

**Animal Metaphors in Heinrich Böll's *Billard
um halb zehn*
and Günter Grass' *Hundejahre***

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Since the beginning of time, people have used animals - mythical or otherwise - to portray emotions, events, and attributes. For example, the Chinese often use dragons, the Indians write about cobras and mon-gooses, the ancient Greeks invented the chimera and the hydra, Africans personify elephants and cheetahs, and Americans tend to associate certain qualities with eagles, bears, and snakes. Each of these animals appears in the stories and legends of these cultures, such as India's Riki Tiki Tavi, Greek mythology's Jason and the Argonauts, and Rudyard Kipling's African tale, *The Elephant Child*.

The traits assigned to animals used as characters in a story could be connected with the demeanor of the creature, such as slow turtles or lazy lions, but the reasoning behind these characteristics is often not obvious. Why, for instance, does American culture often consider owls wise? There is nothing inherently wise about the bird, yet stories and shows geared toward children such as Winnie the Pooh and *Mr. Roger's Neighborhood* portray the character of the owl as a wise old grandfather-figure.

Authors, too, use certain animals to depict specific

personality traits. Sometimes, these traits are easily associated with the specific animals possessing them, but other times one must dig deeper and examine the behavioral characteristics of the actual creature before the reasoning for its use in the storyline becomes apparent. Heinrich Böll's *Billard um halb zehn* and Günter Grass' *Hundejahre* contain animal characters with personality traits both commonly associated with them and also several not usually thought of. Böll's lamb and Grass' mouse are two figures that possess qualities frequently attributed to them in American culture: the lamb is gentle and submissive, and the mouse is mischievous and destructive. However, two other animal characters, the buffalo and the dog, have attributes Americans rarely associate with them: the buffalo is oppressive merciless, and the dog is devious and controlling. The following commentary will analyze the features typical of these animals and attempt to explain what they represent, as well as why the authors chose them.

Before beginning an analysis of the animals, though, a brief summary of the two novels should be given. Böll's *Billard um halb zehn* describes three generations of architects living in the Rheinland who are faced with the moral challenges of life before, during, and after World War II. The main conflict, depicted through the symbols of the 'lamb' and the 'buffalo', is the struggle between the individuals who think and act independently and the opportunistic majority (Böll 2). It is not only a struggle of self-determinism versus Nazi brainwashing, but also a struggle of creating a defining line between good and evil. Böll demonstrates that even good people can do bad things, and that the division between the two is not black

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and white.

Grass' *Hundejahre* also deals with the Nazi era, but his novel focuses more on the ramifications of the Nazi mentality and how its effects manifest themselves again and again throughout time. He especially links together art and politics. "*Dog Years* is about the role of the artist in understanding how the politics of the past inform the present and thereby determine the future" (Keele 74). One of the protagonists of the book, Eddi Amsel, takes to constructing figures to represent evil—not just nazism, but all of the wicked deeds done around his home in Danzig over the centuries. These models are so horrifying that he ends up selling them as scarecrows. These scarecrows however, frighten more than just birds, even people are afraid of them. They illustrate a tangible depiction of hatred and malice released in an artistic form.

The mouse and the dog are also used to portray this penetrating evil. The mouse symbolizes internal destruction and decay, whereas the dog represents ultimate corruption and selfishness. Grass' message in the novel is that although Hitler may have died and nazism may be officially over, the potential for tremendous evil still exists. It, given the proper conditions, can strike in any part of the world, not just in Germany. Given this information about the two books, an analysis of the animal symbolism contained in them can now be made.

True to their nature, the lambs spoken of in Böll's novel are gentle, passive, and peaceful creatures. While there are no actual lambs in the book, various characters are given a lamb-like status by virtue of their own traits, such as Edith (the archetypal 'lamb'), Ferdi Progulske, and for the most part Schrella. Although Schrella is not

without blemish and enjoys throwing bombs and making threats (Böll 205), he declares himself a lamb (53) and refuses to give in to the cold hatred of the Nazis. The lamb-like characters tend to be the targets of violent attacks by the ‘buffaloes’ (Nazis) because of their submissiveness and timidity. While they may be weak physically, the lambs possess a steadfastness and strength of character which their aggressive, and domineering counterparts, the buffaloes, lack. Although the world in blindness and ignorance tramples over them, the reader learns to have respect for these almost supernatural seers and doers of good.

Since Jesus Christ was first called the “Lamb of God” in the Bible, the lamb has symbolized meekness, gentleness, peace, and goodness. One bestiary lists the lamb as the “symbol of...our mystic Saviour, whose innocent death saved mankind” (Barber 81). Based on typical characteristics of lambs portrayed in stories over time, the same bestiary defines a lamb as “anyone among the faithful whose life is blameless” (81). In the Bible, Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God and the Good Shepherd to all mankind, his flock of sheep. To Christians, Christ is the Savior of the world and represents all things blessed, righteous, and peaceful. When this analogy is extended to the lamb-like characters of Böll’s work, it brings their natures into a new light and hints to the reader the likeness of these people to Christ.

As with any flock of sheep, there are shepherds guarding over them. Fähmel serves as one of these shepherds. He refuses to participate in the “Sakrament des Büffels,” or the ritualistic Nazi tormenting of the innocent lambs, but lacks the purity of intent embodied by

the lambs. For example, he still enjoys bombing buildings, although not for the purpose of killing others (Böll 315). He is less insightful than the lambs, but is willing to protect and defend them, thus earning himself the title of Hirte, shepherd (54).

The polar opposite of the lamb, the buffalo represents the violence, hatred, aggression, and ruthlessness associated with nazism. Two of the characters described as buffaloes are Otto and Nettlinger. Otto is a die-hard Nazi, without mercy or love for anyone (43). He does not really think about what he is doing; rather he blindly obeys what he is told to do and never questions his superiors. Nettlinger is a vengeful enemy from Fähmel's past who is willing to say anything to get what he wants (203). These men depict the malicious unbound hatred associated with nazism and are therefore characterized as buffaloes, or those who have partaken of the *Sakrament des Büffels*.

In order to understand why Böll chose the buffalo as the symbol of evil, one needs to know what sort of buffalo it is he is referring to. It is not the docile American bison of the Plains, rather it is the wild and sometimes ferocious African Cape buffalo. These creatures are "similar to oxen, but so wild that no yoke can be laid on them" (Barber 91). "They are gregarious and rather touchy beasts that can be highly dangerous if they are provoked" (Audubon 80). African buffaloes live in herds dominated by a mature bull, graze on grass, and may charge even without provocation (Whitefield 144). They are especially dangerous when wounded during hunting, because they will often "circle around and stalk the hunter," charging and thrusting their massive horns into their victim (EA 4:717).

Bestiaries also list common qualities expressed by such buffaloes. One reports that “their status is similar to that of good teachers, but they swell with pride, and trust rather in the horns of worldly power than in divine help. And against the apostolic law, they choose to rule over the clergy, rather than lead them as a flock” (Barber 91). This description has profound implications for the use of the African buffalo in *Billard um halb zehn*.

At first, one may think of a more openly violent creature such as the lion, tiger, or snake to portray the terror of nazism, but upon further inspection, the Cape buffalo is actually the perfect figure. They are wild and aggressive and may attack without purpose. A mature male leads a group of between a dozen and a hundred animals, which can loosely be compared to the role Hitler played. Tigers and snakes hunt alone, but buffaloes are generally part of a herd. Nazis rarely did anything alone, for each individual lacked the strength to protect himself, as with the buffalo. Also, because buffaloes are grazers and not carnivores, they do not have the cunning, the prowess, or the intelligence required to hunt prey. They simply eat the grass as it comes, without thought or planning. This is significant in comparison to most Nazis: many of the officers seemed to simply follow orders and do as they were commanded, without thought as to the moral cause or implications of their actions on others.

Even stronger evidence for the use of the buffalo emerges when one examines its description in the bestiary. The supposed original intent of national socialism was to construct a new, more efficient economy by teaching the people to be loyal and unified, although what resulted was mere paranoia and suspicion. The

Nazis abused their position of leadership and abandoned and even forbade God. Eerily similar to the bestiary's description of the buffalo, the Nazis bribed, manipulated, and threatened the clergy into supporting their cause. Given this, it would seem Böll chose the perfect animal to describe nazism.

Although the buffalo depicts the evil nature of nazism well, the mouse and the dog are used to symbolize evil. In *Hundejahre*, Grass inserts mice throughout the book to portray corruption and decay. By definition mice "carry a variety of viral, bacterial, and parasitic diseases" and are "associated with crop damage, destruction of trees, and food contamination" (AAE 13:625). Interesting to note is that bestiaries do not only mention the physical pestilence caused by these rodents, but also some negative personal attributes connected to them as well. For example, one bestiary states that "mice represent greedy men who seek earthly goods, and make the goods of others their prey" (Barber 109). Another lists synonyms for mice as "greed, gluttony, and sloth" (Hassig 65). In relating the effects of mice to those of nazism, Grass explains throughout his book that the horror of this period did not occur overnight, rather it brewed slowly over a period of years until finally everything came crashing down. By mentioning mice and rats repeatedly throughout the novel, Grass depicts the corruption and decay of the collapsing Nazi society.

In the first couple of pages, mice are mentioned seven times in relation to the demolition they cause by eating away the dikes (Grass 539-544). This gradual gnawing of the walls holding back the sea not only represents physical destruction, but also an eating-away of society and a

dredging-up of the past. When the dike finally breaks, long-buried secrets from history emerge, exposing the secret misdeeds of years gone by (541). Thus, mice not only symbolize physical corrosion, but also societal deterioration.

A few pages later, Tilde Matern further emphasizes this rotting function of mice when she exclaims, “Daas hab ech mä emmer schon jedacht, daas de Evangjelschen em Loch drinn dem Deikert sain Mäuschen ham” (Grass 550). She is saying that mice not only serve their own purpose, to cause decomposition through eating and nesting, but that they really are doing the work of the devil - killing humans, in this case by eating embryos in utero.

A more direct reference to the evil nature of mice occurs when Amsel dresses Pikollos in a bridal gown that smells like Mäusedreck, mouse droppings (Grass 578). Pikollos was created as a physical embodiment of evil, and the fact that mice play a part in this image is significant. Mice are also mentioned several other times in the earlier sections of the novel and rats, often given the same characteristics as mice, if not stronger and more grotesque, are used frequently in the latter half. This theme of gradual destruction through physical, moral, and societal decay is a major message in Grass' book.

The final creature to be discussed in this article is the dog. Two bestiaries describe dogs as “clever, more understanding than any other beast, [unable to] live without human company” (Barber 72) and “loyal, faithful, [representing] envy and gluttony” (Hassig 65). One book goes so far as to say that the “devil was believed to transform himself for sexual purposes into an animal, commonly a

... dog" (72). This point shows that by their very nature certain breeds of canines are devilish, an argument which will be discussed further in the ensuing paragraphs.

The same bestiary also states that "Latin bestiaries also compare the dog returning to his own vomit to those who repeatedly sin" (85). It is a common fact that a dog that vomits will return hours later and reingest its own puke. In this sense, the dog in *Hundejahre* not only represents the devil, but also the Nazis who followed him. Those who were truly converted Nazis seemed to lack a conscience and sinned habitually, apparently without remorse or regret. They too, as well as Hitler and the devil, are embodied in this symbol of the dog.

In this case, when speaking of a dog, the reference is to a German shepherd descended from a Lithuanian she-wolf (Grass 548). As is well known, German shepherds are commonly used for police or military purposes. The dog in Grass' novel, whose names are Prinz and Pluto - Prinz as in the name of Hitler's dog and Pluto as in the God of Hell - is truly evil itself. Mice may be servants of the Devil, but this dog is actually the devil in animal form. At one point, Harry and his father are waiting to meet Hitler and Prinz, since Harry's father is the owner of Prinz's late father, but Hitler never appears: they only see Prinz (792). This idea is important because it signifies that the dog is not without his master, but that the master is without his man. Hitler is the puppet of Prinz. When Hitler is doomed to die, Prinz moves on to a new servant, Matern, and then to the West, meaning that the evil of the Holocaust did not end with the death of the Führer (810). Interesting to note is that Prinz does not behave like a typical dog; he is neither loyal nor faithful.

This further shows who was the master in the relationship: it was not Hitler.

After Pluto thrusts himself into the possession of Matern, Matern becomes even more wicked than before, denoting the influence of the Devil when he is embraced. At the end of the novel, even though he finally decides against evil and relinquishes himself of the cursed animal, leaving him below ground in the potash mine (954), Matern is still not cleansed. Although he bathes and becomes symbolically clean (955), the past is never forgotten or erased, and Pluto is still alive. The fact that Pluto does not die at the end of the book symbolizes that evil still exists, even though the Holocaust has ended. It is ironic, but intended by Grass, that Pluto goes underground, where the devil is commonly thought to dwell. This idea emphasizes the demonic nature of the dog in the novel.

Of the four animals discussed in this paper, three of them have ties to wickedness. Only Böll's lamb portrays peace and goodness, representing hope of not only the German people but of all people. The buffalo, mouse, and dog all represent the evil forms of nazism. Böll uses the buffalo to depict the harsh aggression and mindless slaughter employed by the Nazis. Grass incorporates the mouse into his story to symbolize constant decay and corruption, not only of the Nazi regime but of the world in general. Grass also uses the dog to represent evil, but this animal embodies a more violent and overtly destructive nature than the mouse. The dog exemplifies evil in its basest form, that of pure selfishness and hatred. The authors' use of these animals depicts their condemnation of nazism as well as their belief in man's potential for good or evil. By personifying qualities found in humans,

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the animals represent mankind and effectively portray the authors' basic message of good versus evil.

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