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Affirming Animal Subjectivity through Equine Individualistic Behaviors in Jane Smiley's *The Horses of Oak Valley Ranch* Series

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Unlike traditional literature where animals are often portrayed allegorically as mere symbols, in Pulitzer Prize winner Jane Smiley's *The Horses of Oak Valley Ranch* series, the portrayal of horses underscores their distinct individuality and autonomy. Focusing on three novels in the series—*A Good Horse*, *True Blue*, and *Pie in the Sky*, this paper analyzes how Smiley crafts a narrative that resists anthropocentrism and validates the subjectivity of nonhuman animals. By examining the unique reactions of horses in various situations, such as their differing facial expressions before a jump, their various responses to feeding and grooming, and their individualistic moving behaviors, this study reveals how Smiley highlights the psychological and physical diversity within a single species. The horses' individual traits are portrayed not as mere animal instinct but as conscious, intentional responses that signify their agency. Drawing on Marc Bekoff's defense of animal individuality, Val Plumwood's condemnation of anthropocentrism, and Cynthia Willett's critique of speciesism, the paper argues that Smiley's representation of equine individualistic behaviors is an affirmation of the inherent subjectivity of animals. Through these detailed descriptions, Smiley challenges the Cartesian notion of animals as mere automatons and encourages readers to recognize animals as complex individuals. Ultimately, this study emphasizes the significance of acknowledging animal subjectivity in fostering a more ethical and harmonious human-animal relationship.

Keywords: animal subjectivity, individualistic behavior, anthropocentrism, nonhuman agency

Introduction

Different from animals as allegorical embodiment in traditional literary works, the nonhuman animals in Pulitzer Prize laureate Jane Smiley's fiction are narrated as independent agencies with their own subjectivity. Among her works, the novels of *The Horses of Oak Valley Ranch* series are a case in point. The equine characters in this series are depicted with distinct traits rather than a blind oversimplification of them as horses only. Such a rough oversimplification is shown to the reader at the start of the first book of this series *The Georges and the Jewels*. The heroine Abby's father Mr. Lovitt who owns a horse ranch in California forbids his daughter to name any horses and calls all the geldings George and all the mares Jewel. Nevertheless, after the

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birth of a colt, Abby names him Jack after her father's permission. This ban on naming horses is completely lifted at the end of the novel due to Abby's insistence and her father's concession. This change plus subsequent characterization of various horses in the series draw our attention to the message Smiley insists on sending to the world through her writing about the agency and subjectivity possessed by those diverse and unique nonhuman animals.

Unfortunately, there is still insufficient research on her works from this angle and much less on this series. Mary Trachsel (2022) analyzes the relationship between Abby and the horses by focusing on Abby's change in her understanding of those equine partners and reveals Smiley's resistance to the anthropocentric framework of defining a horse's purpose solely as to satisfy human needs and desires. However, her study doesn't focus on the equine characters, which leave space to dig up for a new perspective to read the series. Besides Mary's research, there are only a few brief book reviews of the series, introducing the characters and plot. It is of great necessity to further the study of these novels.

Animal subjectivity emphasizes the quality or condition of being an individual who has conscious experiences. In Smiley's *Oak Valley Ranch* series, animal subjectivity is affirmed through the purposeful presentation of horses' individualistic behaviors. Due to their respective propensity, their reactions are different. Marc Bekoff accentuates the significance of the study on animals' individualistic behaviors as this—"Individual differences in behavior are exciting to study because variation provides information that highlights just how different individuals, even closely related individuals, can be" (Bekoff, 2002, p. 33). Bekoff believes that nonspeciesists pay careful attention to "individual variations in behavior within a species" (Bekoff, 2002, p. 53).

Animal behavior is a topic of tremendous dimensions, such as feeding behavior, parental behavior, and mating behavior. In Smiley's fiction, there are doubtlessly lots of portrayals of animals' behaviors. This paper will only focus on a direct telling of the individualistic features of animals' behaviors in the series. In addition, here the word "behaviour" mainly refers to "the way that a person, an animal, a substance, etc. behaves in a particular situation or under particular conditions" ("Behaviour," def., 2025). Accordingly, "animals' individualistic behaviors" means the different ways that animals behave in a particular situation or under particular conditions.

In this series, Smiley emphasizes within-species or intraspecies individual difference in terms of their behavior under the same conditions, such as "Horses are different in their enjoyment of mud" (Smiley, 2011, p. 252) or "I knew that their whinnies were so individual that they were saying 'This is me'" (Smiley, 2013, p. 117). In fact, there are many places in the series where animals' behavior differentiates from one another through the descriptions narrated by Abby. This paper will study the anti-anthropocentric narration of equine individualistic behaviors and its implications mainly in three novels from the series: *A Good Horse*, *True Blue*, and *Pie in the Sky*.

Difference in Equine Facial Expressions before the Jump in *A Good Horse*

In *A Good Horse*, there is a portrayal of horses' different facial expressions or looks on their faces when they are going to the jump. Horses behave differently in front of the jump, which can be found from their facial expressions.

> Horses have all kinds of looks on their faces as they are going to the jump—I had seen that at shows. With some, their eyes are wide and their ears are up and their nostrils are flared, and maybe they will refuse. Others look dull and others look determined, and others even look tricky… I saw one horse who jumped all the jumps but was grinding his bit the whole time. Black George had the look of a horse who was taking care of his job and who liked his job. (Smiley, 2010, pp. 184-185)

The dissimilar looks on horses' faces indicate the difference in both their psychological and physical condition. Some are mentally nervous and physically unready for jumping the jump, some are not active and energetic enough both in spiritual and physical aspects, some are confident and resolute in their performance, while others are tactful in their job. Without doubt, among these various facial expressions, there are individual differences between them. For instance, as a kind of personal habit, one horse likes grinding his bit during the whole jumping process. The variety of their facial expressions reveals a diversified and individualistic animal world instead of the monotonous and automatous one assumed by the Cartesians. Under the influence of Cartesian mechanism, animals are often regarded as machines which have no intelligence, feelings, souls, or thoughts. Their individual attributes and differences have been denied. Smiley's revelation of the variety of equine facial expressions under the same situation just emphasizes nonhuman animals' subjectivity.

Difference in Equine Reactions in *True Blue*

The novel *True Blue* contains several descriptions concerning horses' different reactions. The first description is about horses' dissimilar reactions to feeding: "Amazon and Foxy were the whinniers; Happy snorted and nickered; Sprinkles tossed her head. In the gelding pasture, Lincoln and Jefferson walked around, and Jack went over to the gate, where he ran his teeth along one of the metal slats, making a grating sound. He only did it once each feeding …" (Smiley, 2011, p. 46). The horses respond differently to Abby's coming feeding. Each horse has his or her own way of drawing Abby's attention to their hunger for hay. Behind every different reaction lies each horse's intention and inclination. Though belonging to the same species, the horses are different in many ways. Hence, the individuality of each horse is clearly unfolded.

The second description is about horses' diverse reactions to grooming:

> Some horses hate to be groomed, but most don't mind… Blue was not like that. He acted as if the currycomb was torture, the stiff brush was ticklish, but the soft brush was heaven. He especially liked me to stroke the soft brush gently over his face… The other thing about Blue was that he always knew where I was while I was grooming him. Some horses don't care where you are, and some horses pretend not to know where you are—they step into you, or even on you. Other horses push against you as you brush them, and you have to tell them to move over—if you push back, they only push harder. But Blue knew where I was, and always moved out of my way. (Smiley, 2011, p. 103)

Although Blue's behavior during grooming is definitely a focus in the above description, the other horses' different reactions to grooming are also covered. What's more, horses' various behaviors are intentional rather than reflexive, verifying their independent subjectivity that is denied to them by anthropocentrism. Cynthia Willett criticizes that "The unquestioned assumption that language and reason mark humans as the moral animal or superior species blocks serious attention to animal agency, social intelligence, and community life that shapes them and us together" (Willett, 2014, p. 7). Animals are deprived of subjectivity and reckoned as a herd without any distinction. Smiley criticizes such speciesism through her detailed depiction of horses' diverse attitudes to grooming.

The third description is about horses' different reactions in front of something new:

> He did run around, and seemed to enjoy it, though unlike Jack and some of the other horses, he didn't investigate things. There are some horses, and Happy was the best example, who see something and want to know all about it. They might startle or even spook a little bit, but then they want to go right over and sniff it and get a good look at it. Those kinds of horses learn quickly and are always pretty trustworthy. Most other horses will tolerate something they don't like the look of if you ask them to and if they trust you. Then they get used to it and don't worry about it anymore. But some horses avoid things, and that's what Blue did—he remembered the spots where he had been worried before, and he stayed away from them. (Smiley, 2011, p. 139)

Faced with something new, different horses behave in dissimilar ways, which to a large extent results from the diversity of their personality and inclination. Some horses like Jack and Happy, are so curious about new things that once they catch sight of something new, they will approach it, sniff it, and observe it; some other horses will just adapt themselves to the new things gradually without any worries; some horses like Blue have no interest in something new, and will try to keep themselves far away from the places where unpleasant things happened before. In a word, horses show different reactions in the same situation due to their different individuality, which affirms their subjectivity.

Difference in Equine Moving Behaviors in *True Blue* and *Pie in the Sky*

Both in *True Blue* and *Pie in the Sky*, there're portrayals about the difference in horses' moving behavior. In *True Blue*, different horses trot and canter in different ways:

> Because Blue had a nice trot—even and steady and balanced, but nevertheless nothing eye-popping, nothing like, say, Jack's trot, which was huge and floating, or Happy's trot, which was exact and perfectly sure-footed. It was not a trot to remember. But his canter was so effortless and graceful that it was like a ball rolling. It made Jefferson look as though he was on a pogo stick, popping around the pen. (Smiley, 2011, p. 54)

From the above description, we can find that different horses have different trots and canters. Every equine has his or her own moving style as well as athletic talents. The kinaesthetic distinctions between them indicate the subjectivity of each equine. By contrast, in anthropocentric culture, nature's agency is denied. Val Plumwood points out that "Mechanistic worldviews especially deny nature any form of agency of its own. Since the non-human sphere is thought to have no agency of its own and to be empty of purpose, it is thought appropriate that the human coloniser impose his own purposes" (Plumwood, 2005, p. 109). Like Plumwood, Smiley speaks for animals by spreading a vivid picture of richness and variety in equine movement to show their full agency.

In the novel *Pie in the Sky*, there is a portrayal of the difference in horses' moving behavior with Abby on their back. The difference is felt by Abby when she is riding them just like what she summarizes—"It is funny how every horse feels completely different from every other horse" (Smiley, 2012, p. 119). Abby compares three horses—Black George (or Onyx), Pie in the Sky, and Blue, and points out their different moving characteristics respectively. Black George feels smooth and solid and steady—"You could sense from the way he used his body that he was thinking and planning. That's why jumping big jumps was not as hard as it might seem—he always knew where he was, and because he was big and solid, where he was was where he was going to stay. He was reliable, and also talented" (Smiley, 2012, p. 119). Different from Black George, Pie in the Sky doesn't feel smooth or solid or steady—"The power he had was not steady and solid power, but whooshing and energetic.

Sometimes the power felt disorganized and sort of outside of him, and then sometimes… that power arranged itself and just came through him from back to front; you were sitting on it and going with it" (Smiley, 2012, p. 119). Compared with Black George, the power Pie in the Sky releases when he moves is dynamic, changing, and mighty. By contrast, Blue doesn't feel so powerful as Pie in the Sky, "but more floating, as if with each stride he was in the air a little longer" (Smiley, 2012, p. 120).

Every horse has his or her individualistic style of moving, and the existence of each different style has its significance. Smiley expresses her appreciation of this difference between individual horses through Abby's mind—"I could not say which horse felt better, just that they were entirely different" (Smiley, 2012, p. 120). Each horse is a valuable unique being. The diversity of horses' moving behavior verifies the individuality and subjectivity of horses while refuting the Cartesian mechanism thinking of animals as identical automata.

Conclusion

The variety of equines' behaviors in Smiley's fiction exhibits animal individuality and subjectivity. Marc Bekoff believes that "By learning about the behavior and minds of other animals, it will be easier for humans to appreciate them for who they are" (Bekoff, 2002, p. 99). For Smiley, to know animals as individuals instead of as a monotonous group is very crucial. That is why in her fiction, the anti-anthropocentric depiction of animal individuality and diversity based on her long-time observation of, communication with, and research in animals is prevalent everywhere. Any anthropocentric and speciesist assumption of animals as undifferentiated masses or any contemptuous neglect of animal individuality will harm the relationship between humans and animals. Only when human beings know more and more about animal individuality and acknowledge animal subjectivity can the human-animal relationship become more and more dialogical and harmonious.

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