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“IF I CAN’T FIND A GOOD ENOUGH STORY, I MAKE ONE”: ANALYSIS OF
ANTHROPOMORPHISM IN HOLLY BLACK’S SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT

The paper is an attempt to trace the elements of Anthropomorphism in Holly Black’s short story collection *The Poison Eaters and Other Stories*. Holly Black is well known for her series “The Spiderwick Chronicles” especially among children and later became renowned for her skill at writing prose especially in the sub-genre of Modern Fantasy. The paper aims to critically analyse the short story collection- a collection of 12 drastically different yet relatively similar short stories. The entire process of seamlessly interweaving creatures and supernatural elements into stories of everyday life exhibits the magnificent ability of Black to create a new turn to the genre of the dark fairy tale. These characters are infused with cynicism, moderated by satire so that they appear more humane than the other human characters in the stories. The paper also aims to analyse the degree to which each of these characters shows human characteristics.

Keywords: Modern Fantasy, Anthropomorphism, Satire, Dark Fairy tale

INTRODUCTION

Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human-like characteristics, feelings, and behaviors to non-human characters such as animals, Gods, and supernatural creatures. It is a literary device similar to personification, both of which are present in the Fantastical genre of books. In this study, anthropomorphism is analyzed concerning a specific character in some of the short stories in the short story collection *The Poison Eaters and Other Stories*. It aims to evaluate how these non-human characters sometimes appear more humane than human beings themselves.

“The Coldest Girl in Coldtown” concerns Matilda - the protagonist of the story who renders Anthropomorphism at its best in the tale. Matilda who was once human gets bitten by a vampire and gets infected with the cold. Matilda still has a chance at regaining her human form physically but only if she abstains from drinking blood from a human for eighty-eight days and sweats the virus out as any human waits for a cold to get out of their system. The parallelism is satirical but has much more depth to it when the cold is a deadly virus that turns humans into vampires after it kills their host and almost brings them back to life except as cold-blooded creatures that feed on human blood to survive. Matilda runs away from home hoping to sweat out the virus and go back to how she lived as a human with her mother and boyfriend Julian. However, her plans fail when Dante, her neighbor, and friend approaches her to save his sister and Julian from going into Coldtown. Matilda surrenders herself into Coldtown after feeding off Dante for the coupon to get

Lydia – Dante’s sister out of there. Once again, the contrast between Lydia who is trying to turn herself into a vampire, and Matilda who lived off alcohol and tobacco to keep herself from feeding as she desperately clings on to any chances of becoming human again highlights Anthropomorphism incomparably. Matilda goes as far as to become the very creature she despises to get the people she loves out of Coldtown and to save them from turning into them. "I'm here to turn in a vampire. For a voucher. I want to turn in a vampire in exchange for letting a human out of Coldtown." (Black 23) Matilda says when she decides to turn herself in in exchange for a voucher to get Dante’s sister Lydia out which is proof of Anthropomorphism.

In “A Reversal of Fortune”, the tale involves the appearance of the devil in the guise of an old man emanating an unbearable stench approaching people who are in need specifically which is when he approaches Nikki – the protagonist of this tale who would do anything to save her dog Boo. The devil is the anthropomorphic character in this story who arrives in Nikki’s sight just before she finds out about the tragic accident that leads her back to him. The devil appears to be helpful and offers her anything she wants which she doesn’t believe initially but he is still the person she goes to when she can think of nobody else to save Boo. “He laughed again, hard and long. “I gave you what you wanted. I'll give you the next thing you want, too.” He winked a rheumy eye. “For a price” (Black 40). Nikki’s impression of him being a deviant and depraved person doesn’t wear off but he assures her that he only requires the price of her soul if she fails to win against him in her choice of contest. The devil seems confident to win the competition. At the time of the competition, the devil arrives ready to eat and competes in the eating competition against Nikki using gummy frogs. The devil resorts to playing a game that he is sure he will win at using his trickery and shrewdness. He even cuts open his belly to create space for more which Nikki is unable to do because of her human body. Despite his cunning move, Nikki still wins after eating one of his half-digested gummy frogs which both impresses and disgusts the devil. The devil could have still taken her soul, but leaves giving Boo back to her healed and full of life. The devil appearing in this story using a human form offering help generously despite having wicked schemes behind his actions challenges is exactly how Black portrays and paints an image in the readers’ minds which makes it the paradigm of Anthropomorphism because of how the devil is portrayed to fit the human perception of him.

In “The Dog King”, the protagonist of the story – Elienad is a werewolf character who displays Anthropomorphism. Elienad is raised in the kingdom of Dunbardain where wolves are used for royal entertainment, Elienad is the only wolf that stays with a human and is managed by the king. Elienad is a loyal wolf that is of countless uses to the king; however, the king keeps Elienad’s ability to transform into a human secret from the rest of the kingdom. Elienad is part boy, part wolf but the king hides this from the rest of the kingdom as he doesn’t want to jeopardize his throne as well as cause chaos in the kingdom. Elienad knows that the king is lying when he tells him that he was found among the last of a litter pack amid a forest to be taken to the dog fights as he says here ‘The boy is very calm, very still. “I could hear it in your voice. It isn't a true story, but I can't tell which parts are false.” (Black 79). Elienad who grows up under the table of the king where he learns the king’s secrets, lies, deals, and hidden threats, learns to be able to analyze his lies from the truth. When there is widespread terror in the kingdom because of the brutal killing of human children by a wolf, they all suspect the king’s wolf; however, they do not question him about it after he denies the very possibility with a lot of authority. Instead, the king announces that the next person to ascend the throne has to bring the wolf who was the cause of all the deaths in hopes that Toran, the famous wolf hunter, and son of his friend will bring it to him. Toran appears a day later with a human hand that belongs to the wolf behind the killings and stirs even more chaos in the kingdom because the whole kingdom comes to know of the breed of wolves that live among them like Elienad. Elienad uses this lead to track her down but finds out that the king was his father all along and expresses his anger by bringing her corpse to fulfill the king’s promise to the kingdom and ascend the throne. Elienad has a lot of features that are more human than when compared to the king who disregarded and raised Elienad with fear. Elienad shows features of forgiveness, loyalty, trustworthiness, love, and even other feelings like a betrayal that give him more humane characteristics accordingly making him an Anthropomorphic character too.

Roiben from “The Land of the Heart’s desires” is the archetype of an anthropomorphic character as he is also a faery, but a quintessential one – Lord Rath Roiben Rye of the Unseelie court and several other places, he was king to all and had the responsibility of managing their realm from the human realm where faeries often came down to in disguise for entertaining themselves. Roiben however, has only one reason to come down to a place that reeks of iron and that is his girlfriend – Kaye. Roiben’s character finds himself deeply in love with Kaye, so much that although faeries are known for their lack of sentiment and vehemence, Roiben finds himself afraid of losing Kaye but even more afraid of hoping for a future for the both of them which may be uncharacteristic of faeries but a perfect portrayal of the human features attributed to him. This is seen when he says, “After all the humiliations I have suffered, all the things I have done for my mistresses at their commands, here I am in a dirty human restaurant, serving coffee to fools. For Kaye. Because I am free to. Because I think it would please her. Because I think it would make her laugh” (Black 162) which goes on to provide more evidence on the foundation of Roiben’s feelings. Roiben’s relationship with Kaye also gives him relief from the person he once used to be, signifying that he feels regret and guilt in his past self which Kaye somehow seems to relieve. These other feelings of regret and guilt, possible trauma are also other characteristics relevant to the human world. This makes Roiben a classic representation of an anthropomorphic character in this story.

In “The Poison Eaters”, Cecily – one of the three sisters is an exemplar of an anthropomorphic character. Raised by a father along with her two sisters makes them seem more human than their natures which are shown when Alice says, “Imagine any of us married. What would happen then, sisters? We are merely knives in the process of being sharpened.” (Black 168) Cecily and her sisters were poisonous to the touch and were often called “The Walking Dead”. Cecily ventures out searching for the boys on all their chains to look for a place to bury her sisters. Cecily’s father uses her to kill the boys of two houses and is taken to the third house, which belongs to the protagonist. The protagonist reveals that she was being used in a political scheme to kill any possible successors for the throne. Cecily tries to fix the brunt of her actions by killing both her father and the protagonist’s father and ends up being killed herself. Cecily’s only condition for the protagonist was that she will be buried along with her sisters and taken care of. Cecily’s affection towards her sisters, her sense of responsibility for her actions are all attributed features of human characteristics.

CONCLUSION

The characteristic of Anthropomorphism in Holly Black’s tales manages to explore the supernatural realm of dark fairy tales and modern fantasy as well as brilliantly exposes their human facets tying them down to this realm. She successfully molds the supernatural world with the human world while remembering not to blur the lines of distinction between the two. Black’s ability to weave magic and surprise in all her stories conveyed with the help of this literary device enunciates her skill at writing.

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