



Environmental Consciousness in Lewis Carroll's Fictions

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Abstract:

For scientific experimentations on animals, humanity has allowed very ethics on the belief that humans alone deserve certain principles. In other words, man has the right to use 'inferior' beings in his quest for knowledge and power. The Victorian fictionist Lewis Carroll known for his fantasy wonderlands has touched upon a serious subject concerning science and human attitude toward animals in the nineteenth century England. Needless to explain that the Victorian awareness of non-human beings has been shaped by the dominant Christian faith which normally puts animals lower in the scale of socio-religious hierarchy.

Carroll's creative consciousness could enforce subtle insight into the connect between the human ego, quest for knowledge, for power and dominance over the nonhuman other for wealth accumulation at any cost. However, he has explored the line between human/animal realms as slippery, the interspecies relationship as more charming and challenging. And his perception of the scientific test upon animals evokes man's inhuman and unethical treatment. Whether it is the Snark, or Caterpillar or Cat, etc, Alice's encounters with them tell it all exposing man's instrumental reason to dominate the powerless realms including children and animals. Carroll's creative challenge to the discriminatory human-animal hierarchies may be a precursor of the critical philosophical concern of the twentieth century that speaks now a language of compassion and ethics.

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I. Introduction:

In the Victorian England, as an author of children's books Lewis Carroll is accredited with bringing a closure to the relentless didactic tradition prevalent in literature, which was expressly intended for younger learners and readers (Susina 3). The author fought against the paternalistic ideology, which subordinated children to the whims of the Victorian adults. This inclination to defend the powerless extended towards a protection of helpless animals. Described as a "sharp satirist of the self-presumption of scientific rationality and authority" by Mayer (431), Lewis Carroll also strongly resisted the scientific authority that oppressed powerless animals in the name of seeking knowledge.

Animals rendered different functions in the Victorian England, in the sense that they alternately served, according to Mayer (432), as "food, symbol of masculine or national power, zoological spectacle, scientific specimen, even domestic pet." Kerchy observed that for the Victorians, collecting specimens of plants and animals, ferns, fossils and beetles, taxonomically arranging them and exhibiting them in emerging museums

and galleries represented an accomplishment of the rational human mind that is capable of commanding the nonhuman world, which in extension is a way of asserting cultural dominance over lesser beings (4). In his defence against the oppression of helpless animals in the Victorian England, especially regarding vivisection, Lewis Carroll wrote essays expressing his argument on the controversial matter.

II. Critique of Scientific Reason:

An increasing practice of vivisection parallels the rise of the professional man of science. However, the fact of Vivisection was seldom practiced in Britain before 1870, and the condoning and With increased acceptance of Darwinian theory of evolution, vivisection was charged with a renewed sense of purpose (Mayer 432-433). As observed by Hilda Kean, “The real growth of vivisection in Britain dated from Darwin’s arguing for an understanding of the commonality between species; it also dated from the dissemination of Claude Bernard’s pioneering work on physiology within the scientific community” (97). William Rutherford was among many who advocated the practice, and he strongly voiced the power of vivisection to strengthen Britain’s “high moral rank amongst nations; for every step which is calculated to improve the physiological state of the individual must inevitably contribute to make the nation successful in the general struggle for existence” (5). As did Michael Foster who also wrote in earnest support of vivisection in his 1874 essay, “The success of the human race in the struggle for existence depends on man’s being well fed; man is therefore justified in slaying and eating a sheep. The success of the human race in the struggle for existence is dependent on knowledge being increased; man is therefore justified in slaying a dog or a rabbit, if it can be shown that human knowledge is thereby enlarged” (369). The very principles which allowed for such experimentation on animals to enhance the status of human is based on the belief that man has the right to use ‘inferior’ beings in his quest for knowledge and power.

A number of concerned citizens voiced their critique of the scientific community for endorsing such a practice. Edwin Ray Lankester even declared that the “physiologist suffers with his experimental animal,” and it is with an enormous amount of pain that both the operator and the operated, “becomes a sacrifice offered up on the altar of Science” (145). In an environment of the nineteenth century, with increasing writing against vivisection, physiologists, as anticipated, also insisted on their compassionate feelings towards the animals. Claims of mutual suffering by the scientists were assumably their attempt to appease public apprehensions about the inhumanity of vivisection; however, the practice nonetheless underlines the species hierarchy structuring the practice and methods of science laboratories.

The use of live animals as test subjects in laboratories was highly concerning for Carroll. And the escalating debate over the ethics of animal experimentation compelled him to write essays in challenge of the rationale which justified the act of gaining scientific knowledge at any cost. In his “Vivisection as a Sign of the Times” (1874), Carroll expressed his deep sorrow that in the new age of science, the world “has seen and tired of the worship of Nature, of Reason, of Humanity; for this nineteenth century has been reserved the development of the most refined of all – the worship of the Self” (4). In a tone which is rather prophetic, Carroll questions the justification of the exploitation of powerless beings for the purpose of gaining knowledge and progress. He challenged the ideology that warranted vivisection in favour of human progress and compared the subordination of animals to the subordination of women and the working classes:

The enslavement of his weaker brethren – ‘the labour of those who do not enjoy, for the enjoyment of those who do not labour’ - the degradation of woman- the torture of the animal world- these are the steps of the ladder by which man is ascending to his higher civilisation. (5)

The writing also links practices of the scientific laboratory with economic, political, domestic and scientific exploitation which encompasses abuse of power. Carroll openly questions the accepted evolutionary superiority of the experimental physiologist over his animal subject, as well as those who advocates for the human advancement at the expense of lesser beings. He asks,

Is the anatomist, who can contemplate unmoved the agonies he is inflicting, for no higher purpose than to gratify a scientific curiosity, or to illustrate some well-established truth, a being higher or lower, in the scale of humanity, than the ignorant boor whose very soul would sicken at the horrid sight? (5)

The writing concludes with a rather ominous prophecy of the time: “When the man of science, looking forth over a world which will then own no other sway than his, shall exalt in the thought that he has made of this fair green earth, if not a heaven for man, at least a hell for animals.” (5)

In his other anti-vivisectionist piece, “Some Popular Fallacies About Vivisection” (1875), Carroll challenges the sense of dominance, which believes “that man is infinitely more important than the lower animals, so that the infliction of animal suffering, however great, is justifiable if it prevents human suffering, however small” (Carroll, *Complete Works* 1191). The writer takes a stance against the enterprise of the time and sharply criticises the era’s “lust for scientific knowledge” (1192) that exploited animals for profit of an ego-centric culture. He exposes this hypocrisy: “A strange assertion this, from the lips of people who tell us that man is twin brother to the monkey!” (1191-1192). Stressing on this kinship, Carroll continues to question if science will know any limit in its claim for progress. He challenges the supposition that “while science arrogates to herself the right of torturing at her pleasure the whole sentient creation up to man himself, some inscrutable boundary line is there drawn, over which she will never venture to pass” (1199-1200). Echoing the apocalyptic tone of his previous antivivisection writing, Carroll forewarns “the possible advent of a day when anatomy shall claim as legitimate subjects for experiment, first, our condemned criminals - next, perhaps, the inmates of our refuges for incurables - then the hopeless lunatic, the pauper hospital - patient, and generally ‘him that hath no helper’” (1200). Carroll relates his concern regarding experimentation on helpless animals that it will soon lead to experimentation on helpless human beings, and the sacrifices will most likely be always made by the vulnerable section of the society. He concludes his piece by forewarning of a day when the roles of the experimenter and the experimented may reverse:

And when that day shall come, O my brother-man, you who claim for yourself and for me so proud an ancestry - tracing our pedigree through the anthropomorphoid ape up to the primeval zoophyte - what potent charm have *you* in store to win exemption from the common doom? Will you represent to that grim spectre, as he gloats over you, scalpel in hand, the inalienable rights of man? (1201)

Long before the modern world’s concern for the animal and environment, Carroll directly makes the connection here between human rights and animal rights.

While he was writing his antivivisection pieces, Carroll was also involved in a composition of his nonsense poem, *The Hunting of the Snark* (1876). The self-proclaimed natural historian among the crew, the Butcher is known for his exceptional abilities in writing and lecturing, and as his name suggests, for his surgical skills. In the “Fit the Fifth,” the crew set off to explore “spot unfrequented by man/A dismal and desolate valley” (769) armed only with “paper, portfolio, pens/And ink in unfailing supplies” (771). As a “strange creepy creatures came out of their dens/And watched them with wondering eyes,” the Butcher proceeds to write “with a pen in each hand,” explaining “all the while in a popular style,” which his companion, the Beaver, “could well understand” (771). Like the experimental physiologist of the time, the Butcher attempts to unveil “what has hitherto been/Enveloped in absolute mystery” and writes down his knowledge in a lengthy “Lesson in Natural History” (771). The mysterious creature is believed to be a Jubjub bird. In a sharp parallel to how exotic animals from foreign lands were received in the Victorian England, the Jubjub bird is considered in terms of its economic value as much as it is considered for its scientific value. The lesson taught from the Butcher’s tale links the accumulation of knowledge with the accumulation of wealth. Animals may serve as objects of study and, at the same time, provide sources of material wealth, and thus, the Jubjub’s description by the Butcher emphasizes the linkage. The bird is described in relation to contemporary fashion trends that “Its taste in costume is entirely absurd/ It is ages ahead of the fashion” (772). And its value as a source of meat is emphasized:

Its flavour when cooked is more exquisite far
Than mutton, or oysters, or eggs:
(Some think it keeps best in an ivory jar,
And some, in mahogany kegs. (772)

And of course, the bird is described in terms of preserving its exotic appearance in taxidermy for its worth as an object of vision for display, perhaps in galleries or zoological museums:

You boil it in sawdust: you salt it in glue:
You condense it with locusts and tape:
Still keeping one principal object in view
To preserve its symmetrical shape. (772)

This evaluation of the bird mainly in terms of its value for human use emphasizes the self-absorbed nature of the Victorian attitude that do not really care about transforming this “fair green earth” into a “hell for animals” (Carroll, “Vivisection” 5). The poem exposes the connection between the quest for knowledge and the quest for power in the Victorian context.

For the imperialistic Britain, scientific classification of different species of plants and animals represented an assertion of cultural and intellectual dominance in newly explored regions as in colonized territories. In her extensive work on zoological nomenclature of the nineteenth century, Harriet Ritvo discusses the various ways in which

[C]lassification represented European possession of exotic territories, as well as intellectual mastery of their natural history. . . Citizens of a prosperous global country like Great Britain easily conflated such metaphorical dominion with more practical or literal modes of appropriation. Thus, naturalists in the mother country automatically claimed the right to classify colonial plants and animals- their subjects in more than one sense. (336)

Classification is surely a mean by which animals can be subjugated for professional gains because “the lists of newly recorded varieties and species increases the bulk and cost of zoological monographs...” (Mayer 438).

The Hunting of the Snark raises a number of ethical issues regarding human authority over other animals. The Snark is a mysterious hybrid creature belonging to no fixed environment. It is both domestic and threatening. And the hunt for the unknown animal is undertaken on multiple levels. As explained in the poem’s refrain:

They sought it with thimbles, they sought it with care;
They pursued it with forks and hope;
They threatened its life with a railway-share;
They charmed it with smiles and soap. (Carroll 769)

The Carroll lines express his undertone of ridiculing man’s egotistic unconcern for the animal. Meticulously examined, pursued as an exotic delicacy with the feasting fork, threatened by industrial progresses, charmed and washed with soap, the Snark appears as a fascinating creature for the crew. The ambiguous nature of the Snark poses a threat to the crew due to the problem of classifying it. Some of the crew members anxiously try to come up with the best means to categorizing the creature. The Bellman’s extensive description as in the fifth bend, where “each particular batch” of the creatures is given, by “distinguishing those that have feathers, and bite/ From those that have whiskers, and scratch” (763). While mentioning the different types of Snark, the Bellman cautions the crew of a particular type,

“For, although common Snarks do no manner of harm,
Yet I feel it my duty to say
Some are Boojums-” The Bellman broke off in alarm,
For the Baker had fainted away. (763)

Even the mention of the name of this type of Snark cause fear in the hearts of the crew. The Baker’s uncle has told him that while regular Snark can serve as food or be a profitable resource (765), there is the other type which one must be wary of:

“‘But oh, beamish nephew, beware of the day,
If your Snark be a Boojum! For then
You will softly and suddenly vanish away,
And never be met with again!’” (765)

The evasive Boojum poses an existential threat to anyone finding it. Though the Boojum has sparked a number of assumptions and interpretations on the poem’s philosophical symbolism, it can be concluded however, that this particular class of Snark defies classification.

Another recurring theme found in Carroll’s fictional works is the false sense of authority the humans hold against the animals. In his essay “Alice on the Stage” (1887), Carroll labels his protagonist using positive attributes of animals, such as “gentle as a fawn” and “loving as a dog” (225). Echoing the description, the *Alice* stories highlight a multidimensional human-animal relationship that identifies their difference in a way that does not overpower either of the species. The stories offer a “fanciful and nonsensical perversion of any illustrated natural history” of the Victorian time (Lovell-Smith 29) by the way the inhabitants of the lands combat the scientific classification of species, which gripped the late nineteenth century naturalists. Like the

Snark, the people of Wonderland and Looking Glass land exhibit characteristics that makes categorization difficult. From *Alice in Wonderland*, we have a merging of man and animal such as Fish Footman and Frog Footman. From *Through the Looking Glass*, we have Carroll's invented beings like Jabberwock, Bandersnatch and Jubjub (which reappeared in *The Hunting of the Snark*). There are also curious amalgamated insects such as "Rocking-horse-fly" (Carroll, *Complete Works* 173), "Bread-and-butter-fly" (174), and "Snap-dragon-fly." (174)

III. In-between Space:

Another notable feature of Carroll's fantasy lands is that the line between species is treated as slippery, and the places are filled with strange hybrid animals. In *Wonderland*, a human child curiously turns into a pig (70), and the Looking Glass land unsettles the human-animal boundary such that the Queen turns into a sheep (201), and another Queen possibly turned into a kitten (269) and the elephants in this place are able to make honey from flowers just like bees (168).

Some critics have interpreted the Dodo, a wonderland animal to be a fictional self-portrait of Carroll as he was known to pronounce his name as Do-do-dodgson due to his speech impediment. The Dodo is a hybrid creature whose defective wings are supplemented by human hands holding a walking cane while offering a thimble as prize to Alice (30). The bird is a curious blending of natural vulnerability and civilised intellectual superiority.

The Cheshire Cat is one of the most enigmatic inhabitants of Wonderland. According to Lecercle, the Cheshire Cat, with its repeated disappearance and reappearance represents language that is both poetically subversive and ideologically manipulative because it differentiates the speaking human from the animals whose inarticulate purring or growling never make sense in terms of human interpretation (Kerchy pt.1). The Cat oscillates between the realms of reality and dream, while the illustration shows a rejection of human-animal hierarchy, for we see Alice looking up at the Cat with hands politely folded in her back, eagerly and respectfully gazing up at the animal. The Cat also displays a paradoxical disposition, in the sense that, though it looks good-natured, it also has "very long claws and a great many teeth" (Carroll, *Complete Works* 71), indicating its ambiguity as a predator or a pet.

Carroll's book chapter "Advice from a Caterpillar" sets up another scene that displays a denial of human intellectual superiority. In the illustration, we see Alice looking up at the animal standing on her tip toes while listening to his advice. Visually and verbally, the Caterpillar occupies a dominant role in this encounter. The whole episode centres around the metamorphic quality of living things. This interchangeableness of beings has already been contemplated by Alice as she falls down the rabbit hole, before her arrival into Wonderland:

"But do cats eat bats, I wonder?" And here Alice began to get rather sleepy, and went on saying to herself, in a dreamy sort of way, "Do cats eat bats? Do cats eat bats?" and sometimes "Do bats eat cats?" for, you see, as she couldn't answer either question, it didn't much matter which way she put it. (Carroll, *Complete Works* 20)

We see this theme repeated in the episode where Alice finds it difficult to come up with a reason as to what differentiates her from a serpent to a pigeon.

In Carroll's fantasy realms, the hierarchy between man and animal, as well as man and other species is put through a lens of looking-glass reversal. In the woods "where things have no names" (177), Alice experiences a sweet companionship with a fawn. Through this alternative, non-discursive, nonsensical classification that is based on empathic interspecies' relationality, a human child can be "grouped with other organisms 'like any other natural species'" (Dusinberre 7). This identification between species is also observed in *Sylvie and Bruno* wherein the Professor refers to the children as "small human animals." (Carroll, *Complete Works* 452)

Alice's meeting with the Lion and the Unicorn also emphasizes the theme of interspecies relationship. When he sees Alice, the Lion poses a question that challenges her humanity and undermines her existential stance, "Are you animal, or vegetable, or mineral?" (231). The Unicorn's reply, "It's a fabulous monster!" negates the status of her reality and nudges her towards fictional space where mythical beings and a human child

have mutually dependent empowerment. This is further confirmed by the Unicorn's account to Alice, "if you'll believe in me, I'll believe in you" (229). Wonderland not only challenged Alice's sense of identity and perception of life, the place and its inhabitants significantly break down any boundaries set between human beings and animals, and between reality and fiction.

According to John Berger's account, when a human is "being seen by the animal, he is being seen as his surroundings is seen by him. His recognition of this makes the look of the animal familiar. (But) The animal (also) has secrets specifically addressed to man" (5). What makes the fantasy lands of Carroll so pleasing is the recognition that these secrets do not need to be uncovered by ways of intellectual or scientific reasoning, which suppose the supremacy of man. The blurring of human and animal hierarchy, the merging of different species including humans, and the animals fluently speaking a nonsense language that often amazes Alice, may be said to communicate a near Derridean message, suggesting that

we are not the auto of autobiography, we are always radically other, already in—or ahuman in our very being—not just in the evolutionary, biological, and zoological fact of our physical vulnerability and mortality, which we share as animals, with animals, but also in our subjection to and constitution in the materiality and technicity of a language that is always on the scene before we are, as a radically ahuman precondition for our subjectivity, for what makes us human. (Wolfe, "Human, All Too Human" 571)

Carroll's in-between beings, the animals with superior intellect, the shapeshifting creatures and the "nonsensical" rules that subvert the aboveground law, all puts into doubt the dominance of human reason and reaffirms the relevance of alternative outlooks of previously powerless life-forms. Zoe Jaques's evaluation rings true when she declares that Carroll's predominant project in his writing was to "displace the naturalised assumption of human dominion over the animal kingdom." (50)

IV. Conclusion:

The humanist/post-humanist studies in the twentieth century are, in fact, more aware of the intellectual concerns focussed on the vulnerability of non-human living beings. These not only sensitize the ethical responsibility of humans towards non-human beings, but also attempt to revitalize the shared trans-species experience of vulnerability such as the fear of suffering, and reactivate the human capacity to feel pain, the inevitability of mortality as well as the impossibility of direct communication with other species (Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* 46). According to Zoe Jaques, while posthumanism exposes and undermines boundaries between human and non-human beings, it also re-establishes such boundaries so as to "facilitate a dialogue as to how these borders might become more fluid" (3). Carroll's artistic challenge against the inhuman treatment of animals in an attempt to minimize the pain in beings, as well as his interrogation of the human-animal boundaries, is a precursor of critical philosophical thought of the twentieth century such as Derrida's ethics of compassionate responsibility (395). This new ethic is based on the desire to establish a more humane relation to anything that can be considered "others" in comparison to us humans.

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