

I. Quest for Voice of Animals in Sewell's *Black Beauty*

This research focuses on the study of Anna Sewell's novel *Black Beauty* (1877) from the eco-critical perspective and examines the writer's firm stance for the animal rights. The novel is set on the Victorian English society in which animal power had supported the society in every walk of the people. Instead of the modern cars, Horse-drawn carriages were the reliable means of travel in the absence of modern vehicles. In this novel, Anna Sewell gives voice to the horses to narrate their ordeals. So, a black horse narrates the whole story that is full of the experiences of the horses about their owners and their treatments to the animals.

The research focuses on anthropocentric human attitude in the Victorian society which was responsible for the abuse of the environment and the animals. Even though, Victorian society was obsessed with the proper moral codes as we look at the history but it appears to be very immoral and mindless regarding the question of the treatment of animals and the women of the society. This research attempts to unravel this dark side of the Victorian society.

Black Beauty is the narrator of the novel and is a "well-bred and well born" handsome black horse with one white foot and a white star on his forehead (2). The character is possibly based on Sewell's brother's beautiful carriage horse Black Bess, or Bessie. Black Beauty is the son of a wise older mare named Duchess and the grandson of the winner of a famous race. Following his mother's advice to be always good hearted and a hard worker, Beauty encounters a variety of good and bad owners and grooms, as well as enjoyable and miserable jobs during his life as a horse in Victorian England. Through Beauty and the other horses he meets, the readers learn about the mistreatment that horses often endure and the difficult nature of some of the work imposed on horses. The character of Beauty is Sewell's device for making the

public more aware of the need for more humane treatment of horses and other animals.

Beauty has a good start in life under the skillful care of Farmer Grey, and then enjoys a happy time at Birtwick Park where his master is a knowledgeable advocate of humane treatment for horses. But that master must leave England, and Beauty's life takes a downward spiral, thanks to a drunken groom who ruins Beauty's knees in an accident. Fashion dictates that a blemished horse cannot pull a carriage. So Beauty begins an odyssey through a series of middle and lower class labors. While he enjoys three years with a wonderful cab driver, the work is hard and debilitating. Fate sends him to even harder work where he collapses and is almost sent to the slaughterhouse, but is fortunate instead to be sold to a farmer who rehabilitates Beauty's health and finds him a pleasant home for the rest of his life.

The people and horses that Beauty meets in each of his jobs all have stories to tell that illuminate the situation of horses in that time period and reveal the natures of the people who are charged with their care. Beauty's gentility and goodness, even during hard times, make him an enduring favorite among readers.

In the original introduction to *Black Beauty* that Sewell herself wrote, she seems to indicate that the purpose of the book is that of "an equine care manual" (2), and not that of an entertaining story. Education was very important to Sewell, and since she declared, in part, that her intent was to induce "an understanding of the treatment of horses" through her "little book" (2), she had to explain how to treat horses. Consequently, it has been said that one could read *Black Beauty* and come away fairly well prepared to actually care for a horse.

The point of describing appropriate equine care was to provide alternative, replacement behaviors to the practices that Sewell abhorred and wanted to stop.

Evidence of abuse that causes pain and suffering for horses is found in nearly every chapter: tail bobbing, blinkers, double bits, check or bearing reins, risky jumps for sport, and long-term confinement in stalls. These practices, and the hope that pointing out their cruelty would bring an end to them, are the real focus of the book. Sewell's audience also learned that mean-tempered horses were not born but made by cruel treatment. It is important to note that Sewell did not lay blame for the mistreatment of horses so much on working men, even though they enacted the mistreatment, as on the owners and customers who exploited these workers and thereby their horses.

Sewell maintains the theme of evoking sympathy and understanding of horses through the different horse characters that appear in the book. Although Beauty experiences several different types of jobs, Sewell could not realistically place him in every kind of situation. So, evidencing her storytelling skill, she weaves encounters with different horses throughout the book, and each has a unique story to tell. As a result, Sewell is able to present to the reader the types of mistreatment that arise for horses in the city as well as the country; horses that are used for sport, for individual riding, for pulling carts, cabs, and carriages, and for combat. There are abuses that occur in each of these situations, and Sewell's pointed descriptions bring them to the reader's attention as had never been done before in literature.

Horses played a vital role in nineteenth century life. They provided not only the main means of transportation, but also the labor force for a variety of jobs. They pulled carts, cabs, wagons, and barges on the roads and on city streets, worked as pit ponies in the coal mines, and helped plough rural fields. Writing for *Horsepower*, Margaret Bennett reports that "During the 1890s, there were over 11,000 hansom cabs (the taxis of their day) alone on the streets of London, needing twice that number of horses to operate" (9) . Despite their importance, horses were treated miserably.

Bennett adds that horses “often died in harness due to overwork and lack of care” (10). As brute labor, they were taken for granted, beaten, and, as Ginger said in the book, simply “used up” (224). Those that pulled carriages were subject to whims of fashion that dictated docking tails or forcing horses to hold their heads up higher than was comfortable or practical. Without a long tail, a horse cannot rid itself of flies. With a head held in a painfully unnatural position by a bearing or check rein, a horse cannot use its full strength for pulling, to breathe properly, or to move its head from side to side to look about. It was abusive practices such as these that Sewell attacked in *Black Beauty*.

Though the Victorian society had the profound faith on the moralistic bearings and codified lifestyle of the people, it is clearly highlighted in the novel that it was not rational, sensitive, and sympathetic to many aspects of the society. By the means of the experiences of a black horse, the protagonist Black Beauty, Sewell has explored the darker side of the Victorian society in which human barbarity is seen instead of just and moral treatment of the animals. Various analysts have analyzed the multiple aspects of the novel from wide range of perspectives.

Kerschen discusses the moral lessons, particularly about temperance that Sewell incorporates into her novel *Black Beauty*. He sees the heterogeneity among the men and their treatment of the horses and other animals of the nature. He writes to this move:

There are a great many kinds of men; there are good, thoughtful men . . . ; but there are bad, cruel men . . . ; there are a great many foolish men, vain, ignorant and careless, who never trouble themselves to think; but still I say, do your best, wherever it is, and keep up your good name.

(12)

Kerschen gives the moralistic interpretation suggesting the mankind to be moral and preserve the goodness the name of human beings implies. He expects the honorable dealing with every aspect of the society and nature let alone the animals. Kerschen sees, “One of the strongest themes in *Black Beauty* is that of temperance” (13).

Kerschen provides the examples the mindless and immoral behaviors of mankind that puts the animals into danger in the novel. He draws the instance of the protagonist Black Beauty’s accident and injury caused by the mindless activity of drunken groom Reuben Smith. The consumption of alcohol is regarded as immoral and negative behavior for a man.

Another critic of the novel, Catherine Dybiec Holm looks at how Sewell effectively uses a horse’s point of view to address issues of cruelty, morality, and class in mid-Victorian English society. She observes:

Almost immediately, the reader is made aware of the importance of class in the setting of this story. Even among horses, class and breeding are quite important. Black Beauty’s mother tells him that he is “well-bred and well-born,” and she warns him not to bite or kick in play, as the cart horses (who have not learned manners) do. (6)

Thus, instead of good manner and morality, the concept of class has also been emphasized by Sewell. To be treated as gentle and well-bred, even the horses, like human beings, consider their nature, manner, breed and class.

Yet another critic Laura Carter considers the social and historical relevance of Sewell’s document as a treatise on animal rights as it not only advocates the animal rights but also advocates the feminist and personal life of the author. She proceeds:

Anna Sewell’s *Black Beauty* served in her time not only as a treatise on animal rights, it is an account closely relevant to the author’s

personal life, as well as her advocacy for horses in a time where females were not a presence in the equine community, their voices more often than not discounted in a male-dominated society. Examples are sprinkled throughout the novel, in the words and actions of the characters, both animal and female, which demonstrate their ability to provoke responses that expose the very underpinnings of a male-dominated Victorian society. (17)

Carter sees, thus, the voicelessness and strivings for voice in both horses and women in the Victorian society. So, Sewell is concerned for the voice of the voiceless in the Victorian society.

Taking all the criticisms about the novel, this research converges to see the issues of animals and the advocacy of the animal rights in Anna Sewell's novel *Black Beauty* using the various theoretical insights from ecocritics and animal-rights activists in the course of this research. It is relevant here to discuss the basic orientation of eco-criticism as a theoretical method that plays great role to examine the novel.

Eco-criticism as an academic discipline intensely began in the 1990s, although its roots go back to the late 1970s. Because it is a new area of study, scholars are still engaged in defining the scope and aims of the subject. Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the pioneers in the field, has defined ecocriticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii) and Laurence Buell says that this study must be "conducted in a spirit of commitment to environmentalist praxis" (18). David Mazel declares it is the analysis of literature "as though nature mattered" (28). This study, it is argued, cannot be performed without a keen understanding of

the environmental crises of modern times and thus must inform personal and political actions; it is, in a sense, a form of activism.

As Buell suggests the literary enquiry should be conducted with the spirit of the commitment to the environmentalist praxis, the analysis is centered to see the sympathetic stance of Anna Sewell regarding the treatment of animals and nature during Victorian time. Her stance for sake of the natural entities and their humane treatment is very significant to voice the nature conservation. It counters the attitude of the Victorian people towards the nature and highlights the environmental praxis of the writer in the society which is indifferent regarding the environmentalist causes. The society is rapidly heading ahead to the industrialization and technological modernization and the animals are being compared to the machineries and displaced from the society. It is in the novel, the writer backs the cause of animal rights, the destruction of the nature by the selfish human behaviors has been bitterly criticized and thus, we find the strong animal-rights activism of Sewell in the Victorian time for and propaganda of environmentalism has been the politics of the novel.

Many critics also emphasize the interdisciplinary nature of the environmentalist enquiry, which is informed by ecological science, politics, ethics, women's studies, Native American studies, and history, among other academic fields. The term "ecocriticism" was coined in 1978 by William Rueckert in his essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism." Interest in the study of nature writing and with reading literature with a focus on "green" issues grew through the 1980s, and by the early 1990s ecocriticism had emerged as a recognizable discipline within literature departments of American universities. Another pioneer of ecocriticism, Scott Slovic, offers a similarly broad definition: "the study of explicit environmental texts by way of any scholarly approach or, conversely, the scrutiny of

ecological implications and human-nature relationships in any literary text, even texts that seem, at first glance, oblivious of the nonhuman world” (114). Although such inclusiveness holds much appeal to scholars in the humanities, it does not integrate well with the scientific method. In both the social and physical sciences, precise definitions are the basis for constructing models and testing hypotheses. Even within the humanities, scholars are beginning to rumble. Nancy Easterlin warns if ecocriticism, like any other academic unit, is to be firmly established and recognized, it will hardly do to define it as “less a method than an attitude” (15). We all have many attitudes, some more rationally or ethically justifiable than others, but no attitude alone can define or sustain an area of intellectual inquiry. The mindless, cruel attitude of mankind in the Victorian era is not eco-friendly that has been exposed and criticized by Anna Sewall and thus, her attitude towards the nature is rationally and ethically far more eco-friendly and just to the animals and the other aspects of nature than the attitudes of the Victorian people.

In Garrard’s very broad definition, ecocriticism entails ‘the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term “human” itself’ (5). The importance of this undertaking, in his account, derives from the premise that ‘environmental problems require analysis in cultural as well as scientific terms, because they are the outcome of an interaction between ecological knowledge and its cultural inflection’ (14). At the same time, Garrard stresses that ecological knowledge is itself a shifting terrain rather than a firm ground for ecocritical analysis, emphasizing in particular the challenge to earlier ecological postulates of integrity, harmony and stability posed by the new ‘postmodern’ ecology of fluid and permeable boundaries, discord and change. Garrard also points to the necessarily interdisciplinary nature of ecocritical scholarship, which

‘draws on literary and cultural theory, philosophy, sociology, psychology and environmental history, as well as ecology’ (14)

In assessing this emergent field, of ecocriticism, Dana Phillips is more critical than Easterlin, “A lot of work calling itself ecocriticism has taken the form of preliminary, exploratory, accusatory, and hortatory essays [...].As a result, ecocriticism still seems embryonic and unformed” (144). Phillips, thus, sees ecocriticism still in the preliminary stage. It is in the stage of embryo, and because of its still developing stage it is hard to categorize the criticisms as eco-critical. The name of eco-criticism has been misused due to the unformed stage of the field and even the accusatory writings are considered as ecocritical writings due to the lack of fully developed ecocritical approach.

Because treatment of animals and nature is a real phenomenon measured by real ecocritical tools, we must find a precise definition of ecocriticism that is befitting the sciences. Considering the several definitions that already exist, the most insightful can be gleaned from a description offered by Karen J. Winkler in a survey article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*:

[...] nobody is willing to pin down what ecocriticism is. Very broadly, scholars say that it adds place to the categories of race, class, and gender used to analyze literature. For some, that means looking at how texts represent the physical world; for others, at how literature raises moral questions about human interactions with nature. (28)

Winkler’s description implies that the physical world can be gauged by science and compared to works of art that represent it. This is the beginning of a precise definition and we are encouraged to refine it, not by those scientists who bemoan "a generation of ecological yahoos" (86) or disdain the postmodernists "who have chosen not to

encumber themselves with a scientific education,"(44) but by the many ecocritics who genuinely seek a synthesis between the sciences and the arts. In the same review article from *The Chronicle*, Glen A. Love comments:

As a literary scholar, it embarrasses me to listen to colleagues who see science as just a bunch of cultural stories or who talk about nature writing without knowing very much about nature [...]. It's time to heal the breach between the hard sciences and the humanities---and literary theory isn't going to do it. (qtd. in Winker, 24)

The understanding of the natural aspects from the keen study of the nature is essential for the nature writers according to Glen E. Love. The binarism between science and humanities needs to be subverted and the gap between them should be bridged. Only then, the reading of the nature becomes complete and the science can be used for the conservation of nature.

Human culture is profoundly anthropocentric. So, the nature and animals are treated as dead things that have the only function to serve the interests of mankind. In anthropocentric culture, nature and animals are constructed according to the logic binary of the self and the other where animals become the other in relation to man. Val Plumwood, in this context, writes, "An anthropocentric viewpoint treats nature as radically other" (106).

The Black Beauty and the other horses have been deprived of their agency in the novel. Human-centered world does not accept that they also have the feelings and the likes and dislikes similar to mankind and this world also belongs to them.

Plumwood clarifies it further:

Anthropocentric culture endorses a view of the human as outside of and apart from a plastic, passive and dead nature which is conceived in

mechanical terms as completely lacking in quantities such as mind and agency that are seen as exclusive to the human” (“The Blindspots of Centricism and Human Self-Enclosure” 107).

With the study of treatment of nature and animals and dead and lacking in agency and following the anthropocentric attitude to mistreat the horses, this research attempts to decipher Sewall’s solidarity and advocacy of the animal rights and environmental conservation in the novel *Black Beauty*.

The present research work has been divided into three chapters. The first chapter fundamentally deals with introductory outline of the present study. It introduces critical review and the writer and her characters in relation to their oppressive, anthropocentric and selfish treatment of human beings. Thus it presents the bird's eye view of the entire research. The second chapter aims at providing the theoretical methodological reading of the text briefly with both the textual and theoretical evidences. It attempts to examine the inhuman and barbaric treatment of horses in the Victorian society due to which the horses have lost their proper share and respectful treatment in the nature and society though they serve mankind all the time. On the basis of ecocritical insights, the novel has been analyzed in this chapter. It will further sort out some extracts from the text to prove the hypothesis of the research. This part serves as the core of the present research. The third chapter concludes the ideas put forward in the earlier chapter, focusing on the outcome of the entire research. The various logical conclusions are summarized as the proof that how animals are crushed under the jaw of anthropocentric treatment and the mankind has become evil responsible to deteriorate and degrade the various aspects of the ecosystem and ecological chain. Through the study of the writer’s commitment for the betterment of the environment and the lives of the horses, this research attempt to

prove the novel as an environmental discourse. In the process, the inhuman treatment of the animals in the human society is examined and the writer's position regarding the nature and the animals is focused and the novel is located in the structure of the environmental narrative.