

Theme of Nemesis in British Animal Poems

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This essay provides a thematic study of several British animal poems written by poets including John Gay, William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Hardy, and Wilfrid Wilson Gibson. By directly or indirectly expressing the theme of nemesis or anti-nemesis, these poems aim at showing the bad consequences of the abuse of animals, serving as a warning to the animal abusers as well as the potential ones, and providing a way to achieve a harmonious human-animal relationship and thus avoid revengeful results.

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Nemesis is the Goddess of retribution for evil deeds in Greek mythology, and is used to mean deserved and inevitable punishment for one's wicked wrongdoings. The theme is frequently used in literature and in some animal poems as well, so as to show the evil consequence or disastrous effect resulting from the abuse or maltreatment of animals, and at the same time serve as a warning or alarm to those potential or would-be animal abusers.

The first poem the author would like to discuss is the 18th-century poet John Gay's "Fable V. Wild Boar and Ram" (1727), which is mainly a dialogue between a boar and a ram, and the first half of which goes:

Against an elm a sheep was tied,
The butcher's knife in blood was dyed:
The patient flock, in silent fright,
From far beheld the horrid sight.
A savage Boar, who near them stood,
Thus mocked to scorn the fleecy brood.
"All cowards should be served like you.
See, see, your murderer is in view:
With purple hands and reeking knife,
He strips the skin yet warm with life;

Your quartered sires, your bleeding dams,
The dying bleat of harmless lambs
Call for revenge. O stupid race!
The heart that wants revenge is base." (Lines 1-14)

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Seeing that one of their kindred is being killed by the butcher, the tamed and frightened flock of sheep just stand far away, watching patiently and silently, or even detachedly. Hence a savage boar nearby makes a remark in which he points out the cowardice of the sheep. In the boar's view, the sheep should rebel and fight back by themselves, instead of only calling for revenge, which is a reliance upon others or supernatural powers, and which he thinks is base. As a reply to his criticism, an old ram says:

We bear no terror in our eyes;
 Yet think us not of soul so tame,
 Which no repeated wrongs inflame;
 Insensible of every ill,
 Because we want thy tusks to kill.

Know, those who violence pursue,
 Give to themselves the vengeance due;
 For in these massacres they find
 The two chief plagues that waste mankind:
 Our skin supplies the wrangling bar,
 It wakes their slumbering sons to war,
 And well revenge may rest contented,
 Since drums and parchment were invented. (Lines 16-28)

The old male sheep thinks that the boar has misunderstood the sheep, since they are not so tame that no repeated abuse or ill-treatment can exasperate them, nor are they so numb that they are not sensible or aware of human beings' wrongdoings. But because the sheep are not strong enough to rebel, they hope that the boar who has sharp tusks can retaliate against human beings on their behalf. What the sheep can do is to turn to the Goddess of Nemesis for help and it really has worked, because human beings' massacre of animals has brought about plagues that hurt or torture them. One of the retributions is that when the skin of the sheep is used to make drums, the drums will drive the young men to fight and sacrifice themselves in the brutal war. And thus the sheep's vengeance is wreaked.

In the prophetic poet William Blake's "Auguries of Innocence" (1803), he first describes the abuse and suffering of various animals in the hands of human beings, such as the robin imprisoned in the cage, the doves and pigeons shut in the dove house, the starving dog at the gate, the misused horse on the road, the hunted hare in the field, the wounded skylark in the woods, the game cock clipped for fight, as well as the misused lamb in the butcher's house.

And then he predicts how human beings' cruelty to animals is going to be revenged by Heaven:

He who shall hurt the little Wren
 Shall never be lov'd by Men
 He who the Ox to wrath has mov'd
 Shall never be by Woman lov'd
 The wanton Boy that kills the Fly
 Shall feel the Spiders enmity
 He who torments the Chafers Sprite
 Weaves a Bower in endless Night
 The Catterpillar on the Leaf
 Repeats to thee thy Mothers grief

Kill not the Moth nor Butterfly
 For the Last Judgment draweth nigh
 He who shall train the Horse to War
 Shall never pass the Polar Bar. (Lines 29-42)

Even though Blake's sympathy towards animals has gone so far as to the harmful insects including chafers, flies, and caterpillars, which is somewhat overdone, the concern about the welfare of other animals (such as wren, ox, and horse) is advisable. Blake suggests that if we human beings do not treat mammals, birds, insects well, we will be revenged on and bad consequences will be inflicted upon us naturally or supernaturally; for instance, we will not be loved by our fellow mankind; upon our death we will be reincarnated into the creature that we have killed and will be killed subsequently by its natural enemy; our unkind deeds will incur the Last Judgement by the stern Jesus Christ and what ensues is the end of the world; and we cannot enter into the posthumous spiritual world through a gate in the north. What's worse, the revenge is not only on individuals, but on the nation as a whole, since Blake states that the ill-treatment of animals "Puts all Heaven in a Rage" and "Predicts the ruin of the State" (Lines 6, 10). As Derek Wall proposes, "That we are all interconnected and what befalls one part of nature will influence the rest is lyrically captured by the poet" (1994, p. 63).

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's most well-known and representative poem "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (1798) is sometimes interpreted from an eco-critical perspective. As the story goes, the old mariner kills an innocent and harmless albatross, a deed which in his own words is "a hellish thing" (2.9). His reckless act irritates the Goddess of Nemesis, and as a result, severe punishment is inflicted upon him and his fellow sailors. There is no wind over the sea at all and they are stuck in a stagnant situation, "nor breath nor motion" (2.34). They are deprived of drinkable water and their throats are parched. Finally, "With heavy thump, a lifeless lump,/They dropped down one by one" (3.76-77). Consequently, the old mariner's wrongdoing costs the lives of two hundred of his fellowmen as scapegoats, which is really a harsh and cruel punishment. What's more, he himself also has to suffer from loneliness and fear, with his "soul in agony" and his "heart as dry as dust" (4.12, 4.24). The mariner is mentally tormented and begins to repent for his wrongdoing. Then he sees the water snakes, and begins to bless them subconsciously.

O happy living things! No tongue
 Their beauty might declare:
 A spring of love gushed from my heart,
 And I blessed them unaware:
 Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
 And I blessed them unaware. (4.59-64)

As a result of his blessing the snakes, the albatross falls off his neck and his sin is repented. He gets redemption and salvation. However, the mariner's repentance is not finished yet, since one supernatural voice says, "The man hath penance done,/And penance more will do" (5.117-118). That is why the mariner has to intercept the wedding guest, and tell him the story. And he will tell the story to many more people in the future as a way of penance. The mariner's attitude or change of attitude towards animals in nature plays a crucial role in our understanding of the poem as an animal poem, and his remorse for his wrongdoing in the treatment of the albatross serves as the turning point of the story. As Neil Roberts and Terry Gifford propose, "In 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner', Coleridge wrote perhaps our language's greatest ecological fable" (1998, p. 169). Even though

the mariner eventually gets redemption and salvation by blessing the water snakes unawares and the story seems to end in a rather consummate way, the inserted theme of nemesis is also crucially important, which has a warning and alarming function for those animal abusers and murderers, including the potential ones, since according to John Blades, “Scapegoat and pariah, he [the old mariner] suffers terrible psychological torment as the punishment for his ‘crime’” (2004, p. 191).

Another of Coleridge’s nemesis poem is “The Raven. A Christmas Tale, Told by a School-Boy to His Little Brothers and Sisters” (1798). In the tale, the raven couple build their nest in a tall oak tree, with the young birds in it. But a woodman comes and cuts down the tree, which kills the young birds who still cannot fly and as a result the raven mother dies of grief. The woodman then makes a boat using the wood of the oak tree. When the woodman and his friends put out to sea in this hand-made boat, an accident takes place:

Such a storm there did rise as no ship would withstand.
It bulged on a rock, and the waves rush’d in fast;
Round and round flew the Raven, and cawed to the blast.
He heard the last shriek of the perishing souls—
See! See! O’er the topmast the mad water rolls! (Lines 36-40)

So, revengefully, the woodman and his fellowmen are all killed by a ferocious and devastating storm. The raven father who witnesses the miserable death of those men cannot help feeling relieved and delighted. And the poem ends:

Right glad was the Raven, and off he went fleet,
And Death riding home on a cloud he did meet,
And he thank’d him again and again for this treat:
They had taken his all; and Revenge it was sweet! (Lines 41-44)

So we can see that the God of Death comes to the raven’s aid and punishes those wrongdoers severely and duly. The last sentence of the poem “Revenge it was sweet” makes use of the rhetorical device of oxymoron, since such a cruel revenge cannot be deemed as being sweet in human beings’ eyes, and it is only true from the raven’s point of view. If the woodman and his friends had treated the raven and his family in a humanitarian way, perhaps there would not have been any revenge at all on the raven’s side, and both of them could live happily.

Unlike the four previous poems, Thomas Hardy’s “The Bird-Catcher’s Boy” (1912) uses an indirect way to show his protest against the abuse of and brutality to birds, and according to Rosemarie Morgan, this tragic poem presents a more powerful outcry against cruelty to animals than Hardy’s purpose-built poem “Compassion—An Ode”, subtitled “In Celebration of the Centenary of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals” (2007, p. 181). This poem also contains some supernatural element and describes a child named Freddy who runs away from home because he is forced by his father to make his living through catching birds. Tragically, he only returns to his home as a ghost when the sea gives up his body.

At the beginning of the poem, the boy says to his father:

FATHER, I fear your trade:
Surely it’s wrong!
Little birds limed and made
Captive life-long.

Larks bruise and bleed in jail,
 Trying to rise;
 Every caged nightingale
 Soon pines and dies. (Lines 1-8)

The little boy has realized that what his father does as a profession is not morally right, and he is afraid of such a bird-catching profession, because the birds are confined in a prison-like cage, and thus they become very depressed and even die of grief.

Hearing the little boy's worry and concern, his father replies in an authoritative manner:

Don't be a dolt, my boy!
 Birds must be caught;
 My lot is such employ,
 Yours to be taught.

Soft shallow stuff as that
 Out from your head!
 Just learn your lessons pat,
 Then off to bed. (Lines 9-16)

The father is persuading his son that they have no choice but to catch birds because it is their way of making a living, and what's more, the boy is supposed to inherit his father's trade when he grows up. In the father's eyes, what the boy has just said seems to be stupid words and "shallow stuff". However, in the eyes of the animal protectionists, the boy's remark is far from being shallow; instead, it is significant and enlightening.

As a way to rebel against his father, the little boy leaves home secretly and nobody knows where he has gone. Weeks and months have passed, and the heart-sick parents can only wait anxiously and painfully for their son's returning home. Nevertheless, the birds are still kept imprisoned in the cages:

Hopping there long anon
 Still the birds hung:
 Like those in Babylon
 Captive, they sung. (Lines 37-40)

The story turns out to be a tragedy since the concluding stanza of the poem tells us that the boy becomes a sailor and is drowned in the sea. As the English proverb goes, "wickedness does not go altogether unrequited". On the ground that the boy's father has caught and caged many birds, nemesis falls upon the household, with the boy as the victim or scapegoat. This poem serves more as a warning or premonition of danger rather than a wisdom of hindsight. If we do not treat animals in a more humane way, regard them as equal members of the earth, and take animal ethics into serious consideration, we are doomed to be punished in the long run. As Singer has argued, "Pain and suffering are in themselves bad and should be prevented or minimized, irrespective of the race, sex, or species of the being that suffers" (1975, p. 49).

The last poem in this section the author would like to bring into discussion but feel reluctant to do so is "The Hare" (1912) by the 20th-century poet Wilfrid Wilson Gibson. It is a long poem of 415 lines about the legendary tale of a man, a hare, and a girl. The reason why the author hesitates to talk about this poem is because it is actually the opposite of the aforementioned poems, since it does not deal with retribution, but repaying the favor instead. At the very beginning of the poem, the man tells us his experience of catching a hare in a snare:

My hands were hot upon a hare,
 Half-strangled, struggling in a snare—
 My knuckles at her warm wind-pipe—
 When suddenly, her eyes shot back,
 Big, fearful, staggering and black;
 And ere I knew, my grip was slack;
 And I was clutching empty air,
 Half-mad, half-glad at my lost luck... (Lines 1-8)

The “Big, fearful, staggering and black” eyes of the hare staring back at the man startles him and makes him loosen his clutch of her, and so she flees away for life successfully. The man has ambivalent feelings toward such a loss, both anger and happiness. What he narrates seems to have happened in a dream, since soon after telling the story, he says “I awoke beside the stack” (Line 9). But even he himself is not sure whether this is a dream or reality, as he later says “Last night I loosed you from the snare—/Asleep, or waking, who’s for knowing!” (Lines 63-64).

However, when he wakes up and looks around, he indeed sees a hare. When he stands up, the hare quickly runs away. He then starts to follow her, but soon loses sight of her. However, when he later sits down beside a river to have lunch, he again sees the hare, runs after her, and fails again to catch up with her. He goes on travelling, and at twilight, he tells us “dropped my hands in time to feel/The hare just bolting ’twixt my feet” (Lines 135-136), but again “She slipped my clutch” (Line 137). The hare seems to be teasing him or playing a game with him. So he “cursed that devil-littered hare” (Line 138), because she leaves him “stranded in the dark” (Line 139). As luck would have it, he finds a caravan on his way, and the hostess warmly welcomes him to be a guest. In this household, he catches sight of a girl from whose eyes he detects the fearful look of the hare, and once again he recalls the scene in his dream. Up to this point, there is some supernatural or mythological element in the story, since the girl seems to be the embodiment of the hare, or kind of fairy-like figure, turning up to pay a debt of gratitude, which actually resembles the stories in *Strange Stories From a Chinese Studio*, a collection of bizarre stories written by Pu Songling in the Qing Dynasty.

Later on, the girl tells him that a leering and ignoble widower wants to marry her, and his shameful coveting makes her frightened. Supposing the girl is the embodiment of the hare, the widower may symbolize the hunter. Then the man falls in love with the girl and they decide to run away together. Even though six happy months has passed after their elopement, the man still fears that one day when the girl wakes up in the morning, he would see the fearful look of the hare in her eyes. One night, he dreams again the previous hare-catching scene, and startles from the nightmare, and finds the girl is absent from the bed. He looks for her and sees her standing in the darkness, with a “leveret cuddled to her breast” (Line 398). She explains to him:

... she could not rest;
 And, rising in the night, she’d found
 This baby-hare crouched on the ground;
 And she had nursed it quite a while;
 But, now, she’d better let it go...
 Its mother would be fretting so...
 A mother’s heart... (Lines 402-408)

So it turns out to be a false alarm. Even if the girl is not the embodiment of the hare, she is definitely a lover and protector of hares, or animals in general. The man's epiphany is conducive to their harmonious and consummate relationship.

I saw her smile,
 And look at me with tender eyes;
 And as I looked into their light,
 My foolish, fearful heart grew wise...
 And now, I knew that never there
 I'd see again the startled hare,
 Or need to dread the dreams of night. (Lines 409-415)

If in his previous dream, he is still uncertain about whether or not it is the right choice to let the hare go, now he is assured that he has done the justified thing. In the future, he will be a wise man, and he will love and protect animals, just like what the girl is doing now. Moreover, he will never be conscience-bitten, never see the frightening look in the girl's eyes, and never have nightmares about hare-catching again. As the saying goes, one good turn deserves another. This long tale can also be regarded as an ecological fable, or a poem with the theme of anti-nemesis, since nemesis is really a cruel alternative in the animal rights movement when there are genial and peaceful solutions. If human beings treat animals in a more compassionate and considerate way, the relationship between man and animals will become more harmonious and revengeful results will give way.

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