Creaturely Poetics and the Humanities: An Interview with Rhiannon Quillin

Rhiannon Quillin's 2022-23 mentored research project "Hunted, Haunted, and More-than-Human: The Creaturely Poetics of Jean Rhys's Early Novels" examines two of Rhys's works, *Quartet* (1928) and *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie* (1931), from the perspective of animal studies. Specifically, Quillin applies a "creaturely" analysis of Rhys's work, examining how corporeal vulnerability aligns Rhys's human protagonists with nonhuman (or more-than-human) animals within these novels.

In this Student Showcase interview conducted by her faculty mentor Ben Wetherbee, Quillin explains the importance of animal studies in the contexts of Rhys's work, literary studies, and liberal arts education.

WETHERBEE: Your mentored research project focuses on writer Jean Rhys's early novels from the perspective of animal studies, specifically Anat Pick's "creaturely approach" that she introduces in her book *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film*. What drew you to Pick's work, and what do you think her approach affords literary critics?

QUILLIN: I think the major reason why I adopted Pick's creaturely approach is that it offers an affirmative and nonreductive way of reading more-than-human animals in literary texts. Rather than reduce animals to metaphors or mirrors for the "human condition" only, thereby effacing "actual animals" from texts altogether, I read them not as tropes or devices but as subjects who have complex relations with other living beings.

The creaturely approach conceptualizes these relations through a "universal mode of exposure," or the idea that all living beings are vulnerable and exposed to natural law, morbidity, and death by the very nature of their corporeality. But even though every being has the bodily capacity to experience morbidity and death, this does not mean that we are all susceptible to the same oppression or intensity of stress. Nonhuman animals, for instance, are uniquely more vulnerable than humans, especially in America where animals are hunted, abused, and slaughtered on a mass scale. In this way, vulnerability is dual-sided; we are all vulnerable thanks to our material reality, but it is also necessary to consider how some of us are more vulnerable than others.

The term "creature" is particularly important in disrupting binaries, as it often refers to any vulnerable living being, whether categorized as human or nonhuman. Looking at texts through the ethics of creaturely vulnerability, then, allows literary critics and me to complicate and collapse the distinction between human and nonhuman animals, while also centering the concerns of those beings—typically "nonhuman" beings—who are doubly vulnerable and exposed.

And plus, "creature" is a fun word; I love using it.

I like "creature," too, and you map the term onto Jean Rhys's work in a really interesting way, since her protagonists are often characterized as helpless victims. How does it change our thinking when we examine these characters as vulnerable creatures rather than victims?

There are many reasons why I reject the idea that Rhys's protagonists are simply victims. One reason is that her protagonists are rather active and resistant, despite their destitution and their dependency on men for survival; they aren't completely passive, and they defy those who attempt to subjugate them, while also extending compassion towards their fellow creatures who are relegated to the very margins of society.

Additionally, victimizing Rhys's protagonists robs them of their agency and does little in the way of interrogating forms of oppression that affect their lives. In my project, the form of oppression that I analyze is speciesism, which is the discriminatory belief that one species (usually humans) is superior to all others.

Rhys's protagonists may seem "human," yet we should take into account how the notion of the human is not just a scientific classification of a species but a social construct based on certain ways of being or performing that has racist, sexist, imperialist origins, since normative humanness is grounded in masculine, European whiteness.

This is all easy to comprehend when you see how some "humans"—like those who are gendered and racialized as "Other" (women, black people, indigenous people, etc.)—are often dehumanized and deprived of humanity, which works to expose them to various degrees of violence. In fact, literary critic Cary Wolfe argues that imperialism, racism, and sexism (among other -isms) are "locked" in a speciesist framework that delineates humans above and against nonhuman animals (1).

Although many critics have noted how Rhys's protagonists are dehumanized due to their gender and class positionings, these critics also neglect to interrogate the humanist, speciesist ideologies that make their dehumanization possible. Instead of trying to insist on her protagonists' humanness, I view them occupying a dehumanized state that not only allows them to protest against humanist tenets, but also bestows them with a creatureliness and a heightened awareness of the more-than-human world. Dehumanization becomes a vehicle through which Rhys's protagonists realize the exposedness and vulnerability of all living beings, making them more attentive and sympathetic to the various other creatures that populate their surroundings.

So, I view Rhys's protagonists as creatures—as precarious, vulnerable beings—who confound the human-animal distinction and reject the values and standards of Western humanism, which are oftentimes complicit in various forms of oppression and violence.

Rhys also employs some evocative animal language to describe Marya and relationship to other characters in her first novel *Quartet,* including a lot of canine language (underdog, top dog, etc.). At one point, you offer a wonderful coinage, arguing that Marya has been

"dogified" in the narrative. Can you say a little about that term and how you read Rhys's use of canine language?

I'm not sure if I've ever seen the word "dogified" before. I think it just popped into my head when I wrote about Marya's animalization and her specific characterization as an "underdog"—a term originating from the late nineteenth century to refer to the beaten dog in a dogfight. In *Quartet*, this dogfight is described as a "ruthless, merciless, three-cornered fight" that transpires between Marya and the Heidlers (117), a rich English couple who invites Marya to stay with them after her husband is imprisoned for theft. She becomes financially dependent on H.J. Heidler and emotionally dependent on his wife Lois, but their relationship quickly develops into a three-way power struggle, or rather a messy ménage à trois that is divided between the "top dog" Heidlers and the underdog Marya.

Although both Marya and Lois are referred to as dogs at various moments in the novel, due to their gender and their financial dependence on Heidler, they distinguish themselves from one another in a few key ways. Whereas Lois clings to Heidler like a companion species but attempts to disavow her vulnerability and animality, Marya is openly vulnerable but mocks and defies the Heidlers, even calling Lois a "well-trained domestic animal" at one point (107).

Overall, this canine language prompts me to view Marya not as a human victim or a beaten dog, but as a feral, "dogified" creature who uses her underdog perspective to bark and bite back at the Heidlers.

On the topic of nonhuman or more-than-human animals, Rhys also uses such creatures evocatively in her narratives. In your project, you have really compelling thoughts about a moment in *Quartet* where Marya sees a restless fox in a zoo.

Yes, confinement (or imprisonment, specifically) is a recurring theme in Rhys's *Quartet*. Marya expresses a general feeling of enclosedness in her relationship with the Heidlers, her husband Stephan is animalized through his imprisonment, and she encounters a confined fox during her visit to a Parisian zoo.

Here is a brief excerpt from the latter scene:

> There was a young fox in a cage at the end of the zoo—a cage perhaps three yards long. Up and down it ran, up and down, and Marya imagined that each time it turned it did so with a certain hopefulness, as if it thought that escape was possible. Then, of course, there were the bars. It would strike its nose, turn and run again. Up and down, up and down, ceaselessly. A horrible sight, really. (160)

There are several things that could be said in response to this passage. One is that Jean Rhys herself expressed a hatred for zoos after visiting the London Zoological Gardens, an event that she recounts in her unfinished autobiography *Smile, Please.* Because Rhys has shown regard for actual animals and their imprisonment in zoos even in her nonfictional work, I diverge from readings like that of literary critic Thomas Staley, in which he argues that the fox in *Quartet* is

meant to serve as a metaphor for Marya's precariousness as a "human" woman struggling to survive in a patriarchal society. Instead, I think it would be better to read Rhys's nonhuman animals as they are (as subjects), rather than as metaphors for her so-called human protagonists.

And so, in analyzing this passage, I discuss how Marya recognizes the unethical confinement of the fox and how she perhaps perceives its repetitive movements as related to her own repetitive acts of resistance against the Heidlers in particular and against human-created institutions of domination (like prisons, zoos, etc.) more generally.

It might also be important to mention Marya's reaction to the "horrible sight" of the fox's suffering. Shortly following the scene, the narrator discloses that "she (Marya) was thinking: 'I must get so drunk tonight that I can't walk, so drunk that I can't see'" (160). Her response is not directly attributed to the "horrible sight" of the fox's confinement, but she makes an explicit reference to sight and the act of seeing, suggesting its relation to what she saw previously at the zoo. Her desire to become so incapacitated that she cannot "walk" or "see," then, can be understood as a struggle to come to terms with the difficulty of acknowledging one's shared vulnerability with nonhuman animals, specifically the caged fox, while simultaneously recognizing the violence that animals are exposed to under human subjugation.

Let's zoom out a little for the final question. I think a lot of liberal arts students—and even established literary scholars—have missed the boat on animal studies, which is less entrenched in English curricula than feminism, Marxism, psychoanalysis, and a host of other schools of literary analysis. (I had missed that boat, too, by the way; reading your work has introduced me to a wealth of new ideas.) What would you say is most valuable about animal studies that we don't get from these other schools of criticism?

Well, it makes sense why people "missed the boat" on animal studies. The liberal arts tradition is a humanist tradition, and animal studies is a relatively new area of analysis in the *human*ities.

Additionally, I think that feminism, African American studies, Marxism, among other schools of thought, all have important roles to play in the academy, and I wouldn't say that animal studies is looking to delegitimize or supplant them. In fact, animal studies helps to revitalize these areas of analysis because, now, we can recognize speciesism as a form of oppression and identify how it intersects with other variables of marginalization like gender, race, class, etc.

But I'm not quite sure if animal studies can be said to exclusively offer something that these other strains of cultural studies do not. Each one has its own focus and yet must account for interdisciplinary crossings and whatnot to be truly beneficial. For example, you can't have viable, contemporary feminist criticism without critical race studies, or vice versa.

Even so, animal studies does explore a lot of unmapped territory and, for that, it is especially rich and timely, coming at the heels of the current climate crisis. In light of anthropogenic climate change and the threat of mass extinction, the humanities at present can be characterized by a "more-than-human turn," as scholars begin to shift focus towards animals, plants, and the "environment" altogether. Scholars are steadily realizing that human exceptionalism and

anthropocentric dogma need to be revised or eradicated if we're going to cultivate sustainable, vitalizing relations with the world.

I'd also like to clarify that academia isn't just a theoretical playground. The ideas that we learn inform how we behave and interact with those around us; the ideas that we learn in the classroom are directly related to actual lives. Learning about humans' supposed exceptional capacities in World Thought I can cause us to feel little to no remorse when we step on a bug or hit an animal with our car, because we're taught that humans are exceptional and superior to "lesser animal and vegetative beings." Unlike liberal arts curricula that are still steeped in a humanist, speciesist tradition, however, animal studies encourages us to stop thinking and behaving as if we are the only beings on this earth whose lives are worth living.

Works Cited

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