

The Role of Woman in *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell through Representation

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Abstract

Women often face stereotypes of being nurturing or empathetic due to their historical roles as caregivers, leading to unfair judgments based on emotions compared to men's rationality. Because of this situation Simone de Beauvoir, a French philosopher, later criticized gender inequality in her writing "The Second Sex". This paper delves into the phenomenon of slavery endured by women and children during the Victorian era, as depicted in Anna Sewell's "Black Beauty". By contextualizing the characters' experiences within historical realities, this study contributes to a broader comprehension of the representation of gender oppression and woman slavery in that book. Using Stuart Hall's representation theory, it analyzes how societal norms and power dynamics during Queen Victoria's reign shape the portrayal of female characters. Hall's theory highlights that representations are constructed through cultural and historical contexts, not direct reflections of reality. Ultimately, the analysis shows that "Black Beauty" effectively portrays the harsh realities of slavery, especially for women and children, making it a significant social critique of its time.

Keywords: representation, slavery, victorian, woman

INTRODUCTION

In understanding literature, particularly novels, the significance lies not only in the explicit narrative but also in the underlying representations and symbols embedded within the text. Roland Barthes, a prominent semiotician, contends that signs and symbols carry specific messages, such as black signifying grief or a rose symbolizing beauty. Similarly, animals in literary works often serve as representations of broader concepts or societal roles (p.12).

Anna Sewell's "Black Beauty," a classic novel ostensibly centered around a horse, transcends its literal subject matter to depict profound commentary on societal norms and

injustices. Published in 1877 during the Victorian era, a period marked by rigid gender roles and systemic oppression, Sewell's work offers a reflection of the realities of its time. During the

Victorian era, women experienced a form of slavery linked to the social and cultural systems that controlled nearly every aspect of their lives. This period, spanning from 1837 to 1901, was characterized by strong patriarchal norms and strict limitations on women within society. Victorian women were often confined to traditional roles as obedient housewives, dictated by societal views rooted in the idea that their place

was within the home to care for their husbands and children.

However, women's slavery in the Victorian era also extended beyond the household. In the economic sector, women were often treated as property and employed for low wages, sometimes even unpaid. They frequently worked as marginalized factory laborers or domestic workers, without officially recognized rights and adequate legal protection. This economic oppression placed women in vulnerable positions, dependent on men, making them susceptible to exploitation and abuse.

Additionally, aspects of women's slavery in the Victorian era manifested in practices that harmed their health and reproductive rights. Inequality in access to healthcare and control over their bodies often resulted in preventable diseases and life-threatening medical conditions for women. Furthermore, restrictions on their reproductive rights and lack of access to information about contraception often led Victorian women to experience repeated pregnancies without the option to control the number of children they had.

In a social and cultural context dominated by

patriarchal values, women in the Victorian era were trapped in limited roles and often subjected to oppression. They had to struggle to gain their basic rights and resist structures that limited their freedom and autonomy. Nevertheless, some women of that time led reform movements and fought for their rights, paving the way for significant changes in English society and inspiring women's movements worldwide. During the Victorian era, literature served as a platform for exploring and critiquing the oppressive conditions faced by women. Numerous literary works of the time shed light on the plight of women and served as vehicles for social commentary and advocacy for women's rights.

One notable example is Charlotte Brontë's "Jane Eyre," published in 1847, which delves into themes of gender inequality, social class, and the struggle for independence. The novel follows the journey of its protagonist, Jane Eyre, as she navigates the constraints of Victorian society and

strives to assert her identity and autonomy in a world dominated by patriarchal norms.

Similarly, Elizabeth Gaskell's "North and South," published in 1855, addresses issues of gender, labor, and social justice through the

experiences of its female protagonist, Margaret Hale. Set against the backdrop of industrialization in northern England, the novel explores the challenges faced by women in both the domestic sphere and the public sphere, highlighting the intersectionality of class and gender oppression.

In addition to these fictional works, non-fictional texts such as Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman" (1792) and John Stuart Mill's "The Subjection of Women" (1869) provided intellectual arguments for the equality and liberation of women. These influential texts contributed to the burgeoning feminist movement of the Victorian era and laid the groundwork for future advocacy efforts. Overall, Victorian literature played a significant role in raising awareness about the enslavement of women within society and advocating for social change. Through nuanced portrayals and compelling narratives, authors of the time challenged prevailing attitudes and norms, paving the way for greater recognition of women's rights and freedoms.

"Black Beauty" effectively captures and mirrors the Victorian era through both direct and subtle elements. The novel explicitly tackles social issues like animal welfare, class differences, and many others. Implicitly, it communicates deeper moral and religious themes, critiques societal norms, and symbolizes the quest for freedom and humane treatment. Through its multifaceted narrative, "Black Beauty" not only recounts the story of a horse but also provides a poignant critique of Victorian society and its values. Employing Stuart Hall's representation theory, this paper endeavors to dissect the nuanced portrayal of women within "Black Beauty" and its reflection of Victorian societal constructs.

During Queen Victoria's reign from 1837 to 1901, women in Britain faced significant societal

constraints. Denied autonomy and relegated to subservient roles, they were often commodified, traded, and subjected to various forms of abuse and exploitation. Within the pages of "Black Beauty," Sewell utilizes the allegorical representation of horses to shed light on the plight of women in Victorian England. Through a reflective approach, as posited by Hall's theory, the novel serves as a mirror reflecting the harsh realities of female oppression during this era.

Drawing inspiration from previous research utilizing Stuart Hall's framework, this study aims to delve into the specific representations of British women within "Black Beauty." By examining how Sewell utilizes the narrative to depict the struggles and triumphs of female characters, readers gain insight into the broader societal attitudes and ideologies prevalent during the Victorian era. Ultimately, this research seeks to elucidate the role of women in shaping and challenging societal norms, as depicted through the lens of a literary masterpiece.

An interesting aspect to analyze from the novel *Black Beauty* is how representation theory can uncover a message within a text. The author references several previous studies that use representation theory or analyze *Black Beauty*. For instance, Gita Batari Hermayanthi's research titled "Representasi Kekerasan Pada Anak Dalam Film *Miss Baek* (Analisis Representasi Stuart Hall)" found that almost all forms of violence, their causes, and long-term consequences are depicted in every scene of the movie *Miss Baek*. Researcher also refers to several studies that have been conducted on the novel *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell. Such as the research with title "The Representation of Animalism

Issue in Sewell's *Black Beauty*" conducted by Madeline Yudith and friends, the result of this research is showed that five factors affected Sewell's life background, namely ankle illness, Phillip Sewell, Late Industrial

Revolution, Victorian Era, and Crimean War. Another study by Sri Wahyuni and Sudarmin Harun titled "The Depiction of Slavery through Animal Treatment in Sewell's *Black Beauty* in Relation to Living with Environment" focuses on how the treatment of animals in *Black Beauty*

depicts Victorian-era "slavery" and violations of animal protection laws.

This research also refers to Wening Putri Pertiwi's 2017 study, "The Meaning of 'Black Beauty' as Seen in Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty*." Pertiwi concluded that the character *Black Beauty* symbolizes Victorian women, shown by their submissive attitudes and tenderness, which align with societal expectations of women at that time. Agreeing with Pertiwi's findings, this research aims to further prove that *Black Beauty* represents British women in the Victorian Era by presenting additional evidence.

In light of these considerations, this paper titled "The Role of Women in *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell" endeavors to unravel the intricate tapestry of representations within the novel, offering a deeper understanding of the cultural and historical contexts in which it was crafted. Through this exploration, readers are invited to critically engage with the complexities of gender dynamics and societal power structures inherent in Sewell's timeless work to know how *Black Beauty* represents British women in the Victorian era and the roles of that represented by *Black Beauty*.

METHODS

The researcher uses qualitative descriptive methods in analyzing the novel "Black Beauty" by Anna Sewell. Cresswell (2014) Qualitative method is a research method that focuses on process and meaning. This method is a descriptive analysis that requires in-depth observation. Descriptive qualitative method holds the view that all things that constitute the sign system cannot be underestimated, because everything is important and has an influence and is related to one another. Because, researchers want to describe the form of representation that exists in the novel "Black Beauty" specifically and in depth (p.13).

Researchers refer to Stuart Hall's Representation theory in conducting research. Hall (1997) proposed this theory in his book "Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practice". Representation is an essential part of the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between members of a culture. It

does involve the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things Stuart Hall's theory of representation outlines three key approaches for understanding how meaning is constructed in texts and media: reflective, intentional, and constructionist. The reflective approach argues that meaning comes from human experiences within society, indicating that our interpretations are based on shared cultural and social contexts. The intentional approach, on the other hand, focuses on the creator's role, suggesting that meaning is embedded in the language used, both spoken and written, by the creator to convey a message. This approach highlights the importance of the creator's intent in shaping the interpretation of a work. Meanwhile, the constructionist approach provides a more intricate view, stating that meaning is not inherent in objects or works themselves but is actively constructed by humans. This perspective implies that interpretation is a dynamic process influenced by cultural and social factors rather than a fixed quality of the work. Collectively, these approaches offer a comprehensive set of tools for analyzing representations in various forms of media, emphasizing the complex relationship between creator, audience, and societal context in the construction of meaning (p.25).

In collecting data using literature review techniques, Khan (2008) which go through the stages of determining the text, reading, identifying, describing, and concluding the results of the analysis. The literature referred to in this qualitative research is the selection of manuscript materials to be used. The characteristics of literature in scientific literature research are due to the nature of literature as an autonomous world and as an imaginative activity (p.97).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

After laying the foundation by examining the theoretical framework and methodological approach, the researcher now shifts focus to the core of the discussion: the role of women as depicted in Anna Sewell's "Black Beauty." Through a qualitative analysis influenced by Stuart

Hall's representation theory, this study aims to uncover the complex representations embedded within the text and explore their implications within the broader socio-cultural context of Victorian England. By delving into the intricacies of Sewell's narrative and employing a reflective lens, the researcher seeks to elucidate the ways in which the novel serves as a mirror reflecting the societal constraints and struggles faced by women during this era. Through this exploration, the researcher endeavors to highlight the complexities of gender dynamics and societal power structures inherent in

Sewell's timeless work, ultimately offering a nuanced understanding of the role of women as portrayed in "Black Beauty."

Woman in Victorian Era as Reflected in the Novel

Anna Sewell through the novel "Black Beauty" presents a nuanced portrayal of women in the Victorian era, blending traditional roles with progressive traits. Female characters like Mrs. Gordon and Lady Anne embody the Victorian ideal of nurturers and caregivers, showing kindness and compassion towards animals and acting as moral guardians within the home. These women are depicted as more emotionally sensitive and empathetic than their male counterparts, reflecting the stereotype of women as naturally more compassionate.

However, Sewell also gives her female characters progressive qualities, portraying them as advocates for animal welfare, a forward-thinking stance at the time. Characters such as Mrs. Gordong and her daughter actively oppose cruel practices like the bearing rein, mirroring the broader societal shift towards social reform and women's involvement in public moral campaigns. This subtle critique of gender norms suggests that women possess greater capability and intelligence than the traditional domestic role allows. The female characters in "Black Beauty" often demonstrate moral leadership, guiding the men around them towards more humane and ethical behavior, highlighting their influence within their immediate environment and community. Symbolically, the

empathy and compassion shown by these women represent the Victorian ideal of women as spiritual guides. Their struggles in advocating for better treatment of animals mirror the broader challenges faced by women in society, and their resilience and determination foreshadow the growing awareness and activism that would lead to significant advancements in women's rights. Through these layered portrayals, Sewell reflect the societal norms of her time while hinting at the emergent changes that would eventually contribute to greater gender equality.

The Form of Woman Representation in BlackBeauty

Based on Stuart Hall theory, representation is the production of concepts of meaning in the mind through language, where concepts and language portray real objects and events into fictional objects and events. One of the approaches from Hall's representation theory is a reflective approach, meaning can be produced by humans based on experiences or real situations that occur in society. In this case, the researcher uses this approach to examine the novel *Black Beauty* by Anna Sewell.

Black Beauty is a novel that tells the life of a stallion named Black Beauty who is mistreated, such as being exploited and tortured with relentless forced labor that leaves him injured. Typically, this novel is seen by readers as a depiction of animal mistreatment that occurred during the Victorian era with the aim of criticizing such actions and understanding that animals also have feelings, "...they never think that a pony can get tired, or have any feelings.." (p,17).

In "*Black Beauty*" the main character undergoes exploitation and mistreatment akin to that experienced by women in the Victorian era. Both are traded, a circumstance that arises because women were often regarded as property, exchanged between men. Through reflective analysis by Stuart Hall, the depiction of Black Beauty's grueling forced labor mirroring the treatment of women in the Victorian, indicating their lack of agency and autonomy.

"...the saddle he prevailed upon my master to sell me to a friend of his, who wanted a safe, pleasant horse for riding." (p, 159)

"I was thought very handsome; my master would not sell me till I was four years old.." (p, 22)

The second issue reflected is the use of a bit and saddle on Black Beauty, representing the social expectation for women in the Victorian era to remain silent and obedient. Both items can be depicted as symbols "muffling" women's voice at that time. Just like what written by Shanley in her book, women, like Black Beauty, were expected to endure suffering without protest, reinforcing their subordinate status within Victorian society (p.59).

"...men who seemed to think that all depended on

holding the reins as hard as they could, never relaxing the pull on the horse's mouth, or giving him the least

liberty of movement." (p, 147)

Then, another symbol of the role of women through Black Beauty is shown through "slavery" in the novel. Where the black beauty is used to be a "tool" to earn income and must submit to her master, without respite. Just as the horse, women in the Victorian era faced relentless demands and expectation from their husbands and employers, also being traded by both the husbands and the employers.

"..I might find myself slaved about under a butcher's boy, or worked to death at some seaside place where no one cared for me, except to find out how fast I could go, or be flogged along in some cart with three or four great men in it going out for a Sunday spree, as I have often seen in the place I lived in before I came here; no,.." (p, 54)

"and thought I enjoyed the liberty and sweet grass, yet I had been so lay used to society that I felt very lonely." (p, 143)

“I had my feet thoroughly cleansed and stuffed with tow soaked in some strong lotion; and an unpleasant business it was.” (p, 167)

Last but not least, *Black Beauty* experiences physical abuse, such as harsh beatings and excessive burdens, reflecting the brutality endured by women in the Victorian era. The fact that this novel serves as Anna Sewell’s depiction of her own suffering during the Victorian era, portrayed through a horse, also evokes the pain and suffering experienced by women in a rather patriarchal society. The resilience and patience of the main character in the novel reflect the endurance of Victorian women, which unfortunately perpetuates the cycle of oppression.

“One day I was loaded more than usual, and part of

the road was a steep uphill. I used all my strength, but I could not get on, and was obliged continually to stop. This did not please my driver, and he laid his whip on badly. “Get on, you lazy fellow,” he said, “or I’ll make you.” (p, 252)

Based on the analysis presented above, the researcher can conclude that in the novel “*Black Beauty*”, there are symbols representing the suffering of women during the Victorian era, depicted through the main character *Black Beauty*, himself.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the study highlights how “*Black Beauty*” by Anna Sewell serves as a powerful critique of gender oppression and slavery during the Victorian era. By examining the depiction of women and children in the novel through Stuart Hall’s representation theory, it becomes evident that societal norms and power dynamics of Queen Victoria’s reign heavily influenced these portrayals. Sewell’s work not only reflects the historical context but also challenges the stereotypes of women nurturing and empathetic caregivers. Through its nuanced representation of suffering and resilience, “*Black*

Beauty” underscores the broader issue of gender inequality, making it a significant literary contribution to social commentary on the era’s injustices.

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