



A READING OF ALAN ARMSTRONG'S *WHITTINGTON*

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Anthropomorphism (animals acting like humans) is used frequently in children's literature. In Alan Armstrong's *Whittington*, the animal persona is part of the charm of the story. It is a successful technique that triggers and feeds the child's imagination, inducing them to suspend their disbelief. For children, unlike adults, it is a kind of involuntary or spontaneous suspension of disbelief, the child 'falls' into it as soon as the story starts. This is also used in audio-visual media as a crucial characteristic of children's programs, such as cartoons. *SpongeBob SquarePants* is an example of this. It uses sea creatures endowed with human characteristics to tell a story of human drama.

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Similarly, the Lady in *Whittington*, although she is a duck, stands for an obviously human character. In chapter one, she starts a conversation with Whittington the cat, in which she reveals that she is the matriarch of her little society or community of animals. She says, "In Bernie's barn they call me the Lady because I'm in charge." (3)

The author describes her as steady, confident and responsible. Linguistic capability and conversation are exclusively human traits, but we see them manifested between the animals in this book. The Lady's conversation with the cat reveals that "she had strong views about romance and dreamed of love" (5). In the same chapter, she shows a sense of generosity and hospitality, a sense of human kindness towards a fellow human being, by offering the cat a place to live in the barn. But, she makes it clear to the cat that the final word in this issue should be for the majority of the animals in the barn. This type of democratic political motion is normally exclusive to human societies.

Later in chapter five, we see the duck as a master debater, trying to convince the barn animals of the important role that Whittington (the cat) could play if he is allowed in the barn. She suggests he could take the role of law keeping, "Whittington says he's a ratter...He looks like a fighter. We could use a ratter." (19)

In chapter six, we see her sense of etiquette. When Whittington is accepted in the barn, she begins introducing him to the other members of her society. In the same chapter, another strikingly human trait is introduced, Lady's sense of history and her pride in history. She claims, "My ancestors were English. . .There is college in England where they honor my line by marching around behind a duck held aloft on a pole. It has to do with the wings of knowledge." (22) An imaginative quality is also attributed to her. She has the ability to carry the burden of the past, the damage and loss of lives that the rats have caused, and live in the present anticipating the future. "She looked down at the soft brown body and imagined the barn without rats." (36)

Finally, she plays the role of counselor in helping Ben (a young boy) to learn to read. Trying to encourage Ben to have positive self-esteem, she says, "Look, it's not so bad. You're not stupid. Abby had a reading problem. She got over it. You will too." (48)

Whittington (the cat) understands that usually, when someone reads, hears, or watches a story, it can create a cathartic moment, purging him or her of strong emotions. It has a cleansing effect. It gives consolation by suggesting that circumstances the reader may be going through are not unique, but are part of being human, or in this case, an animal endowed with human consciousness. Stories sometimes offer encouragement and open one's eye to ways of coping with our problems. When Whittington starts telling his story, Ben identifies with the main character, Dick.

Dick had difficulty reading, but he was taught by his grandmother. The barn animals think that the techniques the grandmother used with Dick might be helpful to Ben. As well as offering some ways to help Ben's reading, the story charges his motivation, "Dick Whittington was in Ben's dreams and day dreams" (144). The story grabs Ben's attention. It motivates him to ask the cat questions about the meaning of words, which builds his vocabulary.

Besides being an entertaining story, *Whittington* could be considered a case study, describing a specific problem and offering a practical solution. The story tells us about Ben, who has difficulty reading due to the lack of interest or motivation. His lack of motivation leads him to lag behind his classmates in literacy. As the story goes on, Whittington tells the history behind his name to the barn animals, Ben and Ben's sister Abby.

The story the wise cat tells of the self-made man shows Ben what it means to have a goal and to try hard to achieve it. The story gives him a sense of purpose. He says that before he hears this story the whole thing seemed like "nightmares" (144). As such, motivation cannot be imposed from without, it springs from within out. And it is like a pulp that is suddenly lit; Ben says about his experience, "It was like coming in out of dark. When I started, it was dark, there were shapes and things but nothing was clear. It was clear and I could see. It was like being born" (185).

The story behind the cat's name 'Whittington' is told as a reward and encouragement for Ben. It is told in an interesting way, as a story within the main story. This reflects real life gatherings, the way people, like friends or family members, get together to talk and share stories.

In *Whittington*, the readers are repeatedly taken back in time to the story of Dick and suddenly brought forwards again to the present. This happens when Ben and the other characters ask the cat questions in request for further clarifications. This technique also helps the reader see the impact of the story of Dick on the characters in the barn, such as helping Ben to read.

There are many conflicts, many human dramas, going on in this book. One, major conflict that propels the story forward is between the Lady and Whittington.

"Who are you? Asked the [lady]..."Whittington" he said. "Whittington?" she asked, pushing her head forward and cocking it toward him a little...he nodded. "Whittington?" She asked again, stifling a giggle. "That's a funny name for a cat. It's more like the name of a town"...the cat's eyes narrowed, his tail switched with annoyance. "Doesn't it mean anything to you?" [he asked] "No." [she said] "Then you don't know history." [he said] (2)

Later the cat answers these questions by telling the story inside the story, which initiates the education of Ben.

There are two plots to this book. None of these stories can stand alone as they intermingle with one another. They work collectively to create a rich and elaborate unity, like real life. Although the story of Dick happened long time ago, Dick has become real and familial with the other characters listening to the story. They care about him and his success as if he were one of them. In the same way, Dick and the other characters become real to the readers of this book, via their imaginative faculty.

The 'glue' that makes the reader so attached to the story and the experience of it is the same one that makes Ben attached to the story of Dick, which is the element of suspense. Suspense keeps the reader or listener wanting to know what happens next. A story without this element would be boring. In *Whittington*, Ben is totally involved with the story of Dick. He identifies with him, and finds consolation in his story, as well

as a way to resolve his reading problem. His involvement with the story can be seen by his frequent questions. Also, we see the story is invading his dreams: "Dick Whittington was in Ben's dreams and day dreams."

The power of the story is reflected in the character of Ben who could be any child having difficulty in reading. So there is a connection between the child reading or listening to this book with Dick and Ben. The achievement of Dick motivates Ben to learn how to read: "It was like coming in out of dark. When I started, it was dark, there were shapes and things but nothing was clear. It was clear and I could see. It was like being born" (185). Here is where the mark of perseverance and success can leave its impression on the reader.

REFERENCE

Armstrong, A. (2006). *Whittington*. New York: Random House.
