



## THE ROLE OF ANIMAL IMAGERY IN CONSTRUCTING MEMORY AND TRAUMA IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

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**Abstract.** This article explores how animal imagery functions as a narrative strategy for representing memory and trauma in children's literature. Unlike realistic human characters, animal figures provide a safe symbolic distance, allowing young readers to approach overwhelming experiences indirectly. Through analysis of key texts, the study demonstrates that anthropomorphized animals can embody fragmented memories, encode unspeakable events, and facilitate the gradual reconstruction of a traumatized self. The paper argues that animal imagery serves not only as a shield but also as a bridge toward narrative healing.

**Keywords:** animal imagery, memory, trauma, children's literature, symbolism, healing

**Аннотация.** В данном тезисе исследуется, как образы животных функционируют в качестве нарративной стратегии для репрезентации памяти и травмы в детской литературе. В отличие от реалистичных человеческих персонажей, образы животных создают безопасную символическую дистанцию, позволяя юным читателям косвенно приближаться к травмирующим переживаниям. На основе анализа ключевых текстов исследование демонстрирует, что антропоморфные животные могут воплощать фрагментированные воспоминания, кодировать невыразимые события и способствовать постепенной реконструкции травмированной личности. В работе утверждается, что образы животных служат не только щитом, но и мостом к нарративному исцелению.

**Ключевые слова:** образы животных, память, травма, детская литература, символизм, исцеление

**Annotatsiya .** Ushbu maqola bolalar adabiyotida hayvon obrazlari xotira va travmani ifodalashda qanday narrativ strategiya sifatida ishlatilishini o'rganadi. Realistik inson qahramonlaridan farqli o'laroq, hayvon obrazlari xavfsiz ramziy masofani yaratib, yosh kitobxonlarning og'ir tajribalarga bilvosita yaqinlashishiga imkon beradi. Asosiy matnlar tahlili shuni ko'rsatadiki, antropomorfik hayvonlar parchalangan xotiralarni aks ettirishi, so'zlab bo'lmaydigan voqealarni ifodalashi va travmalangan shaxsning asta-sekin qayta tiklanishiga yordam berishi mumkin. Maqolada hayvon obrazlari nafaqat himoya vositasi, balki narrativ shifo sari ko'priq vazifasini ham o'tashi ta'kidlanadi.

**Kalit so'zlar:** hayvon obrazlari, xotira, trauma, bolalar adabiyoti, simbolizm, shifo.

### Introduction

Children's literature frequently employs animal imagery as a vehicle for exploring complex psychological states, particularly memory and trauma. The use of non-human



characters creates what Perry Nodelman calls “a safe space for dangerous ideas” [2: 47]. When a child protagonist is represented as an animal or encounters animal figures, the narrative gains flexibility: painful memories can be displaced onto the animal body, and traumatic events can be recoded as symbolic rather than literal. This mechanism is crucial because young readers often lack the cognitive and emotional vocabulary to process trauma directly [3: 112]. Animal imagery thus acts as a double agent: it conceals the full weight of traumatic experience while simultaneously revealing its emotional truth. The central argument of this thesis is that animal imagery in children’s literature performs three interrelated functions in constructing memory and trauma: encoding fragmented or repressed memories, creating protective distance for re-enactment, and enabling gradual integration and healing. Drawing on examples from classic and contemporary texts, the paper demonstrates how anthropomorphized animals serve as narrative prostheses for wounded memory.

### **Main Part**

The first function of animal imagery is the encoding of fragmented traumatic memories. Trauma disrupts linear narrative; memories are stored not as coherent stories but as sensory shards—sounds, smells, bodily sensations [4: 68]. Animals, with their heightened sensory worlds, naturally accommodate such fragmentation. In Maurice Sendak’s *Where the Wild Things Are*, Max’s wolf-costume journey to the land of Wild Things encodes his rage and fear after being punished. The Wild Things’ wordless roaring and gnashing of teeth mirror the pre-verbal, somatic nature of traumatic memory [1: 35]. Max’s memory of the punishment itself is never directly narrated; instead, it is translated into the growling, chaotic animal realm. Similarly, in Michael Morpurgo’s *War Horse*, the horse Joey witnesses the horrors of World War I. Because Joey cannot speak in human language, the trauma of trench warfare is conveyed through sensory impressions—mud, explosions, the smell of blood—without explicit verbal elaboration [5: 78]. The animal perspective allows the narrative to retain the fragmented quality of traumatic recall while remaining accessible to a child reader.

The second function is the creation of protective distance that allows for safe re-enactment of trauma. Children who have experienced trauma often repeat elements of the event in play [3: 116]. Animal imagery in literature facilitates a similar repetition compulsion but within symbolic bounds. In Judith Kerr’s *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*, the sudden appearance of a tiger who eats all the food in the house has been read as a coded representation of domestic intrusion or fear of an unpredictable adult [6: 43]. The tiger is simultaneously frightening and harmless (it is polite and leaves quietly). This ambivalence enables a child to re-experience the feeling of a home invaded without confronting a literal traumatic scenario. The narrative allows the child reader to return to the “tiger event” multiple times, each time mastering a little more of the associated anxiety. As Nikolajeva argues, “the animal surrogate absorbs the threat, becoming a container for the child’s projected terror” [2: 51]. This distancing mechanism is essential: too direct a representation would risk re-traumatization, while too indirect a representation would fail to engage with the memory.





The third function concerns the gradual reconstruction of selfhood and the movement toward healing. Trauma fractures the continuity of memory and identity [4: 70]. In children's literature, the animal guide or animal self often facilitates the reintegration of fragmented experience. A canonical example is E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*. Wilbur, the pig, faces the trauma of his own death. His memories of fear are associated with the barn's darkness and the other animals' ominous warnings. Charlotte the spider, however, helps Wilbur reframe his memories by weaving words into her web: "Some Pig," "Terrific," "Radiant" [7: 89]. These words become externalized memory aids. They transform Wilbur's identity from a victim of fate to a celebrated being. The animal imagery here is not merely decorative; it is therapeutic. Charlotte's web functions as a tangible, visual reconstruction of memory that counters the traumatic narrative of inevitable slaughter. Similarly, in Kate DiCamillo's *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*, the china rabbit Edward is repeatedly lost, broken, and separated from loved ones. Each trauma is encoded in his changing appearance—a cracked head, a repaired face. But it is through encounters with other animal figures (the dog, the old doll) that Edward learns to "open his heart again" [8: 156]. The animal body holds the scars of memory, yet it also demonstrates resilience. It is important to note that not all uses of animal imagery are therapeutic. Some texts employ animals to silence or minimize trauma. In classic didactic tales, a child's fear might be dismissed as "silly" by an adult animal figure, which can invalidate the child's emotional memory [2: 55]. The ethical dimension of using animal imagery in trauma narratives therefore requires careful attention. However, in the most critically acclaimed children's books, animal imagery serves to honor the child's experience while making it bearable.

### **Conclusion**

Animal imagery in children's literature is not a mere decorative device but a sophisticated narrative technology for constructing memory and trauma. By encoding fragmented memories through sensory animal experience, providing a safe symbolic distance for re-enactment, and enabling gradual healing through animal guides, these texts offer young readers a path toward integrating overwhelming experiences. The animal body becomes a palimpsest of trauma—written upon by events, yet capable of regeneration. Future research might explore how cultural differences shape the use of animal imagery in trauma narratives, as well as the potential limitations of this strategy for children who have experienced severe, ongoing abuse. Ultimately, the animal figure stands as a testament to children's literature's deepest ethical commitment: to tell the truth about pain without abandoning hope.





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