

Animal Rights and The Novel

BY ALYSON FORTOWSKY

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Outline

Empathy and fiction

Interpretation

Modernist novels

- The Jungle

Postmodernist novels

- Oryx and Crake
- History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters
- Disgrace

Reading list

Empathy and Fiction

WHY NOVELS?

Fiction as a rehearsal

Keith Oatley (psychologist) "uses the metaphor of a flight simulator to explain fiction's role in our lives: Just as the flight simulator allows the pilot-in-training to quickly and safely encounter all sorts of contingencies that might happen in the air, so fiction allows us to experience emotions in a safe place, training us to understand ourselves and others." (Taylor)

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/books-and-media/why-fiction-is-good-for-you/article593693/>

Interpretation

IS THERE A PLACE FOR VIOLENCE IN ART?

A big question:

Can art that portrays violence be used to promote empathy?

Interpretation

The author of a novel is not the narrator!

Art can promote empathy through various interpretation: examining the biases of the characters, examining the technical choices of the author (repetitions, motifs , symbols), recognizing our own biases as readers.

Expansion of perspective.

Picture: What the author
meant/what your English
teacher thought they
meant (student thinks
teacher's interpretation is
not supported by text).

Modernism

DESCARTES AND RESPONSE

Descartes (1596-1650)

"[A] rethinking of human nature occurred in reference to animality." (Armstrong 6)

Animals in modernity:

1. Subjects to be studied.
2. Beings whose lack of mental discipline **contrasted with** humankind's rationality.
3. **Conceptual/symbolic.**

Painting: Moby Dick.
Negative aspects of
humanity projected onto
the whale.

Image: Gulliver's Travels
Yahoos and Houyhnhnms:
reversal of human and
animals to reflect on
humanity's lack of reason.

Available here:

[http://www.ufpi.br/nuplid/
images/stories/Ilustracoes/
Houyhnhnms.jpg](http://www.ufpi.br/nuplid/images/stories/Ilustracoes/Houyhnhnms.jpg)

Modern animals as symbols

Treated "as screens for the projection of human interests and meanings." (Armstrong 2)

Cover Image: Upton
Sinclair's The Jungle

Muckraking

Silent Spring

Who Killed the Electric Car?

Food, Inc.

Literature vs. propaganda

"Very few works of literature have actually changed the course of history, and critics have usually been suspicious of those that did. Compared to propaganda, literature usually influences life in subtle and indirect ways." (Dickstein v, italics mine)

The Pure Food and Drug Act (Wiley Act) 1906

First of more than 200 food and drug consumer safety laws now passed in the US (FDA).

Setting

Chicago stockyards.

By 1900, stockyard was 475 acres (50 miles of road, 130 miles of railway track) (Chicago Historical Society).

Photos of Chicago
stockyards: available at
[http://www.chicagohs.org/
history/stockyard/stock1.ht
ml](http://www.chicagohs.org/history/stockyard/stock1.html)

*Livestock pens comprised
approximately 40 acres of
the stock yards, 1880. (Chicago
Historical Society)*

Photo of present-day
slaughterhouse for
comparison (actually used
to sell slaughterhouse
floors!). Available at
[http://hps1987.homestead.com/files/slaughterhouse.j](http://hps1987.homestead.com/files/slaughterhouse.jpg)

[pg](#)

Characters:

Jurgis Rudkus: Lithuanian immigrant.

Workers are mostly Eastern European immigrants.

Constantly taken advantage of by landlords, banks, real estate agents, merchants, etc.

Sinclair's point about slavery:

Wage slaves.

Cheap labour plentiful.

Injuries and illness.

Weak or no unions.

(The author himself uses characters instrumentally!)

Another type of enslavement:

"Each one of these hogs was a separate creature. Some were white hogs, some were black, some were brown, some were spotted, some were old, some young ... And each of them had an individuality of his own, a will of his own, a hope and a heart's desire; each was full of self-confidence, of self-importance, and a sense of dignity. And ... the while a black shadow hung over him and a horrid Fate waited." (37)

Sinclair's verdict:

"I aimed at the public's heart, and by accident I hit it in the stomach."

Postmodernism

ANIMALS AS OTHER



Awareness of subjectivity

"[T]he living beings included when we use the generalization 'animals,' however it is defined, can be startlingly different from one another. [Many ...] are so complicated and enigmatic mentally and socially that we may not have the ability to understand their lives well." (Waldau 3)

Picture: cover of Julian
Barnes' History of the
World in 10 1/2 Chapters

The Woodworm

If God gave us animals for human use, why does the woodworm exist?

Image: wood eaten by woodworms.

My notes on the book:

- Chapter 3
- A lawyer representing the people of a small French town argues against a lawyer representing the woodworms who have destroyed their church (1520).
- Based on actual historical court cases.
- Cited: *The Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals*, 1906, E.P. Evans.

CHAPTER 1: WOODWORM NARRATOR.

Woodworms eat their way through the whole book. They eat our historical documents, our houses, our churches, our furniture. And yet we coexist with them, though they serve no functional use to us and their interests are in direct opposition to our own. Suggestion: the interpretation that God put animals on Earth solely for human use is brought into question by the existence of species like woodworms, and documented court cases like the one where the woodworms ate the bishop's chair show that historically, the Catholic Church occasionally had to face this philosophical problem. Barnes turns it on his head. He shows that this is a "problem" only from the human viewpoint by giving the woodworm a voice.

GREAT WAY IN TO DISCUSSIONS ABOUT SILENCE/ABSENCE OF NON-HUMAN ANIMALS.

Paradox:

Animals cannot speak human languages.

Any non-human narrator speaking a human language is STILL a projection of human traits onto animals (modernist-style).

Cover Image: Margaret
Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*

Artist's image of pigoons:
[http://www.perdador.com/fall
06/oryx&crake01.jpg](http://www.perdador.com/fall06/oryx&crake01.jpg)

Artist's image of ChickieNob
(genetically modified chicken
without CNS or ability to
move).

Satire

Animals still used as symbols-- but so are human characters.

Cover image: Milan Kundera's
Unbearable Lightness of Being

"Humanity's true moral test, its fundamental test, consists of its attitude towards those who are at its mercy: animals. And in this respect humankind has suffered a fundamental debacle, a debacle so fundamental that all others stem from it." (289)

"The very beginning of Genesis tells us that God created man in order to give him dominion over fish and fowl and all creatures. Of course, Genesis was written by a man, not a horse. There is no certainty that God actually did grant dominion over other creatures. What seems more likely, in fact, is that man invented God to sanctify the dominion that he had usurped for himself over the cow and the horse. (286)

Still from film: Karenin the
dog. Animal character with his
own motivations and
interests.

To conclude, for now:

Even when non-human animals are used symbolically in novels to comment on human nature, this symbolic use still often serves to bring the human/animal dichotomy into question.

For this reason, well-written novels depicting violence can be useful for opening up discussion for a non-violent cause.

Postmodern novelists still use animals symbolically, but have expanded their use to speculate on the motivations/interests/voices of animals.

Reading List (Updated)

Note that some of these titles portray violence against animals.

Adams, Richard. *Watership Down*.

Atwood, Margaret. *Oryx and Crake*.

---. *The Year of the Flood*.

Camus, Albert. *The Plague*.

Crichton, Michael. *Jurassic Park*.

Coetzee, J.M. *Disgrace*.

---. *Elizabeth Costello*.

Engel, Marian. *Bear*.

Kafka, Franz. *The Metamorphosis*.

Kundera, Milan. *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

Garcia Marquez, Gabriel. *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*.

Reading List Cont'd

O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*.

Orwell, George. *Animal Farm*.

Pullman, Philip. *His Dark Materials*.

Roth, Philip. *The Human Stain*.

Safran Foer, Jonathan. *Everything is Illuminated*.

Sinclair, Upton. *The Jungle*.

Swift, Jonathan. *Gulliver's Travels*.

Wells, H.G. *The Time Machine*.

White, E.B. *Charlotte's Web*.

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