

# COMMENTARY

## The Sympathetic Imagination and the Human–Animal Bond: Fostering Empathy through Reading Imaginative Literature

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**ABSTRACT** This article is an exploration of human attitudes toward animals as depicted in literature, with special emphasis on enhancing the human–animal bond—a psychological and emotional link generated in the text when empathy develops among humans, animals, and readers. Imaginative literature, featuring both human and animal characters, conveys this bond to the reader through sympathetic imagination and becomes an effective vehicle through which to support both psychological shifts and cultural changes in the reader’s perceptions. The psychological shifts produce greatly heightened empathy and a deepening of the human–animal bond in the individual reader; the cultural shifts result in the growth of a less anthropocentric sensibility toward animals in the larger society. In order to understand how these processes occur, a brief analysis of literary works appears in which these psychological dynamics arise: Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty*; Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang*; Arthur Vanderbilt’s *Golden Days: Memories of a Golden Retriever*; Richard Adams’ *Watership Down*; and William Kotzwinkle’s *Dr. Rat*. The reader’s emotional identification with literary characters leads, in turn, to his or her experience of sympathetic imagination—the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another—and achieves empathy, or simulation.

**Keywords:** empathy, human–animal bond, imaginative literature, reading, sympathetic imagination



In the post-Civil-War period, spurred by national trauma, American cultural sensibilities heightened, championing the helpless and powerless, human and nonhuman. The Thirteenth Amendment (1865) banning slavery followed two years after Lincoln's "Emancipation Proclamation" and was in turn followed in 1866 by the establishment of the American Humane Society. Ironically, the brutal and divisive Civil War fostered empathy and compassion—for the soldiers who had fought the War, for the disaffected members of post-War society, and for the children and animals touched by it. Reform movements emerged as the century progressed. The Settlement House Movement gave rise to Hull House in Chicago and the Henry Street Settlement House in New York City. Emma Lazarus' poem, "The New Colossus" (1886), part of which was later placed on the Statue of Liberty, reflected and voiced the plight of immigrants. Jacob Riis' metropolitan reports and photographs illustrated the squalid conditions in which they lived and worked in *How the Other Half Lives* (1890). The launching of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ASPCA) in 1875 made a new and direct connection between the treatment of children and animals.

Many readers of Anna Sewell's novel, *Black Beauty* (1877)—the declared "autobiography of a horse," according to the author—saw it as a benchmark in the heightening empathy for both humans and animals in England and America. According to Marion W. Copeland and Heidi O'Brien, Anna Sewell was influenced by reading moralistic writers and educators such as Dorothy Kilner, Mary Wollstonecraft, probably the American author, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and her own mother (Copeland and O'Brien 2003, p. 53). She lived in a time when writers such as Anna Letitia Barbauld were cited by the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge as one of the authors whose novels of manners "had done most to make compassion toward animals 'universally fashionable'" (Copeland and O'Brien 2003, p. 55), and Harriet Beecher Stowe "wrote a number of animal stories concerned with the welfare of nonhumans like *A Dog's Mission*" as well as the antislavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Copeland and O'Brien 2003, pp. 54–55). Dorothy Kilner's "The Life and Perambulations of a Mouse" [was] a new type of animal tale . . . which used the natural behaviour of animals to point to a moral for human behaviour . . . they were intended to be seen as their natural animal selves" (Copeland and O'Brien 2003, p. 53). Mary Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories* also deals directly with the treatment of animals and posits that kindness to animals is the foundation for kindness to fellow humans (Copeland and O'Brien 2003, p. 54). All this imaginative literature provided a moral and humane cultural context for Anna Sewell's later *Black Beauty*.

Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* uses empathy—the ability to see and feel things as others experience them—as a way to effect change intellectually and emotionally, generating public sympathy which garnered support for organizations such as the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (MSPCA) founded in 1868 by George T. Angell. He was so moved by what he called "the equine Uncle Tom's Cabin" that he had ten thousand copies of the book published privately and distributed them to people who worked with horses, so that their empathy might deepen by the act of reading. Later, Angell ran a contest for a novel which would generate sympathy for dogs in the same way that *Black Beauty* had for horses, and it was Margaret Marshall Saunders' *Beautiful Joe* that won the contest with a sympathetic story of a dog who imparts a unique autobiography rather than using animal stereotypes to project a human animal's frailties and foibles, typical of previous animal literature (Copeland and O'Brien 2003, p. 55).

*Black Beauty* (1877) dramatizes the beginning of the slow emergence of humane sensibilities in English and American society and the gradual development of empathy, compassion, and sympathetic imagination in the modern psyche. The only work written by Anna Sewell, the

novel is an attempt to call attention to the cruel plight of horses and the need for their humane treatment. One of the best examples of novels for young adults and older readers, *Black Beauty* himself must leave his happy life on a farm to live under miserable circumstances for many years, finally coming full circle to ownership by people who remember him lovingly and treat him well. That initial upbringing gives him the strength and good nature to carry him through difficult times of mistreatment and cruelty.

Sewell also introduces an array of other badly treated equine characters for whom we feel compassion. Three of these horses—Ginger, Merrylegs, and Sir Oliver—tell stories of their maltreatment, and scenes depicting the whipping and bleeding of horses appear throughout the book. Horses wear bearing reins, interfering with their breathing, for the sake of ornamentation. A painful operation docks their tails, preventing the horses from brushing away flies. Further, while hunting, the fate of the human rider who falls draws everyone's attention while the fate of the horse draws no one's attention. Ironically, during Anna Sewell's own funeral procession, her Quaker mother, Mary, to whom Anna had dedicated the novel, noticed that all the horses wore bearing reins. She went from carriage to carriage to request their removal. Thus, what *Black Beauty* tells us in fiction is re-enacted in real life. The reader experiences "simulation," the empathetic re-experiencing that allows them to identify with the horses.

Heightened empathy for animals is reflected in numerous other works of imaginative literature, a few of which are analyzed later in this paper, and enforces in the reader's mind the textually-embedded human-animal bond that is produced through feeling empathy. In so doing, the reader identifies psychologically with the fictional characters and this dynamic stimulates and nurtures his/her "sympathetic imagination:" the result of feeling compassion for another, of "think[ing] ourselves into the being of another" (Coetzee 1999, p. 34). In *Black Beauty*, for example, the horse, Ginger, tells us that she was cruelly used; the power of sympathetic imagination transports the reader into Ginger's emotional state, and he identifies with the ill-treated equine character. We think ourselves into the mind and being of another, whether it be human animal or horse.

One branch of philosophy of mind theory, Simulation Theory, argues that simulation, or empathetic re-experiencing of a text by a reader, allows one to put oneself into another's situation through the stimulation of sympathetic imagination, driven by the rise of empathy in the reader (Kogler and Steuber 2000, p. 181). In turn, we experience an emotional dimension of thought, occurring prior to its expression in words and sentences. This process enables the reader to relive the experience, empathize and bond with characters, and internalize positive attitudes toward animals. Empathetic re-experience, or reconstruction of the original thought, is the essential method in psychological interpretation.

According to Rudolf A. Makkreel, "simulation allows [the reader] to identify with others by pretending to be in their situation. Not only does [the reader] identify with others by feeling at one with them (empathy), but [he] also predict[s] their behavior by imagining (simulating) what [he] would do if [he] were in their shoes" (Kogler and Steuber 2000, p. 181). Imagination allows us to "work [our] way 'into' another; [we] attempt to grasp the other's experiences, thoughts, and feelings and to imagine being that person" (Kogler and Steuber 2000, p. 175).

The "'transfer' of text to reader," according to Wolfgang Iser, "is often regarded as being brought about solely by the text. Any successful transfer, however—though initiated by the text—depends on the extent to which this text can activate the individual reader's faculties of perceiving and processing. . . Reading is not a direct 'internalization', because it is not a one-way process, and our concern will be to find means of describing the reading process as a

dynamic *interaction* between text and reader” (Iser 1978, p. 107). Twenty years earlier, the French philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, called the act of reading a “pact” between author and reader: “When a work is produced, the creative act is only an incomplete, abstract impulse; if the author existed all on his own, he could write as much as he liked, but his work would never see the light of day as an object, and he would have to lay down his pen or despair” (Iser 1978, p. 108). The process of writing, he continues, includes as a “dialectic correlative the process of reading, and these two interdependent acts require two differently active people. The combined efforts of author and reader bring into being the concrete and imaginary object that is the work of the mind” (Iser 1978, p. 108). In other words, reading is an activity guided by the text, processed by the reader, who is in turn affected by the text.

Central to the reading of every literary work is the interaction between its structure and its recipient. As a result, imaginative literature can become an effective vehicle through which both psychological and cultural shifts in sensibility occur. The psychological shift produces greatly heightened empathy and a deepening of the human–animal bond in the reader; the cultural shift results in a more civilized sensibility toward humans and animals in the larger society. The literary critic, Simon O. Lesser, brings a psychoanalytic basis to his thinking about reader response: “In addition to participating vicariously in the stories in which we become absorbed, we frequently create and imaginatively act out our stories structured upon them. We analogize” (Iser 1978, p. 49).

Imaginary literature provides its stories with character, setting, and conflict and resolution. Stories allow their readers to interpret ethical principles by giving them emotional texture and vicarious experience. “A story can evoke strong emotions in the reader that help convey the lessons and values central to humane education, such as knowledge, respect, empathy, and compassion. . . the relationship that a story creates gives a [reader] the opportunity to develop an empathic understanding of others and to evaluate actions based on their potential to do harm or good. . . Readers begin mentally to construct their own moral scenarios, or stories, which guide them in thinking about the consequences of their actions” (Copeland and O’Brien 2003, pp. 51–52). Once more, these dynamics foster sympathetic imagination through the generation of empathy.

Copeland and O’Brien further expound on creating empathy “by encouraging readers to care about animal characters. A good story—especially one that has a strong moral theme—can engender a sudden intuitive realization that makes the essence of an abstract rule or maxim crystal-clear. Empathy not only leads people to recognize what is morally good, it also teaches them to embrace it and act on it. The dramatic nature of stories helps readers develop an emotional attachment to goodness and a desire to do the right thing, because they want to follow the good examples set by characters. Stories allow them to ‘rehearse’ moral decisions, strengthening their solidarity with the good [and] help people gain the perspective of other animals” (Copeland and O’Brien 2003, pp. 51–52).

Interest in the dynamics of the sympathetic imagination, empathy, and the human–animal bond has recently emerged in a number of disciplines, including literary theory and criticism. Bonding between protagonists and readers in literature develops through sympathetic imagination. These dynamics emerge through reader response to demonstrations of human kindness and cruel acts toward animals in Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty* (1877), Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906). Trust and affection between human and pet deepen in Arthur Vanderbilt’s *Golden Days: Memories of a Golden Retriever* (1998). A community’s emotional and social fabric unravels when trust flags and human greed threatens animals’ habitat in Richard Adams’ *Watership Down* (1972). Lastly, the sacrifice and betrayal

of animals in the name of science without compassion and empathy dominates the text of William Kotzwinkle's *Dr. Rat* (1971).

Many works of imaginative literature exist which focus on the psychological identification between animals and readers. For example, Jack London's novels, *The Call of the Wild* (1903) and *White Fang* (1906), foster the development of the human–animal bond and display real affection or cruelty between canine protagonists and human characters. *The Call of the Wild* received such rave reviews that the novelist decided to write the companion volume, *White Fang*. These two books share similar themes and inspire great empathy in their readers. They allow us to enter the mind of their fictional animals through the involuntary use of our sympathetic imagination and identify with them.

Both novels revolve around a canine facing internal and external conflict regarding humans and other animals. In *The Call of the Wild*, the story begins with the part husky, part wolf, Buck, living contentedly on the estate of Judge Miller; *White Fang* concludes with the dog living happily on the estate of Judge Scott. White Fang moves from birth and brutality to happiness and domestication while the central character, Buck, of *The Call of the Wild* is happy and domesticated but responds involuntarily to the instinctual call of the wild and the lure of the wilderness at the end of the novel, his wolf heritage gaining dominance and contributing an achingly elegiac ending. *The Call of the Wild* focuses on both Buck and his life with other wolves, dogs, and humans. London's later novel, *White Fang*, also examines these aspects, its canine protagonist forced to become a fighting dog against his will and nature. Judge Scott's son, Weedon, saves him and brings him to the California ranch where White Fang fathers offspring with the sheep dog, Collie.

Sympathetic imagination generates a human–animal bond in these novels. In *The Call of the Wild*, London describes how John Thornton, Buck's rescuer, comes to his aid: "John Thornton sprang upon the man [Hal] who wielded the club. Hal was hurled backward as though struck by a falling tree.... John Thornton stood over Buck, struggling to control himself, too convulsed to speak.... 'If you strike that dog again I'll kill you,' he at last managed to say [to Hal] in a choking voice... Thornton knelt beside him [Buck] and with rough, kindly hands searched for broken bones.... 'You poor devil,' said John Thornton, and Buck licked his hand" (London 1979, pp. 476–477).

Another novel that elicits empathy and sympathetic imagination, in the form of tenderness and intimacy between pets and owners, is Arthur Vanderbilt's memoir, *Golden Days: Memories of a Golden Retriever* (1998). Ideas of equality between human and animals have developed currency and support in contemporary literature. Many memoirs have in common sensitive, humane, and loving owners whose animals respond positively to their good treatment. Arthur Vanderbilt's Amy is at the center of this piece, and he tells Amy's story as a flashback, following a natural cycle from the peak of her energy in July to her death in October. In October, the narrator learns that Amy has lymphoma. Together, they reminisce about the "golden days" of their life together: "What is it about golden retrievers that can break your heart? Is it their love unconditional, love unqualified, love in its purest form? The range of their emotions, from unimaginable joy to unthinkable sorrow? Is it their seemingly uncanny insight into our lives? The worries and concerns and wisdom you can read so well in their expressions as they mull things over? 'All knowledge', the nineteenth-century novelist Franz Kafka wrote, 'the totality of all questions and answers is contained in the dog'" (Vanderbilt 1998, pp. 1–2).

Amy is a very protective dog and cares for every family member, making nightly checks of their bedrooms. She becomes a "ragtag pack" leader, at the head of the group consisting of

a retired couple and two adult children. When the family neglects to take Amy to dinner with them, the end-of-summer sadness sets in, foreshadowing the golden retriever's demise. As October light comes over the narration, Amy dies, and a crow appears whom the author sees as a messenger from the dog. Finally, poignantly, Art thanks Amy for having been Amy and for enriching his life more than he could ever express.

The human–animal bond is weak in *Watership Down* (1972), a novel featuring fictionalized rabbits as its central characters—creatures as fully realized as well-conceived human characters in anthropocentric fiction. *Watership Down* focuses on animals put in danger by humans and the animals' attempts to rescue themselves. These animals exist in their own fictional right, drawn realistically in the novel, and generate empathy and psychological identification in the reader. Richard Adams' epic can be read as allegory with analogues between human and rabbit, but is more effective as a straightforward tale of rabbit adventure.

The novel opens in Sandleford Warren in Berkshire, England, where some rabbits decide to relocate to another warren, trying to escape the destruction of their home by a land developer. As much as the novel is about freedom, ethics, and human nature, it is also about rabbits seeking shelter. As they search for a safe haven, they traverse territory populated by fierce dogs, battle a rival rabbit's warren, and ford a wide river. When they encounter difficult situations, they come up with surprising solutions that are still in the realm of possibility for actual rabbits. Hazel and the other rabbits work out their problems through intuition and cognitive insight. After Hazel and the other rabbits establish their new warren, they confront yet other problems. In the end, Hazel lives longer than the two or three summers wild rabbits usually live. He leaves the warren to join his Owsla, a ruling spiritual clique of the strongest rabbits.

Adams provides a story whose protagonists elicit the reader's sympathetic imagination, empathy, and compassion. Hazel's death is poignantly described and deeply felt by the reader: "One chilly, blustery morning in March . . . many springs later, Hazel was dozing and waking in his burrow [when] he woke to realize that there was a rabbit lying quietly beside him . . . He raised his head and said, 'Do you want to talk to me?' 'Yes, that's what I've come for,' replied the other. 'You know me, don't you?' . . . Then he [Hazel] saw that in the darkness of the burrow the stranger's ears were shining with a faint silver light. 'Yes, my lord', he said. 'Yes, I know you' . . . They went out past the young sentry. . . It seemed to Hazel that he would not be needing his body any more, so he left it lying on the edge of the ditch . . . together they slipped away, running easily down through the wood, where the first primroses were beginning to bloom" (Adams 1972, pp. 474–475). Although the presence of spirituality in nonhuman animals may be controversial, this fictional ending allows our sympathetic imagination to generate the necessary empathy and compassion for satisfactory resolution.

By no means the first to examine the vexed problem of the plight of laboratory animals in research, William Kotzwinkle's novel, *Dr. Rat* (1971), takes as its title character a laboratory rat that has become crazed from running the maze. He rants about the research scientists who perform the experiments. "Death is Freedom!" he shouts repeatedly (Kotzwinkle 1971, p. 1). In his madness, he summarizes the human view of laboratory animals: "You're all just basic models, fellow rats! Don't you understand the meaning of that? A basic model that has no feelings, has no spirit. Man is able to twist us and starve us and cut off our tails because that's the law! Haven't you read St. Thomas Aquinas? Animals have no souls!" (Kotzwinkle 1971, p. 21).

While *Dr. Rat* lists the atrocities performed on his fellows by the Learned Professor and his graduate assistants, the revolution inside the laboratory parallels the gathering of every sort of

nonhuman animal in the outside world where they seem to merge into One Animal. When humans finally arrive, catastrophe strikes. Our sympathetic imagination identifies not with the human animals in the novel but with those nonhuman animals that experience pain and torture.

In J. M. Coetzee's *The Life of Animals* (Coetzee 1999), Prof. Elizabeth Costello's lectures at the fictional Appleton College contain philosophical arguments that focus less on empathy than on the ethical issue of how human beings should treat nonhuman beings. We could, she believes, treat animals with sympathy for their "sensation of being" (Coetzee 1999, p. 4). Costello thinks that there is no excuse for the lack of sympathy that human beings display toward other animals because "there is no limit to the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another. There are no bounds to the sympathetic imagination" (Coetzee 1999, p. 35). Yet most human beings, she observes, do not stretch the bounds of their imaginations with regard to animals, because we "can do anything [with regard to animals] and get away with it; that there is no punishment" (Coetzee 1999, p. 35).

"We have closed our hearts to animals," Costello concludes, "and our minds follow our hearts...Philosophy [she argues] is relatively powerless to lead, or in any event in the right direction, because it lags our sympathies" (Coetzee 1999, p. 4). This necessitates our rejection of our rational faculties to effect empathy. Our sympathetic imaginations, to which imaginative literature appeals more than philosophy, should extend to animals other than ourselves.

Costello believes that "if fiction does not so extend our sympathies, then neither will philosophy" (Coetzee 1999, p. 4). She urges us to recognize the accessibility of such sympathy for the fullness of animal being. "If we are capable of thinking our own death," she asks, "why on earth should we not be capable of thinking our way into the life of a bat? What is it like to be a bat?...To be a living bat is to be full of being; being fully a bat is like being fully human, which is also to be full of being. Bat-being in the first case, human-being in the second....To be full of being is to live as a body-soul. One name for the experience of full being is joy" (Coetzee 1999, pp. 32–33).

Costello's lecture, therefore, asks its audience to "open your heart and listen to what your heart says" (Coetzee 1999, p. 37). She sees the presumption that the mind should lead the heart as erroneous. We need to reconceive our devotion to reason as a universal value. If we have closed our hearts to animals, our sympathetic imagination can restart by reading literature that induces empathy and compassion. If literature is successful in this role, then perhaps philosophy will follow. Let us hope, she urges.

In order to understand the positive emotional and moral effects created by reading literature that is animal-centric and emphasizes a compassionate human–animal bond, one must read imaginatively and thoughtfully if Elizabeth Costello's "hope" is to come to fruition. In an attempt to generate the psychologically transforming and culturally civilizing effect that reading imaginative literature offers, our sympathetic imaginations must emphasize empathy-building and psychological identification with the characters. Imaginative literature can thus stimulate the development of a moral and ethical sensibility in the reader.

The creating and nurturing of a human–animal bond requires readers to open themselves up, by way of their sympathetic imaginations, and experience empathy and compassion for the creatures about which they read. In turn, readers should feel the same toward the creatures with whom they interact in real life, Sartre's pact working successfully. *Black Beauty's* ending is satisfyingly happy for both horse and human reader: Black Beauty himself states, "I have nothing to fear [any longer], and here my story ends. My troubles are over, and I am home." (Sewell 2001, p. 245). Appropriately, this sentiment welcomes humans and other animals to

Black Beauty Ranch, a home for abused animals founded by the late animal activist Cleveland Amory. It is one measure of the “hope” that Elizabeth Costello wishes for when readers are exposed to literature that triggers and deepens our sympathetic imagination and results in the establishment of a positive human–animal bond.

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