

Of Crows and Humans: The Affective Economy of Mourning and Grieving

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Abstract

This paper aims to examine the representation of animals in Max Porter's *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (2015), a multi-awarded novel about an academic's struggles on coping with the grief of losing his wife. Previous scholarship on *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* focuses on an anthropocentric approach to grief and melancholia. However, I argue these emotions can be approached through an examination of the Crow, a fantastical talking bird who makes itself known during the funeral, against the human protagonists of the novel. My approach focuses on how the Crow manages to facilitate what Sara Ahmed calls an "affective economy" which aids the human characters to process their emotions. I critically analyze in this paper how the novel blurs the boundary that separates the human and beasts through its representation of animal emotion. I speculate on how the moments of encounter between the crow and humans emphasize the acts of touching and smelling as a mode to cope with melancholia and grief. Lastly, I look at how its hybridization of prose and poetry performatively imitates affective and emotional responses to personal loss.

Keywords

Grief is the Thing with Feathers, Max Porter, Affective Economy, Sara Ahmed, Animal Studies, Ignês Sodré

Introduction

Sigmund Freud introduces in his essay "The Unconscious" the notion of unconscious emotions, where "an affective impulse is perceived but misconstrued, and which becomes attached to another idea" (Freud, 1964, p. 110). What is repressed from consciousness is not the feeling, but the idea to which the feeling was first temporarily linked. Psychoanalysis presents the movements or associations in which "feelings" take us to various levels of signification, such feelings cannot be completely admitted in the present. Sara Ahmed calls this the "rippling effect of emotions" (Ahmed, 2014a, p. 120). Her stance challenges models that theorize emotions either moving from inside out (psychological) or from outside to within (sociological). Instead, she posits that "emotions are not simply something 'I' or 'we' have. Rather, it is through emotions, or how we respond to objects and others, that surfaces or boundaries are made: the 'I' and 'we' are shaped by, and even take the shape of, contact with others. . . Emotions. . . produce the very surfaces and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects" (Ahmed, 2014b, p. 10). They move sideways (along "sticky" associations between signs, figures, and objects) as well as backward (repression leaving its trace in the present—hence "what sticks" is also bound



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up with the “absent presence” of historicity)” (Ahmed, 2014a, p. 120). By situating her theory of emotion as relational, she stands in contrast against theories where emotion is viewed as primarily physical or cognitive. Instead, she argues that “[E]motions involve (re)actions or relations of ‘towardness’ or ‘awayness’ in relation to such objects” (Ahmed, 2014b, p. 8). Ahmed offers an “analysis of affective economies, where feelings do not reside in subjects or objects but are produced as effects of circulation” (Ahmed, 2014b, p. 8). My paper focuses on how the Crow manages to facilitate an “affective economy” which ultimately aids the human characters to process their emotions from negative emotions of grief and anger to acceptance.

This paper is grounded particularly on Sara Ahmed’s examination on “how emotions work to shape the ‘surfaces’ of individual and collective bodies ... by reading texts that circulate in the public domain, which work by aligning subjects with collectives by attributing ‘others’ as the source of our feelings” (1). I use Max Porter’s *Grief is the Thing with Feathers* (2015) to consider how emotions operate to produce and share bodies in action through their orientations towards others. His debut novel was published by Faber. It won the 2016 International Dylan Thomas Prize, the *Sunday Times*/Peter, Fraser + Dunlop Young Writer of the Year award, included in A *Sunday Times* Top 100 Novel of the Twenty-First Century, shortlisted for the *Guardian* First Book Award, and the Goldsmiths Prize. The novel draws heavily from Porter’s obsessions, he reveals that the title is inspired by Emily Dickinson’s “Hope is the thing with feathers” and the character of the Crow is influenced by Ted Hughes’s *Crow: From the Life and Songs of Crow*. I will examine how feelings such as grief and melancholia are converted into hallucinations and how these feelings are circulated through signs, most notably, the Crow, as a sticky “[figure] of grief” (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 8), a creature transformed into a creature that is neither myth nor beast. I critically analyze in this paper how the novel blurs the boundary that separates human and beast through its representation of animal emotion. Central to my argument is Ignês Sodr e’s idea that the uncanny is “the thing with feathers”. She writes that the uncanny disturbingly evokes simultaneously the “primal scene” and the “death scene”. I speculate on how the moments of encounter between the Crow and the humans, generate a mode to cope with melancholia and grief until they can reach acceptance. Lastly, I look at the author’s experimentation in form constructs a poetics of mourning that is meant to evoke the spectral presence of the dead. This hybridization of prose and poetry also performatively imitates affective and emotional responses to personal loss. By decentralizing grief into an animalistic lens, the Crow becomes a device through which the humans can (re)contextualize their personal tragedy by allowing them to simultaneously confront, experience, and interrogate loss until they recover.

The “Affective Economy” and its production of the uncanny experience

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed explores how “emotions can move through the movement or circulation of objects” (2004b, p. 11). She goes on to explain that “[s]uch objects become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension” (2004b, p. 11). Stickiness signifies how certain affects such as pain, hate, and disgust attach themselves to objects such as objects, inversely, people thereby associate these affects with these objects. Additionally, stickiness also points to how the affects objects that got stuck to an object also stick to other objects in turn. She primarily uses the idea of stickiness to help shape the relationship between objects of fear, and their capacity to affect other objects and bodies by “expand[ing] the mobility of some bodies and contain[ing] others” (Ahmed, 2004b, 79). I argue that in the case of *Grief is*

the Thing with Feathers, this results in an affective economy of grief where grief 'could be anyone and anywhere'. To elaborate, the Crow as a representation of the other has affects attached to it, and in turn, this has the capacity to produce other affects related to mourning and loss. I ruminate on how grief triggers Ignês Sodr e's idea of the uncanny experience. This is a schizoid phenomena which involves depersonalisation and de-realisation: disturbances to one's sense of identity (qtd. in Sodr e, 2020, p. 117). Sodr e would specify that this happens with disturbing moments dominated by unexpected and unusually powerful projective identification, when something happens which, for a moment, threatens to become overwhelming and deeply disorienting to the analyst (2020, p. 117). This results in moments where what is "not mine" is experienced as "mine" through a temporary identification of a part of the self with a projected part of the subject's self which, at some level, must be a known/unknown state of mind in the subject as well. I put forth that the uncanny experience functions as a wall between the subject and the full extent of grief, thereby allowing the subject to experience loss at its most primal form. In my reading of *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*, the Crow intrusion in the human's lives is a crossing of the boundary between self and non-self. The Crow, as an animal, is the closest representation for the repressed feelings of the characters in the text.

Sticky animals as creators and distributors of affect

Grief is the Thing with Feathers is a story told in the alternating perspectives of "Dad", "Boys", and "Crow". It begins in the wake of a woman's funeral with her husband "alone in the living room wondering what to do" (Porter, 2015, p. 2). Even after some days have passed since his wife's death, he is still completely desolated by a grief that "felt fourth-dimensional, abstract, faintly familiar" (Porter, 2015, p. 2). The Dad attempts to deal with his anger and feelings of abandonment while also strategizing, albeit poorly, his new role as a solo parent. He describes his feelings as 'hung-empty', which could be read as a combination of the phrase 'hung out to dry' and the word 'empty'. He tries to find a sense of normalcy again for the sake of his children and goes through the motions of life like entertaining visitors who would drop by to pay their respects. Interestingly, he claims to be an expert in navigating through the grievers by saying this:

Being at the epicentre grants a curiously anthropological awareness of everybody else; the overwhelmeds, the affectedly lackadaisicals, the nothing so fars, the overstayers, the new best friends of hers, of mine, of the boys. The people I still have no fucking idea who they were. I felt like Earth in that extraordinary picture of the planet surrounded by a thick belt of space junk. I felt it would be years before the knotted-string dream of other people's performances of woe for my dead wife would thin enough for me to see any black space again, and of course – needless to say – thoughts of this kind made me feel guilty. (Porter, 2015, p. 2)

He acknowledges that being in the focus of the mourners grants him the ability to be aware of everyone else, even only to the extent of one human being conscious of another's existence. Their shared commonality as a species, however, does not help him ease his grief. If anything, the Dad fails to connect with any of the guests, even going as far as labelling his visitors as "post-mortem bitches with kind intentions" (Porter, 2015, p. 2), signifying that underneath the fa ade, he does not see any distinction between the hypocrites and friends. He frustratingly views the guests' attempts to help him through their bereavement as a nuisance. The Boys also wonder in confusion

why despite the catastrophic event that has befallen their family, people were not “going out of their way to help ... to try and settle [them] and save them?” (Porter, 2015, p. 7). Instead of noise and clamor they expected, “people visited and gave [them] stuff” (Porter, 2015, p. 7). Acceptance or any forward movement towards recovery seems like an insurmountable feat. It was at this point that the Crow arrives at the family’s doorstep amid “a rustling of black feathers and “a rich smell of decay, a sweet furry stink of just-beyond-edible food, and moss, and leather, and yeast” (Porter, 2015, p. 3). The animal declares that “[it] won't leave [them] until [they] don't need me any more” (Porter, 2015, p. 3).

The uncanny moment brings to mind the material and the sensory that go along with the (pathological) sense of loss: “the sensorial impact of vision and smell and hearing communicates the terrible invasion of the mind by the simultaneous absolute absence and persecuting presence of the dead loved object. Here, the sudden uncanny experience makes life/art possible” (Sodré, 2014, p. 128). The arrival of the Crow triggers the “primal scene” and the “death scene” where the Dad and the Boys multiply the metaphors of the body in order to postpone the confrontation with their loss, through identifying with the bird, as the family is able to (re)contextualize their loss.

Dad is a Ted Hughes scholar and he was working on “Ted Hughes' Crow on the Couch: A Wild Analysis”, a book inspired by Ted Hughes’s *Crow: From the Life and Songs of Crow* during this. Crow’s timely appearance does not seem surprising when considering how out “[of] Hughes’s collections, Crow was the blackest, bleakest, most ambitious work, written in the wake of Sylvia Plath’s suicide” (Crown, 2015). It is later revealed that apart from being an animal, Crow could be endlessly repurposed to be whatever the family needs.

In other versions I am a doctor or a ghost. Perfect devices: doctors, ghosts and crows. We can do things other characters can’t, like eat sorrow, un-birth secrets and have theatrical battles with language and God. I was friend, excuse, deus ex machina, joke, symptom, figment, spectre, crutch, toy, phantom, gag, analyst and babysitter. (Porter, 2015, p. 10)

The Crow as a sticky animal has the ability to generate and distribute new affects. From the first meetings alone, Dad gratefully succumbs to a restful sleep. Meanwhile, the Boys are encouraged by Crow to compete in drawing effegies of their mother, with the promise that the winner will be awarded a living mother to tuck them in bed. They set to work at once, each one modelling their artworks after the mother they lost, only to have their hopes crushed in the end because Crow could not make good on his promise no matter how much they demanded for it. Despite Crow’s cruel methods, this exercise taught the Boys about the finality of their mother’s death, which sets into into the path of slowly learning to accept their mother’s passing. All the following encounters between Crow, Dad, and the Boys follow the concept of slowly working towards the family processing their emotions and honoring their loss.

Articulations of grief and recovery

The novel is an experimental amalgamation of different forms. Space and time are more like tremors of something akin to Ahmed’s idea of the ‘rippling effect of emotions’. The text is sometimes told in prose or poetry, and other times, the text is so disjointed that the words seem to performatively imitate the affective and emotional responses to personal loss.

Gormin'ere, worrying horrid. Hello elair, krip krap krip krap who's that lazurusting beans of my cut-out? Let me buck flap snutch clat tapa one tapa two, motherless children in my trap, in my apse, in separate stocks for boiling, Enunciate it, rolling and turning it, sadget lips and burning it. Ooh, pressure! Must rehearse, must cuss less. The nobility of nature, haha krah haha krap haha, better not.

(I do this, perform some unbound crow stuff, for him. I think he thinks he's a little bit Stonehenge shamanic, hearing the bird spirit. Fine by me, whatever gets him through.) Megalith! (Porter, 2015, p. 20)

The Crow could symbolize the things humans regress to when they are going through grief. It is black –an omen of sorts and is similar to an animal in the way that it is loud and brutal. It scavenges and pecks at wounds and the dead. It is also savage and wild in the way that things internally become completely dismantled when filled with negative affects such as loss, anger, and grief. The connections between the Crow, Dad, and the Boys, “transcends the linguistic representation of the animal in fiction, establishing the link between the human and the non-human” (Nibakure, 2021, p. 7). Simultaneously, the novel shows the failure of language in articulating the full spectrum of emotion by blurring the boundaries between human and non-human emotion. The result is a text that both muddles and clarifies what the characters are going through. Grief, especially, desolates everything in its path. The objects around the house remind Dad of his wife and in turn, they generate affects that indicate that he misses his wife.

The house becomes a physical encyclopedia of no-longer hers, which shocks and shocks and is the principal difference between our house and a house where illness has worked away. Ill people, in their last day on Earth, do not leave notes stuck to bottles of red wine saying ‘OH NO YOU DON'T COCK-CHEEK’.

She was not busy dying, and there is no detritus of care, she was simply busy living, and then she was gone. (Porter, 2015, p. 15)

Grief is all-encompassing, it has seeped into the house and its occupants.

[...] the whole place was heavy mourning, every surface dead Mum, every crayon, tractor, coat, welly, covered in a film of grief. Down the dead Mum stairs, plinkety plink curled claws whisper, down to Daddy's recently Mum-and-Dad's bedroom. (Porter, 2015, p. 14)

It is no different for the boys as they purposefully leave drawers open and fleck the bathroom mirror with toothpaste when they miss their mother. They view recovery as a form of betrayal where “[m]oving on, as a concept is for stupid people, because any sensible person knows grief is a long-term project. I refuse to rush. The pain that is thrust upon us let no man slow or speed or fix” (Porter, 2015, p. 76). Gradually through the Crow's ‘counselling’, the pain abates, the Boys grow up, and Dad allows himself to love again. When the family no longer needed Crow, he takes his leave and flies away. The animal turns into a symbol of recovery, signifying that although loss endures, grief subsides to free us eventually.

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