

The tragedy of the domestic cat

By Colby Cosh, National Post

"I frequently run into people who like to have cats around, but who think it would be cruel to neuter or spay them." - Colby Cosh

I'm a single male with two shorthaired cats -- a sleek, inky black one and a plump, downy white one. This is not an arrangement I planned in the hope of attracting insults to my masculinity and guaranteeing that whatever clothes I wore would always display traces of fur. It's just how things worked out. Forgive me for cashing in on it like this: Writing about one's pets is a cardinal sin for a columnist, on the highly damnable order of referring to one's spouse as "He/She Who Must Be Obeyed," but yesterday's Post item about cat overpopulation gives me a news peg, which functions as a sort of permit for self-indulgence.

My cats, who are both surgically neutered, don't get along as well as I would like. Their occasional boxing matches are harmless, and when things are going well, they can squeeze past one another in a narrow passage without chaos and recrimination. Mostly they avoid each other. But the hopes I once had of coming home to find them forming a fuzzy little yin-yang on the couch will never be borne out. I do not know how to account for this. Sometimes I wonder if I did a bad job of introducing them, though I went about it with all the care and gradualness recommended in cat guides. Sometimes I think of their enmity and incivility as a cartoonish metaphor for racial strife. Sometimes I think it comes down to personality. The black cat is boyish, scatterbrained and athletic; the white one is prim and comfort-loving, a neurotic spinster type.

But I would never confuse my daydreams for reality. Cats don't have concepts or opinions -- just a perceptual apparatus radically unlike our own, and a set of complex instincts. You can learn to predict a cat's behaviour, and do things that will please it, but you can't really "think like a cat"; you can only build a clumsy model for the cat's mind. Anthropomorphizing them is irresistible because they've been bred for 10,000 years -- think about that: ten thousand years, on a Darwinian clock spinning through generations much faster than our own -- solely to be amusing, useful and endearing to humans. They have been designed, by a force

much more cunning than mere human ingenuity, to trick us into regarding them as family members.

Thus is the tragedy of the domestic cat. I frequently run into people who like to have cats around, but who think it would be cruel to neuter or spay them. I'm not saying I run into any smart people who think this way, mind you; but it's not as though there is some IQ qualification for owning a cat. If there were, we wouldn't have to euthanize somewhere around 100,000 unwanted cats a year in Canada.

Why would anyone think it was cruel to have a pet cat surgically prevented from reproducing? Mostly, it's pure anthropomorphism. We humans have affectionate, satisfying primate sex, designed to promote pair-bonding and investment in the raising of energy-expensive children with overgrown brains. We don't want to deny to our cats a capacity that is so essential to our own lives; we think of them as sharing our most complicated emotions, and we hesitate to deny them the "right" to go have "fun." (This thinking is especially typical of people who don't know any other way to have fun.)

It is all sentimental balderdash. Cats can't contemplate, anticipate or savour intercourse. Feline sex could best be described as a no-holds-barred rape competition, if such categories were meaningful at all to animals. The males literally have barbed penises designed to tear at the walls of the vagina. Some fun!

But to own a cat is to succumb to sentimentality in the first place, and it only takes a few soft-hearted cretins in a city to keep the numbers of stray cats larger than the capacity of humans to care for them. We can expand the niche, but as long as non-neutered pets are allowed to roam, it is almost inevitable that they will outbreed our efforts, Malthusian-fashion. Which forces humane societies and shelters -- run by the people who care for animals most -- to euthanize them in myriads. Evolution is crafty, but it respects no higher law, and can create some pretty miserable equilibria.

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