

Introduction

In 2000, the Nobel Prize-winning chemist Paul J. Crutzen and marine-science specialist Eugene Stoermer coined the term “Anthropocene” based on the assumption that the global impacts of human activities during the last 300 years are so significant and far-reaching in scale that they lead to a new geological epoch. The Anthropocene is adopted to signify the epoch subsequent to the Holocene in which human actions are shaping the planet so profoundly that they are now acting as a geological force. In this era, human activity is the dominant influence on the environment, and all lives on earth. This is the age we are currently living in, though debates about precisely when it began continue to rage. The term has not as yet officially accepted within the field of geology; however as a frame for understanding a period of geological time marked by the significant impact of human activity on the planet, the Anthropocene has “extraordinary potential”, and it is a “unique term simultaneously oriented to the past, present and future” (Human Animal viii). As Morten Tønnessen, Kristin Armstrong Oma argued, “no matter what one thinks about the Anthropocene, the notion radically changes how we look at nature, and mankind” (viii).

Since it was coined, the notion of the Anthropocene has been growing in influence in the fields of social science and environment studies. It poses challenging questions to literary and cultural studies.

The Anthropocene is a “multidimensional predicament that needs to be navigated through by the deployment of new ways of thinking” (qtd. in Mathur 5).

In the Anthropocene, all the species on the planet are confronted with the possibility of extinction. The animals that we take for granted today might become miracles for our future generations who would never have the chance to see. We should reconsider the human-animal relationship in the Anthropocene since one of the most defining characteristics of the Anthropocene is the loss of species diversity or even species extinction. Just as Mathur said, “Human-animal relationships the world over are being profoundly shaped and changed by the ecological breakdown.” (5)

In the Anthropocene the nature/culture dichotomy is increasingly blurred, and the division of the subject and of human agency since the Enlightenment should be reconsidered. As Latour contended, the Anthropocene not only unsettles the nature/culture divide but also makes clearer the connections and deep entanglement between humans and nonhumans (qtd. in Mathur 15). The Anthropocene heralds a convergence of enthusiasm and enquiry to a remarkable “new avalanche of human reflection, observation, data, and activism” and this confluence is engaged in numerous “collaborative avenues of thought, feeling, and endeavor that encompass philosophy, comparative ethology, animal liberation ideologies and commensurate activism” (Tobias, Morrison 1), etc. The new epoch calls for a new

literature and a new mode of storytelling. And the stories about animals is of great importance for us to have deep understanding of human-animal relationship. Donna Haraway said, “It matters what matters we use to think other matters with; it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with; it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts, what ties tie ties; it matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories. Stories matter for the Earth.” (qtd. in Malone et al. 213) Haraway implies that the stories that we choose to write to tie our stories together is helpful for use to know our worlds. Similarly, Hamilton argues that “[i]ndeed, the stories that the elites of industrial modernity have told themselves—about nature as external and purposeless, about the world as resource, about human exemptionalism, about progress and freedom as an escape from nature’s determinations and limits, about technology as quasi-autonomous prime mover—have served as the cultural origins and conditions of the Anthropocene. In the same way the kind of stories we tell ourselves today about the Anthropocene can shape the kind of geohistorical future we will inhabit.” (Hamilton et al. 17)

The Anthropocene challenges certain distinctions that were formerly deemed fundamental to the modern West: human exceptionalism and the ontological break between the human being as subject of entitlement and the object of nature. In the same way, the Anthropocene challenges the modern definition of freedom and progress, long conceived in opposition to nature.

The Anthropocene is rooted from the Western culture, and

“[d]ominant western culture is androcentric, eurocentric and ethnocentric, as well as anthropocentric” (Plumwood 101). The Anthropocene, “shaped by a culture of predation, is characterised by fragmentation, absent referents and violent domination” and calls for respect, peace, equality. It is closely related to patriarchy since predation is “largely male-centred” (Kirjner 146). Therefore, to reflect on the Anthropocene is systematic.

It is high time that we reconsidered and reflected western culture. In the epoch of the Anthropocene, it is a must that we should subvert the traditional notion of the human-animal division by means of analyzing how animals are represented, depicted culturally. It is no exaggeration to say that animals can manifest and mirror the power relationship between people from different groups, classes, communities, show the relationship between non-human beings and humans.

The recent decades have witnessed the rise of animal studies, and animal images are correspondingly becoming a non-negligible part of literary studies. Animal studies address how humans interact with, use, and view nonhuman animals. Kristin Dombek argues that animal studies are about “how we relate to animals, how we represent and imagine animals, and how we use animals to construct the idea of what the human is” (Delliquanti, 27 March 2010). Generally speaking, animal images in literary works can be divided into two groups: animals functioning as instruments and animals as themselves. Animals in the first group are either molded as symbols from the point of

rhetoric or depicted to manifest main characters in literary works. As for the second group, the instinctual value of animals is taken seriously and they are examined in their ontological meaning. To put it another way, attention is attached to the fates of animals and actual human-animal relations. These two groups are not clearly separated, and animals in some works can be classified into the two groups simultaneously. The analysis of animal imagery contributes significantly to comprehending the author's ecological thought, and cultural reflection.

In the context of the Anthropocene, animal studies gains new momentum. The mainstream study of the Anthropocene has focused upon climate change, but “the role and place of animals has so far received relatively little attention in the Anthropocene discourse” and it is “definitively deserving of further academic studies” (Tønnessen, Oma ix). This book will have a comprehensive study of how the animals are endowed with agency, both culturally and ecologically, and explore the underlying mechanism that forges the complicated relations reflected from the human-animal relations. The first step is that we should know how non-human species, especially animals are imagined and depicted in western literature. This book aims at have an in-depth study of animal images by choosing typical cats, bears, elephants and whales which represent both domesticated and wild animals in English culture and literature.