



Dogs as Representations of Self and Other

An Analysis of Narrative Tone in Franz Kafka and Sara Baume

Maddie Wallace

ENGLISH 499 Xavier University

In an era of posthumanism, the binary between what is human and what is animal has become increasingly blurred. Posthumanism marks the shift from humanism, which emphasizes the individual human's agency, or ability to act of his or her own volition, to an emphasis on the expansion of this agency to include nonhuman others. This field of study poses to blur or delineate the boundaries between self and other, between animal and human. Literature is one way in which society is attempting to clarify this ambiguity.

Literary works featuring nonhuman populations as central characters often use differing styles of narration as a technique to allow readers to simultaneously view animals as representative of self and representative of otherness. In the late 19th century, Franz Kafka's short story, "Investigations of a Dog," emphasizes the similarities between the human reader and the animal narrator through the use of first-person narration, but rely heavily on the eventual understanding of animals as representative of humanity. By placing the reader in the mind of the animal in question, the reader is forced to understand his or her relationship to the protagonist as self, rather than other. In the 21st century, the novel *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* by Sara Baume, challenges the cultural narrative informing what is human and what is not through the use of *second*-person narration, expanding the reader's ability to understand animal characters as more than representations of humanness, and allowing him or her to embrace nonhuman populations as sentient-others. In an era of increasing efforts to minimize anthropocentrism, attempts to understand animals as both representations of self and as other have resulted in varying levels of success. Although Kafka effectively blurs the line between what is human and what is animal through first-person narration, Baume succeeds in this field more effectively through her use of second-person narration, and crafts a character that is both incredibly relatable and alien,

allowing the reader to fully explore the ways humans interact with and represent nonhuman populations. This guides readers in developing an epistemological framework for empathizing with and understanding a nonhuman other as a being with agency and the right to exist outside of human understanding.

Spill Simmer Falter Wither by Sara Baume follows the story of a man slightly over middle-age, who adopts a dog from the local pound. Ray, the protagonist, and the dog he adopts and christens One Eye, are social outcasts who struggle to find their places in a society that assigns worth based on attractiveness and productivity. “Investigations of a Dog” by Franz Kafka is written from the perspective of a dog attempting to understand philosophical questions that plague him about existing as a canine in a world where communication is impossible, such as from “whence does the earth procure this food?” (Kafka 288). Although these stories differ in plot, both utilize unique narrative perspectives, which function to portray, as effectively as possible, the space a nonhuman animal occupies in modern society. They also focus on the same animal: man’s best friend. By placing dogs at the heart of each story, both Baume and Kafka are attempting to break down the barriers between the reader’s understanding of self and the animal, the nonhuman other.

Throughout literature, dogs in particular “evoke a complex range of alienations, occupying a liminal space between the domesticated life of humans and the wilderness of nonhuman animals. Living in close proximity with humans, they forge tight fellowships that ineluctably cause them to seep into human consciousness and creativity” (Anderton 273). In “Investigations of a Dog”, humanity’s connection to canines is completely ignored, whereas this relationship is complicated in such a way that the reader has no choice but to reevaluate this connection altogether in *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*. The narrator in “Investigations of a Dog,”

examines the concept of classism within his species and claims that “no creatures to [his] knowledge live with such wide dispersion as dogs, none have so many distinctions of class, of kind, of occupation” (Kafka 279). By ignoring the existence of humans, which have quite as many distinctions of class, kind and occupations, Kafka removes the generic human-reliance expected from a dog, and begs the reader to wonder where he or she fits into a world in which the dominant species refuses to acknowledge your existence. In *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*, One Eye is often described as disobedient, aggressive, and physically difficult to look at with his “maggot nose” and “a hollow and a gaudy scar” where his eye once was (Baume 37, 27). One Eye, is represented as a dog who has no loyal connection to humanity, only to Ray, and does not contribute to the aesthetic value of a companion animal. He is described as “not exactly obedient,” and led by his “maggot nose” rather than his relationship with Ray (Baume 37). This both alienates and endears the reader in a way that a typical dog could not. In this way, Baume is more successful in destabilizing the reader’s understanding of what a dog should be.

Both Kafka’s “Investigations of a Dog” and *Spill Simmer Falter Wither* attempt to represent central canines as having agentic characteristics, by portraying them as being relatable to the reader, but also existing outside of the realm of human understanding. This is unique in a literary tradition that expects solely human characters to display any level of agency and power within society. However, “the animal story relies upon the notion that animals have specific, predetermined characteristics (e.g., dogs are obedient and apes are mimetic by nature), whereas humans are a dynamic complex of characteristics” (Powell 130). Animals, in most works of literature, act as a mask for humanness, representative of the society’s values. Reading all animals in literature in this way diminishes their distinctness from humans, and allows animal characters to be read solely as self, as relatable. Both Kafka and Baume break these generic

characteristics in order to grant their characters an agency generally reserved for humans to experience. Neither the narrator in “Investigations of a Dog,” who is described as “cold,” “reserved,” “shy,” and “calculating” (Kafka 278), or aggressive, disfigured One-Eye embody the stereotypical dog, and neither character would succeed in what society views as contributing to society. However, through their expression of countercultural agency in both settings, these creatures gain a power in society by not conforming to the genre expectations of nonhuman animals. This allows both creatures to be viewed as other, rather than solely as representative of humanness.

In *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*, One Eye is endeared to the reader through his disobedient behavior, and his sublime otherness. Shortly after he is adopted from the shelter, Ray takes him for a walk, and sets him free to “chase and rove and zig-zag feverishly, to be [his] own unhuman and unprogrammable self” (Baume 44). This allows readers to gain empathy for a creature who is outside of the acceptable boundaries of what a productive dog should be, and gives the reader a chance to understand the animal “as a privileged site of alterity” that challenges our postmodern relationship with otherness “beyond the easy boundaries of human fraternity” (Rohman 20). By situating One Eye as free in his unhumanness, Baume is situating the reader in such a way that he or she is able to understand One Eye’s otherness as freeing, and not confining.

Nonhuman animals in literature are perceived as incredibly subjective, meaning that the representation of these populations is very problematic. The problem with this subjective representation, along with the complicatedness of signifying the “organic liminality” of animals as similar but different from humans, is “the intractable mystery of the animal consciousness” (Rohman 16). Nonhuman animals represent an otherness, an alterity, that humans struggle to reconcile with their understanding of nonhuman animals as representative of an otherness that

cannot be understood, as “beings with ways of knowing and being that resist our flawed systems of language and who may know us and ourselves in ways that we may never discern” (Weil 12). This foreignness is one that humans struggle to represent in literature. One way that authors have been, and are currently, attempting to bridge this unknowable divide between humans and nonhuman others is through narrative tone.

Because intimate understanding is typically needed in order to form a connection with another individual, authors attempting to portray nonhuman characters intimately tend to rely on first-person narration in order to accomplish this: In order to attempt to empathize with a nonhuman other, one must see things from its viewpoint. Franz Kafka wrote multiple stories from animal perspectives, utilizing first-person narration to encourage his readers to empathize and relate to the nonhuman narrators driving his stories. In “Investigations of a Dog,” Kafka’s narrator takes the form of a canine seeking answers to broad, philosophical questions. This narrative technique is intended to pull readers from their own human perspectives, and forces them to wonder what it would be like to grapple with these issues as something other than human. However, according to Joseph Anderton, “far from securing itself to the individual, [this] attempt to articulate the self bypasses the human and nonhuman animal distinction to betray only a general, anonymous significance” (Anderton 271). In order to articulate an “I,” the writer distances himself from readers in that whether the narrator is human or animal, and is consequently unable to fully articulate what “I” is signifying, thus leaving readers ignorant of *either* animal or human identity. Eventually, Kafka’s canine narrator asks “but is not everybody silent in the same way?” (Kafka 301). This question, along with the alienating nature of the pronoun “I,” represents an “inability to engage with the world as anything other than Other” (Powell 137).

In “Investigations of a Dog,” Kafka, although speaking for a canine narrator, does little to convince his readers that the canine mind is different from their own, understandably embracing anthropomorphism in exchange for writing in a way that readers could easily understand, rather than attempting to “devise a canine aesthetic” through which to write (Anderton 276). His canine narrator claims that “apart from us dogs there are all sorts of creatures in the world, wretched, limited, dumb creatures who have no language but mechanical cries” (Kafka 279). Although this first-person perspective pulls the reader into the perspective of a nonhuman other, this dog is utilizing a very human thought process. While reminding the reader that in this dog’s world, humans have no significance, Kafka is confounding traditional representation that dogs are reliant upon humans, while simultaneously evoking a very human frame of mind. In depicting a world in which the central species believes that all other animals are “limited, “dumb,” and without language, Kafka is invoking a very humanist perspective, and forcing readers to reevaluate the ways that humans view other species. Although this is an attempt to destabilize the humanist perspective, it eventually reinforces the concept that anthropomorphism is the most effective way to destabilize a reader’s sense of self and represent nonhuman populations. This first-person narrative style also carries with it a risk of misrepresentation, as “the practice of speaking for others, even when undertaken with the best of intentions, carries a real danger of misrepresentation and, in particular, of erasing difference, of turning the other into the same” (DeMello 23). By ultimately representing this nonhuman other as representative of humanness, Kafka is falling into the unethical nature of misrepresenting a voiceless population.

Despite the first-person narration prevalent in “Investigations of a Dog,” Kafka’s narrator begins the treatise referring to “dogs like you and me” (Kafka 281). This brief shift into second-person narration effectively informs the reader of his or her place within the story, and the

distance he or she inhabits from the narrator. By utilizing second-person narration, Kafka is effectively minimizing the distance between the reader and the canine population around which the story *centers*. This technique is one that Sara Baume relies on heavily throughout *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*, and is an extremely effective tool in minimizing emotional distance between the narrator and nonhuman populations.

In contrast to first-person narration, which attempts to engage the reader by decreasing the perceived distance between the narrator and the reader with limited success, second-person narration more fully implicates the reader into the fictional world in which it takes place. In *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*, second-person narration is utilized through dialogue between the protagonist of the novel, Ray, and his dog, One Eye, who cannot speak back. Because One Eye is not expected to answer, and is unable to do so, this narration is then redirected to the reader, who is expected to respond, both emotionally and intellectually to Ray's stories and questions, where One Eye cannot. When Ray first brings One-Eye into his home, he addresses him to inquire, "can you hear all the things I can't any more, all the things rendered soundless by familiarity?" (Baume 24). The reader gains insight into Ray's own perspective, but through his address of One-Eye, the reader is able to gain access to the intimacy shared by a human and his nonhuman companion in a way that first-person narration alone would not have accurately represented.

Baume's use of second-person narration effectively minimizes the distance between the reader and One Eye, the nonhuman subject of Ray's address. As Ray's story progresses, he builds an intimate relationship with One Eye, with the Other. He confesses that when he was a child, he "didn't really believe [he] was of the same species as the children [he] saw passing along the sea front, going to school" (Baume 60). This distances Ray from other humans, and supports that otherness can be found within one's own species. However, when Ray looks at One

Eye, he can see something of himself in the canine. He addresses One Eye, saying “I see the sadness in you, the same sadness that’s in me” in “the way you never wholly let your guard down and take the world I’ve given you for granted” (Baume 47). This progression allows the reader to disassociate Ray with other humans, and view Ray and One Eye as similar, as sharing something of a self. As the reader begins to make this connection, the distance between the reader and One Eye is also decreased significantly. Whereas One Eye’s otherness works to alienate him from the reader, this otherness also endears him, building empathy between this physical representation of otherness, and the reader’s understanding of self. As Ray asks One Eye, “How can you be so unremittingly interested? How can every stone be worthy of tenderly sniffing, every clump of grass a source of fascination?,” there is value and intimacy built into this canine’s otherness (Baume 37).

Although Baume eliminates anthropomorphism more effectively than Kafka and other animal-fiction writers, there is still an element of humanization of One Eye in her writing. According to Jarmila Mildorf, “there is no denying that, in everyday communication, *you* indeed has a special function as an indexical pronoun alongside the first-person pronoun because it allocates the role of ‘recipient’ or ‘listener’ or, more generally, ‘addressee’ to the person or persons addressed” (Mildorf 149). Essentially, although Ray is addressing One Eye as “you,” there’s an assumption of understanding that can only be fulfilled by the reader’s humanness and understanding of language.

However, this use of second-person narration more effectively eliminates the potential for *unnecessary* anthropomorphizing, which first-person narration necessitates. Where Kafka’s dog explores “his own kind through human logic and language,” One Eye’s thoughts remain unknown to the reader (Anderton 276). The animal’s otherness is especially poignant in that

nonhuman populations are unable to speak our language, which reduces these populations to simply “Other” (Stalking the Subject 17). This creates a unique conundrum for those attempting to represent these populations. When attempting to speak for a nonhuman creature, authors must first come to terms with the fact that words and language can never accurately represent a creature that does not have an equivalent capacity for language. Authors like Kafka accept this as a complication in representation, but contemporary authors are attempting to give their subjects more agency. Baume, rather than directly stating what One Eye, a nonhuman animal without lingual capabilities, is experiencing, Ray questions and wonders about him, which allows the reader to do the same; “What are you thinking?,” Ray asks One Eye. “I wish I could teach you how to read. I wish you could understand when I read to you” (Baume 68). This avoids the imposition of a voice upon a population that authors have no way of fully comprehending, and perpetuating that misrepresentation onto their readers. Along with avoiding this imposition of inaccurate representation, this technique encourages readers to wonder about the experience of a being so foreign from themselves. Rather than viewing a dog, or any other nonhuman other, as simply other, as “limited,” “dumb,” and incapable of language, as the protagonist views others in “Investigations of a Dog,” the reader is able to view One Eye as differently abled (Kafka 279). In *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*, Ray often laments his lack of wonder about the world by comparing it to One Eye’s, “I wish I’d been born with your capacity for wonder. I wouldn’t mind living a shorter life if my short life could be as vivid as yours” (Baume 37).

Onno Oerlemans begins “The Animal in Allegory: From Chaucer to Gray,” by posing the question: “How can we define the boundaries between [literature] that uses animals to signal purely human concerns and those that seem to take animals seriously, that is, to represent animals in themselves?” (Oerlemans 297). Many animals in literature function as signifiers for

human characteristics. This removes any sense of agency that each creature may have to exist outside of the realms of humanity. Although readers are able to draw parallels between the struggle faced by the dog in “Investigations of a Dog,” the nonhuman population in that short story is eventually symbolic of humanity’s struggle for uniqueness. Baume, in *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*, takes this symbolism further. Although One Eye is an effective tool in helping the reader to understand Ray’s relationship to society through his relationship with One Eye, One Eye has *agency* as a creature. He is able to misbehave, exhibit aggression, and form a tight bond with Ray, completely outside of the total knowledge of the reader. Following an incident in which One Eye publicly exhibits aggression, Ray expresses relief at One Eye’s return to himself, and admires his independence, something dogs are not often championed for having; “I don’t want to turn you into one of those battery-powered toys that yap and flip when you slide their switch. I was wrong to tell you you’re bold. I was wrong to try and impose something of my humanness upon you, when being human never did me any good” (Baume 39). In literature, animals are often depicted as acting as representations for the narrator or main character. By admiring One Eye’s difference from himself, even though it caused a scene, Ray is respecting One Eye’s agency, his ability to act within a given situation according to his own instincts and wishes. This creates a model for readers to respect nonhuman animals not only despite their differences, but because of their difference from humanness. By portraying One Eye as inexplicably Other, but also as a creature so admired by the human closest to him, Baume is binding the self with the other in a way that makes otherness something to be empathized with and respected.

Although readers are able to watch One Eye through Ray, the reader is never privy to One Eye’s innermost thoughts as readers of “Investigations of a Dog” are. This creates a distance

between the reader and One Eye that functions as a device to keep readers understanding One Eye as Other, but also allows the reader to fully experience a relationship with One Eye through Ray. By creating empathy between the reader and One Eye, but not giving the reader access into One Eye's thoughts and responses, the reader builds a relationship with a nonhuman other with the understanding that they will never know what One Eye is experiencing. This creates a model for readers to use when interacting with nonhuman others outside of literature, and allows them to view nonhuman others as valuable in their otherness.

Humans are animals. However, there has long been a strict binary in place that separates what is "human" and what is "animal," and this has justified abuse and a rigid hierarchy in which animals are commoditized, abused, and disregarded. In the 19th century, Franz Kafka wrote about animals utilizing a first-person perspective, which allowed readers to inhabit the perspective of a nonhuman population, and to interpret his characters as more than simply representative of self, of humanness. By allowing readers to interact with a creature that is completely foreign, Kafka created a way of representing nonhuman animals as relatable, and as worthy of empathy and compassion. This perspective is helpful in dissecting the human relationship to nonhuman animals, but not accurate in creating a helpful guide for understanding the nonhuman, or other, experience. In the 21st century, Sara Baume wrote about an outcast nonhuman creature, allowing her human narrator to address him in a second-person narrative tone. This allowed Baume to permeate this nonhuman character with a sentience and foreignness that readers could use to build a model for understanding otherness. By using second-person narration to build empathy and an understanding of a nonhuman character's value as different, Baume is guiding her readers in developing an epistemological framework for interacting with the nonhuman Other in a way

that allows readers to relate to these individuals, but also a way in which to respect and admire these nonhuman populations because of their differences from humans.

Works Cited

- Anderton, Joseph. "Dogdom: Nonhuman Others And The Othered Self In Kafka, Beckett, And Auster." *Twentieth Century Literature* 3 (2016): 271. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 25 Nov. 2016.
- Baume, Sara. *Spill Simmer Falter Wither*. n.p.: Boston : Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2016. Print.
- DeMello, Margo. *Speaking For Animals : Animal Autobiographical Writing*. n.p.: New York: Routledge, 2013., 2013. *OhioLINK Library Catalog*. Web. 12 Dec. 2016.
- Kafka, Franz. *Complete Stories*. New York: Schocken Books, 1971.
- Mildorf, Jarmila. "Reconsidering second-person narration and involvement." *Language and Literature*, vol. 25, no. 2, 2016, pp. 145-158. *OhioLINK Electronic Journal Center*, 25 Nov. 2016.
- Powell, Matthew T. "Bestial Representations Of Otherness: Kafka's Animal Stories." *Journal Of Modern Literature* 1 (2008): 129-137. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 25 Nov. 2016.
- Oerlemans, Onno. "The Animal In Allegory: From Chaucer To Gray." *Isle: Interdisciplinary Studies In Literature And Environment* 20.2 (2013): 296-317. *MLA International Bibliography*. Web. 12 Dec. 2016.
- Rohman, Carrie. *Stalking The Subject : Modernism And The Animal*. n.p.: New York : Columbia University Press., 2009. *Xavier XPLORE Library Catalog*. Web. 12 Dec. 2016.
- Weil, Kari. *Thinking Animals : Why Animal Studies Now?*. n.p.: New York : Columbia University Press, 2012. *Xavier XPLORE Library Catalog*. Web. 12 Dec. 2016.