Anja Höing

Reading Divine Nature

Religion and Nature in English Animal Stories

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1. Introduction

> When we follow the white rabbit, we don't simply fall down a hole. We fall down a hole into multiple understandings of why we think we are even following a rabbit as well as multiple perspectives on the rabbit we thought we were following. (C. Adams xi)

Carol J. Adams uses this example to introduce Steve Baker's *Picturing the Beast*, but she could just as well refer to the extraordinary complexity of human-animal relations in general. Throughout history animals have fascinated and influenced humans, not only as wild creatures, but also as pets and working animals, or as metaphorical mirrors of humans. "Central to beliefs and myths, as emblems of the force of nature permeating the surrounding world" (Deering and Blanco viii), animals have left their impacts on daily life, on folk tales and song, on art, and, of course, on literature. To fiction in particular animals prove a never-ceasing inspiration "throughout all the known cultures of the world" (Pollock and Rainwater 1), as they can serve both as mirrors reflecting the human self of the reader and as "others" operating in non-human worlds fiercely different from, but at the same time strikingly similar to the reader's own one. The unique non-human character of these worlds allows broaching issues difficult to address in literature centring on the worlds of human experience.

"Western society", as Steve Baker states, "continues to draw heavily on symbolic ideas involving animals and … the immediate subject of those ideas is frequently not the animal itself, but rather a human subject drawing on animal imagery to make a statement about human identity" (S. Baker xxxv). According to Jim Dwyer "there is a long literary tradition of using anthropomorphized animals to speak to explore and explain that odd species known as *Homo sapiens*" (Dwyer 43). Thus, a first layer of meaning to literary animals is their function as an "image" (S. Baker xxxv) in human contexts – one might only think of Aesop's fables or George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. This image function is not only a synchronic one, mirroring contemporary society structures. As Donna Haraway states, animals also "show people their origin, and therefore their prerational, premanagement, precultural essence" (*Simiens* 11).

Literary animals have multiple layers of meaning. Basically, there are two ways of relating to them: similarity and difference. In their "ability to be both like us, and not like us" (DeMello 4), animals offer a "paradox of … same and different" (Fudge 7). This dichotomy can be connected to metaphorical and metonymical elements in storytelling:

> [Die Aussage einer Tiergeschichte] verbindet vielfach metonymische Elemente (die sich auf die Tierwelt beziehen, über die die Leser belehrt werden) mit metaphorischen (bei denen Charakter und Verhalten der Tiere für menschliche Eigenarten stehen), wobei jeweils der eine oder andere Aspekt im Vordergrund stehen kann. (Kullmann, *Kinder- und Jugendliteratur* 172)

Metonymically, talking animals might teach a reader about the migratory routes of sea lions, the organisation of an ant colony or the patterns of movement natural to rabbits.

Metaphorical functions are equally varied.[1] In *In Defense of Fantasy*, Ann Swinfen provides a list of different metaphoric functions of literary animals:

> Animal tales can be used to explore the whole range of human character and relationships, by examining human society from the point of view of the animal, or animal metamorphosis may provide an enhanced vision of primary world reality; or the search may be widened to explore not only the individual but the community – how it is created, how it operates, what are its philosophical, religious and political assumptions – through the medium of the animal community. (12)

The list appears extensive, yet one could add at least one further important category. Literary animals also often appear as images for abstract concepts, especially ones our culture perceives as specifically non-human such as "nature" as opposed to "culture", or, as this study will argue, an "animal mind" as an alternative ideological stance towards the connections between the self and the environment.

Metaphorical and metonymical functions are not opposed. As Cosslett states, "animal characters … may be metaphors for slaves, women and children, but they are also metaphors for animals" (182), i.e. teach the reader about the suffering of real-life animals in a metonymical way. Generally, talking-animal stories do not do the one or the other, but both at the same time. According to Flynn, it is this "intermingling of human and 'animal' meanings" (421) that talking-animal stories derive much of their "energy" from (421). But, as Carol J. Adams remarks, an animal is not a "blank screen upon which we project our issues" (C. Adams xi). It contains meaning of its own. Animal imagery thus always operates in a field of tension between various imagery functions of the literary animal (regardless of these functions being metaphorical or metonymical), the author's and the reader's concepts of the real-world animal used as template for the images (which might be distinctly different from each other), and the biological reality of the real-world animal (which might be an altogether different thing still, and moreover one we do not have access to).

This study aims to discuss to which extend and to which effects these dimensions of the literary animal meet. Talking animals are an especially rewarding field to analyse such divergent layers of meaning and their interconnections, as the talking-animal story deliberately transgresses not only "species boundaries" in general, but what is commonly referred to as the "human-animal border" (Clark 186).[2] Talking-animal stories, often somewhat derogatively referred to as animal fantasy (Blount 18), deal with animals anthropomorphised to various degrees. Predominantly, though not exclusively

1 Garrard (2012) also introduces metaphor and metonymy as categories to analyse "the play of likeness and difference in the relationship between humans and animals" (153) yet argues that any understanding of animals "in human terms" (154) is only possible "once contiguity (metonymy) is granted" (154). This renders his typology rather difficult to apply to stories which build on anthropomorphism.

2 The "human-animal border" is by no means a fixed concept, but highly contested in both Animal Studies and philosophy. For a concise summary of the debate and its main protagonists, please refer to the Chapter "Animals" in Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism*.

these stories are written for children. Karin Lesnik-Oberstein even estimates that "at least two-thirds of [children's books] are in some form or other linked with nature and the environment, and – specifically and most importantly – with animals" (208).

Although both setting and plot of talking-animal stories vary widely, all of them present animals not as fables or folklore do as embodiment of human character flaws (Swinfen 12), but as individual characters living either in human surroundings (an example for such a story would be *A Bear Called Paddington*) or in more or less complex animal societies (e.g. Richard Adams's *Watership Down*). Especially talking-animal stories of the latter kind provide a perfect background for authors to discuss human society and its shortcomings on a metaphorical basis, without the limitations and pitfalls of a realistic human cultural background, while at the same time they allow to address issues real animals struggle against.

Talking-animal stories are almost as vast a field as animal fiction itself. "Even within the bounds of contemporary Western culture", as Baker states, "the talking animal story has many different forms, different purposes and different audiences" (S. Baker 125). Yet, research focuses on those stories placing talking animals in a human society setting.[3] This focus is so strong that even Baker, while otherwise convincingly discussing visualisations of talking animals, remarks that "it goes without saying that talking animals lead thoroughly humanized lives. This is why they wear clothes, why they drive or ride in cars, why they eat the food they do" (S. Baker 152). This claim has been justly challenged by Cosslett (2006) as it does not meet the facts in her field of study, talking-animal stories of the 18th and 19th century (182). The same is true for many talking-animal stories of the late 20th and early 21st century, in which animals are often humanized to the degree that they talk and live in complex societies with sometimes even a religious background, but they do not thoroughly adhere to human culture. Most often, animals in these stories live in their natural surroundings, eat their natural diet, walk on all fours and do not even know the concept of clothes. Manlove writes that in this kind of talking-animal story the reader enters "alien psychological landscapes" (101) in which "the animals may talk, but they are no longer proxy humans" (101). These characters form an entirely new "species" of talking animals.

Talking-animal stories such as these offer new research perspectives. They can be read as metaphoric not just of human cultural structures but of abstract concepts such as ecology or nature, while at the same time there always is a metonymical undercurrent in which the reader is led to see these literary animals as images of "real" animals in need of conservationist or environmental action. Fictional animal societies often share a form of religious belief and worship. This study seeks to illuminate the ways in which religion and nature interweave or even fuse in talking-animal stories, and in doing so create new modes of relating to the non-human environment, but also

3 See, for example, the corpora of talking-animal stories used in Margaret Blount's *Animal Land*, Tess Cosslett's *Talking Animals in British Children's Fiction* or Catherine Elick's *Talking Animals in Children's Fiction.*

reinforce stereotypical notions of the human-animal border or of "natural balance", sometimes to the point of undermining even explicitly voiced environmental agendas.

Such stereotypical notions derive from a vast spectrum of pre-conceptions, but most prominently from two conceptual debates on the "nature" of nature and the quality of the human-animal border. There are two basic thought traditions that seek to explain the mechanisms governing the natural world in general. The one describes nature as static, the other highlights change and development. The idea of nature as static has a long tradition in cultural history. Both Christian doctrine and ancient Greek philosophy propose basically static models of the natural world (Mayr 74), although these models differ in kind.[4] While stasis was dogmatic to Christianity, the ancient Greek world view allowed for processes and changes inside a static general framework. The philosophy of Heraclitus, for example, taught that all existence is governed by eternal change ("Herakleitos", *Der Kleine Pauly*). Heraclitus's saying "No man ever steps in the same river twice" has become proverbial. Therefore, nowadays, he is often described as a "Vordenker" (Storch, Welsch, and Wink 2) of modern evolutionary biology. Aristotle, too, understood natural phenomena as processes (Mayr 73-74). While the Christian framework prevailed in the Middle Ages, Renaissance philosophers and authors re-explored Ancient Greek concepts of the natural world. Enlightenment philosophers, too, made use of the Greek philosophers' concepts of nature, but did not contribute any new conceptual developments (Storch, Welsch, and Wink 4). There were no groundbreaking conceptual changes until Charles Darwin published his evolutionary theory which revolutionised biology through providing shared framework for all biological disciplines. With regard to concepts of nature, the most important facet of the evolutionary theory is that it is the first theory of nature to entirely dismiss a static framework and instead propose a basis of continuous development.

Nonetheless, many everyday concepts of the natural world remain rooted in the idea of stasis. This is especially true with regard to popular concepts of ecology. In contemporary discourse on the environment in particular one can often see at work a myth Colleen D. Clements refers to as the "fairy tale ideal of an ecosystem of achieved and unchanging harmony" (136). In this myth, so Clements

> it is implied that, once a delicate balance has been achieved, once a system has successfully achieved homeostasis, what we will have is a harmonious, benign bit of complex machinery recalling that awesome construction, the Clockwork Universe, in which everything has its appointed place and from which, for all practical purposes, change has been eliminated. (136)

This myth is generally dated back to a model of Ecosystem succession proposed by Frederic Clements in 1916. The Clementsian model is also referred to as the *mono-climax hypothesis*, as "the biotic community, according to Clements, is a highly integrated superorganism that develops through a process of succession to a single end

4 For a comprehensive discussion of these world views, the reader may refer to Ernst Mayr, *Die Entwicklung der biologischen Gedankenwelt: Vielfalt, Evolution und Vererbung*, 70-108.