

## Editors' Note

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# Toward a Critical Theory of Animal Issues in Fiction

The presence of nonhuman animals in works of fiction vary: from children's story-books and young adult novels—which often feature them to the exclusion of human characters—and adult fiction—which occasionally gives them a titular role, as in Sterchi's *The cow* (1988) and Hoeg's *The woman and the ape* (1996) to a minimal presence—an occasional, tired, animal metaphor (take that, you dirty rat) or the inevitable, absent referent (the protagonist waved away the menu and ordered his usual steak, medium rare).

Whether they have a lead or two-bit part, a major presence or a presence striking by its absence, we can approach any work from a critical perspective in which the treatment of nonhuman animals is the operative analytic frame. No less than feminist, Marxist, post-colonial, structuralist, and formalist approaches, a literary criticism perspective on animal issues is a point of view, a form of consciousness, a way to read any work of fiction.

We offer this note to promote the development of a full-blown, animal-based interpretative theory. When

developing *Society & Animals* guidelines for contributors invited to submit a review of fiction involving nonhuman animals, we discovered (a) that we did not agree on what constitutes such a critical perspective and (b) that the literature articulating it is sparse and problematic.

As feminist, critical theory has discovered both the gross and subtle ways in which fiction has undermined the status of women, we expect to find that authors typically treat nonhuman animals in ways that are reductive and disrespectful of them. In part, this emerging literary theory, then, will consist of cataloguing and deconstructing those reductive moves. Many of the reductive moves are obvious—an animal or animal part is an instrument or resource for the use of humans.

However, some moves are more subtle, although no less pervasive. Consider an animal who is given a name, a character, and a rich consciousness. The being of the animal apparently is robust; on closer examination, however, the animal is reduced radically. Beyond a few species-typical behaviors and character traits, the latter our own projections (the sly fox)—the animal is absent, replaced by a human with fur.

Or, consider the use of animals as symbols of humans—whether the repeated use of a metaphor as a handle on a human character (bull or bear) or the extended trope of an animal who has more than a walk-on role. Many reviewers of fiction featuring animals are satisfied with explicating these symbols. However, a full-blown, animal-based, interpretative theory should examine the status of the use of nonhuman animals as symbols. Is this symbolic use, “figurative appropriation” (Malamud, 2003, pp. 4-5) or ideational exploitation (Scholtmeijer, 2000, p. 380) and, therefore, necessarily reductive or disrespectful? Is it at least anthropocentric, and is it not grist for this critical theory?

What are the alternatives to a symbolic role in particular and reductive roles in general? An animal could appear as him or herself—as an individual with some measure of autonomy, agency, voice, character, and as a member of a species with a nature that has certain typical capabilities and limitations.

Of course, there are problems with knowing an animal in this way but, like any other critical position, the degree to which an animal is presented true to himself or herself is an evaluative ideal. “We lack a language at present in which we can think about and represent animals to ourselves *as animals*,

in ways that are not metaphorical” (Fudge, 2002, p. 12). Yes, but that overstates the case. We all have some knowledge of the life of a nonhuman animal and—Nagel (1974) notwithstanding—some ability to empathize with the world-as-experienced by that animal.

Each in his or her own way, the three authors cited above as literary critics (Malamud, 2000; Scholtmeijer, 2000; Fudge, 2002) describe the two approaches we have suggested here:

1. Deconstruct reductive, disrespectful ways of presenting nonhuman animals; and
2. Evaluate the degree to which the author presents the animal “in itself,” both as an experiencing individual and as a species-typical way of living in the world.

As editors of this journal, which carries the subtitle, “Journal of Human-Animal Studies,” we add a third approach: that the critique include an analysis of human-animal relationships in the work at hand. Again, it is not enough to describe instances of such relationships. The critical task is to explicate the form of that relationship and to place it in the universe of possible relationships—from the animal as forgotten resource for a consumer (the steak, medium rare) to the animal as more or less equal partner in a relationship—the fruit of which is a common project, a shared world.

*Society & Animals* publishes reviews of fiction—including poems—emerging genres, and cinema that contribute to the emerging content area of Human-Animal Studies. We particularly are interested in texts that (a) give a more robust and respectful presentation of animals and (b) make observations about the history and development of the human-nonhuman animal bond. We invite suggestions of works to review.

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