



Animal Slaughter in Jane Smiley’s Fiction

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Abstract

In the American Pulitzer winner Jane Smiley’s fiction, there is often a concern about animals. One of the animal issues in her fiction is animal slaughter. In her novel *A Thousand Acres* and her novella *Good Will*, the killing of nonhuman animals is no longer taken for granted, but contains reflections on humans’ cruelty and instrumentalist attitude to nonhuman animals. On top of cruelty to animals, animal slaughter also does harm to humans. The cruel slaughter of animals is very likely to aggravate the cruelty to humans. Besides, the exposure to animal slaughter intensifies violent tendencies. Smiley objects to instrumentalist views of animals and asks for reverence for them.

Key words: Animal slaughter; Instrumentalist; Cruelty

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INTRODUCTION

Animal slaughter, or the killing of nonhuman animals, occurs in some of Jane Smiley’s fiction. Behind animal slaughter usually hides the long-existing instrumentalist view of one of animals’ values as food. The animals are no longer remembered as hen, hog, cow, and sheep, but become dishes of chicken, pork, beef, and mutton on the table. In Carol J. Adams’ opinion, animals become

absent referents in this way— “Through butchering, animals become absent referents. Animals in name and body are made absent as animals for meat to exist. ... Without animals there would be no meat eating, yet they are absent from the act of eating meat because they have been transformed into food” (Adams, 2010, p.66). Val Plumwood agrees with Adams on this issue. For Plumwood, “such a commodified concept of meat involves a strong, fetishistic form of instrumental reductionism, in which the other is defined in narrow ways that identify them with what is only a part of their being, the part that is of use to us as flesh, and do not recognise that all living beings are much more than that” (Plumwood, 2005, p.157).

Nevertheless, most people have no idea about where the meat comes from. Those slaughterhouses are located in remote areas and hardly accessible. “Geographically, slaughterhouses are cloistered. We do not see or hear what transpires there” (Adams, 2010, p.76). Without seeing the bloody scenes and smelling the suffocating air, people rarely feel uncomfortable when eating meat. However, in some of Smiley’s fiction, such bloody animal-killing scenes are described vividly on purpose to implicate the cruelty hidden behind, arousing our awareness of man’s instrumentalist attitude towards animals, and of the influence of animal slaughter on humans as well. Despite her opposition to animal cruelty derived from animal slaughter, Smiley doesn’t propagate vegetarianism in her works. She does touch on this issue occasionally here and there. For instance, the important character Jess Clark in *A Thousand Acres* is a vegetarian who advocates organic farming, so are his lover Rose and her two daughters. Anyway, Smiley’s foremost goal of describing such bloody animal slaughter scenes is to expose humans’ cruelty to animals, underneath which lie humans’ habitual instrumentalist views of nonhuman animals. The following are some typical cruel scenes of animal slaughter in Smiley’s fiction:

1. LARRY'S AND HAROLD'S SLAUGHTER OF ANIMALS IN *A THOUSAND ACRES*

In *A Thousand Acres*, two wealthy farmers in Zebulon County, Larry Cook and Harold Clark, are not only brutal towards animals but also tyrannical and rude to their children and wives. Though Smiley doesn't directly point out the correspondence between their cruelty towards animals and their cruelty towards humans, the similar merciless attitudes to both humans and animals are by no means coincidental, but echo each other to testify their crimes. Larry's and Harold's cruel deeds to animals are recalled and condemned by Ginny and her younger sister Rose:

"What's the difference? You know what Jess told me? Once Harold was driving the cornpicker, when Jess was a boy, and there was a fawn lying in the corn, and Harold drove right over it rather than leave the row standing, or turn, or even just stop and chase it away."

"Maybe he didn't see it."

"After he drove over it, he didn't stop to kill it, either. He just let it die."

"Oh, Rose." The tears burst from my eyes.

"Daddy killed animals in the fields every year. Just because they were rabbits and birds instead of fawns-I don't know." (Smiley, 2008, pp.234-235)

When the Cook sisters were still children, their mother died pathetically. Since then their father Larry had been sexually abusing them respectively for quite a long time. In another family, Jess' father Harold showed contempt and opposition to Jess' blueprint for ecological farming. He even humiliated the Cook sisters in a public gathering once. It's a tragedy for both the two families that the mothers Mrs. Cook and Mrs. Clark were maltreated by their husbands and died too early, leaving the children to the tyrannical fathers. Ginny and Rose's recollection and condemnation of the fathers' cruel deeds to animals display a contrast between the two women and the two men in their views on other species. For Ginny and Rose, animals' lives deserve respect. If it's unnecessary, kill no animals. The bottom line for them is to lessen animals' pain as much as possible if death is unavoidable. By contrast, in Larry's and Harold's eyes, animals, regardless of being wild or domestic, have no moral rights at all and are instruments at humans' disposal. To kill animals is quite a common part of their farm life, and they have no concern about whether the animals will suffer or not. That's why Harold drives right over the fawn and leaves it there dying slowly with great pain, and that's why Larry kills animals in the fields at will. What's more, their cruelty to animals corresponds with their mercilessness to humans. In some sense, the cruelty to animals intensifies the cruelty to human beings, and vice versa. As for this connection, American professor Frank R. Ascione argues:

First of all, although it is true that animal abuse may not cause violence to people, it may make it more likely. For example, abusing animals may desensitize the perpetrator to suffering

in general and reduce his or her capacity to empathize with a potential victim, human or animal. In a climate of pervasive terror, the roots of human empathy may wither and die, or fail to develop at all. Second, the same underlying factors, such as domestic violence or exposure to violent models, may give rise to abuse of both animals and humans. (Ascione, 1999, p.50)

Obviously, Harold's and Larry's instrumentalist views of animals blind themselves to animals' sufferings, and hence desensitize themselves to suffering in general. There's no wonder that they treat their wives and children in such tyrannical and coarse ways. Smiley warns us that humans' cruelty to the other species is very likely to increase the cruelty to humans themselves, and vice versa. Besides Harold and Larry in *A Thousand Acres*, there are some other male characters who also hold an instrumentalist attitude toward animals. The following section is just a case in point.

2. BOB'S SLAUGHTER OF ANIMALS IN *GOOD WILL*

In Smiley's novella *Good Will*, Bob Miller, against his wife's will, insists on moving the family into a valley to escape from capitalist society and consumerism. Different from the ambitious farmer Larry Cook in *A Thousand Acres* who keeps on expanding his acreage by all means, the Millers seemingly lead a life of minimalism and self-sufficiency. Nevertheless, the ostensibly pastoral peace is broken after one animal slaughter by Bob, and the situation deteriorates after his second animal slaughter. The successive consequences testify the cruelty of animal slaughter, and question the logic hidden in bloody animal slaughter: animals are viewed as existences for humans to consume and use, just like instruments.

2.1 The Slaughter of Sheep

Sheep slaughter is an annual routine for Bob to conduct, and a lesson for Bob's son Tom to take. Since his birth, Tom, who is nearly eight now, has been exposed to eight sheep massacres at his father's insistence, and cognizant for at least four times. Bob notices Tom's resistance to this event and feels angry at him for his taking the sheep's point of view. The following dialogue between the father and the son fully exhibits Tom's reluctance to face and take part in the coming bloody sheep massacre and Bob's defence for sheep slaughter. Meanwhile it discloses a dilemma lots of people are stuck in.

I shout, "Well, you are going to help! That's the lesson here. If you eat something, you have to help produce it. Do you want to be a vegetarian?"

He shakes his head. "Do you like lamb stew? Or trout? Or sausage?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"Well?"

"I don't want to."

"Want to what?"

"Watch you kill them."

“Why not?”
“I don’t want to.”
“Mr. John Doe, a guy who buys a steak at a grocery store. Don’t know where it came from, don’t know what it means to eat it. You want to be like that?”
“No, Daddy.”
“We took good care of those lambs. They ate good grass and had plenty of fresh water, and now they won’t know what hit them. This is a good life for a lamb, Tommy, all the way to the end and past it.”
“I don’t want to.”
I stand up from the table. “Come on outside.” (Smiley, 1990, p.117)

As a father, Bob tries to teach his son a lesson by showing him where the food comes from and later involving him in the procedure, whereas distains to face Tom’s inner feeling, and refuses to respect the boy’s choice. With regard to animal slaughter, Bob finds many a reason for doing that, such as “I feel less than no compunction about slaughtering the lambs, because in fact they are no longer cunning little lambs, they are now stupid, homely sheep. A sheepskin, a leg of mutton, these are things of beauty to me. A flock of sheep trampling each other in a panic is not” (Smiley, 1990, p.116). In Bob’s eyes, sheep are stupid and ugly, whereas the products made of them are beautiful. Sheep themselves have nothing for humans to appreciate until they are used in various ways for humans. It can’t be more common for animals to be raised and slaughtered, for the purpose of raising them is for their skin and meat. For him, as long as animals are fed well when alive, there is nothing wrong to kill them for flesh, fur and skin. Sheep are commodities or financial instruments instead of individualities with their own minds and emotions. Despite Tom’s reluctance, Bob forces his son to take part in the sheep slaughter anyway. The sheep slaughter is narrated by Bob as this:

We shear the lambs first, getting a few pounds of lovely soft wool, and then I shoot them in the head and cut their throats to drain out the blood. We do a good job—quick, competent, without arousing much fear in the lambs. ...Tommy has been so obedient—holding the lambs during the shearing, helping me hoist them by the feet and catch the blood after they are slaughtered—that I have forgotten, or dismissed, the morning’s disagreement. (Smiley, 1990, pp.117-118)

Bob tries to cover up the bloody side of the butchery by emphasizing that the killing action is quick and competent without arousing much fear in the lambs. However, one shot in the head cannot make sure that lambs lose consciousness completely while their throat is cut. It’s very likely that lambs still suffer during the so called “quick” killing. Smiley doesn’t describe bloody details about lamb-killing directly, but she reveals how cruel the slaying is through its negative impact on Tom, the child who is compelled to participate in sheep slaughter. The aftermath comes up four days later—Tom deliberately twists and breaks apart his classmate Annabel’s dolls after entering the cloakroom at school. Realizing the cause and effect, Bob tries to talk with his son this time, but Tom

denies the connection between the sheep slaughter and his intentional destruction of the dolls. Being questioned for several times by his parents, Tom finally answers: “She’s a nigger” (Smiley, 1990, p.119).

As a newcomer and the only black in Tom’s class, Annabel from a wealthy family owns a lot of things that Tom longs for. The main factors contributing to Tom’s violent offense to scapegoat-like Annabel are the following: firstly, he overhears the other teachers and senior students calling her “nigger” secretly and feels the prejudice against the black girl; secondly, their skin color and family background vary a lot; thirdly, he is irritated for not having what the girl possesses because of his father’s obstinate objections; fourthly, it is a way of releasing his longtime oppression by his father; fifthly, the resort to violence is what first comes into his mind after almost eight years of being exposed to animal slaughter as well as being threatened and beaten by his tyrannical father. As a matter of fact, the fifth is the most important internal factor, just as what Jorgensen and Maloney maintain:

Children and animals in a household have special relationships and they are profoundly affected by the abuse they experience and witness...Children are at risk of repeating the abuse they experienced. Retrospective research studies generally support the anecdotal claims that many criminals who have been violent toward people share a common history of brutal parental punishment and cruelty to animals. (Jorgensen and Maloney, 1999, p.145)

Unfortunately, Bob doesn’t realize the consequence and insists on showing his son the bloody scenes and even asking him to take part in the process, which leads to Tom’s change from a victim to a victimizer. Through Tom’s violence towards the black girl, Smiley hints that humans’ violence to animals is very likely to have a negative influence on humans themselves. Any perception of animals merely as instruments serving mankind will prove to be dangerously wrong.

2.2 The Slaughter of a Turkey

Another shocking animal slaughter in the story takes place around Thanksgiving Day. In actuality, Bob hunts turkey every year and knows wild turkeys’ behavior and habit well. Compared with Larry and Harold in *A Thousand Acres*, Bob does think more for the animals. For example, an idea of giving up meat-eating even flashes through his mind once when he is aiming at a turkey. Nonetheless, he cannot give up the human feeling of superiority over animals. Bob is extremely confident in his capability of keeping everything under control, and enjoys his power over animals, just like his retrospection of the past turkey hunting when he is riveted and enthralled by his power over the turkey. Nevertheless, he can’t always keep everything under control. For instance, this time the turkeys he discovers are one tom, three hens, and two young birds. Bob targets the nearest hen, but in the end he shoots dead the tom by mistake. It is very likely that Bob’s

original intention is environmental, but there is no denying that to guarantee turkeys' reproduction is also possibly a consideration for his future hunting. However, the most unexpected result is that he misses the target and kills the only tom in the turkey family. For all humans' intention to minimize the harm to nature during their animal hunting, their actions will still pose potential threats to animals. What's more, the turkey hunting for Bob is more a way of satisfying his appetite for power than for meat. Once the hunting comes to an end, Bob loses all his previous excitement and interest, and even falls into "a heart-sinking moment like exhaustion" (Smiley, 1990, p.137). In the whole hunting process, turkeys act as an instrument for the satisfaction of man's desire for power and conquest over the others.

Moreover, the shooting of the only tom doesn't only have destructive effect on the left turkeys, but also on Bob's son. When Bob comes home with that biggest turkey he has ever shot, he and Liz spread the turkey on newspapers on the front porch for their son to discover after school. The couple hide in the kitchen while Tom gets off the school bus and walks toward the dead body alone. One horrible picture is that the spread turkey is described to be "so large that it is nearly human in some way" (Ibid). Though Bob's analogy between the turkey and a human is mainly about their similar size, there's undoubtedly an implication from Smiley that nonhuman animals and humans are similar to one another in some sense. Such an analogy intensifies the bloodiness of turkey-killing as well as the cruelty of the exposure of turkey carcass to a child. Tom's reaction to the turkey carcass is the best proof.

Tom's first response in front of the unexpected dead body is "startled" and "afraid". The sudden sight of the human-size turkey corpse dumbfounds Tom, while at the same time, arouses his sympathy and confusion:

He walks all the way around it, fingers some of the wing feathers, pokes the beak, picks up one of the feet. ...He gazes for a long time, much longer than I would have thought possible for him. ...Now, though, he seems to be drinking this turkey in. No toe-tapping, head-scratching, sniffing. Nothing. ...And then he steps forward and strokes the turkey's breast with the back of his hand, gently, three times. (Smiley, 1990, pp.137-138)

Even though there's no detailed description of Tom's inner thought when he catches and strokes the carcass, Tom's abnormally long-time attention to the dead turkey reveals his shock and compassion. Furthermore, what Tom does at school shortly after the event uncovers the consequence. A few days later Lydia Harris visits the Millers to notify the parents that Tom takes the scissors out of the teacher's desk and cuts up her daughter Annabel's beautiful new coat secretly. Obviously the destruction escalates into a more violent one than last time. The impact of this time's turkey slaughter is not less severe than last time's sheep slaughter. Actually the escalation of Tom's violence discloses the brutality of

animal slaughter and its damaging influence on children.

On the other hand, Bob's attitude towards animals is relatively complicated and contradictory, just like what he comments in terms of animals' death:

It is hard for a farmer not to take a practical attitude toward animal death... I used to trade for a hog and a beef steer every year, name them, raise them, slaughter them, eat them. I fish for trout all season, and I hunt, too. But the fact is, I've let the last few years go by without bothering to get a beef calf or a shoat or a venison. I don't keep a milk cow anymore, and I haven't shot a duck or a Canada goose since Tommy was a baby. We don't often slaughter a chicken. It is not a moral position, but it is a disinclination to undergo too many animal deaths...I think it is good to experience one's power over the animal, to treat it well, house it properly, give it a good life and a painless death, to feel with one's own hands the bloody cost of one's appetites, and to know viscerally what one is like—one is like an animal, one lives in nature, where death is. (Smiley, 1990, p.185)

Bob does have some awareness of reducing animal deaths, but at the same time he enjoys his power over animals. Though he does admit that a man is like an animal living in nature where death is, Bob definitely refers to the fact that no matter humans or animals, all live in nature and will die someday. In Bob's eyes, animals are hardly equal to humans. The relationship between him and animals is by no means communicative. Instead, Bob endows himself with God-like authority to dominate animals' lives, just like his patriarchal dominance over his wife and son. Bob can hardly see animals' mental world just as he refuses to hear his son's voice. In fact, Bob's attitude to animals is, like what he admits, practical, or instrumental, rather than dialogical. His self-centeredness and tyranny prevent him from hearing and respecting others. In consequence, his son is exposed to and involved in bloody animal slaughter year after year, which sharpens the father-son conflicts and exerts destructive effect on Tom.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, any instrumentalist conception of animals will harden human-animal relationship and lead to random killings of animals, whereas the bloody slaughter of animals has a negative impact on humans too. The cruelty to animals often increases the cruelty to humans, and the exposure to animal slaughter aggravates tendencies to violence. In short, Smiley calls for an anti-instrumentalism attitude towards nonhumans and emphasizes reverence for life.

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