

Harry Potter and “The Question of the Animal”

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Shapiro and Copeland call for the development of a literary criticism that entails “a critical perspective in which the treatment of nonhuman animals is the operative analytic frame.”² This paper argues that, to be relevant, a nonhuman animal-centred literary criticism must pay particular attention to how animal others are represented in contemporary texts that are considered to be successful, due to either critical acclaim or popular appeal. Critiquing such texts can then lead to an exploration of the discursive strategies currently active that effectively *naturalize* certain relationships with, attitudes to and treatment of nonhuman animals. Once these strategies have been identified these fictive relationships, attitudes and treatment can then be examined to see how they reflect or challenge prevailing norms. While all representations are of interest, if there are any sections of text that show evidence of a disjunction between the textual representation of these relationships, attitudes and treatment and contemporary cultural practices, these spaces of apparent contradiction allow for further investigation of how apparently successful strategies *naturalize* these representations and, therefore, have the potential to effectively reduce reader concern.

Adopting this approach to analysis, it is argued, has the ability to centre attention on fictive “animals” and how they are represented in relation to “animal” issues rather than, as in a humanist approach to the text, “the human condition”. Because these representations can be compared to current cultural practices associated with animal others, such an analytic approach works to facilitate spaces to reflect on the significance of such representations for the lives of actual nonhuman animals.

The phenomenal success of the *Harry Potter* series strongly indicates that the representation of nonhuman animals within the narrative has been embraced enthusiastically by the majority of the readership. Therefore, the discursive strategies used to construct these representations can also be considered to be very successful. Though it may be true that none of the characters of the nonhuman animals in any of the seven books of the series are ever fully developed, it would be wrong to overlook the central role that the representation of nonhuman animals plays in helping to establish not only the genre of the text but also the identities of the magical world and of the wizards and witches who inhabit that world. The various representations of the presence of nonhuman animals in this one series also make it possible to consider many issues to do with nonhuman animals, including their welfare and rights, treatment in science and agriculture and as food and “pets”.

This paper deals with how “pets” are represented by examining three nonhuman/human animal relationships within the series: Hedwig and Harry Potter, Mrs. Norris and Argus Filch, and Nagini and Voldemort. “Pets” have a seminal role in many Australian households with at least one companion animal living in the majority of homes. The care taken of these family members is reflected in the growth of a “pet” care industry that is worth many billions of dollars a year, while the human health benefits of sharing your life with an animal other are often touted. “Pet” owners are also conventionally seen as friendlier and happier people. “Pets”, it seems, are good for the economy and good for our health³ and, as such, “pet” ownership is viewed in a very positive light in contemporary Australia.

This understanding of the benefits of “pets” seems to be reflected in the *Harry Potter* series, when it is revealed that students attending Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry are allowed to bring a nonhuman companion to school with them. Hedwig the owl is given to Harry Potter as a birthday present and their relationship is represented as close. Hedwig is positioned as very independent and possessing agency: “Hedwig swooping in and out of the open window as she pleased,”⁴ however, she also fetches and carries for Harry without question and is always aware, through some unexplained sense, where to deliver his messages: “Harry’s owl had never yet failed to deliver a letter to anyone, even without an address.”⁵ Hedwig also always knows where Harry is or will be. Even when Harry abruptly leaves the Dursley’s house while she is away, as he does in the third book, Hedwig arrives at the *Leaky Cauldron* five minutes after Harry steps off the Knight Bus. Hedwig not only delivers messages, she is capable of carrying out other instructions, such as in book five when she pecks Hermione and Ron, at Harry’s command, until they write long letters that answer Harry’s many questions. However, although Hedwig seems to have some form of psychic connection with Harry, this understanding is not represented as being reciprocal. On occasions throughout the series Harry does not know where Hedwig is and he does not always understand what message she is trying to communicate to him. Therefore, while the reader is encouraged to understand that they are emotionally close, their relationship would still best be described as a traditional one of human and “pet”.

Disturbingly, the relationship of the caretaker Filch and the cat Mrs Norris, along with that of Voldemort and the snake Nagini, would better illustrate relationships that reflect Haraway’s idealized concept of companion species.⁷ Both these relationships have at their heart the concept of “becoming with” that Haraway supports, as both Filch and Mrs Norris and Voldemort and Nagini construct and are constructed by the other. Mrs Norris “patrol[s] the corridors alone” and it is clear that Harry and his friends consider being caught breaking school rules by Mrs Norris to be the equivalent of being caught by Filch: “Break a rule in front of her, put just one toe out of line, and she’d whisk off for Filch.” That Mrs Norris understands Filch’s directions to her and Filch understands her equally as well is shown by the fact that Filch would then “appear, wheezing, two seconds later.”⁸ The “becoming with” exhibited by the Filch/Mrs Norris relationship involves Mrs Norris “becoming” more *human*. She possesses “lamp-like eyes just like Filch’s”, she carries out “caretaker” functions rather than behaving as a “real” cat and, though they appear to understand each other completely, it is never suggested in the text that Filch converses with Mrs Norris in any language other than English. Filch and Mrs Norris can be considered as a hybridized family, a view of their relationship encouraged by the cat being named *Mrs Norris* and Filch addressing her as “my sweet”.

The relationship between Voldemort and Nagini has Voldemort “becoming *animal*” by taking on snake-like aspects. In book two, before Voldemort has regained his physical form, he is described as “scaly-looking” with a face that “was flat and snake-

like."⁹ Once he regains his corporeal form Voldemort still has "a nose that was as flat as a snake's, with slits for nostrils" In subsequent books this aspect of the *animal* is linked to the abhorrent: "his terrible snakelike face,"¹⁰ "the red eyes, the flattened, serpentine face, the pallor of him gleaming slightly in the semi-darkness."¹¹ Voldemort is also a Parselmouth, which means that he can talk to snakes. This ability to speak to snakes in their own language, which is innate and not learnt, is considered to be a sign of evil that generally identifies a *dark* wizard. However, Voldemort's affinity with Nagini goes further than his physical resemblance to a snake and his ability to converse with her in Parseltongue. Voldemort has made Nagini into a Horcrux, a keeper of a fragment of his soul, and so is able to literally *be at one* with her on a number of occasions, such as when she attacks Arthur Weasley in book five. On this occasion, because Harry Potter is also an accidental Horcrux of Voldemort, this information comes to the reader in the form of a "vision" to Harry Potter. That Voldemort actually becomes Nagini, seeing through her eyes, tasting the air with her forked tongue and attacking the victim, is confirmed when Dumbledore later explains that Voldemort had a dangerous connection with Harry Potter: "On those rare occasions when we had close contact, I thought I saw a shadow of [Voldemort] stir behind your eyes ... ," and again: "Harry remembered the feeling that a dormant snake had arisen in him, ready to strike"¹²

This connection with Nagini also allows the snake and Voldemort to communicate over vast distances telepathically, as when she corners Harry Potter at Godric's Hollow: "Once we were up in the room, the snake sent a message to You-Know-Who, I heard it happen inside my head, I felt him get excited, he said to keep me here"¹³

It is Voldemort's way of interacting with Nagini that can be seen to best reflect Donna Haraway's "becoming with" as exemplified by the bioanthropologist Barbara Smuts' observation of a baboon colony: "It ... changed everything about me, including ... the way I used my eyes and voice. I was learning a whole new way of being in the world – the way of the baboon."¹⁴ In Voldemort's case, of course, he has learnt "the way of the snake".

All three of the nonhuman animals in these relationships suffer what could be termed an adverse outcome. By examining how their experiences are represented it is possible to gain an understanding of the ideologies underlying the social values being constructed as *normal* within the text. When Hedwig is killed by Death Eaters in the final book, Harry is very distressed, although when "the realisation of her death crashed over him: he felt ashamed of himself as the tears stung his eyes." He is then comforted by Hagrid saying "gruffly", "[n]ever mind ... Never mind. She had a great old life."¹⁵

Filch, on the other hand, is inconsolable when Mrs Norris is petrified in the second book. He reacts with "dry, racking sobs" and "slump[s] in a chair by the desk, unable to look at Mrs Norris, his face in his hands."¹⁶ He shows no embarrassment at his "blotched and tear stained face" as he swears revenge on the perpetrator. He also keeps vigil on the spot where she was attacked. In the case of Voldemort, he has invested part of his soul in Nagini and takes care to guard her against harm, which also protects his own life. When she is killed in the Battle of Hogwarts in the final book, Voldemort is rendered human and Harry Potter is able to kill him.

Within these three incidents it is possible to identify certain embedded assumptions. On the death of Hedwig, Rowling has said that "[t]he loss of Hedwig represented a loss of innocence and security ... Voldemort killing her marked the end of childhood."¹⁷ Read this way, the loss of Hedwig can also be linked to historical discourses that associate growing up with the transcendence of animality. In this light, Hedwig's death, though represented as very sad, can be understood as not only *natural*

at this stage of Harry's development, but also as a desirable outcome because her death facilitates Harry's transition from his social status of *child* to that of *adult*.

Rowling's comments indicate that this is the *natural* reading of Hedwig's death, so it is not unreasonable to also read the attack on Mrs Norris and the death of Nagini as metaphors. Argus Filch is described as "[e]ven worse than [the poltergeist] Peeves"¹⁸ and is generally despised: "The students all hated him." That Harry and his friends are to be included in the "all" is made plain when "Harry and Ron were delighted to hear Hagrid call Filch 'That old git'". As the series unfolds it becomes increasingly clear that this negative representation of Filch's character will not change. Filch is not only positioned as a decidedly unpleasant character but also a failure, and it is his reaction to the attack on Mrs Norris that demonstrates the extent of his multiple failures. Carol Adams observes that part of the social construct of masculinity involves the suppression of empathy;²⁰ in this light, Filch's compassion and concern for Mrs Norris can be read as evidence of his failed masculinity. The failed nature of Filch's character is further emphasised when the reader learns that he is also a "squib", that is, a member of a magical family who has failed to inherit magical ability. That being a squib is considered a failure is hinted at in the first book when Ron tells Harry that not all his family are magical: his mother has a distant cousin who is an accountant, but they don't speak about him. That Filch has kept his condition a secret indicates not only that he considers it to be shameful, but also that it marks him as a target for discrimination and persecution. This is revealed when Filch accuses Harry Potter of petrifying Mrs Norris and puts forward the fact that he, Filch, is a squib as the motive. Just as Harry's magical ability was first proven for the reader by his interaction with a nonhuman animal, the snake at the zoo, so Argus Filch's lack of magical ability is shown through this incident with Mrs Norris. Further, Filch also reveals at this time that he has failed to come to terms with his lack of magical ability, demonstrated by his attempting to learn magic through a Kwikspell course. Added to this is the fact that Filch's grief for Mrs Norris is ongoing: "Filch kept it fresh in everyone's minds by pacing the spot where she had been attacked, as though he thought the attacker might come back."²¹ The "as though he thought" indicates that his actions should be read as futile and perhaps childish: unlike Harry Potter at the death of Hedwig, Filch has not been able to successfully achieve the transition from *child* to *adult*. Read this way, Filch's grief for Mrs Norris is, as a consequence, reduced to yet more evidence of his seemingly habitual failure to perform any of the socially valued identities within the magical world that he seeks to inhabit: wizard, adult, male.

The death of Nagini, read metaphorically, can be seen to caution against identifying too closely with a nonhuman other, against the very "becoming with" that Haraway urges. Voldemort is the villain who "committed acts of unspeakable evil" and who "does not love."²³ However, Dumbledore considers that Voldemort "is perhaps as fond of [Nagini] as he can be of anything."²⁴ Voldemort's "fondness" for Nagini is exhibited by his liking "to keep her close." Within the text it is unclear whether the "fondness" Voldemort exhibits for Nagini merely reflects the physical care and protection he takes of her in order to protect his own existence or whether it should be understood that there is also, for Voldemort, an emotional *caring* component to their relationship. Whatever the case, the text seems to say that if we invest too much of ourselves, if we become companion species and give even a part of our soul across what Haraway terms "the Great Divide"²⁵ between humans and other animals, then we need to be aware that this could in fact, just as in the case of Voldemort, be the death of our *humanity*. And from the humanist perspective of this text, the reader is left in little doubt that such an outcome is too high a price to pay.

The "question of the animal" that texts such as the *Harry Potter* series raises is why do we think about our relationships with animal others as we do? The representation of nonhuman animals in the *Harry Potter* series is complex and can be seen to reflect current ambivalence in Western societies regarding the moral status of nonhuman animals and what constitutes *proper* nonhuman/human animal relationships. Within the series, the non-magical Muggle world is represented as distanced from nature and other species, while the magical world abounds with life of many varieties and is richer as a result. However, the status of these nonhuman animals is still uncertain and how wizards and witches negotiate their interactions with animal others is open to question.

The moral status of nonhuman animals within the magical world reflects the ambivalent position of animal others in contemporary Australian society. Despite their pervasive presence in Australian households and the many benefits, both in terms of health and economics, that nonhuman animals are able to bestow on their human companions, every year in Australia an estimated half a million animal others are surrendered to animal shelters, and this figure does not include those abandoned by their owners.²⁶ Wirth suggests that "all those who acquire a companion animal, regardless of source, should be encouraged to attend a local education program."²⁷ It can be argued that unexamined ideological assumptions concerning what constitutes a *proper* nonhuman/human animal relationship, found in texts such as the *Harry Potter* series, are also of concern as they already function to educate young readers to accept that in a relationship with an animal other an emotional distance should be maintained and that it is *natural* and desirable that they will grow out of such relationships. In other words, texts such as the *Harry Potter* series not only reflect current ambivalence in Western societies regarding the moral status of nonhuman animals, they also work to reinforce these attitudes.

Applying a nonhuman animal-centred literary criticism to successful contemporary texts, such as the *Harry Potter* series is, important for analysis of (as Stibbe states) "[h]ow animals are socially constructed influences [and] how they are treated by human society."²⁸ Just as feminist literary critique called for an "altered reading attentiveness"²⁹ with regard to gender issues, only by an "altered reading attentiveness" that questions the representation of nonhuman animals as a *natural* part of literary studies can we come to appreciate where and how our habits of thought are formed. Only then can we begin to understand that, as Donald Broom has stated³¹, we also need to recognise our moral obligation to those animal others who we include in the *us* of our community.

Notes

1. Dianne Hayles is a PhD candidate at the University of Western Sydney. Her thesis, tentatively entitled "Towards a Nonhuman Animal Centred Literary Criticism: Critical Discourse Analysis and the Literary Representation of Human and Other Animals", seeks to contribute to Critical Animal Studies by suggesting a theoretical model that can be utilised to examine all manner of narratives with a view to coming to an understanding of how nonhuman animals are being represented and how their social construction affects cultural practices. An abiding concern for animal rights has motivated her interest in the representation of nonhuman animals in literature, particularly children's literature and its role in the transmission of cultural practices that normalize our relationships with animal others.
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