

**‘HUMANIMAL’ RABBITS: A STUDY OF
ANTHROPOMORPHISM IN RICHARD ADAMS’
WATERSHIP DOWN**

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Abstract

Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human characteristics to a nonhuman entity. Human beings have been anthropomorphising deities, nonhuman others such as birds, plants and animals and even abstract concepts like nations, natural phenomena. Though this practice has been present for a long time in almost all the fields of study, the anthropocentric attitude behind this ambiguous concept has been contested repeatedly and is charged with negative connotations. The concept of ‘humanimal’ slowly dissolved the line that distinguished the human from its nonhuman other. The posthuman era is in search of the quality that qualifies a human as a human. This paper highlights the similarities and differences between rabbits and humans.

Keywords: Anthropomorphism, humanimal, nonhuman, anthropocentrisim.

“Animals are everywhere and yet nowhere” contend Creed and Reesink (95). Human beings have anthropomorphized any non-human entity from an early age. Often this attribution of human characteristics to the nonhuman, projects an anthropocentric representation where the

animals are physically reduced to humans in animal cloaks. Human beings anthropomorphize often to connect or relate to their nonhuman others and to have enough or correct knowledge about a particular nonhuman entity. Anthropomorphism is not universal in children as it “is an attitude that children acquire in urban societies in which animals are not part of everyday life except as pets and companions” (Airenti 7). When faced with the unknown, children anthropomorphize to make sense of the alien. This attitude gradually dissolves as the child acquires adequate knowledge about the unknown. But some adults encourage the children to anthropomorphize unknowingly probably through children’s literature, movies, or by their own attitude, behaviour and communication with their pets or any other nonhuman entity. Thus, children maintain this acquired anthropocentric attitude to anthropomorphize throughout which later calls in the ethical question of depriving the nonhuman other of their individuality.

There are three kinds of writers who find the need to anthropomorphize. Margret Blount categorises writers in her book *Animal Land: the Creatures of Children’s Fiction* (1974):

...first, the sort of writer who cannot help writing about animals – they are his first love and find their way into his work whether he will or no;...The second kind of temperament tends to dislike, or be critical of, the human race and finds animals a more innocent, congenial alternative with which to populate the earth,...The third category [...] is concerned, consciously or unconsciously, with teaching us something. The moral urge is very strong – not in the folklore animal stories, but in the early animal tales of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; however, more twentieth-century writers belong to the group than one might think. ...all these numerous creators who start by dressing animals and giving them human voices end up by saying more than the intended – anthropomorphism has unexpected results. Animals are beautiful, innocent, funny and strange, and their built-in appeal can be

used as a half-way stage towards comment on the human race. One can do this, as perhaps Kenneth Grahame did, without realising it. (16-17)

Whatever the category the writer may belong to, there tends to be a huge misinterpretation of the nonhuman other while anthropomorphising the characters. The representations of the animals are not accurate rather they are often based on limited knowledge and fancy so the result product is more often than not, just a human in animal skin. This faulty representation is the influence of the western philosophy that human being is the centre and superior.

A binary of human and nonhuman was established in order to affirm human beings' superiority over its nonhuman other. The human mind could not consider the nonhuman as an individual with different unique identity and could perceive them only through their biased eyes which saw them as mere mechanomorphic entities. With the dawn of Darwinism this hierarchy started to wobble a little.

Anthropocentrism thrived to “maintain the centrality and priority of human existence through marginalizing and subordinating nonhuman perspectives, interests and beings” (Weitzenfeld and Joy 4-5). The main argument that supports the human animal binary is as Descartes pointed out that the “mind or soul is strictly a possession of human beings” (Crist 211). The nonhuman animals are believed to be somewhat mechanical and that they “only achiev[ing] meaning instrumentally through human consciousness” (Weitzenfeld and Joy 6). Darwin contradicts this idea of mechanomorphic animals in his *The Descent of Man* (1859) by pointing out that “there is no fundamental difference between man and higher animal in their mental faculties” and that any “difference in mind between man and higher animals, great as it is, is certainly one of degree and not of kind” (Crist 18). He was especially against the reason and instinct binary for he found that the two terms are similar and can be interchanged. As explained by Crist, Darwin “rejects polarities traditionally summoned to draw a sharp boundary between human and animal life. Specifically, he did not accept that

distinctions between instinct and reason, instinct and intelligence, invariability and plasticity of behaviours, or involuntary and wilful action which support a status between animal and human nature” (19). He also goes against Descartes’ philosophy by stating that human beings as well as their nonhuman other share the same emotions. Though there were criticisms, Darwin’s theory contested the long-standing western philosophy of man being the centre and probably opened the discussion for ecocentrism and posthumanism.

Though the term anthropomorphism has some negative connotations some ecologists and ethologists believe that “an anthropomorphic element in perception can uncover a whole world of resonances and resemblances . . . revealing similarities across categorical divides,” (Bennet 99). Though a human centred approach is bound to spring occasionally it is necessary to adopt the process for “[r]efusing to run the risk of anthropomorphism at all simply allows the perceived hierarchy between human and nonhuman, and settled anthropocentric understandings of ethical encounters, to remain unchallenged (Ryan 295).

Lockley describes: “The rabbit has a baby face, of rounded outlines, snub nose, enormous ears and eyes, and an appearance of helplessness. Konrad Lorenz has suggested that it is because of these attributes of infancy, this facial resemblance to the young human, that we – women and children especially – are pleased when we gaze at a rabbit” (11). They were more often than not represented as their appearance suggest, innocent and naughty much like children. Adam’s rabbits are often seen severely mutilated and violent. He gives a more non-anthropomorphic representation of the rabbits which draws out the characteristics that are shared by both the humans and the rabbits. As Douglas Peter Leatherland explains Haraway’s interspecies relation consisting of “partial connections” (6), “[t]his notion of the interrelation between species encapsulates the concept of the “humanimal”. The human is neither wholly nor partially human, neither wholly nor partially animal. Neither the human nor the animal is made up of composite parts; both exist in a state of continual flux” (46) meaning “[h]umans

are so rabbit, rabbits are so human. Humans are not rabbits, or rabbits humans, per se. Nor, however, are humans entirely humans or rabbits entirely rabbits” (223).

Adams relies on R.M. Lockley’s *The Private Life of the Rabbit* to make a more natural representation of rabbits. He reaffirms some of the facts by including the naturalist’s name in the passages: “Rabbits are like human beings in many ways. One of these is certainly their staunch ability to withstand disaster and to let the stream of their life carry them along, past reaches of terror and loss” (WD211). The author draws out a similarity between rabbits and human beings. Rabbits are no strangers to danger. As Frith and the other creature calls the mythical legend El-ahrairah Prince with a Thousand Enemies, rabbits much like other small creatures have many predators. Though not exactly like the rabbits’ predicament, human beings do face a lot of adversities and the strength and the determination with which both kinds not only face but survive the situation is comparable. This fact of rabbits being as human beings in their ability to survive situation is reaffirmed throughout the novel. The crux of the novel which is the migration of the rabbits to find a better home for themselves is not foreign to human beings as they too have and still are on the move to find a place to which they can belong.

Rabbits are related to primitive as opposed to civilised people. Adams avers that the civilised people have lost the power to feel which the primitive people possessed. Much like other “Creatures that have neither clocks nor books”, the primitive people were “alive to all manner of knowledge about time and the weather and about directions too ... from their extraordinary migratory and homing journeys” (WD59). The civilised humans have lost their natural ability to tell the passing of time and assessing the weather by replacing it with technology.

Adams brings in rabbits and the primitive people together while talking about punctuality: “Rabbits, of course, have no idea of precise time or of punctuality. In this respect they are

much the same as primitive people, who often take several days over for assembling for some purpose and then several more to get started” (WD21). The author again precisely mentions primitive human beings suggesting they were more harmonious with the nonhuman world as opposed to the civilised human beings who on the other hand are concerned with “[t]ime, punctuality, precision... that are symptomatic of the West’s desire to maintain order, control, and dominion over both the human and nonhuman world” (Battista 160). The author seems to draw not only the shared traits of both rabbits and the primitive human beings but the negligence of these traits by the civilised. Yet he does not fail to bring the civilised closer to the nonhuman as he observes that:

Before such people can act together, a kind of telepathic feeling has to flow through them and ripen to the point when they all know that they are ready to begin. Anyone who has seen the martins and swallows in September ... the hundreds of individual birds merging and blending, in a mounting excitement ... until that moment when the greater part ... of them know that the time has come: they are off.... [A]nyone seeing this has seen at work the current that flows ...to fuse them together and impel them into action without conscious thought or will: has seen at work the angel which drove the First Crusade into Antioch and drives the lemmings into the sea. (WD21-22)

The author brings in birds and civilised human beings, the crusaders alongside rabbits and primitive human beings to point out that the rabbits, the primitive, the birds and the human beings are driven by the same force to achieve their ends.

Richard Adams’ representation of rabbits is close to their natural individual identity because of the author’s non-anthropocentric rendition and the naturalist account of the rabbits. The author sometimes even cuts the flow of the narrative to bring the readers out of the story to

give a fact. He compares the rabbits with human beings to bring out the differences between the two. For example, rabbits do not have a sense of romance and as the narrator informs,

...the idea of protection, fidelity, romantic love and so on- are, of course, unknown to rabbits, although rabbits certainly do form exclusive attachments much more frequently than most people realise. However, they are not romantic and it came naturally to Hazel and Holly to consider the two Nuthanger does simply as breeding stock for the warren. (WD323-24)

This passage explains the rabbits' way of building a family as opposed to human beings.

The author gives a naturalistic representation of rabbits. He brings in both the similarities and the differences between rabbits and human beings which makes them both relatable and individualistic beings true to their nature. The rabbits by exhibiting human traits and by being real animals become 'humanimal'.

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