

# Animality and Entanglement: The Gothicized “anthropological machine” in Bram Stoker’s short fiction

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## Abstract

This paper closely reads what constitutes the “non-human” vis-à-vis animality in Bram Stoker’s often overlooked short stories, namely *The Squaw* and *The Burial of the Rats*. *The Squaw* is a tale about an American who murders a kitten in cold blood, and in turn, the mother grotesquely avenges her kitten. The anxiety of interspecies relationship is evident in this text, and I argue that this anxiety allows what Giorgio Agamben calls the “anthropological machine” (a system which excludes animals from the zone of livable human life) to operate. The same can be said in *The Burial of the Rats* where the inability to articulate a boundary between animality and humanity becomes the same thing that pervasively haunts the characters in the story. Here, the vermin and the humans become “relationally entangled” as Donna Haraway puts it and I argue that the notion of entanglement here is precisely what makes the “anthropological machine” gothic in the stories. I also suggest that what makes the representations of animals horrific is the possibility that the caesura between man and animal is non-existent.

## Keywords

Animal Studies, Giorgio Agamben, Bram Stoker, Entanglement, Donna Haraway

As with every bottomless gaze, as with the eyes of the other, the gaze called animal offers to my sight the abyssal limit of the human: the inhuman or the ahuman, the ends of man, that is to say the bordercrossing from which vantage man dares to announce himself to himself, thereby calling himself by the name that he believes he gives himself. (Jacques Derrida, “The Animal Therefore I Am (More to Follow)”, p. 382).

## Introduction

In “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow)”, Jacques Derrida (2002) intriguingly starts his essay by exploring if animals can also look at humans and suggests that the non-human can also bear the gaze. Using a cat as an example (Derrida emphasizes that he is referring to a “real cat” here), he explored ways in which we can think about the ontological qualities of what constitutes the human and the non-human, and animal and animality (Derrida, 2002, p. 374). More specifically, Derrida argues that there is an epistemic undercurrent, which is the idea that “the animal is without language”, that established the divide between humans and animals. Derrida



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would elaborate that because it was deemed that animals cannot respond in the way humans do, mankind took it upon itself to “speak of the animal with a single voice.” (Derrida, 2002, p. 400). But because the “real cat” he is referring to looked back at him (in his “moments of nakedness”), Derrida understands that animals are not objects and that there is a particular language that the cat used (2002, p. 381). Donna Haraway follows Derrida and she polemically responds to this by saying that he “failed a simple obligation of companion species; he did not become curious about what the cat might actually be doing, feeling, thinking, or perhaps making available to him in looking back at him that morning” (Haraway, 2008, p. 20). She continues by saying that Derrida instead “[nurtured] an entanglement and a generative interruption called response.” (Haraway, 2008, p. 20). But how does this notion of “entanglement” affix itself to how humans look at animals and vice-versa? Haraway suggests that this can be seen in how we think about the notion of response. She elaborates by saying that “[r]esponse is comprehending that subject-making connection is real” and that “[r]esponse is face-to-face in the contact zone of an entangled relationship” (Haraway, 2008, p. 227). However, in this paper I suggest a generative way of examining how animals can look back by exploring how beings “respond” in older works of fiction. It is in this spirit that I also look back, the same way animals look back at us, by revisiting and retracing how a gothic tradition might inform us on the possibilities of animals in representation.

My paper follows a growing body of work on the presence of animals in gothic fiction. Works such as *Gothic Animals: Uncanny Otherness and the Animal With-Out* (2020), *Werewolves, Wolves and the Gothic* (2017), and *Minor Creatures: Persons, Animals, and the Victorian Novel* (2018) have collectively expanded the scope of gothic studies by adopting a non-anthropocentric approach in their respective analysis. Ruth Heholt and Melissa Edmundson would specifically write that “[a]nimals of all sorts have an entirely different and separate life to humans, and in fiction, this often morphs into Gothic horror. (Heholt and Edmundson, 2020, p. 7). Reflecting on this, I suggest that “gothic horror” becomes the liminal space where the supposed boundaries between the human and non-human are blurred. In the succeeding paragraphs, I closely reflect on Bram Stoker’s short fiction, namely “The Squaw” and “The Burial of the Rats” by looking back on how these texts manifest an anxiety of interspecies relationship, which manifests as a form of gothic horror. This primordial fear of entanglement between man and animal is what allows what Giorgio Agamben calls as “anthropological machine” (a system which excludes animals from the zone of livable human life) to operate (2004, p. 35). However, that is not to say that there is no form of entanglement in these two works. Rather, these two texts show a different form of entanglement between vermin and humans, an entanglement that is far from how Derrida and Haraway would idealize it in their writing. I attempt to ponder on here how the inability to articulate a boundary between animality and humanity becomes the same thing that pervasively haunts the characters in the story. Here, the vermin and the humans become “relationally entangled” as Donna Haraway puts it (2008, p. 330) and I argue that the notion of entanglement here is precisely what makes the “anthropological machine” gothic in these short stories.

### **The “Anthropological Machine” and the notion of entanglement**

In *The Open: Man and Animal*, Giorgio Agamben (2004) speculates on the broad philosophical conceptualizations of man, animal, and the boundary between these two categories. Agamben traces this division to how the foundation of Western thought has categorized human life and thereby connecting it to his Homo Sacer project, where he theorizes on bare life—a result of the

division between *zoē* and *bios* (Agamben, 1998, p. 83). Agamben then conceptualizes what he calls the “anthropological machine”, which is an apparatus that “functions by means of an exclusion (which is also always already a capturing) and an inclusion (which is also always already an exclusion)” (2004, p. 37). He continues by also theorizing that this “anthropological machine” functions in modern times by “excluding as not (yet) human an already human being from itself, that is, by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human” (Agamben, 2004, p. 37). In other words, this “anthropological machine” is what enables the arbitrary exclusion of life from other forms of life thereby providing a way to govern categorizations of life. Although Agamben’s thoughts in *The Open: Man and Animal* does not specifically relate to the growing discourse on animal studies, or even the gothic, I opportunistically reflect on how the notion of the “anthropological machine” might be expanded by contemplating on its relationship with how Donna Haraway thinks about the notion of “entanglement”. For Haraway, “individual animals, human and nonhuman, are themselves entangled assemblages of relatings knotted at many scales and times with other assemblages, organic and not. Individuated critters matter; they are mortal and fleshly knottings, not ultimate units of being. Kinds matter; they are also mortal and fleshly knottings, not typological units of being. (Haraway, 2008, p. 88). That is to say, that it is inherently difficult to establish the caesura between man and animal precisely because humans and non-humans are essentially entangled. What I suggest then is that the “anthropological machine” operates by attempting to remove these entangled relations, to establish the very divide which governs forms of life. But as my reading of “The Squaw” and “The Burial of the Rats” will show, the gothicized “anthropological machine” has, in some way, failed to disentangle the human and the non-human, thereby amplifying the horrific representations of the animal in those texts. What makes these representations grotesque and intolerable is the idea that there is no caesura that divides man and animal. The inability to disentangle from the affixation that there is a divide is what makes the stories I read inherently gothic.

### **The gaze of the great black cat in *The Squaw***

Bram Stoker’s “The Squaw” is a tale about a couple who travels to Nurnberg, Germany for a honeymoon. During their trip, they meet Elias P. Hutcheson, an American adventurer, and together they all visit “The Burg” (or Nuremburg Castle) where the famous “Iron Maiden of Nuremburg” lies. Here, the party sees “a great black cat lying stretched in the sun, whilst round her gambolled prettily a tiny black kitten.” (Stoker, 1914a, p. 47). Elias Hutcheson then picked up a “moderate sized pebble” (Stoker, 1914a, p. 47) to “help the play” (Stoker, 1914a, p. 47), as they saw the black cat playing with her little kitten. Hutcheson intends to “drop it near the kitten” so that the kitten and the mother would wonder “where it came from” (Stoker, 1914a, p. 47). What happens next is best described in the following passage:

“See, I’ll drop it fur away on the outside so’s not to go near her!’ Thus saying, he leaned over and held his arm out at full length and dropped the stone. It may be that there is some attractive force which draws lesser matters to greater; or more probably that the wall was not plump but sloped to its base—we not noticing the inclination from above; but the stone fell with a sickening thud that came up to us through the hot air, right on the kitten’s head, and shattered out its little brains then and there.” (Stoker, 1914a, p. 48)

While the circumstances of the kitten's grotesque and horrific death is manifestly gothic as it appeared to be subtly influenced by the supernatural, what is arguably gothic about this is the response of the kitten's mother:

The black cat cast a swift upward glance, and we saw her eyes like green fire fixed an instant on Elias P. Huteson; and then her attention was given to the kitten, which lay still with just a quiver of her tiny limbs, whilst a thin red stream trickled from a gaping wound. With a muffled cry, such as a human being might give, she bent over the kitten licking its wounds and moaning. Suddenly she seemed to realise that it was dead, and again threw her eyes up at us. (Stoker, 1914a, p. 48)

Similar to how Jacques Derrida speaks about his cat that looked back at him without the use of human language, the black cat also responded by subjecting Elias Huteson to its gaze. The gaze here however is different, as the cat's gaze is a response to a human being who adamantly believes in the divide between the human and non-human. What makes this scene particularly gothic is the inherent humanity seen in the black cat who is grieving and gazing in a way that a human being would. The black cat attempted to climb the wall to reach and kill Elias Huteson. This boundary, symbolic of the initial divide between man and animal, protects Elias at first, and he would even remark that the "animal in the midst of her fury recognises the voice of a master, and bows to him!" (Stoker, 1914a, p. 51). At this level, the "anthropological machine" operates when a human being is able to separate the human and the non-human in his or her thoughts. But this boundary does not stand for long, as the cat continues her "response" to Huteson's unethical treatment of animals by following the party. The black cat found the perfect opportunity to kill Huteson when he is inside the "Iron Maiden of Nuremberg", a torture device that impales its victims with iron spikes. The cat does this by attacking the custodian that was holding the rope that kept the spiked door open. The custodian lets go, which resulted in a bloody death for Huteson:

And then the spikes did their work. Happily the end was quick, for when I wrenched open the door they had pierced so deep that they had locked in the bones of the skull through which they had crushed, and actually tore him—it—out of his iron prison till, bound as he was, he fell at full length with a sickly thud upon the floor, the face turning upward as he fell. (Stoker, 1914a, p. 61)

The black cat's monstrous response is just as similar to how abhorrent Huteson is, who likened the cat to the Apache, who he basically described as animals who ought to be excluded from white America. What this passage tells us is that the entanglement between the non-human and the human manifested in a gothic space, where it was shown that a being deemed as an animal is able to respond the same way humans do when they suffer grief. What pervasively haunted and claimed Huteson then was his inability to recognize that black cat has the capacity to respond, as he pervasively ignored the cat throughout the story, confident that it can never erase the boundary between them.

### **The vermin of "The Burial of the Rats"**

We see more of these gothic animals in Bram Stoker's "The Burial of the Rats", a story about an Englishman who ventures into Paris, which he describes like a living animal remarking that "Paris

alone is the analogical apotheosis of the octopus”, a city where “we see radiating many long arms with innumerable tentaculæ, and in the centre rises a gigantic head with a comprehensive brain and keen eyes to look on every side and ears sensitive to hear — and a voracious mouth to swallow” (Stoker, 1914b, p. 122). This opening sets this urban space as a gothic zone where the gothicized version of Haraway’s entanglement occurs. The unnamed protagonist here wanders to the “the holy of holies of the city of dust” (Stoker, 1914b, p. 125) which turns out to be a poverty-stricken place filled with shanties, scavengers, and cutthroats. Inside a hut, he first encounters the rats described as carnivorous:

In one corner was a heap of rags which seemed to move from the number of vermin it contained, and in the other a heap of bones whose odour was something shocking. Every now and then, glancing at the heaps, I could see the gleaming eyes of some of the rats which infested the place (Stoker, 1914b, p. 128-129).

Like the black cat in *The Squaw*, the rats found in the story also look back at humans, but the difference here is that the presence of these very critters is in itself abominable and repulsive. The entanglement here is present when human bones and these critters exist side by side, as if there is no boundary on what constitutes death and decay for the human and non-human. The liminality here is more evident when these rats are used to dispose of the cutthroats’ victims. The Englishman sees more of the rats in this hut and the “baleful glitter” of their eyes when they look at him, which is similar to how the hut’s inhabitants eyed his gold rings (Stoker, 1914b, p. 131). The protagonist took flight from the hut and was able to escape after a lengthy pursuit. He returns to the shanty with a company of guards where they see the fate of the old crone who attempted to fool the Englishman:

It was a gruesome sight. There lay a skeleton face downwards, a woman by the lines—an old woman by the coarse fibre of the bone. Between the ribs rose a long spike-like dagger made from a butcher’s sharpening knife, its keen point buried in the spine. . . The rats are many here—see their eyes glistening among that heap of bones—and you will also notice “—I shuddered as he placed his hand on the skeleton—”that but little time was lost by them, for the bones are scarcely cold! (Stoker, 1914b, pp. 152-153)

What this scene embodies is a Gothicized rendition of “entanglement” where companionship has led vermin to consume the old woman to the bone whereas Haraway’s notion of entanglement should potentially de-gothicize the caesura. But in this case, the “anthropological machine” also failed to articulate this divide because of this very entanglement, as the “isola[tion] [of] the nonhuman within human” (Agamben, 2004, p. 37) becomes impossible. This attempt to disentangle the human from the non-human then operates by, “excluding as not (yet) human an already human being from itself, that is, by animalizing the human, by isolating the nonhuman within the human” (Agamben 2004, p. 37).

### **Towards a gothicized “anthropological machine”**

Croft and Hatter (2020) would emphasize in “‘Rats Is Bogies I Tell You, and Bogies Is Rats’: Rats, Repression, and the Gothic Mode” that “rats were treated as a commodity, much as the working class were themselves: to be captured, sold, groomed, and killed as needed” (p. 131). What this reading signifies in the context of this paper is the lack of a clear boundary between vermin and

the human demonstrating a form of entanglement between them. While Agamben's "anthropological machine" should have created the conditions possible for the exclusion of the animals from the human, what is shown here instead through my reading of "The Squaw" and "The Burial of the Rats" is how the act of returning the gaze blurs these boundaries, thereby opening the possibility that a gothicized version of the "anthropological machine" instead articulates the pervasive fear of humans—which is the idea that there is no caesura between man and animal.

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