

PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT OF THE STORY “SILVERSPOT – THE STORY OF A CROW” BY ERNEST SETON-THOMPSON

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ABSTRACT

In this scientific thesis it is analyzed one of Seton’s most popular animal stories, which is entitled “*Silverspot – the Story of a Crow*” from Seton’s realistic short story collection “*Wild Animals I Have Known*” (1898) according to its psychological method in literature. Being a realistic animal story, “Silverspot” is divided into three chapters and the setting of the story is Toronto, Ontario, where Seton resided for a few years of his youth. Author symbolizes the old and wise crow as a human as it acts like a man as well as it has psychological impact with its reactions to the human’s actions.

INTRODUCTION

The U.S. naturalist, writer, and illustrator Ernest Thompson Seton was an early practitioner of the modern school of animal-fiction writing. He was also a cofounder of the Boy Scouts of America. In 1866, when Seton was five years old, he moved to Canada with his family, where he went through most of his time within the woods observing and examining creatures as a way to escape his abusive father. He composed and outlined more than thirty books on the subject of nature and animals. One of his most popular books is entitled “*Wild Animals I Have Known*” which became increasingly popular within the genre of fiction. In 1903 the well-known naturalist, John Burroughs, attacked Seton’s work by deeming it unrealistic, accusing him of being a “*nature faker*” and accusing animal story writers in general of overdramatizing their stories in order to sell their books. In any case, Seton continued his composing which brought him an awesome bargain of financial success. One characterizing feature of Ernest Thompson Seton’s writing is that his animal stories present as very realistic and conclude in a dramatic manner. Regarding the tragic endings of Seton’s stories, Seton himself once said:

“*There is only one way to make an animal’s history untragic, and that is to stop before the last chapter*”[6,15].

One of Seton’s most popular animal stories, which I am going to analyze in the following chapter, is entitled “*Silverspot – the Story of a Crow*” from Seton’s realistic short story collection “*Wild Animals I Have Known*” (1898). “Silverspot” is a realistic

animal story divided into three chapters. The setting of the story is Toronto, Ontario, where Seton resided for a portion of his youth.

MATERIALS and METHODS

According to Thomas Dunlap, we often assume that animals have always been associated with human emotion and depicted as such in animal literature. However, this idea completely changed during the nineteenth century when modern science acknowledged animals' mental activity. As the analysis below will show, this new approach to animal psychology allowed nature writers such as Seton and Roberts to interpret their animal characters in a much more wide-ranging, human, and thus more "realistic" way.

Seton's "*Silverspot – the Story of a Crow*" opens with a question to the audience: "*How many of us have ever got to know a wild animal?*" [6,47]. It seems that the first person narrator here wants to make the reader aware of the fact how rare and thus unique it is to get to know **wild** animals. Furthermore, the first person narrator emphasizes the fact that he will not provide us, his readers, with a sentimental romance, but on the contrary, with a realistic animal story portraying **wild** animals not domesticated ones. In the very first lines, we read that the narrator seeks to give us an insight into the animal's life and history which is to help connect the readers to the animals in the same way that they would connect with a human character. Also, he does not deny the fact that it is rather difficult to observe one specific animal for quite a long time in order to give accurate reports of his behavior, doings and physical appearance. Other than that, he goes on and attributes a very high and precious status to the wild animals he has observed so far: "*But once in a while there arises an animal who is stronger or wiser than his fellow, who becomes a great leader, who is, as we would say, a genius, and if he is bigger, or has some mark by which men can know him, he soon becomes famous in his country*"[6,47]. Moreover, in the second section of the story we find even more charming words, which shall highlight Silverspot's superiority: "*Silverspot was a crow of the world. He was truly a successful crow their acknowledged chief.*" [6,60]. By doing so, Seton individualizes the peculiarities of crows and their psychology, which will be discussed carefully throughout this section of my thesis. It is of high interest that from the very beginning on and throughout the story the narrator clearly voices that he sees much more in wild animals than in ordinary beings. The qualities that he admires in wild animals are characterized throughout the story as being superior to human beings. He depicts the animals as stronger, more intelligent, better leaders and more powerful than humans. What precisely does he intend to tell us? The narrator's description of wild animals in this story may be offering a comparison to a more powerful and leader-type figure, such as a king or hero in human society. Reading Seton's realistic animal story in that context, it would mean

that the author puts specific emphasis on the peculiarities of crows and additionally tries to give them an almost higher status than human beings, which becomes evident when reading the following: “ *the life of a wild animal may be far more interesting and exciting than that of many human beings*” [6, 65]. In other words, Seton attempts to individualize crows and subsequently points out the crow’s superiority to human beings. The narrator literally tells his audience that animals have the more interesting, exciting and better lives. He then goes on to provide precise explanation and justification for his observation. In the next paragraph, the speaker reports on terrific events caused by wild animals, which are based on true stories that happened throughout human history. For instance, he reports about a bob-tailed wolf that terrorized the whole city of Paris for approximately ten years during the fourteenth century. Furthermore, he continues by telling some more similar happenings caused by wild animals including wolves, grizzly bears and panthers. All these records from the past on wild animal stories may be understood to be foreshadowing to Seton’s tragic story endings. In the very last sentence of this paragraph, the narrator finally introduces the protagonist of his short story, Silverspot.

ANALYSIS

Seton’s protagonist, Silverspot, is certainly not like any other crows, but the author describes him as: “*simply a wise old crow*” crows our most intelligent birds ‘Wise a an old crow’ did not become a saying without good reason.” Not only is Silverspot depicted as a wise and intelligent crow, but he is also unique and to distinguish from the other crows. In order to support the idea that crows were superior to men Seton emphasizes: “*Crows know the value of organization, and are as well drilled as soldiers*” [6,73]. The allusion with the soldiers does show already a precise anthropomorphic function. At this point of the narration, Seton clearly points out that the life of a crow is an adventurous life but not an easy life. On the contrary, he compares the crows’ life to that of a human soldier life: “crows are always on duty, always at war, and always dependent on each other for life and safety.” In the next few sentences, the narrator of the story gives deeper insight into the life of a crow. He teaches us about the animal world and that it too has its own rights, rules and orders. In doing so, he mentions, for instance, that the animal world, like the human one, has a hierarchical order in which each being has a specific duty. The most important animal, in this case one specific crow, is the leader who rules and is in charge of his fellow species. This leader, of course, must also possess kingly qualities. These qualities include maturity, wisdom, strength, bravery as well as life experience: “*Their leaders not only are the oldest and wisest of the band, but also the strongest and bravest, for they must be ready at any time*” [2,56]. The speaker then mentions the crows that are at the lowest rank in the crows’ community life- the youngsters. He

defines them as those crows without specific gifts. In other words, the animal kingdom has very experienced crows functioning as the leaders and teachers who must take care of those who are weaker and not fit and experienced yet. The most obvious anthropomorphic function that can be analyzed here is the fact that crows do have their own life-style, community life and value of organization. Therefore, one must acknowledge that crows show semi-human characteristics such as taking care of their fellows, which is accompanied by performing responsibility. Taking into consideration the analysis above, Seton portrays crows as intelligent thinking and living beings what makes them, according to the author, individual beings.

In the ongoing passage, the speaker finally begins recounting his story and acquaints us with his protagonist, **the crow**: “*Old Silverspot was the leader of a large band of crows and made their headquarters near Toronto, Canada, in Castle Frank*” [6, 75]. The narrator provides the reader with additional information such as the location of the setting, namely, Toronto. Furthermore, we read about the specific location of the story, a pine-clad hill located northeast of the city where the band of crows nest every year. When focusing more on the upcoming lines one might recognize again a structure, a system, literally a regular habit in crows’ life: “*But each year in the last week of February Old Silverspot would muster his followers Each year he came with his troop, and for about six weeks took up his abode on the hill. Each morning thereafter the crows set out in three bands to forage*” [6, 78]. Seton’s descriptions of the crows’ annual habits and of the regularities of their lifestyle again give them their own individuality and peculiarity and thus help humanize them.

Another highly interesting and striking phenomenon in Seton’s writing can be noticed when reading the following lines: “*little by little, opened my eyes to the fact crows, though a little people, are of great wit, a race of birds with a language and a social system that is wonderfully human in some is better carried out than our own*” [6, 81].

This passage clearly illustrates that crows have their own language, which allows Seton again to attribute certain human characteristics to the crows. Reading “*Silverspot – the Story of a Crow*”, Jopi Nyman, for instance, interprets the narrator’s function in the text as an expert in the field of crows [5, 79]. The narrator claims his expertise by conducting closer observations of the crows, however, at the same time he clearly separates himself from the Other by adopting the role of a translator. The narrator thus claims that he alone is able to interpret the crows’ linguistic code and messages.

According to Jopi Nyman: “*the language of the crow is both accessible and inaccessible, familiar and Other, and we can understand it by following their reactions to our actions*” [5, 88]. In addition to this, Nyman states that it is us, humans, who are able to understand the crows’ language, but the crows have to rely of their knowledge

of us, on observation rather than linguistic decoding, and this explains why they continue to lack power.

To sum up, it can be said that Seton's attempt to individualize crows is mainly evident in two particular ways, which are the crow's own social system and organization as well as the existence of their own language.

DISCUSSION

When reading "Silverspot – the story of a Crow" the one or other reader may notice that throughout the entire story there is a strong undeniable connection between narrator and protagonist even though they do not descend from the same species. In other words, the narrator is a **humanbeing**, while its protagonist is a bird, more precisely, a crow. However, even though they do not share the same linguistic code, interestingly they seem to be able to interpret the gestures and signs from each other:

*"Silverspot saw me standing there, and as I was closely watching him he didn't like it. He checked his flight and called out, "**Be on your guard**", or and rose much higher in the air. Then seeing that I was not armed he flew over my head twenty feet, and his followers in turn did the same. Next day I was at the same place, I raised my walking stick. The old fellow at once cried out "**Danger**" But on the third day I took with me a gun, and at once he cried out, "**Great danger – a gun**"[6, 59].*

As can be read in the passage above, the narrator claims to have a close relationship with Silverspot in that he had been observing and studying him and his fellows for ages. This also most convincingly explains his expertise in interpreting the crows and their language: *"Many others of his words of command I learned in the course of my long acquaintance, and found a very little difference in the sound makes a very great difference in meaning"* [6, 87]. The narrator goes on to explain the crows' language and its meanings.

During his adventurous voyages into the Canadian woods, Seton was obviously able to observe crows' life, including their family structure, in more detail. When more closely analyzing the aforementioned lines the reader is again reminded of the harshness and toughness of the wild animal's life. Due to this struggle for survival, crow families stick together and show a high degree of social cohesion and solidarity among each other. In order to be well prepared for the wild life in the woods, the youngsters undergo a harsh form of schooling: *"to drill the youngsters, who, of course do not much enjoy the punishment and nagging. But it is all for their good, as the old lady said and old Silverspot is an excellent teacher"* [6, 91].

At this point I would like once more to emphasize that Silverspot embodies an **animal hero** with certain vices and virtues as human beings would possess: *"Sometimes he seems to make a speech to them. What he says I cannot guess it must be extremely witty"* [6, 91].

According to Nyman, a final interesting observation that can be recognized in Seton's short stories is the fact that he shows constructed life-stories of animals [5, 86]. The narrative starts from the early age of the animal and most commonly ends in its death: "I turned over the remains, and by chance unburied the head – then started with exclamation of sorrow. Alas! It was the head of old Silverspot. His long life of usefulness to his tribe was over" [6, 90]. In short, it can be argued that one of Seton's remarkable narrative techniques is to show the life process of animals from birth to death including tragic endings.

Conclusion. The short story analyzed clearly shows Seton's talent in disguising his realistic animals in human clothes. Drawing analogies between animals and human beings with regard to psychology, individualization, communicative and social structures and kinship, Seton manages to provide readers with a different access to animals. The animal as "other" is exchanged by a concept which rather concentrates on commonalities than on differences.

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