PALGRAVE STUDIES IN ANIMALS AND LITERATURE

The Palgrave Handbook of Animals and Literature

Edited by

Susan McHugh · Robert McKay · John Miller

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Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature

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Various academic disciplines can now be found in the process of executing an 'animal turn', questioning the ethical and philosophical grounds of human exceptionalism by taking seriously the nonhuman animal presences that haunt the margins of history, anthropology, philosophy, sociology and literary studies. Such work is characterised by a series of broad, cross-disciplinary questions. How might we rethink and problematise the separation of the human from other animals? What are the ethical and political stakes of our relationships with other species? How might we locate and understand the agency of animals in human cultures?

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ISSN 2634-6338 ISSN 2634-6346 (electronic)
Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature
ISBN 978-3-030-39772-2 ISBN 978-3-030-39773-9 (eBook)
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-39773-9

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG.
The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Acknowledgements

Susan McHugh would like to thank Marion Copeland for providing long-time support and encouragement to study animals as animals in literature. All students studying animal-themed texts in her courses deserve credit as well for inspiration, especially Halie Pruitt in the Animal Humanities seminar. My work also is made possible by my beloved family, friends, and many supportive colleagues at the University of New England and elsewhere. Here it is dedicated to memories of learning how to study animal behaviour from Teresa Dzieweczynski, fearless and peerless leader of Team Fighting Fish.

Robert McKay would like to thank Lily Buntain, for the classes on *Animal Farm* that started it all. Thanks also go to the University of Sheffield for supporting this project, and particularly to friends and students in the School of English who make working life enjoyable. I especially thank everyone involved in the Sheffield Animal Studies Research Centre over the past years. I thank Sonny and Oscar, who fill my days with joy, and as ever, my deepest thanks, for this and everything else, go to Gayle.

John Miller would like to thank successive generations of students on LIT6045: Humans, Animals, Monsters and Machines at the University of Sheffield. Every group has challenged me in different ways and taught me a huge amount about how we imagine the lives of other creatures. The seed for my contribution to the volume was planted by the late Anthony Carrigan, an inspiring thinker and writer.

The editors would like to thank the contributors, and each other.

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Introduction: Towards an Animal-Centred Literary History

Susan McHugh, Robert McKay, and John Miller

Slippery or hard to catch, difficult to pin down, to be flushed out into the open, a moving target. Metaphors abound for describing the elusiveness of literary meaning, metaphors that equate it to an animal to be pursued (such as, here, a fish, butterfly, fox, or grouse). The implication is that interpretation itself is some seemingly proper violence to be done. And yet, other more generous, friendly kinds of encounter of reader and animal in the field of literature are possible. This handbook is a record of such encounters, and so we hope it will bring yet more into the world.

To introduce them, let's start by opening a well-known and important novel, finding the animals in it, and making sense of the encounters with animality it makes possible. The beginning of Virginia Woolf's classic work of literary modernism, *To the Lighthouse*, is itself a good example of literary meaning's evasions, its disturbance of the human, and its proximity to animality.

> "Yes of course, if it's fine tomorrow", said Mrs Ramsay. "But you'll have to be up with the lark", she added.[1]

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S. McHugh et al. (eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Animals and Literature*, Palgrave Studies in Animals and Literature,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-39773-9_1

These sentences place and then promptly displace a human reader. For the "you" they speak to is not the "me" that is reading, pulled into the story by the direct mode of address; instead "I" am changed to become Mrs Ramsay's tantalised son James, a six year old boy who fervently hopes to make the eponymous visit to the lighthouse. As the novel proceeds, this visit, and the lighthouse itself, become heavily overdetermined symbols of humans' striving for meaning and for understanding, of their perpetual need for that striving, and for the attempt to establish through it some kind of new order; it therefore matters greatly how these symbols are introduced. Mrs Ramsay is first reassuringly affirmative about the trip, but then immediately conditional: *To the Lighthouse* is set on Skye, an island to the north west of the Scottish mainland, where the prospect of good weather is certainly *not* to be guaranteed. Human projects, we are given to understand, are necessarily subject to climatic conditions—a strong enough reminder of their cosmic insignificance. But Mrs Ramsay is at last even more determinate and commanding: only by following the ways of the birds, by participating in the animal world, is there hope that such plans will come to pass. As the opening of a novel, this moment is a perfect instance of literature's ability to undermine self-certainty, and its demand for a suspension, an evasion or a projection of the reading self. In literature, it says, "we" are not "ourselves", our fully and separately human selves. And such a self-suspension demands of us, Woolf suggests, that we place ourselves at one with the animal.

Perhaps, you are thinking, such a reading is *strictly for the birds*—an idiom meaning unimportant or worthless (after the seeds and sprouts that sometimes appear in horse manure); after all, isn't "up with the lark" simply a dead metaphor, a turn of phrase meaning to get up very early: something every traveller knows well enough? But if so, that makes it all the more fitting as a way to approach to the central topic of this handbook, animals in literature. The critic John Berger asserts that "it is not unreasonable to suppose that the first metaphor was animal".[2] It is a speculation whose reasoning, while strictly speaking impossible to prove, sits well with the near omnipresence of animal imagery across forms of visual, sonic or linguistic representation or creativity, from anywhere in the world at any point in time. Phrase and fable, religious iconography, painting, heraldry, popular cartoon, animated film, music, advertising, dance, digital media, drama, fiction, poetry. Certainly, the prevalence of the animal-as-metaphor thesis ensures that animals present a particular problem to reading or interpretation. This can be presented as an either/or dilemma. Do we read this or that literary animal as a metaphorical figure: as a symbol, part of a cross-species allegory in which animal life embodies ideas about human life? Or should we, reading animals in literature, find ways to make sense of them *as* animals, attentive to their portrayal as an account of their own material or experiential reality? But this would be to oversimplify, and to miss the special value of animals as literary presences. For, as the essays in this volume show, there is great value in both of these interpretive positions, the metaphorical and the material, in navigating between them, and attempting both at the same time.

From the very beginnings of literary production—in this handbook we travel as far back as the eighth century with some discussion of works from the ancient world—animals and animality have offered writers a limitless resource of expressive possibility. In creative, poetic hands, such imagery produces new and insightful ways of understanding human life and the world around it. Woolf is herself fond of such imagery and uses it throughout *To the Lighthouse*, with almost everyone in the novel characterised in relation to animal life at some point. Here are two examples which highlight how Woolf's modernism, an art of multiple perspectives showing that meaning is always shaped by the form of perception, would be impossible without a metaphorics of the animal.

Mrs Ramsay's husband is a philosopher whose aim is to comprehend the nature of reality, a project he thinks of as like working progressively through the alphabet; but he is past his prime, some way short of the genius he narcissistically hopes for, and self-conscious of his mind's waning acuity. The limits of his intellectual capacity are represented in a memorable saurian simile. "A shutter, like the leathern eyelid of a lizard, flickered over the intensity of his gaze and obscured the letter R. In that flash of darkness he heard people saying—he was a failure—that R was beyond him" (41). The poetic image here, strikingly alliterative and assonant, couples an exotic animal (by the standards of an English family holidaying in island Scotland, at least) with the mundane resilient quality of tanned animal skin. The metaphor is somewhat overburdened, though, drawing also on the way sight conventionally stands for intellectual knowledge, and mixing this with a symbol of finality in the closing of a window shutter. So the effect is striking, if somewhat strange, and this highlights by contrast the hidebound stolidity of Ramsay's intellect.

Conversely, the intimate reality of other people, and Mrs Ramsay's deep ability to perceive it through the "knowledge and wisdom [of the] heart" (58–9), is imagined by Lily Briscoe (a young artist and guest of the Ramsays) in quite different animal terms:

> How then, she had asked herself, did one know one thing or another about people, sealed as they were? Only like a bee, drawn by some sweetness or sharpness in the air intangible to touch or taste, one haunted the dome-shaped hive, ranged the wastes of the air over the countries of the world alone, and then haunted the hives with their murmurs and their stirrings; the hives which were people. (59)

For Martha Nussbaum, this passage shows Lily recognising that people cannot fundamentally be known, that they "cannot be entered and possessed" because they are "in fact, sealed hives".[3] But this is surely to downplay how Woolf undermines the difference between human and bee by moving away from simile, to metaphor and then to an assertion of selfsameness; the effect is to naturalise and so insist upon the intimate understanding that Mrs Ramsay achieves. She is first "like a bee", pathetically and romantically imagined in a solitary, involuntary "haunting" of the "dome-shaped hive", a clear enough figure for

a compulsion to experience other minds. But the sentence ends with a kind of refusal of metaphor that is equally an assertion of cross-species existence: "the hives that were people". As bees quite naturally range individually but live collectively in hives, Mrs Ramsay is herself alone but empathetically inhabits the worlds of others. Woolf's writing does not put the specifics of apian life to use instrumentally, imaginatively drawing on them to describe a fundamentally different and more aesthetically important kind of life that is human. Rather, it lays bare the force of the creaturely, a space which holds human life together with nonhuman life. Many essays in this volume explore that space too.

We can sense in these examples something perhaps obvious but still needing to be remarked about the presence of animal life in literature, and this is the sheer experiential richness of animal bodies and animal worlds. This aspect of literary animality is important not least because of the increasing vulnerability of those bodies and worlds in this era of extinction. In their visual, sonic, olfactory, physical and experiential heterogeneity animals inspire, and thus they can be made to epitomise, any possible emotion: they surprise, excite, delight, intrigue; they provoke trepidation or fear *and* anticipation, fun; disgust *and* hunger; horror *and* compassion. Any such list will by necessity be incomplete; but it is also one reason why animality has been such a part of the imaginative force of mythological representations, to choose one especially prevalent site of animal imagery. Woolf, too, knows this. James Ramsay's oedipal animosity towards his father, which he continues to experience in adolescence as impotence to resist the force of a fierce murderous rage, is figured as a "sudden black-winged harpy, with its talons and its beak all cold and hard, that struck and struck at you (he could almost feel the beak on his bare leg, where it had struck as a child) and then made off" (198). The creative significance of avian animality in bodying forth psychic horror in lines like these reminds us that it is almost impossible to imagine a literary gothic without the aura of black feathers.

But beyond this—the meaningfulness of an animal otherness not encountered in actuality but profoundly experienced nonetheless—we need also to recognise the force and meaningfulness in literature of the quotidian world of human–animal encounters. The importance of interpreting the everyday and the ordinary, of which animal encounters are a significant component, has been highlighted in recent years by literary critics and theorists such as Rita Felski.[4] In *To the Lighthouse*, we learn that Mr Ramsay decides to abandon the homosocial world of male friendship and learning to enter family life when he sees a hen "straddling her wings out in protection of a covey of little chicks" and finds this "pretty, pretty" (27). This is neither the first nor last time that womanhood will be associated with such domestic animality, in this novel or elsewhere. By contrast, we learn of his characteristically masculine and metropolitan entitlement in longing for pastoral escape from the exact same family world when he wistfully and fantastically reflects on the intellectual freedom he has felt on "little sandy beaches where no one had been since the beginning of time [and] the seals sat up and looked at you" (77). Different again, Woolf characterises

with grim humour the uneasy mixture of fragility and violence that marks Ramsay's patriarchal position—an animal encounter and a glass thrown in rage as a result: "'An earwig', [his daughter] Prue murmured, awestruck, 'in his milk'. Other people might find centipedes. But he had built round him such a fence of sanctity, and occupied the space with such a demeanour of majesty that an earwig in his milk was a monster" (214–15). This insect is out of place at the breakfast table, of course (hence the outrage). Another animal is involved but the difference is stark when Mrs Ramsay serves, as the *pièce de résistance* at the novel's centrepiece dinner, *boeuf-en-daube* (a peasant dish of beef and vegetables cooked slowly in a clay pot). There, an animal in its proper place, as meat, epitomises a rich coming together and mingling of different elements, speaking to the commingling of consciousnesses that is the novel's formal method.

Alongside such individual moments, literature documents the more systematic ways in which animal encounters are structured. As well as eating animals, humans live with animals, work with animals, train animals, make sport of animals, trade animals, study animals, farm animals, look at animals, fight beside animals, worship animals, make animals live and make animals die. These activities are so extensive in human societies that it is no surprise to find their significant presence in literature. And this offers rich scope both for learning about such important aspects of life through literature's lens and for forms of textual interpretation—historical; materialist; queer; feminist; colonial—that find literary meaning always embedded in social context.

At the dinner in Woolf's novel, for instance, Charles Tansley, a rather self-important young philosopher and would-be politician, shows his true colours like this: "They were talking about the fishing industry. Why did no one ask him his opinion? What did they know about the fishing industry?" It is a fleeting moment; but our understanding of the characters and their politics—and what it means for metropolitan intellectuals to pontificate at leisure about such things while on holiday in a community directly affected—would be helped by knowing more about the extensive parliamentary discussion on the topic around 1908–09, when this part of the novel is set.[5] Later, we gain an insight to the troubled marriage between Paul and Minta Rayley by way of the increasingly boring husband's practice of breeding Belgian hares, a kind of domesticated rabbit (188). Our understanding of quite what a dull and ineffectual man Paul Rayley has become is helped by knowing that there *was* a lucrative vogue for this pastime, but it waned some twenty years before his interest. Elsewhere in the novel, when Mrs Ramsay's children laugh dismissively as she "speaks with warmth and eloquence", and on the basis of research, about "the iniquity of the English dairy system" a quietly complex ironic point is made about misogyny and the diminution of women's expertise (112). In turn, though, Woolf offers us Mrs Ramsay's opinion, and her mothering, as a direct counterpoint to the violence of British colonial masculinity. When doing the work of calming a roomful of children scared or excited out of sleep by a taxidemised boar on the wall, she wonders "what had possessed Edward to send this horrid skull?"(112–13). She covers it with her shawl, and reimagines it, for her

frightened daughter Cam: "it was like a bird's nest; it was like a beautiful mountain…with valleys and flowers and bells ringing and birds singing and little goats and antelopes".[6] And Cam is still soothing herself with this story a decade later (219).

Such moments indicate a truth borne out by many essays in this handbook, that if we pay attention to the ways that human and animal lives interact—attending to the tension, the complex relation, between animals' lived experience and their literary representation, between their lives and what their lives are made to signify—we can come, through literature, to encounter animal standpoints and to understand animals' experiences per se. This can happen in two broad ways. The first is by way of textual strategies that decentre humanist perception. As the ensuing essays reveal, there are too many of these to count. *To the Lighthouse*, famously, comprises two long sections each covering a few hours and one short, profoundly anti-realist section, "Time Passes", which covers around a decade. In the latter, the force of what has recently been called a lively materialism, the agency of nonhuman beings and things, is epitomised in a memorable sentence that captures nature's counter-colonisation of the Ramsays' holiday house during the years the family is absent: "toads had nosed their way in" (150).[7] Elsewhere, with a quite different technique, Woolf shocks us into thinking carefully about a moment of animal experience. This is the imagistic chapter six of the novel's second section in full.

> [Macalister's boy took one of the fish and cut a square out of its side to bait the hook with. The mutilated body (it was still alive) was thrown back into the sea.][8]

By devoting an entire chapter to what is presented as a kind of parenthesis to the novel's main action, Woolf asks us to reconsider the seemingly minor nature of what is, from the animal's perspective, such an extreme event. It is the multi-perspectival aim of her literary modernism extended, beyond subjectivity, to the animal as object.

The second, perhaps more recognisable, way we can encounter an animal's standpoint entails what is often called anthropomorphism. This is a word that is often applied, not blankly to mean the representation of animal life in human manners or terms, but pejoratively for the misattribution of language, consciousness, perception, intentionality, emotionality or the like to animals.[9] Certainly, the history of literature is also a history of putting clothes on animals' backs and words in their mouths; but that is not quite to say that such words cannot be true to animals themselves. This handbook will offer many accounts of how we might read through anthropomorphism to animals. One final example from *To the Lighthouse* documents this dilemma too, when Mrs Ramsay thinks of two rooks on a treetop, playfully but with obvious meaning, as "Joseph and Mary". Recognising them one evening, she speaks to her son who likes to hit at them with a slingshot:

> "Don't you think they mind", she said to Jasper, "having their wings broken?" Why did he want to shoot poor old Joseph and Mary? He shuffled a little on the stairs, and felt rebuked, but not seriously, for she did not understand the fun of shooting birds; that they did not feel; and being his mother she lived away in another division of the world. (90)

Living away in another division of the world—a division not characterised by the separation of humans from animals—is, we might say, rather a good definition of the literature studied in this handbook, and of the interpretive encounters with animals and animality offered in it.

We have offered this survey of examples from *To the Lighthouse* not because it is especially noteworthy as a literary work about animals, but rather because it reveals the extent to which the meaningfulness of animals, animality and human–animal relations is hiding in plain sight in literature. As such, the novel stands as a helpful introduction to the different ways of writing and reading animals that follow in this handbook: from making sense of the interpretive complexity of animal imagery to meeting the demand to read textual animals as representations of actual animal presence; from documenting the phenomenological richness and complexity of animal worlds to dramatising the meaningfulness of everyday animal encounters and the social practice of life with them; and from thinking through the problematics of anthropomorphism to developing strategies of literary form that push us beyond anthropocentric interpretation.

That these aspects were not prioritised by Woolf's initial critics also indicates how the value of reading and teaching literature in this way has not always been self-evident. Because literatures of all cultures and times include representations of nonhuman life, it is important to ask why literary animal studies has taken shape as a sub-field only in recent decades. The history of literary criticism largely reads like a handbook for the studied avoidance of animals in literature as anything but human symbols or other literary devices.[10]

That approach became impossible to sustain from the 1980s onwards with the applications of poststructuralist theory to twentieth-century literature. As reflected in many chapters of this book, Jacques Derrida's linguistic emphasis in deconstructive theory has proven particularly influential. Initially, it helped to defer the problem of literary animals as human representations by identifying human animality as a deconstructive element, at least, within the hierarchical and dualistic terms that oppose human to animal in dominant Eurowestern traditions. But Derrida's last set of lectures is proving still more significant as a direct call to address the violence inherent in language itself, which from posthumanist perspectives creates and maintains a limited notion of what constitutes humanity with dire consequences for all who are thereby thrust out of the human fold.[11]

Yet it can also be said that the recent and profound changes to scholarship on animals in literary texts reflects a millennial turn marked by ever-growing scales of deaths, whether through genocide, industrial slaughter, or

anthropogenic extinction, and the interlinked, disproportionate losses of and for historically oppressed peoples. While animal studies across the disciplines remains dominated by an emphasis on Anglophone texts and perspectives, a propitious thread across still more literary scholarship from the 1980s works to decolonise representations of humans, animals, and human–animal relations alike. Recourse to Woolf's novel allows us to foreground a problem that the volume as a whole resists. By situating canonical literature in English amid so many other rich texts and traditions, this volume is crafted to complement the inroads staked by Derridean deconstruction in literary animal studies by identifying possibilities for animal stories to transform the very terms of justice, upholding related claims of feminist and decolonial historians, philosophers, and others that animal discourses and embodied experiences are difficult to separate.

There are and need to be many more ways of studying and teaching animals in literature. With the wealth of additional possibilities modelled in the pages that follow, we make the case for why literary animal studies must remain open and welcoming in pursuit of creative answers to a shared problem, which is, as Tobias Linné and Helena Pedersen phrase it, "how to create a space and a language in academia […] to speak about, and work to change, the situation and experiences of animals in human society".[12] The global rise in meat consumption in tandem with the animal rights movement is an irony which shows that, at the very least, rights-based pro-animal logics need complementing. Reflecting and shaping the vital and intimate structures of feeling that negotiate "between the animals we are and the animals we aren't", in Philip Armstrong's resonant phrasing,[13] the socially transformative work of literature requires that there can be no pre-set agenda for representing—let alone imagining into being—a better world for humans and other animals. Taking up the challenge means resisting the moral solace of limiting ourselves to any one of the ways of doing literary animal studies that seem possible now, instead holding open a space for the possibility of more ways yet to come.

Even so, the organisation of this volume is based on a conventional division of literary studies into distinct historical periods, with the addition of a section on some of the theoretical underpinnings of literary animal studies and a section on future directions for research on literary animals. In many fields of critical endeavour, following this schema would require little explanation. Academic departments are often organised in terms of historical expertise, reflecting the way in which the process of academic specialisation tends to involve an increasing commitment to knowledge and understanding of a particular historical period; and university courses are often subdivided in terms of this periodisation. One significant aim of this handbook is to document and analyse the meaningful presence of animals and human–animal relations across the history of literature in English as it is read and studied today. As such, abiding by these periodisations is helpful because we want this handbook to be useful to students and educators, especially those who encounter literary animals in the context of university English studies courses without a specific focus on animals.

There are, of course, caveats that might be added to the parcelling up of literature into the institutionally convenient sequence of seven historical segments we use here: Medieval, Early Modern, Eighteenth Century, Romantic, Victorian, Modernist and Contemporary. Clearly, the neat demarcations of these periods are somewhat false. That the eighteenth century ran from 1700 to 1799 is unarguable, but this does not mean that the period is marked off by radical schisms in literary style that happened suddenly in 1699 or 1800. Similarly, though the Victorian period indisputably follows the reign of Queen Victoria from 1837 to 1901, this does not mean that Romanticism ended in 1836 and that Modernism began in 1902. There are alternative ways of dividing literary history too. The long nineteenth century running from 1789 to 1914 enables a broader historical sweep; we might have included a section on the Restoration to include greater specificity in the earlier periods. Equally, any periodisation, most especially those based on nation states, like Victorian, is thrown into complex confusion when the inter-relation of time and place in a colonial or transnational world are taken into account. But despite these cautions about the precision of the shift from one period to the next and the seemingly rather arbitrary process of drawing of historical lines, the periodisation we have here still tends to be thought of as meaningfully, if broadly and contestably, descriptive of the march of human history and culture and, more specifically, of literary production. Here is what a very bald, generalising and traditional account of the literary history this volume covers might look like.

The Medieval period—in Anglophone literary studies—sees the arrival of something that might be thought of as *English* Literature; the Early Modern period brings us the great flowering of cultural production of the Renaissance; the eighteenth century is synonymous with the Enlightenment; Romanticism is an age of revolutionary sympathies and of emotional attunement to the natural world; the Victorians bring us realism; the modernists take it away through the remarkable artistic and cultural revolutions of the early twentieth-century avant-garde; the contemporary period sees the arrival of something called postmodernism and a proliferation of different national literatures in English stimulated by decolonisation and globalisation.

But what happens when we try to think of this periodisation from the point of view of literary animal studies? What do beasts know or care of the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, or the avantgarde? The answer, presumably, is nothing.[14] Literary historical periodisations function through a humanist framework that conveys a partisan and exclusionary conception of textual production. A conventional view of literary history privileges particular forms of life and marginalises others (and, as well as being a humanist tradition, a canonical conception of literary history is also patriarchal and Eurocentric). Thinking of literary history, or indeed history more generally, as just the business of humans confines scholarship to a tiny fragment of planetary experience. Moreover, to treat human history as isolated from other species is phantasmagoric. Darwin begins the conclusion to his final book, *The Formation of Vegetable Mould Through the Action of Worms*, with the perhaps surprising