# Why Anthropomorphism in Children's Literature?

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Anthropomorphism is the ascribing of human attributes to non-human things. Much that is written is anthropomorphic, especially literature for children, but little is written about anthropomorphism and its practice. (Derby, 1970) While the broad definition of the word would include children's stories of talking machines and dolls, such as *Little Toot* and *Raggedy Ann Stories,* I am concerned here only with the genre of talking animal stories.

Animals have always had a place in literature. Primitive story-tellers used animals as antagonists to dramatize man's ceaseless struggle against the forces of nature. (Magee, 1969) Animals were also used in didactic stories such as the fables of Aesop, and had roles in medieval literature as "questing beasts and dreamland dragons." (Magee, 1969) The humanism of the Renaissance eclipsed interest in animals or animal stories.

Not until *Black Beauty* was written by Anna Sewell did the genre of animal stories revive. William H. Magee suggests a connection between the revival and the emergence of Darwin's theory of evolution. (1969) Presumably, people would have to accept their unity with nature before they could enjoy a tale with animals as the focus of attention. In post-Darwinian animal stories, the animals could have needs and wishes of their own, but were not necessarily people in animal appearance or animals conflicting with man's needs, such as those in stories written previous to the emergence of the theory.

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May Hill Arbuthnot categorizes animal stories three ways: stories that tell of animals that dress and act like people, as *The Wind in the Willows;* stories in which animals talk, but act otherwise naturally, as *Bambi;* and stories in which animals are objectively described, as in Marguerite Henry's horse stories.[5]

The former two categories, display anthropomorphism, the first to a greater degree than the second, and the third does not. Ms. Burnford suggests that these categories express a child's reading chronologically; earlier, s/he enjoys dressed animal stories and then progresses to more realistic and more objective treatment.[6] However, I can find nothing to prevent the same child from enjoying *The Wind in the Willows* and *King of the Wind* simultaneously, and have observed it happen. Furthermore, adults enjoy *Animal Farm,* which uses animals anthropomorphized, for satirical reasons.

What are the reasons that an author of children's books may dress animals or make them talk? The first reason is to enable young readers to identify with the animals. The animals in themselves—stripped of all human trappings of speech and clothing—may or may not be familiar to the child. The one thing that can unify what different children bring to a given book is that

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they may identify with an animal that has human attributes. Most children can identify themselves with errant Peter in Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit.*

The second reason is for the flight of fantasy itself. Animals that talk can let us in on another world which we may not be able to see without their help. We may see an occasional rabbit cross our path, but the talking rabbits on *Rabbit Hill* let us enter a world of woodland creatures with their own social structures and social behavior that mimic and express our own. Many authors suggest that all humans, not only children, need to participate in an occasional flight into fantasy: "Inanimate objects can do what people are not able to, or cannot." (Derby, 1970) Perhaps this desire to escape is also related to a need for security: "We find a measure of escapism in the non-controversial constancy of animal behavior." (Burnford, 1962) Escapism must be looked at as not only escaping from a reality, but as escaping to a new form of reality which an imaginative author can provide. Thus escapism need not have negative or limiting connotations.

The third reason is for variety. An author can develop a great variety of characters in a short book with few words if an animal is used to express attributes commonly assumed to represent the creature. This is especially important in a picture book; a being can be lazy and slow-witted as a possum, simply by being a possum, with no elaborate description or character buildup necessary. An example is the goose who, "well, was a goose" in *Johnny Crow's Garden.* No more description is needed; the few simple words, the pictures, and the readers' mental image of being "silly as a goose" tell the whole story. If the young readers do not know the expression or have this mental image, but meet the expression later, they will certainly know what it means if they remember the goose in *Johnny Crow's Garden.*

The fourth reason is for humor. Animals who are caricatures of certain types of people are funny to adults and children alike. The humor is often based on the animal's picture and on what it says, not by its verbal description or a verbal account of its actions. Thus the humor in anthropomorphism may be grasped by the youngest of readers of picture books, as much of the humor is not dependent on language. Toad, in *The Wind in the Willows,* is a good example of a humorously exaggerated personality type. The discrepancy between his being a toad, often a symbol of ugliness in literature, and his being a fop and a dandy, also make him an inimitably funny creature.

Following are some excellent anthropomorphic animal fantasy stories.

*Johnny Crow's Garden* is a picture book, a story without a plot. It is a description of some very entertaining animals' antics which took place in the fantasyland of Johnny Crow's garden. The concepts and humor are developed in Leslie Brooke's pictures, with the words suggesting events in simple rhyming couplets. The humor is in the anthropomorphizing, both verbal in the couplets, and visual in the pictures; the vain and silly lion, usually the King of Beasts, and the whale boring everybody with his "very long tale." Leslie Brooke's animals are mocking stereotyped people and the different kinds of animals lend variety and humor to the picture.

Beatrix Potter's family of rabbits in *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* are sensitively done in delicate watercolors and in delicate, gentle humor and irony, which contrasts with Leslie Brooke's broad and exaggerated humor. The rabbits wear jackets and go to market but do not lose their naturalness as rabbits. They are timid and get chased by dogs and people; they lead rabbit-like lives in spite of their speech and clothing. "The secret of a good 'dressed animal' is

that, while it may conform to human ideas of behavior, it remains in essence the pig or mouse or rabbit which it really is."[9] Beatrix Potter could identify with the creatures who were her companions; hence this sensitive and realistic anthropomorphism, done without the excessive sentimentality of *Rabbit Hill* concerning the animals' relationships with human beings. Peter Rabbit's relationship with Mr. McGregor is certainly more realistic and exciting, than little Georgie's relationship with the New Folk.

Kenneth Grahame takes us on a flight into a fantasyland of woodland creatures in *The Wind in the Willows*. All the animals, of which there is great variety, have individual and unique personalities. The reader can laugh at them or with them. "Mole and Badger and Toad are real both as animals and as persons."[10] This is a fantasyland of woods and the river as well as a microcosm of human trials and tribulation. The anthropomorphism is well done as the animals behave consistently according to their personalities, which derive from Grahame's imagination and not necessarily from popular conceptions of the animal. A badger is not considered worldly and wise, nor a toad, foppish and stubborn—except in *The Wind in the Willows*. Grahame's anthropomorphism consists of giving an animal a unique personality instead of developing one already assumed in that animal. It requires creativity of the highest order to successfully create a new fantasy world such as this.

Another author of this high caliber, who uses talking animals to introduce the reader into a fantasy world, is E. B. White. In *Charlotte's Web*, the animals look and act (to outsiders) just as normal barnyard animals should. They have a remarkable ability to communicate with one another, however, and the reader and Fern can participate in their world, which excludes the other humans in the story. Charlotte, the spider, possesses the ability to communicate with other humans however, by spinning messages in her web. The buildup in barnyard details, such as manure piles and board fences and spider webs, sets the stage for a fantasy which ends in a rather adult irony: Wilbur gets all the credit from people for being "Terrific" and "Some pig" while the remarkable Charlotte dies an unsung death (although she will never be forgotten by Wilbur of course). E. B. White builds his characters somewhat on animal stereotypes—the stuttering goose, the sometimes proud, sometimes insecure pig, the sneaking, self-serving rat—but he uses these stereotypes as a point of departure for creating totally unique and unforgettable characters.

These works show how four outstanding authors use different types of anthropomorphism, and they stamp it individually with their own creativity. Anthropomorphism will probably always be with us as mankind, increasingly dependent on technology, will find enjoyment in nature and will be creative in projecting his humanity onto it. Small children will probably continue to find delight in their pets, in wild creatures, and in animals in zoos, and also in the world of fantasy inhabited by talking animals.

(Pgs 463, 464, + 465 are not available through JSTOR)

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ing of the words . . .;" "the way he said it").

Third, fourth, and fifth graders, then, seem to dwell on the literal aspects of the story and on their reactions and evaluations of it. By the sixth grade, there is introduction of interpretation, particularly in the form of questions about character. "The Indian boy was kinda small and skinny thing . . . he is a stubborn boy . . . he is also curious and he thinks about things a lot," is one example; another: "And he just didn't like grown-ups, because he had to go to school and he didn't have as much freedom." The number of interpretations increase through the seventh and eighth grades, by which time the formal evaluations often change to evaluations concerned with meaning and understanding ("It was a cute story, but I didn't understand it;" "I liked it; it seemed to convey a message.") The eighth graders began looking for hidden meanings, a trait of all the older students and one familiar to most high school and college teachers. As one ninth grader said, "You could take it literally . . . or it could have sort of more deep meaning like . . . you can't trust adults." One engaging ninth grader said, "I think third graders through fifth graders would understand this story more because I don't think it is at our level really, I mean I really don't understand it myself." This is a charming confession, I think, one which tells us that the student who says a work is for younger or less sophisticated students is perhaps operating out of insecurity cloaked with superiority. By the twelfth grade, the students respond primarily in terms of interpretation, and evaluation related to meaning rather than in terms of their engagement and their evaluation of the work's evocative power. Their concerns are with "the alienation bit," "'searching for themselves" and the like.

Such then are the first tentative findings, and they raise a number of questions and conjectures about teaching and the literature curriculum. What happens to the concern for affect and form? Is it muted naturally? Is it suppressed by teaching or by growth? Why is it that teachers have generally failed to see that their younger students are acting as respectable and responsible literary critics? How can the critical responses of young children be encouraged? All of these questions point to a need for teachers to spend more time looking at and listening to their students, not only when they are performing for examinations but as they read and talk about what they read. Such observation and the encouragement of talk may well result in a more articulate generation.

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