

LIT 3032: ANIMAL WRITES: Beasts and Humans in Fiction

MODULE DESCRIPTION

It is an intriguing paradox that authors have so often used the very highest literary resources of language—the single defining factor that we usually think separates us from animals—to bridge the gap between us and the non-human. In this module we will survey a range of literary texts in which the animals, their lives and their minds, and humans' relations with animals are central concerns. We will cover texts such as Orwell's famous allegory *Animal Farm*, and other texts by H. G. Wells, Virginia Woolf, continuing up to contemporary novels by Yann Martell and J. M. Coetzee. Along the way we will explore questions such as: how have 20th Century writers re-written the animal fable form (one of the oldest literary modes)? Under what literary conditions does the most successful animal story appear? How does writing about animals alter in authors of different race, nation, or gender? And, perhaps most topically: does literary writing have any ethical potential to help us think about how humans relate to animals?

AIMS

This unit aims to:

- Give students a broad understanding of the ways in which animals are represented in twentieth century literature in a range of genres
- Examine the impact of literary form on human knowledge and understanding of animal life
- Examine the ways in which the representation of animals affects and is affected by other key issues of representation, such as race and gender
- Examine the 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

OUTCOMES

Knowledge

It is expected that by the end of the course students will

- have developed a critical understanding of the representation of animals in a variety of genres
- be able to relate the stylistic features of the texts studied to wider ethical and epistemological issues both in the consideration of animals and in culture generally
- be able to evaluate critically the different kinds of animal representation studied

Skills

It is expected that by the end of the course students will have

- The ability to sustain a reasoned argument backed-up with relevant evidence; presented according to the department's criteria
- The ability to conduct independent web-based and library research that can be used to develop and refine their individual response to course material
- The ability to communicate their own ideas and respond to others in discussion
- The ability to engage with others' work (peer review/feedback) using webCT

TEACHING METHODS

Teaching will be in the form of two 1 hour seminars 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 as well as the 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. There will also be occasional tasks posted on the course WebCT site that will structure students' independent study of the issues outlined in the outcomes, and offer opportunity for peer review and feedback.

ASSESSMENT

This module is assessed by three assignments:

a mid-term of 1,500 words (40% of marks) set wk6 due wk 10

a final essay of 2,500 words (50% of marks) set wk9 due wk13

MOLE discussion board postings (10%)

You are required to post weekly 200-250 word responses on Bulletin/Discussion Boards on the course's MOLE site. Posts should show engagement with the course topics and/or texts. An element of review between students is strongly encouraged. The mark for this assessment will be calculated on Monday of week 13. This counts for 10% of your overall assessment.

Students will be rewarded for additional posts showing reflective engagement with others. Students who have completed 8-9 posts receive a 10 mark rubric violation penalty. Any who have completed 6-7 posts receive a 20 mark rubric violation penalty. Any who have completed 4-5 posts are deemed to have met a minimum standard, so will receive a maximum pass mark of 40%. Students with less than 4 posts will receive 0% this part of the assessment.

If for any reason you cannot post on the MOLE boards you must contact r.mckay@shef.ac.uk immediately.

COURSE TEXTS

It is essential that students read the following texts. The most easily available editions have been indicated, but cheaper editions are acceptable. It is also recommended that students check online book providers (for example amazon.co.uk or abebooks.co.uk for readily available second hand copies.

George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (London: Penguin 1988)
Jack London, *The Call of the Wild* (Oxford: OUP, 1998) or available
free online
H. G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau, A Possibility*
(Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2007) or available free online
Virginia Woolf, *Flush* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 1998) also
available free online
J. R. Ackerley, *My Dog Tulip* (New York: NYRB, 1999)
J.M. Coetzee, *Disgrace* (London: Vintage, 2000)
Supplied short story pack (Patricia Highsmith, James Agee, Angela Carter, Franz Kafka,
Ursula LeGuin, Ernest Hemingway, Maxine Kumin)
Liz Jensen, *Ark Baby* (London: Bloomsbury, 2006)
Yann Martel, *Life of Pi* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2003)
Ruth L. Ozeki, *My Year of Meat* (London: Picador, 1998)



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Assessment 1

Answer ONE of the following questions in relation to the texts you have studied on the module. Over the course of the two submitted assessments you must discuss at least three different texts. If you choose to write on short stories, you should consider that TWO short stories constitute a "text" for this assessment.

Questions

1. Explore the relevance of one of the following thematic areas to the texts you have studied on the module: anthropomorphism; 'wildness'; 'survival of the fittest'; breeding; domestication; experimentation; evolution; hybridity.
2. Discuss the questioning and/or establishment of hierarchy in the fictional representation of animals and/or human-animal relations.
3. Literary representations of animals can, in the end, be nothing more than ways of thinking about the human. Discuss.
4. Explore the interplay of human-animal relations and human-human relations in any of the texts you have read.
5. How does the representation of animals affect our understanding of class, gender, sexuality, or colonialism in any of the texts you have read.
6. Discuss the concept of EITHER "law", or "fact", in relation to EITHER "fiction" or "uncertainty" "the literary" in one of the texts you have studied.
7. Explore the relevance of history to our understanding of literary texts about animals/human-animal relations.
8. Discuss the ways in which formal features (for example genre, style, narrative form) affect the representation of animals and/or human-animal relations.
9. Explore how the literary animal stories you have read represent the issues of similarity and difference.
10. Offer a commentary on **ONE** of the following passages. Your answer should include some close reading of the linguistic/formal features of the passage. Making reference to the rest of the text from which the passage comes, you should also analyse any key issues that the passage raises in the

representation of animals and/or human-animal relations.

Passage:

- a) George Orwell, *Animal Farm*, chapter 1. Passage begins 'And even the miserable lives we lead are not allowed to reach their natural span' and ends 'There were only four dissentients, the three dogs and the cat, who was afterwards discovered to have voted on both sides'.
- b) Jack London, *The Call of the Wild*, chapter 3. Passage begins 'All that stirring of old instincts which at stated periods drives men' and ends 'Buck's heels raised a hell's chorus of delight'.
- c) H. G. Wells, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, chapter 16. Passage begins 'But my inexperience as a writer betrays me' and ends 'He took out his revolver, examined the cartridges in it, and replaced it. Then he began to pull at his drooping lip'.
- d) Virginia Woolf, *Flush*, chapter 2. Passage begins 'But then, Miss Barrett was the teacher' and ends 'he longed for the time when he too should blacken the paper as she did'.
- e) J. R. Ackerley, *My Dog Tulip*, chapter 6. Passage begins 'It is winter. It is her thirteenth day' and ends 'and that was the end of you, perfect but imperfect boy'.
- f) J. M. Coetzee, *Disgrace*, chapter 16. Passage begins 'It is not a sodality he tries to join' and ends 'This is what he is becoming: stupid, daft, wrongheaded'.



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Assessment 2

Answer ONE of the following questions in relation to any of the texts you have studied on the course. Over the course of the two submitted assessments you must discuss at least three texts.

1. By concentrating your discussion on a range of specific examples, explore why any one of the following topics is important in the characterisation of human-animal relations in the texts you have studied: justice; globalisation; utopia and/or dystopia; realism and/or fictionality; violence; misanthropy; ethnicity; myth and/or religious belief; nationhood; artistic creativity; science; wealth and/or poverty; confession.
2. Consider the role of movement from country to city and vice versa, or of other kinds of geographical displacement, in the context of the literary representation of animals or human-animal relations.
3. Consider and evaluate the literary representation of animal consciousness.
4. 'The value of art lies in the manner of its cutting across the philosophical distinction [between the human and the animal], using it and testing it without ever quite conforming to it' (Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (London: Reaktion, 2000)). Discuss how a text or texts of your choice productively 'cut across' philosophical or moral debates about animals; **OR** evaluate the incorporation of moral debate into literary writing about animals and/or human-animal relations.
5. Compare the representations across the texts you have studied of one or more of the following major institutions of human-animal relations: meat eating, zoos, pet keeping, animal experimentation, zoology; agriculture, hunting.
6. Write an essay that considers the literary portrayal of animal death and/or killing. You may decide to focus on situations where either animals or humans are killers, or look at both.
7. Compare and contrast the literary representation of one or more animal species in at least two texts.
8. In many contemporary contexts, polarised representations of animals show them either as violent and aggressive or as passive victims of human power. To what extent does literary fiction offer a space for a more complex picture of animal agency?
9. By critically analysing a range of specific examples, discuss the literary portrayal of human-animal communication
10. If you wish to write on a topic not covered here, this may be possible, but you must get approval for your idea from me first. You must formally submit your proposed essay question/topic in an email at least two weeks before the essay deadline. You should also include brief details of the authors and themes you intend to write on. I will then either approve, amend, or reject

your title. Your essay will not be marked if its subject has not been approved.