ANIMALS AND ANTHROPOMORPHISM IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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Animals have long been popular subjects in literature, especially children's literature. However, they have often been treated anthropomorphically, to the dismay of biologists who feel that endowing animals with human emotions and motives presents misguiding pictures of such creatures and may lead children to false impressions and expectations of real life animals. After all, biologists could point to a period only a few hundred years ago when animals as well as men could be brought to trial for moral derelictions. A dog could be solemnly condemned for killing sheep, or a cat as the accessory to witchcraft. There are people who continue to hold a cat morally responsible for stalking birds and wolves for killing deer, as though these were decisions made by the individual creatures. One woman I know deeply disapproves of mourning doves because they make nests so shallow that their eggs are easily lost over the edge. Biologists argue that childrens' literature devoted to anthropomorphic creatures encourages the tendency to judge animals by human standards. Sometimes such judgments are legislated; laws require that the cat be belled and other laws promise a bounty for wolves or coyotes even in areas where they are no direct threat to domestic animals. In more peaceful settings a woman may be appalled that her cat doesn't recognize her own kitten of several years previous. The cat has failed to live up to the sentimental expectations of human motherhood.

Alternatively, many biologists feel that the "Bambi syndrome" resulting from anthropomorphic treatment of animals is dangerous, both to humans and to the animals, since most children (and many adults) come to view animals as cuddly, soft, friendly creatures which they can treat as pets. In reality, of course, even squirrels and rabbits can inflict severe wounds, and many animals carry lice, ticks, rabies and other diseases and parasites. Baby animals, especially, may be picked up and carried home as "pets," where they either succumb to improper care or become a nuisance and a hazard as they get older. The Bambi syndrome is also scored by wildlife biologists as a source of pressures against rational management of wildlife populations through hunting and trapping.

Despite such well-founded uneasiness by biologists, childrens' stories continue to abound with anthropomorphic animals. Snakes got a bad press in the Bible and no author seems to have tried to endear a snake to young readers. However spiders, mice, water rats and other unlikely small creatures have shared childrens' affections with kittens, dogs, horses, pigs, and such wild creatures as raccoons, deer, bears, and foxes. Anthropomorphism is too deeply embedded in our literature, and not only childrens' literature, to be easily eliminated even if it proved desirable to eliminate it.

Aesops *Fables* illustrates one use which has been made of anthropomorphism. The didactic stories provide a means of conveying both practical and moral judgments without pointing to specific people. The creatures in these stories talk as humans do and evince human emotions including regret in "The Sick Lion," a story in which other animals insult a dying lion who now wishes that he had treated them less arrogantly in the past. Vanity is castigated in "The Fox

and the Crow" in which a fox flatters a crow into singing and therefore dropping its food. The cautionary tales were intended for adults as well as children and adults were also the original audience for animal stories such as those collected by the brothers Grimm, as well as for the tales of Reynard the Fox. In fact, there was almost no literature designed exclusively for children until the 18th century. But the 19th century produced a flood of literature for the children of the increasingly literate and education-oriented middle class. Animal stories increased dramatically in the latter half of the century, and Magee (p. 221) has suggested a connection between the emergence of Darwinism and the increased interest in animals. However that may be, the production of animal stories for children has increased with the ensuing years. During 1980-81 over 1000 children's animal books were in print in America. The books exhibit degrees of anthropomorphism ranging from the almost totally anthropomorphic to the entirely realistic. In general, the books for younger children are the most anthropomorphic and are the most likely to continue the cautionary tradition begun by Aesop's *Fables*. The books for older children are the most realistic and are often designed to teach readers about the instincts, habits and life cycles of wild and domestic animals. Thus the books for older readers, at their best, serve to counter the possible misconceptions gained from early exposure to anthropomorphic tales.

Animal stories for children can be defended on the ground that they have positive impact on children's behavior. Pet stories bring out children's desire to nurture and protect, while the vulnerability of wild creatures encourages a sense of compassionate kinship. Since many animals, particularly the wild ones, are unfamiliar to young readers, giving them human characteristics can make them seem less alien (Markowsky, p. 460) and thus engage the reader's interest and sympathy. Moreover, "talking beast stories are perhaps the first kind of fantasy that younger children encounter" (Sutherland, p. 222). Anthropomorphic animal books may also be a child's introduction to humor in literature. Children too young to have seen any of the animals represented seem to be amused by pictures of animals wearing clothes, not because they know that animals don't wear clothes but because they are familiar with clothing on people and a kitten's face and paws peeking out of the garb they associate with themselves or their parents strikes them as funny. At a somewhat more sosphisticated level the discrepancy between the animal and its actions and clothes may be a source of humor. At a still higher level of sophistication the anthropomorphic animals can become caricatures of tradesmen, grumbling grandfathers, or fearful children. The child is amused by the recognizing the types while the text is simultaneously suggesting methods for dealing with such people.

Animal stories can be divided into three broad categories based on the degree of anthropomorphism present: 1) those in which animals behave like human beings; 2) those in which animals behave like animals except that they talk and may wear clothes; and 3) those in which they behave entirely like animals (Sutherland, p. 341). It has been suggested that these categories represent the chronology of a child's reading. However, adults also enjoy anthropomorphic animal tales, particularly in satire, and children of any age often enjoy both realistic and fanciful animal stories, alternately.

The three categories of animal stories can be illustrated best by examining one or two of the best known stories in each category.

In the category of complete anthropomorphism *Little Bear* and subsequent books in the series by Else Homelund Minarik are widely available in bookstores and libraries. Little Bear is a child with childlike feelings and experiences, with whom child readers can identify. He and his friends entertain themselves by trying to stop his hiccups. They discover their imaginative capacities

when he and Owl pretend that a log is their boat for a fishing expedition, and when they imagine that they find a mermaid in the river near where they are picnicking. Little Bear consciously plans his future—he will be a fisherman some day. He also learns to write a letter to his friend Emily who has gone away to school. Little Bear appears to be a biological bear—meaning that he has fur and looks like a bear, but he really is only a nominal bear. He lives in a house with furniture with father Bear, who wears suits, and mother Bear, who wears dresses and cooks dinner. Family relationships and the imaginative play of childhood form the basis of the stories.

A more complex story in which the characters are animals dressed and acting like human beings is the childhood classic, *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame. Each chapter tells a complete story of the four friends: reflective Mole, kindly Water Rat, shy Badger and rich, conceited, troublesome Toad. The characters assume quite different traits from those commonly associated with their species. Their thoughts, personalities and actions are clearly those of children rather than animals. When Mole was lost in the deep wood, Rat became alarmed. "The rat looked very grave, and stood deep in thought for a minute or two." He armed himself with pistols to look for his friend and as he passed through the wood, "wicked little faces . . . vanished immediately at the sight of the valorous animal." Rat brought "a fat, wicker luncheon basket" on a fishing expedition. When Rat offered to teach Mole to swim, "Mole was so touched by this kind manner of speaking that he had to brush away a tear or two." In a burst of creativity Rat composed poetry.

The friends and other creatures owned property that only humans have. Toad's house was grand, with stables, a boathouse, and a banquet hall. "Toad is rather rich, you know, and this is really one of the nicest houses in these parts, though we never admit as much to Toad." Toad prepared a caravan for his friends and himself so that they could travel.

The friends are overtly kind to each other in human manner. Toad, according to Rat, "is indeed the best of animals . . . [although] he is both boastful and conceited." Badger had a fire and a fine dinner prepared for his friends who had just come in from a frightening night in the deep wood. Toad loved cars, but was a careless driver so that Rat and Badger tried to figure out a way to keep him from being killed by accident.

The equally classic tale of *Winnie the Pooh,* while superficially belonging to the class of anthropomorphic animal tales, is technically a tale of anthropomorphic dolls, since these are stuffed toy animals and, unlike Little Bear, must first be endowed with life and only then with characteristics either bear-like or human.

The category of partially anthropomorphic stories is in some ways the most complex. The animals in such tales usually behave like animals except that they talk. They may also have some human characteristics which provide a familiar footing for the reader, but "the secret of the good 'dressed animal' is that it never loses its believability as an animal, even though it wears clothes and talks" (Sutherland, p. 97).

The stories which are partially anthropomorphic are those which are most altered by illustrations. "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" has been reprinted for a hundred years and in that time has had dozens of illustrators. The bears' house is more or less tree-like depending upon the illustrator's vision. The bears' beds may be nests of leaves or four posters. The chairs and the cooked porridge as well as the conversation make the story partly anthropomorphic, but as other household details and clothing are depicted by the illustrator the story can seem much more anthropomorphic than the text warrants. Southey's bears were still bears and Goldilocks prudently fled for her life. (I have heard rumors of a modern version of the story in which Goldilocks is invited

to stay for breakfast and accepts—an alteration which makes Southey's 'dressed animals' nearly the equivalent of Little Bear and his family.)

Peter, in Beatrix Potter's classic *Tale of Peter Rabbit* is another dressed animal. Although the animals wear clothes, talk and go to the market, they never lose their believability as animals. They live in a hole in the ground and eat what rabbits normally eat. Peter stole vegetables from a garden, which is what rabbits often do. When he was chased and again when he was lost, he was frightened, but no human motives or thoughts are attributed to him. He and his family continue to live rabbit-like lives despite their clothes and language. Death occurs, as it does in nature, but is treated in a matter of fact way. Children can identify with Peter, who is much like a child, except that his basic rabbit nature is not changed.

E. B. White's masterpiece, *Charlotte's Web* contains barnyard animals who look and act just like ordinary animals to everyone except the little girl, Fern, but who can communicate with each other remarkably. Wilbur, the runt pig who was raised on a doll bottle, is the focal point of the story. His banishment to the barnyard starts the amazing fantasy in which animals understand each other and are understood by Fern. Charlotte, the aloof, intelligent spider, feels sorry for Wilbur, who has been marked for butchering, and weaves messages into her webs which eventually save him. The fact that Charlotte can write and Wilbur can mourn his own demise mark the animals as having human characteristics. Wilbur is a child needing affection, "Wilbur didn't want food, he wanted love"; he is also a true pig who loves to roll in the muck, "So he pushed the straw aside and stretched out in the manure," and would love to be "in a forest . . . searching and sniffling along the ground, smelling, smelling, smelling." Charlotte lives like a spider, "I drink them—drink their blood. I love blood," yet feels emotions, as she said to Wilbur, "You're my best friend, and I think you're sensational." She was at once a believable spider and a feeling being, as she sat ". . . moodily eating a horsefly and thinking about the future." Templeton, the rat, ". . . had no morals, no conscience, no scruples . . ." He said of himself, "I prefer to spend my time eating, gnawing, spying, and hiding." He also took frequent trips to the dump. The animals, who remain true to the characteristic of their species (Charlotte dies after laying her eggs), speak and show emotion in a story that is a believable fantasy.

Partially anthropomorphic animals are human enough through their dress and speech to enable children to identify with them. Yet despite their appearance, each remains true to the basic biological pattern of his or her species.

The third category of animal stories is limited to tales in which animals both look and act like animals. However they often display characteristics which children admire in human beings. There is greater variety in these stories than in those in the other two categories. Realistic stories for young children are usually cheerful, while the tragedy which occurs in the lives of many animals is more often portrayed in the stories for older readers.

The primary criterion for realistic stories about animals is that the animals be portrayed objectively. If there is conjecture about motives it should agree with interpretations recorded by animal behaviorists. Sentimentality and melodrama should be used very sparingly.

The well known author, Marguerite Henry, specialized in horse stories. Her *Misty of Chincoteague* portrays the lives of two captured wild ponies, Misty and her mother Phantom. The story is realistic throughout. Both ponies act as ponies normally do. Phantom never lost her wildness although she had been captured and became well trained. Misty loved attention and did pony-like pranks to obtain it. As Misty gave the boy, Paul, a great swipe with her tongue,

"it was as if she had said, 'Why is everyone so quiet? I'm here! Me! Misty!' " Both ponies nuzzled for sugar and loved treats. Throughout the book when the animals are credited with emotions, it is clear that the interpretations are being made by people. During a hard rain after they had been caught, "Misty's head fell across Paul's lap, not because she wanted human comfort but because she was tired from the hard drive and the rain." As Phantom ran back to her island after being freed, she turned once to look back to her people. " 'Take good care of my baby,' she *seemed* to say. 'She belongs to the world of men, but I—I belong to the world of wild things!' " Motives are never imputed directly to the horses and the animals are never sentimentalized.

Realistic stories designed to teach children about pets and to counter the sentimentalized animals and the "dressed animals" they may have encountered in earlier reading have begun to appear in recent years. Stories of children overreacting to their pets and their assumed needs are among the fine realistic stories to be published in the past decade. None of these has the classic reputation of the books previously discussed, but they deserve mention because they are representative of a modern approach to animal stories. . . . A boy believes that a baby bird he has rescued needs help in learning to fly in the book *Bird* by Liesel Skorpen. . . . Dick Gackenrack's *Do You Love Me?* is the story of a small boy with no playmates who accidentally kills a bird he had found by too much fondling. He later discovers that his new puppy enjoys cuddling as much as he does. *Leave Herbert Alone,* by Alma Whitney, is amusing in a wry way. A girl is so eager to show her love for a cat that she frightens him and must learn gentler methods in her approach.

Perhaps the problem of anthropomorphism in childrens' animal stories is less important than it has been made to appear. Certainly anthropomorphism has literary and practical virtues of engaging the attention of young readers, serving as a vehicle for slightly veiled teaching about social relationships, and introducing young readers to fantasy and to humor in books. Moreover, there are so many excellent animal stories in print that as readers become older they will inevitably be exposed to realistic animal stories, some of them deliberately designed to correct more fanciful representations of animals and many of them designed to provide biologically accurate accounts of the lives of wild and domestic animals.

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