

***Humans and Animals in the Graphic Novel The Call of the Wild from the
Perspective of Ecocriticism Reading***

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Abstract

Nowadays, environmental crisis is one of the most important problems. Many people are affected by this crisis. Graphic novels can be used as a powerful tool to raise environmental awareness and urge people to protect the natural world. This paper aims to analyze the relationship between humans and animals in the graphic novel version of *The Call of the Wild* and examine the artistic techniques employed to show the relationship. The graphic novel is analyzed through frameworks of ecocriticism and artistic techniques. The study shows that humans' treatments have major impacts on animals' behavior. In addition, the study demonstrates that the graphic novel uses texts, illustrations, and colors as the keys to present the relationship between humans and animals. This graphic novel can encourage readers to have appreciation and concerns for animals.

Keywords: Graphic Novel, Children Literature, Humans and Animals, Ecocriticism, Artistic Techniques, the Call of the Wild

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Introduction

Nowadays, our world is globalized by new technology that humans have created to improve their lives. These creations are created to facilitate humans' needs. Actually, humans invent new things without any consideration of future consequences. Our planet is suffering from environmental crisis, which affects people, societies, and ecosystems. Humans have to find a way to raise environmental awareness and protect nature. Environmental awareness will be more effective when it is taught to children. According to the United Nations (2015), thirty percent of the world's population is under the age of eighteen, so the key to long-term success is to educate children and young adults about environmental problems.

There are many methods that can be used to gain the children's attention about the environmental awareness. Graphic novels can be used as an effective tool for children's environmental awareness. Graphic novels are a form of storytelling by combining texts and illustrations. This kind of novels easily draws children's attention and provides a better understanding. Today, there are many graphic novels concerning environmental awareness available for readers.

Many of the classic literature are modified into graphic novels because of their popularity and classic themes. These classic graphic novels somehow gain children's attention, and motivate children to read and use their imagination in order to become aware of environmental issues. *The Call of the Wild* is one of the famous classic stories created into graphic novel versions that can raise the environmental awareness.

Ecocriticism

Ecocriticism is a study about literature and environment. The study explores the relationship between humans and nature in literature and humans' attitudes toward environmental problems presented throughout literature (Habeeb & Habeeb, 2012). Moreover, Glotfelty (1996) stated that an ecocriticism share essential idea that humans are connected to the world because humans are affecting the world, and humans are affected by the world. Humans and nature have an important relation in our life especially with animals. Humans and animals depend on and rely on each other to live.

The connection between humans and animals is "one of the most basic human traits" (Buell, Heise, & Thornber, 2011, p. 430). The fundamental bonds create the harmonious relationships between humans and animals. According to Pythagoras, Greek philosopher, desires to create a universal law not to kill a living creatures (as cited in Spencer, 1995). Similarly, Plutarch, Greek philosopher, believes that animals have value like humans (Appleby & Hughes, 1997). Peter Singer (1974) wrote an article about the equal rights for animals and non-anthropocentric. Moreover, Tom Regan (1987) believes that humans should not experiment on animals and use animal for labor works. It can be conclude that humans and animals can live together in the society.

Most of the disharmonious relationships occur because humans apart themselves from animal. According to Plato and Aristotle, Greek philosopher, in the 'Scale of Nature,'

humans and animals have a separate status by using their reasonableness and intelligence as the basic of the scale (as cited in Serpell, 1986). This believes begin since the early Christianity On the 'Scale of Nature,' the pyramid is a hierarchical structure, which God and humans are at the top of the pyramid and animals are on the lower pyramid. Even though some of the Christians are kind to animals but some humans during that period considered animal as their subordinate (as cited in Joanne Vining, 2003). From this theory, some humans separated themselves from animals because they believed that animals were subordinate and had limited intelligence. Also, animals do not have reason comparing to humans. The hierarchical system between humans and animals portray that humans are above and higher than animals. Moreover, Descartes, Greek philosopher, emphasizes that animals are like robots and they cannot reason or feel pain (as cited in Cottingham, 1978). Some humans are willing to do anything they want to satisfy their desire to animals without any hesitation. This type of humans can also be called anthropocentric because humans consider themselves as the central and most important entity of the universe (Burchett, 2014). Therefore, human relies heavily on the exploitation of animals to serve human needs without considering the consequence that affect animals.

Graphic Novel

Graphic novels are combination of text and artistic image, and it come in a variety of lengths, formats, and genres (Bealer, 2014). Fletcher, Benjamin & Copeland (2005) define graphic novels as "book-length narratives told using a combination of words and sequential art, often presented in comic book style" (p. 37). Graphic novels are complete books that combine texts and illustrations together in novel length, presented in sequential art or comics-strips format. Illustrations and colors are the significant element of graphic novel.

According to Fang (1996), illustrations consist of four elements. First, illustrations can create the setting of the story including time, place, and mood. Second, illustrations can extend the meaning and develop plot of the story. Illustrations can explain meaning that the author does not mention in the text. Third, illustrations can define and develop characters, and help to present actions and reactions of each characters in the story. Fourth, illustration can support, reinforce, extend, and amplify the text and help readers fully interpret and understand the story.

Colors can present symbols, carry out moods, and foreshadow an important event in the graphic novels. According to Pilgrim and Trotti (2012), colored pictures in graphic novels often show specific mood changes in the storyline. The changes in color and facial close-ups of characters in the story are signs that important event will happen. Also, the color can shift from "light and funny to dark and sad," which depend on the mood of the story (Dallacqua, 2012, p. 375). For instance, the color will be brighter when the character arrives to a newer and safer place. Moreover, white and pink colors are used to present "dream or a flashback" (Pilgrim & Trotti, 2012, p. 38). On the other hand, the use of black and white colors can present sad and sorrow scene of the story (Schwarz, 2007). In short, graphic novel combine texts, illustrations and colors together to assist readers for a better understanding and more accessible to the story.

The Call of the Wild

The Call of the Wild is a story about a dog named Buck living in California. In the beginning, he is living a good life until he is kidnapped and sold to a dog trader. His life completely changes when he becomes a sled dog. He must learn to survive in a cold environment. Along his journey, he is handed to a different kind of owners. Buck, the protagonist, is one of the dogs that experienced harmonious and disharmonious relationship between humans and animals.

In the graphic novel, Buck experienced several harmonious relationships with humans. First, Buck lives with the Miller's family, which is his first owner. Buck is an ordinary happy housedog and lives in a loving family as the narrator describes in the opening scene, "Buck lives in a big house in the sun-kissed Santa Clara Valley" (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 6). The writer described the surrounding and climate as "sun-kissed" valley which explains the feeling of the warm weather and Buck's warmth and comfortable feeling toward the family. According to Shipman (2010), the fundamental relationship between humans and animals is influenced by the good care of the owner. Bradshaw (2012) also emphasizes that most dogs feel the good connection with their owner through their well living. These statements match with Buck and the Miller's family because the writer portrays the strong bond between them. In the case of Buck, he feels that he is one of the family's member and they make connections between each other as he recalls the event, "He plunged into the swimming tank or went hunting with the Judge's sons" (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 6). Buck lay down on his owner feet; this scene emphasizes the closeness between them. Also, that Buck swims with the family and even involved in the family activity such as hunting. Moreover, he is mostly involved in the family's activity where the narrator described, "He even escorted the Judge's daughters on long twilight rambles" (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 6). From this statement, Buck receives trust from the family and is considered as one of the family members because the family treats him well and values his goodness. Therefore, the good treatment Buck gains from this family makes him feel secure and trust humans.

Buck experiences another pleasant relationship with Francois and Perrault, his third owner, through the working relationship. Buck has to learn to adapt to the new environment and cold climate. Buck quickly learns that they are fair owners because they use dogs to work, but they are not cruel to dogs. They treat their dogs with respect and bring out the best part of the dog's ability to work. They teach and train their dogs to become a sled dog. According to Darwinism's theory of survival of the fittest, human beings as well as animals have natural instincts, which passed down through the genetic code (Okasha 2013). This theory also emphasizes that "social conditions, heredity, and environment" have an important impact on shaping one's character (Zhang, 2010, p. 279). This can apply to Buck's situation, where he learns to fight and start using his animal instinct for survival. In order to survive, Buck has to learn how to fight and adapt to the cold environment. He also learns that only the smartest and the strongest can survive in this world. Francois and Perrault are not a gentle type of owner, but they never mistreat Buck and other sled dogs. Whenever Buck learns something new, Francois compliments him, "That Buck, he pulled like hell. He is a quick learner" (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 17), and he added, "What did I tell you, Perrault? That Buck is a quick learner" (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 19). The

last day that Buck sees them, he feels sad: “And that was the last of Francois and Perrault. Like other men, they too passed out of Buck’s life for good” (38). Although the relationship between Buck, Francois and Perrault is a working relationship, but Francois and Perrault treat Buck with good care and they create a companionship together.

Buck and John Thornton, his fifth owner, have a royal and truthful relationship. Thornton saves Buck’s life without hesitation and they rapidly create an intimate human-animal bond. Thornton became his new master and “he [Buck] experienced love from the first time—genuine passionate love” (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 51), and “This man had saved his life. He was also the ideal master because Thornton took good care of him. He looked after his dogs as if they were his children” (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 52). Thornton sincerely cares and loves him. “Buck knew no greater joy than his rough embrace. Buck expressed his love by lightly biting Thornton’s arm” (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 52). From this statement, it shows that the relationship between Buck and Thornton is harmonious. According to Walsh (2009), dogs are considered as loyal companions to the owner (463). Buck becomes faithful and devoted to Thornton as recalls “For a long time after his rescue, Buck did not let Thornton out of his sight. He was afraid he would pass out of his life as his earlier masters had” (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 52). After all, Buck feels deeply connected to Thornton and creates a strong companionship with him.

However, Buck also experienced several disharmonious relationships with humans in this graphic novel. First of all, Buck experiences harsh relationship with Manuel, the gardener’s helpers in the Miller’s family, and a group of dognappers. Manuel and a group of dognappers are Buck’s second owners. Manuel steals Buck from the Miller’s family, and he sells Buck in order to pay off his gambling debts. Manuel kidnapped Buck and sold Buck to a group of dognapper. Manuel ties Buck with a tight rope around his neck, so Buck cannot run away. According to Francione (2010), some people believe that animals are things that have no moral value and exist completely outside the moral and legal community. Manuel is an example of this type of people. He only sees Buck as an object and is careless about Buck’s feeling. Manuel and the dognappers maltreat Buck as describes, “Any trouble for him, just twist this rope for complete obedience” (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 7). The word “complete obedience” shows that Manuel has absolute control over Buck by abusing him. This previous statement also portrays the cruelty and selfishness of Manuel and the dognappers. Buck allows Manuel to put a rope around his neck at first because he trusts Manuel as he describes, “Buck accepted the rope with quiet dignity” (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 7). Buck did not realize that he has been betrayed by Manuel because he had learned to “trust the men he knew.” (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 8). Miller’s family teaches him to trust everyone in the family, and he believes that Manuel is one of the family members. But when the ends of the rope were placed in the stranger’s hands, Buck feels betrayed by Manuel as the narrator explains, “Never in all his life had Buck been so wickedly treated, and never had been so angry” (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 8). From the maltreatment that Buck receives, he starts not to trust humans.

Buck experienced heartless and savage relationship with Hal, Charles, and Mercedes, the fourth owner, in the story. They brought Buck to join the other sled dogs and they

have a mission to go to Canada for a gold rush. They did not prepare for the long and difficult journey ahead. They are cruel and force dogs carry overload sled as recall, "The dogs strained against the breast bands, unable to move the sled" (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 44). According to Bujok (2013), some humans use violence against animals and attempt to oppress, mistreat, and threaten animals to pursue their domination. This statement can be applied to Buck situation because Buck and other dogs cannot move the heavy sled, the three unkind masters force the dogs by whipping them as the narrator describes, "You've got to whip them to get anything out of them" (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 44) and "Hal's whip fell upon the dogs again" (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 45). The three owners use violence to make them do as they desire. Moreover, Buck and other dogs suffer the coldness, hunger, and starvation. Buck has limited food as the narrator explains, "But one sled could not carry food for fourteen dogs. It was inevitable that they would fall short of dog food" (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 46). Even though the dogs did not have enough food to eat, the most thing that they want more at the moment is to rest as recall, "However, it was not food that Buck and the huskies needed, but rest" (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 46). From this condition, the sled dogs are weak and exhausted. Hal did not care and shot the six dogs with heartless feeling as the narrator describes, "It was impossible to make the dogs travel faster. The first to go was Dub. Hal shot him with a big Colt revolver. In the end, the six new dogs also died" (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 47). After six dogs died, Buck must use his animal instinct in order to survive in this harsh environment. Hal, Charles, and Mercedes maltreat every dog in the team. The three owners are inconsiderate about the dogs and they use power over the dogs to achieve what they want. The ill treatments that occur to Buck causes him not to trust human. The relationship between Buck and Hal, Charles, and Mercedes represent a clear illustration of the disharmonious relationship between humans and dogs in the graphic novel.

In the end, Buck chooses to return to nature. After Thornton's death, Buck feels lost and hopeless. He does not want to live with humans anymore as state, "Buck's last tie of bond with human was broken. Man and the calling of the man no longer bound him" (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 65). Buck is no longer attached to humans. Buck does not want companionship with humans anymore. Every year, Buck returns to the place where Thornton died to mourn for his dead master. Even though in the past his life experiences harmonious relationship with humans, he still chooses to live in the wild with a pack of the wolf. In the past, he used to trust humans because humans take good care of him and he builds a strong connection with humans. Humans' good treatment affect the good behavior that Buck show. On the other hand, he also experiences the maltreatment. From all of the bad experience Buck have been through, he becomes eager to have freedom by himself. He feels that nature is where he belongs and nature does not destroy or betray him. His final decision to live in nature reflects that he do not want to associate with humans because of the bad experience he has with humans. He does not trust humans anymore because humans abuse and mistreat him. Therefore, humans' bad treatments had effects on his decision to separate himself from humans and live in the wild.

In order to raise the relationship between humans and animals effectively, artistic techniques are used. First, illustration can establish the setting of the story. The opening scene introduces the house of the Miller's family which is surrounded by

trees and natural environment (Figure 1). The trees and natural surrounding represents the fertility of the family. The house portrays a place of family to live together and a safe environment, which give the readers a better understanding of Buck's pleasant life with the family. In addition, colors help create symbols and a deeper meaning to the words, which make the content more powerful for readers to understand. In Figure 1, the Miller's family house enclosed by green trees and natural environment symbolizes the happiness and peacefulness. This picture gives a relaxing and refreshing feeling to the readers. The illustrator tries to highlight the natural atmosphere by using light green and blue to create the image of the sky (Phunkitchar, 2014). Combining the blue and green color in this illustration portrays the harmonious relationship between Buck and the Miller's family. The connection between Buck and the Miller's family encourage readers to have a positive feeling. In short, the setting and colors assist readers to understand the peaceful relationship between humans and animals and interpret the story better.



Figure 1: Buck and the Miller's Family (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 6)

Second, illustrations can expand the story's meaning. Illustrations can explain meaning that the author does not mention in the text. The author never mention that Buck and Francois have a good relationship but the author uses picture to portray the deep bond between them. The illustrator portrays the companionship through the image that Francois touches and hugs Buck (Figure 2). This is an emotional scene between Francois and Buck. The gentle gesture between Francois and Buck give readers a better understanding of their relationship. Readers can feel the love and care that Francois gives to Buck through the illustration. Also, words help to emphasize the relationship: "And that was the last of Francois and Perrault. Like other men, they too passed out of Buck's life for good" (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 38). This statement can describe that Buck feels strongly connected to Francois and does not want him to leave. Moreover, colors can transform the written content and illustrations into a more powerful instrument. According to Ferber (1999), winter or snow in literature can refer to losing someone you love, pain, loneliness, or an end. In Figure 2, the surrounding of white snow that covers on the ground symbolizes an ending relationship between Francois and Buck. Also, the white snow foreshadow that Buck will feel loneliness after Francois leave. Therefore, the illustration and color in this picture can support readers in understanding the deep human-animal bonding between Francois and Buck.



Figure 2: Buck and Francois (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 38)

The illustration in Figure 3 is another clear example of extending the meaning of the story. The facial expression of Thornton along with the smile on his face while holding Buck's head shows the deep connection between Buck and Thornton. The illustrations and words highlight the marvelous relationship between Thornton and Buck through the description, "This man had saved his life. He was also the ideal master" (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 52). The description explains the important event that Thornton saves Buck's life from drowning and torturing from Buck's previous owner. The author also uses the word 'ideal master' to imply the great treatment that Buck experience while living with Thornton. Buck appreciates the excellent care and the tenderness that Thornton gives to him as he describes, "He looked after his dogs as if they were his children" (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 52). Thornton truly loves Buck and treats him well. Thornton never separate Buck as an animal but he treats Buck as one of his kid. In Figure 3, the white sunbeam shines between Buck and Thornton's face represents the pureness, freshness, and goodness. According to Chijiwa (1987), brown color stands for a strong need for safety, belonging to a family, loyal and faithful, sincere and reliable. In this scene, the brown color in Buck's face helps to underline that he is faithful and honest to Thornton. In sum, words, illustrations, and colors join together to create the meaning: the deep companionship between Buck and Thornton.



Figure 3: Buck and Thornton (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 52)

Third, illustrations can present strong actions and reactions of each characters in the story. According to Fang (1996), illustrations can help characterization within the texts by showing characters' actions and reactions to one another or make character more flesh out. This can be seen in Figure 4. Buck's facial expression and action emphasize that he is angry. The illustrations in this scene underline the cruelty Buck has to face in the story. Buck's fang in the illustration shows the reaction and madness that Buck is having because someone whom he trust has betrayed him. In addition, the illustrator painted the picture with dark blue sky. According to Pilinis (2002), colors can create the feeling of happiness and joyfulness, on the other hand it can form anger. The illustrators express their ideas through their use of colors. The dark blue can form strong faithful relationships, on the other hand it respresent being betrayed (Chijiiwa, 1987). Similarly, in Figure 4, dark blue color in the sky shows the readers about Buck's feeling of betrayal.



Figure 4: Buck and Manuel (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 8)

In figure 5, the illustration is another obvious sample showing the characters' action and reactions. The scene shows that Buck is extremely angry with the Yeehats for killing his beloved master Thornton. The illustrator draws Buck's face showing his fang to express the rage that he has over the Yeehats. Readers can see fear on the Yeehats' faces. Buck did not hesitate to fight the Yeehats and Buck did not afraid of them at all. Buck is willing to do anything for his beloved master. Additionally, the illustrator uses different shades of red evoke the readers' emotion (Figure 5). According to Chijiiwa (1987), red is an extremely leading color, which can have an exciting and stimulating effect on the readers. Red color can express both positive and negative emotions. Also, red is a strong color and often use as signs for warning or caution. Moreover, red color can also trigger the readers' attention. In this scene, red color is used as a powerful tool to highlight negative emotion. It not only highlights the anger but also highlights fire, blood, danger and aggression. The text also underlines the anger as describe, "He plunged about, tearing, slashing, and destroying in such quick motion that none of their arrows hit him" (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 64). This fighting scene, violent action and red color, can arouses readers' emotion and make readers understand Buck's anger.



Figure 5: Buck fight with the Yeehats (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 64)

Fourth, illustration can support, reinforce, and amplify the text and help readers fully understand the story. This can be shown clearly in Figure 6. After Buck lost his beloved master, Buck becomes sad and lonely. The narrator describe “All day Buck brooded by the pool or roamed restlessly above the camp” (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 65). From this statement, it highlight that Buck thinks about Thornton all the time even though Thornton is dead. Also, the moon in the background of the picture help to reinforce Buck’s sad feeling. According to Ferber (1999) the full moon symbolizes deep feelings and soul. The illustrator uses full moon to describe the strong love Buck has for Thornton. Moreover, the illustrator painted different shades of blue and black color of the sky and trees. The different shades of dark blue and black are employed in order to create the sorrowful mood of the situation. Buck is deeply attached to Thornton because he was Buck’s closest master. Thornton takes good care of Buck and they live together as a family. After Thornton’s death, Buck feel extremely sad and hopeless. Buck’s facial expression and text as the author describe, “He followed Thornton’s scent down to the edge of a deep pool. All day Buck brooded by the pool or roamed restlessly above the camp. He knew John Thornton was dead” (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 65). To represent Buck’s feeling, colors in this scene grow darker to underpin Buck’s emotional feeling.



Figure 6: Buck feels sad and lonely (Wagner & Nagar, 2010, p. 65)

Conclusion

The graphic novel version of *The Call of the Wild* raises the environmental awareness especially associated with animals. This graphic novel inspires readers to consider about the moral responsibilities towards animals. In this graphic novel, Buck lives harmoniously with humans that surrounded by good environment. Buck receives love and care from the good owners, which easily creates intimate animals-humans bond. On the other hand, Buck faces disharmonious relationship with cruel owners. Some of the owners mistreat Buck and other dogs, and see the animal as an object. The bad relationships occur because humans believe that they can use power over animals and do not appreciate their value. More importantly, words, illustrations, and colors join together to raise the awareness. All of the techniques are employed to enhance deeper meaning in the story. Therefore, the study shows that humans' treatments have major impacts on animals' behavior and also motivates them to care for animals.

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