



# Lessons about Animal-Human Relations

## *Shaun Tan's Tales from the Inner City in Education about the Climate Crisis and Animal Welfare*

*Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak, University of Wrocław, Wrocław, Poland*

### **Abstract**

This article introduces the course work with undergraduate students at the University of Wrocław, Poland, that involved discussing theoretical frameworks from human-animal studies and posthumanist thought while creatively engaging with Shaun Tan's collection *Tales from the Inner City*. I propose that Tan's stories can be used in education to address the deeply interconnected issues of the climate crisis, biodiversity loss, and animal welfare. Recognizing that climate change and biodiversity loss are deeply linked, I draw on research to argue that tackling these crises requires integrated strategies and a transformation of societal values toward care and accountability. Fostering awareness of animal welfare is seen as a crucial step in this shift. I then introduce the students' contributions, which all show how Tan's depictions of a range of human-animal relationships encourage reflection on both hopeful and uncomfortable aspects of these bonds.

### **Keywords**

animal welfare, biodiversity loss, climate crisis, human-animal studies, Shaun Tan

## Climate Crisis and Biodiversity

Biodiversity loss and climate crisis are often seen as separate phenomena and addressed as distinct issues (Shin et al. 2022). And yet, they are both drivers and consequences of one another, closely linked to human activities and resulting in negative impacts on the planetary well-being. Just as climate crisis is partly an effect of the loss of biomass and biodiversity, rising temperatures result in further losses of biomass and biodiversity. On one hand, climate crisis is increasingly affecting animal species, causing them to seek more hospitable habitats for example due to extreme events, such as heat waves, severe droughts, and floods, thereby endangering chances for their survival. On the other hand, biodiversity loss reduces carbon stocks and sink capacity in natural and managed ecosystems, increasing emissions. Following a joint meeting of members of the International Panels on Climate Change and Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services, Pörtner et al. explain that interdependencies of biodiversity loss and climate change “include temperature-induced changes in photosynthetic capacity and carbon storage, modified reflectivity of the land surface, altered formation of clouds and atmospheric dust, and shifted biogeochemical cycling of nutrients and carbon, which in turn influence the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere” (2023, p. 1). As they further propose, we need integrated and coordinated strategies that address both crises together: “Strengthening the biosphere on land, in freshwater, and in the ocean will support climate change mitigation, adaptation, biodiversity, human well-being, and livelihoods” (ibid). They also conclude that such interventions require a transformation in both personal and collective values, which will enable moving away from individualism and materialism towards accountability, care, and justice (ibid).

An important step in this transformation of values is fostering interest in animal welfare, as animals are “being swept along” with humans in the changing world in “farms, zoos and game parks as companion animals” or “through the effects of human activity on the environment and the wild” (Butterworth, 2018, p. 1). Some human-driven changes are so significant that they profoundly impact entire animal populations, often in ways that cannot be undone. Deborah Bird Rose (2004) describes this demise of regenerative potential as double death, a process that amplifies death to such an extent that not only individuals but also entire groups, species, and ways of life are being eradicated. Double death thus involves the death of future continuities, which will affect the lives of the current young generations. Bearing this prospect in mind, should we not agree, as Andy Butterworth proposes in *Animal Welfare in a Changing World* (2018), that animals

(i) probably have complex experiential worlds, and mental needs and natures; (ii) can probably experience pain [...] as evidenced through their response to aversive conditions); (iii) are probably aware of their own surroundings; (iv) probably have an emotional dimension; (v) are probably aware of what is happening to them; (vi) probably have the ability to learn from experience; (vii) are probably aware of bodily sensations – hunger, heat, cold; (viii) are probably aware of their relationships with other animals; (ix) have the ability to choose between different objects and situations; and (x) probably have the capacity to ‘suffer’? (p. 1).

Butterworth further explains that his repeated use of the word “probably” is deliberate, as “the accumulation of ‘probables’” is needed in a world where practical action is delayed “until there is ultimate proof,” and in the context of animal welfare, “this has been the cause of much diversion, delay and distress – the animals continue to be used (and abused) while more proof for example of whether ‘these animals really feel pain?’ or ‘these animals really need so much space’ is “collated, analysed and debated” (p. 1). As he suggests, “a welfare positive position could be the default position, rather than the position towards which man and animals move after divisive confrontation” (p. 1). It seems that to be able to make this perspectival flip, we would do well to follow the postulates of posthumanist scholars such as Donna Haraway (2016), Anna Tsing et al. (2024), or Vinciane Despret (2021), who all argue for developing an attitude of attentiveness, curiosity, care and readiness for complex and often uneasy relations and entanglements with real and imaginary animals around us. This attitude in turn may perhaps inspire fully embodied participation in and responsibility for a more-than-human community, enabling ecological restoration.

### **Thinking with Shaun Tan’s *Tales from the Inner City***

These questions and concerns guided me in the academic year 2023/2024, during my meetings with a group of undergraduate students in two of the Global English Cultures and Languages specialization courses at the Institute of English Studies, at the University of Wrocław, Poland: Selected Research Approaches in Literary Studies and Project Classes: Literary Studies. In the first course, we discussed, among other things, issues concerning literary research in the Anthropocene, including human-animal studies. During the second course, we attempted to apply these theoretical approaches to a collaborative project on *Tales from the Inner City* by Australian writer and illustrator Shaun Tan. This collection of 25 stories in words and images that explore relationships between humans and animals in urban environments and beyond can be

seen as encouraging various speculative engagements with animal welfare. It has usually been praised for its hopefulness about a posthuman future effected through redefined human-more-than-human relationalities. Chengcheng You (2023) for example proposes that Tan's depictions of "human-animal assemblages" move away from "positioning animals and humans as adversaries" towards "cultivating our 'animal nature'—which includes traits such as sensitivity, instinct, and interdependence with the more-than-human world" (p. 7). Kirsten Hunt (2023) emphasizes how the book's invitation to speculate on human-animal companionships awakens hopeful imagination about "what we could be if we let go of anthropocentrism and embraced otherness in all its forms" (p. 92). Lorraine Kerslake's (2022) discussion of the collection concludes on an optimistic tone: "[d]espite Tan's haunting lament [...], warning about the failures of human beings and our perverse attitude toward the environment, there is also room for optimism and wonder" (p. 46). Hence, as she argues, the collection may encourage the reader "to go beyond the text and remind us that we stand fully embedded within the natural world" (ibid).

To me, the extraordinary phenomenon of Tan's book is its emotional diversity that boldly encompasses a range of responses and attitudes we may have to our relations with animals. Importantly, these responses may exist at the same time even if they seem irreconcilable. They do not exclude each other but coexist side by side, if not commingle, in our affective repertoires. While some of the tales indeed project hope for more just human-animal connectivities, some stories emphasize instead humans' inability and reluctance to mend their ways. Humans are sometimes presented as persevering in brutalities against animals and nature, as is the case in "The Lungfish", "The Shark", "The Bears", "The Orca", "The Rhino", "The Sheep" or "The Pigeons." A poem about the extinction of the last rhino on the earth that happens as if by accident or an account of the shark culling that turns into a symbolic extermination of future generations of sharks are not easy reads and will for sure disturb, if not horrify, readers regardless of their age. But perhaps we need to experience this discomfort as a motivation to reflect and act. Embracing these difficult responses instead of overcoming and suppressing them through pursuing only more positive emotions may turn out to be an effective form of educating our desire for a transformation of human-animal relations as a complex and non-innocent process fraught with tensions and conflicting interests. The mechanism of how such an exposure may lead to a change in perspective is reflected in the apprehension that the narrator in "The Shark" begins to feel as the culling progresses. This is a hopeful omen of awakening and of the potential for developing a deeper ethical awareness, one that acknowledges the shared

vulnerabilities of all species and the need to reimagine human-animal relations as grounded in mutual respect and coexistence.

With my students, our joint responses to selected tales focused both on close reading that resulted in literary interpretations and on more elusive and ineffable affective responses that, we thought, would sometimes be best rendered through art as “central to thinking with and feeling through the Anthropocene” (Davis and Turpin, 2015, p. 3), as it offers “a range of discursive, visual, and sensual strategies that are not confined by the regimes of scientific objectivity, political moralism, or psychological depression” (p. 4). In our readings of Tan’s animals, we also relied on Matthew Stewart and Kate Cole’s conceptual map of the social construction of “other” animals (2014, p. 21), which generates a framework for understanding how humans categorize and relate to non-human animals according to the cultural, ethical, and functional dimensions of these interactions. Some animals can thus be tools or commodities for human use, while some are “dead ‘meat’” or pets and companions, often anthropomorphized and integrated into human families. The map is divided into four general areas: “Friends”, “Nature”, “Things” and “Killing zone.” Usually, one animal can be seen in terms of several constructs, depending on whether and how it is objectified. These constructs also elicit various responses, from sensibility at one end, as is the case with pets and cultural representations of animals to non-sensibility, as is the case with vermin. Tan’s *Tales from the Inner City* invite readers to examine how humans create the constructs defining animals and how these constructs shape human-animal relationships, often neglecting the status of animals as beings with intrinsic value. Using Stewart and Cole’s conceptual map alongside *Tales from the Inner City* provides rich opportunities for helping us all to critically analyze how human-animal relations are socially constructed and culturally encoded, which in turn may result in further explorations of the complexities of human-animal relationships both in culture and in real life, including care for animal welfare.

The three student-authored articles that follow below suggest some ways in which these explorations could be implemented in school settings with the help of Tan’s stories and their potential to make young readers rethink their relationships with animals for a more connected present and future. While they include possible interpretations of selected stories, their primary goal is proposing discussions and other activities that can be implemented across a broad age range to foster ethical, philosophical, and practical discussions about human-animal relationships. In the first one, responding to the story about the moonfish, Jan Dudek asks what happens if we accept that fishes feel pain and experience negative emotional responses to inhospitable conditions. Martyna Obodyńska then shares her affective response to the

story about the horses and proposes creative activities that may challenge students to explore both past and current forms of animal exploitation alongside their love for individual animals in their lives. Finally, Magdalena Puciłowska and Urszula Żoczek offer ideas for creative classroom engagements with “Crocodiles” and “Butterflies” as ways for nurturing curiosity and wonder in students.

We realize that we can only begin to touch upon the vast and complex topics surrounding animal welfare. Today, we are witnessing unprecedented changes in the world of animals—changes that are deeply intertwined with the unfolding climate crisis. The accelerating degradation of ecosystems affects not only animal habitats and survival but also reshapes our ethical responsibilities toward other species. Developing climate literacy—an understanding of how human actions impact planetary systems—is essential to making informed, compassionate decisions in the face of environmental uncertainty. The choices we make under these pressures will have profound implications for the future of animals and humanity alike. We hope that these articles can support teachers and students in exploring these interconnected issues, sparking curiosity, encouraging critical thinking, and perhaps even challenging long-held assumptions. Finally, I would like to sincerely thank Jan, Martyna, Magdalena, and Urszula for generously sharing their insights throughout our course and for putting in the effort to transform our discussions into thoughtful articles—their dedication has truly been inspiring. I would also like to acknowledge the contributions of two colleagues, Aliona Yarova (Malmö University) and Agata Alicja Zelachowska (University of Salamanca), who visited our classes and kindly shared their insights with us. Last but not least, I would also like to thank the University of Wrocław for supporting the students’ work through the funding allocated to extracurricular activities.

## References

- Butterworth, A. (2018). Introduction. In A. Butterworth (Ed). *Animal Welfare in a Changing World* (pp. 1-3). CABI.
- Davis, H. and Turpin, E. (2015). Art & death: Lives between the fifth assessment & the sixth Extinction. In Davis, H. and Turpin, E. (Eds). *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies* (pp. 3-29). Open Humanities Press.
- Cole, M. & Stewart, K. (2014). *Our Children and Other Animals: The Cultural Construction of Human-Animal Relations in Childhood*. Ashgate.
- Despret, V. (2021). *Living as a Bird*. Polity Press.
- Haraway, D. J. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Duke University Press.

- Hunt, K. (2023). Posthuman fiction: The speculative landscape of Shaun Tan's *Tales from the Inner City* & Nnedi Okorafor's *LaGuardia*. *Revista Hélice*, 8(2), 77-94.
- Kerslake, L. (2022). Aesthetic entanglements in the age of the Anthropocene: A posthuman reading of Shaun Tan's *Tales from the Inner City*. *Bookbird*, 60(4), pp. 38-47.
- Pörtner, H., Scholes, R. J., Arneth, A., Barnes, D. K. A., Burrows, M. T., Diamond, S. E., Duarte, C. M., Kiessling, W., Leadley, P., Managi, S., McElwee, P., Midgley, G., Ngo, H. T., Obura, D., Pascual, U., Sankaran, M., Shin, Y. J., & Val, A. L. (2023). Overcoming the coupled climate and biodiversity crises and their societal impacts. *Science (American Association for the Advancement of Science)*, 380(6642).
- Rose, D. B. (2004). *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation*. University of New South Wales Press.
- Shin, Y.-J., Midgley, G. F., Archer, E. R. M., Arneth, A., Barnes, D. K. A., Chan, L., Hashimoto, S., Hoegh-Guldberg, O., Insarov, G., Leadley, P., Levin, L., Ngo, H. T., Pandit, R., Pires, A. P. F., Pörtner, H.-O., Rogers, A. D., Scholes, R. J., Settele, J., & Smith, P. (2022). Actions to halt biodiversity loss generally benefit the climate. *Global Change Biology*, 28(9), pp. 2846–2874.
- Tan, S. (2018). *Tales from the Inner City*. London: Walker Studio.
- Tsing, L. A., Deger, J., Saxena, A. K., and Feifei, Z. (2024). *Guide to the Patchy Anthropocene: The New Nature*. Stanford University Press.
- You, C. (2023). Outlandish creatures and genre crossover in young adult liminal fantasy: A Deleuzian perspective. *Humanities & Social Sciences Communication*, 10(1), pp. 1-9.