POV: You Are a Lion. *Pride of Baghdad* and the Strategies to Interpret Animal Narratives

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Abstract
The present work explores the various uses of animals in literature and the problem of representation of the animal experience. It also pays close attention to anthropomorphism and the postures for and against it as well as to different proposals to interpret animal narratives without losing sight of animal agency. Additionally, this paper examines a number of features of the graphic novel that contribute to achieve the animal point of view. Finally, all ideas and concepts developed are put into action in the analysis of the 2006 graphic novel Pride of Baghdad.

Keywords: ***Pride of Baghdad, graphic novel, comics, Animal Studies, anthropomorphism, literary representations, literary criticism, literature.***

Resumen
El presente trabajo explora los varios usos de los animales en la literatura y el problema de la representación de la experiencia animal. Además, presta atención al antropomorfismo y a las posturas a su favor y en su contra así también como a las diferentes propuestas para interpretar las narrativas con animales sin perder de vista la agencia. Adicionalmente, esta obra examina un número de características de la novela gráfica que contribuyen a la construcción del punto de vista del animal. Para concluir, todas las ideas y los conceptos aquí desarrollados se aplican en el análisis de la novela gráfica de 2006 *Pride of Baghdad*.

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Introduction

On March 19, 2003, the United States launched Operation Iraqi Freedom, an orchestrated large-scale military offensive against several targets in Iraq. Baghdad, the capital city and center of power of Saddam Hussein's regime, received most of the air and ground attacks. American rockets fell all over urban territory destroying not only buildings and streets, but also the Baghdad zoo, bringing down the walls and fences that kept the resident animals inside. In the turmoil of destruction, a pride of lions escaped the zoo and wandered aimlessly through the ruins of the city for days. The felines met their tragic ending at the hands of American troops after allegedly charging at the soldiers, as was reported by *The Guardian*[1] on April 22.

Pride of Baghdad, a graphic novel published in 2006 by DC Vertigo, is inspired by this true story. It imagines the adventures and misfortunes of the lions while they try to survive in the aftermath of the attack. Author Brian K. Vaughan and artist Niko Henrichon build a highly emotive visual narrative in which animals face not only material difficulties, but also human dilemmas. Zill, Noor, Safa and Ali, the four anthropomorphic members of the pride, confront ethical predicaments, such as who is to become their food, who should be spared, and whether it is correct to abandon the zoo.

An analytical problem arises out of this brief description: how to approach animal narratives from a critical perspective. In order to find a possible answer for this question, we will begin our work by exploring the functions of animal imagery in literature with the purpose of showing that, although they are widespread resources, they fall short when it comes to the analysis of narratives that involve animal agency. We will proceed to discuss anthropomorphism, main feature of the lions in *Pride of Baghdad*, and examine positions for and against it. This will, in turn, lead us to reflect on the issue of animal representation, for which we will resort to ideas from the field of Animal Studies. Finally, we will focus on a selection of relevant features of the graphic novel as a genre that collaborate in our suggested line of analysis for *Pride of Baghdad*.

Before we continue, we shall address two points that may require clarification. The first point involves the use of specific terminology. Many of the conceptual elements we will use have their origin in the interdisciplinary field of Animal Studies. A great matter of debate in this field is that of delimiting and defining the object of study that, as a starting point, is not human. What is, then,

[1] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/apr/22/iraq1

included in this "other-than-human" category? Since this group includes not only wild life and pets but also other forms of life like "microanimals" (microorganisms, for example, bacteria), the next step is, then, finding an appropriate term that can encompass all these different strata of other-than-human existence. Due to the complexity that the classification entails, different authors have opted to refrain from using "animal," and have conceived various words to refer to living creatures and be able to remain inclusive enough. With full awareness of that, we will purposefully use "animal" to refer to all the other-than-human creatures both in *Pride of Baghdad* and in additional examples of our own. It is out of our scope to enter the debate on nomenclature or on life categories. Moreover, our work intends to appeal to a wide readership not necessarily acquainted with these debates. Hence, we will choose to simplify all terminological complexity. Secondly, we would like to stress that any given work of fiction allows a myriad of interpretations. In the present work, we will suggest only one of the multiple possibilities available.

Literary Animals

Animals have been present in story-telling even before the development of any writing system when the oral tradition was still predominant. Myths, legends, folk tales and other types of originally oral narratives from all around the globe contain abundant animal figures. From this we can infer that the natural world has played a more than important part in the construction of our own identities and our understanding not only of the world around us but of ourselves. Literary animals have traditionally fulfilled three significant roles: symbolic, metaphorical and allegorical. Let us now explore each.

In his *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, J.A. Cuddon defines *symbol* as "an object, animate or inanimate, which represents or 'stands for' something else" (2013, p. 699). That is, we see the symbol and, if it is effective, we can immediately associate it with another element: The image of a white dove instantly makes us think of peace. In addition to abstract ideas, animals as symbols have also come to represent human attributes, such is the case of the owl (wisdom), the lion (courage) and the fox (cunning), as well as other less fortunate cases as the vulture and the crow, both used as symbols of death.

A *metaphor* can be defined as "a figure of speech in which one thing is described in terms of another" (Cuddon, 2013, p. 432). This implies that in the use of metaphors, a relation of similarity is established between two elements that may not necessarily be related to each other in the "real" world. Among all the animals that have served as metaphors, birds occupy a significant role in literature. As Frank Dogget explains, for the English Romantic poets, "the image of the bird at song embodied the poet's idealization of his art" (1974, p. 547). As a result of Romanticism's appreciation for nature, creativity and spontaneity, poets came to admire singing birds and, especially, the nightingale, which was adopted as the ultimate metaphor for the romantic poet, poetry and art, hence,

"if poets can be considered singing birds, birds can be considered composing poets" (Dogget, 1974, p. 550). During the 19th century in American women's fiction, which idealized domesticity and women as wives and mothers, caged birds "represent[ed] the creative woman in her domestic sphere" (Showalter, 1988, p. 37). In the groundbreaking novel *The Awakening*, Kate Chopin reverts this association and instead, uses the bird as a metaphor for women trapped in oppressive marriages and conservative societies. Here, wings are of particular importance to think of the protagonist, Edna Pontellier, and her struggle for liberation from the gender roles that suffocate her. In chapter XXVII Mademoiselle Reisz, the old pianist, touches Edna's back and explains this peculiar action saying that "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth" (Chopin, 1993, p. 103), anticipating in this action Madame Pontellier's challenge and demise. In the end, a bird "with a broken wing … beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water" (Chopin, 1993, p. 136) announces Edna has been unable to live up to the challenge.

Lastly, an allegory is "a story or image with several layers of meaning: behind the literal or surface meaning lie one or more secondary meanings of varying degrees of complexity" (Cuddon, 2013, p. 21). Fables make a good example of the allegorical use of animals. These stories in general, but not exclusively, aimed at children, feature animals embodying certain aspects of the human behavior that need to be cultivated or corrected. In Aesop's "The Tortoise and the Hare," the hare, who has the natural ability of speed, is defeated in a race by the tortoise who, although naturally slow, is constant and hard-working. The moral lesson is then that "sobriety, zeal, and perseverance can prevail over indolence" (Gibbs, 2002, p. 226). Art Spiegelman's graphic novel about the Holocaust, *Maus*, employs animals as characters instead of people. In its pages, the classic mouse-cat-dog triangle is put at play significantly: Jews are mice, Nazis are cats and Americans are dogs. We can see, then, that the cautious selection of animals helps the author to convey the dynamics of the relations of power in Nazi Germany. As was illustrated by the examples, animals are not chosen at random; instead, they are selected taking into account their own natural attributes or their cultural associations.

The Anthropomorphic Question

Of particular importance for the effectiveness of the allegory is the use of anthropomorphism, defined in broad terms as the granting of human characteristics –physical and emotional– to non-human beings. This is more than often manifested especially in the presence of linguistic abilities, that is, the ability to speak. Anthropomorphic representation of animals has not lost its significant position in the contemporary world. We have only to consider

animated audiovisual products (films, series, etc.), and the presence of animal protagonists is still strikingly numerous. Among wild animals, lions quite frequently play the main character role, perhaps due to their aesthetical beauty and overall regal cultural connotation.

Anthropomorphism, however, has not been free of critiques. One recurrent accusation is that fiction featuring anthropomorphized animals is over simplistic and for children. To the eyes of the critics, this alone would seem enough to guarantee artistic mediocrity. Others claim that having animals depict traces of human behavior does nothing other than confuse children into "absorb[ing] false and dangerous notions of animal behavior" (Keen, 2011, p. 140). There are those who see in anthropomorphism a misrepresentation of both humans and animals, which "foster[s] woeful misunderstandings of what they, the animals, are really about" (Philo & Wilbert, 2000, p. 18)[2]. Although, at first sight, all these appear to be harmless rants, something rather pernicious seems to lie beneath the surface: the idea that humans are a superior form of life. This is what Paul Waldau (2013) calls "human exceptionalism" and it is

> the claim that humans are, merely by virtue of their species membership, so qualitatively different from any and all other forms of life that humans rightfully enjoy privileges over all of the earth's other life forms. (p. 8)

As a consequence, having animals participate in human attributes could be misleading and only diminishes human perfection.

In spite of all critiques, anthropomorphism continues to play a prominent role in fiction. The question then remains, are there any benefits to it? What can we achieve through anthropomorphizing? Scholars who have reflected on the matter consider that the fact that animals and humans are simultaneously similar and different from each other is crucial. As Brian Boyd (2007) explains, there are physical and behavioral features common to us all, such as "limbs and locomotion, actions and reactions, aggression and defenses" (p. 227), and one main difference: we do not share a linguistic code. It is precisely this element the one that opens the door for the use of anthropomorphism because since "animals are agents, yet do not articulate their actions in ways that we can understand, we can allow them to stand for us all, and yet appeal to the imagination by their difference from us all" (Boyd, 2007, p. 228). As Margo De Mello (2012) summarizes in her great *Introduction to Human-Animal Studies*: "Animals are *like us*, but also *unlike us*. Because of this ambiguity, they are a perfect vehicle for expressing information about ourselves, to ourselves" (p. 287).

For Suzanne Keen (2011), the key of anthropomorphism lies not so much in the reader's identification with the characters but in generating empathy for them. In her analysis of *Pride of Baghdad*, the author proposes the concept of

[2] Neither in Keen's nor in Philo & Wilbert's case do these ideas represent their opinions on the matter; rather, their works collect and expose some of the manifold accusations against anthropomorphism.

ambassadorial strategic empathy, which she defines as a resource that "attempts to reach readers outside the boundaries of the depicted social world in an effort to change attitudes and even solicit assistance in the real world" (p. 136). The overall goal of this resource is to inspire the reader to become involved with the reality of the conflicts represented in the fictional world and to demand justice or aid for those in pain. Furthermore, Keen considers that the four lions in *Pride* function as an analogy for the civilian population in Iraq and other war zones and what they endure (p.142). While empathy is of paramount importance when approaching animal narratives, we believe it is not the non-present humans we should empathize with but the actual animal characters. The pivotal elements to better understand them lie in the field of Animal Studies, and more specifically, in the animal point of view approaches.

The Animal Point of View

Emerging in the last decades of the 20th century, Animal Studies can be understood as "an interdisciplinary field that explores the spaces that animals occupy in human social and cultural worlds and the interactions humans have with them" (Di Mello, 2012, p. 4). As Catherine Parry (2017) describes, these "human relationships with animals are inflected through political, economic, gendered, legal, social and cultural discourse" (p. 9). As a result, human-animal interaction does not imply face-to-face encounters exclusively; to think about animals, to draw them, to talk about them, to write and read about them is also to interact with them. Because of this, Susan McHugh (2009) remarks that two fundamental points for the field are those of representation and agency (p. 488). With these notions at hand, we can now rethink anthropomorphic depictions in literature and their meaning: Is there actual animal representation or do animals function as vessels to say something else?

In *About Looking*, one of the field's foundational works, John Berger notes that "everywhere animals offered explanations, or more precisely, lent their name or character to a quality, which like all qualities, was, in its, essence, mysterious" (1980, pp. 8-9). This implies that when we use animal imagery seldom are we really referring to a characteristic proper of the animal in question; rather, we are resorting to a cultural construction that uses the animal to illustrate something that up until then we could not picture mentally. As Waldau (2013) also observes, the symbol's degree of accuracy with the natural world may vary:

> It is not at all uncommon for them to be based on outright factual error, that is, a nonreality associated with the animal because of ignorance or apathy. Symbols can, then, be so fundamentally unrelated to other animals that they have, as it were, a life of their own. (p. 134)

It is true that most imagery implies verbalizing an immaterial or abstract idea. However, the intention in this action is to find a way to express some part of our own experience, the human experience, thus, as Margot Norris (1985) noted:

> It seemed that nowhere in literature were animals to be allowed to be themselves, to refer to Nature and to their own animality without being pressed into symbolic service as metaphors, or as figures in fable or allegory (invariably of some aspect of the human). (p. 17)

Animal imagery more than often resorts to oversimplification resulting in the reduction of animal identity to a singular attribute that is culturally installed and from which there is no escape. The problem of the traditional uses, then, is the obliteration of the actual representation of animal experience.

The critical proposals that regard animal narratives as means to ultimately think about the humans in similar situations seem to end up, perhaps unwillingly, objectifying animals. Animal suffering would appear to be valid only as long as it can point to a human or group of humans who are suffering as well. It would seem that once again animal agency is overlooked, and in the end, all that remains is human experience while animals disappear. Ironically, symbols and allegories can become intellectual zoos. Elisha Cohn (2015) considers that the ultimate question for animal studies is "how can a distinctness of animals' experiences be acknowledged, understood, and represented on their own terms from a human point of view without being appropriated or refigured?" (p. 576).

To approach a possible answer to this question, we deem appropriate to observe Josephine Donovan's concept of *animal-standpoint criticism* (2011). Spanning from standpoint theory, "which attempts to identify and articulate the point of view or standpoint of a silenced, oppressed group" (p. 203), animal-standpoint criticism considers that:

> animals are seats of consciousness – subjects, not objects; that they are individuals with stories/biographies of their own, not undifferentiated masses; that they dislike pain, enjoy pleasure; that they want to live and thrive; that in short they have identifiable desires and needs, many of which we human animals share with them. (p.204)

To retrieve, reproduce and/or interpret the animal point of view is not an easy task. Reflecting about the difficulties that more accurate representations of animal experiences could, John Simons (2002) explains that:

> To write, or to produce any other aesthetic object by means of a creative activity, is both an ongoing production of experience in the creative act itself and also a reproduction of the experience, real or imagined, which preceded, or was coterminous with, that act. (p. 87)

Not being animals, our experiences are not animal. Furthermore, if animals and humans do not share a common code, then animals cannot really communicate their experiences so that we can reproduce them accurately. Although, at first sight, these affirmations might sound rather pessimistic, they

actually prompt us to be creative and respectful in the search for a valid method. Already in 1990 Kenneth J. Shapiro proposed using *kinesthetic empathy*, which consisted in the close observation of animal movements so as to comprehend not only their motor abilities but also their behavior through "the investigator's bodily sensibility" (p. 4). Shapiro applied the kinesthetic empathy method in the real world in the observation of his own dog, this tool can aid imagination to create representations that do not efface animals. Our challenge as writers and scholars, then, is to gain awareness on how much of our own species is projected upon animals and opt for strategies and devices that will bring us closer to perfect the animal point of view.

The Lions and the Graphic Novel

When approaching *Pride of Baghdad*, we must not forget we are dealing with a graphic novel and, as such, there are certain genre particularities that differ from traditional prose. Graphic narratives use images and words simultaneously to construct meaning in a fictional world that is enhanced by illustrations, panels and text. Illustrations can be depicted in different artistic styles, they can be presented in black or white, or they can use colors. Panels can differ in size and placement within the same page and be positioned vertically or horizontally. Text can use a variety of fonts and sizes and can be put inside a panel or exceed its boundaries. At the same time, all these elements interact with each other, which further stimulates the reader. In graphic novels, furthermore, characters perform actions and deploy emotions we can actually see –and freeze if we stop at a certain panel for a moment–, turning the process of reading graphic narrative into a dynamic experience.

In *Pride of Baghdad*, dynamism is not just a formal feature but also the way in which the animal world works. In this zoo-society lions and antelopes negotiate to launch a rebellion, birds are messengers, apes live in anarchy while a giraffe proclaims the second coming of the gods. Animals behave like humans, yet they face problems exclusive of their species. It is in this way that the narrative transcends the allegory because "nonhuman animals are no longer used merely to represent human institutions and practices; rather the center of the narrative gravity shifts, producing a more textured portrayal of a story-world-as-encountered-by-other-animals" (Herman, 2011, p. 169).

Vaughan and Henrichon succeed in producing the animal point of view making use of the resources that the graphic novel can offer: facial expressions, spreads, language choices and exchanges with other animals outside the zoo.

Spreads are images that occupy one full page or two full pages. *Pride of Baghdad* uses spreads to express extreme emotions arising from the four lions' encounter with the unknown. The shock of the air strike, the violence and destruction of the explosions, the chaos that unfold afterwards, the first impressions of freedom and the discovery of a desolated Baghdad are all presented as large and vivid

images that allow the reader to be immersed in the animals' first-time encounter with the world of human wars.

The effects of the spreads are amplified by the detailed anthropomorphic facial expressions that make it possible to recognize a vast catalogue of emotions ranging from happiness to anger and despair. The lions curve their eyebrows and open their mouths in fear when the explosions hit the zoo, they show all their teeth when they argue, and baby Ali's eyes sparkle when he discovers they are free to roam. Hence, the pride's reactions to human stimuli become familiar, thus allowing us once more to reconsider what the animals could have felt.

First time experiences are heightened by the use of a restricted language that struggles to describe the world around. The novel's very first panel includes a single bird exclaiming "The sky is falling! The sky is falling!" It is clear that neither the bird nor the rest of the animals in the zoo can comprehend that planes are flying over them, nor can they understand what a plane is. As part of their expedition beyond zoo walls, the four lions have significant exchanges with other animals along the way. In the first one they meet a turtle who, due to his longevity, has witnessed a great deal of Iraq's history and is in charge of teaching Ali and the old lioness Safa some things about the human world. The two lions learn that rivers have names, that there has been another war prior to this one, and more importantly, that the cause of the war is oil or what they can only describe as "the black stuff under the earth". Lastly, the turtle leaves with a pessimistic message about the future implying that violence is cyclical and cannot be avoided.

The next two significant encounters take place at Saddam Hussein's residence and involve animals who have been held in captivity as "pets" in chains. An agonizing lion, who has been hit by bullets, has enough time for his final words that warn the lionesses of the dangers of human dominance over the animal body; his death, moreover, foreshadows our pride's demise. In the final encounter, Hussein's enraged bear attacks them with no purpose other than killing them for fun. It does not matter to him that they are all animals and they are all in danger: in war even the codes of nature are broken.

At the end of the narrative, the pride is shot by a young and clumsy American soldier. After the initial shock, his superior approaches the still lions and proclaims that "They are free". Wartime freedom, however, proves to be unjust since it can only be achieved after death.

Conclusion

That war is dehumanizing is an accepted universal truth. However, "dehumanizing" implies the loss of humanity. Animals are not humans yet their world is threatened too: they lose their kin, their habitat and their lives. What is more, their voices cannot be heard nor are represented anywhere. As a consequence, narratives that deal with animals involved in wars against their will have both a responsibility and an opportunity to faithfully convey the experience.

In *Pride of Baghdad* the animals face situations proper of their own species and they do so in the most "animal" way. The lions not only learn about war but they also discover human spaces for the first time and they struggle to understand them, lacking the knowledge and the words that define them. *Pride* exceeds the allegory since it privileges to portray animal agency and consciousness.

Due to the possibilities of the genre, graphic narratives that apply animal standpoint can contribute to granting faces and voices to those who cannot speak for themselves. Animals, as civilians, are involuntary victims of wars. They find themselves entangled in a type of violence they cannot understand and threatens their home and existence. For animals, the world of man is foreign, let alone the world of international politics.

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