The Animal Paradox as represented in the Harry Potter series.

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Summary

An essay about The Animal Paradox as represented in Harry Potter, with a particular focus on werewolves and animagi.

Notes

Erica Fudge defines the Animal Paradox as the idea that in practically every instance of interaction between humans and animals, there is some form of a paradox. We view animals as both like, and not like us. We both love, and hate them. This essay explores how the Animal Paradox is represented within Harry Potter, with a particular focus on lycanthropy and animagi.

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The 'Harry Potter' series, written by J.K. Rowling, follows the adventures of a young wizard as he
attends Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, where he faces off against many different challenges and eventually battled against his arch enemy, the evil Lord Voldemort. Throughout the series, Harry comes across a range of characters – human and otherwise – that either help or hinder him in his exploits. Two of these characters are the werewolves Remus Lupin and Fenrir Greyback[1], who fall into the category of friend and foe respectively. It is through these two characters that the Animal Paradox (as described by Erica Fudge) is most commonly represented, though it can also be seen reflected in the Animagi – the witches and wizards in the series who can turn into an animal form at will. The Animal Paradox, which Fudge describes as the “paradox of like and not like, same and different, that exists in our fascination with animals” (Animal, pg7), is explored through the treatment of werewolves in society (both within the series and also historically within Europe), Lycanthropy as a metaphor for our fear of animal-to-human disease and the way that Animagi are viewed and anthropomorphised[2]. These various examples within ‘Harry Potter’ link back to how Western Society views and treats animals, and the paradoxes that can be found within that treatment.

The way society treats werewolves, both within the ‘Harry Potter’ series and historically throughout Western Society, reveals the way people can simultaneously love animals and wish to distance ourselves from them and the violence seen in nature. Werewolves, “[t]ypically defined as a human being who transforms into a large and bloodthirsty wolf” (Ransom, 577) are generally considered to be creatures of fantasy, but there was a time in Western Society when the risk of being labelled a werewolf was all too real, as were the repercussions that usually followed. During the mid-to-late sixteenth century, Europe underwent a time in which people (almost exclusively men) were condemned and tried as werewolves, in a “quasi-equivalent of the female witch trials” (Beresford, 110). Those arrested for lycanthropy were sometimes violent criminals and this view of lycanthropy as an illicit, ferocious condition carries over into J.K. Rowling’s ‘Harry Potter’ series, in which the Wizarding World shuns those known to be werewolves. Those with lycanthropy are forced to register with the Ministry of Magic, and are treated with suspicion at best and outright hatred at worst. Remus Lupin, who is introduced in ‘Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban’ as the Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor, is presented as an intelligent, compassionate character; late into the book it is revealed that Lupin is a werewolf, and that despite being a likeable character with positive qualities, “[he has] been shunned all [his] adult life, unable to find paid work because of what [he is]” (PoA, 261).[3]. The negative treatment of Lupin due to his condition reflects one aspect of the Animal Paradox; the fear society holds for some animals is extended to the human-lupine character resulting in his degradation and mistreatment. The paradox is presented in society through the way human beings fear some animals, but adore and admire others; in how people keep dogs as pets, but are afraid of wolves. The difference likely comes down to the perceived ‘wildness’ of the animal. Through the treatment of Lupin it can be seen that despite his human appearance, his status as a werewolf is enough of an animal link to cause society to mistrust and fear him. The fear of werewolves (which represent the ‘untamed animal’) perhaps can be traced to the anxiety that surrounds our own animalistic origins. We are fearful of the brutality of nature and this fear manifested in the way we distance ourselves from violent convicts. In the past, we achieved this by labelling them – the criminals – ‘werewolves’ so as to separate ourselves from the viciousness they prove that human beings are capable of. Even in today’s society, everyday citizens distance themselves from vicious felons; our modern day ‘werewolves’ are the offenders we compare to animals, the human beings we give creature based monikers so that we can once again separate society into ‘us’ and ‘them’. Society uses “animal imagery… to underline rogues’ supposed lack of human qualities” (Olson, pg152); one example of this habit here in New Zealand is the nickname given to the violent criminal Stewart Murray Wilson, who is known commonly as ‘The Beast of Blenheim’. This use of animal comparisons suggests we create distance between ‘us’ and ‘them’ because the violence of the crimes serves as a reminder of a heritage and common animal ancestry that we would prefer to deny, so that we do not have to question our anthropomorphic view of the world. So we distance ourselves, and our view of animals as lesser beings displays itself (in both
fiction and reality) through fear and the way our anxieties influence the way we treat one another.

This view of animals as lesser beings perhaps explains why the two characters of Lupin and Greyback are presented so differently in Rowling’s series. Lupin is ashamed and horrified by his lycanthropy; he does his best to integrate into Wizarding society, despite being treated as a lesser citizen because of his condition. In contrast, Greyback revels in being a werewolf; he purposely targets children to bite and infect. Greyback’s deliberate mission to contaminate as many people as he can (as opposed to Lupin’s consistent anxiety about accidentally doing the same) allows Rowling to portray him as a monstrous character without it being solely about his lycanthropy. Rather, he is viewed with dread and disgust because of the very real fear of contamination. Lupin, though feared at times, is not ever portrayed in the same horrific light simply because he himself was a victim of Greyback’s vendetta, and because he personifies the human side of lycanthropy, with Greyback countering as the animalistic side. Indeed, Rowling has explicitly stated that “[Lupin’s] being a werewolf is really a metaphor for people's reactions to illness and disability” (Fraser, pg40). Within the 'Harry Potter' series, lycanthropy is transferred via a bite; the subsequent exchange of bodily fluids and the following infection directly represents how society fears the spread of disease via animal contagion. In 'Harry Potter', the “werewolf is feared and represents the loss of control (the result of external, outside infection). The references to the werewolf’s condition as an infection or contamination also invoke the idea of an uncontrollable spread” (Weaver, pg74). The way Wizarding society treats lycanthropes very closely resembles how society treated (and, in places, still treats) carriers of the HIV/AIDS virus and, to a lesser extent, other animal to human contagions. For example, the stigma that surrounds the HIV virus has sometimes resulted in those with the disease being banned from attending school, losing their jobs and other forms of discrimination (avert.org) – all things that Remus Lupin mentions having experienced (or expected to experience) throughout his life. This parallel showcasing the fear of disease exemplifies the animal paradox once again; this time rather than our fear of what the animal represents to us as humans it is the fear of how we can be contaminated by them. People view animals as unclean and disease ridden, and so we avoid contact with them so as to evade animal to human contamination, with such illnesses as Swine flu, Avian flu and, more recently, Zika virus making anxiety-driven headlines around the world. The paradox comes into play when scientific treatment of animals is considered – despite the fact that we view them as diseased and dirty, we still use animals to further our own medical advancement. Rodents are an interesting example, particularly rats, which would by most be considered one of the lowest types of animal (both on the food chain and in our esteem) and have negative stigma surrounding them due to their association with the Bubonic Plague – and yet despite these associations, they are used in laboratories for a huge variety of reasons, including as experimental subjects in the quest for medicinal cures. Organ transplantations are another example – the word ‘pig’ is commonly used as an insult and has negative, generally dirty connotations; but the interest in xenotransplantation as a medical practice is becoming more common, with many medical professionals believing that pigs “offer hope of a limitless supply of organs and cells for [people] in need of a transplant” (Cooper). It is in using these animals to test out drugs and treatments eventually intended for humans that we tacitly admit the similarities run deeper between our two species than we once again would like to admit, and that despite our fear of infection via these animals we are not above using them in order to further our own betterment.

In contrast to how the werewolves of the 'Harry Potter' series are treated is the inclusion of Animagi – human witches and wizards who elect to transform into an animal form. This example of transfiguration is presented as extremely difficult magic of which only a few skilled sorcerers are capable. Animagi do not have the ability to choose what animal they turn into, and they are limited to only one form. Rowling has explained that you “become the animal that suits you best” (Rowling, World Book Day chat). The Animagi in 'Harry Potter' are treated differently than werewolves primarily because they can control their transformations, but also because they are seen as more ‘human’ than other human-animal hybrids. This humanisation of animagus forms represents the
animal paradox in two ways. The first is in how the humanity of the wizard is still present, even while in animal form. This infers that humanity is ‘stronger’ than animality, that the wizard retains some sense of self despite having changed physically and – to an extent – mentally. This retention of humanity anthropomorphises the animagus form and acts in itself as a paradox, because humans view themselves as separate from animals, but through the animagus transformation both the person and the animal are represented as inhabiting one form. The animagus is simultaneously ‘us’ and ‘them’, though the ability to control this situation and animality separates them from the werewolf, who experiences a complete lack of control and submits to the animal rather than existing alongside it. The other way the animal forms of animagi represents the animal paradox is through how the animal forms are viewed, both by the main character of Harry and subsequently by the reader. Because the animal form is directly related to and based on the characteristics of the witch or wizard, how the animal form is portrayed is also influenced by how the human is portrayed. For example, in Prisoner of Azkaban, the reader learns that the supposed mass murderer Sirius Black\[5\] is an animagi, and takes the form of a “giant, spectral dog” (PoA, pg83). Before it is exposed that Black was framed and is actually innocent, his form is most commonly known as ‘The Grim’ which is an omen of death to which Harry “immediately reacts with primal fear” (Green, pg92). However, once the truth is discovered and Black revealed as Harry’s loving Godfather, he is later described simply as a large black dog who gives “joyful bark[s] … and chas[es] its own tail” (OotP, pg165)\[6\], making Harry laugh. This change in the representation of and reaction to Black’s animagus form exemplifies the paradox in the domestic context. The description of Black’s form changes because how Harry views Black changes; the form itself has not altered – Black still transforms into the same gigantic black hound – what has changed is Harry’s perspective of him\[7\]. Once there is a positive relationship between the two of them, Harry inherently humanises and domesticates Black’s animagus form. His own human emotions colour how he views what is, objectively, a huge and potentially dangerous dog. This suggests that rather than a biological influence, our view on what constitutes a ‘good’ animal versus a ‘bad’ animal is generally subjective and random. People keep some dogs as pets, but are scared of wild ones who have not been subjected to domesticity and humanisation. This shows that it is our own contexts that influences how we view animals; the paradox being why we allow our own experiences influence how we view an animal that has not – and potentially even could not – inherently changed, but do not extend that influenced view to all animals.

The animal paradoxes within the 'Harry Potter' series are presented in a variety of ways; the fear of our own animal heritage and how distance ourselves from animalistic behaviour, the anxieties surrounding animal to human contagion and the way each person’s view of the world shapes how we treat some animals. Each of these paradoxes and many more give us an insight into our own society, how we interact with both the animal world around us and also with each other. But more importantly, these paradoxes push us to question why it is we interact with animals the way we do, and to look closely at the differences therein. It is through this questioning of the representation of various paradoxes, not only in literature but in everyday life, that we begin to explore and possibly understand the reasoning and context behind our interactions with animals – even if we cannot ever understand the animals themselves.

Footnotes
It is interesting to note that Rowling’s werewolves are named for famous wolf / wolf affiliated characters: Remus, the founder of Rome in myth, was raised by wolves, and the word ‘lupine’ means ‘wolf-like’. Fenrir was a monstrous wolf in Norse mythology, the son of Loki who was foretold to kill Odin during Ragnarök.

To anthropomorphise is to talk about a thing/animal as if it were human.

‘PoA’ is shorthand for ‘Prisoner of Azkaban’.

Plural of ‘animagus’.

Another example of Rowling’s naming connotations: ‘Sirius’ being the brightest star in the Canis Major constellation.

‘OotP’ is shorthand for ‘Order of the Phoenix’.

As well as descriptions of Black’s dog form, this also is shown through the naming of the dog: it changes from “Grim” (with obvious implications) to “Padfoot” and even “Snuffles”; both names with far less ‘Sirius’ connotations.

References


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