

The Research Paper

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English 3460

Human Nature in Margaret Cavendish's "The Hunting of the Hare"

Margaret Cavendish's 1653 poem "The Hunting of the Hare" relates the cruel fate of a hare that has fallen prey to a group of hunters. A study of this poem suggests that Cavendish can be viewed as one of the first supporters for animal rights as she criticizes the cruelty of men who kill animals for sport. On a more personal level, Cavendish could have closely identified with the hare, which is ostensibly humanlike, and also with its fear. She might have even intended to parallel her critics to the dogs and the hunters within the poem. On a grander scale, Cavendish might be making the critical judgment that humankind seeks enjoyment through violent competition with others. Through a study of the many different thematic levels of the poem, Margaret Cavendish's "The Hunting of the Hare" seems to have an overarching theme of humanity's destructive attraction to violence in order to achieve supremacy.

It is evident through the poet's portrayal of the hare that it is meant to be seen as a significant and even a symbolic figure, beginning in the first line of the poem where the hare is granted the name "Wat." He is humanlike, "glaring"

across the landscape as his “Haires blew up behind” him in the wind instead of his fur (4 and 6). The hare is also described as “wise” instead of merely being a sentient creature, and Cavendish makes its humanlike features even more evident as the hare “walks about” rather than hopping or crawling (Cavendish 7 and 11). Another way the rabbit is seemingly anthropomorphized is through the continual use of the personal pronoun “him” in the poem, which is used instead of “it.” To indicate her disapproval of the unethical treatment of all animals, near the very end of the poem Cavendish grants all creatures the same humanlike quality as the hare by saying that creatures are being “murdered” (100) by men instead of “killed.”

The word “murder” connotes unlawfulness and makes a connection between that illicitness and the killing of animals, indicating that all sentient life, that of humans and animals, is important and worthy of being preserved. Some may even argue that Cavendish was trying to make a point that humankind should not express dominant authority over other creatures through use of violence, because within the last lines of the poem, man is portrayed not only as murderous, but also as an oppressive tyrant that rules over all other living creatures.

Cavendish’s humanlike portrayal of the hare might raise concerns for some readers. Bruce Thomas Boehrer discusses some critics’ objection to an author’s anthropomorphizing nonhuman characters. To anthropomorphize is to project one’s own tendencies and traits onto another species. Some critics argue that this

act ignores a nonhuman species' real behaviors and traits and illustrates humans' feeling of dominance over nature. However, as Boehrer explains, many animal characters in literature "challenge the human-animal divide" (5) and force people to examine their values, especially those related to nature. Donna Landry supports the view that "The Hunting of the Hare" raises these issues. She argues that in Cavendish's work, she promotes the "democratizing of relations between humans and other species" (471). Rather than emphasizing the superiority of human emotions by anthropomorphizing the hare, Cavendish humanizes him in order to bridge the gap between the reader and the hare. Paul Salzman states that Cavendish's main goal as a writer was "to enter into an empathetic relationship with the world around her" (142). In "The Hunting of the Hare," Cavendish portrays the hare with empathy in order to persuade the reader that committing unnecessary violence on animals is cruel and terrible.

In addition, the description of the hare is used to form and emphasize the strong connection between the hare and Cavendish, who was similarly being pursued by her critics as a female writer. This criticism is clearly shown through the description of Cavendish by Mary Evelyn, who portrayed her as extravagant and vain and said that her discourse was "as airy, empty, whimsical, and rambling as her books" (Qtd. in Damrosch and Dettmar 2058-9). Many people of Cavendish's time viewed her as outrageous, partly because publicly recognized women writers were rare during the seventeenth century. Although scholars seriously study Cavendish's work now,

Emma L.E. Rees says that because of the harsh critics of her time, “The impression which lasted for many years was of an eccentric, disturbed and arrogant woman” (11). “The Hunting of the Hare” could be interpreted as a response to this criticism. Her critics, paralleled by both the “cruel dogs” (16) and the men in the poem, are often referred to as merciless. The critics are described as nosy through common references to the dogs and how they always “thrust [their] snuffling nose[s]” into things (64). They are also described as loudmouths through the image of the dogs who cry out with their “wide mouths” (19). While at times Cavendish seems to be uncaring as to what the critics say about her, at other times she seems terrified of the public’s opinion of her life and writing, much like the hare’s terror of being pursued. She suggests that in public, she hides her fear of the critics, similarly to the hare when, “Licking his feet, he wiped his ears so clean / That none could tell that Wat had hunted been” (41-2). Although the critics continued to pursue her, Cavendish emphasizes through the poem that she will continue to maintain her composure until the very end, like the hare does until his death. Yet, this continual pursuing and killing of hares, which parallels Cavendish’s experience, critiques human nature’s desire for supremacy over all living things—even each other.

Not only can Cavendish’s poem be seen as a response to the cruelty to animals and the cruelty of the critics, but it can also be seen as an assessment of how humankind treats its brethren. In the poem, the men are portrayed as bloodthirsty monsters that thrive off cruelty to others. The

men in Cavendish's poem, who "destroy those lives that God did make" (98) solely for "sport or recreation's sake" (97), seek to kill the rabbit, the symbol, through heavy personification, of a fellow human (Cavendish 2062).

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To conclude, Margaret Cavendish's "The Hunting of the Hare" is a comment on human nature and the desire for obtaining dominion over others by any means necessary. Through her extensive use of pathos throughout the poem, her audience was meant to feel a sense of culpability and a desire to change. Despite her portrayal of human nature as inherently evil, the guilt the audience is supposed to feel offers a sense of hope, as it indicates that human nature is capable of being altered and even changed.

Works Cited

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9.6 Research Paper Checklist

When you write an academic research paper, there are so many factors to keep in mind that it can become overwhelming. Often, students finish an assignment like this having overlooked an important requirement or two.

This chapter closes with The Research Paper Checklist below, intended to help you double-check your paper before you make the final submission.

Criterion	Check if Completed
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- Asserts a clear and interesting thesis that controls the entire essay

- Opens with an engaging and effective introduction, which provides background on the topic and writer's position
- Is clearly and effectively organized
- Employs clear and engaging prose (prose that is not riddled with grammatical errors or awkward constructions)
- Provides transitions and explanations that help reveal relationships between ideas (develops coherence)
- Provides adequate evidence to prove the writer's point (asserted by thesis)
- Effectively integrates outside sources, providing internal documentation according to appropriate documentation style
- Uses tag phrases (such as "according to Smith," "Smith argues," etc.) to indicate whose ideas are whose
- Incorporates minimal number of scholarly sources in the essay according to the professor's instructions
- Avoids plagiarism by
 - __indicating all quoted material (even short bits) with quotation marks and in-text source information and
 - __providing in-text source information for all paraphrased and summarized material

- Wraps up with a conclusion that effectively reiterates the point and/or urges the reader to action or change of perspective
- In Works Cited section, lists only sources that are mentioned in the essay
- In Works Cited section, lists all sources that are mentioned in the essay
- Follows field-appropriate documentation guidelines for Works Cited entries