
Straight from the Horse's Mouth: Fauna-criticism and *Black Beauty*

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ABSTRACT

This paper employs *fauna-criticism*, as outlined below, as a unique perspective from which to (re)examine some of the major literary features of *Black Beauty*. From this perspective, we speculate on how the presentation of themes helps or hinders Sewell's intended messages. In particular, this paper addresses Sewell's use of anthropomorphism, animal advocacy, and the role of animals in human society. Though many of the specific concerns regarding the treatment of horses that are addressed in the novel are not as relevant in today's world, such as genuine 'horsepower' which has been replaced by technology, the novel is rich in deeper messages and values that are far-reaching and possess continued relevance. For instance, Sewell repeatedly "acknowledges the special moral wisdom of women, children, and animals throughout the text" (Guest x), all of which have been historically devalued and underrepresented, and continue to be today. The book has many timeless and critical themes including the responsibility of citizens to speak out and demand justice. In a time of women's movements such as two national Women's Marches in Washington, D.C, #MeToo, and the Larry Nassar and Hollywood sexual assault scandals, lessons can still be drawn from old works like *Black Beauty*, lessons of solidarity, speaking out and taking a stand against unequal and exploitative power relations. Therefore, it is important to continually revisit classic works of literature through different lenses, such as fauna criticism, in order to provide different interpretations and perspectives on the continued cultural relevance of a work.

As a fictional story, *Black Beauty* has been considered a work of *imaginative literature*, a classification incorporating such genres as fantasy, myths, legends, fairy tales, science fiction, and speculative stories. Beierl argues that the power of imaginative literature as it relates to strengthening the human-animal bond and heightening empathy lies in its use of sympathetic imagination, which is defined as "the extent to which we can think ourselves into the being of another" (213). Through the emotional identification with the

characters, the reader is able to deepen their empathy, which could result in changes in the individual's perception of nonhuman animals or a cultural shift as society moves further away from an anthropocentric view of human relationships with other animals (Beierl 213).

Readers use sympathetic imagination as they put themselves into the characters' situation and experience their emotional state. This allows the reader to empathize with and connect to the nonhuman animal characters, which can also lead to the internalization of positive attitudes towards animals (Beierl 215).

Anthropomorphism is perhaps the primary element throughout *Black Beauty*. There are many takes on anthropomorphism (see Cadman) but we wish to highlight one distinction that pertains especially well to *Black Beauty*. John Simons makes the contrast between “trivial” and “strong” anthropomorphism. The difference has to do with the presence of an intention: the former “treats animals as though they were people but [does] not seek to use this strategy to point [to] any moral or teach any example,” whereas the latter confers upon animals human-like capabilities in order to emphasize a difference or to challenge the notion that there are any fundamental differences between humans and nonhuman animals (119-20). *Black Beauty* clearly uses anthropomorphism, especially human speech, to encourage certain morals, and therefore, Simons’ concept of strong anthropomorphism proves to be quite apt for the purposes of this paper.

We approach our interpretation of *Black Beauty* through the concept of *fauna-criticism* as innovated by Stephen DeVries. DeVries imagines fauna-criticism to be a new literary approach within animal studies that builds on, yet goes beyond, ecocriticism by reframing literary history to “expound animal ethical positions from literary texts” (27). This is accomplished by elucidating how fictional stories might address such topics as animal sentience, nonhuman moral agency, or the human-animal divide. Fauna-critical analysis brings to light inquiries concerning the realities and ethical treatment of nonhumans by

examining literary elements used at plot points when the ethics of human-animal relations is challenged. In *Black Beauty*, this is frequently done through autobiographical narrative. In light of Simons's strong anthropomorphism, we see this as a fitting way in which to read *Black Beauty* because part of Sewell's intention was to appeal to nonhuman sentience, emotion, and reason in order to draw parallels between humans and animals, reevaluate humans' relations to non-humans, critically examine purely academic education, and awaken imagination.

DeVries suggests seven contributions fauna-criticism can make to animal studies. In examining a single text, we do not aim to apply all seven, nor would all seven necessarily apply. But what DeVries identifies as task six is especially pertinent here; that is, to emphasize ethical positions stated or implied in literary texts, and their *ability* to be effective in doing so. Under the premise that humans cannot re-*produce* nonhuman experience but only re-*present* it, DeVries asserts that fauna-criticism is a superior mode of this expression as opposed to philosophical articulations. As DeVries explains,

It is one thing to follow the logical premises of a deductive ethical argument...[such as] why the industrialized production of meat may have ethical deficiencies. But it is quite another to read of industrialized slaughter and imagine the blood and gore as described on the page.... The immediacy of such images somehow has more power than that of a tightly-constructed treatise to convince us that something is wrong, that something must be done (30).

Fiction, perhaps especially imaginative literature, unlike scholarly works, is not limited by conventions or structures. Literary works, then, have a much wider range of means at their disposal with which to connect personally with their audience. Different parts of a story may resonate more or less strongly with individual readers, whereas with an argument, if one premise is considered inadequate, the whole of the conclusion may be deemed invalid. As *Black Beauty* is a fictional text, readers understand the animal abuse depicted as not real—the actual animals in the story do not exist and were not abused. However, similar animals do exist and are abused in similar ways. Thus, *Black Beauty* conveys a message of cruelty in a

convincing way without being ‘too real’ or relying on shock tactics which may be overwhelming.

The Autobiography of a Horse

That the story is told through a first-person narrative—from Black Beauty’s own perspective—may be the most potent feature of the book. Anthropomorphically giving Black Beauty the power of human language, the author describes Black Beauty’s voice and language as “translated from the original equine” (Victorian Studies 1). Although anthropomorphism is a popular aspect of children’s literature, Sewell builds her characters in a compelling and innovative way. Black Beauty tells “a unique autobiography rather than using animal stereotypes to project a human animal’s frailty and foibles, typical of previous animal literature (Beierl 214). The main character is Black Beauty, a male horse who the novel follows throughout his life—from the happy days he spends early on with his mother in the green meadows of Squire Gordon’s Park, to his later life, where he spends much of his time working as a carriage horse, and finally to the ultimate denouement—where Black Beauty is reunited with a familiar person at the home of Miss Blomefield and Miss Ellen.

The story is of a horse and by a horse, but is not just about horses. It is generalizable to many animals, including the human variety. Because *Black Beauty* is narrated by a horse whose intended audience is people, this technique invites the human reader to consider the realities of nonhumans. The technique implicitly calls on notions of human-animal communication. Because Black Beauty, in addition to many other nonhuman characters describe what they are thinking and feeling, attention is drawn to the ideas of nonhuman consciousness and non-visual and/or non-obvious aspects of wellbeing. Moreover, this rests on the assumption that animals possess sentience in the first place, from which perspective can be drawn. This assumption is taken for granted at the basis of the novel. This is a complex way to write a book, especially a book in which you want to deliver a believable

message through a variety of metaphors. After all, how can we ever really know what a nonhuman animal is thinking?

While it would be impossible to truly understand the reality and the inner lives of the horses, Harju asserts that, in fact, “Anthropomorphism is a *necessary* means we employ to make sense of and relate to other species' experience because we still have no real [that is, personal] knowledge of animal cognition” (173, emphasis added). Sewell uses anthropomorphism as a powerful literary tool to illustrate what it might feel like to be a horse based on our familiar feelings and experiences as humans. The use of anthropomorphism also seems rife with human values which are implied to be shared by animals, as though animals have the abilities of at least self-awareness and complex rationalizations regarding past and future events.

Anthropomorphism in children's literature is sometimes criticized as misrepresenting animals, which can lead to unrealistic or inaccurate perceptions of nonhuman animals in the natural world (Anderson and Henderson 297). While this may cause unintentional problems in terms of children's factual understanding of other species, or may even potentially lead to dangerous situations when children misjudge the risk of approaching the real-life versions of their favorite characters, children are generally able to distinguish between fantasy and reality (Anderson and Henderson 302). It was noted in an article in *The New Yorker* that “anthropomorphic creatures serve as vehicles for teaching their young readership moral and practical lessons related to the human world” (Kreilkamp 2). Furthermore, anthropomorphism could also be an important tool in allowing children to identify with the characters and develop emotional and imaginative responses towards other beings, which could also affect their behavior. As stated by Anderson and Henderson, “Childhood attachment to animal characters and stories unconsciously may influence adult behavior toward animals” (298).

The reader of *Black Beauty*, whether child or adult, views not only “a day in the life” of an animal, but the whole lifecycle of another species. This helps to add context to situations and introduce variety into the types of situations experienced. In-depth and prolonged exposure can boost the ability of the reader to empathize with the characters. Despite potential criticisms of using anthropomorphism in some cases, Beierl notes the significance of *Black Beauty* as it was seen by many as a “benchmark in the heightening empathy for both humans and animals in England and America”(214). Indeed, through the anthropomorphism of a talking horse, “Black Beauty dramatizes ... the gradual development of empathy, compassion, and sympathetic imagination in the modern psyche” of the English speaking world (Beierl 214). Imagining things through another’s eyes is the very definition of empathy. Since empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another, what better way to do this than to tell a story from the other’s point of view? Thus, the reader gains access to an empathic perspective of horses and humans simultaneously. Beauty’s perspective is all that we directly experience; when humans mumble, walk away, or think to themselves, the reader no longer has access to their ruminations. The reader is bound to Beauty’s capabilities, just as Beauty himself would be if he were a real horse. Black Beauty serves as an invitation to the reader to embody him, to grow hooves, to eat wonderful warm bran mash, to wear a bit and harness, to pull a cart, to make friends, and ultimately, to feel pain, loss, and sorrow and mature through those experiences.

Activism, Intervention, Responsibility

Through Black Beauty’s perspective, it becomes easier and even convenient to consider an animal’s viewpoint. Black Beauty is not just a horse, he is Horse, personified, but also a stand-in for all sentient animals. While the possible plight of other animals is not

directly discussed, there are several instances where Sewell is clearly including many animals in her proselytizing.

Speaking of John Manly, the head groom from Birtwick Hall, *Black Beauty* relates that “he thought people did not value their animals half enough, nor make friends of them as they ought to do” (61). During an exchange between the title characters from the chapter *Jakes and the Lady*, ‘the lady’ proclaims that “we have no right to distress any of God’s creatures without a very good reason; we call them dumb animals, and so they are, for they cannot tell us how they feel, but they do not suffer less because they have no words” (246). Not only do quotes such as this encourage a holistic outlook built on inclusivity, but they also directly implicate humans in causing unnecessary suffering by failing to see animals as subjective agential beings. Sewell continuously drives these powerful messages home throughout the story, and with a wide variety of characters, in a way that encourages readers to think critically about their (and their societies’) relationship with other animals while promoting values essential to humane education efforts.

In addition to the messages of compassion over cruelty, the novel also highlights the dangers of ignorance and standing idly by as a bystander in the presence of injustice. Ignorance is presented as being at least as morally problematic as acts of cruelty themselves. Joe Green's ignorance resulted in a near death experience for *Black Beauty*, which led John Manly to deliver an impassioned speech:

Only ignorance! only *ignorance*! how can you talk about *only* ignorance? Don't you know that it is the worst thing in the world, next to wickedness? - and which does the most mischief, heaven only knows. If people can say, "Oh! I did not know, I did not mean any harm," they think it is all right. (Sewell 94).

The first-person perspective of *Black Beauty* further addresses ignorance by exposing readers to the idea of animal sensorial experience, and of animals being cognitively aware of those experiences. Elsewhere in the novel, animals’ memory and intelligence are alluded to

as well (Sewell 55). Sewell, however, argues for far more than just awareness of nonhuman sentience and violence towards animals, action is required also.

It is important to note that in most instances of cruelty the situation is intervened upon which ends up working in the horses' favor. This could be symbolic of Sewell encouraging advocacy and activism on behalf of animals in the face of mistreatment. Indeed, Sewell includes many scenes involving direct intervention with positive outcomes. Several characters model examples of standing up against cruelty throughout the novel. Joe Green took action and testified against a man whipping two horses whose cart was stuck in a rut; a woman passerby insisted Jakes remove the bearing rein and stop whipping Black Beauty as he struggled up the hill; a gentleman interjected as a carter whipped and punished two horses in the street. He noted,

It is because people think *only* about their own business, and won't trouble themselves to stand up for the oppressed, nor bring the wrong-doer to light. I never see a wicked thing like this without doing what I can, and many a master has thanked me for letting him know how his horses have been used....My doctrine is this, that if we see cruelty or wrong that we have the power to stop, and do nothing, we make ourselves sharers in the guilt (Sewell 204).

The message is clear: even if individuals do not commit personal acts of violence themselves, if they see or are aware of mistreatment elsewhere, a bystander becomes at least indirectly responsible for allowing cruelty to continue, implicitly condoning the act by remaining silent. This kind of selfishness—or ignorance thereof—is asserted as the primary reason for “why this world is as bad as it is” (Sewell 204).

In the case of Joe Green, then apprentice at Birtwick Hall, when delivering a message with Black Beauty, he comes across a carter whipping two horses straining to pull a cart full of bricks. Joe immediately goes up to the man and pleads with him to stop hurting the horses, for they cannot move the cart because it is stuck in mud. Upon Joe's return to Birtwick, John admires Joe's initiative: “Right Joe! You did right, my boy, whether the fellow gets a summons or not. Many folk would have ridden by and said ‘twas not their business to

interfere. Now, I say that with cruelty and oppression it is everybody's business to interfere when they see it" (Sewell 98). In all of these examples, Sewell is urging the reader to not merely treat animals with kindness and compassion, but to go further and attempt to stop others from causing harm to animals. This is an active stance against cruelty and not merely a passive one that would reduce compassionate treatment of animals to a personal choice.

Through his lifelong struggle with the ups and downs of owners who possess varying degrees of attentiveness and care, *Black Beauty* maintains his good nature despite witnessing and falling victim to repeated cruelty and abuse. Whether mistreatment is direct (as in whippings to pull overloaded carts, or ignoring *Black Beauty*'s obvious pain by overlooking a stone trapped in his hoof) or due to negligence (such as when a carelessly placed pipe caught a stable on fire containing *Black Beauty*, Ginger and two other horses), most nonhuman animal characters were subjected to harsh times as a result of their human masters. For example, Beauty was subjected to ill-treatment when he worked for Skinner's cab company. While working for Skinner, Beauty worked seven days a week without rest, carrying loads that were far too heavy while in a bearing rein, which limited his ability to pull whilst going uphill.

Sewell's views on animal cruelty and interference appear to be motivated by her Christian faith. In Sewell's version of "good," a righteous person is morally called upon to treat animals kindly and stop cruelty when they see it because "we shall all have to be judged according to our works, whether they be towards man or towards beast" (56). Evoking a universal judgment references the second coming of Christ. Elsewhere, through the character of John Manly, Sewell explicitly associates cruelty with the devil and love with God (66-67). Therefore, to see cruelty and ignore it is a sin against God because it is a deliberate turn away from love. This appeal to Christian virtues was likely to have resonated with the English public as "[t]he Victorian age was without a doubt a religious age," which saw a renewal of

the Christian faith (Evans n.p.). The Victorian era also saw the creation of the RSPCA as well as a relative spate of Christian texts which grounded compassionate animal treatment in a life of faith (Massaro 2016). All of this made for a particularly potent time for Sewell to make her pro-animal statement, based at least partially in Christian principles.

Another major theme in Sewell's novel is the relationship between an animal's temperament and the way that they are treated by humans. Throughout the novel and with various human and nonhuman characters, the following theme is repeated: that a large part of why an animal 'misbehaves' is if they are or have been ill-treated by humans. If humans are unhappy with an animal's behavior it is because humans have somehow encouraged that behavior. Black Beauty is noted for being strong-willed and well-mannered. But Ginger, a mare Beauty befriends after arriving at Birtwick Hall, has a more tempestuous demeanor toward humans. It is explained by Ginger herself that this is due to previous unfair treatment. This is directly revealed when Ginger laments to Black Beauty that, "I wish I could think about things as you do; but I can't after all I have gone through" (39). This quote implies that animals cannot just be mentally and spiritually 'broken' and become subordinate in terms of being ridden, but that animals can also be turned against people if pushed far enough. This is not unlike human responses to desperate situations.

Ambivalence and Welfare

While *Black Beauty* explicitly teaches compassionate life lessons like those discussed above, the book is not without its own inconsistencies on this front. Implicitly there are mixed messages. For example, during a hunt, the hunting dogs were treated abusively, but it was not openly condemned, merely observed: "One of the huntsman rode up and whipped off the dogs, who would soon have torn [the rabbit] to pieces" (Sewell 7-8). This quote, while condemning hunting in one aspect, subtly condones the "whipping off" of the dogs, who were sent to chase the rabbit in the first place. Another example occurs during a conversation

about Ginger's sour temperament: "our master never uses a whip if a horse acts right" (Sewell 19). Again, the implication to the reader is that harsh physical punishment is acceptable and subtly condoned in certain circumstances, when animals "misbehave." The frequent use of punishment as motivation throughout the story obstructs the intent of the author to champion the humane treatment of animals.

A critical reading of the text reveals much ambivalence on the themes of obedience, authority, and subjugation. According to Dorré (169),

Although Sewell does not advocate that horses remain undomesticated, or by extension, that girls resist initiation into the social realm, the text's ambivalence...sustains the compulsory operation of social induction while simultaneously objecting to the violence inherent in the process. Therefore, the rigid framework of strict gender and class consciousness that Sewell constructs has trouble admitting kindness as a moral prerogative of the text, creating a narrative that is rife with formal fractures and ideological uncertainties.

Chevalier, in investigating the human-horse relationship through fictional representations, places *Black Beauty* with other popular novels in which "American literature began to imagine wild or untamed animals ... as not to be submitted to the will of man by force, but to be won over patiently, without breaking their spirit" (122).

Thus, it is possible that readers could only infer a limited freedom for animals from the novel. Animals may deserve freedom from overwork and beatings, but not necessarily freedom from general human enslavement—they are apparently still "to be won over." This resembles a welfare stance on animals. Sewell clearly believes that horses (and other nonhumans) should be treated with kindness under the care of humans, but work for animals seems to be put forth as inevitable and natural. Ironically, in the chapter entitled 'Liberty,' Black Beauty describes his new situation: "Straps here and straps there, a bit in my mouth, and blinkers over my eyes. Now I am not complaining, for I know it must be so" (26).

This willing submission to the demands and restraint apparatuses of humans is part of what makes Black Beauty so likeable to many characters in the novel, and, we would

suggest, also helped to make the novel so influential to many readers since it upholds what society views as the natural order of things. We would argue that this comes at a serious price to actual horses since children, indoctrinated into a society that generally devalues animals, will probably not see that it is because *Black Beauty* is born into a life of servitude that he, and others like him, run into much cruel treatment. *Black Beauty* is perfectly willing to serve kind ‘masters,’ even describing the feeling he would get when a harness was put on him as pleasurable (Sewell 111). Later in the novel, Beauty again asserts animal complicity to subordination: “We horses do not mind hard work if we are treated reasonably” (Sewell 213). Passages such as these are why, in her study of *Talking Animals in Children’s Literature*, Catherine Elick acknowledges the giant leap for animal-kind that *Black Beauty* helped initiate while also remarking that *Black Beauty* is emblematic of animal characters who “remain *objects* of human cruelty or kindness rather than fully fledged *subjects* in charge of their own destinies” (8). This theme of indoctrination was likely particularly important to Sewell as she wrestled with her own social and physical subjugation.

While Sewell targets individual behavior with her novel, and to a degree institutional practices as well, epistemologically, animals are still subservient to humans. Nowhere is it stated that horses have a right to not work for humans, but it is repeatedly stressed that animals (especially horses) will perform work-related tasks and reflect the ‘owner’s’ class status better with improved treatment. This resembles a welfarist take on Aristotle’s myth of consent. That is, that animals willingly agree to captivity and to perform laborious tasks for humans in exchange for humane treatment including their protection. This idea is not challenged in the novel, creating an awkward tension that runs through the book:

Despite her concentration on its torments, Sewell maintains an oddly ambivalent attitude toward the subjugated body. For example, the fact that Beauty can speak his story appears to be a liberatory act, and on the literal level of horse care, it may very well be. But Sewell’s message, which has Beauty vowing to always do his work and never kick his master, functions to maintain social systems that are intrinsically cruel. Beauty’s protest against hurtful practices consistently capitulates to mechanisms of

power Sewell implicitly condones mastery over the disenfranchised, yet she struggles with her own powerlessness as well, so that her text at once legitimizes oppression while avidly protesting against it (Dorré 171).

In this respect, while the autobiographical nature of the novel may seem liberation orientated in that it gives a voice and an individual history complete with desires, emotions and autonomy, to a nonhuman animal, the end result may not be quite so revelatory. In fact, the autobiographical nature of the book may even “reinforce the idea that personal agency is linked to language,” that is, that the value of animals is measured against their similarity to humans (Elick 81). Likewise, the nearly exclusive focus of attention on horses could also limit the effectiveness of the novel to induce readers to extrapolate its compassionate messages to animals of other species.

Even so, it is widely recognized that *Black Beauty* was the impetus for some significant, lasting and positive effects for animal welfare, which should not be overlooked. As a consequence of being handed out to carriage companies in an effort to educate the public on the cruelty that exists in the industry, it was crucial in helping abolish use of the bearing rein, a notoriously harsh restraint strap “used to pull a horse’s head in towards its chest to force the appearance of a noticeable arch of the neck” (Norris 4). The treatment of animals in the era that Sewell lived and was writing this book was perhaps put best by Morse and Malone: “Although perspectives on animal welfare and animal subjectivity were changing drastically in the Victorian era, few people espoused the radical idea of animal rights” (Victorian Studies 13).

Conclusion

This paper employed fauna-criticism to critically assess some of the major literary features of *Black Beauty* and the degree of effectiveness to which they articulated the animal standpoint. While *Black Beauty* clearly presents a morality inclusive of all sentient beings, it is not also without its potential drawbacks which may impede the effectiveness of such a

morality. That being said, the popularity the novel has enjoyed since its publication has no doubt contributed towards better treatment of animals that are in close contact with humans. The importance of this point cannot be understated. It is as if the reader is the human equivalent of *Black Beauty*, and Sewell is talking to them as people. When Duchess, Beauty's mother, gives Beauty advice to always be good and gentle, it is really Sewell's voice informing the reader of how to treat others. That Beauty never goes against his mother's advice illustrates that people can maintain compassion throughout their lives, even in the face of opposition, which is to be expected from society. Hope for the future is symbolized in Beauty's eventual contentment; The re-appearance of Joe Green, a character who Beauty shared a mutual fondness of as a colt, reinforces the theme of perseverance and being spiritually rewarded for kind behavior.

In writing *Black Beauty*, Anna Sewell was a visionary for the need for animal protections, especially in the case of working animals such as carriage and cart horses. Although she wrote the novel with adults in mind, she likely would have been pleased at the place that her book now holds in children's literature. The novel, while not intended as a children's story, continues to hold critical educational potential as a school text that "instill[s] values of benevolence and compassion in children" (Dorré 168). Children seem to be more willing to connect with nonhuman animals and possess a less inhibited imagination with which to do so. Perhaps Amy Weldon says it best: "The genius of Sewell's simple conceit—what would you learn if the horse that pulled your carriage everyday could speak to you? —is that it upsets adult prejudices by returning us to the moral and imaginative porousness of childhood, where empathy wasn't a conscious effort at all" (Weldon).

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