

## Found in Narration: Nonhuman Voices in Jessica Grant's *Come, Thou Tortoise* and Colin McAdam's *A Beautiful Truth*

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### Abstract

This article delves into the problem of nonhuman subjectivity in two literary texts: Jessica Grant's *Come, Thou Tortoise* with the first-person tortoise narration, and Colin McAdam's *A Beautiful Truth* that employs the collective primate narrator. While nonhumans cannot actively participate in the act of creation of the text, their presence in the story, arranged by the author, conveys multiple meanings. Considerations of the narrative techniques are critical for negotiating the relevance of nonhuman actors. I argue that although each author finds different methods of giving voice to nonhumans and both ensure practical significance of animal particularity, nonhuman subjectivity should not be perceived as a fixed value of the presented literary texts.

**Keywords:** *nonhuman, nonhuman narrator, nonhuman narrative, Jessica Grant, Colin McAdam, tortoise, chimpanzee, Looee*

### Multidimensional Relationship between Nonhumans and Literature

Darwin's *Theory of Evolution*<sup>1</sup> has been shaking the foundations of claims about the distinctiveness of the human species even though humans reluctantly admit that the border between them and nonhumans<sup>2</sup> is far thinner than it has been engrained throughout the ages. In this light, literature experiences a certain aporia – on the one hand, nonhumans have no direct access to it as authors or direct recipients (readers) – on the other, the text is the tool that has the power to shape humans' perception of nonhumans. '[B]uilt on tenderness toward any being other than ourselves', literature is

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<sup>1</sup> What is striking, Josephine Donovan notes, is that one of the less popular works of Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals*, investigates this subject more thoroughly as Darwin 'catalogued and analyzed the various forms of emotional expression that he found in animals (including human)'. See Josephine Donovan, 'Animal Ethics, the New Materialism, and the Question of Subjectivity', in *Critical Animal Studies*, ed. Atsuko Matsuoka and John Sorenson (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2018), 270.

<sup>2</sup> Referring to Jacques Derrida, considering one border between humans and nonhumans, and therefore extracting one group of beings which are other-than-human, can be understood as a sweeping generalization. However, I dare to use this generalization in some sections of the article to keep the clarity of the presentation. See Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 32.

open for empathic negotiation of nonhuman roles, even without direct insight into their thoughts and emotions.<sup>3</sup>

Besides literary studies, Mieke Bal notes the growing importance of narrative in history, cultural and film studies.<sup>4</sup> Providing that narrative becomes an inseparable aspect of human activities, Arkadiusz Żychliński voiced his criticism against hastily rejecting the theory of human particularity. The ability to create fiction, as he suggests – an exclusively human skill – can be considered as a result of people’s shared intentionality; the feature, developed over thousands of years of human evolution, seems connected with an intellectual growth that is difficult to trace to biological structures. According to him, literature is one of the ‘metaphysical or symbolic immune system[s]’; the ‘compensating mechanism that allows humans to put down roots in the uncomfortable circumstances of constant exposure to the winds of fate’.<sup>5</sup> Whilst nonhumans cannot actively participate in literary authorship, ‘the constant, if marginal, presence of animals in literature not only impels us to reconsider the significance of animal tropes, or, rather, of the animal-as-trope; it also pushes us to reassess the character, morphology, physiology, and force of tropes themselves, of the trope-as-animal.’<sup>6</sup> Justyna Tymieniecka-Suchanek highlights the crucial role of biological sciences in the verification of false images of nonhumans, which are deeply rooted in culture. Comparing nonhumans’ communication abilities to human ones, as she points out, leads to a situation in which the former are underestimated. The nonhuman-centred approach allows, therefore, for achieving the holistic view that covers the value of the whole nonhuman world as well.<sup>7</sup>

Contrary to humanism, posthumanism rejects the idea that human beings should comprise the center of research or a benchmark for measuring nonhuman abilities; hence it considerably broadens the perspective of literary analysis within the human-nonhuman relationship field.<sup>8</sup> With its strong emphasis on expanding the field of ethical interests, the posthumanist perspective allows readers to understand the less obvious aspects of literature, such as the position and significance of nonhumans that extend beyond the symbolical discourse. According to Mario Ortiz-Robles, literature creates a special space where alternative ways of co-existing with animals can be imagined; readers can therefore perceive ‘the migratory patterns of animals rather than the history of nations; genera rather than genres; biomes rather than languages; taxa rather than texts’.<sup>9</sup> The posthumanist perspective seems to be open to questioning the level of anthropomorphisation through referring to the discourse of natural science.

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<sup>3</sup> Olga Tokarczuk, ‘Nobel Lecture: The Tender Narrator’, *The Nobel Prize*, December 2019; available at <https://www.nobelprize.org> [accessed 30 April 2021].

<sup>4</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), xiv.

<sup>5</sup> Arkadiusz Żychliński, ‘The Narrative Instinct: The Anthropological Difference in the Philological Framework’, *Teksty Drugie* 1 (2015): 142-52.

<sup>6</sup> Mario Ortiz-Robles, *Literature and Animal Studies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 19.

<sup>7</sup> Justyna Tymieniecka-Suchanek, ‘Eto/biologia w dyskursie (zoo)semiotycznym’, in *Biological turn: idee biologii w humanistyce współczesnej*, ed. D. Wężowicz-Ziółkowska and E. Wieczorkowska (Katowice: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2016), 47-8.

<sup>8</sup> Ian Buchanan, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 374. See Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013): 142-3.

<sup>9</sup> Ortiz-Robles, xi.

Even though anthropomorphisation of nonhuman actors ‘proposes a relationship between human and animal psychology’, it is an aspect particularly vulnerable to biased conclusions.<sup>10</sup> Rather understandable reasons for being sceptical about anthropomorphisation are presented by Hank Davis, who emphasizes the flawed assumptions of this process. As ‘we do not know enough about the role of conscious thought in determining human behaviour to extrapolate to any other species’, the attempts to embrace nonhuman cognition using not yet fully recognised human awareness may be futile.<sup>11</sup> This faulty logic leads to imposing questionable assumptions about nonhumans, and thereby over-interpreting their inner life. The ‘figure of animal’, broadly discussed by Andrew Benjamin, seems to be particularly significant in the anthropocentric context.

Figure [sic] can be defined therefore as the constitution of an identity in which the construction has a specific function that is predominantly external to the concerns of the identity itself. Not only will this play a significant role within the imposition of the quality of being other, it will sanction, at the same time, the possible repositioning of the other as the enemy.<sup>12</sup>

A nonhuman individual hidden in the construct of the figure is deprived of inner life. Having no influence on its identity, it loses the ‘particularity’ and thereby human/nonhuman division is being enforced. Apart from the limitation of the nonhuman autonomy, which is analogous to anthropomorphisation, Benjamin also emphasizes purely negative aspects of this separation: perceiving an animal as the other that leads to ‘a difference within humanity itself, that is, the difference between those who are properly human and those racialized or gendered others who are said to be inferior and who do not measure up to human essence’.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the parallels between the figure of the animal and the process of anthropomorphisation, the latter has a fundamental role in literary studies. As Anna Barcz emphasizes,

The animal’s appearance, mostly vulnerable, brings back the ability to experience reality and enables the reconstruction of our bonds with the outside world, making it culturally significant. Animals seem the closest, the most special connectors, mediators between people and the impersonal world of nature, and their anthropomorphisation also serves this purpose.<sup>14</sup>

While nonhumans cannot express themselves through literature without the application of human categories, there is not only a question as to how animals talk in literature but

<sup>10</sup> Robert W. Mitchell, ‘Anthropomorphism and Anecdotes: A Guide for the Perplexed’, in *Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes, and Animals*, ed. Robert W. Mitchell, Nicholas S. Thompson and H. Lyn Miles (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 414.

<sup>11</sup> Hank Davis, ‘Animal Cognition Versus Animal Thinking: The Anthropomorphic Error’, in *Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes, and Animals*, 336-8.

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Benjamin, *Of Jews and Animals* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, ‘Otherwise than Universal: On Andrew Benjamin’s *Of Jews and Animals*’, *Postmodern Culture* 20.3 (2010): 10; available at <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/444701> [accessed: 29 April 2021].

<sup>14</sup> Anna Barcz, *Animal Narratives and Culture: Vulnerable Realism* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 54.

also what aim can be achieved through their utterances.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, anthropomorphism may turn out to be a way of making the nonhuman world more approachable for humans. By increasing empathy, anthropomorphisation encourages a reflection on the essence of life as well as ethical responsibility.<sup>16</sup> Animal Studies that use continuously evolving research on language, cognitive abilities, emotions, and pain perception comprise an instrument for building up a certain political pressure.<sup>17</sup> Hence, whilst ‘the sophisticated descriptive models zoology, and the biological sciences more generally, provide for giving a comprehensive account of animal life are arguably infallible, or at least irrefutable in terms of the methods used to advance its insights’, literature as ‘the discipline within the humanities best equipped to account for the figurative character of our engagement with the world’ proves to be an essential tool for ethical, political and scientific considerations<sup>18</sup>.

## The Independent Nonhuman Narrator

*Come, Thou Tortoise* comprises a worthwhile example of bringing together human and nonhuman narrative agents: Audrey, a young adult, and her tortoise. While Jessica Grant confessed that she was not convinced of involving the tortoise as a narrator,<sup>19</sup> her ‘unique style of playing with language and narrative structure’ that ‘sets the novel apart from the romantic realism of Newfoundland and Labrador’s early literary canon’<sup>20</sup> has earned her numerous awards.<sup>21</sup> The novel consists of four chapters, called Parts, and the Epilogue, without a strict division between the parts narrated by the human and nonhuman. The events can be assigned to four main categories: Audrey’s past and

<sup>15</sup> In fact, Mario Ortiz-Robles not only asks the following questions, ‘What kind of characters do animals play in literature? What sorts of narratives do they inhabit? What is their figurative status? Why, how, to whom, and for whom do animals speak?’ but also argues for ‘common ground’ between literature and animal studies that is necessary to provide answers. See Ortiz-Robles, *Literature and Animal Studies*, 1.

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g. Nicole Anderson, ‘Ethics’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Animal Studies*, ed. Lynn Turner, Undine Sellbach and Ron Broglio (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 154; or Gwendolyn Davies, ‘Marshal Saunders and the Urbanisation of the Animal’, in *Other Selves: Animals in the Canadian Literary Imagination*, ed. Janice Fiamengo (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2007), 170.

<sup>17</sup> Marc Bekoff and Colin Allen, ‘Cognitive Ethology: Slayers, Skeptics, and Proponents’ in *Anthropomorphism, Anecdotes, and Animals*, ed. Robert W. Mitchell, Nicholas S. Thompson and H. Lyn Miles (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 331. Cf. Nandini Thiyagarajan, ‘We Are Not in This World Alone: On Drawing Close, Animal Stories, and a Multispecies Sense of Place’, in *The Palgrave Handbook of Animals and Literature*, ed. Susan McHugh, Robert McKay, John Miller (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); *Critical Animal Studies. Thinking the Unthinkable*, ed. and intr. John Sorenson (Toronto: Canadian Scholars’ Press, 2014).

<sup>18</sup> Mario Ortiz-Robles, XI.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Penguin Random House Canada, ‘Jessica Grant author of *Come, Thou Tortoise*’; available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dGzjz157hjE> [accessed 30 April 2021]; Shelagh Rogers, ‘Interview with Jessica Grant’, *CBC/Radio-Canada*; available at <https://www.cbc.ca/books/come-thou-tortoise-1.3970179> [accessed: 30 April 2021].

<sup>20</sup> Gemma Marr, ‘“I Picture Two Men Intertwined in a Double Helix”: Denaturalizing the Heteronormative in Jessica Grant’s *Come, Thou Tortoise*’, *Studies in Canadian Literature / Études en littérature canadienne* 43.2 (2018): 205; available at <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/scl/2018-v43-n2-scl04807/1062922ar> [accessed: 30 April 2021].

<sup>21</sup> 2009 Winterset Award, 2010 Amazon.ca First Novel Award, and 2010 OLA Forest of Reading Awards - Evergreen Award.

present as well as Winnifred's past and present. The story is highly fragmented as the events do not appear chronologically.

The reader gets to know Audrey when she begins a journey to her hometown, where her father had an accident; she was informed that his condition is critical – he dies soon after. Not only is her journey a physical coming back to the place where she used to live but she also explores her childhood memories. In the meantime, the reader gradually becomes acquainted with the tortoise's past. Audrey became Winnifred's keeper, when her ex-boyfriend, Cliff, also known as 'the previous tenant', asked her if she wanted to take care of the tortoise while he was moving out (what is worth noting is that Cliff 'inherited' the tortoise from the tenant before). Audrey only commented, 'I would not say no to a tortoise'.<sup>22</sup> Changing the tortoise's name from Iris to Winnifred and equipping the reptile with a paper castle, which she made herself, were the symbols of beginning a new life.

Audrey, a narrative agent, presents the story in a highly personalised manner; her first-person narration resembles a diary. Although the continuity of events is not achieved – past experiences are mixed with speculations about alternative future events – the change of grammatical tenses precisely indicates to which period she is referring. Simultaneously, Winnifred appears from the first page of the novel. Understanding the risk of employing a nonhuman narrator, Jessica Grant admits that initially Winnifred was not intended to have any significant role in the novel, but 'at some point, she highjacked the narrative' in order to supplement Audrey's story.<sup>23</sup> Firstly, the tortoise comes into sight merely as a topic of the conversation when Audrey reports the bits of advice that she is giving Linda on looking after the tortoise. Mentioning 'Never assume a tortoise is dead. Rule Number One of Tortoise Ownership', she points out that this animal can stay still for a considerable amount of time (*CTT*, 3).

While Audrey is presented as rather a scatter-brained person, she seems to be conscious of the tortoise's species membership: '[w]hen we were first introduced he called me a turtle and Audrey pointed out that I have claws not fins' – as Winnifred is not a turtle but tortoise (*CTT*, 409). Apart from the physical characteristics: shell, cloves, eyelids that cover the eyes from below, to name a few, Winnifred's diet and the habitat she should live in are the most commonly commented references to the biological facts. From the beginning of the story species requirements of the tortoise become crucial; by justifying the specific actions and interactions between the characters, they shape the way in which the story is told. Attention is paid especially to warmth: being an ectotherm, she relies on external sources of heat.

Being forced to leave the city, Audrey entrusts Winnifred to her friends, Linda and Chuck. When it comes to Audrey, firstly, she describes the way she informed the tortoise about the upcoming changes.

Yesterday I peered down into her castle and she was beside the pool making the same journey I'd seen her start two days ago. I knocked on her shell. Excuse me, Winnifred.

No legs emerged. No little ancient head.

I picked her up and held her under my armpit. This usually worked. I did have a heat lamp, but paper castles tend to be flammable.

Finally she woke up.

<sup>22</sup> Jessica Grant, *Come, Thou Tortoise* (London: Old Street, 2010), 4; hereafter *CTT* with page references in the text.

<sup>23</sup> Penguin Random House Canada.

There, I said. I put her in the pool. [...]  
 She climbed out of the pool and creaked over to the window.  
 I have to go home for a while, I said. (*CTT*, 4)

This scene undoubtedly highlights Audrey's attachment to her nonhuman companion as well as her emotional engagement in the problem of creating a safe environment for the tortoise. Although the woman speaks to the tortoise, explaining what she has to do, she does not expect to receive an answer. The interaction with the nonhuman provides the reader with bits of information that are meaningful from the story perspective.

The presence of the tortoise, as the element that complements the narration, is crucial as it helps to extend the reader's viewpoint. For instance, the continuation of the mentioned phone call with Linda, in which Linda claims that the tortoise is supposedly dead, appears again in Winnifred's narration. The trick with warming the tortoise under the armpit, recommended by Audrey, does not evoke Linda's enthusiasm.

Hold her under your armpit, I tell Linda  
 Ugh.  
 Trust me.  
 And I hang up. (*CTT*, 5)

The development of the events is presented from the tortoise's point of view. Winnifred, dwelling at Linda and Chuck's, hears and understands people's discussions and adds her own mental comments, as in the following passage, when Audrey's friends are discussing who should warm the tortoise up.

Put her under your armpit.  
 No, you.  
 You.  
 A knock on my shell. Winnifred.  
 What.  
 Hello in there.  
 But I cannot move. When was the last heartbeat. If I have to choose armpits I choose  
 Linda's.  
 I think she's traumatized, says Linda.  
 Shell-shock, says Chuck. (*CTT*, 17)

Apparently, Linda and Chuck's preoccupation with Winnifred is incomparable to the care provided by Audrey and the nonhuman comprehends it. The dialogue is constructed in the way that includes the tortoise's utterances. Although they are mute for the keepers, the nonhuman self-consciousness is evident to the reader.

Interactions with the tortoise are crucial among the aspects that influence the way in which the narration is constructed. Not only do they, as it is in the case of describing the tortoise's behaviour, form the scientific background to the representation of the animal, but also reveal Winnifred's individual character. Although Audrey utters the words directly to Winnifred, the reader cannot know the tortoise answers during human first-person narration. Whilst Winnifred often provides answers for human calls, the tortoise's voice cannot be heard by the other characters. It is the reader, therefore, who is authorised to recognise the entire scope of the tortoise's voice that includes nonhuman internal monologues as well as reported human statements and discussions.

Such a conceptualization of narration reveals ‘language about the contact between speaker and hearer, and language about others’.<sup>24</sup> What should be emphasised is the fact that some situations are presented only through the lens of Winnifred; such events, for instance, take place in Linda and Chuck’s house.

The process of transporting Winnifred to her temporary home with Linda and Chuck is an event presented entirely by both narrators. Audrey comments:

We drove out to Oregon City where the streets are all named after presidents in the order they were elected, so you can’t get lost if you are American and know your presidents. Linda and Chuck live on Taft. When I pulled up, Chuck was outside smoking with his actor friends.

Evening, Chuck.

Hey.

As I climbed the steps, one of the actor friends said, Am I hallucinating or is she carrying a castle.

Yes, a castle. (*CTT*, 5)

On the other hand, Winnifred explains what the trip looks like from her perspective:

It was weird, coming here last night, because normally in the car I ride the dashboard (hook my claws into the defrost vents and hang on!) but last night, since my castle and all its amenities as she calls them, were being relocated, I was shoved, castle and all, into the back seat. Cold back there. And the castle floor was sloped. So crawling up to the windows took even longer than usual. When I finally arrived I stuck my head out and the speedometer said 20 mph. Twenty! I can walk faster than that. She was saying, Which president comes after Harrison. Lincoln. No.

I looked around for a piece of lettuce to drop. Depends which Harrison.

Over the dashboard I could see little waves of heat, beckoning. Come hither, tortoise.

Here we are, she said. Taft Street.

Whereupon I was transported up some steps and transported into Linda’s custody. I watched her go with my head out the window. (*CTT*, 17)

The collaborative narration of two agents enriches the story with additional details that imply the certain viewpoints. Although the importance of details that appear in Winnifred’s narration may seem lesser, they outline a more extended background to the story. As the action progresses, the reader learns that Audrey is not an intellectual type, so her struggle to recall American presidents can suggest the possible understanding of Audrey as a character. On the other hand, Winnifred seems to be eager to discuss the history of American democracy. This situation shows that the tortoise’s personality has been affected by fixed symbolism of turtles and tortoises. As a matter of fact, in Asian and African cultures turtles are connected with wisdom and ancient knowledge; they are prized for their longevity, which suggests their endurance and outstanding intelligence. This symbolical understanding does not reclaim Winnifred’s particularity, but it provides a frame on which her anthropomorphic picture is built; therefore, she can be perceived as neither a ‘symbolic’ nor ‘real’ animal.<sup>25</sup>

Despite multiple references to the scientific facts about the tortoise, Winnifred tells the story in a highly anthropomorphised way.

<sup>24</sup> Bal, 51.

<sup>25</sup> Ortiz-Robles, 22.

Why am I beside the fridge so that every time Chuck opens the door and stares at its content I get a blast of cold air through my castle. Why. Someone once said that there is no such thing as cold, only degrees of heat. The person was an idiot. A fridge proves that cold is a *thing*. A fridge is a rectangle of cold. (*CTT*, 17)

The story is shaped to make clear that Winnifred has spent years among people, in the human-constructed environment. That is why she understands, for example, how certain devices work. Yet, her comprehension, based completely on her own observations, differs considerably from the real principles of operation. The process of familiarization takes place in accordance with the knowledge that she has already learnt and the direct experience she has gained. Apart from the mode of comprehending ‘human’ life, Winnifred can be distinguished by a certain sense of humour and a rather ironic attitude, for instance, after Chuck’s remark on her staying still because of shell shock she answers ‘Try freezing’ (*CTT*, 17).

Her self-awareness is more than apparent: she knows her limitations and her dependence on human care; the world focalised through her eyes is full of threats, usually indiscernible for human beings. What is more, she even realizes biological processes that take place inside her body and her descriptions of them are quite poetic:

When was the last heartbeat. I think yesterday. But do not be sad for me. When the heartbeats do come, they are magnificent.

Though of course they are followed by the ebb.

Let’s capitalize Ebb. The Ebb is rather sad, I do admit. And when the heartbeats are few, the Ebb stretches on. The Ebb is like a path that becomes less a path the further you travel along it. Until you are forced to stop because you are in some nondescript place and there is no path and what is the point of going forward. (*CTT*, 18)

The first-person narration of the tortoise equipped with the ability to understand human speech, behaviour as well as Shakespeare’s writing (*CTT*, 292) cannot comprise the basis for reliable nonhuman narrative – as Lucy Ellmann argues, ‘[h]er authorial job could as easily – if not as outlandishly – have been carried out by the usual autistic child or coma patient’.<sup>26</sup> There are, however, numerous undeniable aspects that allow the reader to recognise her nonhuman particularity. Apart from distinctive species features, the age of Winnifred also plays an active role in constructing the narration (*CTT*, 4). Jessica Grant highlights that understanding of tortoises’ longevity inspired her to imagine the time from this perspective; this is why Winnifred’s narrative seems more capacious.<sup>27</sup>

## Collective Nonhuman-Centred Narrative

Extensive research on apes’ cognitive abilities was characteristic for the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its main aim was not only to bring a closer look on apes’ thinking processes but also to find a way to communicate with them. Although the attempts to

<sup>26</sup> Lucy Ellmann, ‘Ladies of Lettuce’, *The Guardian*, 4 July 2009; available at <https://www.theguardian.com> [accessed 30 April 2021].

<sup>27</sup> Rogers.

teach them spoken language failed,<sup>28</sup> unexpectedly promising results appeared when chimpanzees were taught American Sign Language. Washoe was the first primate that freely used ASL to communicate with humans. The fact that she not only learnt set structures but also created her own heightened expectations for future research.<sup>29</sup> However, the Project Nim, which taught ASL to Nim Chimpsky, a chimpanzee, since he was two weeks old, was not noted as a comparable success. Observations of Nim and other apes, therefore, do not reveal the conscious use of regular sentences. While communication was possible, the exchange of information was based on 'multisign utterances' that can 'be explained by reference to simpler nonlinguistic processes'.<sup>30</sup>

Apparently, Colin McAdam did not remain impassive to the attempts to bring apes in the discourse of language: his novel, *A Beautiful Truth*, is not only set in the 1970s, when the mentioned projects took place, but also one of the characters, David, was carrying out similar investigations.<sup>31</sup> The novel starts with the story of Looee, a baby chimpanzee, who is adopted by Judy and Walt – a couple unable to have their own offspring. Bringing Looee up as their child, they face the hardship of keeping an ape in the structures of civilization. Looee grows and becomes stronger, while his nature becomes increasingly more distinctive from the behaviour characteristic of human beings. In addition, from the second chapter, a completely different story begins: the reader encounters the story of the Girdish Institute in Florida and chimpanzees living there. The social life of the group of apes is juxtaposed with vain attempts to blend Looee into human society. Both threads draw together when Looee, after being exploited in a medical laboratory, finally joins the group of chimpanzees in the potentially safe space of the Girdish Institute.

The concept of discussing the novel's setting as separate laboratory and home spaces, introduced by Laura Jean McKay, shows a certain idea on how to trace human and nonhuman viewpoints.<sup>32</sup> The structure is constructed to make the latter more visible when action takes place in the laboratory space of the Girdish Institute. Certain events that take place in the home space are also introduced from a zoocentric viewpoint – the perspective of Looee, who represents primates in the human world. His presence forces Judy and Walt to question the line between humans and nonhumans, for instance when they wonder if they should take him to a doctor or a vet (*BT*, 16) and publicly defend his personality (*BT*, 43). Although the way Looee adjusts to a home life amazes observers, he also has to modify some of his behaviours to meet human expectations.<sup>33</sup> The

<sup>28</sup> Despite the noticeable differences between the chimpanzee and human vocal cords, amongst which the place of vocal cord and length of the tongue are mentioned, 'computer simulation work concluded by Philip Lieberman indicated that chimpanzees' vocal tracts could produce many more human-like sounds than they produce'. The problem with using spoken language in communication with chimpanzees seem to lie in insufficient 'neural control'. See William Hillix and Duane Rumbaugh, *Animal Bodies, Human Minds: Ape, Dolphin, and Parrot Language Skills* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2004), 11-3.

<sup>29</sup> R. Allen Gardner and Beatrice T. Gardner, 'Teaching Sign Language to a Chimpanzee', *Science* 165.3894 (1969): 672.

<sup>30</sup> H. S. Terrace, L. A. Petitto, R. J. Sanders and T. G. Bever, 'Can an Ape Create a Sentence?', *Science* 206.4421 (1979): 900.

<sup>31</sup> Colin McAdam, *A Beautiful Truth* (London: Granta, 2013), 167; hereafter *BT* with page references in the text.

<sup>32</sup> Laura Jean McKay, 'Crossing the Threshold: Domestic Territory and Nonhuman Otherness in Colin McAdam's *A Beautiful Truth*', *Otherness: Essays and Studies* 5.2 (2016): 233-5.

<sup>33</sup> McAdam, 45.

changes are visible in the nonhuman as well as human characters: Looee behaves as if he can understand human speech, while Judy starts to call herself ‘Mummy’ (and later Walt names himself ‘Daddy’).

Looee’s voice appears in the novel unexpectedly, as a part of a dialogue, that cannot be heard by the interlocutors. One of the distinguishing features of his voice is referring to Judy as ‘Mummy’.

I was visiting James at Harvard. His graduation.  
Oh my god, already.  
Yes. It’s gone so fast.  
Susan, you must be so proud.  
Mummy was excited.  
I’m relieved. I am very proud. (*BT*, 48)

Judy talks with her friend, Susan, in the presence of Looee, who is unable to participate actively in the conversation. Instead, he grabs the attention of Judy through behaviour, which resembles that of a naughty child.

Looee squeezed her boob and she jumped.  
Looee.  
Mummy was shouting.  
Looee!  
No! (*BT*, 49)

His mute comments do not, as in the case of Winnifred, considerably complement the scene, but rather show his understanding of the circumstances. Their role on the level of text in mentioned examples can be compared to the role of attributive verbs in dialogues. As the communication is one-sided, the reader is the exclusive recipient of Looee’s utterances. Contrary to the chimpanzees from the Girdish Institute, Looee does not get any tool to express his thoughts in a manner other than by intuitive gestures (e.g., hugging) or misbehaving.

Communication between the primates living in the Girdish Institute and their keepers turns out to be much more reciprocal, since lexigrams serve as a communication tool for the human-chimpanzee teams (*BT*, 166).

Everything that Mr. Ghoul wanted and learned began with the lever and the machine.  
David was his friend.  
? [sic] Machine make Dave tickle Ghoul. [...]  
Some of the people used sticks in those days and there were rules and customs which he can’t find anymore.  
When he got things right, the machine gave him pieces of apple. (*BT*, 18)

Instead of sign language, the apes use a device that allows for the basic exchange of thoughts with a human interlocutor. Similar to the conversations in the Project Nim, this cannot be treated as language; the syntax seems to have much in common with expressions that real apes presented in ASL.<sup>34</sup> Even though the structure of sentences formulated by the apes seems quite accidental, they manage to communicate with humans because of David’s involvement into decoding their utterances.

<sup>34</sup> Terrace, Petitto, Sanders and Bever, 901.

The narrative technique applied by McAdams embraces a nonhuman-oriented perspective; the third-person narration focalized by chimpanzees can be understood as a collective narrator who represents the apes living in the research centre.<sup>35</sup> The common primate voice, 'the World', describes the characters and events in the third person, using plain language (*BT*, 12). The distance of the third-person narration suggests the line, which has always existed, between humans and nonhumans, as well as the human inability to delve into the nonhuman mind (and vice versa).

Apart from simple sentences, whose use distinctively indicates a language competence that is different from a human one, a wide variety of neologisms deepen the impression.

Podo feels the oa, grateful Podo. Magda feels safe.

He is huge, black Podo, and he walks with his black hair raised, and daylight blue and slick on his body, and his shoulders are widening, legs surprising, he coils and uncoils with prowess and venerable grace.

There is oa in the ground and oa in the wind and everyone nuckles and bows, how-do. (*BT*, 13)

The use of neologisms draws attention to a communication barrier between humans and nonhumans that may result from the differences in cognitive processes rather than a certain inability to use language itself. The human standpoint may not be capacious enough to recognise the inner qualities of communication systems distinctive for each species.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, introducing such ambiguities is crucial as it 'has the effect of bringing the reader into the voice and mind of the other'.<sup>37</sup>

Dynamically described events from the Girdish Institute concentrate on the chimpanzees' social life. Individuals of different temperaments and personalities attempt to find their own place in the group. The reader witnesses everyday situations as well as major turning points of changes in the hierarchy. The suspicion grows along with the tension between chimpanzees ('Jonathan no longer greets Podo', 'Mama is growing afraid of Bruke', '[...] everyone else feels nervous every day' [*BT*, 159]), up to the tipping point:

Jonathan runs at Podo, and Podo holds him by a foot as he passes. He bites Jonathan's leg. Jonathan screams injury and vengeance and he spins. His fist hits Podo's ear and deafens it.

They roll in black percussion and the women are running back and forth screaming.

They face each other with hungry teeth and roar the inevitable future. Podo hears nothing but a low bright whistle.

Boulders are the muscles of the dead.

They are poised on their haunches and neither will run, but Burke makes noises nearby, behind Podo's back. Burke rolls and jumps, throws his hands up and screams. He is cheering Jonathan's fight. (*BT*, 160)

Even though the description of these events is so deeply embedded in the nonhuman-oriented narration, it portrays the relationships and behaviour in a methodical way. A

<sup>35</sup> Mckay, 254.

<sup>36</sup> Tymieniecka-Suchanek, 'Eto/biologia w dyskursie (zoo)semiotycznym', 48-49. See also Philip Ball 'The Challenges of Animal Translation', *The New Yorker*, April 2021; available at <https://www.newyorker.com> [accessed 30 April 2021].

<sup>37</sup> Mckay, 246.

brief insight on social dependencies offered by The Jane Goodall Institute's website emphasizes this complexity. It is argued that in a natural habitat, chimpanzees form a complex hierarchy; it is led by the alpha-male, whose relationship with other males is intricate. As Brittany Cohen-Brown points out, '[t]he alpha will have friends in his coalition, who helped him gain control and are helping him maintain power', but 'also maybe be a chimpanzee or a coalition of chimpanzees who want to overthrow the alpha and install a new chimpanzee in his place'.<sup>38</sup>

What is striking is that the author does not avoid confronting the reader with dramatic, yet natural events. The mentioned situation ends tragically for the previous leader, who was accidentally electrocuted by a security element.

The screaming doesn't stop, but it changes.  
Jonathan leaps down and shouts at Podo's face, and his fists come down on his chest.  
There is no response from Podo.  
Jonathan runs with a limp to Magda and hugs her. He runs back to Podo and pounds him, and runs again to Magda.  
Mr. Ghoul and Mama are restless and looking at each other in fear.  
Podo hasn't moved.  
There is screaming and crying and Jonathan charges again. (*BT*, 162)

Chimpanzees' behaviour is shown precisely but the narrator refrains from giving far-fetched reflection upon the events. Interpretation depends on the readers, their knowledge and experience; as humans do not have a direct insight into the nonhuman mind, such an approach seems to leave space for the particularity of the species. Although the observations and investigations that allow for interpreting nonhuman behaviour and 'reconstructing conscious [...] experiences of other forms of life [...] could bring us closer to a realistic representation of animals'<sup>39</sup>, the moral judgment of keeping animals in captivity for scientific purposes is highly disputable.<sup>40</sup>

In the chapters on the Girdish Institute, passages of human-oriented text can comprise counterpoints that emphasize nonhuman-oriented fragments. Getting back to the mentioned sequence of the events, the story is interrupted by the following excerpts: '[t]he video from the roof shows the alpha holding the tree and then falling backwards, apparently untouched' (*BT*, 161) and '[t]he body is left outdoors to study their reactions' (*BT*, 162). The neutrality of these passages highlights the emotionality and dynamics of the mentioned fragment of the nonhuman story. Subsequent passages, which demonstrate how the presence of a dead companion influences the rest of the group, are contrasted with the description of scientific procedures.

<sup>38</sup> Brittany Cohen-Brown, 'From Top to Bottom, Chimpanzee Social Hierarchy is Amazing!', *Jane Goodall's Good for All News*, July 2018; available at <https://news.janegoodall.org> [accessed 30 April 2021].

<sup>39</sup> Barcz, 56.

<sup>40</sup> In her article, Margot Adler emphasizes that the ethics of Project Nim was questioned even by the participants of the experiment, principally because there was 'no plan for protecting [Nim]'. Cf. Margot Adler 'The Chimp That Learned Sign Language', *NPR*, May 2008; available at <https://www.npr.org> [accessed 30 April 2021]. Moreover, Nim's story became an inspiration for Elizabeth Hess: by expressing the concerns that '[c]himpanzees were never meant to be born, or live, in captivity', she challenges the problem of exploiting nonhumans for scientific purposes. Cf. Elizabeth Hess, *Nim Chimsky: The Chimp Who Would Be Human* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2008), 5.

The body is removed at night with a forklift.  
 The annual electrocardiogram and serial blood pressure had shown moderate amounts of interstitial myocardial fibrosis. It is registered as sudden cardiac arrest. That day's video is reviewed and a short paper is prepared, with a focus on IMF among captive chimpanzees.  
 (BT, 163)

The chimpanzees, the 'fully embodied' individuals living in a self-managed society, seem to *be* provided with a considerable dose of agency.<sup>41</sup> The chief obstacle is, however, the fact that the group is subject to examination. Their inter-group freedom is severely limited by the structure of the institute; numerous aspects of their existence, from food up to the decisions on the incorporation of a new member (or taking away the body of the dead one) are imposed by the researchers.

In McAdam's novel, nonhuman voices in most cases do not emerge directly, and this distance is established by the third-person narration. The collective nonhuman narration draws the attention to the fact that, as a rule, nonhumans subjected to research are deprived of their identities; 'animal collectives operate on biopolitical principles of division that entail using biological categories for political purposes', since in natural science the most desired outcomes are those which are applicable to a certain category of organisms, for instance, a family, tribe, genus, or species.<sup>42</sup> On the other hand, since chimpanzees live in communities of complex hierarchy, applying collective narration emphasizes the natural bond between individuals that is crucial to narrative realism.

## Conclusion

Since, according to Derrida, 'the frontier [between humans and nonhumans] no longer forms a single indivisible line but more than one internally divided line', the presented novels demonstrate various ways of challenging the border between humans and other beings.<sup>43</sup> Winnifred, the tortoise, is anthropomorphized to such an extent that her utterances, thoughts, and sense of humour lack linguistic specificity; her narration and Audrey's narration do not differ considerably. Undoubtedly, Winnifred's perspective is essential and allows the reader not only to observe the second thread that takes place in Linda and Chuck's apartment, but also to get an insight into the past of both heroines. The tortoise, who passes from one keeper to another, seems to be entirely dependent on human actions. It should be noted, however, that Audrey's actions are motivated by the Winnifred's needs, such as its vulnerability to low temperature.<sup>44</sup> Assuming, therefore, that the key aspect in searching for the particularity of the individual is spotting a being that deserves 'respect, safety and care', the nonhuman presented in *Come, Thou Tortoise* possesses certain subjectivity.<sup>45</sup> In addition, despite the anthropomorphic nature of the narration, the several scientific facts about *Testudines* included extend the nonhuman viewpoint.

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<sup>41</sup> Ortiz-Robles, 80.

<sup>42</sup> Ortiz-Robles, 176.

<sup>43</sup> Derrida, 30-1.

<sup>44</sup> The issue that is still open for discussion is how adequately Audrey understands Winnifred's species requirements.

<sup>45</sup> Justyna Tymieniecka-Suchanek, *Literatura Rosyjska Wobec Upodmiotowienia Zwierząt* (Katowice: Uniwersytet Śląski, 2020), 35.

In *A Beautiful Truth* the case of Looee shows how the ape's presence in human society forces people to continuously question the human/nonhuman border. Even when most of the chimpanzee's needs are satisfied, it turns out that inter-species differences impede Looee's integration with humans; as soon as he attacks a human, he is banished and sent to a medical laboratory. It puts him in the subordinated position as an object at humans' exclusive disposal. The nonhuman voices proposed by McAdam differ considerably from the human narration, especially as they seem to be based on the genuine experiments on apes' ability to use American Sign Language. The so-called nonhuman collective narrator concentrates upon species particularity, which makes extracting an individual perspective nearly impossible. Yet, such a mode of narration reaches a higher level of reliability, in which nonhuman subjectivity is more apparent.

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## **Găsite în narațiune: voci non-umane în romanele *Come, Thou Tortoise* [Vino, tu, broască țestoasă] al lui Jessica Grant și *A Beautiful Truth* [Un adevăr frumos] al lui Colin McAdam**

### **Rezumat**

Acest articol se ocupă de problematica subiectivității non-umane în două texte literare: romanul *Come, Thou Tortoise* [Vino, tu, broască țestoasă], care este o narațiune la persoana întâi și romanul lui Colin McAdam *A Beautiful Truth* [Un adevăr frumos], al cărui narator este un primat colectiv. În timp ce non-umanii nu pot participa activ în actul creației din text, prezența lor din povestire, așa cum e orchestrată de autor, redă multiple înțelesuri. Considerațiile în legătură cu tehnicile narative sunt critice pentru negocierea relevanței actorilor non-umani. Argumentul meu este că, deși fiecare autor găsește diferite metode pentru a da o voce non-umanilor și pentru a asigura semnificația practică a însușirilor animale, subiectivitatea non-umană ar trebui percepută ca fiind o valoare fixă în textele literare prezentate.