

**Analyse the figuration of Gerasim in terms of animality in Turgenev's "Mumu". Your discussion should include explicit engagement with at least one independently sourced critical reference.**

Turgenev has a fraught relationship to subservients and animals, being a writer housed in an estate kept by serfs in 19th century Moscow, hunting wild animals in his spare-time, while being deeply sympathetic to serfs and animals, unlike his cold mother who took pride in the house more so than anyone in it. His story, *Mumu*, follows Gerasim, a "dumb and deaf" serf who works devotedly for an old wealthy mistress. In the beginning of the story, he falls in love with a laundress named Tatyana, who he chases excitedly and clearly adores; his affection is characterised as over-zealous, and it is said that he "gave her no peace" (p. 91) as if he were a demanding puppy. Another remark on his dog-like ignorance is made by a serf who says "if he hits you, he don't know how hard he's hitting" (p. 95) as if he were an unsocialised hound.

Turgenev himself was an animal enthusiast. Whether an organic appreciation or the milieu of literary realism fostered an appreciation for the bare environment in him, he doesn't hold the modern cartesian view of animals as soulless. In a letter to Pauline Viardo from April-May 1848 Turgenev confessed: "I would prefer to watch the precipitous movements of the damp foot of a duck as it scratches the back of its head by the side of a lake, or the long sparkling drops of water falling slowly from the mouth of a cow as it stands motionless and up to its knees drinking water from a pond, to anything the cherubim (those illustrious flying forms) could perceive in their heavens." (Kadyrbekova, Z. 2019) In this letter Turgenev rejects the beauty of divinity and posits himself as a lover of his fellow earthly inhabitants, while also being a hunting hobbyist, a contradiction that foils many.

The narrator describes the stress associated with Gerasim's forced move from his home village to the city, by comparing him to a displaced animal who: "having been moved to the city, did not understand, was longing and confused, as a young, healthy bull feels confused, who has been taken off the field, where grass reached his belly, and now he is being rushed somewhere, but where, only god knows!" While it may have been a frequent occurrence of the enslaved to be taken from homes and dispatched to an unknown place for manual labour, to also be deaf further instills the disorientation that someone like Gerasim would feel in the process of displacement. Just as a bull may not be able comprehend the situation of being transported for agriculture, Gerasim is "confused". Here Turgenev's narrator is probably obscuring Gerasim's subjectivity and innate sensitivity to his environment and other beings, but perhaps not. He could also be expressing the inward resignation of serfdom, a relinquishing of agency, a merciful defeat, and a shrinking into the bottom of the "animal" kingdom. This is the quelling power of a social hierarchy that is internalised in its participants, which Turgenev may have felt reflects a hierarchy in nature. He may try to justify hunting through such hierarchies and arguments of the harshness of nature, but it is felt through his literary works that he loves nature.

Gerasim is animal-like in that he doesn't speak articulately in any human language. He grunts and moans, and "mu" is the only signifier he uses for anything. While he can offer gestures, such as gifting, making affectionate noises and touching people, his face is quite expressionless. After Mumu's first disappearance, "his face, which had always been lifeless, as with all deaf-mutes, seemed now to be turned to stone." This makes Turgenev's experience as the writer especially difficult as the realist form requires framing that verifies the reliability of the story. The narrator may give "proof" of a story's credibility by being a participant, a witness or a finder of a diary for example (Somoff, 2010). Turgenev conveys the inability to record an animal-like subjectivity. Perhaps he displays the futile attempt at getting inside a serfs mind who has been silenced into suffering. Perhaps he is expressing censorship, as he wrote *Mumu* while imprisoned to his mother's estate for writing an obituary of Nikolai Gogol. All of these possibilities relate to a de-humanising and animalisation at play.

Gerasim, unable to rebel from being on the near-to-last rung of human society, makes the most of his position and lives on the mistress's estate and eats from her kitchen. He is trapped and helpless when she requests Mumu be taken away, just as Mumu is trapped when Gerasim must get rid of her. When Gerasim takes her out on the lake, she trusts he is taking her there for an outing, not to be drowned. The mistress says she never asked for Mumu to be killed, but Gerasim resigns to the fact that he cannot be a serf while

also having a dog, the love of his life, because he thinks he is an animal at the behest of a cruel, arbitrary force and he plays this out by killing Mumu and traumatising himself.

Kadyrbekova says “nature requires from its sons a quiet and slow animation,” and Gerasim feels this as his duty. When he steps outside the bounds placed there by the ruling class, when he becomes something more than a serf, when he extends himself into the human that he truly is and disturbs the mistress who shelters him like a pet, he dismays. Here Kadyrbekova says about humans and animals after they have stepped out of their bounds, “They retreat and waste away, alone as though they feel they no longer have the right to live, and a human who suffered in this world due to his own fault, ought to remain silent.”

Once Gerasim had started calling his dog “Mumu,” he became less animalistic than before. In naming the dog, Gerasim acquires the ability to speak. When he calls his dog Mumu, the animal sound that he is able to produce becomes a human word. The authenticity of Gerasim’s word is confirmed by its recognition by the dog as well as by the larger community: “All the servants in the house liked her, and called her Mumu, too”. Once Mumu dies, Gerasim’s linguistic capacity that made him less “animal”, goes away and he is silent again. Gerasim volunteers his silence because he feels less than human, he decides to reside within his muteness and servitude.

## References

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