

The Nature of Story

by Lori Scheffel *

As oral and written record reflects, throughout history humankind has vacillated between acknowledging its kinship with the natural world and denying it. A great deal of human culture has consisted of stories concerning animals, though modern literature has relegated animals, as a subject of imaginative writing, to children's fiction. One would be hard pressed to name many great works of the past two centuries which include animals as the focus of the narrative. The old animal stories, however, took place in a time and realm when humans and animals were able to communicate and these narratives constituted the mainstay of oral storytelling. This kind of story is an element of the "Golden Age" theme and refers to a time when the world was a harmonious place where people were happy, blessed and "without evil in their hearts." These stories of an ancient and oral character spoke of our place alongside the other animals.

John Berger, in his essay "Why Look at Animals?" says animals first entered the human imagination as messengers and promises¹. Animals were many things to early human cultures, moving together with humanity at the centre of the world:

*... the choice of a given species as magical, tameable and alimentary was originally determined by the habits, proximity and "invitation" of the animal in question.*²

Berger suggests animals were the first metaphors as there is "a universal use of animal signs for charting the experience of the world"³ -- an experience which is largely lost or reduced in meaning in modern times. Everywhere in myth and folklore, animals offer explanations for the world -- "they lent their names or characters to a quality, which like all qualities, was, in its essence, mysterious."⁴ Modern science has gone far in robbing other life forms of their mystery and ambiguity. Once we feel that we know everything we want to know about something, it often is dismissed from our imaginations and resides there in some form unrecognizable to

itself. Animals have become the objects of our ever increasing stockpile of knowledge about an objectified world. The more we think we know of them the further removed they become physically, intellectually and spiritually from us. Animals cease to be the mysterious gifts of a divine creator or even challenging puzzles for the scientist. After all, through popular culture or the "wonders" of bioengineering, we are able to create whatever imaginary and actual animals we wish.

Traditional narratives gave animals a voice whereby they could communicate with humans and this made the distance between us seem less. The influence of scientific method has led us to dismiss such stories as naive, anthropomorphic imaginings suitable (perhaps) for the entertainment of children. We have silenced other life so completely that:

*... its silence, guarantees its distance, its distinctiveness, its exclusion, from and of man.*⁵

The traditions of earlier ages which mediated between humanity and the rest of nature have become like so much quaint and superfluous bric-a-brac gathering dust on the shelves of the Western imagination. But perhaps we are at last beginning to reconsider the value of our narrative heritage. Interestingly, oral storytelling is being "rediscovered" as an important means of communication, and of making connections with our past and with ourselves. We cannot plainly see but we sense the hidden value in traditional stories and that they might help to restore certain things to the creative human experience.

Literature⁶ and other records of the human imagination are valuable for searching out human perceptions of the world. Literature can and does encompass all of life's stories. In *The Comedy of Survival*, a work which delineates correspondences between literature and ecology, Joseph Meeker describes that ability of literature to influence our lives:

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Literature expresses deep human needs and represents the forms of behaviour peculiar to a consciousness-bearing animal. It is not primarily a medium of communication or an educational instrument for perpetuating certain kinds of behaviour but it is often treated as if it were both. . . . Consciously and unconsciously, people imitate literary characters and often try to create in their own lives the circumstances depicted in literature or the motivations which produce its events. Literature which provides models of man's relationships with nature will thus influence man's perceptions of nature and his responses to it.⁷

Literature can have explicit intentions of didacticism such as those found in proverbs, parables and fables -- all genres which have a particular moral to convey which is meant to guide our conduct in the world. The figures are often merely ciphers and the message leaves little work for the imagination. As an example of this type consider Caxton's Christianized version of Aesop's fable, "Of the Bee and of Jupiter":

Now the evil which men wish to others comes to him which wishes it, as it appears by this fable of a bee which offered and gave to Jupiter a piece of honey.

And then Jupiter said to the bee, Demand of me what thou wilt and I shall grant it to thee. And then the bee prayed him, God almighty, grant that whosoever shall come for to take away my honey, if I prick him he may suddenly die.

And because Jupiter loved humankind he said to the bee, Suffice that whosoever shall go to take thy honey, if thou prick or sting him, immediately thou shalt die. And thus her prayer was turned to her own great harm. For men ought not to demand of God but such things that are good and honest.⁸

But perhaps we are more affected by the implicit messages which may lie deep in a narrative or which are created by the individual's experience being brought to bear on the story. Compare the above fable with this one of the Winnebago Indians:

The Animals Gave Freely of Their Medicine

*A man was going to die.
He went to the top of a hill and lay down.*

*Briefly he slept.
When he awoke there was a circle of animals.*

*Each animal gave the man his own personal
Medicine.*

*Raven said -- e-he-a! e-he-a!
Then he spit on the man and gave of his own
Medicine.*

The man felt better.

*Turtle said -- ahi! ahi! ahi!
Then he gave the man of his own boiled
Medicine.*

The man felt better.

*Black Hawk said nothing.
He gave the man of his medicine right
on the place
Where the man hurt the most.*

The man felt much better.

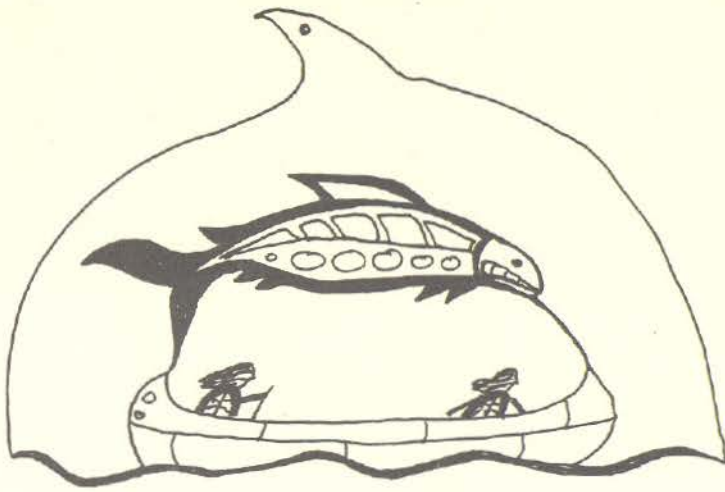
*Then all the animals said --
"Human, in a similar way,
You will cure your fellowmen!"*

*And the man was given the Flutes of
Power.*

*And he became a great Healer, a
powerful
Medicine Man and it was because the
animals*

Gave freely of their medicine.⁹

This piece speaks to us of a very different understanding of the meaning and motivation of non-human beings than does the classical fable and seems, in the end, to be a richer lesson. Literature, however, cannot assume a universal reader and so a singular interpretation of a work can never really emerge in a general audience. There is no common external reality which we all share so it is difficult to evaluate or predict the ability of literature to affect our values or emotions yet it still might serve to suggest the values of the culture that produced the story.



Literature has been a major source of models used to perpetuate our past,¹⁰ that is, in literature we are given evidence of the mediating metaphors (viz. conscious or unconscious allegories or symbol systems) which people used to explain the world, such as the organic cosmological model of the Middle Ages or the mechanical model of the Renaissance period. We learn from literary depictions of cultural models by posing questions -- discerning relatedness among world, self and "text," whatever form that text may be in, and we test the usefulness of these models by applying them to our own social context and perceiving the effect.¹¹ Through this process we are educated by our culture about what sorts of participation might be expected of us:

Education acquaints each new human generation with the models of life and thought available from previous generations. A crisis of consciousness occurs when there is a widespread recognition that many important models of reality inherited from the human past are inadequate, irrelevant, or destructive when applied to present circumstances.¹²

The growing realization that humanity has become a kind of unnatural blight on the Earth has arisen from just such a crisis of consciousness. Our inherited models of human superiority, reason and progress are grossly overrated and imminently destructive on a global level. Somehow, we have the perpetuation of them. We cannot endure scientific callousness. Humanistic arrogance and complacency towards ecological destruction cannot be endured if we are to continue to live on this planet of such diverse life. We may as a species survive in some manner but we may be alone here and if alone, we are inevitably doomed.

Literature, a creation of culture, has had a role in turn, in creating culture, and it may be able to assume a wondrous shape in becoming a tool of social change in our search for a new balance with the processes of nature. As Meeker points out, we have in our society generally regarded artists and philosophers (and I might add other types of storytellers to these groups) as being exempt from ecological guilt - "but strangely, they are largely responsible for beginning or perpetuating harmful beliefs and attitudes towards nature."¹³ The Humanities are to be challenged for giving their questionable sanction to environmental exploitation but they should not be dismissed by environmental educators, for therein may also lie the tools for social change.

Perhaps the creation of a different, ecologically sound literature, that is, literature that encourages a positive, balanced human-nature relationship, can arise from a re-consideration of the value of age-old traditions. The historical, myth-related narrative can still speak to us even as we move through our modern, artificial environments, perhaps because we recognize at some level our tenacious connection to a real life; we somehow understand the tale's message that we are indeed, nature's animals. In *Tales From Eternity*, Rosemary Haughton points to the "folk wisdom" inherent in fairy tales and draws meaningful insight from them for the modern world in its ecological and spiritual state of disquietude:

[Fairy tales] do not express what any particular society considers should occur, or even what does occur in normal practice. They are about much more basic facts of human nature. They are telling us what is the case no matter how strenuously society tries to modify or suppress it.¹⁴

And the "case" is that "the lord of creation is totally dependent on the well-being of his vassals, and that to rule the earth means to serve it."¹⁵

In the stories and myths of many peoples and times, animals are important figures. They do not appear to be representing the animal world as such -- the fact that they have human attributes, motivations and abilities tells us that they are not "really" animals. Rather their roles are as representatives of the non-conscious and non-rational qualities of human life, part of which links humans to their animal ancestry. In narratives about animals, the animals speak to us from that seat of human unconsciousness

that conscious reason often pays no attention to in its narrower view of the world. The abstractions of the animal voices are pointing out that there are other equally "real" realities of human life besides those which reason shows us. Haughton explains how important these types of tales are, especially for us now:

It is just because the fairy-tale animals are not "proper" animals at all, but rather express a humanness which we ignore at our peril, that they are necessary for us at a time when failure to listen to this aspect of our humanness has led us to despise and misuse the world of nature to which we also belong. For the openness to experience, the humility and the sense of respect which is necessary in order to appreciate the value of the wise animals of the tales is exactly what we need if we are to live at peace with and within nature, instead of ignoring it and arousing its powers of revenge.¹⁶

Our past tendency as a species to see in the other animals a source of wisdom, guidance and grace is remarkable and indicative that we were not always disinclined towards them. Children also find nature to be intensely animate and fascinating, at least until the adult world teaches them that this is inappropriate. The polytheistic-like tendency exhibited in folk narrative and legend is not confined to cultures whose mythologies link vitally the spirits of humans and animals, such as that of aboriginal peoples of the Americas and Africa. The folktales of late Medieval Europe, in a culture that had a utilitarian and increasingly callous attitude towards animals in everyday life, show the same array of creatures "who know better than the cocksure hero who ignores their advice at his own peril."¹⁷ The environmental crisis itself has shown us what ensues when we fail to listen and act with humility. However, for a long period in our history, humans looked to the other species as sources of wisdom or simply as teachers of useful skills, and we preserved what we learned from them in story.

Animals have always provided metaphors for us to explain and relate human experience. When we participate in the use of animal-inspired explanations of experience we assign to non-human life human qualities and aspirations. The compendium of animal stories and images which we have from ages past testifies to a recognition that animals are something like

us -- living, exhibiting will and their own forms of intelligence and emotion -- yet at the same time occupying a different realm of experience than that of the human. Other species allow us a basis for comparison; we need them to help us define ourselves.

The quality which is perhaps most characteristic of animal story is its anthropomorphism -- the projection of human meaning onto non-human life. Anthropomorphizing may be seen as an obvious thing for humans to do since the only meanings we can create are human ones. We have seen that this aspect of the human imagination can have positive results in our attempt to understand ourselves and our place in the world. However, some types of animal story (for example, fable and animal epic) are so anthropomorphic that the animal figures are recognized as thinly disguised humans, and we might want to be wary of the harm such treatment might unintentionally provoke. For instance, in some tales innocent beings suffer merely because they are "ugly" animals or carnivores. The only "ugly" animal that is vindicated is the one that is really a transformed human such as the creature of **Beauty and the Beast** or the frog of **The Frog Prince**. Also, animals tend to get typecast negatively in some kinds of traditional tales, for example, the sly fox, the stupid donkey, the wise owl or the evil wolf and we might wonder whether such stories might prejudice children against wildlife if this is the only kind of information they receive and their experience with animals is limited.

If we want to tell stories about ourselves why is it that we choose to make animals deputize for humans? In **Animal Land: The Creatures of Children's Fiction**, Margaret Blount suggests this:

The answer lies perhaps in the way people create, and the kind of life they would secretly wish to lead. . . . Animals are beautiful, innocent, funny, strange, and their built-in appeal can be used as a half-way stage towards comment on the human race.¹⁸

The attractive power of animals and narrative is thus taken advantage of in order to convey an often didactic message -- to sugar-coat the pill. This attractiveness of the animal story could be of use still as an educating tool for people of all ages, as it always has been, but perhaps especially now in the context of discussing contemporary attitudes about nature.



Woodcut from Ernst Voullieme's facsimile edition of the German *Esopus* printed in 1477, reproduced from Caxton's *Aesop*, ed., R.T. Lenaghan, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

Traditional stories, such as those collected by the brothers Grimm among the rural people of late nineteenth-century Europe or the legends of the native people of our country in which the world was depicted as an animated and magical place, are important to us now, in this time when nature and its inhabitants are becoming so remote from us.¹⁹ In *Tales From Eternity*, Haughton's message is particularly addressed to contemporary Christians who share similar obstacles in the world with the youngest child in the fairy tales because their approach to life seems anomalous to the society in which they live. In the familiar pattern of the fairy tale, it is the youngest child who is successful in the end, often by relating to nature and animals as a friend and with an essentially ecological perspective, treating all he meets with equal respect and courtesy (see *The Golden Bird*, *The Poor Miller's Son and his Cat*, *The Two Brothers*, *The Hut in the Forest* -- all tales in which good fortune comes to people through their kindness to animals). Our environmental problems are the result of having approaches and pursuits similar to those of the elder siblings of the fairy tales who are proud, arrogant and scornful of the old, the young, the poor, the ugly, and of animals.

Haughton describes how the traditional stories link us to our cultural, historical and mythical past while also offering us wisdom with which to make decisions about our future:

We can use them to orient ourselves in the present, and discover which way to go. They can help us to do this because they link us to our Christian past, link the Christian past to its pagan pre-history, and link it also to its equally "pagan" subcultures.²⁰

The traditional folk stories have always made it clear that humanity must respect other animals:

The would-be hero who ignores the needs or advice of animals invariably lands in trouble, whereas the real hero or heroine has compassion on the trapped bird, or listens to the advice of the faithful old horse.²¹

Animals are often cast in traditional tales in the roles of helper, guide, prophet and friend. These helpers speak not only with the voice of instinctive wisdom that our culture has come to despise, but also with the voice of common sense from the people of the past who lived intimately with nature.²² This knowledge is required for the hero's success because he or she must understand, accept and carry forward the work of the past, good or bad. The wisdom of the animals is helpful and available for good ends only and is intended only for those who

will bring love and humility to their task. These kinds of stories must not be lost to us because they are able to show us how to live a more balanced existence with other life if we could recognize the way to world health that folk sense sometimes points out. Traditional tales are often rich with the spirituality and ecology of life. In them:

We shall recognize that we are part of creation; we are called out from it, but we must not with scorn reject the parts of ourselves that we share with the other animals and even plants, or try to cut the threads that weave us, body and soul into the intricate and subtle fabric of living things. If we try to detach ourselves from all this we destroy ourselves, spiritually and physically; that is the lesson of modern ecology and of tales so old that their origins are often untraceable.²³

We sometimes sense that the animal figure of story is us -- both animal and human simultaneously -- and is speaking to us from a place deep in shared ancestral memory. Interestingly, children seem to prefer these older, other-worldly tales over the artistic or contemporary children's story.²⁴ The conception of the world reflected in the traditional fairy tale, for example, is, for better or worse, one of specific boundaries concerning goodness and justice which perhaps corresponds to the stage at which a young child is at in developing his or her theories about the world.²⁵ If this is so, then perhaps we could make better, critical use of these stories in attempting to understand our environmental history and in trying to foster an appropriate environmental ethic -- but first we must somehow restore them to their former significance within society.

Notes

1. In John Berger, *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 1.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 2.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
6. For the purposes of this paper, by the term "literature," I mean to imply the collective body of writings produced in the history of a culture (in this case Western culture) which may range in content and form from recordings of unsophisticated folklore to the reflections of learned people on any given subject, to aesthetic prose and poetry. In the sense I use it, literature is any work of a place or period that serves to record and

reflect impressions of the world in which it was produced in a creative or imaginative manner.

7. Joseph Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival* (Los Angeles: Guild of Tutors Press, 1980), p. 28.

8. B. and C. Gascoigne, eds., *Caxton's Aesop's Fables* (London: Hamish Hamilton Ltd., 1984), p. 4.

This fable can also be regarded as an etiological or origin tale which explains the reason why things are as they are, in this case, why the honeybee dies when she stings someone.

9. "The Animals Gave Freely of Their Medicine" (Winnebago), in Gerald Hausman, *Meditations with Animals* (Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear and Co., 1986), pp. 41-42.

10. Meeker, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

11. Folklorist Barre Toelken, in an article called "The Pretty Language of Yellowman," interviews a Navajo story teller about the Coyote stories he tells. Asked why he tells these stories, Yellowman said: "If my children hear the stories, they will grow up to be good people; if they don't hear them, they will turn out bad." Asked why he tells the same stories to adults, he answered: "Through stories everything is made possible." In *Folklore Genres*, ed. Dan Ben-Amos, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1976) P. 55.

12. Meeker, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

13. Meeker, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

14. Rosemary Haughton, *Tales From Eternity* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1973), p. 50.

15. *Ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*, p.52.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

18. Margaret Blount, *Animal Land: The Creatures of Children's Fiction* (London: Hutchinson of London, 1980), pp. 16-17.

19. The Irish tale, "The Dead Moon," is one such interesting story. It concerns the most primitive elements in the nature of the world -- light and darkness. The tale tells of the personified full moon's (almost always in folklore the moon is female) struggle with the evil creature of a bog. (Landscape types have specific characteristics and inhabitants in folklore. The swampland or fen is an especially sinister one, seemingly because it is a mixture of categories: the land and the water are not distinct.) When the Moon is dark these creatures hold sway over the land so the light of the Moon is a greater blessing to the people rather than the haunting light it is described as elsewhere. In this tale, the Moon becomes imprisoned in the bog and the common people must overcome their fear of the place in order to save her and thus, must participate directly in the affairs of nature and the realm of magic.

20. Haughton, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 51.

22. Berger suggests in "Why Look at Animals," *About Looking* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), that these people have been marginalized historically and in the present along with animals.

23. Haughton, *op. cit.*, p. 56.

24. Andre Favat, *Child and Tale: The Origins of Interest* (Illinois: National Council of Teachers of English, 1977), p. ii.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 32.



Red Riding Hood by Gustave Dore from French Fairy Tales.