

**Specters of Nature; or, From Metaphor to Murder:
The Nonhuman-animal in Rash's *Serena***

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ABSTRACT

*This paper explores the marginalized roles of the non-human animal throughout Ron Rash's 2008 novel, *Serena*, by classifying various types of animal occurrences into three categories: "The Metaphorical," "The Authentic," and "The Murderous," to investigate their role(s), significance, and signification in the text.*

Introduction

Serena Pemberton, Ron Rash's eponymous matriarch figure, is assessing her timber empire. "[The rattlesnakes] should be killed off," she says, "especially in the slash" (59). Irony lies in that "the slash," a profusion of "stumps and brush," provides a natural home to the snakes—an evolutionary reaction to both predation and human encroachment (24). Serena and her husband George Pemberton, however, will soon encroach further. They will disregard nature, though gazing over their Appalachian empire, until it poses a threat to their wellbeing—or until it becomes useful, such as the horse as a mode of transportation. Nature is not revered, is rarely discussed, and arises most frequently through pragmatic observations: "snakes rarely stirred until the sun fell full on the slopes... yellow jackets and hornets offered no such respite" (24). Nature's role becomes one of absence. It is buried deep into the narrative through metaphorical associations, in materialistic descriptions such as "gray tiger cloth pants," "swallowtail hunting blazers," or, in comparative relationships, such as "Ross... stared at the lay preacher as he might a chimpanzee that had wandered into camp and begun chattering" (22, 25, 31). Readers, like the Pembertons, assume a passive relationship with the natural world. But the presence of animals in the within the text is undeniable; one is left with the impression that the novel is laden with animality. But most allusions to the non-human animal, though ubiquitous, fail to signify the actual agent. Readers, attempting to parse a sentence, might first anticipate the manifest image of a "tiger," thus loading the text with specters of nature, before ultimately signaling toward the materialistic with "gray tiger cloth pants."

Scholars have noted the deep-rooted animality of the metaphors at work throughout works such as *Serena*. Cary Wolfe, a leading scholar in "the burgeoning area known as animal studies," compares it to "herding cats." She explains the "recourse to [her] analogy is meant to suggest that 'the animal,' when you think about it, is everywhere (including in the metaphors, similes, proverbs, and narratives we have relied on for centuries)" (564). Why the animal? What, precisely, does the metaphor gain by employing the animal? Some might posit the animal is used as a symbol of beauty, as a contrast to the 'things' the Pemberton's don't see, or, as a transcendental signified for *this* or for *that*: the exhausted representations replete throughout fable studies. But these notions come too easily—the answer is more difficult. Marianne Dekoven critiques "a reductive, ahistorical approach that lumps all literary animals together," submitting that "[a]ll literary representations of animals no more form a unified or even

meaningful category than do those of women or the working class” (363). Her post-Derridean¹ idea, warning of the moral/ethical dangers of such general and sweeping homogenizations, provides a new crux for exploration: What, in Ron Rash’s *Serena*, is the purpose of the animal? Or more specifically, the function of individual animals in the text.

This arduous task, however, would provide more of a key than an analysis and therefore reinforce the fallacious idea that each instance of animality is with set reason. It seems, instead, more productive to separate various types of references categories—“The Authentic,” “The Metaphorical,” and the “The Murderous”—of discussing their various effects on/function(s) within the text.

The Authentic

“The Authentic” accounts for those animals who *are*—namely, individual nonhuman-animal agents throughout the text, such as “Shakes, the farmer’s prize Plott hound,” “the rest of the dogs piled in back...” or, trailing behind the wagon, the horses on which sit Buchanan and the Pembertons (67). These animals, illustrative in that they all serve the same purpose, are employed in the narrative to serve a need which humans are not capable of fulfilling—in this instance, that of transportation/hunting. These are exclusively exploitative relationships; ones in which the human asserts his/her dominance by 1) discovering a/multiple use(s)² for a/multiple animal agent(s), and 2) controlling/exploiting the animal agent’s use for self-profit.

But this claim is often disputed. Nietzsche writes:

Consider the cattle, grazing as they pass you by: they do not know what is meant by yesterday or today, they leap about, eat, rest, digest, leap about again, and so from morn till night and from day to day, fettered to the moment and its pleasure or displeasure, and thus neither melancholy or bored. (60)

This is the sway of those who have built a formidable defense mechanism, convincing themselves that animals experience in terms of cognitive function and pain than human agents: an anthropocentric fallacy in itself that “human” has its own distinction from “animal.” They, like Nietzsche, may grant you the single concession, “[t]his is a hard sight for man to see,” a misleading shift in pathos—invoking self-questioning and the implicit distinction that “man,” itself, is somehow a more-deserving mammal than the cattle. Nietzsche continues:

...for, though he thinks himself better than the animal because he is human, he cannot help envying them their happiness—what they have, a life neither bored nor painful, is precisely what he wants, yet he cannot have it because he refuses to be like an animal. A human being may well ask an animal: “Why do you not speak to me of your happiness but only stand at gaze at me?” The animal would like to answer, and say “The reason is because I always forget what I was going to

¹ See Derrida’s “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)” (398-99).

² Here, let “*use*” be a trait held, in some capacity, by human agents; however, one more dominant in the nonhuman agent.

say”—but then he forgets this answer too, and stayed silent: so that the human being was left wondering. (60)

His argument both begins and ends with bounding assumptions. Everything in between is simple fiction. Modern science provides verification, Wolfe says, of “the richness of [animals’] mental and emotional lives, the complexity of their forms of communication and interaction” (567). The human agent develops, attempting to justify/absolve his/her guilt, a set of arbitrary scales—*x is less complex than y, so x is less capable of feeling...*—determining *how much* pain/emotion the nonhuman-animal is capable of experiencing. The defense mechanism comes at the need to repress an irrepressible guilt, similar to the defense of racialized chattel slavery in the American South. If the human agent posits the nonhuman-animal agent is less capable of experiencing pain/emotion than himself/herself, the human agent allows himself/herself to shake feelings of guilt. So the hunting dog/horse is explored before, say, the rattlesnake; “because if one travels too far down the phylogenetic tree,” explains Thomas Nagel, “people gradually shed [any] faith that there is experience there at all” (324).

This, for obvious reasons, cannot be the case for Serena Pemberton’s eagle, “[set]... on the perch like a big old rooster” (105). It has been trained and conditioned by experience to serve its God-head role. Ross, reflecting on the eagle’s most recent kill, claims “if it can handle a boss rattler like that one it can handle anything on four legs or even two if it came to that.” But the eagle, as powerful/omniscient as any single living creature could be, is not in control here: “I’d no more strut up and tangle with that eagle,” he continues, “than I’d tangle with the one what can tame such a critter” (107). The eagle’s role is clear: It is other. “The bird, it ain’t from this country,” Snipes claims. “It’s from Asia, a Mongoloid, and it’s worth five hundred dollars... [i]t’s the same kind of eagle Kubla Khan used to hunt with” (106). Its role is earned by the indecision of its roots, by its foreignness to the Appalachians. But, as it soars above, omniscient, its sovereign master literally/metaphorically below, reaps its benefits.

The Metaphorical

“Animals,” claim Susan McHugh, “emerged as significant figures in English Literature only in terms of metaphor” (488). *The Metaphorical* animal constantly fails to signify. The trope is accepted in modern criticism as a means to implicitly explore the relations of human interaction. This, however, only accounts for the literal-animal metaphor: the grand animal figures of fables and parables, or the animal of presence, such as *The Authentic*. Rash’s metaphor is different in its approach: It would prove difficult for readers, picturing “[t]he water [looking] smooth and slow moving, as if the clod made the river sluggish,” to not, at least temporarily, see the absent slug; or to not leave the metaphor, “the appetite of a horse,” without a trace of equine imagery (165, 169). It differs from *The Authentic* in that it only leaves a vague impression of animality, a fleeting vision before signifying toward the materialistic realm.

But these specters serve a significant purpose: The quasi-signifieds are seeded throughout the text to add a false sense of presence, as if suggesting the animals have been forgotten as sentient beings, and now serve only as artifacts of memory, things to recall as comparisons, novelties. The animal, in limbo between presence/absence, suggests an appropriate parallel: the

Pemberton's commitment to materialism; their neglect for the principles and aesthetics of the nonhuman environ until it threatens their wellbeing.

But there is irony in the Metaphorical animal. Halfway through the text, amidst murder and snakebites, felled timber and neglected nature, the same workers who destroy the land begin donning "rabbit's foots," "half-pound iron horseshoes," and "feathers," as if nature has decided to recompense the human agent for its (nature's) decline (183). Nature becomes humankind's protector from nature. The Metaphorical animal, however, wins a single ironic victory in Rash's narrative: in that of Pemberton's sandwich, "rat poison [mixed in] the mustard" with "some of that Green Paris [rodenticide/insecticide] to sweeten it" (363). The poisoned sandwich, mobilized by Galloway—Serena's faithful henchman serving not unlike a faithful dog—kills Pemberton while suggesting his own ratness. Here, we notice characters falling from their esteemed roles as humans.

The borders become porous between human and animal.

The Murderous

"The Murderous" refers not just to the panther, who, even after its final signification in the text, maintains a similar presence to the metaphor: existing passively to signify possible existence. But to the human as well. Here, again, the animal's role is marginalized. Serena is credited for the kill shot but absent at the murder, while "The Murderer" has seen no mention in pages. In fact, as the panther stalks in the brush, "[crying]... like an infant," Pemberton can only consider how "he suddenly knew, knew more surely than he'd ever known anything, that Serena had come for him," further marginalizing the panther (367). Her intended use for the animal agent³ is, again, exploited for her benefit—then subsequently ignored.

There are loud themes, however, at play here—tropes that, if strictly adhered to, risk a certain heavy-handedness. The panther's comeuppance could easily assume "the sensationalist approach to animal violence, supporting the narrow Darwinism that interprets survival of the fittest literally," Dekoven mentions:

Violence is of course inherent in predation. A significant proportion of popular animal culture, especially animal television, still focuses on "the kill"—typically a big cat killing a large prey mammal (the camera can move back and forth between the cat stalking and the prey animal unheedingly grazing)—on male-on-male breeding and territorial violence, on whether the dominant male will eat the offspring of other males or even eat his own offspring, or on other modes of animal violence. (364)

The framework of *Serena's* ending scene suggests Rash's awareness in this regard. The scenes— atop a giant rock in the wilderness; the subtle cry of nature howling in the background; "something brushing [in] the broom sedge;" the camera's point-of-view fitted to the gaze of the unknown prowler, its identity hidden from the viewer's field; the fade to black—are almost identical in comparison, sans the definitive end result.

³ Further, she has manipulated the rattlesnakes, exploiting them for use, though she has all but eradicated them completely.

The final scene becomes, in a literal sense, a return of the repressed. One where even the reader is implicated in “The Murderous,” as the camera’s point-of-view coerces him/her to occupy the murderer’s stealthy movements. Rash’s final move here eliminates human and nonhuman beings with similar nonchalance; further, it destroys the construction of separation: that there exists any meaningful distinction between human and non-human animal.

Conclusion

The “Authentic,” “Metaphorical,” and “Murderous” categories, examined carefully, provide support for Dekoven’s “central motivation for the study of literary animals:” “animal advocacy;” the notion that “current popular animal representation... has switched gears to focus on rescuing endangered species and on showing how intelligent, resourceful, beautiful, loving, and spiritually powerful many animals are” (364).

But Ron Rash, with a lighter, more skillful hand, isn’t overly sentimental. Instead, he eviscerates the line between human and non-human animal and lets nature take its course.

References

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