

## *Original Paper*

# Animal Images in 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Fantasy

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### **Abstract**

*The artistic image in the novel is not only the carrier of the writer's narrative activities, but also the most vivid literary element in the story text. In American fantasy in the 20th century, writers not only created a large number of human characters with distinctive personalities, but also created many animal images full of spirituality and vitality. While absorbing nutrients from myths, legends and folk tales, they also endowed the various animals in the novel with unique psychological and emotional characteristics of humans, thereby creating a new depiction of anthropomorphic animals and supernatural animals. These animal images and the human characters in the novel together form a three-dimensional and multiple fantasy world. While expanding the cluster of artistic images in American fantasy, they also fully demonstrate the artistic charm of literary imagination and fiction.*

### **Keywords**

*American fantasy, animal images, anthropomorphic animals, supernatural animals*

## **1. Introduction**

As Nie Aiping said in *Narrative Study of Children's Fantasy*: "The constant presence of animals in the literary creation circle strongly illustrates the natural connection between human beings and animals from material to spiritual, from emotion to aesthetics" (Nie, 2017, p. 13). Lively and spiritual animal images have been frequent visitors in human literary works since ancient times. Writers can not only show readers the magnificence and wonder of nature by shaping different types of animal images, but also explore and reflect on human beings and the human world with animals and the animal world as a frame of reference. After entering the 20th century, animals with different characteristics have gradually become a very important image cluster in modern American fantasy. Compared with the animal images in previous novels, most of the animal images in American fantasy originate from fiction and imagination. Their existence not only perfects the relevant settings of the "secondary world"

in the novels, but also further broadens the writing boundaries of American fantasy. However, it is a pity that the attention paid to the artistic images in American fantasy is still mainly focused on the human images, while the lively animal images are neglected, leaving more room for interpretation. Therefore, this paper intends to explore the image characteristics of anthropomorphic animals and supernatural animals in American fantasy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and to reveal the fantasy and diversity of American fantasy.

## 2. Anthropomorphic Animals

In American fantasy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the tendency of personification of non-human creatures is a typical feature of story image creation, and among many non-human creatures, anthropomorphic animals are the most common and important image clusters in American fantasy. In fact, anthropomorphic animal images have always been a frequent visitor in Western literary works, and their literary origins can be traced back to ancient fables, fairy tales and folk stories. For example, Gary Wolff points out that animal fantasies were for a long time regarded as a branch of fables or fairy tales (Wolfe, 2012, p. 18). With the development of western literature, anthropomorphic animal images have gradually become an indispensable element in fantasy literature, especially in animal fantasy novels. For example, Victorian British writers were willing to integrate anthropomorphic animal characters into wonderful stories and strengthen the fantastic color of novels. And when Joseph Kipling wrote *The Jungle Book*, “took on a new and more sophisticated literary life” (Wolfe, 2012, p. 18). According to Brian Stableford, “Animal fantasy is a story with characters that include sentient animals credited with the ability to communicate with others of their own species, and sometimes members of other species” (Stableford, 2005, p. 13). Thus it can be seen that animal fantasy fiction is a novel form that deduces animal life into human life, anthropomorphic animals are the main roles in the story, they have a unique social system and its operation system, writers imagine and describe the survival and life of anthropomorphic animals in the fantasy world in the novel. And take this as a frame of reference to examine and reflect on the human civilization dominated by machines and technology.

Indeed, as J. R. R. Tolkien put it in *On Fairy—Stories*: “That fantasies which blended the human form with animal and vegetable forms, or gave human faculties to beasts, are ancient is” (Tolkien, 1938, p. 97). Although there is no supernatural power similar to magic and witchcraft in some American fantasy about anthropomorphic animals, the fact that these animals can act in human language and posture in the novel itself means a kind of rebellion and transcendence against reality and nature. At the same time, the archetypes of anthropomorphic animals should be ordinary animals like cats, dogs and lions. Because they do not have extraordinary abilities in the real world, when they can speak and act like human beings in the story, the novel shows a supernatural color. In addition, anthropomorphic animal images mainly appear in Children’s Fantasy, because children’s minds are closer to nature than adults, and children’s early thinking development is more spiritual, they will subconsciously give life or life

characteristics to inanimate or non-human things. As Zhu Ziqiang pointed out: “They integrate themselves into nature, animals are their brothers and sisters, trees are another form of brothers and sisters “The emotional relationship between children and animals is entirely natural” (Zhu, 2010, pp. 64-65). Thus it can be seen that the anthropomorphic animal images in literary works are the best companions in the process of children’s growth, so American fantasy writers always attract children’s attention with vivid and lively anthropomorphic animals, and use their stories to guide and educate children more gently and imperceptibly.

In the American fantasy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, anthropomorphic animals mainly show the dual characteristics of anthropomorphism and animality. On the one hand, anthropomorphism is the common trait of animal images in fantasy. In order to highlight the characteristics of personification, the writer will weaken the description of the body of the archetypal animal while portraying the human-like personality and characteristics of the animal image, so as to present the “personification” characteristics of the personification animal infinitely similar to human beings. For example, Walter Brooks highlighted Freddy’s cleverness and liveliness in the series of *Freddy the Pig*, in which Freddy has a very strong interest in the human world. This interest has driven him to try different careers and challenges, such as detectives, politicians, newspaper editors, magicians and pilots. In addition to the unchangeable animal appearance, Freddy Piglet coexists with human beings in the same world, and he has the same status as human beings in the story. In addition to his own ethnic group, Freddy is also eager to communicate and communicate with human beings, and at the same time, he learns everything about human beings in his daily contacts. Thus it can be seen that the anthropomorphism of animals is mainly to show that they are equal to human beings, and they have human consciousness, thoughts and emotions, so we can also regard their lives as the mirror and reflection of human life.

On the other hand, as Pamela S. Gates has said, although fantasy allows animals greater freedom in their lives and behavior than in reality, “the author (and illustrator, if the story contains pictures) should know something about the actual habits and character of the particular animal or animals he or she is writing about” (Gates, 2003, p. 81), because the full impact of the story and its success as a fantasy depends on the accuracy of the animal information in the novel. In other words, the anthropomorphic characteristics of animal images in fantasy novels are based on following the true state and natural habits of animals. For example, lions are often regarded as symbols of courage and courage in the real world, so L. Frank Baum, in *The Wizard of Oz*, created a lion who longed for and sought courage. The timid lion finally finds his courage and helps his friends fight off the enemies sent by the wicked witch. The animal characteristics of anthropomorphic animals require fantasy writers to integrate the “animal nature” and “human nature” of animal images neither too high nor too low, to show the true state of animals, but also to stimulate readers’ interest in reading stories between animals and animals or stories between animals and human beings, so as to promote the material and spiritual state of modern human beings through animals. And examine and reflect on the relationship between animals and humans.

In addition, Ursula K. Le Guin once pointed out that the behavior of animals is correct, definite and appropriate, and that the intuition of animals can tell them the way and direction to go home, so Le Guin called animals the primitive and dark brothers of human beings. It is the soul and guide of the human shadow (Le Guin, 1992, p. 63). As the closest creature to human beings in fantasy novels, anthropomorphic animal images are, to some extent, a mirror of human insight into themselves, and their wild and spiritual nature also casts a layer of primitive divine glory on them. Under the interweaving of human nature and animal nature, the anthropomorphic animal images in American fantasy have been more three-dimensional and rich, and constantly show their lofty pursuit and moral self-discipline beyond the population in the stories full of fantasy.

### 3. Dragon Image

Supernatural animals are one of the essential elements in fantasy novels. Their existence not only represents the imagination of human ancestors about magical animals, but also gradually has complex and diverse symbolic meanings with the evolution of human civilization. Dragon is undoubtedly the most influential supernatural animal image in American fantasy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In fact, in terms of etymology and meaning, the etymology of “dragon” can be traced back to the Greek word “δράκων” and “draconem” in Latin, while “draconem” and “δράκων” all have the meaning of “huge snake”. Such as Daniel Ogden pointed out that “draconem” could properly refer to a fantastical dragon of enormous size, complex form, and great firepower (Ogden, 2013, p. 4). Thus it can be seen that “huge snake” should be the most original interpretation of “dragon”. With the development of human civilization, the “dragon” in the West has gradually incorporated more animal elements. For example, in *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, the dragon is interpreted as a legendary animal, “generally described as a winged, scaly, ferocious serpent or lizard with a crown on its head and giant claws on their feet” (Gove, 1976, p. 648). The monster image with scales, claws, wings and fire-breathing, which mixes the characteristics of giant snakes and lizards, has become the most common manifestation of dragons in Western literary and artistic works.

In *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), British anthropologist Victor Turner elaborated on the concepts of liminality and liminal beings in detail. In his opinion, Liminal beings can be represented as monsters mixed with various animal elements in most cases, because “Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions” (Turner, 1969, p. 95). Therefore, we can regard the liminal creature as a kind of magical creature that combines two or more different animal forms, and the dragon is undoubtedly the most representative liminal creature.

On the one hand, through the evolution and evolution of human civilization, the dragon has shown a clear threshold in appearance. As Turner points out: “The attributes of liminality or of liminal *personae* (‘threshold people’) are necessarily ambiguous, since this condition and these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space” (Turner, 1969, p. 95). As a threshold creature, the external form of “dragon” does not belong to any single species in nature, and its basic shape is completely extracted and abstracted from a variety of animal forms. As far as the dragon image in American fantasy is concerned, it basically combines the physical characteristics of snakes, lizards, bats, lions and crocodiles. For example, Karen Luk, in *Just Reward* (1993), describes the silver dragons that attack human villages as terrifying monsters with bat wings, lion claws, and silver scales (Luk, 1993, p. 261). In addition, some American fantasy writers have also transformed and innovated the traditional dragon images in their novels, thus giving them more diverse literary postures. For example, Anne Inez McCaffrey drastically reshaped the image of dragons in *Dragonriders of Pern* (1968-2003). In McCaffrey’s setting, dragons are humans based on the Salamanders, the protozoans of the planet Pern fire—lizard. Genetically engineered to have four paws and a pair of wings, they are described as having a head and overall body shape similar to a horse. They also have small head tumors similar to giraffes on their heads, and the surface of Payne dragons is covered with fur rather than scales. It is worth mentioning that although McCaffrey’s Pern Dragon also has the mixed characteristics of liminal animals, its novel setting has also won the favor of many readers. However, as Sandra Martina Schwab said, dragons are the representative elements of fantasy fiction, and the traditional image of dragons is undoubtedly more fantastic, “dragons seem to fit more into the medievalized setting of fantasy literature than into the more technological world of science fiction” (Schwab, 2005, p. 216), so the appearance of dragons in American fantasy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is still dominated by the traditional Western dragon images.

On the other hand, in addition to the external form, the image of the western dragon has gradually derived many symbolic meanings from the mixed characteristics of the threshold creatures in the long course of development. In fact, dragons have always appeared as violent and evil in Western mythology. Roz Kaveney, for example, argues that “In most Mediterranean and European MYTHOLOGIES, SERPENTS are associated with evil, and dragons, a sort of super-serpent, are more evil still. Centuries before St George slew his dragon, APOLLO and Hercules were disposing of giant reptiles of various kinds and being celebrated for it” (Kaveney, 2012, p. 295). The rise of Christianity further solidified the vicious characteristics of dragons and often appeared in religious texts as a metaphor for demons. Therefore, evil and powerful have become the most common image characteristics of dragons in American fantasy. For example, Lin Carter, in *The Wizard of Lemuria* (1962), deliberately created a fantasy world ruled by a brutal Dragon King and a dragon race. Thonger, the human hero in the novel, is dissatisfied with the tyranny of the Dragon King, so he contacts many human tribes to launch a protracted war against the Dragon King and the Dragon Clan, and finally ends the rule of the Dragon

Clan. In addition to being powerful and evil, dragons that can fly freely also symbolize freedom and liberation in American fantasy. In “Why are Americans Afraid of Dragons” (1974), Le Guin criticized Americans’ fear of dragons and illusions, and she also pointed out that “it isn’t only Americans who are afraid of dragons. I suspect that almost all very highly technological peoples are more or less antifantasy” (Le Guin, 1974, p. 35), and the reason for their fear is that “they are afraid of freedom” (Le Guin, 1974, p. 40). In Le Guin’s view, dragons and fantasies can liberate human beings from layers of bondage, so the image of dragons means rebellion against human material civilization. For example, Boris, the Blue Dragon in *Elmer and the Dragon* (1950), leads Elmer, a little boy, on a fantastic adventure journey, which not only rescues Elmer from boredom and poverty, but also helps him. At the same time, it releases the little boy’s love of freedom and fantasy, and then guides Elmer to understand the true meaning of friendship and courage. At the same time, American fantasy writers are also willing to extract material from dragon legends of different civilizations, so dragons in American fantasy often show non-Western characteristics. For example, the image of the dragon in *The Wheel of Time* (1990-2013) is influenced by both Australian aboriginal mythology and Chinese mythology. In the novel, the dragon is the embodiment of justice against evil. It is a giant snake that is connected end to end and circulates constantly, so it also has the implication of reincarnation and fate. The wheel of time can turn because of the alternation of Yin and Yang, so the dragon also symbolizes the harmony and balance of Yin and Yang forces.

#### 4. Supernatural Animal Images

The so-called supernatural animals are magical animals born in human fantasy and have powerful supernatural powers. Although modern people no longer regard supernatural animals as real creatures or spiritual beliefs, they have not disappeared from people’s memory, but have been reborn in modern fantasy novels. In fact, strictly speaking, the dragon is also a member of the supernatural animal group, but because the dragon has a particularly important significance in Western civilization, the image of the dragon is explained separately in the previous article. Besides dragons, unicorns and griffins are also important supernatural animal images in American fantasy in the 20th century. Their existence not only greatly enhances the fantasy color of the novel, but also endows the novel with more complex and diverse meanings.

The word unicorn comes from the Latin word *unicornis*, where “uni-” means “one” and “corn” means “horn”, so unicorns are often called “one-horned beasts”. In the West, records of the unicorn first appeared in Ctesias’ *Indica*, written at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC: There are wild asses in India the size of horses and even bigger. They have a white body, crimson head, and deep blue eyes. They have a horn in the middle of their brow one and a half cubits in length” (Ctesias, 2011, p. 56). In the first century AD, Pliny the Elder called the unicorn “the fiercest beast” in India (Pliny, 1961, p. 57). It is not difficult to find that both Pliny the Elder and Ctesias regarded the unicorn as a real creature in India, so

the unicorn did not have supernatural characteristics in the early records. In fact, the process of mythologizing the unicorn was completed with the rise of Christianity. For example, the Hebrew word “reēm” is translated as “unicorn” (Hindson, 2013, p. 268) in the *King James Bible* (1611) and is mentioned nine times. In medieval fables, the unicorn was often associated with the Virgin Mary (Curley, 2009, p. 51), and was thus imbued with an aura of purity and holiness. So since the Middle Ages, the unicorn has been weakened in its ravenous character and has been associated with virgins and virgins. The crucifixion of Christ took placeIt’s connected. Over time, the unicorn has been described as a magical phantom beast, which is both powerful and fragile, pure and sacred, and can only be virgins. And this image was carried over into the American fantasy of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

On the one hand, in appearance, the unicorn in American fantasy basically continues the traditional image since the Middle Ages, that is, “a handsome monster with the appearance of a horse and a horn on its forehead” (Takumi Kusano, 2010, p. 313). At the same time, fantasy writers often glorify the unicorn on this basis and describe it as an ethereal and ephemeral legendary creature. In the words of Peter S. Beagle, the unicorn is not a common picture, not at all like a horned horse. “She was smaller and had forked hooves. She has the most ancient and primitive elegance. Her neck was slender and long, which made her even more petite, and her mane fell down to her back, as soft as dandelion hair. She has pointed ears and long, slender legs, with short, snow-white hairs on her knees, and a long horn just above her eyes that shimmers like a seashell even in the middle of the night” (Bigger, 2018, p. 5). On the other hand, although unicorns in American fantasy are still powerful symbols of virginity and purity, because of their complex and contradictory characteristics, unicorns often become symbols of lust, freedom and escape in a contradictory way. Such as Michael Bishop’s *Unicorn Mountain* (1988) combines the legend of unicorns with modern culture, and explores and reflects on homosexuality, AIDS, gender identity and racial discrimination through the relationship between unicorns and modern people.

In addition to the unicorn, the Griffin is also one of the most common phantom animal images in American fantasy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The etymology of “Griffin” can be traced back to the Greek “γρυψ” and the Latin “gryphus”, which originally means “curved” and “hooked”, corresponding to the sharp and curved beak of the Griffin. In fact, as far back as the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, Herodotus described this legendary creature in his *Histories*: “On the side of the Ithadonians lived the one-eyed people Alimasboi, and on the side of the Alimasboi lived the gold-watching Gyrypes. On the other side of these people are the inhabitants of the far north whose territory extends all the way to the sea” (Herodotus, 2009, p. 286). Since the 7<sup>th</sup> century BC, the Griffin has become a popular theme in Greek art and is often associated with gods such as Apollo, Dionysus and Nemesis. Therefore, the Griffin is a legendary creature born entirely in the human imagination. Because the lion is often regarded as the king of beasts in Western cultural tradition, and the eagle is often regarded as the king of birds, so as a legendary creature after the combination of beasts and birds of prey, the Griffin will naturally be

regarded as a particularly powerful and majestic creature, and thus has the symbolic meaning of courage, strength and ferocity.

It was Frank Richard Stockton who introduced the Griffin into American fantasy, as Brian Attebery puts it (Attebery, 1980, p. 184). In 1885, Stockton wrote in *The Griffin and the Minor Canon* (1885), he praised the friendship and kindness through the story of the Griffin and the little priest, and also mercilessly satirized the meanness and cowardice of the townspeople. After Stockton, the Griffin gradually won the favor of American readers and eventually became one of the most common supernatural animals in American fantasy. On the one hand, the shape of the Griffin in American fantasy basically continues its traditional image in Western culture, that is, it has the head, wings and front feet of an eagle, as well as the body and hind feet of a lion. Although some fantasy writers have fine-tuned the Griffin's image, such as in some of the "Dungeons and Dragons" novels, in which the Griffin has the claws of a skeleton and the tail of a wolf in addition to the form of an eagle and a lion, the Griffin still maintains the mixed appearance of a lion and an eagle in most novels. On the other hand, the relatively solidified shape also determines to some extent that the symbolic meaning of the Griffin in the novel will not change much. In fact, griffins always symbolize bravery and toughness in novels, but they lack wisdom and spirituality, so griffins generally do not appear as protagonists. Griffins, for example, appear in *Dragonlance Legends* (1986) as elves, dwarves' mounts, or runners. But in a very few American fantasy, the author also makes a strong description of the Griffin. For example, Skandranon Rashkae, one of the two protagonists in *The Mage Wars* (1994-96), is a white Griffin, and in the writer's setting, Rashkae is a magical creature transformed by the mage Urtho. He is vain, cold and venomous, but he is also brave, wise and values friendship, and the adventures of Lashkay and Amberdrake form the core of the novel.

## 5. Conclusion

To sum up, anthropomorphic animals and supernatural animals are the most representative animal images in American fantasy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. On the one hand, anthropomorphic animals often appear in children's fantasy novels, and show the dual characteristics of anthropomorphism and animality. In the works of American fantasy writers, anthropomorphic animals are completely harmless and benevolent to human beings, because they do not have magic power, so they always appear to be "inferior" to human beings, and this "inferiority" naturally brings readers a sense of security (Nikolajeva, 2012, p. 56). These animals can be children's playmates or incarnations in fantasy stories, which can stimulate young readers' cognitive desire and empathy for the world, human beings and animals. On the other hand, supernatural animals represented by dragons, unicorns and griffins represent human imagination and exploration of supernatural forces. Although the mythical beasts in American fantasy are different in appearance and symbolism, the humanization tendency of non-human creatures is their common intrinsic characteristic. Fantasy writers retain the nature of non-human



creatures while endowing them with human nature and desire, and they have become a unique medium for writers and readers to constantly explore human emotions, desires and beliefs.

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