

Animal Allies: Understanding Animal Sentience Through Anthropomorphism in Patricia McCormick's *Sergeant Reckless*

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Abstract

The study explores the idea of anthropomorphism, which asserts that there is a natural bond between humans and animals and highlighting their phenomenal similarities. The graphic novel *Sergeant Reckless* by Patricia McCormick, illustrated by Iacapo Bruno, provides a starting point for examining the anthropomorphic aspects that the animal protagonist embodies. Examining the interactions between humans and the animal character, this study illuminates the mutual benefits that each brings to the other. In the 'forgotten war' *Sergeant Reckless* played a crucial role and supported the US Marine Corps. By examining the storyline of the graphic novel, the research gathers proof supporting the claim that the horse, *Sergeant Reckless*, was sentient—that is, it had a deep awareness and consciousness. This information is meticulously tracked down and carefully examined in the study, adding to the larger conversation about animals' cognitive capacities. Essentially, the research aims to disentangle the complex dynamics of anthropomorphism as portrayed in *Sergeant Reckless*, promoting a more nuanced understanding of the shared phenomena between humans and animals.

Keywords: *Graphic narratives, anthropomorphism, sentience, korean war, phylogenetic continuity.*

Objective

The purpose of this study is to thoroughly examine how anthropomorphism and sentience come together in the context of Patricia McCormick's graphic novel *Sergeant Reckless*. The study aims to clarify the complex aspects of anthropomorphism in the story by means of a thorough analysis, illuminating the ways in which animals exhibit signs of sentience similar in nature to those of humans. However, the paper analyses only the text rather than the graphic elements.

Hypothesis

Similar to human behaviour, certain animals exhibit signs of sentience. This study examines behaviours and physiological reactions of the animal protagonist in the novel as an attempt to provide empirical evidence.

Research Methodology

In order to conduct this study using the qualitative research method, the research process required a conscious acknowledgement of subjectivity and a commitment to reflexivity. Understanding that qualitative research is by its very nature subjective, the researchers kept a close eye on their own viewpoints, prejudices, and possible influences on the work. This methodological strength of the reflexive approach allowed for transparency and improved the reliability of the results by offering a nuanced understanding of how the researchers' positionality could affect the study's conclusions. Incorporating subjectivity and reflexivity enhanced the research's depth while also strengthening the qualitative research's validity and credibility.

Sergeant Reckless: The true story of the little horse who became a hero

The award-winning American author Patricia McCormick created a masterpiece titled *Sergeant Reckless*: The

True Story of the Little Horse Who Became a Hero in collaboration with artist Iacopo Bruno. It's a graphic novel that highlights the important life of a mare and has beautiful illustrations. It is a true story about a dishevelled mare who rose through the ranks to become a prestigious military staff and recipient of recognition. The story's backdrop attempts to revisit the so-called 'forgotten war', which is actually the Korean War, or the conflict between the United States Marine Corps and Korea (Smith, *U.S. Marines in the Korean War* 2007). The Korean war took place in 1950 as a result of crossing the line that divided North Korea (guarded by the Communist) and South Korea (guarded by Americans). It lasted for about 3 years, costing five million lives of both military and civilians. It is to be noted that no treaty of peace was signed and till date the Korean borders are divided (McCormick & Bruno, *Sergeant reckless: The true story of the little horse who became a hero* 2020).

During the war, not everyone in the First Division was humans. The U.S Marines happened to find a messy little mare and decided to train it and keep with them as a packhorse, that carry heavy loads. The mare was originally owned by a Korean kid named Kim and with the onset of war, he had to be separated from the mare. Lt. Eric Pedersen, who belonged to the marines, had an idea that the little mare could be trained and used to carry heavy loads of ammunition for the First Division troop. It is recorded that the mare has undergone fifty one unguided solo trips back and forth for a distance of thirty five miles carrying nine thousand pounds of ammunition. She was named Reckless because of the 'rec-less' rifle she carried with her during the war (Smith, *U.S. Marines in the Korean War* 2007). After the war, she was taken to the U.S and honoured with 'sergeant' rank and received two 'purple hearts' and a 'Good Conduct medal' for her bravery (Lightfoot, *Here are 13 military animals that outrank you* 2020).

Anthropomorphism

The word Anthropomorphism is said to be derived from the Greek words 'anthropos' meaning *human* and 'morphe' meaning *form* (*Anthropomorphism* 2023). According to Lorraine Daston and Gregg Mitman, the term anthropomorphism, denotes the idea that animals and humans are fundamentally similar and is typically used to criticise morally and intellectually. But, the term originally denoted the practice of attributing human form to gods, which is prohibited as blasphemous by a number of religions. Even though animals are being humanised instead of gods, there is still a remnant of the religious taboo attached to secular, contemporary anthropomorphism (Daston & Mitman, *THINKING New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism WITH ANIMALS*).

It should come as no surprise that the terms personification and anthropomorphism are misinterpreted by many. Personification is the process of imputing human traits to an animal, whereas anthropomorphism is the imposition of human tasks on an animal. In other words, personification is represented by the statement 'the horse was brave like a human', and anthropomorphism is represented by the statement 'the brave horse was trained to rebel against the enemy'. It is now understood that personification is comparing the abstract qualities of people, while anthropomorphism is comparing concrete characteristics or activities that are exclusive to people.

Anthropomorphic elements in Sergeant Reckless

Engaging in wars and fighting battles are characteristics that can only be done by human beings. They make themselves ready to be a part of the same. Lt. Eric Pedersen was wishing for an animal (mule) that can be used to carry heavy loads required for the U.S marines. Carrying loads in war is the task that can be assigned to a human because of the reasoning and logical knowledge they possess. Any small mistake can result in a complete catastrophe. So, relying on animals for such activities could be of great risk. Owing to the onset of the Korean war, a mare happened to be left by its caretaker. The abandoned poor mare came into the sight of Lt. Pedersen and he decided to trust her and gave it a chance. A human can be trusted and trained to perform such activities but, here the Lieutenant considers the mare and decides to recruit her as one among them and orders his soldiers to train the mare just like how a newbie would. The mare was given the 'private' rank, the same rank that a fresh marine would get.

That's when their leader, Lt. Eric Pedersen, had an idea. What if he could get a mule to carry the shells? But all Lt. Pedersen could find was a scrawny sorrel mare with a white blaze and three matching socks. (McCormick & Bruno, *Sergeant reckless: The true story of the little horse who became a hero* 2020)

Training is a word that is very much associated with humans. Human beings undergo training for various activities

that they have to perform or master. They have their own reasons to get trained for. They get benefitted from these training and make themselves capable of doing anything. Pvt. Reckless is treated like a human again and Sgt. Joseph Latham starts to train her. It is known that horses aren't used to sugar cubes like humans do but Latham uses sugar cubes to teach her to safeguard herself by ducking when she is met with incoming fire. He used to tap her legs first and give a sugar cube to eat. Then he gave one more when she knelt down. This is known as positive reinforcement. When a behaviour is followed by the introduction of a pleasurable or desirable stimulus, this is known as positive reinforcement. The behaviour is reinforced by the desirable stimulus, increasing the likelihood that it will recur (Courtney E. Ackerman, *Positive reinforcement in psychology (definition + examples)* 2023). Positive reinforcement is closely related to humans. Humans are rewarded with a salary for their work and this salary encourages them to work continuously. Likewise, the mare was also rewarded with sugar cubes which ultimately made her learn the activity of ducking. "An apple. Or a chocolate candy bar. Or a peanut butter sandwich. Even a can of beans. Whatever it was, Reckless ate it" (McCormick & Bruno, *Sergeant reckless: The true story of the little horse who became a hero* 2020). Pvt. Reckless ate apples, chocolates and even sandwiches with peanut butter spread which are eaten by humans. Instances like these set a platform to trace out anthropomorphic elements with enough validity.

The first thing Pvt. Reckless had to learn was to duck incoming fire. Which meant that her trainer, Sgt. Joseph Latham, had to teach her to kneel down. First he gave her a sugar cube every time he tapped her front leg. Then another one when she knelt down. Before long, the greedy little horse knelt down the moment he tapped her leg. (McCormick & Bruno, *Sergeant reckless: The true story of the little horse who became a hero* 2020)

Preparing for a battle is another characteristic of the human race. They practise the act of putting on armour before a fight which has several benefits that are based on psychological, tactical, and historical factors. Armour is primarily used to protect a wearer from various weapons by lessening the effect of bullets, swords, and arrows. This increases the wearer's chances of surviving a battle. Beyond its practical uses, armour has symbolic significance as a symbol of loyalty, identity, and status. An opponent with heavy armour can have a psychological effect on the combat dynamics by challenging opponents and builds confidence in the wearer. Warriors must be trained and conditioned in armour in order to be able to move and fight effectively even with the weight of protective gear on their backs. Body armour still serves these purposes in contemporary military settings, highlighting how crucial it is for soldiers to be armoured.

Finally, she was fitted with a packsaddle—a
Padded wooden cargo frame with leather straps
Across her chest and legs. Unlike a racing saddle,
It was big, bulky, and constricting. (McCormick & Bruno, *Sergeant reckless: The true story of the little horse who became a hero* 2020)

Pvt. Reckless the mare, was also armoured with a packsaddle which had the provision to carry loads and a wooden cargo frame with leather straps around her chest and legs to provide extra support and strength. She was seen as one among the marines and it is evident when they armoured her up. They could have shown ignorance to the mare by just using her for the purpose until it lived but they did not want to let the mare as such and gave utmost care as they would do to a living human. Pvt. Munroe Coleman made the compassionate and caring decision to treat the animal rather than ignoring her and only using her for their own selfish purposes. A commitment to the mare's well-being beyond her immediate utility and an acknowledgement of her sentience are reflected in the decision to treat her with the highest care, much like one would treat a living human. This moral position shows a greater degree of moral consciousness since it recognizes the intrinsic worth of the mare's life and the significance of showing compassion for all living things. This incident of protecting and treating animals equal to humans serves as an epitome of anthropomorphism.

One day, the enemy troops started approaching the marines. Immediately, Pvt. Monroe Coleman went into battle mode. He saddled up Reckless and climbed the hill to deliver the ammunition. When the cannon fired, it made a huge sound that frightened her and she jumped high along with the heavy loads in her back. As mentioned earlier, everyone was treating Reckless as one among them. Pvt. Coleman attempted to provide support and encouragement to the frightened mare. He saw the mare as a human girl who got frightened of the thundering blow of the cannon and slowly started stroking

her neck and making her calm down. A touching instance of empathy and connection between Coleman and Reckless is seen. He shows a profound emotional understanding and an effort to relate to the mare's fear by personifying the horse as a human girl. It is more common for a human to get emotional support from their fellow human but in this case a human is substituting an animal to a human and provides emotional support in making it feel fine with the battle area. It's a moving example of the kind of empathy that should exist between people and animals that recognizes the emotional connections and vulnerability that all living things have in common.

“Easy, girl”, Coleman said, stroking her mane.

BOOM!

The cannon roared again. She jumped, but not so high this time.

BOOM!

This time, Reckless just snorted. By the next time the gun went off, Reckless was

busy eating a helmet liner she'd found in the grass. (McCormick & Bruno, *Sergeant reckless: The true story of the little horse who became a hero* 2020)

Pvt. Reckless served in numerous battles but the most dangerous one was the Battle of Outpost Vegas. While the marine base was resting in the night, the shells and hot flares of fire fell into the base. The base returned to normal when the chaos settled after minutes. The marines found Reckless trembling inside her stable. When she was offered food, she refused it for the first time. Sentience is the ability of oneself to experience feelings. Because of the nature of human cognition, it is possible to value long-term objectives and tolerate temporary hardships in order to achieve them. However, there is no empirical or conceptual evidence that suggests animals are capable of evaluating the situation and acting accordingly in the future (Rollin, *Animal Pain: What It is and Why It Matters* 2011). By analysing Pvt. Reckless's behaviour of refusing food after the outbreak of fire in the camp can be considered as evidence to prove animals also exhibit the quality of being sentient like humans. Pvt. Reckless might have got disturbed in the heart feeling that it could be the end of her life or might have felt bad for her fellow soldiers who were the victims of the attack.

An additional example to support the point would be a brief video that is still accessible on Instagram. In the video, visitors attempt to snap a photo of themselves with a horse. The horse was hurting some of the tourists and kept refusing to be photographed. But, the horse behaved exactly as anyone would have toward a newborn when a visitor with autism approached it. The woman was even allowed by the horse to stroke and pat its mane (makkal_nanban_jsk_gopi, *Instagram* 2023). Also horses are being used as healers under a therapy called 'Equine Therapy' where the affected individual irrespective of physical, emotional or even mental is treated (Times of India, *Equine therapy- "horses as healers"* 2023). People with cognitive deficits including autism, PTSD, anxiety, depression, and addictions are frequently helped by equine therapy. This helps us to understand that whether it is an animal or a human, traces of sentience will be deeply rooted.

But the minute she was loaded with her pack,
Reckless got to work.

At the base of the path, she took a deep
Breath, pricked her ears forward, and charged
the hill. (McCormick & Bruno, *Sergeant reckless: The true story of the little horse who became a hero* 2020)

While Pvt. Reckless was on her way to the top of the hill carrying the ammunition to the marines, a piece of metal from the exploded bomb hit her left eye and she started to bleed. Her beautiful white spot in the face seemed like a bright red ruby. Another piece of metal struck her left flank as well. She was given first aid with iodine solution and some water just as how an injured human soldier would get from their fellow human soldiers. She resumed her work and at the end of the day she completed fifty one trips of thirty five miles without anyone to lead. Determination and perseverance are two qualities that are often associated with humans because of the rational and logical efforts they put in to accomplish their desires and dreams. People who are determined and persistent put in a lot of time and effort; they have a steady work ethic and are flexible enough to change paths when necessary. Pvt. Reckless was no way lesser than the humans. She did much more than a human would do. Pvt. Reckless exhibited the qualities that a true sincere human militant would possess.

Then a piece of shrapnel hit Reckless over her left eye. Blood trickled down onto her white blaze, but she kept going. Later, another piece of shrapnel hit her left flank. After a dab of iodine and a drink of water, she was back to work. (McCormick & Bruno, *Sergeant reckless: The true story of the little horse who became a hero* 2020)

Once done with the negotiations, the battle came to an end without the signing of any peace treaties. For the immense bravery and determination of Pvt. Reckless and also for her selfless work in the battle field, the U.S Marines decided to promote her with the award of 'sergeant rank' and henceforth she was called Sgt. Reckless. It was hard for the entire marine division to bid farewell to their animal friend. With heavy hearts each of them said good-bye to the mare. They even contested a campaign to bring her to the United States and eventually succeeded. She was shipped to the U.S along with a beautiful scarlet-and-gold blanket marked with the stripes of a sergeant. Sgt. Reckless received two Purple Hearts and retired with complete military honours just like a human militant. She also got a 'Good Conduct Medal' and served as an epitome for the motto of the Marine Corps which read *Semper Fidelis* meaning 'Ever faithful'. She mothered three foals named Fearless, Dauntless, and Chesty. Today, the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Quantico, Virginia, has erected a life-size statue in honour of the incredibly brave Sgt. Reckless as a mark of respect and gratitude.

Summation

Patricia McCormick must be appreciated for producing such a masterpiece that revolved around the true story of a poor little mare which later turned out to be a Sergeant. Both in the graphic novel and in real life, the traits of the animal protagonist serve to blur and even completely erase the dividing line that is traditionally made between humans and other living things. Anthropocentric perspectives that elevate humans above other animals are questioned by the anthropomorphic approach to the story, which gives the animal protagonist sophisticated feelings, ideas, and experiences. This portrayal emphasises the shared capacities for joy, fear, and connection, suggesting an appreciation of the rich inner lives of non-human living organisms. The blurring of this dividing line encourages readers to reevaluate the similarities that all living things have in common and fosters a more inclusive point of view. The paper serves as a representative of the Darwinian concept of Phylogenetic Continuity, which states that both humans and the non-human living organisms are similar and share much of the natural phenomena (Daston & Mitman, *THINKING New Perspectives on Anthropomorphism WITH ANIMALS*).

Human beings consider themselves superior and often fail to empathise with the emotions of other non-human living organisms. The pain that humans undergo is always paid attention to and that is only because of the rational understanding they possess. This lack of empathy is demonstrated by a number of behaviours, including environmental degradation that disregards the emotional health of ecosystems and the exploitation of animals for profit. Just because animals lack the tendency to live a rational life it is unfair to pay no respect for their emotions and pain. The novel teaches an invaluable lesson that animals are no way lesser than human beings.

A paradigm shift is necessary to overcome this lack of empathy, promoting a better comprehension of the emotional lives of non-human entities and acknowledging the intrinsic value of every living thing within the complex web of life. Just like the U.S Marine Corps treated a mare and made it one among them, let the humans accept non-human living beings who are also a part of this universe. They need not be given human tasks or promotions but at least try to give what they deserve. They deserve to be understood, empathised, respected and cherished. This being said, the traces of sentience in animals were limelighted through the lens of anthropomorphism in *Sergeant Reckless*.

Further scope

First, a thorough examination of the graphic narrative's illustrations could offer insightful information about the visual storytelling strategies used, highlighting the mutually beneficial relationship between the visuals and narrative elements. Second, by concentrating on animal trauma within the narrative framework, the field of animal studies gains a deeper understanding of the psychological and emotional effects of war on non-human characters. Third, examining the narrative strategies used to tell war stories can reveal how the graphic novel handles the difficulties of trauma, memory, and conflict. By examining war stories, one can delve deeper into topics like strength and resilience, survival, and the effects of conflict. This can offer a nuanced viewpoint on the connection between literature, history, and visual storytelling. This multidisciplinary approach offers a rich terrain for future research endeavours and promises to deepen our comprehension of the novel. In addition, a historical analysis could reveal the novel's contextual representations and

historical accuracy, which would improve our comprehension of the way the story interacts with particular historical events.

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Co-author consent

This is to inform you that, we, **Dr. Nancy Thambi, Pavithra V and Rajeswari R**, the co-authors of the above manuscript have no objection for due publication of the article in your journal. It is with our consent the publication process has been proceeded.