

Affirming Animal Subjectivity Through Intraspecies and Interspecies Interactions in Jane Smiley's A Good Horse

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Abstract: Different from anthropocentric narration of animals as metaphorical symbols in literature, more and more writers give voice back to animals by focalizing them in the narratives, among whom Pulitzer Prize Laureate Jane Smiley is a case in point. Animals become key characters in her works. Smiley's *A Good Horse* is one of the novels from *The Horses of Oak Valley Ranch* series, of which the main characters are the horses. Meanwhile, animal studies are an emerging trend in literary critical research. It is of great significance to study animal issues in literary works to give further understanding of and enlightenment to humans' relationship with nonhumans in this era when ecological crisis is an impending threat to humans. Based on Val Plumwood's dialogical interspecies ethics and Cynthia Willett's interspecies ethics, this paper will analyze the intraspecies and interspecies interactions about animal community in Smiley's novel *A Good Horse*, and explore its animal ethics and interspecies ethics through Smiley's vivid presentation and antianthropocentric affirmation of animal subjectivity. The paper finds out that Smiley's narration of inner-and-cross-species interactions in animal community holds the purposes to arouse people's awareness of animal subjectivity and animal moral agency, and to advocate a dialogical interspecies paradigm for human-animal relationship.

Keywords: animal and interspecies ethics, animal subjectivity, animal community, anthropocentrism.

1. Introduction

In beast tales of Aesopian allegory and folklore, animals serve as the symbols and metaphors for human narratives, such as the stereotypical images of cunning fox and foolish goat. Animal subjectivity and individuality can scarcely be seen in such narratives. With the development of ethology and ecology, people gradually gain more deep and broad awareness of animals and their crucial roles in a sustainably developing world. On one hand, the ecosystem would face potentially threatening impact if any species of the eco-chain go in danger; while on the other hand, humans' ignorance of nonhuman subjectivity hinders the buildup of a harmonious cross-species community and the healthy development of a more civilized society. Meanwhile, there is an increase in literary and artistic works concerned with animals and human-animal relationship, in which animals become focalizers and have a voice of their own, such as the novel *War Horse*, and later its adapted play and movie. Systematic research into how animals are presented in these works will help us to find out the

writers' intentions behind and their viewpoints on animals and human-animal relationship. At the same time, the ethical exploration of interspecies relationship will inspire humans to reconsider their position on the earth in this posthuman era. According to Cary Wolfe, posthumanism provides an opportunity in which a first-order observer is opened to the alterity of the other by the very conditions of cognition and communication rather than by "taking thought" or by benevolent reflection, and in some sense, animal studies is a subset of the larger problematic of posthumanism [1]. Such an approach to literature is labeled by Josephine Donovan as "animal-standpoint criticism [2]" with the premise that animals are seats of consciousness. They are subjects instead of objects and individuals with stories of their own instead of undifferentiated masses. Disliking pain but enjoying pleasure, they long for living and thriving. Like us human animals, they have identifiable desires and needs.

The literary critical essays in the past are confined to a discussion of symbolic and metaphorical meanings of animals rather than animals themselves or an ethical thinking of human-animal relationship. The research perspective on animals in literature lacks in diversity and creativity. Despite some ecocritical and ecofeminism studies on animals in literature, the interspecies ethics in animal studies are still fresh and need further development. This paper aims at digging out the interspecies ethics in Jane Smiley's novel *A Good Horse* by analyzing how animals of the same or different species interact with one another. Pulitzer Prize Winner Jane Smiley is a typical writer in American contemporary literature whose works deal with animals greatly, such as *Horse Heaven*, *Moo*, and *The Horses of Oak Valley Ranch* series. In these works, animals become subjective entities with their own distinct personalities, active minds, high intelligence, rich emotions, and individualistic behaviors. The frequent appearance and anthropomorphic depiction of animals in Smiley's fiction contain some messages deep waiting to be discovered. Up till now, the animals and human-animal relationship in Smiley's works haven't received enough academic attention. No researchers have explored Smiley's writings from an interspecies ethical perspective. There is still a spacious vacancy in the study on Smiley's works from animal-standpoint criticism, especially from the interspecies ethical perspective.

Primarily based on Val Plumwood's dialogical interspecies ethics and Cynthia Willett's interspecies ethics, the paper will explore the animal ethics and interspecies ethics by analyzing intraspecies and interspecies interactions among animals in Smiley's *A Good Horse*. Through the analysis, the paper suggests that Jane Smiley's animal narration has the purposes to arouse people's awareness of animal subjectivity and animal moral agency, and to advocate a dialogical interspecies paradigm for human-animal relationship, just as Plumwood suggests "The dialogical paradigm stresses instead communicative methodologies of sensitive listening and attentive observation, and of an open stance that has not already closed itself off by stereotyping the other that is studied in reductionist terms as mindless and voiceless [3]."

2. Literature Review

Though the animal studies on literature have been under growth in recent years, only a few essays involve literary animal studies on Smiley's fiction and center on animals and human-animal relationship. Two of the essays are concerned with horses and horse-human relationship in *Horse Heaven*, one of which is from the perspective of interspecies neurotic adjustment, and the other of which is from the angle of horse racing. As for the former one, Bardsley creatively integrates brain science into the elaboration of the novel [4]. By disclosing the limbic system of horses and humans in a political and literary context, he gives a fresh picture of the neurotic adjustment underneath the interspecies interactions. The equine characters are analyzed in a detailed way, and the horse-human interactions are also expounded. It's a pity that as an important canine character, Eileen, a Jack Russell Terrier, doesn't receive any detailed research. In addition, the individuality and uniqueness of each animal still need further discovery. The dependence on brain science in the analysis, to a certain

extent, narrows the interpretation of love between animals and humans. A more comprehensive analysis is still in need. As to the latter one, Pizer analyzes two novels about horse racing—*Horse Heaven* and Jaimy Gordon's *Lord of Misrule* [5]. Though the article centers on horse racing, it makes an analysis of the main human and equine characters respectively. Nonetheless, the important canine character Eileen is left unmentioned. Moreover, there isn't any detailed discussion about the horses' inner world and their interactions with humans.

As we can see, there are still many places to improve. For instance, the important canine character Eileen is missed in the analysis of animals in *Horse Heaven*, while the human-animal relationship in the novel needs further study. Little attention is paid to the interspecies ethics in Smiley's fiction. Besides, Smiley's other works are in urgent need of exploration from literary animal studies. All in all, the studies on Smiley's works advance well but still need further efforts from different perspectives and approaches, especially from literary animal studies. Whether in terms of literary text or methodology, there is still abundant space to develop in the study of her works. As to the theoretical development of animal ethics, according to the extent of the recognition and realization of animals as well as the human-animal interspecies relationship, the previous research concerning animal ethics can be divided into three main stages: the first stage is characterized with anthropocentric prejudices against animals, under which animals are considered inferior to humans with their consciousness, minds, and feelings denied and ignored. The most typical case is Descartes' mechanistic view of animals as mere machines. The representative philosophers in this stage are Aristotle, Descartes, and Kant; in the second stage, the Cartesian mechanistic bias against animals and animal instrumentalization are under fierce criticism, since animals' sentience, feelings, and individuality are recognized, and there is a call for animal liberation and rights. The representative scholars are Albert Schweitzer, Peter Singer, Tom Regan, and Jacques Derrida; there is a turn in the third stage from animal ethics to interspecies communication. Besides admitting animals' ethical rights, the third stage goes further to draw attention to animal subjectivity and animals' own voices through a presentation of detailed interspecies interactions. The human-animal relationship is between individual subjects who are expected to communicate with one another, during which human attention to and care for animals are very important. The representative philosophers and scholars in this stage are Val Plumwood, Josephine Donovan, Donna Haraway, Elisa Aaltola, Cynthia Willett, Traci Warkentin, Michelle Gilbert, Julie Livingston, and Marc Bekoff.

To sum up, in the first and second stages animal ethics circle around whether animals have souls, minds, sentient feelings, moral agency, and whether animals should serve humans and what humans shouldn't do to animals. Most philosophers show their views in a rational way, while leaving vacancy for a study on human-animal interactions. In the third stage, the interspecies ethics surpasses the rationalized methodology related to anthropocentrism and approaches a capacious paradigm where a dialogical interspecies relationship is possible. In this sense, the interspecies ethics is a further step in the development of animal ethics. In short, the three-stage animal ethics and interspecies ethics progress from monological perspective to dialogical one. The trend calls for a reestablishment of a healthy interspecies relationship and a promising paradigm for humans and nonhumans to contact one another.

3. Intraspecies and Interspecies Interactions in Animal Community

Smiley attaches great importance to animal community to reflect animal subjectivity. Here animal community indicates not only a physical community where animals live together, but also a spiritual bond or a sense of community that is felt by animals. Animal community lays stress on the interactions between animals. This part will study animal community mainly from intraspecies and interspecies interactions in animal companionship. From the communication and interactions between animals in different relationships, their attachment, needs, desires, affections, emotions, thoughts, talents, and

intelligence are exposed. It is like what Smiley says “horses in herds are very demonstrative of both affection and dislike toward one another—they clearly differentiate between individuals, they clearly have best friends, dear ones, more distant acquaintances, and enemies. They can also remember” [6].

In *A Good Horse*, animal companionship can be found from the interactions between animal companions in a community, which mainly go on in three situations: pairing; eating; playing. Besides, the animal companions not only include horses, but also a dog. Therefore, there are not only within-species or intraspecies interactions, but also cross-species or interspecies interactions. As regards the interactions in the pairing situation, the interactions between the two mares Happy and Sprinkles are the case in point. They always pair themselves and enjoy the company of each other. Even when Abby is riding one, the other will walk along beside them. No matter what they do, they like being together. Their mutual company comforts and delights each other. For either of the two mares, her companion’s existence brings both physical and psychological effects. In other words, the interactions between the two are not only in physical but also spiritual level. In fact, pairing is an equine habit. Smiley mentions that “horses like to stand right next to their preferred companions. They swish flies off one another, touch one another, press into one another” [7]. Willett also notes that “Like other animals, horses have best friends who they trust to stand guard as well as swat flies away but from their face and they too have those frenemies that they will never see eye-to-eye with” [8]. The description of the interactions between Happy and Sprinkles not only opens our eyes to the equine habit of pairing, but more importantly exhibits reciprocity and altruism in equine pairs as well as horses’ needs and desires, which verify animal subjectivity.

With respect to the interactions in the eating situation, the interactions between Jack and some other horses during their eating time are best examples. Horses tend to have strong interest in their companions’ food. For example, when Abby is feeding Jack the hay, Lincoln “came over then and pinned his ears at Jack to chase him off his hay. It’s a thing that horses do—they always suspect that someone else’s hay is better than theirs, and they need to sample it” [6]. Being a low man on the totem pole, Jack often faces such kind of competition for food from his older and bigger companions. It’s just like what Abby describes— “if they were all standing by the gate and I had an apple or a piece of bread, if I held it out to Jack, Jefferson or Lester would push in and insist that I give it to them” [6]. It’s common for some big horses to take away Jack’s food, but seldom can Jack share their food. Among his companions, only Black George will let Jack share his hay, while the others will pin their ears, chase him off, and even nip him if he comes up to their hay.

Via these interactions, Smiley shows us horses’ tendency to sample their companions’ food and some of the horses will contend for food with the companions, especially the ones weaker than them. Whether from their desire for the other companions’ hay or from their strategic competition for food, horses exhibit high intelligence and disposition. They are not Cartesian machines but individual subjects interacting actively with one another in a community, where both reciprocity and competition exist. About the interactions in the playing situation, the within-species or intraspecies interactions between Jack and other horses, as well as the cross-species or interspecies interactions between a dog named Rusty and some horses are the typical examples. Some horses enjoy playing games like racing. Being a Thoroughbred, Jack is born a runner. He often looks for companions to run and race with him. Even though some horses are older and bigger than Jack, they have no advantage over Jack in terms of racing. The first intraspecies interaction in the playing situation is between Jack and Lincoln. When galloping with a big horse named Lincoln, Jack keeps up with him in a perfect way. “When Lincoln dropped to a trot after half a dozen strides, Jack kept on going to the pasture fence and then trotted back. His ears were pricked and he was ready to play” [6]. Jack enjoys himself in galloping with his companions. Through playing games with bigger and older horses, Jack shortens the distance between his older companions and himself, and weakens hierarchy in the community. As for the function of play, Bekoff believes that animal play also follows the rule similar to universal human

rule—“do unto others as you would have them do unto you” and may also help in learning an egalitarian formulation of social norms and expectations for reciprocity[9]. Willett emphasizes that “key features of play provide the material grounding for an egalitarian ethos by functioning to level playing fields and to build camaraderie” [8]. The interactions in the playing situation help to build friendship between Jack and other horses, hence the companionship is strengthened.

The second intraspecies interaction in the playing situation is between Jack and Black George. To stimulate Black George to join in his racing game, Jack deliberately teases him by trotting around him, nipping him, and then cantering off. Finally Black George decides to join in the game and chase after Jack. Now when Black George overtakes Jack and reaches out to nip him, Jack instantly turns and rears up. In response, Black George rears up too. They toss their heads at each other and squeal. Then “Black George came down and galloped off, and Jack ran after him. Once he caught up (and he did that very quickly), the two of them took off around the fence line of the pasture, bucking and kicking” [6]. Their interactions show that Jack is wise and tactful in starting a play with his companion. The strategies Jack adopts to arouse his playmate’s interest prove his intelligence. Moreover, the two horses have their own way and rules of playing games. They grasp a sense of propriety in playing so that their interactions are intense but harmonious at the same time, which confirms both their EQ and IQ. Undoubtedly their interaction in the playing situation zooms in on their subjectivity, which is underscored by the narrator Abby after her awakening to Black George’s self: “I knew right then all over again that Black George had his own ideas of what was fun and how to do his job [6].” Abby attempts to see from Black George’s point of view, to know about his ideas, to feel what he feels, and to hear what he hears. Her sudden realization of Black George’s point of view is just like Derrida’s awareness of his cat’s gaze at his nudity. Smiley criticizes the wrongness of Cartesian mechanism of regarding animals as mere machines, and warns humans against anthropocentrism and calls for the reverence for animal subjectivity. To acknowledge animals’ thinking and feeling, and to have a try of seeing things from their perspectives are the first step towards a dialogical and harmonious interspecies relationship.

In addition to the within-species or intraspecies interactions in the playing situation, there’re also cross-species or interspecies interactions in the playing situation in *A Good Horse*. The most typical example is the interactions between horses and the dog who is later named Rusty. Rusty is a stray dog who one day follows Mom, Abby and the horses back to the borderline of their pasture and frequently appears nearby. One evening, horses’ high whinnies and galloping feet draw Daddy, Mom, and Abby out of the house to the pasture. They get shocked at what they discover: “there was the dog, speckled white with a brown head, chasing Jack and Lester, or Jack or Lester, down the long side of the pasture, fast and silent, not barking, its head low and intent. Lester turned suddenly, and the dog kept on—Jack was the prey” [6]. Abby’s parents surmise that the dog is attacking the horses. Abby’s dad starts shouting and throws a stone to startle the dog. The dog stops running and turns to look at them. Jack stops running and starts back toward the dog, seeming more excited than worried. Jack flips his tail and whinnies, as if to get the dog to play.

In fact, the chasing is more a game than an attack. Jack’s response proves that. Instead of running away with fear, Jack returns to the dog with excitement after their play is interrupted by Abby’s dad. With an expectation to continue the play, Jack starts his invitation to the dog through his switching tail and whinnies. Jack seems very sure of what he wants and how to achieve that, which reflects his intelligence. Abby’s parents are misled by what they see without realizing that it is just a kind of interaction between Jack and the dog. They change their mind soon after seeing the interaction between the gelding Jefferson and the dog. When the dog is standing with his head turned toward Mom, Jefferson walks up to the dog, bends his knees against the dog’s side, and rolls him over. “Before he knew it, the dog was lying on his back, looking up at Jefferson, who was looking down at him. And the dog didn’t scramble to his feet. He waited for Jefferson to step back, which Jefferson

did, eventually, and then the dog got to his feet, head down, tail low, and slunk away” [6]. The interaction between Jefferson and the dog is more an interspecies play than an attack too, for Jefferson doesn’t hurt the dog though he has the chance at that time. Jefferson rolls the dog over without exerting much strength and steps back to let the dog go in the end. On the other hand, the dog doesn’t get panic and struggle, but waits for his companion to move back. Meanwhile, the two have an eye contact with each other, through which they can exchange information. Through the play between the two companions of different species, they know each other better. Rusty realizes the equine power and dexterity while Jefferson confirms the canine smartness and meekness. To some extent, the rolling play between the two also plays a function of a mild warning from Jefferson to Rusty since the dog keeps on chasing the other two horses at the beginning. The dog, of course, accepts the mild warning and cooperates submissively.

In truth, this is a real story Smiley once witnessed her horse named Persey who does the similar thing to her Great Dane when the dog stops chasing the horse: “The horse was behind him. He didn’t see her walk up to him. She bent her knees against his shoulder and side, and rolled him over... the filly established that she was the boss; he skulled out of the paddock and never chased her again” [6]. The dog attunes himself to fit a new situation to further develop the companionship. It is just as one of the four layers Willett summarizes about the agential ethical engagement: “friendly relations through intersubjective attunement, including face-to-face play for visually oriented creatures or a wag of the tail for some others, and their disruption through hostility or avoidance” [8]. No matter whether in the previous interaction between Jack and the dog, or in the interaction between Jefferson and the dog, intersubjective attunement is indispensable. During the play, all the partners should attune themselves to the changing situation to make sure the play can continue. In short, the interactions in the playing situation between the horses and the dog show the communicative ways across species as well as their subjectivity reflected in communication.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, through the vivid depiction of interactions between animal companions of either the same or the different species in pairing, eating, and playing situations in *A Good Horse*, Smiley reveals us a truth that animals by no means have any difference from humans in that they have their own community, and the ethical consciousness and communicative skills in daily contact with one another. The interactions between animals well exhibit their attachment, needs, desires, affections, emotions, thoughts, intelligence, talents, and propensity. Animals in a community are by no means a static herd but a dynamic group of interactive subjects. The active intersubjective communication among them best proves their independent subjectivity. In a word, Smiley affirms animal subjectivity through a large sum of antianthropocentric descriptions about animals, and calls for humans’ awareness of animal moral agency, and a dialogical interspecies relationship between humans and nonhuman animals. Only when human-centered ethics are decentered and people begin to respect and understand other species can human beings face a hopeful future.

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