

# Humanism Amidst War: A Reading of Michael Morpurgo's *War Horse*

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## Abstract

*War Horse* is a war novel set in First World War Britain. Authored by Michael Morpurgo, the novel is a very poignant tale of the human-animal companionship that transcends boundaries of human language and the normally understood and highly limiting definition of human-animal bond. The protagonist, Joey, is a horse that passes into the hands of a young lad, Albert. The setting of the narrative is the First World War in France, when the British cavalry desperately needed horses, and the novel is about Joey's transition from being a farm horse to a war horse. Millions of horses became victims of the cavalry thanks to the overzealous armies that employed the hapless animals for purposes of war. The noble creatures were forced to become beasts of burden due to man's greed for power. Human-animal relationship is vividly portrayed in the special bond between Albert and Joey. Donna Haraway's notion of companion

species in *When Species Meet* informs much of the theoretical construct of the paper. The framework employed is Posthuman, multispecies family concepts from a political and ethical standpoint. The key message is that animals should be respected and treated empathetically.

**Keywords:** Human-Animal Relationship, Domestication, Multispecies Family, War, Humanism

### **Introduction**

In man's quest for power, when war seemed inevitable in Europe, horses meant for farm work and other chores had to be surrendered for military purposes. Circumstances force Albert Narracott, a young boy, to train Joey to become a farm horse, but Joey is taken away from Albert and moved to distant battlefields to be a cavalry mount, where Albert's equine companion where the loyal animal proves his mettle on the battlefield.

Everything exquisite is destroyed by war, but humanism does shine as a silver lining amidst the brutal clouds of war. The human-animal relationship is quite discernible through the special bond shared by Albert and his horse, Joey. The transition of Joey from farmhouse to battlefield marks a point of departure. He carries sweet memories of the days spent with Albert and his fellow horse, Zoey, in the farmhouse. Memories give them hope, helping them to revisit and reconstruct the past and their identities. Joey and Albert live with the hope that they will reunite one day, and this undying hope leads them to survive the pain and suffering they endure in wartime. Indeed, there is light at the end of the tunnel, and destiny reunites them when Albert joins the Veterinary Corps to find Joey among millions of horses.

### **When Joey meets Albert**

The primary theme of the novel is that animals have emotions too and an intelligence that the human mind fails to grasp or acknowledge. The novel unravels the misery of the hapless horses kept for sale. The narrative voice of Joey reveals the fearful memory of the

experience: “The terror of it stayed with me all my life” (Morpurgo 3). Ethically speaking, horses are not meant to be beasts of burden. Horses are misemployed in the tourism, entertainment and horse racing industries. Tourist carriage journeys end with exhausted horses collapsing. In an online article titled “How does PETA feel about horseback riding?”, PETA.org states that “Horses deserve to live their lives as nature intended. We can connect with horses in our care and have a meaningful and mutually beneficial relationship with these sensitive animals without climbing on top of them”.

When Joey was brought to the farmhouse, the presence of a companion horse named Zoey was soothing to him. “I had caught a glimpse of kindness and sympathy from that old mare that cooled my panic and soothed my spirit” (Morpurgo 6). Joey was an exceptional horse with remarkable features: a red bay, who looked grand with a perfect white “cross down his nose” (Morpurgo 7). He was adored by Albert but had to be trained out of his father’s insistence, for they needed money mostly. “The time has come for you to earn your keep”, (Morpurgo 14) remarks Albert’s father to Joey, and he says he could do it “the nice way or the nasty way” (Morpurgo 14). But Albert wanted Joey to be there as a companion animal and not as a workhorse. The concept of companion species enunciated by Donna Haraway finds an echo in this context: Here, Albert plays the role of a caretaker to his companion horse Joey, whom he considers his equal. There is no hierarchy between them; they are partners. He is against the idea of making horses work on farmland. His anxiety-tinged views to his mother, “After all, Joey works for his living now and he has to have time off to enjoy himself, just as I do” (Morpurgo 24), are redolent of the respect with which he holds animals under his care. To him, animals are as much beings deserving of respect as humans, and they are not in any way different from any living being.

He considers the animal companion as his own brother. Joey and Albert share an emotional bond that moves beyond utilitarian frames of reference. The affection experienced by Joey is understood through the narrative voice that says, “I learnt to come at his whistle, not out of obedience but because I always wanted to be with him” (Morpurgo 11-12). Animals do cherish companionship, and they, too, feel distress when left isolated, for they are sentient like humans. Joey finds a companion horse while in the army—Tophorn. They share an interdependent connection and become inseparable, and it is evident from the following line: “I found Tophorn was always by me and would breathe his courage into me to support me” (Morpurgo 49).

According to E. Lawrence (1988), as cited in Arnold Arluke's article "Managing Emotions in an Animal Shelter," there are instances when people will view the same animal as either a pet or an object. This is the case with children learning to ride; some people see “a horse as little more than a cross-country vehicle, while others will relate to it as a companion” (163). Donna Haraway’s concept of companion species focuses on partnership. The non-human animal is not a pet but a companion animal to the other; both are partners who need each other, and this is borne out well in the novel by Morpurgo. Albert and Joey enjoy a surreal emotional connection that goes beyond the shadow of mercenary purposes for which animals are normally used by mankind, as food, as beasts of burden, and as cannon fodder during manmade calamities such as war, strife, etc. man and animal value each other’s presence as friends and family. Haraway maintains that “multispecies flourishing requires a robust non-anthropomorphic sensibility that is accountable to irreducible differences” (90). A shared life with an animal companion signifies a deeper connection that helps a person to appreciate the differences in cross-cultural species and learn to treat all forms of life with dignity. It enables humans to widen their perspective and be better humans. One who is empathetic to animals would be more humane to one’s own species. The human-animal relationship eventually

translates as social–emotional skills for peaceful co-existence. In advancing the cause of companionship between humans and animals, mankind would be able to think beyond the limited boundaries of the liminal approach to life and appreciate that everywhere, sharing is caring. A shared life with a companion animal would instil in any participant a deeper sense of understanding and purpose in life.

### **Joey’s Transition as a Warhorse**

Circumstances force Joey into being sold to slavery for forty pounds. Albert wants to rescue his companion horse, and he joins the army with the motive of bringing Joey back to his home. Captain Nicholls, who bought Joey, understands the deep bond Albert shares with his horse. Thus, he promises that he would “take personal care of him” (Morpurgo 34). Nevertheless, Joey feels the pain of separation, as is evident in the following narration:

Back at home with Albert I had revelled in the long rides along the lanes and over the fields, and the heat and the flies had not seemed to matter; I had loved the aching days of ploughing and harrowing alongside Zoey, but that was because there had been a bond between us of trust and devotion. (Morpurgo 35)

In the army, Joey finds his role in the cavalry division and is roughly treated by his handler at certain times. A particularly painful instance is recalled by the animal, making the narrative both poignant and invested with appeal to empathy the “dumb” animals expect in their owners: “my rider...Corporal Samuel Perkins was a hard, gritty little man, an ex-jockey whose only pleasure in life seemed to be the power he could exert over a horse” (Morpurgo 36). The attitude of the horse towards him is one of respect, though one based on “...fear and not love” (Morpurgo 36). Though Felony provisions exist in the rulebook to prevent the infliction of pain and suffering on animals, these rules are violated with impunity and callousness.

While the novel *War Horse* was written more than several decades ago, ill treatment and disrespect towards animals continue to define the landscape of human animal relations, if the latest PETA reports are anything to go by. In 2013, according to a report by PETA, leading jockeys and trainers acknowledged using illegal electroshock devices on horses. Roman Chapa, a jockey who had previously been punished for putting a nail in a horse, was charged with a race-fixing felony after using a shocking device during a race several months later. In the report, PETA asserts that it works hard to tackle horse-racing cruelty.

Captain Nicholls was empathetic to Joey, and one major source of consolation for the horse was the daily visits of the captain. He would draw pictures of Joey and send them to Albert, and it was an assurance that Joey was taken care of. Captain Nicholls insists that the Corporal handle Joey gently. Further, the captain reminds him that “A horse may carry you through, Corporal, but he can’t do your fighting for you” (Morpurgo 40). This echoes Donna Haraway's assertion in *When Species Meet* that working sheepdogs "are not human slaves or wage laborers, and it would be a serious mistake to theorize their labor within those frameworks. They're paws, not hands" (55–56). Animals are not machines but sentient creatures with limitations and should not be seen as machines to be exploited exhaustively. Animals are abused when extracting demanding tasks from them, such as pulling heavy loads, tilling land, using them in war for carrying arms and ammunition, etc. It is an empathy-less act to regard them as agencies for rendering “services”. It is high time humans realised that they have a life of their own and they are supposed to enjoy life as nature intended, and not programmed to serve humans. Haraway points out that “Species interdependence is the name of the worlding game on earth, and that game must be one of response and respect. That is the play of companion species learning to pay attention” (19). Animals do find joy in companionship with fellow animal species and with humans. They also experience loneliness,

grief, and pain as humans do. It is important to be empathetic and humane to the needs of the species around us.

Eventually, Joey and Tophorn are employed more as transport animals for mounted infantry and less for cavalry. “The world has gone quite mad” (Morpurgo 74), declares the German officer. The world has gone insane when noble animals such as these majestic horses are transformed into beasts of burden. The armed forces are aware that war is futile and that animal abuse is cruel indeed.

A PETA article titled “The Military’s War on Animals” is very informative and helpful in this regard:

News reports tally the casualties of war, and monuments are erected to honor fallen soldiers, but the nonhuman victims of war—the animals who are shot, burned, poisoned, and otherwise tormented in military experiments and training exercises—are never recognized, nor is their suffering widely publicized.

The U.S. Department of Defence (DOD) maintained and ran the so-called "wound labs" for years, in which dogs and other animals, either conscious or semiconscious, were strung from slings and shot at with powerful weapons to cause injuries for rudimentary medical training exercises. The military stopped the program and outlawed the use of dogs, cats, and primates in training and wound up treatment trials permanently in 1983 when PETA discovered and objected to the Army's plan to buy dozens of dogs from animal shelters and shoot them on a firing range in Maryland.

When the war comes to a halt, Joey and Tophorn unite with Emilie and her grandfather. For a year or so, they are taken by Emily’s generous family, who loved animals as companions. Joey and Tophorn enjoyed her company, and they share a warm relationship.

. . . little Emilie would be there to comfort and to love us. We had that to look forward to and to long for. Any horse has an instinctive fondness for children for they speak more softly, and their size precludes any threat; but Emilie was a special child for us, for she spent every minute she could with us and lavished us with her affection. (Morpurgo 82-83)

The animals are told how much they mean to Little Emilie, who remained a sick child after she lost her parents. But every night, when she goes to bed, she prays for the poor animal companions in the stable. Her grandfather observes this:

She prays for me and for the war to pass by the farm and to leave us alone, and last of all she prays for you two. She prays for two things: first that you both survive the war and live on into ripe old age, and secondly that if you do she dearly wants to be there to be with you. (Morpurgo 84)

Joey experiences humane treatment from Emily and her grandfather. Animals bond with children swiftly, and it is conveyed through the novel that Little Emilie's affection played a role in helping Joey to adapt to new circumstances. He did enjoy life at the farmhouse, as evidenced by the remark: "I was working once more with happy, laughing people around me who cared for me" (Morpurgo 92).

### **The Futility of War**

War is futile indeed, and innocent lives are at stake when humanity is lost. Friedrich, one of the officers in charge, shows his rage against the chaos of war. He rages thus:

They fight a war and they don't know what for. Isn't that crazy? How can one man kill another and not really know the reason why he does it, except that the other man wears a different colour uniform and speaks a different language? And it's me they call mad! (Morpurgo 108)

Friedrich was an empathetic soldier and very affectionate to Tophorn. It is apparent that he frequently took a step back and just stared at Tophorn with radiant awe and love in his eyes. When Tophorn died due to shelling, Friedrich laments: “Why does this war have to destroy anything and everything that’s fine and beautiful?” (Morpurgo 114). Joey stayed there the whole day, realising the finality of death and in his grief, he wanted to stay there as long as possible to comfort the departed soul.

The incident reveals animal reactions to a dear one’s passing away, and when the dear one is not a member of their own species but anyone they had had an affinity with in their lifetime: animals indeed grieve the demise of their relatives and friends. This behaviour of mourning a loss and exhibiting overt sadness is not confined to dogs or horses alone. Cynthia Moss (2000) records the responses of elephants when they witness death: “from frantic denial (attempting to lift a dead elephant to a standing position, even attempting to place food in her mouth) to partial burial of the body to a night-long vigil” (qtd. in DeMello 363). In her paper “Ecofeminism”, Greta Gaard holds that “Animal bodies suffer abuse, confinement, family separations, terror and the slaughter of close companions which precedes their own deaths” (125).

Historical evidence shows that human armies often turn to the animal kingdom for assistance when fighting one another. In earlier wars, pigeons delivered communication, and horses, elephants, and camels transported men and supplies, while dogs tracked down enemies and guarded troops. Many combat soldiers' lives and limbs had been saved by the bravery and foresight of alert animals.

In *archives.gov*, Lisa B. Auel’s online essay “Buddies: Soldiers and Animals in World War II” is factual data that records the following observations about human-animal relations at the time of brutal and long-lasting wars:

Many U.S. military units in World War II adopted animal mascots. Though traditionally considered bearers of good luck, these mascots were really pets who belonged to all the men of a squad, company, or ship.

Military photographs show that individual soldiers also had their own pets. A few men smuggled them from the United States, but more often soldiers' pets were local animals left homeless by the war. For the adopted dog, cat, or bird, being in a soldier's care meant survival; for the soldier, a pet meant comfort and companionship on war's brutal battlefields.

Her observations attest to what has been well known but only acknowledged in very limited and grudging ways by humanity: animals have their own universes of happiness, sadness, elation, kinship, loyalty, and every characteristic attributed to humans. That animals cannot verbalise their thoughts or feelings is no reason for mankind to dismiss them as dumb, feral, unintelligent and emotionless creatures with limited awareness of their surroundings.

## **Conclusion**

The human-animal relationship, even during times of severe anxiety and stress, such as wars, is commendable. It speaks volumes for the world that exists apart from and independent of what is envisaged by mankind – the world of animals with its own unwritten rules of conduct and engagement.

In the final analysis, the message preached, although very subtly and at times imperceptibly, in the novel is that every life matters, and humanitarian gestures will go a long way to rescue animals from the shadow of needless suffering and inhumanity. It is the ethical obligation of humans to care for co-living species. There is no life possible without non-human beings in the ecosystem, for Haraway rightly avers: “We are in the midst of webbed existences, multiple beings in relationship” (72). Yet another writer Frans de Waal, in *Mama's Last Hug*,

provides three reasons why humans should respect all forms of life: “the inherent *dignity* of all living things, the *interest* every form of life has in its own existence and survival, and *sentience* and the capacity for suffering” (245).

Young Albert’s effort to rescue Joey from the army resulted in a positive note when destiny united them after the war. The kind of relationship they shared is heartwarming, and it stands as a testimony to their faithfulness to each other. Joey was not a pet, but a companion animal or a significant other to Albert. A pet and its owner have a hierarchy in the relationship, whereas a companion animal is a partner to the caretaker. Pets are expected to perform specific duties, such as guarding the owner’s home, working as a sniffer dog to sniff out landmines, accompanying owners on mountaineering trips or other adventures, etc. On the other hand, what is expected from a companion animal is primarily emotional support. The animal providing companionship is invested with almost human-like qualities, such as being a caregiver, friend, relative, etc., that the equation is no more in the province of smaller than but is always equal to.

In his article *Animals in Posthumanist Thought: An Introduction*, Krishanu Maiti observes that:

Human beings cannot live separately, without any interaction with nonhuman animals, who are integral to our survival; they are what Haraway calls our “companion species.” Haraway’s concept of “significant otherness” is fundamental, especially in the field of Animal Studies. (6)

Power corrupts humanity—it blinds people and leads to the ill-treatment of innocent humans as well as non-human beings. In the post-human era, it is high time humans realised the futility of war, which only leads to chaos and desolation. Rooting for peace, harmony, and a just life is essential for creating a progressive society, and animals long as much for a society

in which they enjoy equal rights and kind treatment as humans, as human beings themselves do.

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