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Ethical Functions of Anthropomorphic Children's Literature and the Child-Animal Bond

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Abstract

Anthropomorphism has been a constant and enduring element of children's media for the past 100 years. Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*, a classic illustration of how anthropomorphism is employed in children's literature to exclude age, gender, and race from a work, is credited with starting this practice. Examining how *The Wind in the Willows* and the anthropomorphic children's fiction genre are able to communicate complex moral and ideological concepts to a young audience is my mission. Additionally, I have examine how children's unique and dynamic relationship with animals, as well as how often they typically consume that media, contribute to the success of these themes' translation.

Keywords: Children literature, anthropomorphism, animals, children, ethical.

Introduction

How Children View Animals

In order to better understand the literary function of anthropomorphic characters, one must first examine the psychological underpinnings of the relationship between children and animals, as it is highly unique and much more fully-formed than common thought suggests. This is a relationship that is typically glossed over with words like "innocence," and "simplicity" rather than with critical analysis or use of a child's perspective.

In Burke and Copenhaver's *Animals as People in Children's Literature* the child-animal relationship is smoothed over simply by saying "Most children are curious about and fond of animals" (Burke, Copenhaver, 206). How could one aiming to understand the function of animals in children's literature make such a sweeping generalization? Indeed I find this to be a reductive view that discredits the emotional intelligence of both the children and the animals at stake.

Applications to Children's Literature

Children's literature is inherently rooted in moral and cultural values. These books often have an explicit lesson and conclude with a "teachable moment" that is meant to enrich a child's understanding of the world; whether that understanding be about manners (i.e. *The Berenstain Bears*) or gay relationships (i.e. *And Tango Makes Three*). These moral moments are evident regardless of whether or not the

title is rooted in anthropomorphism. Yet, knowing that children possess such a unique understanding of animals and experience relationships with them on a different level than they do with humans, one must consider the implications and methodology of an anthropomorphic character relaying ethical messages about the human world.

Kenneth Grahame's 1908 children's novel *The Wind in the Willows* paints a portrait of simplistic, pastoral life through the eyes of a mole and various animal friends. Yet the underpinnings of the text are the complex concepts of humility, forgiveness, consequences, and nontraditional family dynamics. Many of the themes could be considered native to the lifestyle of early 20th century England, yet I argue that the anthropomorphic aspects of the text create much more universal and transcendent claims. Specifically, Grahame's band of characters tell a story about the splendor of childhood railing against the oppression of adulthood, that is in many ways void of race, gender, and age.

The central characters of *The Wind in the Willows* are a mole, a water vole, a badger, and a toad. They are referred to as the Mole, the Rat, the Badger, and Mr. Toad, respectively. When addressing each other, the articles are dropped, i.e. "Good morning, Rat!" This naming technique essentially establishes each character as a blank slate. Nothing about their names indicates status, cultural or racial origins, or even gender. The one exception being Mr. Toad, whose honorific is most likely

actually a negative trait, meant to highlight his foppishness and alienation from young children readers.

This same technique would not function for human characters in the same way. A novel could not retain its integrity with characters constantly being referred to as “Boy” or “Girl,” as more definitive traits would be required as the cast of characters expanded. Though it appears simplistic to refer to a character simply as “Rat” for 250 pages of text, this lack of a nominally indicated identity creates much broader potential within each individual character.

There is also the matter of variety among the animal characters. None of the main characters are of the same species, yet this difference is never touched upon in a way that is racially coded. Indeed, it is distinguished that the characters appear physically different, but the true distinguishing factor from character to character is simply personality traits. Towards the end of the story, one might presume that the weasels who have taken over Toad Hall are representative of a specific antagonistic group, but Rat earlier establishes in the narrative that “Weasels--and stoats...and so on. They’re all right in a way--I’m very good friends with them.”

The Mole then follows, thinking “that it is quite against animal etiquette to dwell on possible trouble ahead, or even allude to it” (Grahame 11). Here, the Mole is refusing to speculate on the nature of another kind of animal. It is simply against the rules of animal society to make broad generalizations; thus ushering out the potential for any kind of racially-biased dialogue among different kinds of animals. A child reader is encouraged not to be critical or have presumptions about those visually different from themselves.

Grahame further prevents the presence of stereotypes by not attributing specific characteristics to certain animal species. Each animal is regarded as an individual as opposed to an offshoot of a group. There’s the “wise old Badger,” “clever, intelligent Rat,” and “sensible Mole,” and of course the “popular and handsome Toad,” (Grahame, 142-3). These are characteristics not necessarily associated with the particular species in question, but indicative of individual personalities and selves that are able to exist communally and collaboratively.

The greatest line of division is not between animal species, but between animals and humans, with animals representing the splendor of nature and the simple comforts of home, and humans representing corruption and industry. The realm of nature is representative of a carefree and simplistic childhood, while the human world with all its “horrid machines, clinking around the fields” is a form of industrialized and joyless adulthood (Grahame, 167). This helps establish that the reader is not meant to interpret the animal society as a mere stand-in for our own world--this is a world that exists separately but within the same realm as humankind. There are parallels to human society--the animals wear clothes, live in furnished homes, and in the case of Mr. Toad, even drive cars--but these parallels merely make the world understandable and recognizable to the human reader. Once a human can identify themselves in this world, they realize the parallels come to a sharp end and will quickly observe that the way of life in the animal world is entirely different.

There is also acknowledgment of the dangerous ways in which humans have power over animals. In Chapter 5, the Mole and the Rat are walking along on a snowy evening when they peer into the window of a human home. “Close against the white blind hung a bird cage, clearly silhouetted, every wire, perch, and appurtenance distinct and recognizable, even

yesterday’s dulled lump of sugar.” The observation extends for another half-a-page and is accompanied by one of the book’s many illustrations, showing clearly the caged bird with the Mole and the Rat gazing up at it in wonder (Grahame, 84). In Chapter 8, the gaoler’s daughter helps Mr. Toad escape from prison because she is “particularly fond of animals” (Grahame, 143). She inquires about Mr. Toad’s animal-world, but does not “say she was fond of animals as *pets*, because she had the sense that Toad would be extremely offended” (Grahame, 147). These examples both address the ways in which humans have power over animals, and thus the ways in which adults restrict the freedoms of children. Burke and Greenwood address this pre-20th century perspective on youth in their discussion of the evolution of children’s literature: “Children were dressed in the adult clothes of their social class soon after they left their cradles. They were treated as “short adults” with responsibilities...” Much like a caged bird or jailed toad kept from their tendencies towards the natural world, “...children had few rights, privileges, or entitlements to happiness of their own” (Burke, Greenwood, 208).

One of the central ways in which the animal way of life differs is the non-traditional, communal lifestyle the animals participate in. Each of the main animals lives independently, with no mention of family or other relations. Rather than attempting to construct a typical nuclear family, the animals craft their own form of family through a wealth of hospitality. Numerous extended passages focus on descriptions of meals shared and stories told, and it is through these activities that the bonds of love are formed. Nothing about these activities require formality or grandeur--and in fact the case appears to be just the opposite. Humility and simplicity are both key in order to connect with others, but who those others are irrelevant. By displaying unorthodox familial dynamics of love, Grahame is subverting the traditional conception of a nuclear family and the patriarchal gender roles associated with that conception. Because of this unorthodox family unit, the characters can better express themselves emotionally and support each other without the hindrance of power structures. Though the main characters of the story are explicitly male, I would argue that none of the characters explicitly fall into stereotypical gender roles. One of the ways in which the animals subvert their maleness is through their very open emotional expression. Throughout the tale, the animals openly weep and sob for different reasons. In Chapter 5, the Mole picks up the scent of his old dwelling place, but the impending snow means he cannot follow the trail and revisit his old home. This pains him greatly until he can take it no more: “...poor Mole...cried freely and helplessly and openly.” Rather than attempt to subdue him, the Rat gives the Mole emotional space: “The Rat...dismayed...did not dare to speak for a while. At least he said, very quietly and sympathetically, ‘What is it, old fellow?’” (Grahame,89). Later, in Chapter 9, the Rat is overwhelmed with emotion after hearing the tale of another seafaring rat. He hardly has the words to express himself, and the Mole brings his friend a pencil and paper. “‘It’s been quite a long time since you did any poetry,’ he remarked. ‘You might have a try at it this evening, instead of--well, brooding over things so much. I’ve an idea that you’ll feel a lot better when you’ve got something jotted down--if it’s only just the rhymes’” (Grahame, 188).

These two examples illustrate the ways in which emotional openness and expression are encouraged among the male animals and thus subverts the traditional concept of stoic, hyper masculinity. One need not feel they can express

themselves openly, or displace their emotions into the creation of art.

The overall language of *The Wind in the Willows* is dynamic in its shifting nature. Sentences range in complexity from “So he scraped and scratched and scabbled and scrooged...” (Grahame, 2), to “Purple loosestrife arrived early, shaking luxuriant tangled locks along the edge of the mirror whence its own face laughed back at it” (Grahame, 45). The first sentence a clear onomatopoeic delight, and the second a lush description of the natural world. Grahame later makes it quite explicit that there is no one correct way of speaking the English language. In Chapter 11, while preparing for the raid of Toad Hall, Toad cries “I’ll learn em to steal my house!” which prompts Rat to correct his grammar, saying, “It’s not good English.” Badger then quickly jumps in to Toad’s defense, saying, “What are you always nagging Toad for? What’s the matter with his English? It’s the same what I use myself, and if it’s good enough for me, it ought to be good enough for you!” (Grahame, 233-4). Thus peeling back yet another layer of the way adult society impinges upon childhood. This critique would not be as effective were it not for the anthropomorphism present, as the anthropomorphism has broken down the power structures of race, class, and gender, so that an egalitarian and balanced critique can be presented.

Conclusion

In *Animals as People in Children’s Literature*, Burke and Copenhaver chart the ways in which animals have been used throughout the history of children’s literature for the purpose of conveying moral and ethical lessons (touching on everything from ecology to gang violence) through an alternative guise. They refer to the use of animals as “role-playing” and as a function that gives children space to cope with the relation of the moral message to their own universes (Burke, Copenhaver, 211-2).

Children clearly form incredibly special bonds with animals, as evidenced in Becky Tipper’s study. One could infer that this bond then translates into the high amount of animal related media that children consume. As children are prone to seeing animals as friends and peers, that media can be incredibly impactful in terms of teaching children about difficult or complex subjects that might not be as explicitly clear in the “human world.”

The effectiveness of anthropomorphism seems specific to media targeted towards children, as media targeted towards adults is far more likely to write off animals as a gimmick. Again, this is likely based in the very powerful bond between children and animals and the reluctance of adults to admit, both internally and externally, the same bond.

Kenneth Grahame’s novel *The Wind in the Willows* is a classic example of the anthropomorphic children’s novel and the ways in which the anthropomorphism present has the capacity to transcend the confines of gender, race, and family structures. This creates a sort of “safe space” for the child mind in which they are respected as the recipients of complex ideas, and those thoughts are translated to them by way of animals--someone they could respect as a peer--as opposed to an adult seemingly talking down to them about topics potentially out of a child’s intellectual grasp. The receipt of ideas through an anthropomorphic lens helps bridge gaps, connect ideas, and affirm ethics in children that would likely not succeed in the same way without the help of animals.

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