

**Interpret the Brutes:  
The Animal in Postcolonial Writing and the Writing of Race**

**School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics  
University of Sheffield**

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This module studies the literary representation of animals and human-animal relations in twentieth century postcolonial fiction and writings of race. Perhaps the most visible legacy of colonialism is its impact on indigenous fauna and landscapes (both urban and rural). On the other hand, as Gayatri Spivak has pointed out, the colonial project was regularly legitimised by claims that indigenous peoples had not “graduated into humanhood”: they were, more or less, animals. Equally, the American theorist of race Marjorie Spiegel has examined the “dreaded comparison” of blackness and animality in the discourses of race and slavery. On this module, we will study how writers have challenged these logics not by celebrating “the human” but by thinking about animal life and the ethical complexity of human-animal relations in order to challenge understandings of human identity in a transnational world. Authors studied will include many from America and Canada as well as from South Africa and Australia, such as Margaret Atwood, Timothy Findley, Zora Neale Hurston, Yann Martel, Alice Walker and J. M. Coetzee.

**AIMS**

This unit aims to:

- Give students a broad understanding of the ways in which animals and human-animal relations are represented in twentieth century postcolonial writing
- Examine how the concepts “the human” and “the animal” are manipulated in the fictional writing of postcolonial identity
- Examine the impact of literary form on our understanding of the relations between humans and animals in a postcolonial context
- Examine the ways in which the representation of animals affects and is affected by other key issues of representation, such as race and gender and national identity
- Examine the social and ethical questions that arise from the different kinds of literary representations covered
- Enhance students knowledge and skills in the core educational aims of English Literature Study

**LEARNING OUTCOMES**

By the end of the unit, a candidate will be able to demonstrate:

- 1) A critical understanding of the representation of animals in a variety of postcolonial texts.
- 2) The ability to critically assess the relationship between representations of humans/humanity and animals/animality in a variety of postcolonial texts
- 3) The ability to critically assess the particular role of animals and human-animal relations in particular national-literary contexts.

- 3) The ability to critically assess the literary representation of animals in postcolonial culture in terms of wider social, ethical and epistemological issues such as race, class and gender.
- 4) Critically evaluate the different kinds of animal representation studied.
- 5) The ability to sustain a reasoned argument backed-up with relevant evidence: presented according to the Department's criteria.
- 6) The ability to conduct independent web-based and library research that can be used to develop and refine their individual response to course material.
- 7) The ability to communicate their own ideas and respond to others in discussion.

### **TEACHING**

Teaching will be in the form of one 2 hour seminar each week. In these seminars students will have the opportunity to share their ideas developed during independent study, and discuss them with other students and the tutor. The main emphasis will be on close reading and discussion of the style and content of the set texts. Students will also be encouraged to consider how writers utilise literary forms to engage with the general theme of the course: the representation of animals and human-animal relations in the postcolonial environment.

### **ASSESSMENT**

This module is assessed by two assignments: a compulsory but ungraded bibliographic exercise and a research essay of 6000 words (100% of marks). The assignment questions will be designed to allow students the opportunity to write answers that meet outcomes 1-4. Similarly these essays will be used to monitor the extent to which outcomes 5 and 6 have been met. Outcomes 7 and 8 will be not be formally assessed but will be monitored by tutor.

### **ASSESSMENT DEADLINES**

Assessed essay, see webCT for deadline

## **Interpret the Brutes: Animals in Postcolonial Fiction and the Writing of Race**

For each text-study week, I assign students in pairs; each student will have 2 texts to "specialise" in. In their pairs students are required to produce a set of materials for each class discussion. They should produce:

- a short "further reading" bibliography of 5-6 items (you need not have read everything on this list)
- an individually-authored short statement (of two hundred and fifty words) outlining their initial response to the text
- 4 co-authored "discussion topics". The discussion topics must open up areas of debate for the class and consist of a brief explanation (150 words), a quotation from the text that relates to the topic, and an open question.

All of these materials should be posted on the WebCT discussion board for the relevant week by the Wednesday before the class at 5pm. All students are expected to look over and develop responses to the discussion topics before class.

### Class Reading Schedule

#### Week

1. Introduction
2. Margaret Atwood, *Surfacing*
3. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*
4. Alice Walker, *The Temple of My Familiar*
5. Yann Martel, *Life of Pi*
6. J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* and *The Lives of Animals*

#### READING WEEK

8. Timothy Findley, *Not Wanted on the Voyage*
9. Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*
10. Ruth L Ozeki, *My Year of Meat*
11. Barbara Gowdy, *The White Bone*
12. Linda Hogan, *Power*

## **EGH 6004: Interpret the Brutes**

### ***MA Research Exercise***

In preparation for the research essay, you will undertake a bibliographic research exercise on a topic of your own choosing. This will be submitted during the semester and will be assessed on a pass/fail basis, it will not have a mark that counts towards your final grade for the course. You should discuss your proposed research topic with the tutor.

Remember that your research exercise should be a tremendous help for your actual research essay. To this end the direction of the exercise itself is left quite open; however, these suggestions might offer some focal points. You can discuss with me any ideas of issues you particularly want to focus on. You are advised to spend no more than 20 hours of research time on this exercise, so plan your work carefully with a view to what is accessible and manageable).

Please submit a one to two page prose summary of the research you have undertaken and illustrate your research exercise with appropriate material (for example, primary and secondary bibliographic data, images). For the exercises, combine research tool and use a variety of sources: MLA-bibliography, Literature Online, other bibliographical material, primary text databases, cd-roms, the Internet, newspapers, etc. Please indicate which source you used to gather the material.

Possible Research Topics:

- The place of human-animal relations in a particular national context.
- Animals, animality and race.
- The cultural representation of a particular animal, or institution of human-animal relations (eg zoos, meat-eating, animal experimentation, pet-keeping).
- The importance of animal representation in specific cultural spheres: eg folklore and folk-tale, myth, religion, advertising, art.
- The literary or literary-theoretical context of a particular written text.
- Animal genres (anthropomorphic fable, natural history, sentimentalism).
- The role of animals and human-animal relations in critical theory.

### ***MA Research Essay***

Part of the nature of postgraduate study is that students should take more control of defining the perimeters of their work. Therefore, within the general area of the course—the representation of animals and human-animal relations in contemporary postcolonial writing—you are allowed to write on a specific topic of your own choosing. The only stipulation is that your essay should cover at least two literary texts in detail. By the Thursday of week 11 you are expected to provide your tutor with a draft description of your topic (no more than 50 words) which will form the basis of a consultation at which you will discuss your research aims with your tutor. You will then finalise the topic and submit a final topic description that will be confirmed by the end of week 12.

Word limit: 6000 words