

4-11-2008

Black Beauty as Antebellum Slave Narrative

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Black Beauty as Antebellum Slave Narrative

by

Bonnie L. Blossom

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of English
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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Date of Approval:
April 11, 2008

Keywords: Genre, genre criticism, Anna Sewell,
Frederick Douglass, humanitarian literature, children's literature

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Dedication

Why is compassion not part of the established curriculum, an inherent part of our education? Compassion, awe, wonder, curiosity, humility—these are the foundation of any real civilization, no longer the prerogatives, the preserves of any one church, but belonging to everyone, every child in every home in every school. (Yehudi Menuhin, *An Unfinished Life: Twenty Years Later*, 1997)

But ask the animals, and they will teach you,
or the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
or speak to the earth, and it will teach you,
or let the fish of the sea inform you. (Job 12:78)

This work is fondly dedicated to the greatest teachers of my life—the nonhuman animals with whom I have had the astonishing privilege to come into contact—and especially to my best teacher and best friend: Punkie (1990-2006). Truly, they have taught me what it means to be human.

Acknowledgments

A project like this is never undertaken in a vacuum; I have received the help and support of so many people, personally and professionally, for whom a dry “acknowledgment” is not enough. And so, a simple “thank you”:

To scholars who have aided me in my formulation and research: Charles Heglar for epitomizing the spirit of the professoriate by allowing me to explore my original curiosity on this subject as part of a class project; and Tess Cosslett for her collegial spirit and willingness to share pages from her (then) unpublished book;

To members of my thesis committee: Debra Jacobs, who gave me the tools to do what I love; and Pat Nickinson, whose eclectic reading suggestions never left me without something to think about;

To family, friends, and colleagues who have had to listen to me blather incessantly about the ideas contained in this work for longer than they or I care to remember, especially Harriet Blymiller for still pretending to be interested and Beth Curry for still *being* interested;

Finally and most especially, to my thesis director, Rosalie Murphy Baum, for her patience, encouragement, and scholarship in this project; but even more, for early in my academic career instilling in me the habit of questioning everything, a quality that has been by turns a blessing and a curse; and for both allowing me to write what I think about and demanding that I think about what I write. As Jung said, “One looks back with appreciation to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feelings.” For both, I am deeply indebted.

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ABSTRACT

Published in November 1877, *Black Beauty* is one of the most popular and enduring works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The book, in which the eponymous narrator relates his life's story, sold well following its publication in England and in the United States; by 1985, sales were estimated at over forty million. While usually regarded as entertaining, *Black Beauty* has a strong crusading purpose: Anna Sewell herself said she wrote to improve the treatment of horses.

This study springs from an intuitive notion. While reading the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, I could not shake a "curiously different sense of familiarity" that took me home to my well-worn copy of *Black Beauty*. The more I explored a relationship between Douglass's *Narrative* and *Black Beauty*, the more apparent it became that these two works were interrelated in ways that had yet to be explored in critical literature. Although comparisons between animals and slaves have long been made—slaves themselves recognized and used such comparisons—the relationship between animal autobiography and the slave narrative has only recently been recognized. In 1994 Moira Ferguson sketched several commonalities between the two genres. In 2003 Tess Cosslett made an explicit—if brief—comparison of the animal autobiography and the slave narrative, a comparison developed in depth in her 2006 study *Talking Animals in British Children's Literature 1786-1914*.

This thesis investigates that relationship further. It begins by briefly reviewing generic criticism, moves to a consideration of the various genres into which critics have placed *Black Beauty*, and then examines the text as a slave narrative, focusing upon James Olney's 1985 discussion of the conventions of the slave narrative. Finally, it considers Elizabeth W. Bruss's study of autobiographical acts as a literary genre for additional areas that establish my original "sense of familiarity." In short, this thesis confirms *Black Beauty's* rhetorical, formal, thematic, and social power within the genre of the American antebellum slave narrative.

Introduction

Published in November 1877, *Black Beauty* has proven to be one of the most popular and enduring works of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The eponymous narrator, a well-bred gelding, relates his life's story: his idyllic early experiences, his ruin at the hands of a drunken rider and subsequent downward journey through the harsh world of the London cab-horse where he encounters both kindness and cruelty, and his final redemption and restoration to his early home.

Anna Sewall set out nearly on her deathbed to write "what I think may turn out a little book to encourage greater understanding and kindness towards horses" (qtd. in Chitty 174); although she died in 1878, she may well be the "creator of the most famous black horse ever to exist in fact or fiction" (Gavin *Dark Horse* v). Purchased by Jarrod and Sons of London and Norwich for £25-£40¹ with no royalty privileges, the book sold over 12,000 copies in the first year and 100,000 copies in the two years following its publication in Great Britain under the title *Black Beauty: His Grooms and Companions, The Autobiography of a Horse* (Gavin *Dark Horse* 187); sales soared both in Great Britain and the United States following its 1890 U.S. publication as *Black Beauty: His Grooms and Companions, The Uncle Tom's Cabin of the Horse* under the auspices of the American Humane Education Society (AHES), later the American Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. By 1897, the two million sales mark had been met through AHES editions, and Jarrod and Sons claimed sales of nearly 200,000 in Great Britain, figures which do not include the book's sales in various translations: French, German, Spanish, Swedish, Japanese,

Arabic, Dutch, Hindustani, Greek, Chinese, Turkish, Armenian, Norwegian, and Braille (Gavin *Dark Horse* 190-91).

Over 130 years later, the book's popularity continues. As Susan Chitty noted in her 1971 biography of Sewell, "the sales to date have been estimated at thirty million, a remarkable figure when you consider that the entire works of Dickens are estimated to have sold a little over forty million" (238). Richard Dalby updated those figures in 1985, to forty million for Sewell and fifty million for Dickens; he also noted the book had gone through more than three hundred editions (twenty-six of which are still in print) and had been translated into "nearly every language in the world" (14). Sewell's hero does not live on just in print: the 1989 annotated *Black Beauty* has lengthy appendices for film and television adaptations, as well as character-inspired products based on Sewell's "little book."

The very premise of the work—a talking horse relating his life's story—places *Black Beauty* squarely in the realm of the imagination and earns it the critical designation of *novel*; further, the frequent assumption is that the book was written for a youth audience. There is no doubt that children in particular have found the book's charm, adventure, and fantasy an irresistible combination and have been its most avid readers; in fact, a 1977 survey confirmed *Black Beauty* as *the* favorite book among Britain's ten-year-olds (Dalby 15). However, Sewell did not originally intend *Black Beauty* as a children's work, nor should it be so regarded today; rather, in the hopes of inciting a better treatment of horses, she directed her attention to stable hands, drivers, and grooms: the working-class men who handled horses and possessed a functional but limited literacy due to the educational reforms of the day. Although critics have judged the text a critical success or failure at different times, Jane Tompkins (1985) sees popular novels with crusading aims such as Sewell's, often disparaged by mainstream critics, as "sensational designs" that do "a certain

kind of cultural work within a specific historical situation" (100). Gradually, critics have come to examine *Black Beauty* within a more serious context.

This study sprang out of an intuitive notion about a work I was reading in a Spring 2000 graduate seminar in African-American Literature with Charles Heglar.² As we read and discussed the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, I could not shake what Paul Collins described in 2004 as a "curiously different sense of familiarity" (10); that sense took me home to my shelf of treasured books from childhood and my well-worn copy of *Black Beauty*. Like Adrienne E. Gavin, explaining in 2004 the impetus that led to her work with *Black Beauty* and Anna Sewell, I too had been (and still am) "a girl who loved horses, and books, and books about horses" (*Dark Horse* vi), an interest which led me to reflect upon and research the relationship I sensed.

The more I explored a relationship between Douglass's *Narrative* and *Black Beauty*, the more apparent it became that these two works were interrelated in ways I hadn't even considered, one of the most important for me being the use of the first-person narrator. When I was a child, the plight of Beauty and his equine companions was made all the more real to me because the horses were telling their own story, and my imagination allowed me immediate and visceral Aristotelian identification with, and sympathy for, the heroes. As a graduate student reading the slave narratives for the first time, I was again involved and moved by that same power of "I." In both cases, narrators—previously silent and so very unlike me—are able to draw me into their experiences, make me understand something of their lives, and arouse my emotions for their struggles by finding language to tell their own stories and render the "unspeakable things" spoken, to paraphrase Toni Morrison (1989).

The examination in Dr. Heglar's seminar of the slave narrative as a distinctive genre supplied more fodder for my perception: a cursory check of James Olney's 1985 article delineating the elements of a slave narrative revealed that of the twelve structural conventions Olney lists for the genre, the 1845 *Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, which Olney sees as the "supreme achievement" (156) of the genre, contains ten, possibly eleven of the twelve. *Black Beauty* has ten—the same ten.³ Further, I came to believe that Sewell purposefully crafted *Black Beauty* in part to share in the reforming power of the slave narrative, particularly after Gavin's 2004 critical biography revealed Sewell was far more politically informed, activist-minded, and well-read than previously understood, and was someone who had ample interest in and access to former slaves' lectures and narratives. In addition, her terminal prognosis (she had been given 18 months to live when she began to write) and desire to see her book through to completion would have no doubt caused Sewell to utilize a simple and direct narrative structure with which she and her audience were familiar, the ability of which to move people she recognized. To my disappointment, many critics either failed to see this power or did not appreciate the accomplishment of the text—many were dismissive or, worse, condescending—and many critics who did appreciate the work classified it as children's fiction, thereby ignoring much of its inherent power.

The differences in critical opinion often depended upon the genre in which the critic placed *Black Beauty*, and to my thinking, it fit into none of the genres critics were using. It is not merely animal rights propaganda, children's literature, or a fable; at the same time it is certainly a novel, it is more than that. Sewell herself called it an autobiography, suggesting on the title page it was "[t]ranslated from the original equine." While the precision of that claim needs no discussion, Sewell's designation places her work squarely in the genre of animal autobiography, a

popular form of Victorian literature in which talking animals narrated their lives' stories; even so, the critics recognizing *Black Beauty* as exemplary of this genre did not explain for me the intertextuality of what I was reading.

Although comparisons between animals and slaves have long been made—slaves themselves recognized and used them—the relationship between animal autobiography and the slave narrative is only gradually being recognized: in 1994, for example, Moira Ferguson wrote that “Anna Sewell linked slavery to cruelty” (35) and discussed several of the tropes, overtones, and episodes *Black Beauty* and slave narratives have in common. That study was a beginning, but it was not until Tess Cosslett’s 2003 conference paper on animal autobiography that a critic drew a clear, explicit—if fleeting—parallel between slave narratives and animal autobiography, *Black Beauty* in particular. Paul Collins followed in 2004 with an article describing how he realized the relationship between Douglass’s *Narrative* and *Black Beauty* in much the same way as I, albeit in exactly the reverse order. He relates his experience of starting to reread *Black Beauty* one summer after his college graduation, only to find himself consulting his *Norton Anthology* to confirm an overwhelming feeling: “for the first time I could see what she’d [Sewell had] done. *She had taken an American slave narrative and replaced the slaves with horses*” (10). Finally, in her 2006 book *Talking Animals in British Literature*, Cosslett expands on the ideas explored in her conference paper on the two genres, arguing that “there is a clear *formal* parallel between the animal autobiography and the slave narrative, as published by the abolitionists to advance their cause” (186).³ Thus, I experience the cost of procrastination: my intuition languished long enough for critics to catch up. However, because Collins and Cosslett focus on the implications *of* rather than the reasons *for* the correlation they have recognized, there is still need for additional work.

I begin my study by briefly examining generic criticism, including Elizabeth W. Bruss's definition of genre—the structure, context, and intentions of a text—a theoretical framework suggested by both William Andrews (1986) and Angelo Costanzo (1987) in their work with slave narratives. From there, I move into a roughly chronological consideration of the various genres into which critics have placed *Black Beauty*. Next, I examine *Black Beauty* as a slave narrative, using a deductive generic method that relies upon Olney's study of slave narratives that defines Douglass's narrative as the "touchstone" of the genre. Finally, I draw upon Bruss's guidelines for additional areas that establish my original "sense of familiarity" and briefly interrogate Sewell's appropriation of a genre that was pervasive, popular, poignant, and powerful. In short, this thesis seeks a broader understanding of generic criticism, surveys the ways in which critics have failed to fully appreciate *Black Beauty* and its cultural work through a too-narrow interpretation of its genre, and, finally, drawing upon Olney and Bruss, confirms the novel's rhetorical power as situated within the genre of the American antebellum slave narrative.

Chapter One: Genre

Originally from the Latin for “class,” *genre* is a term used in a variety of contexts: for example, in art criticism, media theory, linguistics, and literary theory, to help define the works of a discipline. Heather Dubrow (1982) called the concept “intriguing” because it relates “both to very specialized technical issues and to very broad human ones” (2). Generally, the use of the word *genre* suggests that “all works are not only unique but also resemble other works” (Campbell and Jamieson 25). *Genre* also suggests “a code of behavior established between the author and his reader” (Dubrow 2).

Over the years theorists have emphasized one of the dimensions (some would say functions) of genre—the rhetorical, formal, thematic, or social—and distinguished between the roles of genre for authors, readers, and critics. More recently the emphasis has been on the essentiality of all of the dimensions, genre as a complex dynamic of dimensions or functions. John Frow (2007) suggests that the “key definition” today is that of Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Karlyn Campbell: “a genre is composed of a constellation of recognizable forms bound together by an internal dynamic, a dynamic that is a ‘fusion of substantive, stylistic, and situational elements’ and that works as a range of potential ‘strategic responses to the demands of the situation’” (“Reproducibles” 1630).

One of the simplest, early understandings of genre was that it is a means of classifying and sorting works into types and giving names to those types, a kind of “prescriptive taxonomy” (Frow “Reproducibles” 1627). In 1976, speech theorist Elizabeth Bruss termed such an approach a “Linnaean lust to define and categorize”

(1). In a 1935 letter, Virginia Woolf described this managerial approach to genre: "all one can do is to herd books into groups . . . and thus we get English literature into ABC; one, two, three; and lose all sense of what it's about" (qtd. in Bruss 1). Such an approach, of course, focuses upon the control genre may exert over a text as a limitation and ignores the complexity and power that many critics ascribe to genre. Indeed, Bruss's botanical analogy points to the inherent flaw in the taxonomic understanding: genre—and the study of genre—is neither scientific nor objective. But for many years such an understanding of genre as a restriction or constraint contributed to a neglect of genre theory. Fortunately, recent studies in the field emphasize that genre's "structuring effects are productive of meaning; they shape and guide" (Frow *Genre* 10). Further, genre—in all its dimensions—is "a matter of the textual categorization and mobilization of information about the world," not "a matter of the categorization of texts" (Frow "Reproducibles" 1632).

One effective way to approach genre is to emphasize its rhetorical role; that is, genre is a way (among many) for works to carry information. In the 1960s, Kenneth Burke described humans as "the symbol-making, symbol-using, symbol-misusing animal" and defined rhetoric as "the use of symbols to induce cooperation in those who by nature respond to symbols" (Coe 332-33). Burke's classic definition emphasizes that rhetoric is a human endeavor, undertaken by people in order to communicate with other people. Clearly genre—whether one emphasizes its formal, thematic, or social nature—is essential to communication: the rhetorical nature of genre is "the way [in which] textual relations between the senders and receivers of messages are organized in a structured situation of address" (Frow 74).

Calling genre rhetorical is also to acknowledge that it does not exist in a vacuum. Genre is "a classification based on the fusion and interrelation of the elements in such a way that a unique kind of rhetorical act is created" (Campbell and

Jamieson 25). Further, it exists in a series of relationships not simply between people but to other generic works. As Campbell and Jamieson (1978) suggest, genre, like all rhetoric, "is influenced by prior rhetoric" (26). Thus, many theorists emphasize the formal and thematic resemblances between works classified as a single genre, the formal focusing upon the "shaping" of the medium involved, the thematic upon the "set of *topoi*, recurrent topics of discourse . . . recurrent iconography, or . . . recurrent forms of argumentation" (Frow 74-75).

The classic model of rhetoric—with its elements of speaker, audience, and purpose—elucidates some of these relationships; for example, Dubrow calls genre a "code of behavior between the author and his reader" (2); and in college classrooms, freshmen composition students are now drilled in the relationship between purpose and genre. If any of these elements is missing rhetorically, formally, or thematically, the model fails and the communication act does not occur. Other theorists give examples of some interdependencies which define genre: Bruss writes that a genre depends upon its spatial and temporal placement, what she calls the "history of a genre" (5); Robert Stram (2000) notes in his book on film study that genre "relies on consensus" (57). Clearly, the concept of genre both draws from and contributes to the power of an individual work. Arguably, neither could exist without the other; for example, Bruss says of autobiography, the subject of her generic study, "[o]utside of the literary conventions that create and maintain it, [genre] has no features—has in fact no being at all" (6). Further, genre-designation demonstrates how "the dynamics within the rhetorical acts of human beings, in different times and places, respond in similar ways as they attempt to encompass certain rhetorical problems" (Campbell and Jamieson 21).

Recognizing genre as rhetorical, formalistic, and thematic is also to recognize that it cannot exist in and of itself; rather, it is a social construct, depending in part

upon the “consensus” Robert Stam (2000) notes. Bruss points out that genre’s “existence depends upon the organized efforts of human intelligence” (5). It depends upon the social reality to which it is linked and on its response to the perceived demands of such situations. In other words, genre has been institutionalized in society, functioning in the same way as

a social institution, such as an established church or a legislative body, functions. It is often possible to challenge such institutions, sometimes to overthrow them, but it is virtually impossible simply to exclude them from our lives. (Dubrow 3)

Ignoring these deeply ingrained institutions essentially represents “a rebellion against them, rather than an act born of mere indifference” (Dubrow 4). In other words, critics may challenge genre, but cannot disregard it.⁵ Bruss explains that this interaction may be so effortless as to seem unconscious, but is in fact not:

All reading (or writing) involves us in a choice: we choose to pursue a style of subject matter, to struggle with or against a design. We also choose, as passive as it may seem, to take part in the interaction, and it is here that generic labels have their use. (4)

Generic labels, according to Bruss, lay out the choices available to those who engage with a text. Genre helps give the text power, and rhetorical use of genre is a way in which authors, readers, and critics may try to create, experience, or control the power of a text. On the one hand, an author may invite or expect a reader or critic to adapt a genre to “the aesthetic and social conditions of one’s age and to the predisposition of one’s own temperament” (Dubrow 14). On the other, there is room within genres for transformation and resistance (Bawarshi 93).

Genre and Authors

Every rhetorical act begins with the originator of that act, the person who wishes to communicate: in literature, the author. In *Genre and Invention of the Writer*, Anis Bawarshi (2003) writes that invention—the conceptualization stage of the rhetorical act—is the “site in which writers act within and are acted upon by the social and rhetorical conditions we call genres” (7). For Bawarshi, genre is acting upon the writers in the place where they “acquire, negotiate, and articulate the desire to write” (7); in fact, the influence of genre begins even before the creation of genre, affecting an author’s decision to begin to write—or even the very desire to do so. Once authors begin to write, Bawarshi says they “write within genres and themselves are invented by genres” (7); thus, genre can be used by authors to control material and readers but genre also controls authors.

It follows that if authors consciously choose a particular genre in which to communicate, as Bruss suggests they do, they also may choose the *topoi* and the rhetorical light in which they want the work to be read, i.e., the intertextuality they hope to define, inspire, or encourage. Northrop Frye explains in his 1957 book *Anatomies of Criticism* that an author very rarely sits down to write without thinking of the genre in which to write:

The poet’s intention to produce a poem normally includes the genre, the intention of producing a specific kind of verbal structure. The poet thus is incessantly deciding that certain things . . . belong in his structure, and that what he cuts out in revision does not, though it may be good enough in itself to belong somewhere else. (246)

Dubrow believes the choice an author makes in genre creation has great significance: she says it entails “issuing certain statements about [that author’s] art and often about art in general” (10). Playing on Harold Bloom’s ideas in *Anxiety of*

Influence (1973)—in which he posits that authors have a nearly Oedipal relationship with their literary “fathers”—Dubrow says authors create genre with varying intentions. They may adopt a particular genre, especially a well-established one in order “to imply a respect for the past, or at least for one particular period or school within it” (10); write in a genre outside the dominant literary culture so they “align [themselves] with a subculture, with the rebellious sons who are challenging the authoritarian fathers” (12); even subvert the expectations of what appears to be a conventional genre in order to “choose to speak in slang” (13), thus inviting readers to adjust to a transforming or resisting author (Bawarshi 93), their personal inclinations, and “the aesthetic and social conditions” of their own period (Dubrow 14). Further, genres authors choose are “complex structures” in which “formal . . . rhetorical, and . . . thematic” dimensions have “a constitutive role” even though “different genres give a different weight” to these three dimensions of structure (Frow 76-77).

Genre and Readers

Since a genre carries so much of the weight of an author’s intent in creating a text, readers find genre especially useful as a guide for understanding how to experience a particular work. Dubrow says genre helps to prepare readers for the literary landscape they are about to enter: “recognition of a genre encourages us to relate whatever the work at hand is evoking to the experiences portrayed in other works we have read in the same genre” (34). She also cites Roland Barthes’s assertion (1981) that it is in relation to other texts within a genre that readers make sense of certain events in a text rather than in relation to their own experiences. In other words, readers will suspend their own expectations or experiences in favor of what the genre signals that their expectations or experiences should be: they will,

for example, believe time travel is not only possible but probable when reading science fiction, or that a talking animal may narrate his own life story in an animal autobiography. Dubrow further sees genre expectations as a type of “contract” between the author and reader. For example, authors use certain codes within various works of fiction to signal to readers that what they are experiencing is not real; if that contract is broken by the author, readers’ generic experiences are altered and readers may, in fact, feel betrayed and refuse to continue to participate in the interaction. Bruss says genre operates not to tell readers the construction of a text “as much as how we should ‘take’ that style or mode or construction—what force it should have for us” (4). Genres are for Bruss not an ironclad “law” dictating how readers must read; rather, she believes them useful as points of entry into the text as well as guidelines against which readers may measure their expectations of the genre.

Genre and Critics

Engaging in genre criticism can mean negotiating between the Scylla of overgeneralization on the one hand and the Caribides of essentialism and reductionism on the other: both can do enormous disservice to the text under consideration. By placing a work in a genre, a critic uses the weight of a generic label to further particular arguments about the text. According to Dubrow, such a step is seldom undertaken “lightly or unthinkingly” (3) because genre is deeply engrained in the fabric of critical assessment (4). Indeed, criticism has itself become a genre, one that, in Northrop Frye’s words, is “evidently something of an art” (*Anatomy* 3), with specific expectations it must meet and ways in which it must be controlled.

Genre analysis can be a powerful tool critics may use to recognize and define the power of a text:

When a generic claim is made, the critical situation alters significantly. Because the critic is now arguing that a group of discourses has a synthetic core in which certain significant rhetorical elements, e.g., a system of belief, lines of argument, stylistic choices, and the perception of the situation, are fused into an indivisible whole. (Campbell and Jamieson 21)

A powerful structure—constituted by rhetorical, thematic, and formal dimensions—is thus posited, described, and sent out to begin its intertextual existence.

Genre criticism can also be a tool critics may use to control the power of a text. The text can become a mere “object” for close study, and indeed New Criticism actively discounted the author or reader of a work from its considerations. Problems can arise with the kind of generic labeling Stam recognizes, for example, in film: *extension* (the breadth or narrowness of labels); *normativism* (having preconceived ideas of criteria for genre membership); *monolithic* definitions (as if an item belongs to only one genre); *biologism* (a kind of essentialism in which genres are seen as evolving through a standardized life cycle) (128-29).

For Campbell and Jamison, genre analysis not only “recognizes that all rhetorical acts resemble other rhetorical acts” but also “emphasizes the symbolic and rhetorical contexts in which rhetorical acts function” (26). They point to the work of Frye as exemplary of this generic perspective. Frye uses the terms “centripetal” and “centrifugal” to describe his critical method. In science, these terms denote the forces that act at the same time on an object moving in a circular direction, such as a rock being spun on a string: centripetal is the string that pulls the rock inward, and centrifugal is the force that pushes the rock outward. In the same way, genre analysis, according to Frye, “will always have two aspects, one turned inward toward the structure of literature [centripetal] and one turned outward toward the other

cultural phenomena that form the social environment of literature [centrifugal]" (*Critical Path* 25). He calls both movements essential because, while it is certainly appropriate to analyze the structure of a work, that understanding alone does not develop "any explanation of how the structure came to be what it was and what its nearest relatives are" (*Archetypes* 1447). Further, Frye says, the critic should simply seek to recognize a text for what it is and understand it in relation to other texts:

the purpose of criticism by genres is not so much to classify as to clarify traditions and affinities, thereby bringing out a large number of literary relationships that would be not noticed as long as there were no context established for them. (*Anatomy* 247-48)

Just as both forces working on the rock on a string are what keep it continually spinning, Frye says both centripetal and centrifugal forces are necessary in genre analysis to reach a full understanding of the text in question as well as other relationships it may have.

Several controversial areas exist in genre criticism. An author creates genre for a very specific purpose with a specific audience in mind, with no place, seemingly, for the critic. Is the critic an interpreter of genre, and if so, for whom? Is Bruss correct that the critic, with the benefit of history, can "delight" in the "ability to see what an author busily engaged in his task cannot"? (20). In addition, what place does evaluation have in genre consideration? And why are some genres considered less important, weighty, or scholarly than others? Specifically, which of the humans involved in the communicative/rhetorical act determines the value of a genre or a particular work within that genre?

Jane Tompkins (1985) addresses the latter question in *Sensational Designs*. Frye had argued that criticism should seek only to understand rather than evaluate literature, that value judgment "follows the vacillations of fashionable

prejudice" (*Anatomy* 9). Tompkins discusses the influence critics have had on the canon of American literature:

[Critics] have become responsible for the way we understand entire genres and whole periods of literary history, determining which authors are important, which texts are read, what vocabulary critics use to discuss them, and so on . . . criticism creates American literature in its own image (199)

For Tompkins, critics—"a very small, socially, culturally, geographically, sexually, and racially elite" (200)—are the driving force behind the "fashionable prejudice" of readers. Against this critical perspective, she argues for a "competing attempt" to understand American literature, with "the notion of literary texts as doing work, expressing and shaping the social context that produced them" (200). In other words, Tompkins would have contemporary readers and critics of texts that are not currently in critical favor—some falling outside the scope of critical attention altogether—consider what the neglected genres accomplished.

Early in his critical career, Stanley Fish (1980) said, "texts are what they do"; Tompkins says, in effect "texts are what they did." According to genre critics like Frye in his time, and Dubrow and Frow today, both are right. Determining what texts "did" may not always be easy. As Bruss points out, a critic approaching a literary text from another era—for example, considering a nineteenth-century work in the twenty-first century, as this study does—faces a serious challenge. She asks,

The rules that make form dynamic, that ascribe intention and direction to a textual design, are tacit even for members of the same literary community—how much more silent are they for us looking on a century or more away? (19)

In other words, how does a critic—a responsible critic who wants to demonstrate the power of genre—begin to understand the significance that a genre, or a particular work within a genre, has had or, indeed, still has? Bruss explains that there are certain linguistic signals within a work, genre being one of them, with which “we can proceed to grope our way into the situations” (20). The best critics can do is make a good faith effort to read the contexts and intentions signaled by the rhetorical, formal, thematic, and social dimensions of a genre. It is no wonder Stam calls genre analysis “a theoretical minefield” (128).

Chapter Two: *Black Beauty* and the Critics

Perhaps nowhere is the disparity of expectation regarding genre as evident as in the critical response to *Black Beauty*. Originally praised for its verisimilitude in depicting the lives of working-class animals and men, the narrative has waxed and waned in critical appreciation. Because of its most receptive audience—children—and its fantastic elements, the work has usually been categorized as children’s literature and received little or no critical attention until fairly recently. Late twentieth-century critics often fall into the traps of genre-based criticism delineated by Robert Stam (2000): they misread or misjudge *Black Beauty* because of preconceived ideas of genre (extension), a too-rigid view of genre (normativism), a belief that the “life cycle” of a genre has run its course (biologism), or an incomplete understanding of the multiple genres into which the work falls (monolithicism) (128-29). To this list I would add the trap Jane Tompkins (1985) identifies: a lack of appreciation for a particular genre (elitism), in the case of children’s literature, for example, not recognizing the quality of the genre, not examining multiple levels of meaning (and multiple genres), or not considering the issue of abridged-for-children editions. These critical traps rob the text of its full potential as a work of art.

Critics have placed *Black Beauty*—recognized as animal autobiography but most often loosely referred to as a novel—in various genres, from children’s literature to humanitarian propaganda, with disparate results: the work has been judged a critical success or failure many times over based simply upon the critic’s generic expectations. The rise and fall of *Black Beauty* in critical estimation can thus be traced in roughly chronological order within these varying genres. Critics from the

mid-1990s forward have begun to see a previously unrecognized depth and craft to the work; more importantly, in the present day, a more fluid consideration of genre and less generically constrained readings of *Black Beauty* have opened up new areas of appreciation.

Although most critics from the time of its publication have had no difficulty in speaking of *Black Beauty* as a novel, there is an inherent haziness in the definition: the generic term *novel* is a relatively recent literary construct—many scholars date the English novel from *Robinson Crusoe's* 1719 publication and believe the form achieved its apex in the early nineteenth century—and incorporates many different forms and sub-genres. In fact, a novel is defined as much by what it is not as what it is: it is not a short story or a novella, and it is not bound by any particular structure, style, or subject matter; indeed, for any one attempt at solid definition, several exceptions come to mind. Generally, a *novel* is a work of fiction (although many contain non-fictive elements) written in prose (even though some are in verse) that includes characters who undergo change (while some do not), follows a narrative line (while some do not), and maintains a degree of reality (which some absolutely do not).⁶

In the 1930s, Mikhail Bakhtin argued of the developing form that “every novel is a hybrid” (366) and said that novels are not so much a genre as “a force”; in other words, “a novel can include, ingest, devour other genres and still retain its status, but other genres cannot include novelistic elements without impairing their own identity” (13). The generic term “novel,” then, as used in this study, is an umbrella term to encompass many disparate genres. Thus, seeing *Black Beauty* as a novel does not exclude it from the many other genres into which critics have tried placing it: children’s literature, fable, and animal autobiography. While these genres may in many cases overlap—for example, some critics consider animal autobiography to be

children's literature, while others see it as humanitarian literature—they all integrate within the novel form.

The nineteenth century, "the golden age" of the novel in Britain, contributed such works as *Wuthering Heights* (1847), *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865), and *Treasure Island* (1882) to literature. Broadly speaking, novels such as these are rousing adventure tales, full of fantastic elements, compelling mystery, striking characters, and wonderful storytelling. Many critics claim these same elements for *Black Beauty*: reviews of the time were "laudatory enough to suit the vainest author" (Chitty 274). Still later, a review of the 1890 American edition validates Sewell's "happy decision" to frame her message as a novel that was not at all "namby-pamby" (*Critic* 305). A more recent critic, Lopa Prusty (1996), says the novel form allowed Sewell "to exercise her delight in words and the written form" (6). *Black Beauty* is "engaging for its affective qualities, its memorable characters, and their vividly described experiences" (8). Anne Ludlin (2005) explains the book's continuing appeal by pointing out that Sewell was a "vivid storyteller" (281); in addition, both children and adults enjoy an exciting storyline—and with its midnight gallops to fetch the doctor, barn fires, steam engine encounters, runaway horses, narrow escapes, and thundering hooves, *Black Beauty* provides just that.

Yet at the same time, the narrative provides more than "just that." Carl Jung stresses that a culture transmits archetypes by means of its stories; thus readers should not be lulled by the apparent simplicity of *Black Beauty* into thinking of it as a simple story, nor should they dismiss the subtleties that may exist even in an apparently simple story, for the act of storytelling itself is a powerful art. In her 1993 Nobel Lecture, Toni Morrison says, "[n]arrative has never been merely entertainment for me. It is, I believe, one of the principal ways in which we absorb knowledge" (7). In even the simplest of stories, "[n]arrative is radical, creating us at the very

moment it is being created" (27). Storytelling also allows for communication of ethical consciousness. It is much easier to tell a story than to explain ethical insights directly; in fact, Dell de Chant and Daryl Fasching (2001) argue that without the story, "the abstract explanation will itself seem unconvincing" (22). Further, says Philip Pullman (2003), "[w]e don't need lists of rights and wrongs, tables of do's and don'ts: we need books, time, and silence. 'Thou shalt not' is soon forgotten, but 'Once upon a time' lasts forever" (Rabinovitch "Interview"). Readers of narrative must be willing to take the risk of engaging with the "once upon a time" in order to learn something of the here and now.

The idea of the "once upon a time" and the apparent simplicity of *Black Beauty* have created difficulty for critics, as has the very basis of the novel: a speaking horse relating his life story. Because "animals' thoughts and intentions are unrecordable," says Erica Fudge (2004), "humans have historically asserted that they lack thoughts and intentions" (22). This is evident in the critical response to the narrator in *Black Beauty*; for example, Diedre Pitts (1974) dismisses the idea of a talking animal narrator as an outright "flaw" in a work of otherwise realistic fiction (170). While this fantastic premise stands alone—the work is indeed realistic otherwise—it immediately suggests the genre of children's literature for the novel. The trouble with this designation is essentially the same as with the designation of the work as a novel: the lack of specific boundaries about what constitutes children's literature. Children have long taken pleasure in "adult" reading material; by the same token, adults are often reading over the shoulders of children. Throughout the nineteenth century, according to Peter Hunt (2004), children's literature fell into roughly two categories: one took on a more didactic form with an emphasis on moral education, while a separate body of works emerged whose sole aim was to delight and entertain children—works such as the English translation of Grimm's fairy tales,

Carroll's Wonderland novels, or even penny dreadfuls—and left any and all moralizing strictly outside the text. Gradually, over the course of the century, these two purposes merged in many works; hence, both children and adults could appreciate works by authors such as Charles Dickens, Robert Ballantyne, and Anna Sewell on an aesthetic level and still receive moral insight.

Although her instructional and moralistic tone intermingled with a rousing adventure was the conventional mode of Victorian children's literature, Sewell did not originally intend *Black Beauty* as a children's work. She referred to the text as "a little book, its special aim being to induce kindness, sympathy, and an understanding treatment of horses" (qtd. in Gavin *Dark Horse* 178).¹² Nevertheless, Adrienne E. Gavin, whose biography of Anna Sewell appeared in 2004, writes that Sewell's publishers quickly came to understand *Black Beauty's* usefulness to a juvenile audience. The Education Act of 1870, which legally established public education in England, led to the need for "a huge amount of educational material"; and *Black Beauty*, "viewed as a morally correct book, was eventually being sold by the box rather than the volume" (Pitts 169). By February of 1878, Sewell was "awaiting proofs of a school edition" (Weedon 186).

That *Black Beauty* is a beloved classic of children is without question; the issue is the critical perception of the value of the work as children's literature. In addition to its use as a textbook, *Black Beauty's* value for children was attested to by reviewers of the time: according to *The School Guardian*, the book should be "wherever children are" (qtd. in Gavin *Dark Horses* 186). Later critics, however, took issue with the book, for various reasons, as not suitable for children; commentators in the 1960s and 70s found the moralizing tone a defect. May Arbuthnot (1964), for example, complained about Beauty's blatantly high-minded discourse:

His social judgments are those of a genteel lady . . . Bad language, dirty clothes, and the smell of liquor offended his refined sensibilities—not as a horse . . . but as a perfect Victorian lady. (340)

She goes on to argue that Beauty “thinks and talks out of horse character [and] is so full of human proprieties that he ceases to be convincing as a horse” (424). Ten years later, Andrew Stibbs agreed with Arbuthnot’s assessment, describing *Black Beauty* as a “didactic tract,” and arguing that Beauty and the other horse characters are simply “mouthpieces, enabling the author through them to outline a social abuse or rule of horsemanship” (“Tales” 129). Further, he says, the characters, human and horse alike, are flat representations with allegorical names that undergo little or no change: for example, “Farmer Thoroughgood, for a thoroughly good farmer; Skinner, Filcher, and Smirk for villains who are, respectively, extortionist, thief, and humbug; and Merrylegs who is merry, Ginger who is hot and spicy, and Captain who is military” (130).⁸ Finally, in the counterculture spirit of the age, Stibbs attacked the work’s value: because the obedient, docile, passive protagonist is such a poor role model for children, he would allow the book to remain in the library but never recommend it to a reader.

Since that time, however, critical opinion has shifted regarding *Black Beauty* and its suitability for children. The novel’s aim, to induce kindness and compassion for horses, imparts an important lesson for children, according to Melissa Pierson (2000). She believes that horse-crazy girls (or boys, for that matter) who read and absorb the lessons of kindness imparted in *Black Beauty* grow into adults upon whom “the imprint remains, a part of their bones and their cells” (11); they grow into adults who are “the thoughtful, the intelligent, the ones with unruined hearts” (122). In other words, she says, they are more human(e). Holly Blackford, a child and adolescent clinical psychologist at Rutgers University, found that *Black Beauty* does

indeed have a positive effect on children, particularly young girls. Her 2002, two-year study measured the affective response certain books elicited from girls 11-16 and revealed that girls are far more than passive consumers; rather, "they are co-producers of meaning and negotiate with texts in complex and interesting ways" (4). *Black Beauty* was among the works to which these girls responded most strongly, and they did so on a visceral level with great empathy.

Black Beauty's "once upon a time" sensibility and simple nature also suggests placement in a sub-genre of children's literature, the fable. This designation must again be made with reservations, for as Horst Dölvers points out in his 1997 study of fables, the term "is not very easy to define rigorously" (92); and the genre consists of "a subject that may occasionally appear simple but is frequently anything but plain" (14). Dölvers inventories a wide variety of fables and fabular writings from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, tracing their use as educational material, political and religious propaganda, social allegory, satire, and creative literature, intended more often for adults than children. He explains, for example, that social fables were the preferred method of propaganda for the Chartist movement.⁹ Dölvers also uses R. L. Stevenson's 1874 essay on fable to trace the nineteenth-century fable's increasing complexity, summarizing Stevenson's thinking that fable could not be the same after 1859 because "a comical story of an ape touches us quite differently after the proposition of Mr. Darwin's theory" (qtd. in Dölvers 92). Instead of the traditional animal tale, Stevenson says, later nineteenth-century fables rely on analogies and become "less and less fabulous" in their form; in addition, "the moral tends to become more indeterminate and large . . . and the fable begins to take rank with all the other forms of creative literature" (qtd. in Dölvers 93).

Still, says Dölvers, "fables are told to convey truths concerning invariants of human behavior" (105), frequently using basic sign vehicles such as "animals,

plants, or inanimate things, which are presented as capable of speaking and acting rationally and (im)morally" (106). While he points out that the world of the fable is "obviously a long way from everyday experience," Dölvers also emphasizes that the acceptance of fantastic elements—such as a talking horse—depends upon the reader's willingness to abandon skepticism and enter the fable. He says this engagement is essential "because, on the reader's side, the fable's feints of truth depend on decoding and deciphering" (106) the signs the fabulist is presenting. These signs are fairly stable: foxes are wily, bees are busy, and wolves are cruel. Nevertheless, there can arise an ambiguity in a sign's meaning; for example, the sun, generally seen as a majestic and benevolent presence, may actually be an antagonist, causing discomfort or harm to another character. A text with this oscillation of meaning "demands the reader's activity—his or her working out of alternative meanings which depend on and revitalize each other or even cancel each other out" (111). In other words, the reader must actively engage with the "once upon a time."

Although a contemporaneous reviewer said Sewell "might not have a mind as powerful as Swift's" (*The Critic* 305), Dölvers declares *Black Beauty's* "discursive ambivalence" a match for Book 4 of *Gulliver's Travels* (1726)—also about horses, ironically (146). Using a semiotic analysis to demonstrate the clash of signifiers, he points out Sewell's intentional wordplay in such statements as Ginger's ironic declaration about her abusive breaking-in as "the first experience I had of men's kindness, and it was all force." In addition, he argues, the novel "displays the clash of two vocabularies" (the horse's and the human's) that "imply quite different value systems" (153). For example, he juxtaposes the equine definition of *good* ("someone willing to work") against the human definition ("something to be worked to its absolute capacity"): "the same words are . . . used as distorting mirrors to evoke

reflection and sympathy in the reader" (156).¹⁰ In considering *Black Beauty* as a type of fable, Dölvers posits that among the many animal stories in Victorian children's literature that have been largely forgotten, Sewell's text remains popular not due "to an overly seductive simplicity but, quite on the contrary, to a floating of meaning that the text suggests on various levels" (146); he believes Sewell "shows great skill in handling her oscillating signifiers so as to create fantasy as a mirror phenomenon of reality" (147). In other words, Sewell's textual, moral, and linguistic ambiguities are what make *Black Beauty's* "feints of truth" realistic.

The "floating of meaning" and "discursive ambivalence" Dölvers sees in *Black Beauty* allow for what Tess Cosslett (2006) says are "various analogies between animals and types or classes of humans" (142). In spite of the fact that, as Paul Collins (2004) writes, "Sewell attempted one of the most radical alterations of narrative in all of nineteenth-century literature" in her construction of an equine subjectivity (16), Jennifer Mason (2005) uses *Black Beauty* to lament the way a text about animals, particularly if it uses anthromorphism, is a subject for serious critical study only insofar as scholars can reveal "the animal to be no more than a screen for some specifically human concern" (21). This echoes the opinion Craig Smith expresses in his 2002 critical reevaluation of Virginia Woolf's *Flush*, a biography about Elizabeth Barret-Browning's spaniel: although he believes Woolf was experimenting with "modernist literary techniques in the mapping of canine subjectivity" (348), any serious criticism of the text has "approached it as a feminist allegory of the subjugation of women in Victorian England" (349).¹¹ Thus a work like *Black Beauty* can retain its status as novel or children's literature and still be read as social commentary, with the critic simply placing the identity of their chosen Other onto the narrator. Beauty's body has carried the weight of many identities: women, children, servants, workers, slaves, even Sewell herself.

One of the first critics to give another identity to Beauty was Ruth Padel in 1980, who argues the work reads “almost as one of the great feminist texts” (48) in shape and themes. Padel declares *Black Beauty* to be “anti-porn,” that is, written to defy “the pornographer’s favorite cliché: that the object used had no identity except a spirit whose curbing confirms the male user in enjoyment of his mastery” (51).¹² While she says Beauty follows the advice of his mother, “whose assumptions linger today behind the advice of *Cosmopolitan*,” to always do his best to “please (his) man,” she calls Ginger “the Antigone of Birtwick Hall,” who is “the indignant feminist” (52) raging against the system that ultimately kills her.

In 1994, Moira Ferguson argued that Sewell was able to “weave a horizontal text about a horse . . . with a vertical text” (49) of social commentary. Ferguson believes Sewell creates several Others in Beauty when she

linked slavery to cruelty, and helped reconstitute the definition of Englishness along gendered lines; she also stirred in a subterranean attack on the aristocracy, casting benign, ruling-class male protagonists in the role of enslavers. (35)

Thus, Ferguson identifies the horses in the novel with women, the working class, and, even more importantly, slaves; in fact, she points out several slave tropes in *Black Beauty* and goes so far as to describe several scenes in the novel that would resonate with readers of slave narratives.

Peter Stoneley (1999) gives both slave and female identities to Beauty, Sewell’s narrator; he assesses *Black Beauty* alongside *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, a relationship that has existed in the public’s mind since the subtitle “The *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of the Horse” was added to the American edition. In the two works—that Stoneley dubs “domestic realism” for their attempts by women to describe “the actual conditions of their lives”(54)—he says both Harriet Beecher Stowe and Sewell

grapple with “owning and projecting desire, especially in relation to the black male body” (55). He lays out the physical descriptions of Tom and Beauty side by side, rendered as they are in nearly identical terms, and then he compares the slave and the horse in terms of characteristics, personality, breeding, and essential castration by their “mistresses/creators” (59). Stowe and Sewell, he argues, must discipline and control their protagonists in the same way that they must discipline and control their own desire for the black male body that Sewell has coded as equine.

Stoneley also examines the ways in which Stowe and Sewell use sentiment in order to strengthen their case against cruelty. Although Sewell’s early biographer Susan Chitty (1971) writes, “perhaps the quality one admires most in Anna Sewell is her refusal to allow even one pale-haired little girl to die of tuberculosis” (246)—referring, of course, to what for James Baldwin (1955) is “the ostentatious parading of excessive and spurious emotion in Stowe” (14)—*Black Beauty* has been consistently accused of sentimentalism. These charges stem in part to the anthropomorphizing in the text. Smith remarks on the critical tendency to equate anthropomorphism with sentimentality: “to view nonhuman animal consciousness in human terms is, ipso facto, to sentimentalize it” (349). Lucy Grealy (2000) agrees that this “Disneyfication” allows us to project onto the talking animals “the way we would like things to be” and makes them “maudlin, over-sweetened versions of ourselves” (“Present Tense” 147). Critics leveling the sentimentality charge look no further than the account of the horse fair scene with its melodramatic plot turn and “happily ever after” ending for proof.¹³

While emotional affect may be a distasteful and ineffective tool in the present day, Cosslett reminds us of the complexity of the terms *sensibility* and *sentiment* in the time these works were composed: “they described a capacity to respond emotionally to suffering, which gave evidence of the refinement of the person

responding" (*Talking Animals* 15). Tompkins calls for a reevaluation in contemporary criticism of the strategy; in her 1985 study *Sensational Designs*, with a chapter on *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, she argues sentimental authors not only represent "a monumental effort to reorganize culture from a woman's point of view" (503), but also use sentimentalism intentionally, as an effective rhetorical strategy of the time in which the works were written. Likewise, Cosslett finds no reason why "feelings of pity and benevolence cannot be used to encourage a better treatment of animals" (*Talking Animals* 16). Stoneley argues that politics for Stowe and Sewell, in particular, was largely a matter of what makes someone "feel right": "private sentiment thus becomes the power that will reform public institutions" (27). If a reader can identify with and feel for the protagonist, then that reader may be more inclined to do something to help the group the protagonist represents, be it slave, woman, or animal. As Anne Lundin (2005) claims, "[t]hat the text is sentimental makes it powerful" (281) because of the emotional pull for the reader to identify with the horse. Collins, who asserts that "if literature can ever improve us, then the memoir—whether human or equine—might be the best form to achieve it" (19), says Beauty "does not flatter us with a cute simulation of humanity" (16); instead, he and his equine companions "demand that we put ourselves in their place and see how we'd like it" (17). In urging his audience to feel what he does, Beauty himself states his case well: "I have heard men say, that seeing is believing; but I should say that feeling is believing for as much as I had seen before, I never knew till now the absolute misery of a cab horse's life" (426).

Two critics identify Anna Sewell with the figure of Beauty. Both Andrienne Gavin, in a 1999 article that preceded her biography of Sewell, and Gina Marlene Dorre, in her 2002 article, read *Black Beauty* as Sewell's own life story, complete with biographical details, dearly-held values, religious doubts, and anxiety over her

own health. Gavin says that a Victorian woman limited in her choices, especially an invalid like Sewell, would have little or no chance for self-expression: "it was in the autobiographical novel . . . that she was finally able to express herself" ("Autobiography" 52) and gain a public. Further, Gavin sees Ginger and Beauty as an amalgam of Sewell's character, wishing to rebel at her unfair circumstances, yet choosing to "endure suffering as God's will" ("Autobiography" 57). Dorre also believes the dramatic tension of the novel demonstrates the struggle in Sewell's nature to accept or rebel against the restraints placed upon her. She writes, Sewell "inhabits the stable and runs among men" (168) in her novel, thus freeing herself from her actual physical and social constraints. In addition, in the figure of Beauty—a "bridled, harnessed, and eventually broken horse"—Dorre sees "the corseted and bustled woman in late-Victorian England" (157), suffering in the name of fashion.

Critics have indeed used *Black Beauty* to put forward various identities and human concerns; in fact, Mason says, Beauty himself has become so overloaded with these cultural screens that his body has disappeared under the weight of them. Although Erica Fudge (2004) points out that *Black Beauty* subverts the historical thinking regarding the relationship between humans and animals in which the human is considered superior because, after all, "it is always the humans performing the evaluation" (25), Mason believes criticism of this kind does not further the discourse between animals and human, since it "merely switches the sides being privileged" (21). In the same way "*Flush* may be accepted as a serious object of study only to the extent that it may be represented as being not really about a dog" (Smith 349), Mason says critics have not accepted the author's intentions in *Black Beauty*. She writes Sewell is not using horses to comment on women, children, servants, workers, slaves, or herself in the novel; rather, "Sewell [is] drawing on ideas about slaves to talk about horses" (208 n. 12).¹⁴ Mason reiterates what critics and readers at the

time of publication had already recognized: according to an 1890 reviewer, Sewell constructed *Black Beauty* to “let the horse make a plea for himself” (*The Critic* 305).

In titling her work *The Autobiography of a Horse*, Sewell placed it in a recognizable genre of the day, perhaps not realizing the degree to which she transcended the genre. Literally hundreds of animal autobiographies were published in England and the United States during this period, authored predominantly by women. Like fables, the conventions of animal autobiography include the possibility of a talking animal as narrator or even author: Hunt mentions Jemmy the donkey in Arabella Argus’ *The Adventures of a Donkey* (1815) who spoke of his “writing foot” as an example of cases “where pastures and paws seem to be plying pens with consummate ease” (462). However, unlike fables, “a connection was always made to the treatment and understanding of animals in the world outside the book” (Cosslett *Talking Animals* 1). With titles such as *The Life and Perambulations of a Mouse* (1783), *The Adventures of Poor Puss* (1809), *Pup: The Autobiography of a Greyhound* (1858), examples of this genre—sometimes called animal biographies (Smith), animal stories (Hunt), or even memoirs (Collins)—were unashamedly didactic, moralistic, and often thinly disguised political or religious tracts with minimal entertainment value. *Black Beauty* marks a change in both the length and the sophistication of the works in the genre. Critics agree: Margaret Blount (1975), Prusty, and Smith credit *Black Beauty* as the first full-length work in the genre. Dölvers adds praise for its integration of instructional and entertaining aims; Greally says it strikes an appropriate balance “neither overburdened by politics nor emptied of difficult content” (“Afterword” 220); Collins calls it “the most overlooked book in the entire canon” (8); Fudge says it is among “the most thorough animal lives” available to us (23); and Cosslett credits *Black Beauty’s* narrative voice with

“blurring the human/animal divide perhaps more effectively than the more self-conscious address to children” in other works of the genre (*Talking Animals* 69).¹⁵ Certainly, animal autobiography allows for social critique. Cosslett asserts, “the domestic animal’s movements between various owners . . . can give a comprehensive picture of society and its failings” (*Talking Animals* 64). As Jacques Derrida (2002) points out, the animals’ gaze “offers to my sight the abysmal limit of the human” (382): In other words, in the association between humans and animals, it is the human who suffers by comparison.

Sewell’s blurring of the human/animal divide pushes “the human . . . to identify with the horse experience” (Cosslett *Talking Animals* 70). As Derrida argues, “the animal . . . can look at me. It has a point of view regarding me. The point of view of the absolute other” (380). Collins echoes this opinion when he says, “memoir demands that we see the world through . . . someone who does not necessarily meet a single one of our expectations about how they should think or exist” (20). Grealy disagrees: she believes the fact that the narrator of *Black Beauty* is a talking horse actually insulates the audience from identification because animals have become “merely a projection of . . . our cuter self. The prospect of an actual encounter with the so-called other is excluded” (“Present Tense” 145).

For Dölvers, Collins, and particularly Cosslett, the differentiating “purpose of the animal autobiography is nearly always to argue for the better treatment of animals” (Cosslett *Talking Animals* 1); authors write about animals’ judging people in order to critique the way humans treat animals. Thus, identification with the animal protagonist is encouraged to arouse sympathy for the animals, not to arouse sympathy for an oppressed group represented by one or more animals. In 1947, Coleman Parsons (1947) dubbed early animal autobiographies “humanitarian literature” (156), marking their usefulness as animal rights propaganda. While Gavin

and Cosslett both point out that Sewell was not an official member of any formal animal protection movements, preferring to make her interventions on animals' behalf personally, the Royal Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA), founded in 1824, called *Black Beauty* "one of the best books recently published in support of our principles" (qtd. in Gavin *Dark Horse* 186); further, the book was published for many years with an official endorsement by the RSPCA.

In the United States, George Angell, considered by many to be the pioneer of the animal protection movement in America, began to publish *Our Dumb Friends*, the first animal protection paper in the world (Gavin *Dark Horse* 187), in 1882 and founded the American Humane Education Society (AHES) in 1888. "No one else" reports a historian of the movement, "has inspired the writing and caused the distribution of so many pages of humane literature" (qtd. in Mason 173). In 1890, a reader sent Angell a copy of *Black Beauty*, which he immediately began to publish in large numbers for American audiences—Mason reports distribution of over 600,000 copies in 1890 alone (168)—enthusiastically declaring in the introduction that this was "a book that would have as widespread and powerful [an] influence in abolishing cruelty to horses as *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had on the abolition of human slavery" (3). Like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Black Beauty* has survived because it is a strong, memorable narrative that captured the attention and hearts of its audience, not simply because of its value as humanitarian literature.¹⁶

As more critics have come to value the moral impulse and literary value of *Black Beauty*, they have arrived at very different conclusions about both the work's genre and the implications of that genre's interrelationships. What Ferguson described as a rhetoric of protest about mistreatment woven into a life story and privileged groups acting as enslavers suggests a generic model that Sewell could and

may have used. It was a genre that was pervasive and popular in England at the time and emotionally poignant with the power to change hearts and minds.

What I believed intuitively, Collins discovered accidentally, and Cosslett examines critically: “there is a clear formal parallel between the animal autobiography and the slave narrative, as published by the abolitionists to advance their cause” (Cosslett *Talking Animals* 80). The next sections of the thesis will examine this parallel, using Olney’s generic analysis of the slave narrative and Bruss’s theory of illocutionary force that expands the generic consideration to include the work’s contexts and authorial intention. This expansion strengthens my contention that Sewell consciously crafted her work to fit a genre extraordinarily popular in Britain at the time she was writing, a genre with which she, an activist raised in a literary family, would no doubt have been familiar: the ante-bellum slave narrative.

Chapter Three: *Black Beauty* as a Slave Narrative

Slave narratives, writes Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1985), are “the written and dictated testimonies of the enslavement of black human beings” (xii). They have been “arbitrarily . . . defined as . . . only those *written* works published pre-manumission (1865): “[t]he nature of the narratives, and their total rhetorical strategies and import, changed once slavery no longer existed” (xiii). For Robert Stepto (1985), slave narratives embody the “acquisition of a voice” by a former slave that “is quite possibly his only permanent achievement once he escapes” (225). The genre, according to Sterling Lecator Bland, Jr. (2000), is one of the most significant in U.S. American Literature:

At a time when American writers like James Fenimore Cooper, William Gilmore Simms, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman were struggling to find a form of literary expression that could be seen as distinctly “American,” fugitive slave narrators, in writing their stories—speaking for themselves—created literature that was itself uniquely “American.” (162)¹⁷

The argument of this thesis is that the rhetorical, formal, thematic, and social dimensions of the genre known as the *slave narrative* also characterize some animal autobiographies, in particular *Black Beauty*, the first full-length (Prusty 9), the most powerful (Lundin 280), and the most famous and enduring example (Hunt 421) of animal autobiography, one whose complexity transcends other examples of the genre (Dölvers 143). The slave narrative that is the focus of the comparison of this chapter is the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, the best known of the

published slave narratives, "a remarkable achievement" (Stephens 237) the one most frequently used as "the model for critical studies" (Heglar 32), and "at once the best example, the exceptional case, and the supreme achievement" (Olney 156).¹⁸

In 1985, James Olney argued that "conventions for slave narratives were so early and so firmly established" that one could create a "master outline" of the form, based upon the "great" slave narratives (152)--with Douglass's being "the greatest of them all" (153)--and "guiding the lesser ones" (152).¹⁹ Olney's outline of the characteristics of the narrative—which forms the organization of this chapter--corresponds remarkably to the literary conventions of Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty*. Of the twelve conventions that Olney lists, the 1845 *Narrative of Frederick Douglass* contains eleven; *Black Beauty* contains ten. The conclusion of this chapter will sketch out additional conventions that I suggest characterize slave narratives and also appear in *Black Beauty*.

Olney's "Master Outline"

Issues of Identity

According to Olney, slave narratives open with two important characteristics: first, the narrator states, "I was born . . ." and specifies "a place but not a date of birth"; then the narrator provides "a sketchy account of parentage, often involving a white father" (153). Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* opens in precisely this manner, with Douglass adding that he hasn't much accurate information, for "slaves know as little of their ages *as horses know of theirs*" (255 emphasis added), and separation from his mother since infancy prevented him from the "means of knowing" the truthfulness of his rumored heritage: "It was whispered that my master was my father" (256).²⁰ He does know that he was born in Maryland and that his early childhood days were spent with his grandmother on the outskirts of the Lloyd

plantation where he had "little to do" beyond a few chores and hunting with the plantation owner's son, who made him a sort of pet (270). He also recalls a few visits during the night from his mother, Harriet Bailey, who was a field hand on one of his master's farms some 12 miles away: "She would lie down with me" (255), he writes; but when she died, the lack of contact they had had makes him feel "much the same emotions I should probably have felt at the death of a stranger" (256). Douglass says he has (at least) two half-sisters and a half-brother, but "the early separation of us from our mother had well nigh blotted the fact of our relationship from our memories" (272).

In Sewell's novel, *Beauty* does not open with "I was born," but instead with a pastoral scene from his youth on an English farm, comparable to that the young Douglass may have enjoyed when he lived with his grandmother in the country, before he realized his status as a slave:

The first place that I can well remember was a large pleasant meadow with a pond of clear water in it. Some shady trees leaned over it, and rushes and water-lilies grew at the deep end. Over the hedge on one side we looked into ploughed fields, and on the other we looked over a gate at our master's house, which stood by the roadside; at the top of the meadow was a plantation of fir trees, and at the bottom a running brook overhung by a steep bank. (2)

Beauty's "sketchy account" of his parentage notes that his sire and grandsire were famous racehorses and establishes that his mother, Duchess, is a favorite broodmare of the Master, who "often called her Pet" (4). Given Farmer Grey's possession and complete control over Duchess's reproduction, Moira Ferguson (1994) suggests a "scarcely veiled sexual dimension" (37) to the relationship between the Master and Duchess. Farmer Grey also assumes the role of father and master to Beauty and his

siblings, presumably deciding to castrate Beauty because he believed a gelding would be far more tractable, and therefore a more fitting harness mate for the mare Ginger, as well as a proper mount for Mrs. Gordon and, later, Lady Anne.²¹

Unlike Douglass's relationship with his mother, Beauty's relationship with his mother lasts about four years and is very close. Beauty lives off her milk for many months: Duchess works in the field during the day, coming back so that "at night I lay down close by her" (2). When Beauty later learns that Rob Roy—one of Square Gordon's horses who had been maimed in a hunting accident and had to be destroyed—was his brother, he understands his mother's pain and reflects, "It seems that horses have no relations; at least, they never know each other after they are sold" (50). Beauty never knows how many brothers and sisters he may have. He does spend considerable time with his mother, even trotting beside her in a double harness on occasion; and Duchess gives Beauty the most important advice of his life: "A horse never knows who may buy him . . . do your best wherever it is, and keep your good name" (17).

Condition and Structure of Daily Life

Most slave narratives, as Olney indicates in his "master outline," offer valuable information about life under slavery: a "description of the amounts and kinds of food and clothing given to slaves, the work required of them, the pattern of a day, a week, a year" (153). Douglass's narrative, for example, describes the "troughs" (271) the slave children eat from, the lack of blankets and beds, and the "monthly allowance of food" and "yearly [supply of] clothing" for adults and children (260). He explains the ways in which plantations and farms are structured and the difference between "born" slaveholder and "adopted" slaveholders (286). He is careful to distinguish between the work of house slaves and field hands; the

opportunities available to slaves whose time is hired out; and the advantages of being a slave in the city—"almost a freeman"—as opposed to a slave on a remote plantation because "a sense of shame" protects the slave in the city whose condition is observed by "nonslaveholding neighbors" (275). He identifies several ways in which slave owners control their slaves, ranging from his description of the way in which the slave owner uses holidays as "conductors, or safety-valves, to carry off the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity" (300) and his lengthy account of his own life with a "negro-breaker" (299).

Similarly, *Black Beauty* offers information about the living conditions and structure of a Victorian horse's life, wrapping in and around the narrative line a commentary on equine care, feeding, handling, and training. Beauty describes the amounts and types of food he and his stable-mates are given; what types of harnesses, bridles, and saddles they wear; and the varying types of work he is expected to perform in his various positions. He often talks about the handling of the reins in tender mouths (80), proper driving techniques (252), when and how much water to give a horse (296), or even the humane way to end a horse's life (366).

Beauty also establishes a hierarchy among horses, privileging his own beginnings as a carriage horse for an aristocratic family and as his master's personal saddle horse. At that point in his life, he essentially defines himself as the equine equivalent of the house slave, given proper attention and care. However, when he is "ruined" by a drunken groom, he is sold and re-sold into subsequently worsening situations, until he winds up a cart horse—in a position comparable to that of a plantation field hand—whose sole purpose is to give the maximum amount of physical labor possible until he drops dead of exhaustion.

The proper balance between work and rest is a recurring theme in *Black Beauty*. Beauty explains the amount of work needed to keep horses healthy: too

much and they become worn and jaded; too little and they are likely to be so full of spirit as to be unmanageable. As a cab horse in London, Beauty and his companions do not have scheduled yearly holidays as do the slaves in Douglass's narrative. In fact, says Beauty, the holiday time of year is particularly trying: with all the balls, parties, and dances, "the work is hard and often late" (402). On several occasions Beauty is turned out to pasture to rest; he particularly enjoys a "rare treat" of an afternoon in a country pasture during his time as a cab horse:

When my harness was taken off, I did not know what I should do first—whether to eat the grass, or roll over on my back, or lie down and rest, or have a gallop across the meadow out of sheer spirits at being free; so I did all by turns. (342)

The quality of life Beauty and his companions experience depends upon the humans with whom they come in contact, based not upon social or economic status but upon how the humans treat animals. At the second horse-fair, Beauty says, while some buyers treat him roughly in their examination of him, some are "poor and shabby, but kind and human, with voices that I could trust" (436).

Cruelty of the Slaveholder, Resistance, and Escape

Olney identifies several conventions of the slave narrative that revolve around the cruelty of slaveholders. Slave narratives normally offer descriptions "of a cruel master, mistress, or overseer, details of first observed whipping and numerous subsequent whippings, with women very frequently the victims" (153). They often describe "a 'Christian' slaveholder (often of one such dying in terror) and the accompanying claim that 'Christian' slaveholders are invariably worse than those professing no religion" and include "an account of one extraordinarily strong, hardworking slave—often 'pure African'—who, because there is no reason for it,

refuses to be whipped" (153). In addition, Olney notes that a "description of successful attempt[s] to escape, lying by during the day, traveling by night guided by the North Star, reception in a free state by Quakers who offer a lavish breakfast and much genial thee/thou conversation" are customary in slave narratives. Sterling Lecater Bland (2000) argues that "[t]he tension generated in the fugitive slave narratives usually centers on the method of escape" since "the very existence of the narrative" means "the narrator had escaped" (12).

Douglass's early introduction to cruelty—the "bloody scenes" of the plantation (259)—occurs shortly after he leaves the care of his grandmother, when he witnesses the whipping of his Aunt Hester because she has been with her boyfriend at a time when Captain Anthony, their master, "desired her presence" (258), and when he sees a fellow-slave murdered by an overseer: "Mr. Gore . . . raised his musket to his face, taking aim . . . and in an instant poor Demby was no more" (268). His introduction to kindness that turns to cruelty occurs in Baltimore, when he is about seven or eight and his initially kind-hearted mistress, Sophia Auld, who has never owned slaves, becomes increasingly hard-hearted and spiteful the longer she owns slaves. His most serious experience of cruelty occurs when, at fifteen, he is sent by Master Thomas to be a field hand for Edward Covey, who "had acquired a very high reputation for breaking young [difficult] slaves" (289). Facing overwork, frequent beatings, and impossible living conditions, Douglass recalls that he is "goaded almost to madness at one moment and the next reconciling myself to my wretched lot" (294). Because Christian slave owners—including Covey—are definitely among the cruelest in Douglass's life, he even speculates that finding salvation worsens their temperaments (287). Douglass writes, "[W]e have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle plunderers for church members" (328). He considers "being the slave of a religious man the greatest

calamity that could befall me" (302). Mr. Freeland, who "made no pretensions to, or a profession of, religion" (301), is the man Douglass credits as being his "best master until I became my own master" (304). Douglass expresses contempt for "those bodies, north and south, calling themselves Christian churches, and yet in union with slaveholders" (329).²²

Beauty's introduction to cruelty occurs before he is two years old when he hears the "shriek" of the hare at the end of a hunt (10), followed shortly afterwards by a "loud bang and a dreadful shriek" (12) when a horse injured during the hunt is put down. Like Douglass, who never forgets cruel childhood scenes, Beauty notes that he has "never forgotten" (8) this event. During his life Beauty himself experiences mistreatment caused by ignorance or human vice, neglect, and finally downright physical abuse. At Birtwick Park, a country estate, Beauty becomes violently ill when improperly stabled after running himself to exhaustion because his young groom does not know to walk him until he cools. At Earlshall, the drunken head groom gallops him over gravel and causes him to fall, laming him, permanently scarring his knees, and ruining him for use as a "gentleman's horse" (234). Then he suffers painful sores when the owner of the suburban livery where he is rented out does not check that his harness has been properly fitted. His first experiences with serious cruelty, however, occur in the city: as a draft animal on the streets of London, Beauty is repeatedly beaten and whipped when he becomes unable to pull the heavy loads required of him. Although Beauty himself does not comment upon the effect of Christianity on those who own slaves, he does relate the words of one of his first grooms:

[c]ruelty was the devil's own trademark, and if we saw anyone who took pleasure in cruelty, we might know who he belonged to. . . . On the other hand, where we saw people who loved their neighbors, and

were kind to man and beast, we might know that was God's mark, for "God is Love." (114).

Jerry Barker, one of Beauty's owners, also notes that cab-men and their families cannot attend church because church-goers will not walk a few blocks to church on Sunday,²³ a comment that recalls Douglass's observation that Christian slave holders often refuse to allow their slaves to observe the Sabbath or to attend a Sabbath school.

The degree and regularity of the cruelty in the two works is underlined by the allegorical names of several of the characters. Douglass's narrative mentions Mr. Severe, who delights in wielding his whip, and Mr. Gore, who shoots the slave Demby in the face at close range, leaving only "blood and brains on the water" (268). *Black Beauty* identifies a Mr. Filcher, who steals the horses' oats to sell, and Nicholas Skinner, who would work the horses "as long as they'd go, and then sell 'em for what they'll fetch, at the knacker's or elsewhere" (432).

There are "strong, hardworking" characters in both narratives who resist the cruelty of their masters: in Douglass the character is Douglass himself; in Sewell the character is Beauty's friend Ginger. Driven by days of pain and despair at Covey's and facing the refusal of his owner to help him, Douglass resolves to fight, seizing "Covey hard by the throat" (298). He tells Covey that he had been used "like a brute for six months" and was "determined" that the treatment must stop. After almost two hours of fighting, Covey and Douglass reach an unspoken truce: Covey never whips Douglass again, and Douglass has fed a "few expiring embers of freedom," and restored "a sense of [his] own manhood" (298).

The beautiful Ginger, Beauty's carriage mate whom he admires for her "honest" effort and hard work as his "partner in double harness" (40), has experienced a very different life from Beauty's. Ginger tells Beauty she "never had

any one, horse or man, that was kind to me, or that I cared to please" (50). Her account of her "breaking in" is couched in the language of a slave woman's attempt to resist a rape:

several men came to catch me, and when at last they closed me in . . . one caught me by the forelock, another caught me by the nose and held it so tight I could hardly draw my breath; then another took my under jaw in his hard hand and wrenched my mouth open, and so by force they got on the halter and the bar into my mouth; then one dragged me along by the halter, another flogging behind, and this was the first experience I had of men's kindness; it was all force. (52)

The "high bred" Ginger, with her "great deal of spirit" (52) does not appreciate being "horseflesh" (54) and reacts with volatility—biting, kicking, rearing—when she feels abused. She tells Beauty about her treatment of so-called "Samson" Ryder, who had "a hard voice, a hard eye, a hard hand":

I felt my whole spirit set against him, and I began to kick, and plunge, and rear as I had never done before, and we had a regular fight; for a long time he stuck to the saddle and punished me cruelly with his whip and spurs, but my blood was thoroughly up, and I cared for nothing he could do if only I could get him off. At last, after a terrible struggle, I threw him off backward. I heard him fall heavily on the turf . . . and galloped off to the other end of the field (33)

On one occasion, when Lady W----- demands that York "get those horses' heads up" (192) by greatly shortening the bearing reins, even though Lord W----- has ordered otherwise—Ginger begins "plunging, rearing, and kicking in a most desperate manner," accidentally injuring Beauty (194). Ginger is, of course, beaten and badly bruised for her behavior and never draws the carriage again. Given to the "hard

rider" Lord George to become a hunter, the spirited Ginger exerts herself "to the utmost" in a steeplechase and is "ruined": "her wind was touched" and "her back was strained" by Lord George's weight (234). She shares the spirit of many rebellious slaves; but her rebellious periods do not have the results of Douglass's: she never recovers from the strain of the steeplechase, becomes a cab horse, with every step excruciatingly painful, and loses hope. When Beauty says to her, "You used to stand up for yourself if you were ill-used," Ginger replies, "men are strongest, and if they are cruel and have no feeling, there is nothing that we can do, but just bear it—bear it on and on to the end. I wish the end was come, I wish I was dead" (364). A short time later Beauty sees a cart with a dead horse and hopes the "dreadful" sight is Ginger so "her troubles would be over" (366).

There are no escapes described in Douglass's narrative, even though Douglass writes that "on the third day of September, 1838, I left my chains and succeeded in reaching New York without the slightest interruption of any kind" (319). He says it would give him "great pleasure" to explain "the facts pertaining to [his] most fortunate escape" but fears that "others would thereby be involved in the most embarrassing difficulties" and such an account "would most undoubtedly induce greater vigilance on the part of slaveholders" (315). (He does offer details in later editions of his narrative.)

Likewise, there is no escape in *Black Beauty*—unless one agrees with Beauty's thinking that death for Ginger has been an escape similar to Douglass's reflection that his mother escaped "hardships and suffering" (256) through death. Beauty himself is rather passive and tolerant in his behavior. Ferguson writes that as long as he is treated well, "a rather solipsistic Black Beauty judges the world a happy place" (42). Keeping in mind his mother's advice to "do his best" to "keep his good name," Beauty works to his full capacity for his respective masters, up to and including the

driver who whips him unceasingly, and "would even whip me under the belly, and flip the lash out at my head. Indignities like these took the heart out of me terribly, but still I did my best and never hung back" (428).

Beauty's form of "escape" is the good fortune of being purchased--when he is about thirteen or fourteen and in the company of "old broken-down horses" (436)—by Mr. Thoroughgood and his grandson Willie, whose "kind words and caresses" as well as "[t]he perfect rest, the good food, the soft turf, and gentle exercise" (442) restore him. Beauty ends his days with Joe Green, a former groom at Squire Gordon's, and the Squire's three spinster sisters. He fancies some mornings, before he is "quite awake," that he is "still in the orchard at Birtwick, standing with [his] old friends under the apple-trees" (452).

Account of Slave Auction

An "account of a slave auction, of families being separated and destroyed, of distraught mothers clinging to their children as they are torn from them, of slave coffles being driven South" (153) is another convention that Olney believes has characterized slave narratives from the beginning. Douglass does not describe a slave auction in his narrative. However, after Captain Anthony's death, he describes the disposal of his old master's estate, noting that "horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children" were all "subjected to the same narrow inspection" for valuation and then divided between Master Andrew and his sister, Mrs. Lucretia (282). He is between the ages of ten and eleven as he realizes,

Our fate for life was now to be decided. We had no more voice in that decision than the brutes among whom we were ranked. A single word from the white men was enough—against all our wishes, prayers, and

entreaties—to sunder forever the dearest friends, dearest kindred, and strongest ties known to human beings. (282)

As the slaves are divided, Douglass believes he suffers “more anxiety” than many of his fellow-slaves because he has known kind treatment. He thanks “a kind Providence” that he is given to Mrs. Lucretia and sent back once again to live with Master Hugh Auld in Baltimore (283).

Beauty finds himself in one situation in which an estate is divided and two auctions. At the disposal of property, he loses his happiest home because Squire Gordon is forced to move for the sake of his wife’s health. Within a matter of days, the Squire’s estate is dissolved, including the stable of horses sold to various owners. Beauty and his equine family, complexly social herd animals, scarcely have a chance to bid one another goodbye. At an auction or horse fair a few years later, Beauty reflects, “No doubt a horse fair is a very amusing place to those who have nothing to lose; at any rate, there is plenty to see” (278). He describes the variety of horses represented: young horses fresh from the country, ponies, cart-horses, fancy saddle-horses, and “in the background . . . a number of poor old things, sadly broken down with hard work . . . and some very dejected-looking old horses” (279-80). Beauty, the one who is supposed to be judged by the buyers, says he is the one judging the buyers—“by their manners” (280). Like Douglass, Beauty has known kind treatment and reports that he is “dreadfully afraid” that “a hard-faced, loud-voiced man” (282) will purchase him.

At Beauty’s second auction, he is older and has been handled badly. As a result he is with the old broken-down horses, undergoing evaluation “to be sold to anybody who’d give twenty dollars” (434). He relates that he is poked, prodded, handled roughly, cursed, and humiliated by would-be purchasers as he optimistically searches the crowd in hope of finding a benevolent face to purchase him. For

Douglass, the property disposal had ended well; for Beauty, the estate disposal and horse fairs both end well: in each case he finds a happy home.

Literacy and Naming

Olney argues that a "record of the barriers raised against slave literacy and the overwhelming difficulties encountered in learning to read and write" is a usual convention of the slave narrative as well as the former slave's "taking of a new last name (frequently one suggested by a white abolitionist) to accord with new social identity as a free man, but retention of first name as a mark of continuity of individual identity" (153).

Douglass first realizes the importance of literacy when Master Hugh scolds his wife for teaching Douglass how to read. Douglass begins to understand that literacy is "the pathway from slavery to freedom" (273). He also finds that Master Hugh is correct: learning to read creates a "discontentment . . . to torment and sting my soul to unutterable anguish." Sometimes he thinks of "learning to read" as "a curse rather than a blessing": "It had given me a view of my wretched condition with no remedy. . . . I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity" (279).

The issue of literacy, of course, does not arise in *Black Beauty*; but names are important in both works, with Douglass fulfilling Olney's description exactly. Although his mother named him Frederick Augustus Washington Bailey, Douglass himself disposes of the two middle names and in slavery is generally known as Frederick Bailey, sometimes as Fred. He calls himself Stanley during his escape and changes his last name to Johnson in New York. Later, he bestows on Mr. Johnson, a Northern abolitionist, the "privilege" of choosing his last name, but insists he will not change his first name: "I must hold on to that, to preserve a sense of my identity" (322). The abolitionist, "who had been reading 'Lady of the Lake,'" suggests "Douglass" as a

last name; and Douglass writes, "From that time until now I have been called 'Frederick Douglass'" (322).

Beauty cannot control what he is called and undergoes several name changes in his autobiography, the changes in name reflecting changes in his status. Farmer Gray calls him simply "my little Darkie"; at Birtwick Park, his aristocratic home, he is first called "Black Beauty"; to Lady Anne he is "Black Auster." As his status and condition deteriorate, he is simply called "Jack" by the cabman Jerry and "Blackie" by cruel Jakes, the carter. In all of these stages, however, Beauty does follow his mother's advice to keep his "good name." As Ruth Padel (1980) writes, "Beauty loses his name through his experiences" but keeps his "good name" by his own actions, "until the anagoresis in the last chapter" (48), where he is recognized by a former groom and called by the name with which he has always self-identified, Black Beauty.

Reflections on Slavery

The final convention of the slave narrative that Olney describes—"reflections on slavery" (153)—is, of course, important in both Douglass's narrative and *Black Beauty*. Douglass's descriptions of slavery throughout his narrative are powerful: from the description of himself as a child observing Aunt Hester's beating to his discovery of how owning slaves can change a kind-hearted mistress in Baltimore to his account of the brutal year he spends with the slave-breaker Covey. At times he makes direct assertions of the nature of slavery: it is "hell" (258), "dehumanizing," "soul-killing" (263), and as "injurious" to the slaveholder as it is to the slave (277), with "robes christened with the blood of millions" (306). Douglass also reminds the reader that "real sympathy" for the slave can "only come through an imaginative leap into the total situation of the fugitive and the world of the slave" (Andrews 138).

But perhaps the most dramatic statement of the meaning of slavery in Douglass is the deeply personal passage in which Douglass looks at the white sailboats on Chesapeake Bay, "beautiful vessels, robed in purest white" (293) and cries out:

You are loosed from your moorings, and are free; I am fast in my chains, and am a slave! You move merrily before the gentle gale, and I sadly before the bloody whip! You are freedom's swift-winged angels, that fly round the world; I am confined in bands of iron! O that I were free! (293)

And surely the most powerful series of passages in Douglass's narrative are the eight to ten pages in Chapter X where he describes the "man" who became "a brute," but ultimately the "brute" who became a "man": "It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom" (299).

Black Beauty is described as a fairly passive victim by most critics who emphasize his fidelity to his mother's advice, but despite his accepting temperament he has a number of powerful passages that reflect on how it feels to lose one's freedom and that recoil at the cruelty of human to animal. Early in his experience as a carriage horse, Beauty laments,

No doubt year and year, I must stand up in a stable night and day except when I am wanted, and then I must be just as steady and quiet as any old horse who has worked twenty years . . . but I am not complaining for I know that it must be so. (27)

Like Douglass, Beauty would ask the reader to use imagination to identify with the condition of all driven or ridden horses, more particularly with the mistreated animals. Beauty comes to realize that even he has not realized the suffering of some

of his companions—until he finds himself in a similar situation. When he becomes a cab horse, he reflects,

I have heard men say, that seeing is believing; but I should say that feeling is believing; for as much as I had seen before, I never knew till now the absolute misery of a cab horse's life. (426)

Other Conventions of the Slave Narrative

Since Olney's 1985 list of characteristics of the slave narrative, many critics have examined more and more slave narratives and identified other conventions usual in many, if not most, of the slave narratives. Many of those conventions also appear in *Black Beauty*. An area of particular interest has been the role of the narrator and the relationship between narrator and reader. Other areas have included the narrator's discovery and realization of his or her condition, the literary structure of the narrative, and portrayal of gender issues and communal interactions.

A number of critics, especially Robert Stepto, have focused upon the authenticating documents—proof of the actual existence of the author and of the author's literacy—that Olney identified: portraits, testimonials, prefaces, and introductions at the beginning of the narratives and documentary appendices at the conclusion. Emphasis upon the authenticated authorial voice as both observer and participant permeates the Douglass narrative, with statements like "I was doomed to be a witness and a participant" (258); "I shall never forget is whilst I remember anything" (258); "I saw more clearly than ever" the evils of the system (282); and "I have an abundance of such illustrations . . . drawn from my own observation" (301). *Black Beauty* comments both as himself—"I shall never forget" (22); "Some of the sights I saw . . . make me sad even now" (260)—and for his companions—"This was the sort of experience we endured" (248). He also offers authentication through the

words of other horses who give him accounts of their experiences: "How could I forget?" (Justin 74); "I saw horses shot down . . . men fall wounded . . . heard the groans of the dying" (Captain 302).

Stepito suggests a similar tone of voice among the first-person slave narrators, arguing that "[t]he strident, moral voice of the former slaves . . . is the single most impressive feature of a slave narrative" (225). Douglass, of course, comments upon slavery but also upon other human failings, such as alcoholism. Beauty too presents a strong moral voice in his narrative, not simply about the mistreatment of horses but about prejudicial class distinctions, especially those affecting working men and London cab drivers, and drinking even in moderation.

Andrews discusses the degree to which slave narratives depend upon metaphor and the effect of that metaphor: the transforming of a piece of property—an object—into a narrator, a subjective human being.²⁴ Ironically, too, the speaker of the narrative was not allowed to speak in the world of the narrative he is recounting. As Douglass regularly reminds the reader, "I was not allowed to make inquiries of my master" (255); "we had no more voice [at the breakup of his master's estate] than the brutes with which we were ranked" (282).²⁵ Beauty is, of course, an even more dramatic example of property—an object—becoming a narrator of a narrative world in which he has no voice. He too laments his lack of voice. When his driver tries to cross a washed-out bridge, Beauty says, "Of course I could not tell him, but I knew very well the bridge was not safe" (104); he is unable to explain that a stone in his foot has made him lame (247); and when a groom is shorting his food ration, "I could not complain, nor make known my wants" (266). The possibilities of communication between human and animal are eloquently described by Beauty, who says of John Manley, that although he didn't always know what John said, he knew

what he meant: "He had his own ways of making me understand by the tone of his voice or the touch of the rein. If he was serious, I always knew it" (46).

In both narratives, then, readers are invited to cross the "gulf of dissimilarity" (Cosslett *Talking Animals* 80) between narrator and reader—to accept the metaphor that allows "imaginative self-projection" into a text (Andrews 137) with a narrator "who does not necessarily meet a single one of our expectations" (Collins 19), but becomes aware of his situation over a period of time and then reveals the condition of slavery through a range of possible literary structures. Of special interest in slave narratives, I believe, is the moment when the slave becomes aware of his or her position of servitude. Douglass, of course, first realizes he is a slave and also what being a slave means when he sees his Aunt Hester beaten. In *Black Beauty* the significant description of a horse's being broken in is Ginger's, discussed in the section under cruelty above. Exactly what the horror of servitude can be, however, dawns later in an incident of despair, suggested by Andrews, that seems to occur in many slave narratives and results in physical and psychological collapse. In Douglass the scene occurs on "one of the hottest days of the month of August," when Douglass collapses in the field from overwork. He describes his "helplessness in the face of evil," his collapse into despair (Andrews 8):

I broke down; my strength failed me; I was seized with a violent aching of the head, attended with extreme dizziness; I trembled in every limb. . . . I nerved myself up, feeling it would never do to stop work. I stood as long as I could. . . . When I could stand no longer, I fell, and felt as if held down by some weight. (294-95)

In Sewall, *Black Beauty's* cruelest treatment, "utter misery" (426), is at the hands of Skinner. In a scene similar to Douglass's, Beauty recounts how—in the "heat of summer" (426)—he is beaten on his back, under his belly, even upon his head, with

“a cruel whip with something so sharp at the end that sometimes it drew blood” (428). Overworked and overloaded, he collapses on a steep hill, wishing he would die:

I was struggling to keep on, goaded by the constant chucks of the rein and use of the whip, when, in a single moment—I cannot tell how—my feet slipped from under me, and I fell heavily to the ground on my side; the suddenness and the force with which I fell, seemed to beat all the breath out of my body. I lay perfectly still, indeed, I had no power to move, and I thought now I was going to die. (431-32)

The description of the slave condition may take a number of structural forms. Marion Wilson Starling (1988) asserts that “adventure is the dominant characteristic of slave narratives” (311), and certainly this description would fit both Douglass’s narrative and *Black Beauty*. Andrews speculates that there is a journey or quest motif in both the spiritual autobiography and slave narrative, with sinfulness to righteousness in the case of spiritual autobiography and physical bondage to freedom in the slave narrative (7). This journey pattern can be found in both Douglass’s narrative and *Black Beauty*—for example, Douglass moves from house slave to field slave, Beauty from carriage horse to cab horse to cart horse—but Douglass’s freedom at the end of his narrative is by his own initiative whereas Beauty’s comfortable situation—not freedom—results from the coincidence of his rescue by a doting grandfather and compassionate grandson and his discovery by the former groom of Squire Gordon. A difference I note in the narratives is that Douglass prefers the city to the country during his enslavement; Beauty usually experiences something of a pastoral idyll in the country and abuse in the city. A similarity between the texts is that ultimately Douglass is “free” and Beauty is

comfortable because they have been purchased, Douglass from his legal American owner by British sympathizers.²⁶

Whatever the structural conventions of a particular slave narrative, the texts focus upon issues of human rights, including the dehumanizing and desexualizing of individuals, and the destruction of community relationships. Elizabeth Ann Beaulieu (1999) and Joanne M. Braxton (1986) suggest customary ways in which women are portrayed in slave narratives that are relevant to both Douglass's and Sewell's narratives. Beaulieu argues that women in slave narratives are essentially powerless: "Slavemasters denied their enslaved females the privilege of having a gender identity by co-opting their reproductive capabilities" (4). They are essentially breeders without "mothering" or "nurturing" qualities (12). Braxton argues instead that the mothers are "outraged": they do the best they can to care for their children and embody the values of "sacrifice, nurturance, and personal courage" (14). Both of these positions can be supported in a consideration of Douglass's mother and grandmother and of Beauty's mother. The powerlessness of the female in *Black Beauty* can also be dramatically supported by two non-mothers: Ginger, who is controlled and abused in a manner suggestive of rape, and an unnamed mare whose "long beautiful tail" is cut off "through the flesh and through the bone" in the interest of "'Fashion'" (256).

Charles Heglar (2001) points to the desexualization of slaves in slave narratives, with Beaulieu arguing that slaves are essentially "genderless" because "having a gender identity is a privilege that stems directly from one's race" (13). Douglass himself writes, "manhood . . . [is] lost in chattelhood" (143). The descriptions of Ginger's beatings and fights with owners have overtones of rape and sexual abuse, but Sewell avoids all reference to sex in relation to Beauty, a striking and massively powerful animal whose castration is never mentioned in the narrative.

Heglar's suggestion that community is important to the slave and that descriptions of communal relationships (or the destruction of communal relationships) are an important convention of the genre is clear in both Douglass and *Black Beauty*. On the one hand, Douglass notes that the slave's child is usually removed from his mother before his twelfth month (256), thus eliminating any relationship "from our memories" (272) and allowing the child, as Douglass did when he was seven, to leave one home for another "without a regret" (272). He also, however, describes the relationship that develops between the slaves and hired men at Mr. Freeland's: "We were linked and interlinked with one another . . . I believe we would have lived and died for one another" (305). The friends' greatest fear is that they will be separated from each other. Beauty, who speaks of his closeness both to his mother and to Ginger, does not experience pain when he leaves his mother: he is four years old and off to adventure. But over the years he expresses significant pain when separated from his companions, especially Ginger. He notes that the horses did not have time to say good-bye to each other after their sale by Squire Gordon; and when Beauty is later sold by Lord W-----, he reports again that "there was no leave-taking" (234). He has a halter slipped over his head and is led away, even as Ginger runs the fence and whinnies after him. While they had been recuperating in the pasture, Ginger had proven prophetic, saying to Beauty, "they'll soon take you away, and I shall lose the only friend I have, and most likely we shall never see each other again. 'Tis a hard world!" (236). Later in the work the usually understated Beauty expresses deep pain when a stable-mate is killed in an accident, quietly writing, "I . . . felt it very much" (398). In the closing scene, back at Birtwick, he reminisces about his friends at Birtwick in his early years.

William Andrew asserts that the purpose of the slave narrative was "to enlighten white readers about both the realities of slavery as an institution and the

humanity of black people as individuals deserving of full human rights” (“Introduction”). I believe that this study of many of the conventions of the slave narrative found both in Douglass’s narrative and *Black Beauty* speaks for Anna Sewell: to enlighten human readers about both the realities of animal mistreatment and the intelligence and sensitivity of animals as beings deserving significant individual and communal rights.

Chapter Four: *Black Beauty* and the Slave Narrative

The previous chapter discussed the many rhetorical, formal, and thematic dimensions *Black Beauty* shares with the genre of the slave narrative; indeed it would be tempting to end the study there. However, a consideration of Elizabeth W. Bruss's emphasis upon implicit contextual conditions surrounding texts (4) suggests even more similarities between *Black Beauty* and the slave narrative. Bruss discusses the importance of the illocutionary dimension (sometimes referred to as the social dimension of genre) in autobiographical acts and defines an "illocutionary act" as "an association between a piece of language and certain contexts, conditions, and intentions" (5), areas that contribute to generic determination. Thus, this chapter will examine the literary context of rights literature, including the slave narrative; the authorial conditions under which *Black Beauty* was written; the intentions of the author in writing; and the resulting intertextuality of *Black Beauty* and the slave narratives, supporting the concept of genre fluidity and the designation of *Black Beauty* as a slave narrative amid a multitude of other generic designations.

Literary Context

Bruss argues that the social reality language creates exists within a specific social context. Whether informing, expressing, or commiserating, illocutionary language depends upon a context of conventions for meaning and force. The illocutionary act of the author within that context is driven by intention (including the intention to contribute to ongoing cultural dialogues) and recognized by a hearer or reader sharing the social context of culturally-defined intentional speech acts.

Nineteenth-century England was a period characterized by immense social upheaval and the examination by many writers of emerging changes. The onset of the Industrial Age with its mechanization and array of new inventions as well as the explosion of scientific and philosophical challenges to traditional political, social, and religious structures created an exciting yet bewildering environment. As a result, the artistic culture of the time reflects an array of dichotomies; for example, artists like Charles Dickens or the Pre-Raphaelites looked to the reassuring past while others such as Charles Darwin or James Whistler anticipated the future. The amount and type of writing produced was prodigious. Rising literacy rates—as much as 97 percent of the population could read by 1900—meant that more material of all kinds was written and published than ever before (Fisch 37). In addition to “cheap literature”—such as penny dreadfuls and shilling shockers, serials, bawdy ballads, and police reports of lurid crimes—Mark Canada (2006) says, “[t]his was the golden age of the English novel. . . . poetry and serious nonfiction did a brisk business as well, as did ‘improving’ works on religion, science, philosophy, and economics” (Introduction website). Serious nonfiction included criticism and essays by writers such as Thomas Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, Charles Darwin, and Matthew Arnold as well as religious tracts, self-help manuals, newspapers, and first-person narratives.

Regardless of the genre it assumed, the first-person narrative came to have a distinct role in British literature. Taking such forms as the dramatic monologue, semiautobiographical novel, travelogue, memoir, journal, confessional poetry, or autobiography, this impulse to self-scrutiny and self-expression led Carlyle to speak of “these autobiographical times of ours” and Arnold to say, “the dialogue of the mind with itself has commenced” (qtd. in Dorre 27).

The literature, however, reflected a distinctive dichotomy, both the impulse to reflect inwardly and the need to act outwardly. The literature of the day was awash

with texts focused upon the rights and welfare of individuals, particularly women, children, former slaves, and the underclass. In addition, campaigns against social evils resulted in many works on subjects ranging from temperance to sanitation.

An important form of first-person rights literature in Great Britain was the slave narrative. Although slavery was abolished in England in 1833, British activists turned their resources toward supporting the anti-slavery movement in the United States, so much so, writes C. Peter Ripley (1985), that "black appeals to the British helped keep the American antislavery movement solvent and active" (xvi). Because of the Fugitive Slave Act in the United States and the need for fund-raising, many former runaways eventually found themselves in England where they wrote and spoke extensively. "In the decade before the Civil War, one dozen major and minor narratives had been published in London" (Blackett 198) by authors such as Samuel Ringgold Ward, Moses Roper, Moses Grandy, William Craft, John Brown, John Anderson, and J. W. C. Pennington. While the exact numbers are imprecise, Ripley reports that whether a work was published in Britain or the United States initially, the narratives did "well, probably better than in America, as a rule" (xxx). Pennington's sold six thousand copies in three editions, according to R. J. M. Blackett (1983); William Wells Brown's ran through three British editions; and the English edition of Douglass's narrative sold forty-five hundred copies between May and September of 1856 (26). Gates adds that nine British editions of Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* were printed between 1845 and 1847; Moses Roper's narrative had twenty-five thousand copies in circulation by 1844 (xi).

The popularity of these works did not depend only upon the humanitarian impulse of the audience. Audrey Fisch (2000) suggests that "[u]nder the politically acceptable mantle of abolitionism, the slave narrative offered Victorian readers the excitement for which they were eager: graphic scenes of torture, murder, sexual

violence, and the thrill of escape" (70). The narrators became nothing more than characters in a novel. In fact, an 1855 essay in *The Athenaeum*, the arbitrator of middle-class tastes in literature, complained about the way "the narratives participate in and help to construct a literary marketplace based not on morality but on the demands of the reader" (Fisch 76) and sniffed, "There is too little variety in these Slave-narratives to render their multiplication necessary" (Fisch 75). More recently, bell hooks and Cornel West (1991) have said the narratives were "commodified and consumed almost as completely in a literary context as the narrators were physically consumed as slaves" (87).

Human rights were not the only area of concern in the period's literature: a growing anti-vivisectionist and anti-cruelty movement worked to improve animals' lives; publications ranged from "The Vindication of the Rights of Brutes" in 1792 (the same year as Mary Wollstonecraft's "Vindication of the Rights of Women") to numerous pamphlets, poems, animal autobiographies, and "martyrologies" dedicated to improving the lives of animals (Stoneley 12). Of these forms, the genre of animal autobiography, writes Tess Cosslett (2006), has been "one of the most persistent and popular genres of the animal story" (*Talking Animals* 63). While admittedly a tricky proposition, animal autobiography allows an animal narrator to speak to the reader in first "person" to relate his or her life story and experiences to the reader. While "the project of animal autobiography is nearly always to argue for the better treatment of animals by humans" by asking readers to project themselves into the text—"to 'change situations' with the animal protagonists and imagine its feelings" (*Talking Animals* 63)—the animal narrators also recount lives of adventure, cruelty, excitement, and brutality. As in the slave narrative, the first-person narrator in the animal autobiography seeks to create "empathy between the narrator and reader, across a gulf of dissimilarity" (*Talking Animals* 80).²⁷

The nature of the literature of social reform varied greatly during the century, with social reformers like Carlyle, Benjamin Disraeli, or John Stuart Mill penning well-reasoned, thought-provoking essays. But the significant areas of literature with larger audiences were the first-person narratives, some of which are considered sentimental today. Peter Stoneley (1999) argues that for sentimental authors, politics is largely a matter of what makes someone “feel right”; thus, “private sentiment . . . becomes the power that will reform public institutions” (17). And Jane Tompkins believes that many nineteenth-century works that have been dismissed as sentimental “offer powerful examples of the way a culture thinks about itself, articulating and proposing solutions for the problems that shape a particular historical moment” (xi). The sentimental becomes a set of cultural conventions that evoke sympathy in the reader.

In discussing *Black Beauty*, Bruss would argue that the work remains a “literary act” without a genre until it is “recognizable” within “a particular community of readers and writers” (5), “participating in symbolic systems making up literature and culture” (6), at which time it becomes part of “an intelligible series or a history” (5). From the brief discussion above of the nineteenth-century literary context in which *Black Beauty* appeared, she would no doubt be comfortable with the work as an example of first-person narration, animal autobiography, and social-reform literature. I believe she would not consider the work to be sentimental and would be very interested in considering *Black Beauty* within the symbolic system of the slave narrative.

Authorial Conditions

The conditions of Anna Sewell’s life suggest that she would have been familiar with the rights movements and literature of the day. In fact, her interests and

activities indicate that she, like many women in nineteenth-century England,²⁸ would have been very involved with cultural issues and reform. Moira Ferguson (1994) remarks on the involvement of women in the “political arena” (35)²⁹—especially in the anti-slavery and animal rights’ movements—speaking, petitioning, organizing, and writing pamphlets, tracts, poems, fables, songs, essays, novels, and animal autobiographies.

Although Sewell was long considered to have lived a very limited life—as a single woman and invalid—Adrienne E. Gavin’s 2004 biography reveals her to have been a remarkable woman with a lifetime of intellectual activity and periods of years in which she was physically and culturally active.³⁰ Strongly influenced in her early years by the moral and religious values of the Society of Friends, she was clearly aware of ongoing social and cultural dialogues in England’s changing world and not reluctant to participate.

Gavin describes Sewell’s attending lectures and meetings, traveling by rail to visit family, “almost certainly” attending the Great Exhibition and attendant London sights (*Dark Horse* 114), visiting museums and art galleries. As a member of the Anti-Slavery Association, she probably heard some ex-slaves speak since “[a] black American speaker—preferably a former slave—became an essential part of any respectable antislavery gathering” in the British Isles during that time (Ripley *xvi*). The Great Exhibition of 1851 also included an abolitionist display with William and Mary Craft, William Wells Brown, Josiah Henson, and Box Brown. But even Sewell’s periods of declining health, rather than limiting her world, actually expanded it: she traveled throughout Europe to various spas in Germany, Spain, and Brussels as well as throughout England, to places like Leamington, Marienbad, Bath, and Malvern. It was at Malvern that Sewell met Tennyson, with whom she spent a good amount of time and, Gavin posits, likely “fenced conversationally” (*Dark Horse* 104).

In periods of relatively good health Sewell was an avid horsewoman, riding every opportunity she had; as her health declined, she became more dependent upon her pony and cart. Whether mounted (sidesaddle) or driving, Sewell was an excellent horsewoman: “free temporarily from lameness and dependence; she was strong, powerful, fast, and untouchable” (Gavin *Dark Horses* 131).³¹ Mary Bayly, a friend of the Sewell family, reports that even in the pouring rain, Sewell was “in perfect understanding” with her horse:

Anna seemed simply to hold the reins in her hand, trusting to her voice to give all the needed directions to her horse “Now thee shouldn’t walk up this hill—see how it rains?” “Now thee must go a little faster—thee would be sorry for us to be late at the station.” (qtd. in Chitty 151)

Her nieces and others who had occasion to drive with Sewell gave similar accounts.

During periods of good health Sewell was active with her mother in many activities supported by religious and social-reform groups: Chartism, abolitionism, anti-vivisectionism, and temperance. The two joined in establishing soup-kitchens, providing clothing to paupers, opening reading rooms for working men as an alternative to the pub, setting up reading libraries, and organizing fund-raisers for various charitable societies; however, “teaching was the cornerstone of Anna’s charitable endeavours” (Gavin *Dark Horse* 55). Sewell taught literacy to a wide variety of pupils at various times: working-class men, women, and children, as well as the poor, often driving her pony and cart “quite fearlessly” great distances at night in order to reach her destination.³²

But at all times Sewell was a person with a keen and restless intellect, surrounded by a family that was intellectual, activist, and literary. Her aunt, mother, and cousin were all published authors; and several of her family members were

respected social reformers. Gavin's biography "challenges us to see Sewell's integrity as a radical thinker; a freethinker who could defy religious conformity; a philanthropist and reformer; and a writer whose sensibilities were shaped by a literary family" (Lundin 283). Her relationship with her mother was especially important, with Anna Sewell editing her mother's writing and her mother assisting in the writing of *Black Beauty*. Gavin quotes Anna's niece, Margaret:

[Anna and Mary] formed a mutual admiration society, and were, indeed, singularly adapted to supplement each other. My aunt's appreciation of her mother's gifts was profound Anna, on the other hand, was practical, critical, and far-seeing No one recognized this better or as well, as her mother, who was aware how much she owed to her daughter. (*Dark Horse* 163)

In many ways, Gavin notes, Mary and Anna Sewell were one another's foil: the two women offset and complemented one another. In addition, notes Margaret Sewell, the daughter was a thorough editor of her mother's writing, and in the writing of *Black Beauty* "[Mary] is unlikely to have been as critical as Anna was herself" (*Dark Horse* 180).³³

In such an environment, Sewell's reading was extensive. It included religious tracts like Hannah Whitehall Smith's *The God of All Comfort*, romantic poets (particularly Tennyson), Samuel Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, biographies of figures like Martin Luther and Charles Kingsley, as well as popular authors such as Charles Dickens. Gavin mentions that at one point Sewell and her mother were "so engrossed in Thomas Carlyle's *Past and Present* that they stayed up long into the night drinking coffee to stave off sleep so they would continue with it" (*Dark Horse* 123). In addition, Sewell was interested in current events and social commentary from the newspapers of the day and read Florence Nightingale's works, Elizabeth

Gaskell's *Ruth*, John Seeley's *Ecce Homo*, and "undoubtedly" Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Gavin *Dark Horse* 119).³⁴ I also believe, based upon internal evidence, that she read Frederick Douglass's narrative at some point.³⁵

Thus, in writing *Black Beauty*, Sewell was clearly responding to and exploring much of the world that surrounded her; she certainly was not writing "in isolation or against the common grain" (Bruss 166). Intentionality was significant in the kind of life she lived and in the decisions she made when she began *Black Beauty*, choosing its "social and literary conventions" (Bruss 6), embracing the meaning and force of social reform literature.

Authorial Intentions

While the previous sections describe the literary and personal context in which Sewell wrote *Black Beauty*, Bruss's concept of illocutionary force also requires a careful examination of authorial intentions: the purpose or intent of the author and the culturally-defined genre the author chooses are interlinked, as are the text the author creates and the works with which he or she wants it connected.

In March 1871, Sewell became homebound, with her doctor giving her just eighteen months to live. Although her mother continued with her charitable work, Sewell's "active activism" was effectively at an end. Still, she harbored reformational impulses, as evidenced in one of her final philanthropic acts: that summer, "when it became wrenchingly clear that she would never ride or drive again, she gave her pony and chaise to the Buxton Reformatory" (Gavin *Dark Horse* 168), signaling that her contact with horses was also at an end. Late that year, Sewell made a passing mention to her "life of a horse," which her mother says she had worked on "from time to time" (Gavin *Dark Horse* 168); however, it was not until 1876 that Sewell said, "I am getting on with my little book, 'Black Beauty'" (qtd. in Chitty 184).

Sewell wrote because she could not act, wrote to improve the conditions of horses and humans, wrote to have their voices heard. An entry in her journal makes that clear:

I have for six years been confined to the house and to my sofa, and have from time to time, as I was able, been writing what I think will turn out a little book, its special aim being to induce kindness, sympathy, and an understanding treatment of horses (qtd. in Chitty 184)

In addition, she explained, "In thinking of Cab-horses, I have been led to think of Cabmen, and I am anxious, if I can, to present their true conditions, and their great difficulties, in a correct and telling manner" (qtd. in Collins 12). In her desire—and intention—to give voice to the voiceless,³⁶ this activist in an Abolitionist family turned to a genre whose authors had had similar intentions, thus enjoining the meaning and force of the antebellum slave narrative.

Henry Louis Gates (1985) says of genre that "relations of form are not only implicitly ideological, but also shared or 'collective' despite the intentions or conscious desires of an author" (xx). In Sewell's case, the intention to share the reforming ideology and culture of the slave narratives was explicit, no doubt influenced by living in a culture saturated with the written and oral accounts of ex-slaves. She could not turn to the animal autobiography for several reasons: the genre was considered children's literature³⁷; she wished to include the subjects of temperance, unions, and electioneering, none of which were of interest to or suitable for children; and she wanted to write for a working-class audience with its modest but functional literacy. Thus, she turned to a simple structure, short and episodic; a narrative form rather than a tract or pamphlet so she could "exercise her delight in words" (Prusty 6), her skill as "a vivid storyteller" (Lundin 281); and made the

"happy decision to let the horse speak for itself" (*Critic* 305). With her title page announcing "The Autobiography of a Horse" and the insistence that she is merely translating "From the Equine," Sewell signaled her intention to adopt the genre of the slave narrative.

Interestingly, the slave narrative, like *Black Beauty* as Chapter Two makes clear, has often been categorized under a number of genres. Gates says the genre of the slave narratives "does share resemblances to other narratives, especially the picaresque, the sentimental novel, and the spiritual autobiography" (vi); he further compares slave narratives to detective novels "that turn upon the resolution of a mystery" (vx). James Olney (1985) asks, "are they history or literature or autobiography or polemical writing?" (148); William Andrews (1986) suggests the slave narrative mediates "between historical, rhetorical, and tropological truth" (18). Thus, Sewell chose a genre characterized by fluidity as well as a genre whose literary accomplishment is often questioned or ignored. In a dismissive description sometimes applied to animal autobiography, Marion Wilson Starling (1988) explains, "the rush market for [slaves'] stories as abolitionist propaganda militated against the development of literary excellence of the slave narrative" (294).

Given her intentions, was Sewell successful in her creation of a slave narrative? Clearly, her intent was not to use an animal autobiography as a structure in which to discuss issues of slavery, class, gender, or race; rather, she used the structure of the slave narrative to discuss cruelty to animals. The distinction of intent is subtle, perhaps, but one that must be made in order to accurately judge whether or not the work was successful in its purpose. The assumption by critics and readers that Sewell's animal protagonists are somehow simply a screens for other concerns is perhaps due to her success in having human readers identify with them, which, Tess Cosslett says, "invites various analogies between animals and types of classes of

humans: slaves, women, children, servants, workers . . . ("Animal Autobiography").

If Sewell's intentions were in fact to make these analogies, then readers can agree with critics like Ferguson, who find the work disappointing. Ferguson writes that while Sewell did raise many issues regarding Victorian society,

bringing these plural messages to a tidy closure is impossible since "real" solutions on a grand scale are beyond Sewell's grasp.

Consequently, *Black Beauty* ends on an orthodox note, with a superficially open and easy closure, a satisfying ending cleft with contradictions, many of which carry over into the twentieth century.

("Breaking" 50)

However, if (as I argue) Sewell's intentions were the latter—to a recognized form of protest/abolitionist literature to further her cause against animal cruelty in general³⁸—the novel is an unequivocal success. Chitty comments that while "Anna Sewell was neither the first nor the last campaigner in the field . . . her appeal reached the largest and most impressionable section of the public" (229). The RSPCA in Britain and George Angell's organization in the United States both credited the work with an increased awareness of and improvement in the horse's lot in general; and as Blount allows, the work succeeds if for no other reason than that it accomplishes Sewell's goal that "any human reading *Black Beauty* will be kinder to horses" (252).

Anna Sewell located a source of power in her determination to write *Black Beauty*; in fact, it was as if she chose to live to complete her work: "Her eighteen months came and went. . . . She stopped bothering with doctor's visits altogether; there was no point. But she lived another eighteen months, and another eighteen, and another still" (Collins 7), and died five months after her "little book" went to press. In choosing the genre of the slave narrative, Sewell also found a source of

power in which to contextualize her work and the intertextuality she hoped to define, inspire, and encourage between *Black Beauty* and the slave narratives. Her decision reflected her social and literary contexts as well as her personal interests and intentions, all elements of the work's illocutionary force.

Epilogue: Creature/Creation

In so many ways, a horse and a text, creature and creation, are analogous. In either case, while beautiful in and of itself, each must submit to some type of control in order to perform work. For the horse, tack—the bridles, bits, harnesses, and saddles—is the means of control and also the outward sign of the type of work for which the horse has been trained; for the text, the tack is genre.

Even before an author such as Anna Sewell begins to create her text, she envisions what job that text will perform and chooses the genre with which to control her creation accordingly; before that, the work her text will perform influences the text she even conceives of creating. She is Farmer Grey: she knows, for example, that if she wants a text suitable to convey the weight of meaning she intends—about nobility, about humanity, about compassion—on its back, she has to breed an appropriate creation, just as Farmer Grey has to carefully breed Beauty to get a supple thoroughbred creature of lovely confirmation and sound disposition. Along the way, she shapes her text into its generic expectations, much the way Farmer Grey shapes Beauty, breaking him in without breaking his spirit, teaching him to accept the constraints he must have if he is to do the work he has been bred to do. In addition, she may shape her creation to fit more than one type of tack, just as Beauty learns to accept the harness in addition to the saddle because “master disliked a horse . . . who could do only one thing” (Sewell 78). The author then has the choice of texts to which she wishes to harness her creation in order to join in their power as well. Beauty is harnessed to his mother in much the same way texts are linked to their literary parents to learn from them.

A reader, when judging a text, often looks at the symbols which mark the type of work it is to do, similar to a buyer who looks at a horse's tack and adjusts his or her expectations accordingly; however, a careful reader/buyer will also look at other indications as well, for there are internal, inherent characteristics to consider along with outward trappings when deciding on the work for which a text or horse is suited. For example, a horse trained to carry an ornate, heavy Western saddle and silver-adorned bridle will probably not compete successfully in the Kentucky Derby, but then again, neither would a draft-horse or a sick or aged animal, regardless of the tack the animal wears. In this way, the reader is the sympathetic Jerry Barker, who is able to look beyond Beauty's blemished knees and see the potential/worth he still holds. In addition, the careful reader makes a case by case distinction about the type of restraints the text needs, like Jerry's making sure the harness fits Beauty exactly by letting out some straps, taking in others. A reader may also choose to harness the text to other texts and thus encourage a sharing of rhetorical power among them.

If there is cruelty in the process, a villain in the story, it comes in the form of the critic. These users of a text who see it simply as an object may—unthinkingly or purposefully—disregard the tack the author has selected for her creation, choosing instead to substitute their own harness, which may be too tight or too loose, or even the wrong tack altogether. Further, they may demand constraints that not only rob the text of its power, but damage it in the process, much like Lady W----, demanding York tighten the bearing-reins, all in the name of the critical fashion of the day. The horses serve as testimonies to critical violence: Ginger's mistreatment by men provides an analogy for the violence critics (often male) have done to female-authored texts; and Beauty, like *Black Beauty*, has undergone such categorical

violence that it may be said critics have taken this noble thoroughbred and tried to make him a Shetland pony, suitable only for children's birthday parties.

The difficulty for the sympathetic critic, then, becomes how or even if to establish any genre at all for the text. On the one hand, is genre study a matter of "force," in Flower's terms, seeking to impose rigid guidelines onto the literature that places scholars in a theoretical position similar to the coachman ramming a steel bar into a resistant mouth? Do the conventions of genre, like a bearing rein, and perhaps responding to critical "fashion," function as an apparatus that constrains and reduces the usefulness of the entity subjected to it? Worse still, is genre "force" as Ginger understood it: a reduction of the text to powerlessness in order to "master" it?

In my reading of *Black Beauty*, I seek to use genre study as a "force" in Bruss's terms: to understand the structures, themes, the contexts, and the intentions that a text demonstrates—i.e., the illocutionary force—as a way to explore and capitalize upon the strength that the text holds.³⁸ Placing *Black Beauty* in the genre of the antebellum slave narrative allows a greater insight into the tack Sewell has chosen for her creation, in fact, the very creation she has chosen to create. Further, Sewell's "harnessing" of powerful slave narratives and the call to abolition they embody to *Black Beauty's* power maximizes the potential the texts have to work together, making them fit harness-mates. My reading of *Black Beauty* seeks to do all that—to understand the tack Sewell wished to use, loosen the creation from its previous bearing-rein, allow it the freedom to use its neck, and properly harness it to other powerful works, in other words, to control the unwieldy creation without breaking its spirit.

Notes

¹ Sources vary on the amount paid for the manuscript. The publisher's archivist says £40; however, Susan Chitty gives the amount as £20 in her 1971 biography, which she changes to £30 in an introduction to the 1989 annotated edition of *Black Beauty*. George Angell, in his defense against charges he "pirated" the book, states the sum paid as £20. Gavin summarizes the discrepancies, noting at the time of her biography's publication that Jarrold and Sons' (now known as Jarrold's Ltd.) records were inaccessible, having been donated to the National Registry, but not yet archived and available. Gavin also notes the usual fee for such a manuscript was £10-£20, but because of the novel's great success, Jarrold and Sons paid another £200 to Mary Sewell after Anna Sewell's death (*Dark Horse* 250-51, notes 106 and 107).

² While initially skeptical ("A *talking horse*, Ms. Blossom?"), Dr. Heglar suffered through the paper (and presentation) that forms the basis for this study. Dr. Heglar exemplifies the spirit of the professorate, permitting considerable latitude for me to satisfy my intellectual curiosity and displaying a remarkable tolerance for an idea that seemed far-fetched, perhaps disrespectful, at the time. Even with the research I undertook for that particular paper, I was still grasping for what I only felt to be there, as most of the criticism exploring and clarifying the connection between slave narratives and *Black Beauty* has been done since 2003. For that latitude and patience, as well as for his many valuable challenges and suggestions since then that have shaped my thinking in the matter, I am grateful to Dr. Heglar.

³ Neither the *Narrative* nor *Black Beauty* contains Olney's ninth characteristic, a "description of patrols of failed attempt(s) to escape, of pursuit by men and dogs" (153). In addition, neither contains a portion of the tenth, a "description of successful attempt(s) to escape, lying by during the day, traveling by night guided by the North Star," although Douglass does include "reception in a free state by Quakers" (153). Douglass does not discuss his escape in his 1845 narrative because he does not wish to jeopardize those who aided him; later editions of his narrative reveal that he in fact did not escape in the manner which Olney describes. In *Black Beauty*, Sewell never considers the issue of physical freedom (where could a London cab horse flee?); rather, Beauty sees only death or a kind master as a way to escape suffering.

⁴ Tess Cosslett has been extremely gracious in sharing her work with me, going so far as to provide in early 2006, a pertinent section of her (then) soon-to-be-published book on talking animals in Victorian literature. Her research and her collegial spirit have been immensely helpful.

⁵ Some theorists disagree on the importance of genre: recent literary handbooks such as Gerald Prince, in *Dictionary of Narratology* (1987), and Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, in *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (1995), do not even have an entry for *genre*.

⁶ See, for example, Richard Chase's 1957 distinction between novels and romances. He argues that what critics often consider great American novels should more rightly be called "romance," a form that "feels free to render reality in less volume and detail" and "tends to prefer action to character," with action "freer in a romance than in a novel, encountering, as it were, less resistance from reality" (13). To be sure, Chase was specifically writing about American novels, and *Black Beauty* was (originally) an English work, but Mark Canada (2002) suggests that "some of the

world's greatest novels contain sketchy descriptions, far-fetched plots, unrealistic dialogue, and idealized characters" (*Introduction* website). As Mikhail Bakhtin wrote in 1930, the novel is a genre "whose shell has not yet hardened" (261).

⁷ Believing as I do that Anna Sewell crafted *Black Beauty* after the slave narratives, I was delighted at the resonance this statement from Sewell's journal has with Douglass's closing of his 1845 *Narrative*, in which he signs himself as "[s]incerely and earnestly hoping that this little book may do something" to expose the evils of slavery and hasten "the glad day of deliverance . . . to millions of former slaves" (331). Even a cursory examination of other works, however, reveals the phrase "this little book" to be a convention of Victorian-era writing, particularly that authored by women or other marginalized groups. See, for example, Susan Warner's journal entry about "My little book [*The Wide, Wide World*]" going to press (qtd. in Mason 29).

⁸ Interestingly, Andrew Stibbs (1976) is describing characteristics not unlike those associated with the romance. In fact, *Black Beauty* exhibits many characteristics delineated by Chase, including an emphasis on imagination; a concern for simplicity, often with an interest in the primitive and innocent; preference for the vernacular; and a tendency to be optimistic. However, Stibbs finds these characteristics to be flaws rather than features of a critically recognized genre.

⁹ Many Chartists, a revolutionary reform group in the early nineteenth century concerned with human and non-human rights, came from Quaker backgrounds, people themselves dedicated to social reform. Although she formally left the Society of Friends when she was eighteen, Sewell was raised by Quakers, and according to Adrienne E. Gavin (2004), "Mary [her mother] and Anna would always remain Quaker in nature and habits" (*Dark Horse* 59). In addition, Sewell was very well informed in the political and social movements of her day: among other works,

Gavin says, she was an avid reader and admirer of Thomas Carlyle, who in his 1839 pamphlet *Chartism* not only opposed an industrial society but also disdained political means as a remedy for social ills. He expanded these themes in *Past and Present* (1843), a work Gavin reports Sewell and her mother “stayed up long into the night drinking coffee to stave off sleep” to finish reading (*Dark Horse* 123). Gavin also documents that Sewell read and admired Elizabeth Gaskell and Charles Kingsley, among other writers of the Christian Socialist movement that arose as Chartism died out. It would not be a wild conjecture to conclude that such a politically astute reader as Sewell had therefore read many of the Chartist social fables.

¹⁰ Sewell interrogates within her very text the notion of a “good horse” as one who will do man’s bidding without question. In one episode, Beauty is being driven in harness during a storm; when he comes to a bridge over a turbulent river, he refuses to cross in spite of his master’s giving him “a touch” and then “a sharp cut” with the whip. Immediately, the toll-keeper warns the party that the bridge has gone out, and had they proceeded, they would have been swept into the river and drowned. Beauty’s master credits Beauty with a knowledge that was “perfect in its way,” and the horse receives special rations as a reward for his acting in opposition to what would generally be considered “good” (105-06).

By contrast, in a later incident the groom Reuben Smith gets drunk in town and not only neglects to fix a bad nail in Beauty’s shoe but rides him at a dead gallop over cobblestones toward home. Beauty knows that something is wrong with Smith’s judgment; he also reports that the night was dark, the road stony, and that he feels the loose shoe come off, causing him unbearable pain and an unsteady gait. Unlike the scene at the bridge, he continues to gallop at full speed until he falls to his knees and throws Smith onto the road “with great force.” An inquest later clears Beauty of blame; however, Smith dies, Smith’s widow and children must go to the poor-house,

and Beauty is permanently disfigured and sold to a livery stable simply because he was being "a good horse" and doing his rider's bidding.

¹¹ Although Craig Smith (2002) puts *Flush* in the same generic category as *Black Beauty* and proclaims Sewell's work a forerunner of Woolf's, he makes several important distinctions. *Flush* is a biography rather than an autobiography; further, he says, Woolf is attempting "an experiment" in modernist literary technique "for its own sake" (1): an "intuitive, clear-eyed attempt to represent a non-human subject" (7). On the other hand, Tess Cosslett says Sewell does not explore "the differences between human and animal consciousness" (*Talking Animals* 70). Perhaps the most important difference between the two works is that *Flush* is neither "specifically humane nor specifically humanistic" as other works are in the genre of animal autobiography (348).

¹² Written well before Gavin's biography changed the critical perception of Sewell as a frail, reclusive shut-in, Ruth Padel's 1980 article asks, "Anna Sewell couldn't (could she?) have read *Fanny Hill* or *Justine* or even *Rosa Fielding*" (48). Given the wide range of Sewell's reading, as documented by Gavin (including John Robert Seeley's nearly heretical *Ecce Homo* and scandalous novels such as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth*), we now know the answer is—well, quite possibly.

¹³ Most critics look no further than the account of the horse fair scene with its melodramatic plot turn and "happily ever after" ending for the proof of *Black Beauty's* sentimentalism; however, Pat Pinsent (2001) challenges the assumption that this scene is evidence of melodrama. Rather, for her, the scene concludes a biblical trope and "provides a reversal of the fall" in which Beauty is recognized by a semi-divine figure (his former groom), called by his right name, and restored to his former place, representing Northrup Frye's comic archetype of redemption and

resurrection. The fallen hero's return to the spring-like surroundings of his youth rounds out the religious allegorical elements (20).

¹⁴ There is, however, a case to be made for the analogy that Sewell herself makes in *Black Beauty* between horses and the working class, most notably in the portion of the work that deals with Beauty's life as a London cab horse. This part of the writing led Sewell to think, she says in her journal, "of cabmen, and I am anxious, if I can, to present their true conditions, and their great difficulties in a correct and telling manner" (qtd. in Gavin *Dark Horse* 179).

When a driver named Seedy Sam is criticized for the condition of his horse and its tattered blanket, he draws his own ragged coat around his shoulders and explains that his horse's hardships are his own, something the other men would not understand as they work "for good masters" (358). One of the other drivers agrees, saying "it is hard lines for man, and it is hard lines for beast, and who's to mend it I don't know" (360). Sam dies shortly afterwards, raving about the long hours he has been forced to work "and not a Sunday's rest" (360).

In the next chapter, Beauty meets up again with Ginger, who is so shabby that he does not recognize her at first. She says Beauty, who has a good master and looks "well off," would not understand how terrible her life has become: in order for her owners to wring the last ounce of work possible from her, she is treated harshly and worked long hours "all the week round and round, with never a Sunday rest" (364). A short time after this, when Beauty sees a dead horse that resembles Ginger being hauled away, he says, "I hoped it was, for then her troubles would be over" (366).

Jason Hribal (2003) says the upsurge in both animals' rights and workers' rights during the nineteenth century was no coincidence. Reformers of the time understood the correlation:

[S]ocioeconomic exploitation was systemic—that is, humans and other animals were interconnected under this system, and thus to reform or abolish exploitation of one, it must be done for the other as well . . .

The animals rights movement was part of the working class movement, for their formations had always been linked. Animals are part of the working class. (452-53)

Deborah Morse and Martin Danahay argue in a September 2007 collection of essays on Victorian animals that Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species* (1859) made "the human more animal and the animal more human, destabilizing boundaries in both directions" (2). As a result, any discussion of animal rights brings into question human rights, and any discussion of human rights brings into question animal rights. A "discourse on animals is a political discourse" (5).

¹⁵ Later works of the genre became even more sophisticated and by no means the domain of the literary manqué: Leo Tolstoy published his short story "Strider: The Romance of a Horse" in 1885; Jack London wrote his naturalistic texts *White Fang* and *Call of the Wild* in 1903 and 1906; and Virginia Woolf penned *Flush* in 1933.

¹⁶ Like children's literature, fable, and animal autobiography, the genre of animal rights literature is one that is not taken seriously by critics either. Jennifer Mason (2006) says critics have given an inaccurate impression about the relationship between nineteenth-century literary culture and humanitarian literature; they have suggested that

[N]o one important took it seriously. When Stowe attributed complex mental processes to dogs [*Dred*], she was only joking. When [Charles] Chesnutt praised an animal protection novel [*Pussy Meow, the Autobiography of a Cat*], he was being sarcastic. Twain wrote a story

condemning animal experimentation ["A Dog's Tale"], but his daughter probably made him do it. (173)

Mason, on the other hand, echoes Tompkins' call for reevaluation, for she believes repression of such literature has "significantly impoverished" an understanding of the relationship of humans to the nonhuman world (174).

¹⁷ Toni Morrison (1989) goes on to explain,

It only seems that the canon of American literature is "naturally" or inevitably "white." In fact it is studiously so. In fact these absences of vital presences in Young American literature may be the insistent fruit of the scholarship rather than the text. Perhaps some of these writers, although currently under house arrest, have much more to say than had been realized. Perhaps some were not so much transcending politics, or escaping blackness, as they were transforming it into intelligible, accessible, yet artistic modes of discourse . . . The re-examination of founding literature of the United States for the unspeakable things unspoken may reveal those texts to have deeper and other meanings, deeper and other power, deeper and other significance. (*Unspeakable Things* 25-26)

¹⁸ Douglass wrote two other autobiographical works: *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) and *The Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881, rev. ed. 1892). While these two narratives do not fit Olney's model of the genre—based on Douglass's 1845 narrative—they represent for Douglass increased control over his own story and an attempt to place himself in society not just as an ex-slave, but as a public figure with accomplishments and contributions.

¹⁹ Joanne Braxton (1986) says, "The treatment of the slave narrative genre has been one of the most skewed in Afro-American literary criticism. It has been

almost always the treatment of the narratives of heroic male slaves, not their wives or sisters critics have left out half the picture” (380). Braxton’s study asks, “how would the inclusion of works by women change the shape of the genre?” (381).

Charles Heglar (2001) debates the critical privileging of Douglass and summarizes some of the critical disagreement, particularly among feminist critics, in *Rethinking the Slave Narrative* (2001). He makes the point, echoed in this study, that such a narrow focus opens critics to the dangers of monolithic generic analysis. Speaking of Harriet Jacobs’ 1861 *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Heglar says,

A sense of difference is an important consequence of the work being done in *Incidents*. Studies of Jacobs’ work demonstrate that when Douglass is put aside as the standard for reading all slave narratives, exciting areas for new and further exploration are revealed. (2)

This flaw is precisely what Robert Stam (2000) termed *normativism*, or having preconceived ideas of criteria for membership in a genre. Further, because his work focuses on the narratives of Henry Bibb and William and Ellen Craft, Heglar necessarily argues against the pre-eminence of the Douglass narrative. While the normative acceptance of Douglass helped make the genre of slave narrative a recognizable one, he says, it has done so at the expense of other, valuable narratives: “I believe that the critical focus on Douglass’s *Narrative* has also obscured the accomplishment and quality of several other contemporaneous slave narratives” (2).

²⁰ Douglass says that many slaveholders held the “double relation of master and father,” which led to their having to “stand by and see one white son tie up his brother, of but a few shades darker complexion . . . and ply the gory lash to his naked back” (257).

Jacques Derrida (2002) notes the implications of a relationship such as this. He discusses the relationship between Pegasus, the “archetypal horse,” and Bellerophon, both descendents of the god Poseidon. Bellerophon winds up hunting and dominating his own half brother (an “other self”) with the magic bridle. Derrida asks what that means—for Bellerophon: “what does one do in holding one’s other by the bit? When one holds one’s brother or half brother by the bit?” (411).

²¹ Beauty’s status as a gelding did not stop the 1954 publication of a book called *Son of Black Beauty* by Phillis Briggs. The publisher, Thames of London, noted, “In this book the art of the story-teller has been enlisted to produce what Black Beauty the horse could not—a son!” (qtd. in Wells and Grimshaw 460).

²² This assertion is due in no small part to their refusal to allow slaves to learn to read the Bible, thus depriving them of a deeper understanding of God. Harriet Jacobs says, “the law forbids it, and the churches withhold it,” for which they are “answerable to God” (402).

²³ Susan Chitty’s 1971 biography of *Black Beauty*’s author details a conversation Sewell had with a cab driver, who related that after driving a lady to church, she stepped from the cab and handed him a tract on the observance of the Sabbath in lieu of a tip! “Naturally,” she says, “this thoroughly disgusted the man” (272).

²⁴ Metaphor can also be used as satire: Sewell emphasizes the understood nobility of the horse in much the same way that Jonathan Swift does in *Gulliver’s Travels*. Just as Swift uses the Houyhnhnys, the race of horses that makes humans look so bad in comparison that Gulliver chooses to live in the stables upon his return to “civilization,” Sewell makes the horse—Beauty in particular—the standard against which the reader measures the nature of the humans with whom he comes into contact. And it is the human, specifically, the white, aristocratic male, who suffers

most from the examination.

²⁵ The metaphoric conflation of animals and slaves was not limited to the slave narratives: in 1857, British traveler James Stirling wrote a comprehensive picture of plantation life in the form of a travelogue, *Letters From the Slave States*, a work used by abolitionists in decrying slavery. While generally critical of the mistreatment of slaves, when Stirling describes the various types of slavery from house slave to field hand, he remarks of the house slave that some owners make pets of them “as we do other inferior creatures” (288).

²⁶ Douglass’s purchase was controversial, Marion Starling (1988) says, because the Garrisonians believed that by “entering into that transaction with a slaveholder, recognizing a fellow creature’s right of property in him” (42), Douglass had undermined the basic premise of abolition.

²⁷ Marian Scholtmeijer (1994) says many contemporary women authors “use the link between women and animal victims to analyze the extent of socially authorized aggression against otherness” (236). While Clarissa Pinkola Estes (1992) and Melissa Holbrook Pierson (2000) use different species, they both equate women to their animal counterparts in the ways they are sensitized to the abuse against them that society condones.

Estes compares women to wolves:

Healthy wolves and healthy women share certain psychic characteristics: keen sensing, playful spirit, and a heightened capacity for devotion. Wolves and women are relational by nature, inquiring, possessed of great endurance and strength. They are deeply intuitive, intensely concerned with their young, their mate and their pack. They are experienced in adapting to constantly changing circumstances; they are fiercely stalwart and very brave.

Yet both have been hounded, harassed, and falsely imputed to be devouring and devious, overly aggressive, of less value than those who are their detractors. They have been the targets of those who would clean up the wilds as well as the wildish environs of the psyche, extinguishing the instinctual, and leaving no trace of it behind. The predation of wolves and women by those who misunderstand them is strikingly similar. (Estes 4)

In the same way, Pierson says women and horses both have an ingrained, instinctive sensitivity to the possibility of abuse:

Women are already more like horses than they know. Their inner ears, for one, are able to detect very soft sounds better than men's. . . . Look at the horse: Aren't the ears one of the first things you notice? The way they swivel robotically, sensitive as sonar to the otherwise unheard pin drop down the aisle, or down the miles. The horse . . . still remembers with his blood what it was like to feel the sudden weight of four paws landing heavy and quiet on his back, so that you find . . . when you raise the broom overhead to bring down the cobwebs, an animal suddenly white-eyed with terror, shuffling breath in a frantic tempo through distended nostrils. Now look at the woman, who finds her respiration going ahead without her as she walks through the shadow. . . . She knows, too, what it is like to be prey. (Pierson 161-62)

Scholtmeijer agrees, explaining "Women know what it is like to be victimized, to have one's difference used as a rationale for suppression and violence" (241). Further, women writers "give their allegiance to the animal victim. These writers

claim the totality of women's status as victims by kinship with the more obviously victimized animal. . ." (241).

²⁸ What is sometimes called the Victorian era officially began when Anna Sewell was sixteen and Queen Victoria, older than she by just a year, ascended the throne.

²⁹ Ferguson suggests that it was actually women's position in society as keepers of the private sphere—moral guardians—that earned them considerable power in speaking out on moral issues (75).

³⁰ Until Adrienne E. Gavin's 2002 critical biography, readers were dependent upon Susan Chitty's 1971 biography of Sewell that portrayed her as a stereotypical Victorian woman who was also a spinster, an invalid living a sheltered life with her mother, and a member of a religious sect that abhorred cruelty but emphasized gentleness and pacifism. In 2004, Paul Collins noted with concern the tendency of critics to emphasize Anna Sewell's limited life:

Anna was almost impervious to biography: her one surviving diary is a tatty notebook of fourteen pages in length. Compare this to Sewell's rival in the shut-in spinster-genius sweepstakes, Emily Dickinson: she, at least, left hundreds of letters behind. (9)

In this context, *Black Beauty* seems almost an anomaly, representing merely the efforts of one wounded creature to sympathize with other wounded creatures.

While Gavin does not challenge the facts of Sewell's life, she provides a different context and thus a different understanding of what those facts *meant* for Sewell. For example, Sewell's unmarried status, whether by choice or chance, meant that Sewell was free to "do" many of the things that married women were not, such as own property, have a right to her own income and inheritance, and involve herself in various activist causes. Specifically, Sewell let her parents *borrow* money (Gavin

Dark Horse 105), and her will distributed 700£ in stocks and bonds (nearly 47,000£ in 2003 values, according to Gavin) as well as an unspecified (but apparently significant) amount of cash (*Dark Horse* 211).

Gavin also reinterprets Sewell's invalidism. By many accounts, when Sewell was 14, she slipped and fell in the rain, severely spraining one or both of her ankles. As Gavin says, "Mary describes the initial injury as being to one ankle . . . but after the first few months Anna herself and her family begin to write of problems with her 'feet' in the plural" (*Dark Horse* 35). In either case, Gavin writes, "Anna was lame for life" (35). While the severity of the lameness fluctuated, by 1839, when Sewell was nineteen, "her lameness had become only one in a tangle of symptoms that included chest pains, weakness and pain in her back, inability to concentrate, extreme fatigue, and periods of depression" (Gavin *Dark Horse* 71), conditions that affected her, sometimes more, sometimes less, for the rest of her life. Finally, in 1871, she became confined to her house, often to her room.

While she says no single diagnosis of these conditions "seems to have been made beyond [Sewell's being an] 'invalid'" (*Dark Horse* 71), Gavin argues for the possibility, suggested by Gavin's physician sister, that Sewell was affected by Systemic Lupus Erythematosus (Lupus), a chronic autoimmune disease not recognized at the time that often manifests in adolescence, triggered by stress or injury. Gavin also points out that two paintings of Sewell approximately 20 years apart show her with what could either be rosy cheeks, or "the classic . . . Lupus 'butterfly' rash across the sufferer's cheeks" (72). Anne Lundin (2005) says this reinterpretation is essential, because in contrast to "other writers [who] have imparted a certain neurosis, if not hypochondria, to Anna's suffering, which distorts her accomplishments," this new diagnosis "helps to redeem her mental health" (2). Indeed, Gavin's reinterpretation of Sewell is vital to an understanding of her

authorial conditions. The exhaustion and depression associated with Lupus makes even the most everyday things “difficult, if not impossible” (Gavin *Dark Horse* 72). But, all told, recent critics like Gavin and Collins now see much of Sewell’s situation as less of an oppressive burden to her than “the veritable room of her own” (Collins 7), that allowed her the comparative freedom to compose her novel.

³¹ Gavin’s 1999 article examines *Black Beauty*, with its treatment of lameness and dependency, as Sewell’s own autobiography (52). This view is in keeping with other scholars as well: Susan Chitty (1971) sees in Sewell’s characters Beauty and Ginger a struggle between Sewell’s acceptance of her condition and her desire to rebel against it. Ruth Padel (1980) believes that Ginger has an unhappy ending because Sewell was indoctrinated that women should accept their condition. Gina Marie Dorre (1996) says Sewell appropriates Beauty’s body to overcome her own powerlessness and through him “inhabits the stable and runs among men” (168). Moira Ferguson (1994) equates the powerlessness of the two: like Beauty, “Sewell functions as a passive participant in her world; she asserts personal independence only through her text” (48).

³² It is interesting to note that as far as is known, Sewell, in her various social activities, was not a member of any organized animal rights’ organization. It is not that they did not exist: the Society for Prevention of Cruelty was founded in 1824 to provide enforcement of anti-cruelty legislation (the word “Royal” prefaced “Society” after Queen Victoria granted the organization a charter), but for some reason, Sewell preferred to make her own personal interventions whenever she saw cruelty.

Margaret Sewell writes,

The sight of cruelty to animals or to the helpless or even thoughtlessness and indifference to suffering, roused her indignation almost to fury, and wherever she was, or whoever she had to face, she

would stop and scathe the culprit with burning words. (qtd. in Gavin
Dark Horse 136)

This is a rather different picture from the stereotypical “shrinking violet Victorian lady” or “pacifist Quaker.”

³³ Gavin’s biography also corrects earlier misperceptions about Anna Sewell and her mother. Chitty and other critics argue that Mary Sewell, a strong and active force and published author in her own right, overshadowed her daughter: they characterize the relationship between the women as difficult, stifling, and oppressive for the younger. They also suggest that this imbalance carried over into Sewell’s writing of *Black Beauty*; for example, Dorre refers to Mary Sewell’s heavy-handed editing of her daughter’s work. Gavin’s biography, however, details a much more complex and reciprocal relationship, one in which each woman influenced the other’s thinking and work.

Chitty and Dorre see Beauty’s passive acceptance of his lot and subsequent reward for “good behavior” contrasted with Ginger’s continual struggle against hers and her subsequent death as evidence of Anna Sewell’s capitulation to Mary Sewell’s conventional theology that Christians accept suffering as part of God’s plan. However, Gavin argues that the struggle between acceptance and mutiny results from Sewell’s own examination of her situation. She describes a religious transformation in 1874 that washed away many of Sewell’s religious doubts about the affliction she had struggled with most of her life. Sewell wrote to a friend that she felt her suffering was purposeful: “my very frailty is what gives me a place among the weak ones in whom His strength is perfected” (qtd. in *Dark Horses* 175). After this time, Gavin reports, it was apparent to onlookers like Mary Bayly, author of a biography of Mary Sewell, that Anna Sewell’s “victory had been gained by a

constant inward struggle known only to herself and her Lord" (qtd. in *Dark Horse* 176).

³⁴ By 1852, over forty London editions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been published (Mason 122). In addition, Stowe toured the British Isles extensively in 1853, 1856, and 1859.

Critics have discussed the relationship between *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Black Beauty* at some length. Diane Roberts (1994) discusses the inherent difficulties faced by Stowe and Sewell: as white middle-class women constructing an Other's identity, each is "a double agent, both acting as 'mistress' in controlling her characters and plot, and identifying with them" (19).

Peter Stoneley (1999) points out parallels between Legree's attempted seduction of Emmeline and Ginger's experiences at the hands of her trainers, but makes the larger comparison between Tom and Beauty, who he says are similar in three important ways. First, they are coded as animals: one is black and shiny, powerfully built with large intelligent eyes, glossy hair, and a kind face handsome enough to turn heads. He is also obedient, passive, optimistic, and generally cheerful, innocent, gentle, instantly available for service, satisfied with his lot as a beast of burden, and incredibly noble in the face of suffering. The other is the horse—or the human. Second, they are sexless: Tom's "gender is resignified . . . into the domestic, womanly sphere" (11); Beauty has been literally emasculated (14). Finally, both Tom and Beauty are forced into submission. Stoneley compares Tom's submission of his will to his various masters—kind or cruel—to Beauty's and says each becomes a hero "not by questioning his destiny and changing it, but rather by demonstrating true Christian humility under severe provocation" (14).

The critical perception is that Sewell, like Stowe, fell short in her arguments on race. But was Sewell even talking about race? If nothing else, her choice of color

for her protagonist would lead one to assume so. Black is a rare color for a horse: most animals appearing black are actually dark brown. Sewell, as an expert horsewoman, surely knew the presence of *any* brown hair on a horse makes the horse technically brown (although admittedly *Brown Beauty* does not have the same resonance as a title). Gary Sandman ties Sewell's religious beliefs to Beauty's color, black being the color of preference for Quaker attire; finally, Gavin believes Sewell based Beauty on her brother Phillip's black mare named Bessie who shared many of Beauty's traits (179).

³⁵ That Sewell read and borrowed heavily from the Douglass 1845 narrative is evident not only in *Black Beauty's* structure, as discussed in Chapter Three, but in the episodes and often in the very language she employs. For example, both Douglass and Beauty had mothers who worked in the fields during the day but returned to "lie down close" to their children at night; both witness a shooting at close range—Douglass sees Gore murder Demby, and Beauty sees Rob Roy destroyed—with both reporting the poor victim "was no more"; both feel the "greatness of the master" is somehow transferred to his property; and both remark on the privileged Christians who attend church but will not allow their slaves or the working class a day of rest.

Two significant episodes confirm Sewell's familiarity with Douglass. The first is the episode for Douglass and Beauty in which they are driven to mental and physical exhaustion. In nearly interchangeable language, they recount how on a hot day, they are being overworked after months of abuse, fall heavily to the ground, and think they are going to die. They both recover, however; and this episode marks the turning point in their circumstances: Douglass regains his manhood through his fight with Covey, and Beauty is sold to Mr. Thoroughgood.

The second parallel episode is less obvious, but convincing nonetheless. Douglass writes of his grandmother, who—after serving her Master faithfully for many years—has a little hut built for her in the woods, “virtually turning her out to die . . . in utter loneliness” (284), without family, friends, or community. In *Black Beauty*, Sewall writes of Beauty that, at fourteen, he is purchased by three unmarried ladies and turned out to pasture. Although this may sound Edenic, Sewall clarifies the real situation when Beauty says wistfully, “often before I am quite awake, I fancy I am still in the orchard at Birtwick standing with my old friends under the apple trees” (452). Beauty is by nature a herd animal. Fourteen when he is purchased and expected to live “perhaps till he is twenty years old—perhaps more” according to Mr. Thoroughgood (452), this complex social creature can expect to spend at least seven years in loneliness: well-cared for by humans, yet bereft of equine community.

³⁶ Derrida makes it clear that animals are “certainly capable of crossing the borders” in order to communicate (372); when he says they lack the means to respond, he is referring only to “the inability to form letters and syllables” (375). Other writers agree. Lucy Grealy stresses the preeminence of nonverbal communication for both animals and humans: “Physical language is a more effective means to communicate than black scratches arranged on a white page” (“Present Tense” 145). Alice Walker agrees that animals do have the means to communicate, but asserts that it does them little good: in her essay “Crimes Against Dog” in which she draws comparisons between a dog breeder and a slaveholder, she writes, “Animals can communicate quite well. And they do. And, generally speaking, they are ignored” (*We Are the Ones We’ve Been Waiting For: A Light in a Time of Darkness*. NY: Ballentine. 2006).

³⁷ In their introductory material to the 1989 Annotated *Black Beauty*, Ellen Wells and Anna Grimshaw offer a reason for this. They explain that serious abridgment in the works' various editions significantly altered or even excised much of the social commentary while retaining only the action. They give as an example a 1903 version that shortened the work from forty-nine to thirty-four chapters. Because of changes like these, they argue, "many children read only the shortened diluted versions of this strong tale" (xxxviii). Paul Collins (2006) notes the effect of such abridgments: "it is a sweet-tempered Merrylegs of a book now: it does not kick or bite" (14).

³⁸ Another specific argument Sewell makes in *Black Beauty* is against the check- or bearing-rein to which "fashionable" horses on both sides of the ocean were subjected. There were two types of this device, both of which hold a harness horse's head in an unnaturally high position. The simple bearing-rein attaches to the driving bit, passes through a ring at the horse's cheek, and culminates at the harness. The gag-bearing-rein, however, actually consists of a separate bit with the rein then passing through a ring on the bridle and attaching to the harness. According to Edward Fordham Flower, a noted horse expert of the time, this causes a two-fold problem:

Severe as the simple bearing-rein may be, its evil is doubled by the gag system, for its elevating power is doubled . . . nor can the coachman relax this terrible and dangerous gag-bit, for separate as it is from the driving apparatus, it would fall out of the horse's mouth and to try to put it in again would take time and persuasion, or rather, force. (qtd. in Chitty 232)

The unconscionably cruel bearing-rein situated a second bit tightly in horses' mouths and strung the animals' heads high, causing them to foam and froth at the mouth in

a show of "spiritedness," creating the illusion that they were untamed and uncontrollable. Ironically, the opposite is true: a horse that cannot lower its head cannot buck nor get the bit in its teeth to bolt.

Because most of a horse's strength and balance comes from its neck, this device had serious implications for the health of the animal. Those like Sewell who argued for the abolition of the bearing-rein pointed out that it shortened a horse's windpipe (ruining its breathing ability), prevented it from using its head for leverage in pulling, destroyed its balance, damaged its mouth, and broke its spirit. Beauty, the most tractable of horses, says, "I never knew what it was to foam at the mouth, but now the action of the sharp bit on my tongue and jaw, and the constrained position of my head and throat, always caused me to froth at the mouth more or less" (129).

Although Beauty's passivity causes him to be agreeable in spite of this device, Ginger demonstrates what some horses would do—rather than submit to an owner's "persuasion"—when it came time to tighten the rein: she destroys the traces and injures Beauty, all due, as one groom disgustedly puts it, "to fashion" (133). Beauty himself places the blame for his injuries not on Ginger but on the bearing-rein; however, this is not the last time he will suffer because of the device. At his lowest point he works as a draft horse and demonstrates the absolute absurdity of having those animals in particular subjected to the "fashionable" head-stringing of their harnessed counterparts: he cannot get his head down to pull a heavy load up a slippery hill. As his driver lashes him with the whip, he struggles on until the intervention of a kindly woman passer-by convinces the cart man to unhook the rein at hills (perhaps an insertion of the author into her text); thus loosened, Beauty is able to "throw his neck into it" and move the heavy load.

Both the RSPCA and George Angell's group credited *Black Beauty* with a great reduction in the use of the device.

³⁸ It is not only creatures and creations which must submit to constraints, but the curious writer of the academic thesis as well. Often blinders have had to be applied to this writer to keep her from becoming easily distracted. For every road taken, there have been a thousand left unexplored; hobbles have occasionally been necessary to prevent her from bolting down various side-paths. These constraints (as well as the occasional carrot and/or stick) were necessary in order to get her to perform the work she has done.

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