

Animal Kinship in Jane Smiley's Fiction

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Abstract

In Pulitzer Prize winner Jane Smiley's fiction, there is often a depiction of animal kinship focusing on the emotional bonds between nonhumans, especially the mother-child relationship. Her portrayal of animal community challenges traditional Cartesian and anthropocentric views, emphasizing that animals have deep emotional connections, love, and grief. Through an exploration of animal kinship in Smiley's fiction *Good Will*, *Horse Heaven*, and *The Georges and the Jewels*, this paper investigates the profound implications of maternal love, attachment, and sacrifice in horses. As to *Good Will*, the tragic bond between Sparkle and her mother reveals the emotional depth of equines, as the mare experiences immense sufferings over her foal's accidental death. In *Horse Heaven*, the mare-foal relationships, including the typical example of Donut and her newborn filly, exhibit their various interactive ways and underscore the importance of maternal care in animals' growth. As for *The Georges and the Jewels*, the portrayal of Pearl and her foal Jack praises a mother's ultimate self-sacrifice, highlighting the universal nature of maternal love across species. Based on animal ethics supported by scholars like Val Plumwood, Cynthia Willett, and Marc Bekoff, the study digs out from Smiley's works an ethical understanding of animals' emotional world from animal kinship, calling for recognition of their subjectivity. Through her writings, Smiley unfolds the richness of animal lives, warning people against anthropocentric biases and urging them to recognize the emotional and relational complexity of nonhumans.

Key words: Animal kinship; Animal community; Maternal love; Emotional bonds

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Pulitzer Prize winner Jane Smiley's fiction, great importance is attached to the depiction of animal community to show readers how nonhuman animals interact with one another. The word "community" here not only refers to "an assemblage of interacting populations occupying a given area", but also "friendly association; fellowship" ("Community," def., 2025). Accordingly, animal community indicates not only a physical community where animals live together, but also a spiritual bond or a sense of community that is felt by animals.

Animal community lays stress on the interactions between animals. This paper will study animal community mainly from animal kinship. From communication and interactions between animals, their attachment, needs, desires, affections, emotions, thoughts, talents, and intelligence are exposed. It is like what Smiley says in her book *A Year at the Races*, "horses in herds are very demonstrative of both affection and dislike toward one another—they clearly differentiate between individuals, they clearly have best friends, dear ones, more distant acquaintances, and enemies. They can also remember" (Smiley, 2004, p.66).

Animal kinship is one of the important animal relationships depicted in Smiley's fiction. The animal kinship in Smiley's fiction is mainly about mother-child

relationship. The bond between a mother and her child can be found in their rich intimate interactions with each other in various ways, while the significance of a mother's company to her offspring is underscored. In addition, animals' maternal love is highly praised. Based on animal ethics supported by Val Plumwood, Cynthia Willett, and Marc Bekoff, the paper will study animal kinship as a kind of animal community in Smiley's three works: *Good Will*, *Horse Heaven*, and *The Georges and the Jewels*, and find out the relevant implications from it.

2. SPARKLE AND HER MOM IN *GOOD WILL*

Sparkle is a one-year-old filly raised by the Millers. In Tom Miller's eyes, Sparkle is a beautiful and smart baby pony. Since the birth of Sparkle, she has been accompanied by her mother. Some descriptions show the close bond between the mother and her foal. For instance, the foal and the mare are almost inseparable whatever they do, and there is a tacit harmony between the two:

The mare throws her head up as I lead her out the door, and flares her nostrils at the fresh scents. The foal trots forward a few steps, then halts, trembling, her furry ears flicking back and forth. She paws the crusty snow and snorts a ruffling, miniature snort. The mare neighs to her, and that seems to set her off. She races toward the pasture fence, bucking and kicking...The mare snorts and farts and shivers all the skin along her back, ambles into the snowy pasture. The foal sails in after, her brief tail pointing stiffly upward, like the tail of a deer. (Smiley, 1990, p.172)

Wherever the mare is, the foal follows, and vice versa. The mare guides her foal in the outdoor activities and leads her to explore the pasture. Even when Tom leads the foal around the periphery of the pasture for a while, her mom will follow. "After twenty circuits of the pasture, Tom is ready to tie Sparkle to the fence and groom her. The mare follows them and nuzzles the foal two or three times, then resumes foraging in the thinning snow cover for the grass underneath" (Smiley, 1990, p.175). Sparkle's mom pays close attention to and shows affection to her anytime possible. An image of an attentive and caring mom can be found from the mare.

The harmonious picture of mom and foal is suddenly broken by an accident. One night, the foal and the mare escape from the barn of which the latch is not tight enough. They progress to the big pond near the barn probably for a drink. The water of the pond comes from a little stream. Though most of the pond is still frozen in February, the ice by the intake is melted, resulting from the increase of temperature for two days. The water is flowing freely and fast out of the stream. What the foal and the mare do after their arrival at the pond that night lacks in any human witness. However, the Millers can guess what happens from the scene. The next day before dawn, Tom's father Bob discovers their absence from the

barn and follows the hoof-prints to the pond. He finally finds that:

The pony mare is hidden in the woods on the far side of the pond. She is simply standing in the uncommunicative way equines have, looking at the pond. I turn and survey the pond once, twice. The foal is nowhere...I check the pony. Her legs are wet and cold. She has been in the pond. I look at the pond again; then I see the strangest thing that I have ever seen—the dark form of the foal, stretched out and shadowy under the ice, unmoving. I step toward it. The ice is thick enough to hold me, but clear enough to make out the foal's white markings. I stand over it. The mare looks at me steadily, and I see in her gaze not indifference, but animal endurance. (Smiley, 1990, pp.183-184)

The tragic thing takes place that night. After an accidental fall into the icy water resulting from the break of the ice, the foal gets drowned and frozen. The mare doesn't know how to save her baby, so all she can do is standing there and watching her frozen baby the whole night. The mother endures a long wait for a miracle and hopes that her child can come back to life. She wallows in grief too much to notice the coldness and wetness of her legs. When Bob wants to lead the mare away from her position in the woods, she is balky and reluctant to leave. That morning after the mare is led back to the barn, she "is whinnying and kicking in her stall" (Smiley, 1990, pp.184-185).

Obviously, the mare is heartbroken for the loss of her baby. Smiley shows the reader a pony mom's grief over the death of her child. The sudden change from the loving mother-offspring interactions into the painful mother-child eternal separation forms one of the most tragic parts of the novella. The mare's sadness sheds light on animals' emotional world. Marc Bekoff points out that "Animal emotions are usually easily recognizable. Many animals display profound grief at the loss or absence of a close friend or loved one" (Bekoff, 2002, p.16). In addition, the mother-child bond fully manifests animals' love. Just as Bob sees the endurance rather than indifference in the mare's gaze, instead of being cold machines, animals are full of emotions and affections. The bond between the mare and the foal is a bond between two subjects with rich emotions and love.

3. MOTHERS AND THEIR FOALS IN *HORSE HEAVEN*

In *Horse Heaven*, rich intimate interactions between the mares and their foals are vividly depicted, and the significance of a mother's company to her child is reiterated.

At the opening of the novel, a mother's importance to a filly's healthy growth is illustrated. The gray filly named Froney's Sis isn't sure who she is. Her mother dies of colic when she is only one month old. Hence she is put in with a mini-horse for companionship. Froney's Sis is too old to go to a nurse mare, so she is fed milk from a bucket.

There is a comparison between the mini-horse and a mare to show the difference in their ways of accompanying the filly, as well as to stress the significance of a mare's company to her child.

He didn't nuzzle her much, and he wasn't possessed of that throaty, loving nicker that is a specialty of mares. Most of all, his interest in her wasn't the compelling element of his existence, as a mare's interest in her foal would be. A mare would be pushy and interfering and attentive. A mare would call out and trot over; a mare's body language would be telling the filly what to think and how to behave twenty-four hours a day. (Smiley, 2000, p.6)

From the above comparison, on the one hand, it's not hard to find out the aspects and ways in which a mare helps her filly's growth, and how much a filly means to her mom, as well. Maternal love, nurturing, attention, teaching, and company are indispensable elements for a foal's healthy growth, which is the same with a mother's importance for human babies. In the nonfiction book *A Year at the Races*, Smiley mentions— "The doctors propose that, for mammals, consistent maternal nurturing is essential for the healthy growth of the infant brain, which is only partially developed at birth. A badly mothered infant actually grows up with damaged connections in the brain, preventing it from developing both good reproductive relationships and good life skills" (Smiley, 2004, pp.26-27). In effect, maternal love is not limited to humans only, but exists in other species. Different species share the same need for maternal caring and love. On the other hand, the mother-child interaction is carried out through multimodal ways, involving kinaesthetic, tactile, olfactory, visual, and auditory sensations.

Another case in *Horse Heaven* is about an old mare Donut and her new-born foal. During the delivery, there lurks a big danger for both the mother and the child due to the wrong coming position of the foal. It is a dystocia. With the help of the breeder Krista and her neighbor Margaret, after Donut's agonizing rolling, standing, walking, modulating, stretching, and pushing, the foal is finally pulled out safely. Donut is dazed and exhausted. When Donut comes back to life, the most loving picture comes up:

The filly, though, was wide awake and looking around. Two or three times, she turned her gaze to Krista's face and regarded her for a few seconds. She also turned to look at the bulk of the mare, who at last lifted her head to look at the filly...Donut nickered—not loudly, but firmly. The filly looked at her and nickered back. Krista had the eerie sense that the foal knew more than the mare did. After another moment, Donut understood, got to her feet, stepped through the straw, put her head down to the filly and nosed her, then started licking her face. The filly turned her face up to her mother, and the mare ran her tongue here and there with increasing conviction and pleasure. (Smiley, 2000, pp.173-174)

The interactions between Donut and her foal reveal the multiplicity of communicative ways within species.

Cynthia Willett notes that "Affect exchange makes critical use of variations in sensory modes (vocal, facial expression, visual image, gestural, even olfactory) to communicate a significant range of corresponding meanings" (Willett, 2014, p.91). This multimodal-pattern communication fits mother-child interactions of various species, including humans. The ways of expressing meanings and emotions to one another are by no means restricted by oral language.

What's more, Donut's suffering from childbirth reminds us of the maternal greatness shared by different species. Her tender touch and loving lick of her foal tells us the intense love she feels for her child. The intimate interactions between Donut and her new-born foal show a strong mother-child attachment. Motherhood of nonhuman animals is also respectable. As for motherhood, there is an explanation from Farley:

Fillies were often quite affectionate; mares at the studfarm lived in a world of connection, a hormone haze of sisterhood and motherhood. If you want to know how to be a good mother ... go out to the farm and stand among the mares and their foals and try to *get* it. A bad mother was nervous but neglectful. A good mother was attentive and calm. It was as simple as that, he had said. (Smiley, 2000, p.383)

For Farley, there is some universal truth about motherhood. No matter what species we belong to, we have the same needs of being cared for and paid close attention to by our mother. Accordingly, a good mother is the one who can satisfy her child's needs in a calm way. Smiley's portrayal of equine mother-child relationships reveals that humans and nonhumans share the same mother-child bond, and the same motherhood. Moreover, humans can learn some truth from animals by observing their mother-child interactions.

4. JACK AND HIS MOTHER PEARL IN *THE GEORGES AND THE JEWELS*

In *The Georges and the Jewels*, there is a touching description about the last interactions between one-month-old Jack and his dying mother Pearl. One night Pearl accidentally suffers from colic and keeps on rolling around with the pain, which at last causes a serious intestinal twist. The next morning when Abby and her mother find Pearl lying stretched out on her side in the grass with her foal Jack standing by her rump, it is too late to save Pearl. All Abby and her mom can do is to comfort Pearl by stroking her belly and head. There aren't many moments left for Pearl and Jack. The foal feels uneasy and restless. He keeps pushing at his mom and pawing the ground. All the time he is making noise— little whinnies and nickers and grunts. Around that time, the most touching picture comes up:

She rolled up on her breast and got her front legs under her and then made herself stand up. She gave a huge grunt, almost a

groan. When she was up, she spread her legs to each side and kind of staggered in place...The mare stood there with her head down and her ears flopped, and the foal went to his accustomed spot and started to nurse. But it only lasted a minute. She couldn't do it. She began to collapse, and the foal jumped out of the way. When she hit the ground, her eyes were already closed, and I think she died a minute or two later. By that time I was crying so hard I couldn't see, and Mom was crying, too. We got down next to her and petted her and petted her. The foal kept whinnying. (Smiley, 2009, p.64)

As for the foal Jack, facing his mother's death, he is expressing his sadness and despair through his whinnies. With respect to the mother Pearl, during the last moments of her life, she still tries to fulfil her duty of being a good mom. She knows her foal's hunger and tries her best to breastfeed her baby. Even if it will use up all her left energy, she doesn't have any hesitance to devote all she has to her child. Even if it causes great pain, she would rather sacrifice herself than leave her child suffering. Even at the end of her life, Pearl is thinking of her baby instead of herself. If it is not maternal love, what is it? It is not only about a maternal instinct, but also about a great mother's unselfish devotion and the power of love.

In fact, what happens to Pearl and Jack is by no means an imaginary story. Smiley once witnessed the same thing happening to a great mother and her foal in real life. The mare's name is Biosymmetree and her colt is named Jackie. In the nonfiction book *A Year at the Races*, Smiley recollects the mom's great deed that took place in 1996: "She had managed to stand for a few minutes, long enough for him to get a few mouthfuls, and then she had staggered to her knees and collapsed. Thoroughbred people are always talking about heart. That's what I call heart" (Smiley, 2004, p.39). There is no wonder that this touching story is written into the novel. Smiley shows her respect for a mother's love in nonhuman species and sings highly of animal mothers' love. That's what she calls "heart". In literature creation, such a way of portraying animals is often misunderstood as anthropomorphism only. For the Cartesians and the anthropocentrism upholders, animals own no thoughts, emotions, or love. Val Plumwood criticizes that "anthropocentric culture and science conceive nature and animals as inferiors stereotyped as alike in their lack of reason, mind and consciousness" (Plumwood, 2005,

p.108). Through such a vivid revelation of mother-child kinship in her works, Smiley beats the anthropocentric bias against animals.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the depiction of equine mother-child interactions in Smiley's fiction challenges anthropocentric views and emphasizes that emotional depth, affection, and kinship are not exclusive to humans. No matter whether it is about the tacit agreement and harmony between the equine mother and her child, or the heartbroken separation of the mother and child, or the strong mother-child attachment, or the greatness of motherhood, Smiley confirms animal subjectivity by exhibiting the rich emotional world of animals in kinship interactions. Through her writings, Smiley urges a reconsideration of the boundaries of sentience and emotional experience, calling for an ethical perspective on animal life. All in all, Smiley's fiction not only celebrates animal kinship but also reminds the reader to engage in a more ethical and compassionate relationship with the nonhuman world.

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