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Contrasting Modes of Interspecies Cooperation in Jane Smiley's *The Horses of Oak Valley Ranch* Series

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This paper examines the contrasting modes of interspecies cooperation in Jane Smiley's *The Horses of Oak Valley Ranch* series, focusing on the relationships between humans and horses in training, riding, and performance. Drawing on theories of interspecies ethics, the paper argues that Smiley presents two fundamentally different models of human-equine cooperation: One grounded in mutual respect, trust, and attunement, and the other characterized by anthropocentric dominance, distrust, and coercion. Through close readings of *The Georges and the Jewels*, *A Good Horse*, and *Pie in the Sky*, this study analyzes the contrasts between horsemen who regard horses as intelligent, emotional, and autonomous partners and those who treat them as subordinate instruments to be controlled. By juxtaposing these opposing forms of cooperation, Smiley challenges anthropocentric assumptions and advocates an ethical model of dialogical interspecies relationships based on recognition, reciprocity, and embodied understanding.

Keywords: interspecies cooperation, interspecies ethics, trust and attunement, intercorporeal interaction, dialogical interspecies relationship

Introduction

American Pulitzer Prize winner Jane Smiley's *The Horses of Oak Valley Ranch* series contain plenty of interspecies cooperation in horse training, horse show, and riding lessons. Unfortunately, there are only a few brief book reviews introducing the characters and plot. It is of great necessity to further the study of the series.

Paul Patton once mentions about the peculiar richness that training brings to human-animal relationship, and the ways in which training and riding can "benefit from awareness of and respect for the being of the animal" (2003, p. 84). Training and riding provide precious chances for humans and animals to have close interaction with each other, which betters mutual understanding, trust, and attunement. Conversely, the increasing mutual understanding, trust, and attunement will enhance the interspecies cooperation between humans and animals in their training and riding.

Different horse trainers and riders hold different attitudes towards horses. In three books of the series—*The Georges and the Jewels*, *A Good Horse*, and *Pie in the Sky*, there are two contrasting modes of interspecies cooperation: One is full of mutual respect, trust and attunement, while the other is riddled with contempt, distrust, and violence. Based on the theories of interspecies ethics, the paper focuses on analyzing the two kinds of human-equine relationships and deciphers Smiley's intention of juxtaposing such different types of interspecies cooperation in her stories. Through the contrast, Smiley underlines the importance of mutual respect, trust, and

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attunement in interspecies cooperation while raising a query and criticism on rude and forcible ways of interspecies interaction.

Discord and Resistance Between George and Luke VS. Trust and Attunement Between George and Jem in *The Georges and the Jewels*

In *The Georges and the Jewels*, the first book of the series, there is a sharp contrast between two pairs of interspecies cooperation. The interspecies cooperation between George and Luke is rife with discord and resistance, while the one between George and Jem is full of trust and attunement. The contrast derives from their different attitudes toward animals and human-animal relationship, and their different ways of interspecies interaction. Via the contrast, Smiley reveals the crucial factors that influence interspecies cooperation and relationship.

Abby is asked by her father to train the brown horse George, who has a strong will to do things in his own way. Abby's let-him-be way of training George gives rise to disapproval from her uncle Luke, who comes to help them for a few days. Luke teaches Abby that a horse insisting on his own way is stubborn and needs to be fixed as early as possible. For him, the most important thing is to train the horse to deem the trainer as the boss so that the horse is willing to follow instructions. Concerning the methods of fixing horses, Luke has a principle of inflicting pain on them to make them submissive. In consequence, the first thing Luke does to fix George is tightening a loop of rope around his loins. Every time George bucks, the rope tightens around his belly, which makes him too painful to continue.

However, George refuses to surrender and continues his resistance for a long time till both of them are panting and sweaty. For all the pain, George still bucks thirty times or more. Luke mounts again and gives orders, and George follows for around ten minutes. Just when Luke assumes that George submits, George just drops Luke over his shoulder and gallops to the other end of the arena, leaving Luke sitting there. The unexpected reaction irritates Luke, so he takes the coil of rope again and launches another round of training. This time, it is more violent and fierce than the last. George falls over onto his side when Luke pulls up his foot with the rope. The trainer lays the horse down. Though George struggles to get up, he can't make it due to Luke's hold of his foot with the rope. When George is exhausted, Luke sits down on his shoulder for a while and finally stands up, with George laying there quietly. Finally, George gets to his feet, trembling. It seems that Luke wins, for George does what he orders this time, which is just like what Luke tells Abby—"I think now he knows who's boss" (Smiley, 2009, p. 80).

Luke enjoys the conquest of a stubborn horse, and a sense of superiority over the horse. In his eyes, the relationship between horses and horse trainers should be the conquered and the conqueror, or the subordinate and the boss. Horses cannot resist but follow the orders. The balky look is not allowed for a horse, which in fact is an expression of one's individuality and dissent. They are expected to be totally submissive; otherwise, horse trainers should resort to force and strategies to teach them a lesson. For Luke, horse training is not cooperation but conquest. During the whole training process, there're only interspecies discord and resistance instead of trust and attunement. Luke's haughty attitude toward animals and his tyrannical way of treating them are the epitome of anthropocentrism, which hinders a dialogical interspecies relationship. In the fiction, Smiley expresses her own objection to Luke via Abby's mind—"I surely didn't think I would ever be able to do that to a horse" (Smiley, 2009, p. 80).

By contrast, in the novel, another horseman Jem is extremely different from Luke in his attitude toward horses and his cooperation with horses. According to Abby, Jem is a patient man, whose patience to horses is a

reflection of his respect for them. Jem doesn't rush to mount a horse for training without knowing him or her. What's more, he waits rather than taking action when his equine partner doesn't immediately fulfill his or her expected task. Jem trusts horses' discretion and intelligence and knows how to attune himself to horses' different conditions. Rather than imposing his will on his equine partner, Jem waits for his partner to make some adjustment.

In Jem's cooperation with George, he waits patiently for George to feel the expected moving mode himself—"I could see that Jem Jarrow wanted George to think of this thing himself, to not be told every time what to do" (Smiley, 2009, p. 147). Jem trusts George's intellect and capability, and knows to wait respectfully for his partner to learn little by little. Besides, Jem is so experienced and attentive to notice a crucial problem about George—his stiff body. In order to help George to overcome it, Jem thinks of a gentle but effective way: "Jem just put his hand over the bridge of George's nose and pulled it around so his neck was curved to the left and down. A couple of times, Jem released his hold, and George's head popped back to the front, as if on a spring" (Smiley, 2009, pp. 147-148). In this way, George learns how to relax himself and keeps his head turned even after Jem loosens his hand, as a result of which Jem pats his equine partner as recognition. As to this, Jem explains that "When the horse knows how to soften and go along and be happy doing it, then it won't matter to him what happened before, and if it doesn't matter to him, then it doesn't matter to me, either" (Smiley, 2009, p. 148). No wonder Jem wants to help George to know how to soften his body and relax himself. For Jem the first thing is to make sure that his equine partner feels relaxed and happy.

In addition, Jem trusts horses' wisdom very much. He tells Abby that "All horses are smart…" (Smiley, 2009, p. 151), which is opposed to Mr. Lovitt's idea that horses only understand the carrot or the stick. In Jem's opinion, the key to horse training is curiosity. He explains to Abby that "A horse is a curious fellow…Hardest horse to train is a horse who isn't interested in anything new or is always afraid, but this horse isn't like that. He's of two minds" (Smiley, 2009, p. 152). After a short contact with George, Jem is observant and attentive enough to know a lot about him, such as his curiosity and intelligence. In fact, Jem knows and understands horses very well, which lays a foundation for the interspecies cooperation between him and his equine partners. For Jem, horses are intelligent, alert, and curious—"they're always looking, and that's a sign of intelligence. Lots of people don't give them much credit for intelligence, but I don't agree with that. If your horse is curious about you, then the first step is made. When he satisfies his curiosity and finds something interesting and fun going on, then likely he'll want to join the fun" (Smiley, 2009, p. 152). As a result, no matter what Jem wants horses to learn, he will arouse their curiosity and make the learning full of fun. In this way, horses are not forced to do what they dislike but are willing and even eager to have a try themselves. The cooperation between horses and trainers is spontaneous and smooth instead of being coercive and violent.

With regard to Jem's cooperation with George in horse training, his first strategy is to arouse his interest. When George curiously follows him, Jem gradually helps George to soften his body. After the softening of his body, Jem finally mounts. Nonetheless, Jem sits there for a moment before asking George to walk. Jem gives time for his equine partner to attune himself to an updated situation. Their activities around the arena keep on changing—from stride to trot, from trot to step, and from step to canter, which brings freshness and fun to George. Even when George suddenly remembers something and starts putting his head down, Jem helps him to soften his body by lifting his head up to the inside through rein. Under Jem's assistance, George finally softens and canters on, no longer thinking of bucking. Jem and George attune to each other during their cooperation without any violence. Their interaction becomes more and more smooth with increasing familiarity and trust.

There is no wonder that at last George gives up bucking or any other ways of resistance. He decides to cooperate with Jem. In fact, George is sensitive and smart enough to feel Jem's kindness and to know what is expected to do. Jem's training principles are in accord with what Smiley mentions in her nonfiction book *A Year at the Races*: "Superior horse trainers, though, are backed by theories that give weight to the horse's desire to attach to the trainer…In the course of good training, all facets of the horse's being are developed together. The basis of the training is the horse's growing trust in his trainer and increasing willingness to do as the trainer asks him" (2004, p. 236).

In addition, another important factor about Jem's cooperation with George is that Jem deliberately changes different types of activities and routes to avoid monotony and boredom, so that George's curiosity and enthusiasm are maintained. Behind Jem's training strategies lies his deep concern for George's feelings and his trust in George's intelligence. For him, George deserves respect and understanding in their cooperation.

In brief, Jem's consideration and patience during the training are in stark contrast to Luke's arrogance and impatience. Underneath the contrast are their different views of animals and human-animal relationship. Jem considers animals his peer partners who are also intelligent and capable while Luke deems animals his inferiors who should follow orders with no negotiation. Accordingly, their interactions with equines are also different—the former is smooth, filled with mutual trust and attunement while the latter is rough, rife with discord and resistance. Jem's relationship with horses is dialogical instead of monological, which Plumwood suggests that "we move from the former reductive subject-object models of relationship characteristic of mechanism to subject-subject models of an alternative dialogical paradigm" (2005, p. 190). In short, Smiley presents such a contrast to the reader in order to help humans to rethink the proper ways of interspecies interaction and calls for a dialogical interspecies relationship full of trust and attunement.

Trust and Attunement Between Black George and Abby VS. Doubt and Incongruity Between a Chestnut and Sophia in *A Good Horse*

In the second book, *A Good Horse*, of the series, the interspecies cooperation between Black George and Abby in a horse show fully reflects their mutual trust and attunement, while the interspecies cooperation between a chestnut and Sophia in the show is rife with doubt and incongruity. Smiley juxtaposes the two different pairs of interspecies cooperation on purpose to emphasize the importance of trust and attunement in interspecies interactions and the development of a dialogical interspecies relationship.

As to the cooperation between George and Abby in the horse show, it is George's first show. As soon as Abby gets on, George starts tossing his head towards the arenas. Abby guesses that there's something wrong with him at the beginning but soon realizes that he just wants to get going, and to let her know where to go. In virtue of their daily interaction, it is not hard for Abby to figure out her equine partner's intention. Moreover, Abby trusts George's competence and believes that he will jump clean if facing the jumps. All Abby needs to ensure is that she should learn her courses without making any mistakes. The first course is very simple in Abby's eyes: "Walk in, do a right-hand circle, then gallop down one side, two jumps, and back up the other, two jumps. Then take the first jump again, cross the center, take the third jump going the other way, go around to the left, take the second jump backward, cross the center again, over the fourth jump backward—a circuit followed by a figure eight" (Smiley, 2010, p. 81). In smooth cooperation with Abby, George does all these activities perfectly, including changing leads when he is supposed to. As a result, he gets a white ribbon for the fourth during the first round of the horse show.

The second course is a little harder than the first one. George and Abby walk to the far end of the arena, taking their time. And then they pick up a canter, get the rhythm, and finish the circle. Soon they go to the first jump. At this time, Abby can feel George's hooves hitting the dirt beneath her. Around the bush, his ears are pricked up. Abby feels that George folds his back underneath her. His forefeet touch the ground, and they are off down the long side. Right after they finish another two jumps, Abby's mind falls into blankness—she doesn't remember where to go. At this crucial moment, George keeps going, down the second side, then around through the in-and-out and back over the wall. He keeps the route in mind and leads Abby the rest of the way. They succeed. Feeling thankful to George, Abby kisses him on the cheek after getting off. She can't help appreciating her equine partner's intelligence—"Smarter than I was, again" (Smiley, 2010, p. 85).

The interspecies cooperation between George and Abby is based on mutual trust and attunement. Abby can feel George's movement via their interkinaesthetic interaction, such as his hitting hooves, pricking ears, and folding back. Their bodies share the same rhythm in the movement. The intercorporeal interaction keeps on constantly and precisely the whole time during their performance. From the equine side, George can also feel Abby's physical and mental activity, as a result of which he discovers Abby's trouble of losing the way in time. Furthermore, George is intelligent and calm enough to complete the left performance in the required route without Abby's guidance. He attunes himself to changing situation and cooperates well with Abby. Abby admits her own fault and acknowledges her equine partner's contribution. The gratefulness she feels for George uncovers her attitude towards horses. She regards them as her friends and partners, who are equal to her and deserve reverence.

In contrast to the harmonious cooperation between Abby and George, the interspecies cooperation between Sophia and a good-looking chestnut in the show is riddled with doubt and incongruity. The beginning part of their performance goes rhythmically until they come to a coop, in front of which the horse dodges to the right, almost out from under Sophia, who barely manages to sit up and halt him. Confronted with such an accident, Sophia turns the horse's back to let him face the fence and uses her whip to smack him three times altogether with her right hand while holding the reins tightly with her left. Then she turns a circle and comes back to the jump. The horse jumps it with a little awkwardness and goes on completing the course. His rhythm isn't regained until the last jump. What's more, after they finish the performance, Sophia just jumps off the horse angrily and says that she hates this horse. It's obvious that in their cooperation there're only doubt and incongruity instead of trust and attunement in face of unexpected happenings. Sophia blames the horse for the accident and never thinks of her own problems. She doubts the horse's intelligence, refuses to listen to him, and resorts to whipping him hard in no time rather than making some adjustment herself.

In sum, the contrast between Abby and Sophia in their attitude toward animals and their cooperation with animals are just another evidence to show Smiley's viewpoints on the ideal ways of interspecies cooperation and interaction, where interspecies trust and attunement are essential.

Contrast in Human-Horse Cooperation Between Peter's Class and Ralph's Class in *Pie in the Sky*

In the fourth novel *Pie in the Sky* of the series, Abby attends equestrian classes given by two horsemen Peter Finneran and Ralph Carmichael respectively, who have different attitudes towards horses, and different methods of training horses and guiding horse riders. The interactive modes of human-horse cooperation in Peter's class are in sharp contrast to the ones in Ralph's class. There are contempt, distrust, impatience, violence, and hegemony in human-horse interactions in Peter's class, while Ralph's class is filled with respect, trust, attunement,

patience, and harmony in human-horse interactions. Hence, the cooperation between Abby and her equine partner in the two classes varies from each other.

Abby takes part in a clinic where Peter, a very famous rider in the East and the judge in the horse show, gives three days of costly group lessons on equestrianism. The first lesson starts with Peter asking about riders' and horses' names, and where they come from. When Abby answers that the horse's name is True Blue, Peter comments: "True Blue. How sentimental. I recognize him. Pretty worthless in the show, wasn't he?" (Smiley, 2012, p. 64). Peter's disrespect to the horse and Abby is obviously shown from such a jarring word "worthless".

During the first day's lesson, the cooperation between Abby and Blue doesn't go as expected. Blue picks up the wrong lead so that Abby has to stop him and start again. Then he partly stumbles over the canter poles, and hesitates before the jump. Blue obviously is puzzled and nervous, while Abby feels embarrassed and helpless. Seeing the clumsy cooperation between Abby and Blue, Peter doesn't give any encouragement or suggestion, but shakes his head to show disappointment.

On the second day, Peter gives Abby a whip and suggests: "If your horse doesn't go willingly to the jump, then you must actually use this implement to remind him of his job. With this animal, I think once will be enough, but you have to mean it" (Smiley, 2012, p. 73). According to Peter, one hard lash is sore enough for a disobedient horse to remember. Abby has never whipped Blue before. In fact, before this lesson, she already reads something about punishment from a book entitled *The Cavalry Manual of Horsemanship and Horsemastership*. Abby doesn't like the author's idea of punishing the refuser via the spurs in the rear of the cinch or the riding whip on the croup, and refuses to try them on Blue—"I couldn't imagine jabbing Blue with spurs (I didn't even wear spurs with him) or smacking him hard with the whip…" (Smiley, 2012, p. 48).

However, facing the authoritative equestrian, Abby shrinks and makes a concession. Later during the training when Blue hesitates again, Abby brings the whip down on his right haunch, and this time Blue jumps, high and fast. Finally, violence is involved into the cooperation between Abby and Blue. Though there is a sudden response from Blue after the whip, it hinders further smooth and harmonious interspecies interaction. Peter is still dissatisfied with their cooperation, and suggests that Abby change to another more experienced horse in their third day's lesson.

As a result, on the third day Abby rides Pie in the Sky, Sophia's chestnut, and finishes all the training. At the end of the lesson, Peter tells Abby that "This horse is preferable to that worthless beast you rode yesterday" (Smiley, 2012, p. 88). A "worthless beast" is what Peter deems Blue, who Abby cherishes deeply as her intimate companion. In Peter's eyes, those horses who cannot perform well in their cooperation with human riders are undoubtedly useless and valueless. He has no reverence and love for the equines but considers them as humans' adjuncts and tools. He doesn't trust equines' intelligence and initiative, but believes in humans' complete dominance. Therefore, if horses refuse to follow orders, a resort to painful punishment is unavoidable. What's more, Peter shows no respect for his students either. He not only talks rudely to Abby, but also shouts angrily at some other students who can hardly meet his requirement. Underneath his contemptuous and impatient attitude towards both the horses and the students lie human exceptionalism and hegemonic arrogance.

In contrast to Peter's harsh, frustrating, and violent training courses, Ralph's training style is much more organized, harmonious, and nonviolent. Ralph never enforces his will on horses via whips and spurs. He prefers respect, trust, patience, encouragement, and attunement. So do Ralph's children Andy and Daphne. For instance, during their training of a horse named Barry, the Carmichaels are equipped with lumps of sugar rather than whips. Every time the horse completes such expected tasks as jumping, Ralph will call out "Yup" first and reward him

with a sugar lump. In this way, "Yup" becomes the signal to Barry that he is going to be rewarded. Different from Peter's methodology, encouragement is adopted by Ralph instead of punishment. In addition, at the end of each class, Ralph asks his students to pet their horses, feed them apples, tell them how wonderful they are, and promise them not only more apples but feed tubs full of carrots. Therefore, this way of encouraging equine partners is handed down to the next generation.

Another important characteristic of their training is that "They let him do it his own way and find his own pace, which was easy and graceful, as if he knew exactly how to get himself around the circle and over the fences… And he did it willingly—he got so into the rhythm that he kept jumping the two fences on the circle until they had to ask him to stop in order to raise the fences" (Smiley, 2012, p. 147). Ralph and his children trust the horse's intelligence and competence very much and respect his way of moving at his own speed. They are patient enough to wait for the horse to attune himself and find his rhythm. The horse enjoys himself jumping the fences and does it out of interest, which is apparently opposed to horses' reluctant jumping under Peter's training.

The third important factor about Ralph's training is that he never reacts angrily or disappointedly so as to discourage his students and their horses if they don't fulfil a task. Instead, he stays calm and patient in face of their "failures", and gives them one chance after another to practice, during which the horses will find the crux by themselves through repetition. Ralph trusts that after the repetitive failures in their jumping, horses are smart and observant enough to find out how to improve, and thus attune themselves kinaesthetically to work it out. By contrast, Peter reacts negatively and irritably once his students and their horses don't reach his expectation. As opposed to Peter who orders his students to impose a physical penalty on the insubordinate via a good whip, Ralph grants opportunities for horses themselves to discover problems and attune themselves accordingly.

The fourth feature of Ralph's training is that he divides horses into different groups at different times, enriches the exercises and makes flexible adjustment of those activities in correspondence to horses' condition, as a result of which the exercises are interesting and enjoyable for horses. For example, under Ralph's guidance, when paired with another horse named Parisienne, Blue performs extraordinary well, either with or without the rider on his back. And here is how Blue and Abby cooperate with each other with Parisienne's company: "Blue was entirely comfortable with Parisienne by the time Nancy and I went through on them. … Blue handled all of the jumping—he adjusted the length of his strides, he decided where to take off, he positioned himself in relation to Parisienne. My job was to maintain my balance and go with him" (Smiley, 2012, p. 247).

The interspecies cooperation between Blue and Abby improves a lot once Blue's interest and enthusiasm are aroused. There is no more struggle for both the horse and the rider, but harmonious attunement to each other. Now Blue is willing to jump and knows how to jump well. He leads all the exercises without Abby's guidance. Besides an attunement to his human partner, Blue also needs to attune himself to his teammate Parisienne. All Abby needs to do is to balance herself through intercorporeal interaction with Blue. Both the rider and the horse feel relaxed and free. In fact, all the horses in Ralph's training class enjoy themselves very much—"They looked graceful and free and happy" (Smiley, 2012, p. 249). The equine relaxation, happiness, grace, and freedom in Ralph's class form a sharp contrast to horses' nervousness, puzzlement, reluctance, pain, and bondage in Peter's class. So do the riders in the two different training classes.

To sum up, it's not hard to find Smiley's preference for Ralph's horse training principle, in which nonviolent training is a premise. As a horsewoman, Smiley fully realizes the wrongness of training horses by force, for she feels regretful for those sins and mistakes once made by herself. She confesses that "I committed sins and errors. I hit the horse with my whip in frustration. I clumsily jerked him in the mouth without meaning to… I often felt

embarrassment and sometimes felt shame at the mistakes I made with him" (2004, pp. 258-259). In his essay, Patton stresses the importance of nonviolent technique in horse training. He agrees with Monty Roberts, the author of *The Man Who Listens to Horses*, who also insists that "violence and confrontation are not the best way to obtain cooperation" (2003, p. 85). Through the contrast in human-horse cooperation between Peter's Class and Ralph's Class, Smiley underscores the importance of interspecies respect, trust, and attunement. Only when humans and animals respect each other, trust each other, and attune to each other can they cooperate well and have a dialogical interspecies relationship.

Conclusion

To sum up, in *The Horses of Oak Valley Ranch* series, through a contrast between the different ways of horse training and performing, Smiley casts doubt and criticism on those who despise animals' intelligence and emotion, neglect human-animal interactions, and enforce human will on animals by hurting them on the one hand; and thinks highly of those who respect animals' individuality and intelligence, take animals' propensity and mentality into account, and emphasize the intercorporeal interaction between humans and animals on the other hand. For Smiley, the ideal human-equine cooperation is the "oneness with the horse, a kind of fluid intersubjectivity" (Birke & Brandt, 2009, p. 196). In addition, through depicting some harmonious interspecies cooperation between equines and their human partners, Smiley lays stress on mutual trust and attunement in interspecies interaction and underlines the intercorporeal communication between humans and animals. Besides vocal and audio ways, there are too many other ways for interspecies interaction. The exchange of ideas and emotion across species can also be carried out through the interaction of bodies with trust and attunement, which contributes to a dialogical interspecies relationship.

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