

A Closer Look into Markus Zusak's *I Am The Messenger* Through the Lens of Animal Narratives

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Abstract

The purpose of literature has been a favorite debate for writers and critics since the time of the Elizabethan era. To teach and to delight was the dictum of Horace, and so prove myriads of literary pieces in English literature. Human beings are considered to be the more suitable characters that make up the centre of the narrative as a universal truth. Despite this assumption, legendary authors like Geoffrey Chaucer and Aesop have portrayed animals in their narratives. The position of animals at the periphery is noticed as both interesting and contradictory to their origin and development in the world of stories narrated to children. Animal narratives are often embellished as impressive moral fables and rhymes to educate children in all cultures. Tracing the transition of this change in the position of animals and humans in novels has intrigued the researcher to explore the status quo of their representation as portrayed in the novel by Markus Zusak that is taken for analysis.

'I Am the Messenger' throws light on what animals are capable of doing in fiction, not only as protagonists but also as sideline characters. Doorman is the dog that is dealt with, primarily, with regard to his relation with his owner, Ed Kennedy. Their relationship, Doorman's characterization, and the expression of his thoughts through Ed's verbalization build the novel to its fullness. This research study also enlightens a few of the sub-genres where animals are used effectively as a part of telling stories to children and thereby serve as satires, and sarcasms to adult readers at the same time.

Keywords: Animals, humans, animal's voice and cognition, animal narratives, Doorman.

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Novels have been instrumental in representing cultures, nationalities, myths, and various other elements that are mostly related to anthropology. A variety of novels exist based on the main theme of the plot on which the novel is built. This human centric prose form also has a sidelined depiction of animal representation. Most often, the motive behind creating animal stories is to teach moral values to children, which are narrated to them as bedtime stories. For instance, *The Beauty and the Beast* and the *Aesop Fables* are the best-loved tales of children. However, recent times project animals from a very different point of view, where the feelings of animals are amplified by giving them their perspective and voice as animals. Thus, stories that employ animals as main characters help the reader become more empathetic and conscious of animal rights. The twenty-first century literature discusses this idea widely across continents.

Animals are generally included in narratives either as a part of nature or to symbolize civilization, but never with a voice of their own. Their characterization and action alone correspond to their presence rather than their thoughts or voices. They have been used in literature for umpteen purposes. To count a few with appropriate examples would substantiate the argument of this research article. One of the earliest forms of portrayal of animals in English literature includes featuring them on the periphery of the main narratives. For instance, the domesticated horses and dogs that Eglantyne takes with her on a pilgrimage to Canterbury in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* showcase the marginalized and neglected status of animals that are primarily used for reducing labor and reflecting the social status of the owner. The other category that uses animals and their characterization to ironically represent the virtues and vices in humans is animal allegory. This has gained fame since Chaucer's time, and his *The Parliament of Fowls* is an excellent example of this sub-genre. A more recent work that has become the epitome of animal allegory is George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

In some literary works, animals are treated as characters equivalent to humans. Edgar Allen Poe's *Raven* features a raven with all the darker elements to horrify the poet's persona as ghosts of humans can do. Besides, as animals are shown as characters of significance, they are given voice and thought in some narratives. In novels like *The Call of the Wild* and *White Fang* of Jack London, animals are the protagonists as the plot moves along with their understanding of the world and humans, thereby marginalizing humans. The twenty-first century offers narratives that are written concerning animals in the form of essays that insist on vegetarianism to protect the slaying of animals for food, clothes, furniture, and other leather-based products. John Maxwell Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* advocates for the same cause to save animals and to promote vegetarian diet.

The novel with one such animal that is taken for discussion is Markus Zusak's work of art *I Am the Messenger* (2002). The lead character of the narrative is an under-aged cab driver of nineteen, Ed Kennedy, who passes off as twenty in order to drive cabs. He has three more cabbies as his friends and a dog as his pet. Defying Aristotle's definition of a hero, Ed shines as an average underdog hero. It is his pet

named Doorman that becomes the subject of this study. The dog is introduced by the narrator in a cordial sense, where it is addressed with the masculine pronoun 'he'. "I have one housemate. He's called the Doorman and he's seventeen years old." (Zusak 24). The description follows with a few intimate details that the narrator shares with Doorman.

Doorman seems to be an interesting character because, as a dog, he does not have to appear much in the main narrative, but he eventually does so to manifest his presence and importance. The thought process of Doorman is interpreted by Ed and that showcases the warm relationship they have as friends, apart from a formal owner-pet relationship. The intention of the author to use Doorman in the narrative is startling, as the dog does not help Ed in his endeavors like Tintin's Snowy rather crouches at the entrance of his small shack blocking everyone who enters it with his massive body. "This is because he finds it hard to move on account of the fact that he's so old. He's a cross between a Rotterweiler and a German shepherd, and he stinks a kind of stink that's impossible to get rid of him." (Zusak 25) adds Ed while introducing Doorman. This cross-breed dog, as per *The Happy Puppy Site*, must be of strong muscular built, smart, and fast, as they are usually used as service dogs and watch dogs. But, Doorman's laziness is relatable due to his overweight. This gradually leads to joint degeneration, cancer, heart disease, and hereditary diseases. (Riffie) Thankfully, Doorman is not a victim to any of them and is in pink of health, in his seventeenth year. This one paragraph sums up Doorman as a character, but his relationship with Ed is expressed as the novel progresses. The loyalty of Ed towards this lazy dog is dubious.

The Canadian author, Margaret Atwood gives her opinions on the representation of animals across literature in her book, *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*. She notices the British writers designing animals with human attributes so that the animals in British literature appear fully dressed like a civilized human, and think, talk, sing, and dance like humans. Animals are literally personified, and Atwood points this out as the remarkable aspect of animal representation in British literature, as it also maintains "social relations" (Atwood 62). Her observation on American literature extends to mention that American literature depicts animals with human attributes like the British, but without the clothes on. The animals in American fiction talk English, but are seldom at the centre of action in the novel. Here, hunters become the subject and animals become the object and victim, and usually die in the end. The "people killing animal" (Atwood 62) superiority overshadows in the American literature.

In dealing with Canadian literature, she states that animals are not domesticated in her continent but are treated as companions instead. And so, this amicability aids in delivering literary pieces that are composed from the point of view of the victimized animal. The main focus of "animals being killed" (Atwood 63) has been the theme of many animal-centric novels in Canadian literature. Atwood concludes this chapter by listing out various purposes based on which Canadians prefer animals to be in their company, and it is worthy of consideration at a

practical level too.

As other major literature have their own profound way of characterizing animals in narratives, Australian literature differs in its own way. The animals in Australia differ from other animals because of the land's topography, and the kangaroo is an outstanding example that walks or jumps on two legs when other wild animals walk on four legs. Australia, one of the biggest continents with a scant population, strains its people with loneliness and wilderness. To escape the trauma that loneliness offers, people generally opt for animals as companions. Taking these facts into account, Ed's reason to let Doorman share his shack is quite relatable and reasonable. Though Doorman is not in his prime, he accompanies Ed and supports him in his comfy style by sharing coffee with him.

Despite crowding Ed with three close friends, Zusak gives a special place for Doorman in Ed's life and in the narrative. The dog that seems to live a passive life of lying by the door all day and drinking coffee in huge quantities is more than a dog. Doorman, who belonged to Ed's father, reminds Ed and his mother of the deceased father. This makes Ed sentimentally attach himself to Doorman, however stinky Doorman is. And when Doorman is stolen by a kid in the annual football match, Ed pays a handsome price to get Doorman back. This shows the strong attachment that Ed and Doorman have between themselves.

Doorman is named so for occupying a fixed place near the door, and his overweight restricts him from moving actively as a dog of excellent physique. Symbolically, the dog watches over him in his adventures, minds his relationships with his friends, replaces his father at times, and most of all, helps him fight loneliness by acting as his guardian. A dog in his seventeenth year is the dearest company Ed wants to afford after the demise of his father. And so, the feelings and thoughts of Doorman deserve a closer look.

The following lines from the text reveal the exclusive relationship and the sentiment that Ed feels towards Doorman.

The Doorman's with me.

My faithful companion.

Along the way I buy us some hot chips with lots of salt and vinegar. It's old-style, all wrapped in the racing section of today's newspaper. The hot tip is a two-year-old mare called Bacon Rashers. I wonder how she went. The Doorman, on the other hand, cares little. He can smell the chips.

When we make it to 23 Clown Street, we discover that it's a restaurant. It's tiny, and it's called Melusso's. Italian. It's in a little shopping village and follows the small-restaurant ritual of being dimly lit. It smells good.

There's a park bench across the road and we sit there, eating the chips. My hand reaches down inside the package, through the sweaty, greasy paper. I love every minute of it. Each time I throw the Doorman a chip, he lets it hit the ground, leans over it, and licks it up. He turns nothing down, this

dog. I don't think he cares too much about his cholesterol. (Zusak 257)

The thoughts of Doorman have a valued position in the novel, which Ed reads and reports to the reader in every possible situation. The presence of Doorman with Ed is similar to that of the space filled by a human companion, and that quite justifies why Doorman's thoughts are equivalent to those of a human's as interpreted by Ed. In this case, the dog becomes more than a domesticated pet animal, an inevitable companion, who silently observes and comments on Ed, which the lonely teenager is desperately in need of. Doorman, in a way, replaces Ed's family members. He understands him likewise. Their rapport with one another is cited for reference as "The Doorman seems to nod in agreement as I walk over and open it" (Zusak 334). He does not stop interpreting Doorman's conversation; he also responds to it and makes it look and sound so natural, despite the exclusive attention he gives to his dog. The following lines share the stream of consciousness of Doorman as observed and reproduced by Ed in the narrative.

...the Doorman walks to us and settles down at by side.

'Hey, Doorman,' Audrey says, and again her eyes stream. She looks happy.

The Doorman looks at both of us. He is the sage. He is the wisdom. He says, *About bloody time, you two.* (Zusak 398)

Thus, Ed, the narrator, expresses his desire to be acknowledged, appreciated, and motivated. Doorman, his father's dog, is assumed to take after his father's responsibility by taking pride in his accomplishments. Moreover, the lines cited further showcase Doorman's voice in contemplation. It is given specifically in italics. For instance:

We both pore over what was just said. Ritchie sits there like an injury.

This goes on for a long time, until a certain smell arrives—the Doorman walks in.

"You're a good friend, Ed," Ritchie finally says, and returns to his usual easygoing expression. He fights to keep it there. "And you," he says to the Doorman, "smell like the sewer."

He stands up and leaves.

The words repeat themselves around me as the Kawasaki starts up and meanders down the dark, motionless street.

That was a bit harsh, Ed, the Doorman says.

We stand awhile in mutual silence. (Zusak 335-336)

Markus Zusak's depiction of the relationship between Ed and Doorman is extraordinary and is not based on anything to boast about. The simplicity of this realistic presentation deserves to be studied using the nuances of animal narratives. Animal narratives in literature have been used primarily to inculcate moral values. The personification of animals has been revolutionised during periods of chaos to explore and expose the nefarious impacts of ill-used power. Along with the changing

trends, the narratives resonate with the voices of animals by making them storytellers. And this novel, *I Am the Messenger*, gives a new type of account where an animal subtly plays a part that is more significant to notice with its scanty appearances and actions. The lessons that animal-based stories teach have reached many levels, from a morality checker to allegorical and satirical representations, voicing out from the platform of the victim, and being more empathetic towards other animals and even humans. Doorman soothes Ed with his solace and companionship, which Ed expects from his parents but fails to receive from them. Doorman's role in Ed's life is greater than the participation of Ed's mother in Ed's life. Owing to this aspect, this novel falls into this last category and thus enriches the reader's experience by providing a whole new outlook on what animal narratives are capable of nurturing in their audiences.

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