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# Equality in the Animal Kingdom: Human Beings and Animals Negotiating Their Relationship in the P.L. Travers' Mary Poppins Books

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# Abstract

Pets, instruments, a source of food, objects of wonder - animals are still considered inferior beings because of their inability to speak. Animal rights philosophers, such as Peter Singer, focus on the capacity of animals to suffer, in order that animals are given more rights. However, the animals in the Mary Poppins books fight for their own rights, some of them having the capacity to speak. The focus of my essay is the animal subject and the ways in which the animals in the books are able to demand their own rights, undermining human authority and possession. For my research, I used several stories from four of the Mary Poppins volumes, and using literary analysis, I underline the ways in which animals are portrayed as individuals rather than stereotypes. As individuals with their own desires and needs, they engage into conversations with human characters and question, or even dismiss human society.

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# Introduction

P.L. Travers's Mary Poppins books were written in the course of fifty years, from 1934 to 1988. The books are set in Edwardian London and discuss many issues that are of interest even now. One of these issues is animal rights. Even though the action of the novels takes place in the city, Travers carefully introduced in her books all kinds of animal characters: pets, farm animals, birds, fish and wild animals.

In this fictional world, where animals are seen as pets, objects, or a source of food by the human characters, Mary Poppins intervenes in the relationship between human beings and animals and gives another perspective on the animal kingdom. She is a peculiar character, nanny to the Banks children, but also a provocateur, and also a mediator that facilitates the Banks children's immersion into a world where "animals, people, imaginary characters, and stars are all made of the same substance" (Grilli xvii). She is showing the children and also the readers the fact that "all elements in the world can in fact communicate with and understand each other – they can mix and exchange roles, proving that all notions of category and distinction are but arbitrary constructions" (Grilli xvii).

In Elick's perspective, Mary Poppins is a human character able to understand the language of animals, who is also willing to "advocate for their ethical treatment", acknowledging their shared origins with humans (13). She does a Bakhtinian reading on some of the stories insisting on the elements that suggest a joyous carnival, where the rules and regulations no longer exist. Elick argues that "[a]lthough Travers turns the tables in true carnival fashion and engineers scenes where the powerless become empowered", her books are rather concerned with "the spiritual exploration of shared animal-human origins" (102). Indeed, "Full Moon" and "High Tide" are stories that can be read as being about shared origins, but as this essay will show, it is more to be said about the animal characters in these stories. Elick's focus is on Mary Poppins, whom she sees as "a figure of mythic proportions, a still point at the centre of the whirling changes" (102). Undeniably, the nanny has an important role as a mediator, as Grilli defines her, however the stories are complex, and can be read in multiple ways. This essay will focus

on the animal characters, because Mary Poppins has already been analysed from multiple perspectives.

What might be the purpose of all the animal characters that appear in the fictional world of Mary Poppins? Their presence can have many purposes, which will be discussed further in this paper. As Ascione emphasises in his study on various programs that educate children to show a humane behaviour towards animals, many attempts have been made to teach children to behave better towards other creatures. This was seen in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a teaching strategy to be kinder to other people later, as adults (Ascione 58). In more recent times, it developed into the concern for educating children to show respect towards animals as living entities (Ascione 58). The Mary Poppins books could be considered as an instrument of teaching children in this direction, as there is a clear concern with animal rights, and well-being.

Digging deeper, another reason for portraying animal characters the way they are portrayed might be found. This might be the desire to give animals a voice of their own, by representing animals as free entities that express themselves in various ways. The Mary Poppins books are not only directed towards healthy moral and social development of children, indeed not even just promoting animal rights, but also foster an environment where animals can express themselves freely. This essay will explore the ways in which the animal characters make themselves heard, and have their desires met, regardless of human beliefs or opinions.

The essay will include a section about animal rights and different views on animals and will also define the notions of anthropocentrism, anthropomorphism and talking animals. These notions are important to help underline humans' perspective on animals, and the way people position themselves compared to other creatures. They provide further context for the essay, and will help the reader understand that this paper is focused on the animal as an individual.

The analysis starts with the stories where the animals are the least vocal, and where Mary Poppins intervenes the most ("Miss Lark's Andrew", "Miss Andrew's Lark"), continues with two stories that focus on the connections between humans and animals ("Full Moon", "High Tide"), followed by two of the stories where animals do as they please, disregarding or even

disrespecting humans (“The Dancing Cow”, “The Cat That Looked at a King”), and ends with a story where children serve the animals (“Lucky Thursday”). Because of the brevity of this paper, I was unable to discuss all the stories that feature animals, but I tried to introduce the reader to even more animal characters in the chapter “Other Animal Characters”.

Even though I am aware of animals being used as symbols to illustrate human typologies in many books, I will avoid this approach in my essay. I want to avoid looking at the animal as a symbol for something else, as that would deflect the readers’ attention from the actual animal character. I agree with Baker’s opinion about talking-animal narratives being considered as meaning “something more important than mere animals”, which leads to “the trivialization and the marginalization of the animal” (138). That is why I will focus on the animals and what they might desire.

Although humans communicate with animals in different ways, it is impossible for them to understand “their experience of being”, because animals cannot speak their own mind (Budiansky xvi). Moreover, Budiansky draws attention to humans’ self-centred way of looking at the world, which makes them assume that animals’ behaviour should be defined in the terms they know (xvi-xvii). In his view, this “tendency to view an animal’s actions in terms of our own conscious intentions, thoughts, and motives” is actually a form of anthropomorphism (xvi-xvii). This might be true; however, it is quite hard to escape anthropomorphism, so why not use it in the animal’s best interest. The characters in the *Mary Poppins* books are anthropomorphised and some of them even talk. This makes it easier to understand what they want. The stories could be read as being about them. Trying to understand the animal is a step forward in giving them more rights and consideration. Furthermore, most of the animals in the *Mary Poppins* books talk, which makes it easier to understand them. Elick claims that by giving animal characters the possibility to talk with humans, “a novel’s world becomes more equalitarian, its sense of truth more dialogic” (30). In other words, giving animals the possibility to talk means opening a more complex discussion about their demands.

## Different perspectives on animals and animal rights

As mentioned earlier, the Mary Poppins books are promoters of animal rights. One central work in the field of animal rights is that of professor of bioethics, with a background in philosophy, Peter Singer. In his book, *Animal Liberation* (2002), Singer warns that in our modern times, animals used for agricultural purposes are seen as things, “mere means to our ends, with no other reason for existing” (ix). He advocates for equal consideration (2). By equal consideration, he means considering the capacity of animals to suffer. In his view, “[t]he basic principle of equality does not require equal or identical *treatment*; it requires equal consideration”, which will contribute to animals receiving a better treatment and more rights (2).

In other words, Singer does not want animals to have the same rights as humans. He only advocates for a fair treatment (1-2). He sees animals as sentient beings that should not suffer for the benefit of humankind (xiii). His book appeals to people’s sensitivity and tries to convince them of the necessity to take action on behalf of the animals. In his opinion, animals should be allowed to live a life as free of human intervention as possible. An important idea stated is that in contrast to animals, humans have the capacity to verbalize their pain (Singer 13). In short, as superior beings, able to speak, we humans have a moral responsibility to cease inflicting pain on animals, because even though they cannot speak, they do feel pain and suffer (Singer 8-13). This anthropocentric perspective would give good results in terms of improving animal conditions.

It appears impossible to escape anthropocentrism and it is quite understandable why this is so, if one takes a closer look at how animals have been regarded throughout history. In his historical overview of animal welfare Ian J.H. Duncan highlights some of the most important aspects of the relationship between humans and animals from ancient Greece to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Duncan mentions well-regarded philosophers including Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Hobbes and Kant, whose views have dominated Western thought (13-14). They all believed in man’s superiority over animals, who only had instrumental value. Human beings were considered better because they were rational and able to speak (Duncan 13-14). This way of seeing things resulted in unnecessary pain and suffering for animals. A similar time frame can be found in

the fifth chapter of *Animal Liberation*, called “Man’s Dominion”, with the difference that Singer insists upon the representation of human beings and animals in the Bible. He refers to the passage in the Old Testament when God created the man in His own image, allowing man to consider himself as having a “special position in the universe”, emphasising the fact that in the Bible, “the human species is the pinnacle of creation and has God’s permission to kill and eat other animals” (Singer 187). This view still dominates the Western world.

A change in the perception of animals emerged during The Enlightenment, with the ideas of David Hume, who took notice of animal’s learning abilities and disputed the fact that animals have no moral standing (Duncan 15). Moreover Bentham (1823) believed that the fact that animals can suffer meant that they had intrinsic value, while the veterinarian William Youatt condemned many practices towards animals as being distressful and brutal (Duncan 15-16). In his book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), Darwin acknowledged similarities in the ways humans and animals express emotions and even suggested a common evolution (Duncan 16). Yet, as Duncan points out, Behaviourism, a branch of psychology developed in the USA during the 20th century, takes no consideration of animals’ subjective experiences. In Duncan’s opinion, this new branch of psychology influenced the views on animals in a negative way, preventing being given rights earlier (17).

Nevertheless, a period of time has been omitted, that being the period before Ancient Greece’s views were imposed on society. In her book, Grilli describes a matriarchal universe “dominated by a cosmological outlook that saw man as being merely a constituent part of the whole natural world” (87). In the Pre-Socratic thought “substance, as the unifying principle, was both the matter and the force governing all beings and their transformation” (Grilli 87). That is to say, in that period of time, humans believed themselves to be one with the universe and everything in it. The change came with Aristotle, who chose to explain the world in a rational way, grounded in method, experimentation, and scientific theory (Grilli 87). By doing so, he positioned himself and the rest of the human beings apart from the rest of the universe, leaving no “space for occult or more than human considerations, and the ancient natural sympathies linking man and all that was not him were broken” (Grilli 88). Yet, when analysing the Mary Poppins books, Grilli outlines the way in which some of the human characters become an



integrated part of the universe, by passing to Elsewhere, as she defines this space, with the agency of Mary Poppins (7-9). Elsewhere is a space of wonders that does not comply with the laws of the society (Grilli 7-9). Also, in my view, Elsewhere is a space where animals can talk and moreover demand their rights, from an equal position. The animal characters in Mary Poppins are anthropomorphised, but the superiority of the humans is questioned throughout the books.

According to Burke and Copenhaver who discuss animals in children's literature, anthropomorphism is actually an ancient coping mechanism designed to help human beings better understand their surroundings (207). This is the safest way to assure their survival, because "[w]hen the risks and rewards are high, when the signs are ambiguous, when we are up against powerful forces, we envision human intents and actions cloaked in the shapes of object and animals and we act accordingly" (Burke and Copenhaver 207). After that, it becomes easier and easier for people to anthropomorphize everything around them. Anthropomorphised animals in children's literature can be seen as characters constructed to teach children valuable behavioural lessons, to instruct on cultural and social topics in a didactic tone, while "dealing with issues not yet fully resolved or socially controversial" (Burke and Copenhaver 210).

This is also the way in which Cosslett seems to regard the use of talking animals in literature. She notes that "[a]nimal stories could bridge the gap between child and adult, combining delight with instruction", while also giving the children the possibility to better understand the animals in the world outside the book (1-2). In her opinion, the children's stories written between 1786-1914 were, amongst other things, "allowing issues of animal protection, conservation and what was later called ecology to be raised in a child-friendly manner" (1-2). The same could be said about the Mary Poppins books. Even though published much later, they also engage the readers into discussions about animal rights.

In order to better explain in what way the animal representations in Mary Poppins give the reader the possibility to better understand animals, I will use *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity, and Representation* (1993) by Steve Baker. In Baker's opinion "symbolic and rhetorical use of the animal must be understood to carry as much conceptual weight as any idea

we may have of the ‘real’ animal, and must be taken just as seriously” and in order to be able to get to the ‘real’ animal, it is necessary to understand the culture (22). In this book, Baker plans to reveal some of the contemporary attitudes towards animals and other humans. He underlines that the “intelligibility of these stereotypes is entirely dependent on their conformity and that conformity is not (and never was) to some ‘truth’ of the animal” (40). By starting to analyse the stories from a stereotypical point of view on animals, ways in which the animal characters from the *Mary Poppins* books distance themselves from such stereotypes will unravel.

## Anthropomorphized Dogs, Theriomorphic Human: “Miss Lark’s Andrew”

“Miss Lark’s Andrew”, a chapter included in *Mary Poppins* (1934), tells the story of Andrew, a dog, and the way in which he negotiates with his owner, Miss Lark, to get a different treatment and a new companion, Willoughby. Andrew, “one of those small, silky, fluffy dogs that looks like a fur necklet until they begin to bark” (Travers 44), is the beloved dog of Miss Lark, a wealthy woman, the Banks’ neighbour, who spoils him by feeding him expensive food and dressing him in coats and leather shoes. In Elick’s opinion, Miss Lark considers Andrew as one of her accessories and not as an individual with his own rights and opinions (110).

However, there is more evidence in the text that Miss Lark sees Andrew as a small child. She talks to Andrew as if he were a child, and also Jane Banks, the eldest of the Banks children, believes that “Miss Lark thought that Andrew *was* a little boy” (Travers 44). Indeed, the human name Andrew, supposedly given by Miss Lark, who took him in as a puppy, suggests an anthropomorphised view on the small dog. It is not unusual for dogs to be given human names in England, but of course it is not uncommon for people to anthropomorphise their pets. On the other hand, Miss Lark possesses the name of an animal, a bird, and in later stories she is described as twittering shrilly (Travers 541) or that her “voice sounded shriller than ever” (Travers 597). Attributing animal characteristics to humans is called theriomorphism, and in this case, the name given to her reflects a rather ambiguous stance in which she finds herself in

the books. At times, she is the one asserting power and giving commands, but in most cases, she has to adapt to Andrew and Willoughby's desires.

Still, in the beginning of this story, Andrew possesses the stereotypical image of a spoiled dog that belongs to a wealthy woman. Andrew lives a life of luxury. The narrator claims that Andrew "led such a luxurious life that you might have thought he was the Shah of Persia in disguise" (Travers 44). This ironic point of view of the narrator is similar to some of the other characters, who enjoy amusing themselves watching him taking a walk wearing a coat and leather boots. This image might be found amusing even by the readers, who are confronted with the stereotypical image of a spoiled pet. Andrew becomes a source of ridicule. Nevertheless, Miss Lark seems to be well respected by her neighbours, probably because of her wealth. At this point of the narrative, Andrew and Miss Lark figure in binary opposition, as the object of affection and its owner. In Baker's opinion, when animals appear in binary opposition to humans, they "invariably represent the negative term in the opposition: 'the Other', 'the Beast', 'the Brute'" (Baker 83). Then, in this case, Andrew represents 'the Other' and he is treated as a source of ridicule by the neighbourhood, except Mary Poppins.

The nanny refuses to see Andrew as a "nincompoop" and she is the first one to be on Andrew's side. Respect, fondness, longing to be a "common dog" (Travers 45) without a pedigree, the capacity of choosing his friends amongst other dogs, are characteristics attributed to Andrew by the narrator. Furthermore, the reader finds out that "Andrew's most special friend (...) was half an Airedale and half a Retriever and the worst half of both" (Travers 46). In other words, Andrew's friend is ugly. At this point the two dogs are presented in binary opposition, as two different stereotypes, the pampered, well-cared and well-behaved Andrew and the ugly, disagreeable half-breed, "always getting into trouble with the Postman or the Policeman" (Travers 46). He is 'the Brute', and he is disregarded by the other characters, who are content that he is not theirs. Still, Andrew loves him and wants his company. The image of Andrew evolves, possibly tempting the readers to experience compassion or even respect. Yet, the characters in the story do not have this new knowledge about the small dog. And this is where Mary Poppins intervenes.

After running away from Miss Lark, Andrew asks for the help of the nanny. When Andrew comes back home with his friend, she negotiates the return of Andrew home, translating Andrew's barking to Miss Lark. At first, Miss Lark does not believe that a stranger can understand her dog better than she does, but she soon accepts the meddling of the nanny and in the end, she agrees to Andrew's terms. As Ellick points out, the scene is amusing because of the "humorous interplay between class and species hierarchies in this scene" (111). At this moment, there is a change in the already established hierarchy. Andrew is no longer 'the Other', nor his friend, 'the Brute'. They become equals. At the same time, Miss Lark is put in the unusual situation to accept another dog and give him an equal treatment to Andrew's. Moreover, she is not being allowed to name the foreign dog, as he already has a name, Willoughby. As Ellick remarks, this is an important aspect in the story, because "[t]o ascribe a name is to shape an individual's identity" (111) and Miss Lark is denied this power. In addition, she seems to accept Andrew's other claims and refrains from dressing him up in coats and boots, at least for a while. Andrew and Willoughby will reappear in other chapters of the Mary Poppins books. They live together, receive the same treatment, but are still dressed up by Miss Lark.

As Belk explains in his study, there are many people that treat their pets as members of their family and some of them dress them in clothes (130-132). He mentions that in the case of some pets' owners, there seems to be a confusion regarding the boundary between animal and human (140); this is a confusion that is found also in Miss Lark's behaviour towards Andrew. Moreover, Belk acknowledges the enjoyment of pet owners of having a totally dependent creature in their care, a creature that, in their opinion, manifests gratitude towards them (140). However, in the case of Andrew there seem to be less gratitude towards his owner. Even though Belk refers to real life animals and people in his study conducted in 1996, and Miss Lark and Andrew are characters in a story written in 1934, there are still many similarities between the behaviour of some real pet owners and Miss Lark. That is because Miss Lark seems to portray the stereotypical adoring pet owner and Andrew the stereotypical spoiled dog. Actually, there is more to Andrew than meets the eyes.

The dog character is pictured as an independent being. He goes against Miss Lark's wishes by engaging with ordinary dogs, running away from home and negotiating his return. Andrew's

character is given agency and the possibility to use it as he wishes, even against his mistress's wishes. Even though he is understood only by Mary Poppins, in terms of language, his reactions to Miss Lark's words convey determination and stubbornness in getting his point across. Furthermore, as the ending of the story points out, his behaviour wins the admiration of Jane and Michael Banks. Although Willoughby's personality is less obvious, there is evidence in the text, that he understands Miss Lark's spiteful words towards him and disagrees with her behaviour. In terms on animal rights, the two dog characters get the possibility to negotiate their place in Miss Lark's household and get a say over their own lives. Furthermore, in the next analysed story, "Miss Andrew's Lark", the importance given to animal rights becomes clearer.

## Punishing a Cruel Pet Owner: "Miss Andrew's Lark"

"Miss Andrew's Lark", published in 1935 in the volume *Mary Poppins Comes Back*, relates the story of a lark owned by Miss Andrew, Mr Banks' former nanny. The little bird has been captured by Miss Andrew, who keeps him for her own amusement, hoping he will sing for her every day. However, the unhappy animal refuses to sing and when Mary Poppins discovers him, the two of them engage into a conversation that ends with the bird being freed and Miss Andrew engaged and taken away by the lark.

In this story, the name Andrew is worn by the human, while the lark is named Caruso by Miss Andrew. The presence of the two words 'lark' and 'Andrew' in this story suggests a connection between this story and "Miss Lark's Andrew" in terms of animal ownership and the interaction between humans and animals. However, while Miss Lark is deeply preoccupied with Andrew's well-being although, at times, she ignores his wishes, Miss Andrew is concerned only with her own pleasure at the music of the lark.

Her behaviour is punished while the lark regains his freedom. In Elick's view, this story reflects a much more aggressive discourse on animal ownership and owners' responsibility (113). The lark is not only listened to and understood, but also freed, while the human is encaged and driven away from the Banks family. It appears that Miss Andrew's presence and influence are not wanted in the family's vicinity and thus removed.

In the case of this story, the lark's sufferings cease, whilst the human tormenting the animal is punished. The opposition to encaging animals can be acknowledged at Peter Singer as well. Singer disagrees with keeping animals in cages and causing them suffering (9). The punishment of Miss Andrew in the end emphasizes a harsh view against people that inflict sufferings on animals.

## A Multileveled Story: "Full Moon"

"Full Moon", from the first volume, *Mary Poppins* (1934), depicts another story concerning encaged animals. This time, they are wild animals from the zoo, released during the period of one night to celebrate Mary Poppins' birthday. Jane and Michael are also present at this celebration and they interact with some of the zoo animals, which in this story can actually talk with the children directly, without the intervention of Mary Poppins. As they are roaming free, the animals are kind to each other and in a deep understanding, which Grilli assesses as a scene from "the earthly paradise in which they live peacefully side by side in this brief repose from the natural laws of aggression" (13). However, Ellick regards this space as a carnival, where all rules cease to matter and the hierarchies within the animal kingdom are ignored (126). This friendly interaction is possible only during this special celebration, and only in the zoo. This space is magical and the two children are allowed to participate as friends of Mary Poppins.

As they enter into this magical space, the children meet the Brown Bear, who is wearing a zookeeper's uniform and speaks in riddles such as "[u]sual is as usual does" (Travers 108). In

Baker's opinion, animals portrayed as wearing clothes lose their animality and become something else, a disruptive element to the story being told (163). This is one of many such elements. Another strange situation is the encounter of a man who is being ridden by eight monkeys. The hilarious, yet unusual scene makes Jane remark that "it's all upside down", by which she means that it is different than ordinary days, when animals carry human beings (Travers 109). In Ellick's view, this is yet another sign of the carnivalesque world in which everything is possible (126).

Afterwards, Jane and Michael meet the Seal. The small black Seal seems angry with the children and provokes them to jump into the water after "a bit of orange peel" (Travers 109). His rage reflects the frustration of the encaged animal that needs to perform every day for his human visitors. However, his attitude changes when he finds out that they are "Special Visitors", pointing to their special status, not as humans, but as friends of Mary Poppins.

The Lion takes the children to the spectacle of encaged human beings fed by brown bears dressed as zookeepers. This uncanny, ridiculous scene of brown bears, dressed in uniforms and feeding people, gives a feeling of uneasiness to the children, and might do the same to the reader. The behaviour of the animals, pushing each other to better see the scene of humans being fed, echoes a similar behaviour in humans and the grotesque of the scene reflects the grotesque of human behaviour in a similar situation. Belk claims in his study that giving rights to animals means also not using them as a source of entertainment "in a grotesque and cruel fashion in order that humans might be amused and made to feel more powerful" (122). The exchange of places puts the animals in the position of the observer and the humans become the subject closely observed. Baker, paraphrasing John Berger, states that "the practice of looking is at the heart of both our sympathy and our oppression of the animal" (15). Yet, here are children, women and men, being oppressed and encaged against their own will, which raises questions about the human behaviour against animals in similar situations.

Then, the children meet the Hamadryad, the "Lord of the Jungle" and a relative of Mary Poppins. The idea that the Hamadryad is a cousin of Mary Poppins seems odd to the children,

because they are different species. However, in this ‘topsy-turvy world’, there is no separation between species and all the elements are mixed or have exchanged places, favouring communication between humans and animals which leads to complex relationships across species (Grilli 13). As the Hamadryad explains, the humans and the animals are all made of the same elements, “[t]he same substance composes us —the tree overhead, the stone beneath us, the bird, the beast, the star—we are all one”, and moving to the same end (Travers 119), becoming thus equal in death. This symbiosis between all the elements in the universe is underlined by the dance at the end of the story, when all the animals at the zoo form a chain around Mary Poppins. The frenetic dance becomes a mass of indistinct bodies, suggesting the “dissolution of species hierarchy” and moreover the disappearance of the human dominion over animals (Elick 127). At least for one night, the zoo animals are freed and allowed to experience life, disregarding humane intervention and enclosure. This idea of empowered animals can be also found in “High Tide”.

## The Catch Becomes the Catcher: “High Tide”

“High Tide” is one of the stories from *Mary Poppins Opens the Door* (1943). In this story, the children take part in another animal gathering. This time the encounter takes place under the sea and the sea creatures celebrate Mary Poppins’ night off that coincides with the high tide. As in the previous story, the animals, mostly fish here, are able to speak and share their views with Jane and Michael, who are once again astonished by the whole experience. They meet the friendly Sea-Trout, the scared Haddock, who confuses Jane’s hair with a net, the welcoming Cod, the gluttonous Octopus, who attempts to eat Michael, the grumbling Hermit Crab, annoyed by the noises, a big Bronze, a Mermaid and many others. Under the sea, the children are the odds ones, the out-of-place ‘creatures’. Yet, as “Guests of Honour”, they have a different status than some of the other human characters that are also under the sea during this special night.

Indeed, a group of people, regarded as the Catch by the Deep-Sea Salmon, is held prisoner in a cave, under the sea. This deprivation of liberty is a way of depowering the human beings, and it is similar to the encaging of humans from the previous story (Elick 128). Moreover, as in



“Full Moon”, the people are mocked by the passers-by. The Salmon remarks ironically that they “look extremely funny” and “[e]xactly like a fish out of water” (Travers 451). This observation and the way in which the Angler-fish caught the humans with a fishing-rod and using strawberry tarts as baits make the whole situation uncanny. The fish are now in control and they amuse themselves by catching the humans, not to eat them, but as a sport. This reminds us that humans partake in fishing for entertainment. On such occasions, some fish are released afterwards, some get eaten, but all suffer the shock of being pulled out of water. Recent research on fish demonstrates that fish show “signs of distress when they are taken out of water and allowed to flap around in a net or on dry land until they die” (Singer 172). Singer explains that their sufferings have been acknowledged by scientists, who noticed vibratory sounds or vocalization (172). These sufferings seem to have been presumed by Travers as well. By allowing humans to play the role of the Catch, Travers emphasises the fish’s sufferings. The flipping, turning and vocalization of a human being is described. Miss Andrew, the mean old nanny of Mr Banks gets caught by the fish. Her squirming and wails give a state of discomfort and anguish to the children, but seem to amuse the Salmon, who does not show mercy or regret, and considers the whole situation perfectly normal.

Confronted with all these characters, the children experience guilt (when they meet the Haddock), terror (when the Octopus tries to eat Michael), delight (when they see beautiful decorations under the sea), and anguish (when they realize how humans are tricked by the fish). They can no longer avoid the question: what if they were the Catch? This question seems to enable an anti-cruelty message, allowing issues of animal protection and conservation to be taken into account by the reader. This is not unusual for children’s stories, as Cosslett points out in the introduction to her book (1-7). However, the fact that the children accept the situation as it is, and assist powerlessly at the whole scene, suggests that under the sea, they have no say and the sea creatures are in charge, not only over their lives, but also over the lives of the Catch. Yet, they choose to show mercy and release the people at the end of the night.

The reason for their merciful behaviour might be their conviction in the shared origins with humans. As the wise Terrapin explains to Jane, the earth, the humans, the mountains, and the animals, all rose from the sea. Both Grilli and Elick insist upon the importance of this

conversation, because it points to the “shared origins of life” (Elick 128) as well as the “common features linking and unifying all creatures” (Grilli 15). As “Full Moon”, the story ends in a merry carnival dancing, celebrating “life’s unity” (Elick 128), or as Grilli sees it, a “cosmic unity”, in which “the confines of distinct bodies disappear” (15). Both these views convey the idea of unity, realized through dance and I agree with both of them. However, there is more to acknowledge.

Similar to “Full Moon”, this story approaches many issues. Firstly, it questions the human superiority over sea animals, as the humans captured seem to be naïve and greedy enough to eat strawberry tarts that float on the sea. Secondly, it brings into discussion fishing as a cruel occupation, by inverting the roles and identifying the captured humans as the Catch. Thirdly, it suggests that there is a link between humans and other natural elements and it identifies the origins of life in the sea. Finally, it also gives a voice and agency to the sea creatures and the ability to express their feelings freely.

## An Exceptional Character: “The Dancing Cow”

The motif of dancing appears yet in another story, named “The Dancing Cow”, contained in the volume *Mary Poppins* (1934). The story of the Red Cow is told by Mary Poppins to the children one afternoon. According to the nanny, the Red Cow is living a tranquil and delightful life together with the Red Calf, her daughter, in a field, enjoying fresh dandelions every day, and “[h]er world was bounded by green hedges and the sky and she knew nothing of what lay beyond these” (Travers 54). This idyllic image might remind the reader of a postcard picturing farm animals in a natural, green environment. However, as the story goes on, the idyllic life of the animals is disrupted by a fallen star that gets entangled in the Red Cow’s horn. This leads to uncontrolled dancing and prevents her from having a normal life. As a result, she asks the help of the King, who suggests she tries to jump over the moon in order to get rid of the star. This funny and ridiculous suggestion might remind the reader of the nursery-rhyme “The Cow That Jumped Over the Moon”, whose absurd rhymes have delighted children for a long time.

In “The Dancing Cow”, the cow that jumped over the moon is considered as factual data, which adds to the hilarity and absurdity of the story.

Absurdity is quite entertaining. Referring to a comic jingle and a musical comedy with cows as main characters, Baker emphasises the absurdities that people find funny (22). He believes that the reason they do so, has nothing to do with the lack of sense of the rhymes, but rather with the fact that people see animals as a source of entertainment (22). Yet, this story is more than an absurd and funny story featuring a cow, because after she jumps over the moon, the Red Cow experiences a sense of loss and dissatisfaction.

She is unhappy to return to her old life. In Elick’s understanding, this happens because the Red Cow’s life and spirit become poorer (115). Elick outlines that dance “offers a ritualized route to cosmic joy, to reintegration of spirit and body, microcosm and macrocosm” (115), while Grilli believes that when dancing, “[t]he gravity, seriousness, and purpose of life in dance become weightless, and the world is experienced not as a burden but as something intensely involving and memorable” (78-79). Both see dancing, as represented in the world of Mary Poppins, as an amazing experience that brings happiness and elevates the spirit, which I agree with. This new and freeing experience of dancing has transformed the Red Cow’s vision of life completely and that is why she decides to search for another star. As Elick acknowledges, for the Red Cow, “the freedom of dance has become more necessary to her than her familial green field or beloved Red Calf” (115).

The Red Cow has a lot of agency and control over her own life. She is able to speak, she asks for the help of the King and when she is unhappy with the result of her jump, she begins the search for another star. Moreover, she is capable of sacrificing her comfort in order to get what she needs. Her character escapes the stereotype of a dull, steady animal and develops into a round, complex animal character.

## Cats in Charge: “The Cat That Looked at a King” and “Lucky Thursday”

“The Cat That Looked at a King” features in *Mary Poppins Opens the Door* (1943), and it is yet another story told by Mary Poppins to the Banks children. This time, the main character is a white cat that happens to drop by at the court of a king who aspires to become the wisest man in the world. He is interested mostly in data, such as “how many stars there are”, “[w]hy are cheeks pink and cabbages green” (Travers 382), and he demands everyone around him to assist him in his fruitless inquiries. As a result, what was before a rich kingdom becomes an unattended and dirty place. The Cat arrives just in time to catch a mouse that has been bothering the Queen and afterwards jumps on the desk of the absent-minded King, who has forgotten even his own name. The Cat takes control over the conversation immediately and engages the King into a competition meant to prove who is the wisest. The prize is the kingdom and if the Cat loses, beheading. This end does not seem to concern the Cat, who asserts that he is actually “a Prince in disguise” and the beheading will transform him into that prince (Travers 390). This ambiguity of the true identity of the Cat is reflected throughout the story. Moreover, there are no pronouns that could help establish if the Cat is female or male. The Cat wins the contest, but refuses both the Kingdom and the beheading, choosing the animal form and the freedom of moving around.

Elick sees the encounter with the Cat as leading to an identity crisis in the King, who loses all his confidence in himself and in his wisdom (116). Still, the Cat helps the King to rediscover his true identity, by allowing him to look into its eyes. Elick attributes the Cat oracular powers that allows the animal to see the truth (117). Yet, Elick ignores the connection between the Cat and the Queen. As the Queen leans over to put her necklace on the Cat’s fur, they share a glance, and “in that look lay all the secrets that Queens and cats carry in their hearts and never tell to anyone” (Travers 394). The compound subject, connected with the coordinating conjunction ‘and’ suggests common qualities in queens and cats as well as the universality of those qualities. The ability to hide their own thoughts and keep secrets is useful in a society, ruled by a king, who forgot his own name, and who ignores his queen and his subjects.

But who or what is actually the Cat and what does it stand for? When the old proverb “a Cat might look at a King” (Travers 384) appears in the discussion between the Cat and the King, it seems that the Cat might stand for someone humble, with minimal rights. The statement that the Cat is actually a prince in disguise suggests that the Cat is not an actual animal, but a high-ranked person. The cat seems to have a lot in common with the Queen and is wiser than the King. However, the cat’s mysterious oracular powers, as well as the ability to communicate merely through a glance suggests that it is a mystical creature. The story ends without the true identity of the Cat being revealed, and the Cat chooses to remain in its cat-form. The Cat seems to believe having more wisdom as a cat as he says that “All cats (...) know everything” (Travers 385). The refusal of taking a human form and to take over the kingdom, the mocking of the King’s futile inquiries about the world illustrate a dismissive attitude towards the human society ruled by the King. This society is beneath the Cat and the animal refuses to take part in it.

The contempt of human society is also present in “Lucky Thursday”, a chapter found in *Mary Poppins in the Park* (1952). In this story, Michael wishes upon the Cat Star to have some luck, to be left alone and to get far away from everything, in a place he can have some fun. He is transported to the Cat Star, where cats have their own society. They expect Michael to conform to their rules and are mortified by the child’s refusal to eat mice and lap the milk. The King mocks Michael’s conception of luck, and wrinkles “his nose in disgust”, saying things as “[s]ome people have strange ideas of luck” (Travers 369) or “everyone to his own taste” (Travers 370). At the cat’s court, Michael briefly experiences a reversal of power and what it means to be “a member of a disregarded species ruled over by another more powerful one” (Elick 122).

As in the previous story, the cats seem to believe they possess superior qualities to other creatures assessing that their “duty is to be wise and handsome” (Travers 573) and that “[e]veryone makes mistakes at times—unless of course, they are cats” (Travers 577). As superior beings, they are entitled to use the children that happened to wish upon their star “to be miles away” (Travers 571) as slaves and to disregard their unhappiness. They do offer Michael the

possibility to gain a better status in their society and they test him by posing three questions to which Michael responds correctly. The King offers him one of his daughters' hand in marriage and a third part of his kingdom, which Michael disrespectfully refuses by saying that "[s]he is only a cat" (Travers 577). He fails to understand his low position in the cats' society, being so used to being "a member of the dominant species" (Elick 122). His defiance angers the cats, who refuse to let him leave. However, he is saved by Mary Poppins, who takes him home. The fact that only Michael is saved, while the other children remain as slaves enables the idea that if animals were in power, they might try to use humans for their own benefit, in a similar way to how people frequently do it with animals. The image of the children working in the kitchen, or crying under the table is meant to sensitise the readers and signals the often more than unjust behaviour of humans towards animals.

Both stories are about power and power abuse and both involve cats as protagonists. In "The Cat That Looked at a King", the Cat engages into a discussion with a king that disregards his subjects' needs, while in "Lucky Thursday", the society is composed of cats that use children as slaves. Although conveying different messages, both stories are about animals in charge that dominate their human opponents, and make them question themselves and their superiority over animals.

## Other Animal Characters

Another story that features free animals, in charge over their lives, is "Bad Tuesday", a chapter from *Mary Poppins* (1934). In this adventure, Mary Poppins uses a compass to take the children to meet the Polar Bear, the Hyacinth Macaw, the Panda and Amelia, the Dolphin. They spend a few minutes with the hospitable animals, friends of Mary Poppins, and then return home. However, Michael decides to revisit the four places all at once, by himself. This time, the animals are angry and attack Michael, "rushing upon him, their shadows huge on the ceiling" (Travers 74). This happens because the boy is unwelcome on his own. These are free, wild animals that cannot be summoned at the whim of a child. In Elick's reading, the animals are not evil and thus Mary Poppins does not have to fight them when she removes Michael from

the danger (121-122). It is rather a matter of involvement with “powerful animal forces” that the child cannot handle on his own (Elick 122).

However, there are some wild animals that become close friends of humans. There is a true interspecies friendship shown in “The Faithful Friends”, from *Mary Poppins in the Park* (1952) and even a symbiosis between birds and a human in “The Bird Woman”, from *Mary Poppins* (1934). In these two stories, the animals are not pets, but rather faithful companions that choose their humans. The Lion in “The Faithful Friends” comes to town willingly in the search of Albert, a policeman, his long-lost friend. Unfortunately, the Lion mistakes one of Albert’s other twin brothers for Albert and creates panic in the park, although he is never truly threatening. At the beginning of the story, he is moving by taking “enormous leaps” (Travers 542), and being playful, “[j]ust like a kitten”, as Michael describes him (Travers 542), but after he meets his true friend, he chats with Albert, sitting on his hind legs (Travers 547). He is no longer trying to impress, and he is recognised as an equal. Furthermore, the fact that Albert understands his growling suggests a mutual interspecies friendship.

On the other hand, the relationship between the pigeons and the Bird Woman is rather a symbiotic relationship. The Bird Woman sells food for the birds to passers-by who feed them, and in return the birds are always by her side. Even the way she is known to the children and the readers, as the Bird Woman, shows they belong together. A pigeon even pays his respect to her by sticking a rose that he has stolen from Mary Poppins in the Bird Woman’s hat (Travers 80). This pigeon is not the only bird being disrespectful towards the nanny.

Indeed, the Starling, a recurrent character, takes advantage of any opportunity to tease Mary Poppins, calling her “the Great Expectation” (Travers 100), the “Oddity”, the “Misfit” (Travers 230), adding that “[o]ne of my own day-old chicks is handsomer than Mary P. ever was” (Travers 100). Elick acknowledges the Starling’s insolence (124), but also, as I see it, his courage in criticising the conceited and seemingly mean Mary Poppins. He is one of the few characters that dares to disrespect the proud nanny, and who is not frightened by her reactions.

Actually, the two of them seem to have a special friendship despite their sarcastic comments towards each other.

The complex connections between human and animal are seldom understood by other characters, who are rather prone to debate ownership over animals. Various debates about the right of possession over an animal appear in the books. For example, in the chapter “The Marble Boy”, from *Mary Poppins Opens the Door* (1943), some of the human characters in the story are enraged seeing Neleus, a statue that jumped from his pedestal, sitting alongside his dolphin on the ground. They all express their opinions about how the animal should be treated, disregarding the animal’s signals of affection towards Neleus, as well as his unmasked discontent towards them. As Elick points out, the human characters are unable to acknowledge “the irruption of mystery in the midst of their humdrum lives” (118). Also, in my view the fact that the human characters mistake the Dolphin for other animal creatures, underlines the idea that these adults are so disconnected from nature that they are unable to name a dolphin.

This break from the natural world is clearer in “The Children in the Story”, a chapter of *Mary Poppins in the Park* (1952). In this chapter, three story characters, three Princes, and their Unicorn jump in the real world. The adults that happened to be in the park at this time, come up with different ways of capturing or taking advantage of the Unicorn, seemingly unaware of the uniqueness of seeing an actual unicorn. The meddling people ignore the Unicorn’s affectionate reactions towards the princes and the menacing responses towards them, although he “gave an angry snort” (596), “swung his horn” (596), and at some point “was dancing madly on all four feet” (Travers 597). In this story, the Unicorn seems to be a pet of the three princes, thus a possession. However, his affectionate attitude towards his owners, suggests his willingness to be in their care. In contrast to Andrew and the Lark, he does not defy his owners, although he is fully capable of defending himself, if needed. The same can be said about the Dolphin, Neleus’s pet, who clearly enjoys the boy’s company. The Unicorn and the Dolphin are happy creatures that have a good relationship with their owners.



## Conclusion

The Mary Poppins books are intriguing and complex, offering multiple possible interpretations. It is reasonable to think that the way humans and animals change places in some of the stories raises uncomfortable questions over the human behaviour towards animals. One of these questions is: what if the animals were to have power over humans, how would the people feel about that? Disapproval, fear, and anguish are some of the feelings that the Banks children experience when they see other people imprisoned or suffering. However, in most stories, the change of places is temporary and people are never physically harmed, just distressed. Humans suffer in these stories, rather pointlessly, and their sufferings mirror the meaningless sufferings of animals. Moreover, in a story such as “Lucky Thursday”, the children held against their will have merely instrumental value, being enslaved by the cats. The cats are the rulers, their superior wisdom allowing them to take charge. Their ruthless behaviour highlights humans’ similar ruthlessness and condescending attitude towards animals. Indeed, as previously mentioned, many philosophers disregarded animals and were never concerned about animals’ sufferings.

Nevertheless, some of the stories, as “Full Moon” and “High Tide” transmit a warmer message. This message is the idea that humans and animals are equals, because of their common origins. As part of the same universe, some of the human characters are allowed to mingle with the animals, as well as to experience the magic of togetherness and interspecies friendship. This space of magic is, however, unavailable to most adults, who are rather estranged from the natural world, as well as unable to comprehend magic.

The human society, a place of reason and science is criticised in the stories, and humans’ need for categories and scientific explanations is ridiculed. Animals escape stereotyping, and express themselves freely. Andrew refuses to be seen as a spoiled dog, the Zoo animals are polite to each other, the fish are partying under the sea, the Red Cow abandons her old, steady life in the search of the extraordinary, the Cat that looked at a king refuses human form and power, the Lion goes after his human friend and so on. Some of the animals in the stories have the ability

to talk, some do not. Yet, one way or another, they all get the possibility to get their point across and influence their lives. They compel humans to accept their demands, as well as to make adjustments to comply to their wishes.

The commonality to all Mary Poppins stories involving animal characters is the fact that humans do not occupy a special, superior position. They are not immune to being judged or ridiculed by the animal characters. Furthermore, they are punished, when they show cruelty to other creatures, as in “Miss Andrew’s Lark”, or when they get involve with superior powers, they do not fully comprehend, as in “Bad Tuesday”. All these animal stories are a form of advocacy for animal rights, as well as stories featuring empowered animals, able to express themselves, and to defy human beings.

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