, Sarah in \textit{Sita and Sarita} is disengaged. She completely ignores the viewer, determinably unavailable as she prefers to spend time in her own mind, her eyes gazing off into a distance the viewer cannot span.

The difference of the gazes is reinforced by the animals in the paintings. Although both woman and wolf make direct eye contact with the viewer in \textit{The White Girl}, neither is a dominating force. The wolf submits to the woman standing upon it just as the woman submits to the viewer, and to the artist who forces her to continue standing, despite her demonstrated weariness. She, like the wolf-skin, is merely a shell, her life force gone. In contrast, Sita dominates the woman and the viewer, standing on Sarah’s shoulders while staring down any attempted possessive gaze. Sarah is as unavailable as the cat is confrontational. Thus, these paintings, despite their shared language of “white


\textsuperscript{65} Michael Murphy, \textit{Proust and America} (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 2007), 226. “\textit{Symphony in White, No. 1} was read variously as portraying a ‘fallen woman,’ as showing a woman attempting to dress above her station, as being an image of a virginal bride, or a red-headed temptress,” illustrating how many different ways the portrait was interpreted when the painting was exhibited during Whistler’s lifetime. Spencer, “Whistler’s \textit{The White Girl},” 309-10.
girls,” are about different subjects employing counter-intuitive uses of the sitter’s returned gaze.\textsuperscript{66}

Another of Whistler’s white paintings, \textit{Symphony in White No. 2: The Little White Girl} (1864-1865; Figure 11), also makes for a relevant comparison. Again, looking past the shared language of the white palettes, the paintings are both dual portraits. Whistler’s portrait shows two angles of what we presume to be the same woman’s face.\textsuperscript{67} She seems lost in thought, like Sarah, but she does not have Sita to confront the viewer for her. Instead, both her face and her reflection submit to the viewer’s gaze, seeming too sad or lost in thought to care. The Asian elements—the vase and spray of flowers in the Whistler and the textile pattern of the sofa in the Beaux—are also notable, however, they do not appear particularly significant. While these paintings seem similar due to their shared visual language of the dual portrait, the young woman in white lost in reverie, and the inclusion of subtle Asian-inspired domestic objects, they are not similar in message or content, disrupted by the inclusion of the confrontational, dominant black cat.

\textit{The Dreamer} (also called \textit{Reverie} or \textit{Revery}, 1894; Figure 13) is another “white painting” from Beaux’s oeuvre that employs this white palette mixed with an image of a young woman within a domestic interior while subverting expectations through the directness of the sitter’s gaze. In \textit{The Dreamer}, a young woman dressed in a puffy-sleeved, long white dress sits in a large armchair, resting her face on her hands, palms

\textsuperscript{66} A much stronger, more interesting comparison with \textit{The White Girl} is Beaux’s \textit{A Little Girl} (Fanny Travis Cochran) (1887; Figure 12). The similarity of the titles is a give-away, and the similarity of expression on both Jo’s and Fanny’s faces is striking. They both carry yellow and purple pansies, which have been largely forgotten or ignored by the sitters. Lastly, the textile backgrounds are also similar thick fabric sheets hanging from floor to ceiling. This comparison merits a closer look but is beyond the scope of this thesis.

\textsuperscript{67} Recall the confusion of reflections in Manet’s \textit{Bar at the Folies-Bergère} (1882).
pressed together, against the back of the chair. Like Sita and Sarita, the young woman wears an Aesthetic gown, has her hair pulled back, and is offset by a dark brown, sketchy background of a sitting room. The title The Dreamer seems to contradict or confuse the image, as the young woman’s eyes are wide open. “Dreamer” suggests that she should be sleeping, as the posture of her hands suggests, however, she stares out at the viewer, daydreaming or lost in reverie. The gaze of the young woman seems confrontational like Sita’s, as they directly engage the viewer, but I believe she is actually disengaged from the viewer, akin to Sarah in Beaux’s dual portrait. Lost in thought, she does not acknowledge the viewer, though she does seem to make direct eye contact. Yount writes that the “the picture can barely contain” the sitter’s energy because she is so “alert in her thoughts and alive in the moment.” The result is an unsettling, almost eerie feeling in response to the painting, as she seems to look straight at us with passionate intensity, but is in fact looking through or beyond us. The way Beaux painted The Dreamer and Sita and Sarita, paying attention to the subtleties of expression and gesture, suggests that the women are actively participating in an intellectual activity, rather than simply posing for a portrait.

This use of eye contact and the disengaged gaze recalls John Singer Sargent’s Elsie Palmer (1889-1890; Figure 14). Beaux definitely knew of Sargent by the time she painted Sita and Sarita, although she did not meet him in person until 1900. He was embroiled in scandal after exhibiting Madame X (1884) in 1884 at the Paris Salon but he recovered after relocating to England, enjoying great success at the 1889 Exposition

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68 Yount, et al., American Figure Painter, 28.
Universelle, where Beaux also exhibited two paintings. At the 1889 exhibition, Sargent received a medal of honor, was named a Chevalier of the Legion of Honor, and earned rave reviews from the press.\(^69\) Coincidentally, he was in America while Beaux was in Europe in the late 1880s, during which time he painted *Elsie Palmer*.\(^70\) Elsie, on the cusp of crossing from childhood to womanhood, sits in a pleated white gown with her back against an elaborately carved wooden wall, within the chapel of an English manor house. Her hands are folded in her lap and her ankles are crossed delicately under her flowing skirts, the perfect picture of a young woman.\(^71\) Elsie’s face, however, negates the seeming sweetness of her pose as she stares out at the viewer without smiling; her lips form a straight line, almost like a grimace. A contemporary viewer even voiced his discomfort upon viewing the painting, writing that Elsie’s face “makes one uneasy.”\(^72\)

She, like *The White Girl*, makes direct eye contact with the viewer, but she seems to look beyond the viewer. Like *The Dreamer*, she is disengaged and unreachable, seemingly lost in her own absorbing thoughts, implied by her serious expression and the lack of focus of her eyes. Exhibited in New York in 1890, it possible that Beaux would have seen this portrait before starting to work on *Sita and Sarita*, but even if she had not, the paintings

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\(^{70}\) Burns, “The ‘Earnest, Untiring Worker,’” 37. The 1890s, following his time spent in America in the late 1880s, Sargent’s reputation was on the rise such that that period is sometimes called “Sargentolatry.” Undoubtedly, Beaux was familiar with Sargent, his work, and his painting style by this point in time. Sargent was born just a year after Beaux, making them exact contemporaries, and they were both American-born, French trained portraitists painting the elite and the socialites, with a special interest in depicting women. The two artists were always cordial towards each other and became friends after meeting in 1900, exchanging letters and making studio visits. Beaux even gave a memorial address honoring her male compatriot in Philadelphia in 1926 following his death in 1925.


are bonded by their place in the tradition of women in white dresses in reverie and their intellectualized gazes, making them unavailable to the viewer.

Painted the same year as The Dreamer and Sita and Sarita, French Impressionist Berthe Morisot’s Julie Daydreaming (1894; Figure 15) echoes the themes of the white paintings of women in reverie with the direct, yet disengaged, gaze. It is unlikely that Beaux would have seen Julie Daydreaming or that Morisot would have seen The Dreamer, but the similarities are so striking that they are worth comparing. Julie sits in a white, Aesthetic-style dress against a muddled, nondescript brown background with her face in her right hand, staring out at the viewer but seeming to look beyond, ignoring the presence of the person gazing upon her. Visually, the paintings are incredibly similar, certainly employing the same visual language; however, while The Dreamer is a tense portrait, Julie is more sensual with her flowing hair and heavily-lidded eyes. Julie lacks the intensity of The Dreamer’s sitter, instead gazing out languidly past the viewer, recalling for art historian Anne Higgonet, “Edvard Munch’s sexual Madonna/Vampires, with their swaying silhouettes, long manes, and heavy-lidded gazes.”

Despite this sensuality, Julie is still unavailable to the viewer in the same way as The Dreamer; they make eye contact but do not engage. The connection between these paintings in their date of creation, visual design, and subject matter reveals a significant, international artistic interest in the intellectual lives of women, removing them from the male possessive gaze.

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All four paintings—the two Beauxs, the Sargent, and the Morisot—depict young women in white gowns sitting alone and staring past the viewer or off in space. Their surroundings are not crowded with symbolic objects or other attributes; they merely sit and stare, lost in their own thoughts. This reverie is both captivating and repellant for the viewer because we can see that that person is far away from us; we know that their thoughts are far beyond us. Walter Benjamin, a German philosopher in the early twentieth century, describes this phenomenon:

> The deeper the remoteness which a glance has to overcome, the stronger will be the spell that is apt to emanate from the gaze. In eyes that look at us with a mirrorlike blankness the remoteness remains complete. It is precisely for this reason that such eyes know nothing of distance.  

Benjamin illuminates how these distant gazes draw us in as viewers, as the more absorbed the sitter is in her own thoughts, the harder we would have to try to engage her to bring her back from the “remoteness” in which she resides in her mind. While there is a feeling of isolation when viewing these pensive portraits, both for the subject and the viewer, they differ in tone and effect. *Julie* seems sweet or at least non-threatening, but the other three have a certain degree of confrontational attitude in their gazes, although in *Sita and Sarita* the confrontation is achieved through the surrogate of the cat. *The Dreamer, Elsie Palmer*, and Sita seem to glare at the viewer, making eye contact but not in a friendly or inviting manner. This is interesting because it not only creates a palpable tension, but in some ways it also repels the viewer, preventing the presumed male gaze from subjugating or objectifying the female subject. Further, because of the direct

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74 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 199. Benjamin discusses this phenomenon in reference to both exchanging a gaze and simply receiving a gaze without meeting it, as the latter effectively returns the gaze by “the look of the eye of the mind,” 197.
confrontation combined with the implied reverie, the young woman cannot be objectified because she is, by her very action of being in reverie, more than an object, proving herself not only capable of achieving abstract thought, but actively pursuing it. This kind of intellectual activity was new to women, as the previous assumptions were that the “fairest” sex was incapable of such an employment. Certainly Beaux was aware of those assumptions, as well as of the break-away artists were establishing as they painted young women lost in thought. Beaux painted *Sita and Sarita* within that artistic context, using that artistic language, but she pushed it even further to achieve more than the previous paintings by other artists and her own hand.

Beaux underscores this emphasis on mental activity through the gesture of the sitter. A single white forefinger, offset by the dark background, points like an arrow to both Sita and Sarah’s heads, connecting their gazes as if by drawing a line through their eyes. Further, as the gesture directs attention to their heads, it focuses the viewer on the minds of the sitters, calling for a deeper consideration of the activities, imagination, and potential therein. This gesture also appears in William Merritt Chase’s *Miss Dora Wheeler* (1883; Figure 16), in which a young woman sits staring off at the viewer, lost in thought, much like *The Dreamer* and *Elsie Palmer*. Coincidentally, two cats, one black, frolic as if chasing each other in a never-ending circle in the textile background behind her. Dora’s hand, just like Sarah’s, directs the viewer’s gaze to her eyes as well as her mind, transforming her from a passive sitter to an active one. It is clear that the hand plays a part alongside the intensity of the gazes in developing a more complex understanding of the sitters, feline and as well as human.
The Implications of Reverie

Reverie or daydreaming seems innocent at first glance, but it in fact held a number of serious implications for changing gender roles in the nineteenth century. Daydreaming implies a strong imagination as well a significant level of abstract or independent thinking, things that were previously associated almost solely with men. Women could be muses, could act as sources of inspiration, but were rarely the ones to harness that inspiration to channel it into something tangible. These assumptions were reinforced scientifically by Charles Darwin in *The Descent of Man*:

The chief distinction in the intellectual powers of the two sexes is shewn [sic] by man attaining to a higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than woman can attain—whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands. If two lists were made of the most eminent men and women in poetry, painting, sculpture, music,—comprising composition and performance, history, science, and philosophy, with half-a-dozen names under each subject, the two lists would not bear comparison. We may also infer . . . that if men are capable of decided eminence over women in many subjects, the average standard of mental power in man must be above that of woman.75

Unfortunately for women, many people saw Darwin’s scientific findings as valid, supporting previous biases against women’s intellectual capabilities and confirming societal norms that men were superior to women. Darwin’s books did not, however, slow the women’s rights movement, and women continued to pursue education and job opportunities in increasing numbers.76 The new level of thinking opened up new levels

75 Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*, v. 2 (London: John Murray, 1871), 328. Darwin explains in detail why men are physically superior to women, including larger brains that allow them the greater capacity for intellectualism and creativity.

76 Catherine Clinton and Christine Lunardini, *The Columbia Guide to American Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 129-32. Education reform for women began in the early nineteenth century, and by 1900, females made up sixty percent of high school graduates and about a third of college students. While women in the labor force did not increase in the same numbers, in 1800, only five percent of women were earning wages but by 1900 that percentage had risen to twenty percent and almost half of all single women earned wages.
of creativity and creative production, allowing for women to enter fields or occupations previously held by men. Beaux herself said that, “Imagination sees secrets hidden from the ordinary mind,” alluding to the power that creative thinking holds. Day dreaming and reading for pleasure are also forms of escapism, suggesting that women were becoming dissatisfied with their lives locked away in the private, secluded, domestic sphere. Escapism, too, has serious implications as it shows women outgrowing their traditional roles. Lastly, as women collectively began to take an active interest in reading, their ability to gain knowledge was significantly improved. Women, then, were essentially gaining power as they gained knowledge, and, in effect, they were taking power away from men as they read more and thus learned more.

The more women were educated, the more they questioned the gender inequality that was prevalent throughout American society and the more they pushed for greater power for women. In the United States, the women’s suffrage movement took off in the mid-nineteenth century, as women realized one of the biggest steps to equality would be gaining the right to vote on the laws and regulations that might affect them. The suffrage movement slowed in the 1870s when the large group of activists split into two separate groups with different priorities, approaches, and perspectives on what “equality” for the sexes meant. These two groups were reconciled in 1890, merging to form the National American Women’s Suffrage Association, reviving interest in the movement while bringing together the older generation of women, represented by Susan B. Anthony and


78 Remember that these artists painted women in reverie as well as at leisure, often reading. Yount, et al., American Figure Painter, 69.
Elizabeth Cady Stanton—two of the most important women’s rights activists—and the newer generation of women who had benefited from the greater educational opportunities afforded them in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Thus, Beaux painted *Sita and Sarita* in the midst of this renewed interest in women’s rights and gender quality, when men saw their ultimate power of control threatened by educated, motivated women. With this historical context in mind, one can see how the disengaged, unavailable woman lost in thought was not only a popular theme, but one that could been seen as threatening to men.

Like many middle class women in the nineteenth century, Beaux was an avid reader, and early on her tastes revealed an interest in the powerful potential of women gaining independence from men. She read the classics and had an extensive collection of poetry, but one of her favorite books was Henry James’s *Portrait of a Lady* (1881) about a spirited young American woman dealing with the complications and manipulations of men in relation to marriage, perhaps indicative of her own aversion to marriage. James’s novel was one of many works of literature in the late nineteenth century that reflected concerns about women’s new intellectual freedoms, including Charlotte Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wall-Paper” (1892). First published in January of 1892 in *The New England Magazine*, the story would have been available to Beaux as the *Magazine* had a broad circulation beyond its origin of publication in Boston,

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81 Yount, et al., *American Figure Painter*, 27.
In the short story, the narrator, a woman, is taken to a house for the summer where she is forced into a “resting cure,” in which rest and idleness are intended to cure her of depression. As the story progresses, the narrator’s husband and physician restricts her more and more, trying to suppress her creativity and imagination, which only results in making her more mentally and emotionally unstable. In the end, the woman is completely split from herself and reality, lost to madness.

Gilman intended the short story to illustrate how idleness, lack of productivity or work, and denial of a creative outlet actually harm women, especially when they were forced on women through marriage and motherhood. The “resting cure” was a real, medically-prescribed treatment in the nineteenth century, and many people believe, correctly, that “The Yellow Wall-Paper” is based on Gilman’s own experience of depression and the “resting cure,” during which she suffered a mental breakdown instead of improving. Gilman herself confirmed this in an article published in 1913 in *The Forerunner.* She details what her doctor told her:

[He] sent me home with solemn advice to “live as domestic a life as far as possible,” to “have but two hours’ intellectual life a day,” and “never to touch pen, brush, or pencil again” as long as I lived. This was in 1887.

She goes on, describing how she “came so near the borderline of utter mental ruin” following the doctor’s orders and she only managed to recover by going back to work.

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82 Its primary distribution was to six states, but I was unable to find record of which states those were and if Philadelphia was among them. The *Magazine* was available outside of those states, so it possible that Beaux or her family would have had a subscription. Even if Beaux did not actually read the story, my argument remains the same: in the 1890s, as women gained increasing control over their lives, men retaliated by forcing them however they could into passivity and submission, including the popular “resting cure” for over-diagnosed “female hysteria” of the late nineteenth century.


With passion, she describes “work, the normal life of every human being; work, in which is joy and growth and service, without which one is a pauper and a parasite,” praising the one thing that gave her back “some measure of power,” furthering the association of work and autonomy that concerned the more conservative social groups of the nineteenth century who resisted women joining the work force. After her recovery, she divorced her husband, leaving him with their daughter as she pursued a new life as a journalist, lecturer, and advocate for women’s rights. During that time she wrote the short story to draw attention to the harmful effects of these treatments in an effort to save other women from similar fates. While Gilman later remarried, she used “the Yellow Wall-Paper” and other novels to critique the oppressive facade of middle-class marriages, wherein women were denied the opportunity to work and are instead forced to be idle, passive objects, stuck at home where creativity and imagination are stifled.

Not all literature in the nineteenth century, however, was concerned with the stifling of female creativity and imagination. Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* series (*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, published in 1865, and *Through the Looking-Glass*, published in 1871) explored the female mind through the dreamworld of a little girl, demonstrating the limitlessness of the female imagination in a way that had not been previously addressed or considered. The novels illustrate a definite shift of perception in relation to women’s mental capacity, combining the view of women’s minds as childlike

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85 Ibid.

86 Ibid.

87 For a deeper interpretation of this short story within the context of the Aesthetic movement and the desire to beautify the home in order to provide a safehaven away from the industrial, modernized working world, see Roger Stein, “Artifact as Ideology: The Aesthetic Movement in Its American Cultural Context,” in *In Pursuit of Beauty*, 43-46.
but capable of an elaborate imagination on par with that of men. The book series was incredibly popular, despite its definite break from Victorian literary traditions. Previously, books for children were designed to convey moral lessons and the main characters were often either very naughty or very nice. Carroll’s novels, however, had no moral lesson, or at least they did not involve the strict “dos and don’ts” of childhood.

As a character, Alice is interesting because she breaks from traditional Victorian norms in that she is neither naughty nor nice. She does not represent the feminine evil or the fallen woman any more than she is the embodiment of virtue and purity so valued in the fairer sex in the nineteenth century; instead, Alice’s character is defined by an innate curiosity. Curiosity is a distinctive characteristic for a little girl, in that it suggests a productive and active mind, as well as an interest in the outside world, in how things work, why things happen, and what makes “the world go ‘round.” This kind of intellectual activity, curiosity as well as reverie, was newly attributed to women. Acknowledging that women had this potential for intellectual ventures was a major step in the women’s rights movement, later aiding in successfully achieving the right to vote.

*Sita and Sarita* can be seen as an allusion to the *Alice in Wonderland* series, not only because Beaux both read and enjoyed the novels as a teenager, but because the portrait references female imagination, dreamworlds, and the connection between women and cats. Sarah is a young woman, caught between girlhood and adulthood. She is at a time in life when curiosity and imagination are suppressed in favor of more “mature”

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89 Ibid., 90.
activities for ladies. Sarah gazes off in reverie, possibly daydreaming about exploring new worlds of her own making, and she does so with a cat on her shoulder. Alice as a character is defined by her innate curiosity, a characteristic closely associated with cats. As Alice journeys through Wonderland, she finds comfort in cats; her thoughts often go to her own cat, Dinah, as she moves deeper into the new world, and she finds some solace from the threats of her environment in brief conversations with the Cheshire Cat. She expresses relief when the Cheshire Cat shows up to a party, sighing “now I shall have somebody I can talk to.”

There is a subtle visual connection between Sita and the Cheshire Cat, as they both seem to appear and disappear alongside the girls. A stronger visual connection, however, appears at the very end of Through the Looking-Glass, when the Red Queen, Alice’s opponent throughout the book, turns into Dinah’s black kitten whom the little girl named simply “Kitty.” Because Sita is somewhat petite, she is sometimes called a kitten by scholars, though I would argue that she is full-grown. Either way, they are connected visually through their coal black coats. That the Queen “really was a kitten, after all,” is intriguing because the characterization is consistent with nineteenth-century gender roles. One way to positively read the Queen/Kitty combination is that they collectively represent how women can be powerful on the outside but still sweet and lovable on the inside, an illustration that women are complex instead of caricatures. A more negative interpretation is that women with power are, or at least should be, kittens underneath, sweet and innocent and under the control of men.

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90 Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (New York: Macmillan & Co., 1889), 123. Note that the novel was first published in 1865.

Significantly for *Sita and Sarita*, the cat is inseparable from Sarah by the blending of their dark hair, similar to the inseparable nature of the Queen/Kitty relationship. Alternatively, we can also read the dual portrait as if Sita had the potential to secretly have an inner Queen. Her dominant placement in the picture plane and the seeming-sentience of her expression may have lead the nineteenth-century viewer to recall the Carroll novels, to think that this animal has distinctive human qualities, or is perhaps simply a Queen in disguise.

The tradition of women in reverie, as I have illustrated, incorporates the Aesthetic and Impressionist “white girls” trends while addressing growing intellectualism among women, the male negative response to that, and the celebration and repression of the female imagination, all of which intersect in *Sita and Sarita*. Beaux’s painting sits in the wake of Whistler’s legacy of women in white, participating in debates about the nature of the sitter’s gaze and the ability of the viewer to possess her. Beaux, like Sargent and Morisot, was aware of these standing traditions of women in white portrayed as passive objects within the still life of the domestic interior, but she subverts that by adding a level of intellectualism in her depiction of Sarah in reverie. Though Sarah avoids confronting the viewer’s gaze, she is unattainable by her remote location deep within her own imagination, or perhaps she is locked within it at the order of the “resting cure,” soon to delve into madness as a result of inactivity and lack of creative outlet. The viewer feels uneasy when confronted with the mysteriousness of Sarah’s gaze, as we are not permitted to travel with her through her daydreams, left instead to wonder if they resemble Wonderland. At the end of it all, the viewer is left not staring at Sarah, but facing the
confrontational gaze of an elegant, queenly cat who seems to possess an anthropomorphic quality of human-like consciousness.
CHAPTER TWO

ANTHROPOMORPHISM, PETKEEPING, AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN

*Sita and Sarita* is part of a larger tradition of portraits of people with their pets that shifted following developments in pet-keeping. These developments were the result of the public’s new perceptions of animals in the nineteenth century. The human-like nature of the cat in *Sita and Sarita* is anthropomorphic, meaning ascribing human attributes or characteristics to a non-human thing, in this case an animal.\textsuperscript{92} Anthropomorphism was an effective tool in the animal rights movements of this time period because it increased humans’ willingness to acknowledge animal suffering, although it has roots in literature as well, like the animal characters in Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* series who are human-like in costume, speech, and behavior.\textsuperscript{93} The modern animal rights movement began in the mid-nineteenth century, gaining momentum following the end of the Civil War. Women became actively involved by holding leadership positions, speaking out publicly to raise awareness and promote their cause, and even starting their own organizations. The language these humane societies used often related animals to children, not just in advertisements, but also in their mission statements as the majority of the organizations sought to protect animals and children. In

\textsuperscript{92} Anthropomorphism in art was not unique to the nineteenth century, dating back for hundreds of years in Europe. Keeping pets like lapdogs and cats likewise is older than the nineteenth century, but it did not become so widespread and common in the middle and lower classes until the 1800s, likely corresponding to the institutionalized development of animal rights and humane societies.

\textsuperscript{93} The human characterization of animals in fictional stories is a long-standing tradition in Western culture, dating as far back as 600 BCE in Ancient Greece with *Aesop’s Fables* (620-560 BCE).
fact, it was a rarity to find a humane society at the end of the nineteenth century that protected only animals or only children.\textsuperscript{94}

America’s first protective organization for animals, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) was founded in 1866 by a New Yorker named Henry Bergh who was inspired by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals’s impact in London.\textsuperscript{95} The ASPCA ignited interest in the well-being of animals, calling attention in particular to the health of stray dogs and the abuses of equines laboring in fields, pulling carts in streets, and being transported to the slaughterhouse.\textsuperscript{96}

As news of prosecutions spread, other organizations formed and the animal rights movement gained national attention in the 1870s, growing in size and influence when women became actively involved. Women enjoyed “a seat of equal power in anticruelty work,” furthering their experience in the political arena, in a manner similar to their contributions to the abolitionist movements in the mid-nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{97} The women’s rights movement accelerated alongside the animal rights movement at this time, as women became increasingly involved in issues beyond the domestic realm, emerging into the public sphere through activism while defending the rights of the helpless. Thus, women were closely associated with the humane societies in America, a connection


\textsuperscript{95} England and France began animal rights movements earlier in the nineteenth century, using similar techniques in the language and visual imagery of their advertisements to America with similar rates of success.


\textsuperscript{97} Ibid., 178.
strengthened by the language those groups used tying animals to children, and consequently, women to animals.

The appeal for better protection of animals was tied to children through a basic application of anthropomorphism that, as the movement grew, became associated with the domestic realm. Historian Susan Pearson explains that, “Popular and humanitarian literature identified children and animals as similar, capable of forming intense emotional bonds and reciprocal relations,” touching on the most crucial elements of the anthropomorphic language: emotional bonds and reciprocal relations.

Anthropomorphism happens naturally for humans, as we try to understand the world around us in relation to ourselves, our own lived experience, so once one can convince a person to see the object or animal in front of him or her as potentially human-like, the natural impulse to empathize takes over.

Keeping animals as pets, instead of as laborers, is evidence of a human-animal relationship built almost solely on anthropomorphism, reflecting human emotions and attachments onto animals with the assumption that the love of the owner is reciprocated by the pet. This relationship between owner and pet parallels that of parent and child, in the way that both function as “social support” within the domestic hierarchy.

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98 Katharine Grier discusses this briefly in *Pets in America*, focusing primarily on the emphasis of kindness in the movement for children and animal rights and protection. Kindness towards the vulnerable and the dependent showed good moral character and demonstrated the stability of a society while underscoring the ideal characteristics of middle-class culture such as self-control and gentility (129-131). While animal rights movements had gone on well before the nineteenth century, this was the first time that animals were aligned with children in this way. This was also the first time that women joined the voices of protest, drawing a significant connection between women, children, and animals that would last for centuries (133).


Studies scholars Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman argue that “social support” is genuinely beneficial to humans as it encourages us to believe that we are cared for and loved, resulting in improved physical and mental health. Social support in families exists between husband and wife as well as parents and child, with emphasis on the latter relationship as part of this type of bond results from the parent feeling like the child depends on them. They elaborate on the function of the pet as “social support”:

> The socially supportive potential of pets, assuming it exists, should therefore hinge on their ability to produce similar effects by behaving in ways that make their owners believe that the animal cares for and loves them, holds them in high esteem, and depends on them for care and protection.\(^\text{102}\)

Daston and Mitman’s emphasis on the word “believe” underscores the nature of anthropomorphism: that it is one-sided as a human construction employed to understand animals by human terms, emotions, and logic. Despite the seeming facade, this characterization of animals as childlike dependents offering humans love and affection was instrumental in the success of the humane movement in the nineteenth century and has lasted through the present.

Beaux would have been familiar with these organizations and their use of anthropomorphic language as Philadelphia was one of the leading cities in the animal rights movement in the nineteenth century due, in part, to the activism of Caroline Earle White. In 1869, White was elected the first president of the Women’s Branch of the Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (PSPCA), a position that she held until she died in 1916.\(^\text{103}\) In its first year, the Women’s Branch of the PSPCA

\(^{102}\) Ibid., 126.

\(^{103}\) In 1897, the organization was renamed the Women’s Pennsylvania Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.
opened a temporary pound, which was filled with strays the organization picked up on city streets, the first organized attempt in America to care for unwanted animals.\textsuperscript{104} White was also active in educating children in the Philadelphia area about the humane treatment of animals, founding the American Antivivisection Society, and promoting bird preservation.\textsuperscript{105} In 1892, the year before Beaux began \textit{Sita and Sarita}, White started an “aggressive humane magazine” called the \textit{Journal of Zoophilly} to expand the reach of the PSPCA. The \textit{Journal} remained in circulation until the late 1910s.\textsuperscript{106} With the amount of activity and activism in her hometown, Beaux likely would have been aware of these movements and the written and visual languages they employed.

As the humane societies gained victories through their anthropomorphic pleas, more and more animals were retired from labor, often brought into the home to take their place as a child, among the children, or as a caretaker. The presence of pets in the domestic sphere was restricted to the upper classes at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but by the mid-nineteenth century, the trend in animal care permeated the middle class, leading to an increase in animal portraiture that paralleled the increase in human portraiture, resulting from the rise of wealth and the desire to show it off. In this light, \textit{Sita and Sarita} can been seen as existing within a tradition of middle-class portraits of people with pets.

\textsuperscript{104} Coleman, \textit{Humane Society}, 181.

\textsuperscript{105} Ibid., 183.

\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 184.
Precious Pets, Surrogate Children

As animals entered middle-class homes as pets, they adopted new functions, elevated from their previous status as laborers to sources of comfort, aids for meditation, and foci of moral lessons. Since the turn of the century, many scientists, psychologists, and sociologists have realized the health benefits that companion animals give humans as objects of affection and comfort. The presence of animals can affect humans physically, like lowering blood pressure, reducing depression, and preventing strokes, but animals also aid thought or creativity. The animal becomes an extension of the self: humans touch their pets in the same way they would touch themselves in times of tension, for example rubbing their arms or stroking their hair. Although a person may not look at the animal, he or she continues to touch it in a repetitive motion, thus dividing attention between the “lifelike motion” and the person’s thoughts in reverie, like watching a fire. The woman in *Sita and Sarita* is a visual example of these scientific findings, in that her stroking of the cat seems simultaneous with her reverie, as if the repetitive motion aids in thinking. There were some nineteenth-century artists and authors who were fond of cats in particular, including Charles Baudelaire, who believed felines enhanced reverie or inspired imaginations. Baudelaire’s friend Théophile Gautier explains his fellow poet’s feelings:

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107 Working animals had a variety of jobs, from controlling vermin to herding cattle, that restricted their contact with humans to outside the home, separate from the private, intimate, domestic realm.


He was very fond of these delightful, quiet, mysterious, gentle animals, with their electric shivers, whose favourite [sic] attitude is the prone pose of the sphinxes, which seem to have passed their secrets on to them. They prowl with velvet paw through the house, like the genius loci, or come to sit down on the table by the writer, keeping his thought company, and gazing at him out of the depths of their eyes, dusted with gold, with intelligent tenderness and magical penetration.¹¹⁰ Cats were seen to accentuate the more intellectual aspects of human nature in the way they seem both wise and mysterious, existing in silence at our sides, not because we trained them to, but because they choose to.

In addition to acting as sources of comfort and aids in reverie, pets and pet-keeping were also seen as a way to educate children in “primary lessons” about life, what Katherine Grier calls the “Domestic Ethic of Kindness.” The Domestic Ethic of Kindness taught children that they were “directly responsible for the welfare of others” by putting pets in their care, during which time they would quickly learn how their treatment of the animal affected both the creature’s behavior and its relationship with them.¹¹¹ While boys were included in these “lessons,” theirs were geared more towards animal husbandry and hunting whereas, for girls, pets functioned similarly to dolls, aids in preparation for motherhood. The artist Mary Cassatt certainly understood this function of pet-keeping, and she made a large number of works of art depicting children and animals. Cassatt and Beaux were contemporaries with a competitive, sometimes antagonistic, relationship.¹¹² Born in Pennsylvania like Beaux, Cassatt lived most of her life in France, developing a close personal and artistic relationship with the


¹¹² Yount, et al., *American Figure Painter*, 11.
Impressionists, especially evident in her colorful, quick brushwork style. Cassatt built her career on paintings and prints of women and children, elevating the domestic, the maternal, and the sentimental nature of those relationships. Attuned to the shifting nature of pet-keeping, a significant portion of her oeuvre includes pets in their roles as sources of comfort and teachers of children.

Cassatt’s *Children Playing with a Cat* (1908; Figure 17) illustrates the doll-like function of pets, as they taught little girls how to care for another creature, preparing them for motherhood. A woman sits in a room in her home wearing a lacy, frilly dress and a gold wedding band as she holds a baby in her lap, who reaches towards the cat in the arms of another child, a little girl. The little girl is dressed in her finest frock, the outfit completed with a blue hat dotted with rosettes. Calm in her arms, the cat seems unfazed by the baby reaching toward it, suggesting that the little girl has cared for the cat well, in line with the Domestic Ethic of Kindness, since it seems to trust her implicitly. She looks at the baby with a soft, knowing expression, as if she is already prepared to have a baby of her own. The girl and cat parallel the mother and child in *Children Playing with a Cat*, the same formula when applied to *Sita and Sarita* gives the painting a new meaning. Sarah is of marriageable age and thus should be entering into maternity, yet she is depicted caring for a cat, not a child. This could imply that she is still “in

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114 Rogers, *Human Imagination*, 104. Rogers argues that this is reminiscent of the “traditional Holy Family grouping,” with the cat as the main source of interest as a representation of the harmony of human spirituality and animal nature. I do not find this to be a particularly helpful interpretation as it reveals little about the function of the painting within its context.
training,” by treating the cat as a child, to develop her mothering skills enough to properly raise a child.

One can also read *Sita and Sarita* with the mother and child relationship in mind, but within a situation where the woman cannot or chooses not to have children. Thus the painting alludes to a metaphor about animals functioning as children for the childless:

Emotion-laden metaphor described animals, including adult animals, as beloved children who, within the limits of their capacities, were entitled to the same care and attention as human offspring. This metaphor made a new emotional language available to pet owners and encouraged them to express their feelings about animals in the same way that people ordinarily spoke about children.\(^\text{115}\)

As animals were increasingly compared to children, the more people without human children treated them as surrogate children, affectionately referred to as “furry children” by Grier.\(^\text{116}\) We see this alignment of animals as surrogate children in art, as portraits of people with their pets began to imitate the poses and compositions of mother and child images. In Cassatt’s *The Banjo Lesson* (1893; Figure 18), a pastel drawing created the same year as *Sita and Sarita*, Cassatt unites mother and child through the close proximity of their faces. The two are connected by touch as the young girl leans on her mother’s shoulders, presumably enjoying the music of the banjo, resting her chin on her hand near her mother’s face, a similar relationship to that in *Sita and Sarita*, as Sarah and Sita’s faces are so close together and the cat, the “little one” in this portrait, rests on her “mother’s” shoulder. Sargent’s *Mrs. Fiske Warren and Her Daughter* (1903; Figure 19), painted ten years after Beaux’s painting, depicts a similar mother/child relationship as Cassatt’s pastel drawing, as the two are united by the proximity of their faces and the

\(^{115}\) Grier, *Pets in America*, 155.

\(^{116}\) Ibid., 169 and 179-81.
casual entwinement of their arms as they sit on elaborately decorated furniture in lush, flowing gowns. The daughter sits close to her mother, cuddled up to her with her chin in the curve of her mother’s neck, the same closeness seen in Sita and Sarita, enhanced by the seeming-casualness of their touch. We can read the cat as stand-in for the daughter the sitter does not have in Sita and Sarita based on the anthropomorphic characterization of the animal as a person and the close proximity of their faces as seen in the other mother/daughter portraits.

Portraits with Pets: The Cat Question

With the connection established between children and pets in the rhetoric of the humane movements, this section examines the way this was expressed in art through the elevation of the pet portrait, increase in portraits of middle-class people with their pets, and the anthropomorphized nature of these paintings. To understand how Sita and Sarita relates to this visual tradition, its structure must be established through identifying the major trends, how the portrait fits within the tradition, and how Beaux breaks from it in her specific representation of the black cat. Animals have long been used as symbols in art, whether that be alluding to some greater idea or representing an attribute related to a human in the same painting. In the nineteenth century, dogs were the most-commonly depicted pet in art, most likely because they were so prevalent in households, easily making the shift from worker to companion. To understand why Beaux chose to paint a cat instead of the more popular dog, I will give a basic overview of the perceived characteristics of dogs and cats during the period, their relation to the domestic and to women, and the long established tradition of representation of these animals.
Dogs were prized for hunting and herding, but made their way into the homes of their owners faster than cats because of their ability to be trained quickly and their bathroom habits, since they could easily go outside. An interest in dog breeding grew in the nineteenth century, as dogs were increasingly desired for specific traits, appearances, or skills, leading to the formation of breed-specific organizations and the popularity of dog shows. They were revered for their loyalty, praised for their trainability, and used in art to symbolize fidelity throughout history. In the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, they achieved such high status within the family as to merit funerals. Owners also, on rare occasions, paid to have their beloved pets stuffed, although taxidermy in that time period was not a particularly refined craft. The British Romantic poet Lord Byron wrote a poem mourning the death of a Newfoundland dog. One section of the poem in particular highlights the most valued aspects of those furry, four-legged creatures:

But the poor dog, in life the firmest friend,
The first to welcome, foremost to defend,
Whose honest heart is still his master's own,
Who labours, fights, lives, breathes for him alone,
Unhonour'd falls, unnoticed all his worth.

Though dogs were sometimes more closely associated with males, they were considered great companions for both men and women, appearing in many portraits with each gender.

117 Ibid., 76-77.
118 Ibid., 105-9.
Three paintings roughly contemporary with Sita and Sarita exemplify traditional representations of dogs in paintings: Winslow Homer’s *A Huntsman and Dogs* (1891; Figure 20), Pierre-Auguste Renoir’s *Madame Georges Charpentier and Her Children, Georgette-Berthe and Paule-Emile-Charles* (1878; Figure 21), and Cassatt’s *Young Girl at a Window* (1883; Figure 22). Homer was a “true” American artist in that he lived and worked in the States, instead of formally studying painting abroad like Beaux, Cassatt, and many of their peers.\(^{120}\) By the 1890s, his career was well-established and he was revered for his depictions of daily life in America. *A Huntsman and Dogs* is one of the last paintings Homer created during the decades he spent in the Adirondack mountains, visually documenting the hunting culture that developed throughout the nineteenth century as the area became popular with wealthy vacationers. In the painting, a young scout stands in victory, his prey’s skin carelessly slung over the rifle that rests on his shoulder, the deer’s head dangles from his right hand. He props one foot against a dead tree’s decapitated trunk, clearly felled by man-made tools. Two hound dogs bound happily around him, one of them baying in excitement and enthusiasm. These dogs serve as foils and subjects of the hunter, who dominates the picture plane and his environment, including the living things within it, elevating him as the ultimate masculine figure, strong, solemn, and in control.\(^{121}\)

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\(^{120}\) Franklin Kelly, *Winslow Homer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 13. Homer was, however, still influenced by European and even Asian artists, although he was in his time and still is now considered a pioneer of a genuine American style.

As Homer illustrates, dogs visually reinforce masculine ideals, although they also featured in middle-class domestic scenes, such as Renoir’s *Madame Georges Charpentier and Her Children.*

Renoir was one of the major leaders of the Impressionist movement in Paris alongside other radical painters such as Edouard Manet and Edgar Degas, and he enjoyed a prosperous career with international acclaim. One of his paintings, accepted to the 1879 Paris Salon with rave reviews, *Madame Georges Charpentier and Her Children* pictures a wealthy woman and her children, one of whom is perched on the family dog, in a lavishly-decorated Japanese-style room in the family’s home. Historian Kathleen Kete identifies the function of the dog in this trend of family portraiture: “The bourgeois home as cozy retreat, the dog as whimsical signifier of family life, the echo of nature uneasily subdued, these are ideas we easily, even happily, read in a portrait of domestic bliss.”

As a “signifier of family life,” the black and white Newfoundland in Renoir’s painting stands in as a supporter of the children, as a caretaker of sorts. The dog is not just the lively, loyal companion of the noble hunter, it is also an assistant to the mother, aiding in teaching the children while standing in as emotional supports.

Lap dogs and fancy breeds functioned similarly to bigger family dogs, offering companionship and emotional support to women who spent most of their time in the


124 Diana Donald, *Picturing Animals in Britain, 1750-1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 132-34. Newfoundlands gained attention in the late 1830s, when Edwin Landseer, a British painter, elevated the breed as a subject worthy of high art to very mixed reviews. He painted the dogs as if they possessed human qualities, suggesting the animals had distinct personalities and characteristics similar to those so valued in humans like loyalty, honor, and benevolence.

home. In Cassatt’s *Young Girl at a Window*, a young woman dressed in a frilly white
frock “in the height of fashion,” accessorized with gloves and a large hat, sits near a
window overlooking the Place Pigalle while stroking a small dog in her lap.\(^{126}\) Art
historian James Rubin describes this painting as conventional, in line with the tradition of
picturing the affection between women and their lapdogs.\(^{127}\) Artists creating works of
this type often use a close-cropped or “snapshot” composition to convey the intimacy felt
between the young woman and her pet. Lapdogs during this time period were closely
tied to the bourgeoisie, as attributes suggesting that they were wealthy, or for a working-
girl, as a sign that her situation was improving in that she had become a mistress to a man
who could provide for her.\(^{128}\) The dogs function as status symbols while also embodying
domestic ideals, implying fidelity, and offering women restricted to the home affection
and company.

In all three paintings, the dogs are marginalized in relation to the human figure, so
their importance to the scene is minimized and any anthropomorphic qualities the viewer
might attribute to them are reduced.\(^{129}\) The functions and implications of the inclusion of
these animals, particularly as they relate to the male or female subject of the painting, are
important to keep in mind; they are significant in understanding why Beaux’s inclusion of

\(^{126}\) Cash, ed., *American Paintings*, 164. This was actually Cassatt’s Belgian griffon, a gift from Degas, and
the sitter was her housekeeper, Susan.

\(^{127}\) Rubin, *Cats and Dogs*, 103.

\(^{128}\) Ibid., 95-98.

\(^{129}\) The expression on the dog’s face in *Madame Charpentier and Her Children* seems oddly reminiscent of
the cat’s slighting yellow eyes emerging from the black in *Sita and Sarita*, but because the Newfoundland is
located so marginally in the picture plane, his presence in the image as a distinct personality is diminished.
a cat instead of a dog and its placement within the picture plane dramatically affects the meaning and connotations of Sita and Sarita.

Cats, like dogs, had a vast array of symbolic meaning in art, ranging from respect for the animals’ maternal instincts to much more negative ties to prostitution, witchcraft, even death. Cats were often scorned for their resistance to training, stubbornness, self-serving nature, and tendency to pick on the weak for prey.\(^\text{130}\) Despite this, cats persisted in urban and rural settings, if only for their usefulness in controlling vermin. Their acceptance in the home increased throughout the nineteenth century as felines became less associated with danger, independence, and sexuality, and more closely aligned with the family, motherhood, and the luxury of the middle class.\(^\text{131}\) Fans of the animals often praised their choosiness and cleverness, seeing their mischievous natures as signs of their intelligence, endearing instead of threatening.\(^\text{132}\) In his poem, “To a Cat,” A. C. Swinburne serenaded: “Stately, kindly, lordly friend/ Condescend/ Here to sit by me . . ./ Dogs may fan on all and some/ As they come;/ You, a friend of loftier mind,/ Answer friends alone in kind.”\(^\text{133}\) Similarly, Gautier writes of cats, “Their caresses are tender, delicate, silent, feminine, and have nothing in common with the noisy, boisterous petulance of dogs, on whom, nevertheless, the masses have bestowed all their sympathy,” praising the seemingly civilized nature of the feline while connecting it, as was common,

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\(^{130}\) Cats’ primary job was mousing, but in addition to hunting mice, they would also hunt chickens and their chicks on farms, and birds and fish in homes.

\(^{131}\) Kete, The Beast, 115-16; Rubin, Cats and Dogs, 123.

\(^{132}\) Rubin, Cats and Dogs, 119.

\(^{133}\) Algernon Charles Swinburne, “To a Cat,” 1752.
with the feminine.¹³⁴  Because kitty litter had not yet been invented in the mid-to-late nineteenth century, and cats were difficult to train, they usually lived partially outside instead of solely indoors with their owners.¹³⁵  Despite this, the animals were known for being exceptionally well-groomed, which William Bingley, writer of *Natural History* viewed as a sign of their intelligence over other animals:

> As they [cats] cannot lick those places with their tongues, they first wet the inside of their leg with the saliva, and then repeatedly rub them over with it.  This Dr. Darwin, whimsically enough, esteems an act of reasoning; “because,” he says, “a means is used to produce an effect; which means seem to be acquired by imitation, like the greater part of human arts.”¹³⁶

It may be this level of seeming-sentience that appealed to Beaux when she added the black cat to her portrait of Sarah.

Conventional portrayals of cats in nineteenth-century art are similar to the paintings with dogs discussed above, in that the animals are either marginalized, shown on the floor or at the feet of their owners, or they are centralized by their placement in a lap or in someone’s arms, but in a passive way, as the viewer’s focus stays on the human subject with the animal acting as an accessory or symbolic attribute. The cat in Renoir’s *Madame Charpentier and Her Children* is hardly even visible, although it holds a position in the center of the composition, curled in the lap of the mother. It blends so much into the black folds of Madame Charpentier’s dress that animal and woman become inseparable, aligning maternal instincts with that of the feline. In a different context, however, the cat’s connotations change, as when the animal is depicted in the arms of a

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young woman alone in the picture plane. When closely associated with a woman alone, the perceived independence and dominant sexuality of the cat lingers, implying the sexual availability of the sitter, sometimes suggesting that she is a prostitute. Lapdogs, on the other hand, are more high-maintenance pets, connoting that the women that cuddle them are spoken or provided for as mistresses or wives.\textsuperscript{137}

In these conventional images of cats and women, the subtleties in the way they touch are important, as they hold the clues to the availability of the woman, or at least the woman’s sexuality. Renoir’s paintings again provide useful examples of these traditional modes of representation, namely his \textit{Woman with a Cat} (1875; Figure 23) and \textit{Portrait of Julie Manet} (or \textit{Girl with a Cat}, 1887; Figure 24). In \textit{Woman with a Cat}, a young blonde woman in a white dress in a domestic interior embraces a grey tabby, bringing it close to her face so she can touch its furry face with her cheek. Like the closely-cropped images of women with lapdogs, the intimacy of this painting is enhanced by its “snapshot” quality. The focus of the image is on the sensuality of touch, the pleasurable feeling the woman receives of the soft fur on her skin. While Rubin argues that the “viewer is able to experience that pleasure vicariously, without wanting more,” the intimacy and emphasis on touch can be seen as sexually implicit as well, particularly when considering the cat’s ties to prostitution, promiscuity, self-gratification, and luxurious sensuality.\textsuperscript{138}

Thus, the woman’s entwined arms around the cat align her with the characteristics of the animal which are, in this painting, on the sensual or sexual side of the spectrum. \textit{Portrait of Julie Manet}, however, depicts the sweet, friendly, domesticated cat that was popular in

\textsuperscript{137} Rubin, \textit{Cats and Dogs}, 95-97.

\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 118; Kete, \textit{The Beast}, 116.
the late 1880s. 

Julie is a child in this portrait, holding a smiling, sleeping cat in her lap while she, like the sitter in *Woman with a Cat*, sits in a domestic interior. Julie gazes out at the viewer with a slight smile and slanted eyes, almost as if she is sleepy like the cat in her arms. The nature of their touch is more focused on mutual support than on the sensuality of the animal’s soft coat. The girl cradles the cat, supporting it physically, as it supports her emotionally in its comfort and company, finding its place in the middle-class family structure among the children.

Beaux was aware of these visual traditions and actively participated in them, producing conventional images like *The Brighton Cats* (1876; Figure 25), although she also broke with them in her portraits: *Man with the Cat* (Henry Sturgis Drinker, 1898; Figure 26) and *Sita and Sarita*. Her first published engraving, *The Brighton Cats*, pictures two tabbies in a closely-cropped frame. The image is slightly strange, as both cats have their paws over the top of a wooden chair, as if to look over the back like children would, but their eyes are shut, so they look as if they are sleeping. Both tabby cats are individualized, distinguished by their slightly different markings as well as their expressions. The cat on the left seems more annoyed, expressed in the flatness of his ears, whereas the cat on the right seems merely sleepy, with one ear turned towards a presumed noise while its eyes squint shut. The naturalism and detail of the animals is exquisite, demonstrating both skill and observation on the part of Beaux. These cats exemplify the “truly cherubic sweetness” of the domesticated house cats, an image

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“calculated to win the hearts of all lovers of the feline race.”140 The anthropomorphized quality of these animals recalls the paintings that truly began Beaux’s career as a portraitist in the late 1870s: child portraits on porcelain. These paintings, like the Brighton cats, were closely-cropped with a similar “sweetness” such that “parents nearly wept over” them.141 In The Brighton Cats, Beaux ties together the intimate “snapshot” composition with a visual language that plays on the connection between children and animals established in the mid-nineteenth century, specifically their sentimentalized representations.

Beaux actively played within these traditions of depicting the relationship of humans to animals, not just in child/animal correlation in The Brighton Cats, but also in her capsizing of traditional gender roles, as with Man with the Cat, the male counterpart to Sita and Sarita. He was the younger brother of Catherine Drinker with whom Beaux studied art early in her career, and actually proposed to Beaux, but was rejected and later married her older sister Etta. By the time Beaux painted him in 1898, Drinker was at the height of his career as a corporate lawyer.142 Dressed in an elegant, three-piece suit, Drinker sits in a spindly, dark wooden chair within a light-filled, white interior. In his lap, a small orange cat squints out at the viewer. The animal is again marginalized compositionally while blending into the overwhelming white of the painting. The


141 Beaux, Background with Figures, 85. By commission, she painted live children on porcelain as well as deceased children, often working from photographs. Though she regretted the commercialized nature of these porcelain paintings, at the time she did them, she must have been proud of them, as entered them in exhibitions in the early 1880s. For this, see Yount, et al., American Figure Painter, 22.

142 Carter, Cecilia Beaux, 62. I was unable to find information regarding the possible commission of this portrait, so I believe it was likely made under similar circumstances as Sita and Sarita, with the artist inviting the family relative to sit for her.
relationship between man and cat is distant, as Drinker does not seem to be touching the animal though it lies comfortably in his lap. \textit{Man with the Cat} was, like \textit{Sita and Sarita}, known under an alternative title of \textit{At Home}. With that title in mind, and with the connotations of cat versus dog established, this painting seems to emasculate the man in it, in marked contrast to \textit{Sita and Sarita}, where the female sitter seems powerful and mysterious. Unlike Sita, the orange cat in \textit{Man with the Cat} is non-confrontational and passive, it dozes comfortably curled in the man’s lap, lacking the impressive presence of traditional representations of masculinity so often embedded in the large, active figures of both men and dogs, like in Homer’s \textit{Huntsman}.\textsuperscript{143} The alternate title of \textit{At Home} further reinforces this emasculation by underscoring the setting of the portrait in the domestic realm traditionally assigned to women.\textsuperscript{144} Thus, Beaux calls into question not only the gendered nature of the animal as attribute, but also the gendered nature of the domestic sphere, as it is considered the woman’s domain yet men are also \textit{at home} there.

When looked at alongside \textit{Man with a Cat}, Beaux’s break from traditional representations of humans and cats in \textit{Sita and Sarita} becomes clear. While depicting a cat in the lap of its owner was not unusual, portraying a man with a cat was uncommon, and considering the alternate title of \textit{At Home}, the “white painting’s” association with women, and the effeminate nature of Drinker’s pose, \textit{Man with a Cat} is quite untraditional. Yount elaborates on the relationship of \textit{Man with a Cat} to \textit{Sita and Sarita}:

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 62. Carter writes that “the sleeping cat lying in his lap has trapped him to his chair,” citing the position of his hand as one of anxiety and unease, “as if eager to flee.” While I do not agree with her interpretation of his hand, the idea that the cat is so comfortable that the man feels he cannot move is interesting, because it further emasculates Drinker, putting the house cat above him in the family hierarchy.

\textsuperscript{144} Yount, et al., \textit{American Portrait Painter}, 34-35.
In the Drinker portrait, the roles of cat and human are reversed: this time the sitter confronts the viewer, while the decidedly unthreatening orange tabby lazes with drowsy eyes in his lap. . . . A notable departure from Beaux’s earlier portraits of men in sober suits, posed in nondescript settings. Drinker was a successful corporate lawyer with a forceful personality . . . On canvas, he has been subdued—domesticated and tamed in a way that Beaux’s models for The Dreamer and Sita and Sarita are not.  

Although they confront the viewer with their gaze, Drinker and his cat seem comfortable and approachable, a distinct contrast to the tension created by Sarah’s stiff back and distant expression combined with the cat’s precarious position on her shoulder and its direct, confrontational gaze. Sarah’s self-possession and Sita’s human-like expression give them an air of respectability and confidence so often associated with traditional portraits of men. Further, Beaux’s positioning of Sita in the composition seems even more significant when looked at alongside Man with a Cat where the cat is easy to overlook and lacks the captivating nature of the black feline in Sita and Sarita.

Sita and Sarita is something of an anomaly in its relationship to the established traditions of portraits of people with pets.  Sita’s high placement in the composition and pose standing on Sarah’s shoulder is a dramatic break from tradition in that she is not

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145 Ibid., 34.

146 While there were certainly other artists who broke from these traditions, two works in particular stand out in their similarity to Sita and Sarita: Thomas Eakins’s photograph Amelia C. Van Buren Sitting with Cat on Shoulder (1891; Figure 27) and Giovanni Boldini’s Girl with Black Cat (1885; Figure 28). Made roughly around the same time as Sita and Sarita, Eakins was living and working in Philadelphia and was personally known to Beaux, though it is unknown whether she would have seen this photograph and the others he took like it of van Buren. Van Buren sits at a table reading, with a white spotted cat hanging over her shoulder, whose pose and gaze are echoed in Sita’s in Beaux’s painting. The female sitter is preoccupied, distant and removed from the viewer’s possessive reach, while the cat dominates the image through central positioning and confrontational gaze. Boldini, an Italian artist working in Paris from the 1870s to the 1890s, painted Girl with Black Cat just a few years before Beaux travelled to Paris. Very little is written on the portrait, possibly because it makes one uneasy to look at it, as a young girl with a vacant, but sweet, expression struggles to hold a large black cat who stares daggers directly at the viewer. With no suggestion of a setting, the red background serves to emphasize the tension of the image. While Sarah and Boldini’s girl have little in common, the gaze and presence of the black cats are striking, achieving similar repellant functions.
“displayed on a lap or draped tablecloth,” as was typical.[^147] Importantly, she makes direct eye contact with the viewer from this high position in the picture plane. Beaux’s decision to depict the cat in this way suggests both meaning and intent, despite her sister’s dismissal of the animal’s inclusion in the portrait as being anything more than arbitrary or impulsive. While the painting bears similarities to depictions of mothers and their children, particularly when compared to Cassatt’s pastel drawing *The Banjo Lesson* and Sargent’s *Mrs. Fiske Warren*, the cat does not seem to be characterized as a child, lacking the sweet innocence of the Brighton cats. As an attribute, too, Sita does not fit with convention, as her anthropomorphized gaze draws attention away from Sarah, the human subject, the opposite of conventional representations of pets as passive, marginalized, or generalized. Though Sarah touches Sita in an intimate, sensual way, the young woman does not seem sexually-available like the sitter in Renoir’s *Woman with a Cat*. Sarah’s detached gaze and Sita’s direct confrontation interrupt any attempted sexual possession by the viewer, elevating the cat beyond mere attribute while underscoring Sita’s unavailability to the viewer. I propose that Beaux specifically employed a cat to play with the flurry of connotations that surrounded the animals, especially black ones, in the nineteenth century. When compared to *Man with a Cat*, it is clear that Beaux understood how these visual traditions were structured in regards to gender roles, and she decisively broke from them. In *Sita and Sarita*, Beaux complicates the interpretation of “white paintings” by inverting expectations for portraits of women in reverie and with cats in response to the emerging New Woman in the increase in intellectualism and

education among women, as well as complicating the traditional binary types of women, split between the pure or virginal and the dangerous sexualized object.
CHAPTER THREE

THE THREAT OF THE CAT

This chapter will examine how the cat functions in Beaux’s painting beyond the domestic connections related to portraits of mothers and their children and of the middle class with their pets. The cat has persisted in art for thousands of years, and Beaux’s inclusion of Sita in such a prominent position invites a deeper interpretation, beyond the inclusion of a mere house-cat as a sign of companionship, wealth, and luxury. Cats, particularly black cats, recall vivid images of the bizarre and strange, in the twenty-first century as much as in the nineteenth century. As Gautier describes:

A cat, with its phosphorescent eyes that shine like lanterns, and sparks flashing from its back, moves fearlessly through the darkness, where it meets wandering ghosts, witches, alchemists, necromancers, grave-robbers, lovers, thieves, murderers, grey-cloaked patrols, and all the obscene larvae that only emerge at night.148

I argue that the black cat in Sita and Sarita alludes to the threat of the changing status of women in the nineteenth century by embodying the mystery of feminine power, sexuality, and intellect that the feline connoted for thousands of years. The inclusion of Sita conveys the palpable tension that heightened during Beaux’s lifetime as the New Woman emerged, taking possession of her own sexuality, questioning the validity of traditional gender roles, and threatening the stability of society.149

Since the Renaissance, cats were seen as functional, productive members of society in that they were mousers and hunters, keeping vermin under control in farms as

well as cities. As cats became pets in the nineteenth century, however, they lost that functionality and were instead perceived as lazy and unproductive, devalued because they were considered too independent to be trained like a dog or a horse. In other words, cats refuse to submit and obey. This perception of house cats as being unhelpful, especially when combined with their moodiness and standoffishness, can parallel the period’s perception of women who rejected traditional domestic roles. Alphonse Toussenel, a nineteenth-century French writer with an interest in nature, wrote of female cats:

Lazy and frivolous and spending entire days in contemplation and sleep, while pretending to be hunting mice . . . Incapable of the least effort when it comes to anything repugnant, but indefatigable when it is a matter of pleasure, of play, of sex, lover of the night.

Toussenel was comparing female cats to prostitutes, but his writings can also be read as drawing a broader connection between cats and those women who choose not to marry and start families. Cats were seen as concerned more with their own pleasure than the continuation of their species, which I believe parallels the perception of women who rejected their domestic and reproductive roles in favor of embracing their independence and pursuing their own interests, including work outside the home.

Generally, Victorian society saw women’s sexuality as a threat, an idea reinforced scientifically in Charles Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* (1871), which distinguishes human mate selection from animal mate selection. In the animal world, Darwin

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152 Kete, *The Beast*, 121.
observed, females often pick their male mates with great success for the species. In the human world, however, Darwin argues that men should choose their female mates because women base their selections on primal desires not logical choices, a pattern that threatens the health and continuation of the species. This assertion reinforced assumptions that women were more emotional than men and that their taking charge of their own sexuality was threatening not just to males, but to the entire species.¹⁵³

To understand how Sita in Beaux’s portrait embodies this perceived threat of female sexuality and power, combined with the tensions of changing gender roles, this chapter will delve into Sita and Sarita’s ties to Edouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863), a connection that many scholars have made; Egyptomania, a nineteenth-century phenomenon of fascination with Ancient Egypt through the emerging field of archaeology; and fears of female hysteria and witches, evident in popular literature of Beaux’s time period, particularly in the years immediately preceding the completion of her enigmatic dual portrait.

*Olympia* and le Chat Noir

Scholars have connected *Sita and Sarita* to *Olympia* primarily through the form of the black cat, but here, I consider more thoroughly how Beaux’s portrait relates to Manet’s work in content, implications, and interpretation. Beaux undoubtedly would have heard of Manet’s painting before she saw it in Paris at the Exposition Universelle in 1889 near the end of her trip to Europe, considering the amount of scandal that

surrounded it upon its first public appearance in the Paris Salon of 1865. The similarity of the cats in *Sita and Sarita* and *Olympia* is striking, as is the resemblance of the position of the female sitters’ hands in their laps. Most scholars view these similarities as a parallel between the paintings’ commentaries on female sexuality in the nineteenth century, particularly the repression of women’s sexual drives and the attempt on the part of men to control them.\(^{154}\) To look deeper into the issues of female sexuality addressed by these paintings, we must establish the legacy that Manet’s *Olympia* was responding to in order to fully understand how Beaux’s *Sita and Sarita* relates.

Manet based the structure of *Olympia* on Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* (1538; Figure 29), which, in the nineteenth century, was thought to depict a courtesan.\(^{155}\) A nude woman lounges on a bed covered in a white sheet within her luxurious home, delicately fondling flowers in one hand as her other hand rests between her thighs, her fingers suggestively curling in towards herself, as a lapdog sleeps near her feet. She turns her face to the side with a coy, inviting expression, allowing the viewer to visually consume her unchallenged. Manet’s *Olympia* similarly depicts a nude woman stretched out on a white bed, but he made significant, meaningful changes. Instead of turning her face to

\(^{154}\) Yount, *American Figure Painter*, 34; Pohl, *Framing America*, 279; and Cash, ed., *American Paintings*, 230.

\(^{155}\) Michael Fried, *Manet’s Modernism: The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 58-62, 93-94. Fried argues that the painting is actually about the fidelity of marriage, as it was likely made to celebrate a wedding. The nude woman’s body is that of a mature woman, not a young virgin, and the dog sleeping at her feet implies fidelity and references domesticity, suggesting that the Venus is also a wife. Fried also proposes an alternative source for *Olympia* than Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*. He argues that, at least in the initial conception of *Olympia*, Manet was inspired by Achille Deveria’s lithograph *Sujet gracieux for a macedoine* made in the early nineteenth century, depicting a nude woman lying in bed petting a black lapdog beside her. Manet’s early wash drawing for *Olympia* is much more similar to the Deveria than the Titian, though the woman pets the cat as it crawls behind her whereas the women in the lithograph pets the dog lying in front of her. The final pose Manet chose for his painting, though, more closely resembles the *Venus of Urbino* in the pose of the woman and the placement of the animal.
the side like the Venus, Olympia confronts the viewer, gazing directly outward without so much as a smile. Where the Venus’s fingers curl inward, the tips disappearing between her thighs, Olympia’s hand splays out, covering her genitalia in a protective gesture. Lastly, and most significantly for *Sita and Sarita*, Manet replaced Titian’s sleeping dog with an alarmed black cat.

Part of the scandal that erupted around *Olympia* centered on the assumption that she was a courtesan, not a Venus as the embodiment of love and beauty. Manet portrayed her as a modern Parisian, determined by her jewelry and accessories, rather than a canonical type. More than that, Olympia appears as an actual individual in Manet’s description of the characteristics of her face, as in a portrait.156 This was particularly troubling to contemporary viewers due to the rise of prostitution in the public eye as a result of major renovations in Paris, when the city was redesigned around a broad boulevards in which women could walk about freely. Whether they were courtesans or actual, respectable bourgeois ladies, the distinction between the two blurred as prostitutes dressed in ready-made clothes imitating styles popular with the middle class and available at the newly built department stores.157 The title of Manet’s painting also implied prostitution, as “Olympia” was a name associated with courtesans in this time period.158 The sitter, however, was not a prostitute, but was instead an aspiring French painter, Victorine Meurent, who modeled for Manet multiple times. As with Sarah in Beaux’s *Sita and Sarita*, the sitter’s identity is protected by the title of the painting.


The interpretations of *Olympia* vary dramatically, but the sexual tension of the painting is clear. While Meurent is suggestively posed, stretching across the bed in her obvious nakedness, her direct gaze, uninviting expression, and the placement of her hand firmly in her lap repel the viewer. The interpretations of her expression are varied, but I contend that in her confrontation of the viewer’s gaze, she takes ownership of her sexuality, openly admitting that she is a sensual being in the nakedness of her body while making herself unavailable to the viewer through her steely, steady eye contact and the way her left hand blocks her genitalia from hungry eyes.¹⁵⁹ The black cat, too, poses interpretive issues, as scholars have seen it as a representation of the illicit nature of female sexuality, the male viewer’s arousal when looking at Olympia, sexual violence or aggression, or even the artist himself.¹⁶⁰

Beaux creates a dialog between *Sita and Sarita* and *Olympia* by incorporating both the black cat and the woman’s protective gesture; yet, the connection is more subtle than the obvious trope of *The Venus of Urbino* in Manet’s painting.¹⁶¹ The gesture of the hand over the groin functions similarly in *Sita and Sarita* and *Olympia*, as it blocks the

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¹⁵⁹ Harrison argues that the viewer is presumed to be her next client and that her expression confronts the viewer “with the drollness and brevity of [the] imagined fulfillment” of the prostitute’s job. See Harrison, *Painting the Difference*, 51. T. J. Clark argues that the gaze, along with the other elements in the painting, complicates the genre of the nude, suggesting a much more complex female sexuality leading to a confusion in how to read the painting. Clark emphasizes that the gaze makes us see the woman not just a nude waiting to be objectified: “This is not a look which is generalized or abstract or evidently ‘feminine.’ It appears to be so blatant and particular, but it is also unreadable, perhaps deliberately so. It is candid but guarded, poised between address and resistance--so precisely, so deliberately, that it comes to be read as a production of the depicted person herself; there is an inevitable conflation of the qualities of precision and contrivance in the way the image is painted and those qualities as belonging to the fictive subject; it is her look, her action upon us, her composition of herself”; T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 133.


¹⁶¹ Yount, et al., *American Figure Painter*, 33.
penetrating gaze of the viewer in both paintings. Both women are unavailable to the sexual desire of the viewer, and they are made unavailable by their own doing. The cats’ forms seem nearly identical at first glance as they arch their backs and face the viewer, emerging out of and blending back into a dark background. The cats are, however, not in the same attitude or physical expression, as Sita’s back is arched in response to pleasurable strokes of the woman whereas the cat in Manet’s painting arches its back in a defensive mode.\textsuperscript{162} There is a question of ownership as well, since Olympia and the cat are completely disconnected, sharing neither physical contact nor an exchange of gaze. Sita and Sarah, on the other hand, are intimately entwined, with the cat seemingly indistinguishable from the sitter’s dark hair. The cat seems to curve around her head and even their eyes connect them, as they both have golden yellow irises. Sita, then, can be clearly seen as \textit{extension} of the woman, in contrast to the clear separation and opposing figures of Olympia and the black cat at her feet.

\textit{Olympia} was not well-received by the public when it was first shown in 1865, raising some questions about how and why Beaux would relate to it. The public was outraged, shocked by the expression of the woman’s face, her nakedness versus the classic nude, and the rough painting style that Manet employed.\textsuperscript{163} The criticisms of the painting grew into a scandal that threatened Manet’s career. The black cat is,

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\textsuperscript{162} An alternative source for the cat in \textit{Sita and Sarita} may be Thomas Eakins’s \textit{Home Ranch} (1892; Figure 30). The animals’ poses and the slight slanting of their eyes is strikingly similar, and since Eakins was a prominent artist in Philadelphia and a teacher at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts when Beaux was there, so she likely would have known this work. It remained in Eakins’s personal collection until 1929.

\textsuperscript{163} Nudity was associated with the high arts whereas nakedness was associated with the lower classes and sex in a more explicit fashion. Titian’s \textit{Venus}, for example, was scene as an appropriate artistic nude whereas \textit{Olympia} was seen a naked, and thus inappropriate, woman. For further details, see John Moffitt, “Provocative Felinity in Manet’s \textit{Olympia},” \textit{Notes in the History of Art} 14, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 21-31.
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compositionally, quite marginalized, and it blends easily into the dark background, but because of the connotations of the animal, it became one of the central complaints about the work of art. The “long-since-perceived and generally negative ‘cat = lubricious woman’ connotations” forced the viewers to see the subject in *Olympia* not as an idealized representation of beauty, love, or passion, but instead saw a sex worker naked, waiting on the next customer from whom the bouquet is presumed to be from.\(^\text{164}\) In fact, the cat featured so prominently to nineteenth-century viewers, the painting was commonly referred to as “Venus au chat noir.” One critic, however, “chose even to exclude ‘Venus’ from the title . . . For him, the only motif that counted was that traditionally provocative *chat noir.*” The critic wrote:

> Manet’s present vice is . . . a sort of pantheism in which a head is esteemed no more than a slipper; in which sometimes more importance is given to a bouquet of flowers than to the physiognomy of a woman--as, for example, in his famous painting of *The Black Cat.*\(^\text{165}\)

This is of particular interest considering the connection with *Sita and Sarita,* not only because of the similarity of the feline figures but also in that Beaux originally titled the painting *The Black Cat* before changing it to *Sita and Sarita.* Thus, the connection between the paintings seems intentional on her part, despite her title change and reluctance to have the painting reproduced, which suggest that in retrospect she was uncomfortable with the association. Given her time in Paris and knowledge of art, it seems very likely that Beaux would have known of these “alternate” titles for *Olympia.*\(^\text{166}\)

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164 Ibid., 24, 27.

165 Ibid., 24, 26.

166 Pohl, *Framing America,* 278-79.
While both paintings are, unarguably, about feminine sexuality, Beaux’s is more subtle in addressing it. American art historian Frances Pohl reads more into the correlation between the two paintings, seeing similarities in the black and white compositions, particularly the symbolism of the white in *Sita and Sarita* as broadcasting Sarah’s purity, a reinforcement of Victorian ideals for women. However, she also argues that the white dress hints at an underlying sexual availability, in that the “sheer material in the top of the bodice gives a glimpse of the skin beneath, just as a slight blue shadow suggests the cleavage between her breasts.”\(^{167}\) Combined with the other elements in the painting, namely the black cat and the placement of her hand, she states that *Sita and Sarita* “works against the denial of sexual feelings” stipulated by proper society, doing so “with humor, playfully commenting on the connections so often made between ‘uncontrolled’ female sexuality, evil, witches with their animal ‘familiars’, and darkness.”\(^{168}\) While I agree that the painting responded to social norms or expectations for women, I do not see the dress as hinting at any underlying sexuality necessarily, nor do I see the “hint” of cleavage. Further, the painting seems to have a very serious air to it, again that notable “distinction,” which I do not see as aligned with humor or a playful commentary identified by Pohl. Instead, the painting is striking in its quiet, somber presence, emphasized by the dark background and the lack of implied motion of the subjects.

Certainly, there is an issue of class between *Olympia* and *Sita and Sarita*, as Meurent is depicted as a lower-class courtesan whereas Sarah is represented as she was: a

\(^{167}\) Ibid., 278-79.

\(^{168}\) Ibid., 279.
middle-class, respectable woman. Instead of a humorous commentary, *Sita and Sarita* seems to be a carefully-crafted response to the changing approaches to female sexuality in the late nineteenth century by drawing a connection to the scandalous *Olympia*. With *Olympia*, Manet broke boundaries for representing female sexuality in art through his individualization of the nude woman, the directness of her gaze and unwelcoming expression, and the way he made the subject contemporary to nineteenth-century Paris. Beaux, on the other hand, framed her commentary within acceptable visual modes, operating within a series of traditions that was palatable to the public, instead of shocking and offending to viewers.

In relation to *Olympia*, the black cat and its gaze in *Sita and Sarita* operate within the specific context of nineteenth-century Western art, artists, and viewers, revolving around questions of sexuality, female promiscuity, and possession and power. The black cat likely came to have these connotations in the West from non-Western and ancient sources including Egypt in the time of the pharaohs. To fully investigate the cat’s function in *Sita and Sarita*, the section that follows will delineate the influence of Ancient Egypt on Americans in the nineteenth century, during a time when these exotic sites were being uncovered and excavated, leading to an influx of those objects into private collections, museums, and exhibitions.

**Egyptomania: Cleopatra and Bastet**

Ancient Egypt became a source of interest and intrigue in the nineteenth century as archaeology began to develop as a defined field, flooding America and Europe with artifacts, leading to “Egyptomania” in Western countries. Western culture developed a
particular fascination with Cleopatra during this time, progressively over-sexualizing her as Egyptomania reached its peak near the end of the nineteenth century. The exposure of Americans to Ancient Egyptian artifacts came through a variety of sources, both reliable and unreliable. Beaux may have first witnessed Egyptomania in art through the Ancient Egyptian show in Philadelphia’s Centennial Exhibition of 1876, which even included an exact replica of a facade of an ancient temple among many other objects. Many of the Egyptian shows in Western fairs and exhibitions, however, were Orientalized in nature since Egypt refused to participate, allowing the organizers the freedom to craft the exhibits in a way that would most interest their audience, often through exoticizing and eroticizing the ancient culture represented. There were, however, genuine attempts to present Ancient Egypt in a fair, accurate way. The Egypt Exploration Fund, founded in 1882, helped museums in the United States, including the University of Pennsylvania’s museum, build their collections of these ancient artifacts. One of the founders of the Egyptian Exploration Fund was, surprisingly, a woman. Amelia Edwards, a journalist and novelist, was one of the leading early Egyptologists, breaking into a field that had been populated almost solely by men. Her speaking tour in 1889 was a “rousing success” in America, raising interest there in Egypt that had already taken hold in Europe, while also associating women with the ancient culture because of her public


171 Ibid., 95, 191.

172 Ibid., 178.
involvement. The University of Pennsylvania, in Beaux’s hometown of Philadelphia, was a pioneer in the archaeological field of the Ancient Near East, hiring its first curator of Egyptian art in 1890, just a few years before Beaux began Sita and Sarita. The curator was Sara Yorke Stevenson, another woman following Amelia Edwards in a field still dominated by men. The timing of these events and the presence of women in the public eye in Philadelphia and throughout America in relation to Egyptology is significant, as Beaux would have been introduced to Ancient Egypt by women in the years leading up to her creation of Sita and Sarita.

Among these Egyptian imports was the infamous Cleopatra, the doomed Queen known for her youth and beauty, as well as deceit, cunning, and ambition. The nineteenth century was witness to a great fascination in the West with the celebrity of Cleopatra, romanticizing and exoticizing her in art as well as literature. She became a beacon for overt sexuality, as she was accused of using her sexual charms to manipulate the men around her for political advantage, as well as for “shameless cruelty” not only in her betrayal of Julius Caesar but in her “pitiless testing of poisons on her slaves.”

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173 Ibid., 199. I do not know if Beaux actually went to one of the lectures on Edwards’s tour, but she may have heard about it, returning home from Europe to a country whose interests had been ignited in the Ancient Egyptians.

174 Ibid., 199.


177 This characterization of Cleopatra is consistent with the femme fatale, a type that emerged in the nineteenth century as women were portrayed in ways that emphasized both their sexual appeal and their power as individuals. John Singer Sargent’s Madame X (Madame Pierre Gautreau; 1883-1884) is one such example.

Further, art historian Susanna Gold argues, “Cleopatra enacted the role of sexual deviant according to nineteenth-century expectations for womanly comportment; her self-indulgence, greed, and emotional passions stained her biography” while both enticing and terrifying the white males who consumed her image.\(^{179}\) As such, she personified the fears boiling up Western society as women began to stretch beyond their previous limitations, occupations, and status, particularly in the way she was associated with power, sex, and death.\(^{180}\) Interestingly and significantly, these characteristics tie her to the feline, as cats were disliked in the nineteenth century because they were ruthless, often praying on injured, flightless birds, and baby animals, and were seen as completely self-serving, not unlike the ambitious young queen.\(^{181}\)

Even more interesting, George Bernard Shaw, the British poet, wrote about Cleopatra and her close association with cats in his novel *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1906). Cats were highly valued in Ancient Egypt, seen as protectors and guardians as well as sacred animals;\(^{182}\) they were often mummified and placed in tombs with their owners. In one scene in Shaw’s story, Cleopatra asks Caesar if a black cat she saw could have been her great-great-great-grandmother, explaining that her “great-grandmother’s great-grandmother was a black kitten of the sacred white cat.”\(^{183}\) Later, Caesar tells her “Now you are a silly little girl; and you are descended from the black kitten. You are both a girl

\(^{179}\) Ibid., 333.

\(^{180}\) Taft, *Egypt Land*, 171.

\(^{181}\) Golden, “Marking Her Territory,” 18.

\(^{182}\) Cats likely became seen as protectors because of their original purpose as killers of snakes.

\(^{183}\) George Bernard Shaw, “Caesar and Cleopatra,” 18. While written years after Beaux’s painting, I believe he is expressing undercurrents of how people viewed Cleopatra and what were associated with her, namely cats especially black ones.
and a cat.”\textsuperscript{184} While Caesar’s comment seems condescending and dismissive, he is actually confirming her long lineage of female power tied to the black cat, which, at Shaw’s time, would have been a symbol of mysticism, both dangerous and unpredictable.\textsuperscript{185}

_Sita and Sarita_ is linked to the Cleopatra fascination, particularly if we examine it alongside Edmonia Lewis’s _Death of Cleopatra_ (1876; Figure 31), which commanded a great amount of attention at the 1876 New World’s Fair in Philadelphia when Beaux was studying at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Arts. Undoubtedly, she would have been familiar with this striking sculpture, which depicts the moment of death for the young queen, when she allows a poisonous serpent to bite her so as to save her from the shame and torment of being captured by her enemies. While this sculpture was first exhibited many years before Beaux painted _Sita and Sarita_, it may have influenced her at least in the back of her mind. The sculpture has notable similarities to _Sita and Sarita_, not just in the use of white, but also in the placement of the right hand—resting in the woman’s lap—the seated pose, and the slight smile on the woman’s lips are all echoed in Beaux’s dual portrait. Cleopatra holds a serpent in her right hand while Sarah holds her serpentine sash. _Sita and Sarita_ holds multiple references, then, to Cleopatra, thus tying the dual portrait to the powerful female, who was, as a character, completely in possession of her own sexuality which she wielded to use men for her own gain. Thus, Beaux’s painting

\textsuperscript{184} Ibid., 21.

\textsuperscript{185} Cleopatra was often depicted with leopard skins either on her body or on her furniture, tying her again to cats but in a more subtle way. She is also depicted reclining with a cat at her feet in Alexandre Cabanel’s _Cleopatra Testing Poisons on Condemned Prisoners_ (1887), although the cat seems to be a spotted wild cat instead of a domestic breed. Cleopatra stands on the skin of a wildcat with the animal’s head still attached, similar to the bear rug in Whistler’s _White Girl_, in Georges Jules Victor’s _Sarah Bernhardt as Cleopatra_ (1893). Gustave Moreau’s _Cleopatra_ (1887) includes a statuette in black stone of a cat, or lion’s, head.
can be seen as having a more threatening undercurrent than may have been initially perceived, as a mere portrait of a young woman and her barn kitten.

In addition to the connection with Cleopatra, another female Egyptian associated with cats gained attention during this time of excavation and importation. The goddess Bastet was an important female deity in the Egyptian pantheon as she was the daughter of the sun-god Re and was considered both a “terrifying avenger” and a nurturing mother.\textsuperscript{186} Early Egyptian art depicted her as a lion or a lion-human hybrid because of her tie to the “rage inherent in the sun-god’s eye, his instrument of vengeance,” encouraging the perception of her as a fierce protector.\textsuperscript{187} The black cat in \textit{Sita and Sarita}, then, becomes significantly more powerful with the added association of the Egyptian goddess and feline guardian figures. Sita stands guard over Sarah, keeping her safe by confronting the threatening gaze of the presumed male viewer, like the wakeful stone statues of cats in ancient Egyptian temples, trusted with the safekeeping of those within.

After 1000 B. C., however, Bastet’s imagery shifts to that of a domesticated cat, softening her image as she “presided over maternity, fertility, and female allure. She was also a deity of the home, anticipating the cat’s later role in European art as the representative of domestic well-being.”\textsuperscript{188} Egyptians were one of the first cultures to domesticate cats and they became a common feature in depictions of royalty, often


\textsuperscript{187} Ibid., 165.

Many of the statues created of Bastet depict her as a cat-headed woman with kittens at her feet, thus reinforcing her association with the maternal and domestic. Most of these statues were created in dark materials such as diorite, cast bronze, and cast copper alloys, drawing visual associations between the goddess and Sita. Most significantly, the story of Bastet holds meaning for Beaux’s double portrait. She started as a tool of vengeance, as a lioness, but became a domesticated cat associated with motherhood, which parallels the domestication of the cat itself but also the taming of women through marriage. Sarah was married at the time *Sita and Sarita* was painted, so the natural and expected next step would be reproduction. While domesticated cats were often scolded as being lazy, they were also prized for their supreme maternal skills. In *Natural History* from 1871, William Bingley writes:

> Few animals exhibit more maternal tenderness, or show a greater love for their offspring, than the Cat. The assiduity with which she attends them, and the pleasure which she seems to take in all their playful tricks, afford a grateful entertainment to every observer of nature. She has also been known not only to nurse with tenderness the offspring of different individuals of her own species, but even those of other kinds of animals.\(^{190}\)

With this aspect of the cat in mind, we can see *Sita and Sarita* as it functions within a mother-centric context, drawing a parallel between the young woman and her potential as a mother by aligning her with the animal cat, with her reputation for good maternal instincts, and with Bastet, the goddess of maternity.

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189 Cat cemeteries were found in great numbers in Egypt, particularly in areas that worshipped Bastet as one of their primary deities, and they were often mummified with great care. Some tombs were found with many mummified cats, which suggests a ritual purpose as well as an affectionate one.

190 Bingley, *Natural History*, 203.
In addition to these ideals of motherhood associated with Bastet, she was the goddess of female allure, or sexuality. The festivals in her honor were known for being overtly sexual with women at the heart of it. The annual festival at Bubastis, the city of Bastet, women “celebrated the festival of the goddess by drinking, dancing, making music, and displaying their genitals.” In fact, the Greek Herodotus, upon his tour to Egypt reported that:

The most important and popular Egyptian religious festival was that of Bastet. In April or May, boats would sail along the river to Bubastis, crammed with men and women singing, clapping, and striking castanets. When they arrived at a town, they would call out the local women and exchange bawdy pleasantries. Arrived in Bubastis, they celebrated with a drunken orgy.

Again, this recalls Manet’s *Olympia* and the scandal that erupted over her and the *chat noir* as the symbol of licentious female sexuality. Combined with the associations of Cleopatra and the goddess Bastet, we can see *Sita and Sarita* as encompassing a threat rooted in ancient Egyptian mythic figures of female sexuality and power. The nineteenth century exhibited similar fears of women in literature, extending beyond the ancient figures of Egypt into a dark world of madness, witchery, and the macabre.

The characterizations of these Egyptian figures demonstrates the often dualistic or binary categorizations of women which are present in *Sita and Sarita* as well. Perhaps the most famous of these binaries is the “Madonna/Whore” pairing, though others are just as common, such as child/woman. Cleopatra was quite young when she came to power as a teenager, caught between girlhood and adulthood. She was seen as sexually manipulative, yet she was also a mother to both Caesar and Mark Antony’s children, thus

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embodying both the “Madonna” and the “whore.” Bastet, too, fits within the binary as a sexual being, considering the sexual nature of some of the rituals in her honor, and a mother or nurturer. Sarah in *Sita and Sarita* is young, in her twenties, out of girlhood but she has not yet entered motherhood either. The sensuality in Beaux’s portrait, created by the stroking of the cat, the textures of the textiles, and her hand placed in her lap, supports seeing Sarah as a woman in her sexual prime, yet she also wears white, thus drawing together idea of purity with those of sexual desire. To complicate her categorization even further, the presence of the cat frames Sarah as a nurturer or mother figure. *Sita and Sarita* draws together these conflicting stereotypes applied to women throughout history, as an object of sexual desire, a *femme fatale* who uses her sexuality as a weapon, an ideal of purity and virtue, and a mother or Madonna.

Hysteria, Witches, and the Supernatural

Domestic cats were traditionally associated with witches, mysticism, and the supernatural. With their connection to women, they also came to represent the animalistic impulses within the “fairer” sex. To examine the threatening association of women and cats in literature of the nineteenth century, this chapter recalls the previous discussion of Gilman’s “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” but investigates its connection to the cat and female animality in line with the American literary scholar Catherine Golden’s reading. Gilman’s short story was published alongside a narrative about an innocent victim of the Salem witch trials, a warning about what happens when women are out of control, manipulating men to punish other women with whom they have petty grievances. Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Black Cat” (1843), a macabre story of an alcoholic man who
continues to lose control over his emotions, taking them out on the vulnerable members of his family, will also be discussed as it ties together supernatural powers, women, and black cats, while emphasizing the destructive nature of men and the victimization of both pets and wives at their hands. In these stories, women are antagonists, protagonists, and victims, all connected to cats in some way whether through behavior, totems, or the association with witchcraft, demonstrating why the cat in *Sita and Sarita* holds power as a threatening presence, particularly to the presumed male viewer.

Scholars have viewed the narrator’s actions in “The Yellow Wall-Paper” as animalistic, especially in the way she crawled around her room and tore down the yellow wallpaper, but feminist literature scholar Catherine Golden interprets the short story with cats in mind, examining the narrator’s behaviors as if they were feline. She explains:

> From the perspective of animals, history, and nineteenth-century culture, Gilman’s narrator is not regressing into a wild animal or even a generic embodiment of animality. The narrator is moving into the mind-set of a domesticated feline, acting cat-like, not merely animal-like. She is marking her territory and scenting it, gaining dominance over patriarchy by taking control of her environment.

She goes on to describe how these are cat-like activities, including how the narrator naps during the daytime and “longs to prowl” at nighttime. Most significantly, she emphasizes the cat’s sense of *smell*, which is why the narrator continues to mark her room with her scent by rubbing her body on the walls. Scenting and marking “signal belonging” and assert dominance as they associate the cat’s personal signature smell with a prized object

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193 J. Gerald Kennedy, *A Historical Guide to Edgar Allan Poe* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 64. Poe was a prolific American writer in the early nineteenth century, having “acquired a substantial literary reputation not only as a poet and writer but also as one of the preeminent literary critics in America.” Interestingly, Charles Baudelaire popularized Poe in France when he translated the writer’s works into French which he published in the 1850s and 1860s. Given his popularity, and Beaux’s passion for reading as a child, it is likely that she would have been at the very least familiar with Poe’s work.

or territory. To mark something, the cat presses the scent glads in its forehead, cheeks, and chin by rubbing its head or entire body against the object. In *Sita and Sarita*, it is possible that Sita is marking Sarah as her own, as her head, and thus her scent glads, are so close to her owner’s face. This increases their intimate connection while calling into question the notion of ownership, since it is unclear if they belong to each other as partners instead of owner and pet. The implication of this closeness, if we apply the warning of “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” is that women could return to their feline or animal roots if their affinity with cats is left unchecked. Significantly, at the end of the short story, the female narrator is so overcome by her own animality that her husband, her “owner” of sorts, faints in shock when he sees her. She proceeds to prowl over him, treading on patriarchy, rationality, and masculinity.

When it was first published in January of 1892 in *the New England Magazine*, Gilman’s short story included three illustrations. The first (Figure 32), on the title page, depicts the narrator as a young woman, fully-dressed, sitting in a rocking chair by a barred window writing in her diary. This image, with the exception of the bars on the window, is not particularly unusual, especially considering the Impressionist and Aesthetic artists’ interests in young women in domestic interiors pursuing leisure activities. The woman appears neat and tidy, calm and collected, just as ideal women of this time period were supposed to appear. The second illustration (Figure 33) is a bit darker, depicting two women, the narrator and her sister-in-law, Jennie, in a darkened room. The moment illustrated is when the narrator sneaks up behind Jennie as she

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195 Ibid., 25-27.
examines the stained parts of the yellow wallpaper where the narrator had rubbed grooves in the wall in her “marking” motion. This is the part of the story when things begin to go awry, when the narrator starts acting increasingly strange, paranoid, and cat-like. The final image (Figure 34) on the last page of the story acts as a foil to the first illustration, as the woman has completely lost her mind and humanity. Her hair free-flowing and unkempt, the narrator crawls over the seemingly lifeless body of her husband, completely consumed by her animality. This is the fear that is symbolized by the black cat in *Sita and Sarita*. Sarah is idle, trapped within the domestic sphere, as the narrator was in “The Yellow Wall-Paper.” Her claw-like left hand could suggest this developing animality as the black cat who has marked her as her own begins to take control.

Gilman’s short story was published a year before Beaux began *Sita and Sarita*, in the same issue of *The New England Magazine* as two stories about the Salem witch trials. Since the artist was in Philadelphia at that time, it is entirely possible that she would have read this very issue of the *New England Magazine*, but even if she had not read it, the magazine would have reflected the interests of the times, which Beaux certainly would have been aware of. Domestic cats of all kinds were associated with witchcraft, but black cats in particular held the strongest associations with the supernatural and witches. The story immediately preceding “The Yellow Wall-Paper” was Edith Mary Norris’s “A Salem Witch.” In Norris’s story, a jealous neighbor accuses Margaret, a sweet,

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197 Note also that the left hand is traditionally or superstitiously considered the “sinister” hand, making the claw-like nature of her fingers caressing the black, glaring cat all the more ominous.
wholesome, hard-working young woman, of being a witch. Her trial, like so many of the others accused in Salem, was marked by dramatic exhibitions as groups of young women “reacted” to the spells the “witches” cast on them from the stand. In the confinement of jail, Margaret’s health rapidly deteriorates from idleness, and she dies just hours before her scheduled execution. This story is interesting because it reveals how women, when they are allowed to indulge their fits of fancy, can effectively dismantle society by manipulating the men in charge to such an extent that they destroy the justice system. The juries and judges of the Salem witch trials were all men, spellbound by the accusers’ stories and dramatic, hysterical displays. They jailed or executed women with very little reliable evidence. It is unclear why this issue of the New England Magazine revived interest in these stories of witchery, hysteria, and women out of control, but the timing of the publication—the year before Sita and Sarita was begun—seems significant as Beaux specifically included a black cat, with its multitude of connections to dangerous women.

The black cat also develops as a dangerous, threatening figure in Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Black Cat” (1843). Two cats appear in the story, presumed by the reader to be the same one. The narrator of the story is a man who loses himself in alcoholism, leading him to become abusive towards his pets and his wife, but especially

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198 Hard at work inside the home participating in proper domestic activities.

199 In “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” the narrator’s husband often scolded her when she used her imagination, telling her to “not let any silly fancies run away with [her]”; see Gilman, “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” 652.

200 The other story about the Salem witch trials included in this issue of New England Magazine followed a few articles after “The Yellow Wall-Paper.” Written by Winfield S. Nevins, “Stories of Salem Witchcraft” detailed the trials in Salem, including the names of the accused, the jurors, and the judges. Two of the trials he focuses on at the beginning of the story involve two women, both named Sarah. I feel certain that this is a coincidence with the name of Beaux’s cousin and sitter in Sita and Sarita, but the chance parallel is still amusing, if meaningless.
towards his previous favorite animal, his black cat Pluto. One night, during a drunken rage, the narrator captures the cat who bites him, and in response, the man carves out one of the cats eyes. Filled with a combination of guilt and persistent rage, the narrator captures the cat again and hangs it from a tree outside his bedroom window. That night, the house catches fire, burning to the ground save one wall, which has the silhouette of a hanged cat on it. A while later, the narrator finds a new cat, also black and oddly with only one eye but with a bit of white on his chest. He takes the cat home, where “it domesticated itself at once, and became immediately a great favorite of [the narrator’s] wife.”

After a short period of peace, the narrator begins to have paranoid thoughts about the animal, growing into a stirring hatred. The narrator became so crazy about the cat that he thought the animal was intentionally stalking him, giving rise to a palpable feeling of terror, partly due to the white spot on the cat’s chest taking the shape of the gallows over time. One day, he and his wife were in the cellar of their home when the narrator was struck with an overpowering desire to kill the cat with an axe. When his wife tried to stop him, he murdered her instead. He hid her in the walls of the cellar so when the police came to investigate, they were unable to find a trace of the body, but as they were about to leave, a high-pitching howling began from the cellar. They found the source, brought down the wall, and revealed the corpse of the dead woman with the black cat sitting atop her head.

Significantly, the story aligns black cats with witchery and women from the start, as the narrator’s wife, “who at heart was not a little tinctured with superstition, made

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frequent allusion to the ancient popular notion, which regarded all black cats as witches in disguise.”\textsuperscript{202} The wife was said to have a distinct affection for the pets of the household, demonstrated by her attempt to save the second black cat from the axe despite risk to her own life.\textsuperscript{203} The first cat, Pluto, was named after the Roman god of the underworld, predicting the animal’s return from death as well as its vengeful response to the narrator’s murder of his wife. Certainly, from the narrator’s perspective, the animal could have been a witch in disguise, as it possessed a certain sentience and intentionality that animals rarely have. The growing white spot on the cat’s chest also implies magic, underscoring its supernatural nature, perhaps as Pluto’s return from the grave. Further, the story calls attention to the threat men perceive from those who cannot harm them, their dependents, such as women and pets. They are the least likely to harm the narrator, yet he abuses and eventually kills them, illustrating not only the terrible outcomes of alcoholism but also the male tendency to attack those who are most vulnerable. Certainly, women embracing New Womanhood by moving out of the home, taking possession of their sexuality, and joining the workforce is not a “true” threat to men, despite perceptions in the nineteenth century.

Aubrey Beardsley, an artist of the Aesthetic movement who died quite young, created an illustration for the 1901 publication of Poe’s “The Black Cat” (Figure 35).\textsuperscript{204} Inspired by Japanese woodblock prints, Beardsley’s simple illustration is powerful in its

\begin{footnotes}
\item[202] Poe, \textit{Edgar Allan Poe Annotated}, 59.
\item[203] While the cat was male and the narrator, also male, claimed to be the animal’s favorite, the connections with the wife are still evident.
\item[204] Though this was published after Beaux painted \textit{Sita and Sarita}, the illustration is worth examining because of its shared visual language with the portrait of Sarah and the cat, another example of the connection between women, cats, and the supernatural at the end of the nineteenth century.
\end{footnotes}
high-contrast black and white palette. The dead wife, seemingly lost in deep thought instead of deceased, is all in white and the black cat sits upon her head, staring straight at the viewer with its one eye in front of a black background. Like Sita, Beardsley’s black cat blends into and emerges out of the background with its one eye boldly standing out from the dark. Both animals perch upon a vulnerable woman in white from positions high in the picture plane, accentuating their mysticism, the power of their presence, and the unnerving feeling for the viewer when held in their steely gazes. Whether he saw Sita and Sarita before his death in 1898, Beardsley’s print certainly reinforces the imagery of the vulnerable woman protected by the powerful black cat presented in Beaux’s painting.

With “The Yellow Wall-Paper,” stories of the Salem witch trials, and Poe’s “The Black Cat” in mind, Sita becomes a very complex, powerful figure in Beaux’s painting, particularly when one also recalls the connections to Cleopatra and Bastet, the powerful figures of Ancient Egypt. Sita draws together these notions of the inner animality in women, conveyed in the way she is intertwined with and inseparable from Sarah, similar to how Cleopatra and Bastet were associated with felines, particularly in art. She is also threatening, seemingly-sentient in the slanting of her eyes and confrontation of the viewer, recalling the power of women, exemplified in the Salem witch trials, perhaps more so in the accusers than the accused. Sita stands guard over Sarah, acting as a protector with supernatural intelligence, like in “The Black Cat.” Together, Sita and Sarah embody these connotations, becoming a united front against male dominance, possession, and abuse, just as the New Woman rejected the assumption that men were superior to women, choosing instead to develop their minds and skills, gaining power and
influence as they immersed themselves in the worlds beyond the restrictive domestic sphere.\footnote{Cruea, “Changing Ideals of Womanhood,” 187.}
CONCLUSION

This thesis attempts to fill in the conspicuous gap in scholarship surrounding this specific enigmatic painting and more generally on Beaux. As the painting is often dismissed as merely a reference to Whistler’s *The White Girl* and Manet’s *Olympia*, significant connections within and beyond those masterworks are overlooked, leaving *Sita and Sarita’s* fountain of meaning untapped. I have sought to locate Beaux’s portrait within its social and artistic contexts, with special consideration for Beaux’s own knowledge and experiences which exposed her to a much broader world. Identifying how and proposing why she used elements from existing visual traditions, I hope to have established this painting’s relationship to the works of Beaux’s contemporaries. Certainly she worked within traditional genres and techniques, but her dramatic break from tradition in her placement and depiction of the cat Sita is the main focal point for my argument that there is far more to this painting than has previously been discussed.

The 1890s were a significant time of change in the American social landscape, such that the women’s rights movements and Beaux’s own groundbreaking as a woman in man’s world cannot be separated from interpretations of *Sita and Sarita*. The impact of the emerging New Woman affected Beaux and she was absorbed in it, furthering the women’s rights movement in her own life choices. Many of these New Women found their footing in political activism, particularly in the animal rights arena, so I pursued new avenues of inquiry to uncover relevant connections that enhance our understanding of the depth of this painting including animal studies, pet-keeping practices, and pets in art.
Egyptomania, the fear of Cleopatra and the comfort of Bastet; and popular literature, concerned with female imagination, hysteria, mysticism, and power. The intention of this thesis is to present this portrait in a new light, establishing the painting as socially, culturally, and artistically significant as it encompasses many intersecting issues present at the time it was painted, thus offering us far more information than simply what a woman looked like when she sat on a white and blue sofa with a barn cat on her shoulder. Above all, this thesis demonstrates that Beaux’s work has a depth previously unrealized, offering a framework with which to explore other works in her oeuvre through a lens that incorporates the artist’s own thoughts and the major issues of her time period, especially related to women’s rights.

Beaux’s dual portrait *Sita and Sarita* embodies the truth of the complexities of women: mysterious, dangerous, baffling, and powerful. We can glean that she revered the thoughtful woman, who enjoyed sitting quietly lost in her own thoughts, exploring her limitless imagination without the hindrance of a masculine presence. She embraced the legacy of the strong, independent figures of Olympia and Cleopatra, who wielded their sex like a weapon to control or repel men; Bastet, the fierce mother and protector; and little Alice who pursued her own curiosity about the world in which she found herself, even in the face of the foreign, unknown, and unexpected. In Sarah’s intimate caress of the cat on her shoulder lies a wealth of meaning rooted in her time, place, and historical moment.
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