***Grimm’s Fairy Tales***

***Chapter 2***

***Cat and Mouse in Partnership***

***Summary and Analysis***

***Synopsis:***

A cat befriends a mouse and is so persuasive about her fondness for the smaller animal that the mouse agrees they should set up house together. The cat warns that they must plan for winter, or they'll go hungry. "And you, little mouse, cannot venture anywhere, or you will be caught in a trap someday," adds the cat.

They buy a pot of fat but can't decide where to store it. Finally the cat suggests hiding the pot under the altar at the church, where no one will dare steal it. All goes well until one day the cat feels hungry. She tells the mouse, "My cousin has brought a little son into the world and has asked me to be godmother." They agree that the mouse will stay at home.

The cat, who has no cousins, goes straight to the hiding place and pulls out the pot of fat. She licks off the top layer and spends the rest of the day relaxing in the sun. At home, the mouse asks what the newborn kitten was christened. "Top Off," says the cat.

Soon the cat feels hungry again. "I am again asked to be a godmother," she tells the mouse, and repeats the same action as before. This time, though, the cat eats half the fat in the pot. Back at home, she says the new kitten's name is "Half-done." The mouse is surprised at these odd names but doesn't suspect anything.

Yet again the cat gets hungry, and yet again the mouse agrees to keep house while the cat "goes to the christening" of her new godchild. This time, the cat finishes off the fat and tells the mouse that her new godchild is named "All-gone."

Winter comes, and the companions run out of food. The mouse remembers the pot of fat and suggests that the two of them enjoy it together. Of course the pot is empty when they take it out at the church—and now the mouse understands what the cat meant when she spoke those odd names. As she berates the cat, the larger animal springs forward and devours her.

This simple story stands in marked contrast with "[The Bremen Town Musicians](https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Grimms-Fairy-Tales-Selected/the-bremen-town-musicians-summary/)," in which four animals team up to help one another and succeed. This one seems more like an Aesop tale with a clear moral: "Beware! People do not change their natures." The cat's treachery and the lazy names she produces for her "godchildren" clearly mark her as a villain, but the mouse overlooks her traits to its peril.

Modern readers may wonder why a "pot of fat" seems so appetizing, even to a cat. In the 20th and 21st centuries, excess fat in foods has become a problem for some. But humans and many animals have a predisposition to fat that dates back for millennia. The preindustrial European diet—especially for the lower classes—contained much less fat than the modern one. A French peasant was once asked what he would do if he were king. "I would eat nothing but grease, until I could eat no more," he said.

Unless a family owned a cow, they had no access to butterfat. Lard could be obtained by killing a pig, if one owned a pig, but rendering hog fat into lard was a time-consuming and messy job. Olive trees, a good source of oil, did not grow well in northern Europe. Nuts may be used for oil, but again, a lot of manual work was required for a relatively small output. Grains and in-season vegetables made up a large percent of people's daily meals, with meat a rarity except for the nobility. Fat, a rich source of energy, was therefore something many people craved.

***Summary:***

* A cat befriends a mouse and convinces her to go in on a jar of fat together, which they store in a church.
* The kitty-cat lies three times about being asked to be a godfather for his cousin's kittens, all while eating up the fat, making up a clever name for the kitten each time (Half-Gone and All-Gone, for example).
* Finally, when winter comes, the mouse suggests that they go eat the fat they've been saving. They go to the church, the mouse realizes what has actually happened, and starts ranting at the cat, who promptly threatens to eat up the mouse if she says another word.
* The mouse doesn't shut up, so the cat eats her. (Duh.)
* The tale ends: "You see, that's the way of the world" (7). That's…cheery.

***Critical Study:***

A cat and mouse set up housekeeping together. To be prepared for hard times they purchase a pot of fat which they store in the safety of a church. The cat devises a scheme to leave the house and have some of the fat for herself. She leaves the house three times under pretense of going to a christening. Actually, she makes three visits to the fat pot and eats all of the fat. When the cat and mouse go to the church to eat their fat they find the fat pot empty. When the mouse confronts the cat, the cat eats the mouse.

This story gives readers a warning about who they should and shouldn't trust. Cats and mice are natural enemies, so a friendship between the two is not a common sight. Instead of being suspicious of the cat, however, the mouse does not catch onto the cat's deceit until it is too late. Note also the symbolic use of the three christenings.

***Significance:***

Exposition – The Background

A cat meets a mouse.

Inciting Incident – The Problem

And the cat says all manner of nice things to the mouse in order to win her friendship.

Rising Action – The Build-up

The unlikely pair then buys a pot of fat together and stores it in the church for safekeeping until winter. Meanwhile, they move in together, but the cat secretly covets the pot of fat and contrives to have it all to himself.

Three times he lies to the mouse and says that he must go to the church to stand as godfather for a newborn kitten.

The first time, he licks off the top layer of fat. When he comes home, the mouse inquires about the baptism and asks the kitten’s name. The cat says the kitten was christened “Top-Off.” Though an unusual name, the mouse does not give it much thought.

The second time, the cat eats down to the middle of the pot. Again, he gives the make-believe kitten a fake name, calling him “Half-Gone.” The name worries the mouse, but she does not press the matter.

Climax – The Breaking Point

The third time, the cat devours the rest of the pot and says the kitten was christened “All-Gone.” The mouse grows even more worried but still does not realize the cat is lying.

Falling Action – The Unraveling

When winter comes and food grows scarce, the mouse goes to the church with the cat and discovers the pot of fat empty.

Anti-resolution – Not So Happily Ever After

Before she can finish accusing the cat, he eats her up, and so ends their partnership!

PLOT ANALYSIS

The mouse should have known better than to trust a cat. So why did she? Was she worried about being prejudicial? Did she just want to give him a chance?

Of course not! Those explanations are too modern to apply, not to mention they are not supported by the text, which says very plainly that the cat tricked the mouse through flattery. The mouse should have trusted her instincts, not her vanity. As a result, she misplaced her trust altogether.

Cat and Mouse in Partnership by Walter Crane

The mouse was happy to keep the company of the cat because he boosted her ego. Yet, the cat was biding his time to eat her all the while. As such, neither was really friend to the other. Theirs was a partnership of convenience and met a certain death when that convenience, the pot of fat, ran out.

Neither the cat nor the mouse emerges a likable character. One is a foolish victim, and the other is a cunning predator.

CONCLUSION

Naturally, many middle school students like the ones I teach can readily relate to both characters. What seems to be a true friendship in sixth grade turns out to be merely a partnership of convenience in seventh. If left unchecked, it meets an unhappy ending by eighth.

That sounds rather daunting! But fear not, the Brothers Grimm have sound advice to offer. Simply put, trust your instincts. It’s good to give people a chance, but don’t be fooled by flattery or popularity or something else superficial. You can usually see through the façade if you can get over your ego.

And finally, just as we need to safeguard ourselves from cats, we also need to make sure we don’t turn into a cat.

# Cat and Mouse in Partnership

Tale of the Brothers Grimm translated by M. Hunt [1884]  
Interpretation by Undine & Jens in green [2018]

A certain cat had made the acquaintance of a mouse, and had said so much to her about the great love and friendship she felt for her, that at length the mouse agreed that they should live and keep house together. “But we must make a provision for winter, or else we shall suffer from hunger,” said the cat, “and you, little mouse, cannot venture everywhere, or you will be caught in a trap some day.” The good advice was followed, and a pot of fat was bought, but they did not know where to put it. At length, after much consideration, the cat said, “I know no place where it will be better stored up than in the church, for no one dares take anything away from there. We will set it beneath the altar, and not touch it until we are really in need of it.” So the pot was placed in safety, but it was not long before the cat had a great longing for it, and said to the mouse, “I want to tell you something, little mouse; my cousin has brought a little son into the world, and has asked me to be godmother; he is white with brown spots, and I am to hold him at the christening. Let me go out to-day, and you look after the house by yourself.” - “Yes, yes,” answered the mouse, “by all means go, and if you get anything very good, think of me, I should like a drop of sweet red christening wine too.” All this, however, was untrue; the cat had no cousin, and had not been asked to be godmother. She went straight to the church, stole to the pot of fat, began to lick at it, and licked the top of the fat off. Then she took a walk upon the roofs of the town, looked out for opportunities, and then stretched herself in the sun, and licked her lips whenever she thought of the pot of fat, and not until it was evening did she return home. “Well, here you are again,” said the mouse, “no doubt you have had a merry day.” - “All went off well.” answered the cat. “What name did they give the child?” - “Top off!” said the cat quite coolly. “Top off!” cried the mouse, “That is a very odd and uncommon name, is it a usual one in your family?” - “What does it signify,” said the cat, “it is not worse than Crumb-stealer, as your god-children are called.”

Before long the cat was seized by another fit of longing. She said to the mouse, “You must do me a favour, and once more manage the house for a day alone. I am again asked to be godmother, and, as the child has a white ring round its neck, I cannot refuse.” The good mouse consented, but the cat crept behind the town walls to the church, and devoured half the pot of fat. “Nothing ever seems so good as what one keeps to oneself.” said she, and was quite satisfied with her day’s work. When she went home the mouse inquired, “And what was this child christened?” - “Half-done.” answered the cat. “Half-done! What are you saying? I never heard the name in my life, I’ll wager anything it is not in the calendar!”

The cat’s mouth soon began to water for some more licking. “All good things go in threes,” said she, “I am asked to stand godmother again. The child is quite black, only it has white paws, but with that exception, it has not a single white hair on its whole body; this only happens once every few years, you will let me go, won’t you?” - “Top-off! Half-done!” answered the mouse, “They are such odd names, they make me very thoughtful.” - “You sit at home,” said the cat, “in your dark-grey fur coat and long tail, and are filled with fancies, that’s because you do not go out in the daytime.” During the cat’s absence the mouse cleaned the house, and put it in order, but the greedy cat entirely emptied the pot of fat. “When everything is eaten up one has some peace,” said she to herself, and well filled and fat she did not return home till night. The mouse at once asked what name had been given to the third child. “It will not please you more than the others.” said the cat. “He is called All-gone.” - “All-gone,” cried the mouse, “that is the most suspicious name of all! I have never seen it in print. All-gone; what can that mean?” and she shook her head, curled herself up, and lay down to sleep.

From this time forth no one invited the cat to be godmother, but when the winter had come and there was no longer anything to be found outside, the mouse thought of their provision, and said, “Come, cat, we will go to our pot of fat which we have stored up for ourselves we shall enjoy that.” - “Yes,” answered the cat, “you will enjoy it as much as you would enjoy sticking that dainty tongue of yours out of the window.” They set out on their way, but when they arrived, the pot of fat certainly was still in its place, but it was empty. “Alas!” said the mouse, “Now I see what has happened, now it comes to light! You a true friend! You have devoured all when you were standing godmother. First top off, then half done, then… ” - “Will you hold your tongue,” cried the cat, “one word more, and I will eat you too.” - “All gone” was already on the poor mouse’s lips; scarcely had she spoken it before the cat sprang on her, seized her, and swallowed her down. Verily, that is the way of the world.



At the top level, this fairy tale is relatively clear. Cat and mouse are natural enemies. Therefore, the mouse should beware of the cat and do not trust her, because it is indeed the nature of the cat that she likes to eat mice. Even if the cat shows a good character and has the best intentions, as soon as her hunger awakes, there is no stopping her. This is the power of nature and it should be accepted in nature. So it does not make much sense to blame the cat. The mouse should be careful and stay away from the cat. This eating and being eaten is the normal case in nature. Although man tries to get out of this system, he too relies on natural food. And there is probably no food that other beings do not have to suffer from. Even our artificial chemistry, which should provide us with an independent solution here, is very troublesome to the natural ecosystem, drawing even greater circles of destruction than slaughtering a pig or harvesting a cabbage head. So if you look at it more deeply, then man is still a part of nature, even if he thinks he is something special, which of course every cat also does.

At a deeper level, this conflict of interest can also be transferred to our inside. Then you could consider the grey mouse as our reason and the cat as our passionate ego. The nature of the two can be studied very well on the basis of this fairy tale. There is, first of all, reason, which seeks the good and ideal, but in this house of our body usually has to live with or even wants to live with the ego. Of course, the ego wishes for a safe supply for the future and has little faith in others because it knows itself well enough. According to the motto: “What I think and do myself, I also trust the others to do!” So it decides for a place where it expects a certain security, namely the church. But it does not take long for egoistic desire to awaken and lie to our reason. And it often happens that the egotistical desire hides behind the special lie of helping others and doing them good. A strong reason would have the opportunity to tame the ego. But our little mouse lets itself be seduced, believes the lie and even enthuses about enjoyment. With this, reason first loses its ‘skin’. And every desire that is fulfilled, and every lie that is accepted, lets reason fade away, until it is swallowed up in the end by the greedy ego. That is how life goes...

Anyone who has already been able to observe this game inside will also know the deceptive sense of relief when a desire has been fulfilled in the short term. But this nice feeling is quickly gone, as we read in this fairy tale. And even if the pot is empty and you think that the desire will now keep quiet, it was not the solution, because quickly the greedy ego seeks the next object and snatches it...

If we really want to solve this problem of the cat and mouse inside, we should end up on the side of the mouse and strengthen the reason that it becomes steadfast and can no longer be overwhelmed by lies. This truthfulness is a really big challenge and, of course, starts with these very little lies that we allow ourselves daily to gain very small benefits. And that does not start with the ‘others’ out there, but in our own heads. In this regard, one could still think a lot about this inner dilemma of different interests. A similar story about the coexistence of cat and mouse can be found in the ancient Indian epic of the Mahabharata [[MHB 12.138](http://www.mahabharata.pushpak.de/buch12/mahabharata_b12k138.html)], where many of these aspects are discussed in more detail.

The altar could also be considered as one’s own body, with the lights of the five senses and the thinking as well as the cross symbolizing the Holy Trinity. Inside, both reason and ego live with the pot of accumulated merit, which the greedy ego likes to consume, ideally along with reason.

Maybe another thought about the trust that the egoistic cat has just in the church. Today, in the face of our fast-moving society, many people seek some support in religious communities. This is certainly good, so that the spiritual dimension in our lives gets not completely lost. However, it becomes problematic when it is above all the greedy ego, that seeks there for protection, confirmation and personal fulfilment. This can be seen in the many hundreds of religious groups who are hostile to each other. You join in a certain group, as if you were joining a party and fighting for political goals. Because this is typical of egoism, that of course you want to be something special, to stand out and look down to ‘others’. How can there be so many rock-solid differences, if the spiritual way is to dissolve the hardened superficial views and to find the deeper truth? This is mainly due to selfishness, because our ego is the most threatened by truth and then usually reacts like the cat at the end of our fairy tale: Snap, and truth and reason are gone in the greedy throat.