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Human–Animal Bonds and Emotional Healing: An Animal Studies Reading of *The Friend* and *Hachi: A Dog's Tale*

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ABSTRACT

The growing tendency in modern cinema is to portray animals as essential characters in the human experience of loneliness, bereavement, memories, and emotional healing. This paper will analyze the depiction of human-animal relations in the movie *The Friend* directed by Scott McGehee and David Siegel (2024) and in the movie *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* directed by Lasse Hallström (2009). The major theoretical approach used in this research will be Animal Studies; more specifically, Donna Haraway's theory of companion species will be utilized. Affect Theory will serve as a complementary approach, which can provide an explanation of grief, attachment, and emotional recovery. The paper will use the methods of qualitative close reading and comparative film analysis to understand how the movies create the relationship between humans and dogs and how it affects their experience of bereavement and recovery. While *The Friend* shows the development of companionship as a slow process where Iris and Apollo learn how to deal with common bereavement, *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* is about loyalty, remembrance, and attachment after the death of Parker Wilson. The impact of their presence is not only that they shape the emotions of the human characters but they transform isolation into a sense of belonging. Thus, this study indicates that contemporary film challenges anthropocentric approaches to emotions through healing that is an interspecies phenomenon.

KEY WORDS

Animal Studies, Human–Animal Relationships, Companion Animals, Emotional Healing, Grief, Loneliness.

INTRODUCTION

The relations between humans and animals have always been significant in cultural narratives, in which animals symbolise loyalty, companionship, vulnerability, and care. Yet contemporary cinema has evolved beyond showing animals as pets and symbolic representations of love towards humans. Dogs have especially become a part of films depicting grief, loneliness, memories, and emotions. Thus, there is a need to investigate the nature of relationships depicted between human and non-human characters within cinematic narratives and the role played by these relationships in forming an understanding of emotions.

Films are cultural and narrative texts in the way that meaning can be constructed through characterisation, narration, imagery, dialogue, setting, repetition, and symbolism. As such, cinematic depictions of animals can be considered cultural and narrative texts reflecting changes in cultural attitudes to companionship, care, vulnerability, and interspecies relationships from the perspective of English literary and cultural studies. Therefore, the present research will focus on the representation of animals in the following films: *The Friend* (2024) by Scott McGehee and David Siegel, and *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* (2009) by Lasse Hallström.

Although the two movies are different in setting, story structure and the way emotions are expressed, both involve stories of loss and attachment around a dog character. In *The Friend*, Iris a writer and a professor gets a great dane Apollo from her late friend Walter. Unexpectedly having to care about Apollo helps her to deal with her grief and get used to her new living arrangement with an animal. In *Hachi: A Dog's Tale*, Professor Parker Wilson forms an intimate relationship with Hachi – a dog that continues visiting the railway station where he used to pick up his owner after work despite his death. Thus, two movies become a good base for comparing companionship, grief, memory, loneliness and emotional recovery.

The major theory used in this paper is Animal Studies. The notion of “companion species” by Donna Haraway is especially applicable to this paper since it rejects the assumption that companion animals are there only to serve people. Haraway highlights how animals and humans influence each other by living together (Haraway). Posthumanist approach by Cary Wolfe criticizes anthropocentrism and questions the idea of putting humans at the center of cultural or ethical consideration (Wolfe). Thus, it allows studying dogs as the participants in relationships in the selected movies.

Affect Theory serves as the supporting theoretical framework for the study. According to Sara Ahmed, emotions do not only operate as psychological phenomena, but rather circulate between bodies, objects, memories, and the social spaces (Ahmed). This theory will be used to analyze the films as it is relevant to them in terms of communication of grief and healing as processes expressed by the means of physical presence, routine, silence, touch, waiting, and sharing the same space. The relationship between humans and animals, thus, cannot be analyzed just by means of their communication. Emotions are embodied and communicated otherwise as well.

The method of analysis for this research is qualitative close reading and comparative film analysis. The topics for the study will include representation of loneliness, formation of companionship between humans and animals, grief and memory, and the role of the dogs in the process of emotional healing. The main question is how the films *The Friend* and *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* show companion animals as emotional participants of the experiences of human loss and healing.

Literature Review

Animal Studies has evolved into an interdisciplinary area of research that calls into question the dichotomy between humans and non-human animals. Cary Wolfe's posthumanism theory is especially crucial since it contests the anthropocentric epistemologies that regard human beings as uniquely rational, autonomous, and ethically significant creatures. Wolfe's theory draws attention to the role of cultural representation in perpetuating or dismantling the hierarchies of species (Wolfe). This theory is applicable to film narratives where animals play emotionally and narratively significant roles.

This theory has been further elaborated on by Donna Haraway through the concept of companion species. According to Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto*, humans and animals participate in complex interactions that affect their lives profoundly as they have mutual influence on each other (Haraway). Companion animals are thus not objects but the participants in joint ways of life (Haraway). This theory constitutes the primary

theoretical framework for the current research, since *The Friend* and *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* portray relations where the influence of dogs is profound.

The research of Froma Walsh regarding the connection between humans and animals confirms the importance of pets from the emotional point of view. According to her, pets can be significant members of the family system and can offer the feeling of continuity, stability, support, and resilience during the periods of crises, loss, and transitions (Walsh). She provides an opportunity to understand why companionship becomes especially important in the moments of grief and loneliness. However, the current research expands the therapeutic aspect of the topic and explores the way movies represent such connections emotionally and narratively.

The theory of affect is another theoretical approach used in the paper. The book "The Cultural Politics of Emotion" by Sara Ahmed suggests that emotions are relational and circulate through bodies, objects, memories, and social environments (Ahmed). This approach helps explain why emotions of grief and attachment in the selected films are developed through repetition rather than declarations.

Another way in which Teja Brooks Pribac's research into animal grief and spirituality contests the assumption that grief and attachment are reserved for humans only is her discussion of the way animals experience attachment, separation and loss. This view is especially applicable to the movie *Hachi: A Dog's Tale*, as Hachi's behavior after Parker's death becomes the main manifestation of his continued attachment (Pribac).

These works provide sufficient theoretical background for analyzing the human-animal relationship. However, there is still room left for more detailed analysis from the point of view of literature and culture of the way how individual movies present companion animals as agents of emotional recovery. Research about animals often includes a psychological, therapeutic, ethical, philosophical perspective, but not an approach that would focus on film. This research will fill this gap in the literature by comparing two films and analyzing how these cinematic devices represent dogs as emotionally important agents of loneliness, grief and recovery.

Research Methodology

This research uses a qualitative approach through the method of close reading and comparison of films. The main sources are *The Friend* (2024) and *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* (2009). Films will be viewed as a cinematic and cultural text, analyzed through their narrative, characterization, visuality, setting, motifs, silence, physical touch and behavior.

The theory of Animal Studies is chosen as the key one, and the theory of Haraway about the idea of companion species as the main basis for the interpretation of human-animal relations (Haraway). Posthumanism of Wolfe will help to study the issue of non-human existence (Wolfe). Affect Theory, in particular Ahmed's approach to emotions as relational, will be helpful for the analysis of grief, attachment, loneliness, and healing (Ahmed).

The study will be carried out from four interrelated perspectives: loneliness and emotional isolation; the involvement of companion animals in emotional healing; the themes of grief, memories, and loyalty; and the use of distinct cinematographic methods in representing human-animal relationships. It does not try to quantify the real psychological impacts of animals on people. On the contrary, it focuses on the way cinema portrays those relationships emotionally.

Discussion and Analysis

1. Loneliness and Emotional Isolation: The Beginning of Human-Animal Companionship

One of the key emotions portrayed in both *The Friend* and *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* is loneliness; however, it is portrayed in different ways in the two films. In *The Friend*, loneliness is depicted in connection with the bereavement suffered by Iris. After the death of Walter, Iris faces the loss of not just a dear friend but also the loss of the intellectual and social world created between them. Apollo's appearance adds an element of responsibility to her life. At first, it is not easy because Apollo is linked with Walter and hence he keeps reminding Iris of her loss. It is the very link that gives room for emotional recuperation.

The interaction takes place within everyday experiences rather than grand gestures. Through feeding, co-habitation, looking after him and getting accustomed to Apollo, the relationship helps Iris overcome her grief.

Apollo does not talk, tell or give conventional advice. The companionship is conveyed through presence and daily activities. This portrayal reinforces Ahmed's definition of emotion as being relational because Iris's emotional state shifts through continuous interactions with another body and presence (Ahmed).

Loneliness, however, becomes more apparent in Hachi: A Dog's Tale following the death of Parker. Hachi's regular visits at the railway station serve as the major symbol of his attachment. In fact, the place of public use is turned into a place of memory and waiting for the dog. The presence of Hachi at the station has its effect on those who meet him. It means that the expression of loneliness becomes communal.

These two movies thus depict loneliness not only as being without other people but also as an emotion influenced by broken attachment. The dog serves as the main character through whose transformation the condition in question changes in both stories. While The Friend deals with the process of one person's gradual adjustment, Hachi: A Dog's Tale turns the individual attachment into communal remembrance.

2. Companion Animals as Agents of Emotional Healing

One of the key themes discussed in both movies is that of companion animals being able to help with emotional healing without functioning as traditional therapists or healers. The significance of the former comes with the fact that they are constant companions. In this case, the concept of companion species introduced by Haraway is especially helpful since it is based on the idea of mutual shaping of the human and animal in question (Haraway).

It is possible to see this reciprocal nature in Apollo's role in The Friend. At first, Apollo appears to be a burden for Iris that reminds her of Walter's death. However, with time Apollo becomes an integral part of Iris's daily routine. The need to care about him forces Iris to step out of her emotional comfort zone and become involved in taking care of another creature. Thus, the relationship becomes another structure in Iris's life. Apollo does not take away her grief but gives her the chance to live along with it.

This detail is significant because the healing process in the movie does not involve forgetting about Walter. Apollo is always associated with Walter's memory but the nature of the relationship evolves over time.

"Hachi: A Tale of a Dog" offers a different kind of emotional transformation. In this case, the bond between Hachi and Parker is created through consistent companionship until Parker's death. Afterwards, the dog's continuing wait becomes the act of remembering. Hachi's actions influence those around him and they begin to recognize the intensity of Hachi's bond. Hachi's loyalty thus builds up an emotional community of people around the memory of Parker.

In this context, Walsh's consideration of human-animal relationship plays an important role, since companion animals become the source of consistency in times of emotional disruption (Walsh). At the same time, the two films show how this interpretation is problematic from the purely human point of view. Firstly, Hachi's loyalty cannot be viewed only as something useful for humans; it becomes crucial for the plot itself. Secondly, Apollo does not serve only as a medium for Iris's treatment; he becomes a character by himself.

3. Grief, Memory, and the Ethics of Loyalty

Grief is yet another key point of comparison between the two films. In both, healing is not viewed as overcoming or forgetting one's grief; it is rather about learning how to live with the memories of loss.

The presence of Walter's absence is evident in Apollo in The Friend. He becomes thus both a reminder of grief and a new source of connection. This makes him an emotionally complexity. In order to overcome the pain of Apollo, Iris has to learn how to separate remembrance of Walter from being stuck in her grief. The connection between Iris and Apollo becomes a crucial part of such transformation.

Hachi: A Dog's Tale uses repetition in order to make a point. Each return of Hachi to the station becomes a reminder of Parker's death. The repetition gains its meaning in turning waiting for his owner into remembrance. Unlike Iris, Hachi does not leave the place associated with Parker. His presence turns him into a living monument.

The analysis of animal attachment and grief by Pribac helps to make sense of this approach because it breaks the stereotype according to which mourning is something only humans can experience (Pribac). The movie encourages the viewers to interpret Hachi's actions as continuation of attachment rather than simple repetition. From the perspective of Animal Studies, this becomes a crucial aspect because it provides the animal with narrative agency.

This distinction between two movies is, therefore, telling. While *The Friend* focuses on the process of transformation in terms of establishing a new relationship, *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* focuses on maintaining the old one. However, both imply coexistence of healing and remembrance.

4. Comparative Cinematic Representation of Human-Animal Bonds

Different filmic techniques have been used to create human-animal relationship in both movies. In *The Friend*, a moderate approach is employed where domestic settings, physical closeness, silences and routine activities contribute to the building up of the relationship between Iris and Apollo.

On the other hand, in the film *Hachi: A Dog's Tale*, repetition, symbolic visuals, music and the railway station setting have been extensively used. Repeated waiting of Hachi symbolizes his loyalty, and there is no need for explanation since he keeps on doing this. Time contributes to the persistence of the connection.

This is an illustration of the fact that there is no need for the use of language in the cinema to express human-animal relationships. Human-animal relations are built through gestures, actions, closeness, repetition and physical presence. This is important from an English literary and cultural point of view.

Both movies also question anthropocentrism. Apollo and Hachi are not decorative elements that exist within human narratives. Rather, their deeds affect human actions and shape their relationships, generating emotions. This makes Haraway's concept of companion species especially apt as the connection between humans and animals arises from their shared experience and is not confined to different emotional universes (Haraway).

In conclusion, the films depict the connection as reciprocal. Humans tend to take care of animals, yet animals in their turn have an impact on human identity, routines, and emotions. Thus, the connection can hardly be called therapeutic or sentimental.

CONCLUSION

Both *The Friend* and *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* have been analyzed in order to explore the representation of human-animal relationships and emotional healing processes using the methods of Animal Studies and Affect Theory. Analyzing these two specific cinematic works, it has become possible to reveal the mechanisms of how contemporary cinema constructs companion animals as emotionally meaningful participants of loneliness, bereavement, memory and healing processes.

It is important to note that both movies refute the concept that animals perform the roles of faithful pets who provide their owners with comfort. Both Apollo and Hachi play a certain role in the formation of emotions of human characters and become participants in the creation of some new connections. In the case of *The Friend*, Apollo plays an important role in the grieving process of Iris. His presence forces the woman to interact with a living creature and makes it possible for her to integrate back into everyday life.

In addition, the research shows that neither of these films sees healing through the lens of loss of grief but rather indicates that one may find ways of coping with it while continuing to have relations with memory. It becomes possible due to Affect Theory that permits seeing grief and attachment as relational phenomena (Ahmed). Furthermore, Animal Studies sheds light on the role and agency of non-human characters in this context (Haraway; Wolfe).

Comparing these two films, one will notice that they employ different film techniques in order to convey interspecies attachment. Thus, while *The Friend* relies on intimacy, domesticity, silence and emotional maturation, *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* resorts to repetition, public sphere, waiting and symbolization. Nevertheless, both films depict companionship as a phenomenon that has the power to turn loneliness into relation.

The importance of these narratives lies not only in sentimental tales about canine friends but also in challenging human-centric ideas of emotion by making the animals into emotionally significant participants. In terms of the English literature and culture tradition, these films show how the representations of animals can be involved into the larger issues of grief, identity, vulnerability, memory, care, and belonging.

The scope of this research is restricted to two films and does not discuss the reactions of the audience or the psychological effects of the real companion animals. Further research may be expanded to a larger corpus

and to more films or literary works. Yet, the comparative analysis carried out here shows that contemporary cinema can approach the interspecies companionship seriously from the perspective of emotion and culture.

In the end, however, the two films, *The Friend* and *Hachi: A Dog's Tale*, show that grieving is not necessarily something that people do on their own. In these relationships, through companionship, habit, memory, and vulnerability, the relationship between the humans and the animals becomes a place where grief is worked through. It is not only that the companion animal is a companion to the person, but he or she is also an integral part of the story.

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