



# Friends or Tools?

## *The Duality of Horses in Shaun Tan's Tales from the Inner City*

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### Abstract

This article explores the complex relationship between humans and horses in Shaun Tan's short story about horses included in *Tales from the Inner City*, focusing on the blurred line between viewing animals as tools or as companions. The article highlights how Tan evokes empathy by presenting the horses' historical suffering through a non-verbal, emotional connection. The concept of "wit(h)nessing," introduced by Bracha Ettinger, is used to frame the child's role—not as a passive observer, but as someone who shares and acknowledges the horses' suffering. To deepen this engagement, the article presents my poetic response to the story and discusses their personal experiences with horses, illustrating how direct interaction with animal suffering can inspire artistic expression and emotional growth. Real-life examples emphasize the importance of acknowledging animal pain as the first step toward compassion and change. Finally, the article argues for the pedagogical value of integrating creative practices into education to nurture empathy towards animals, which may enable humans to move beyond instrumental views of animals and embrace relationships based on empathy, respect, and mutual presence.

### Keywords

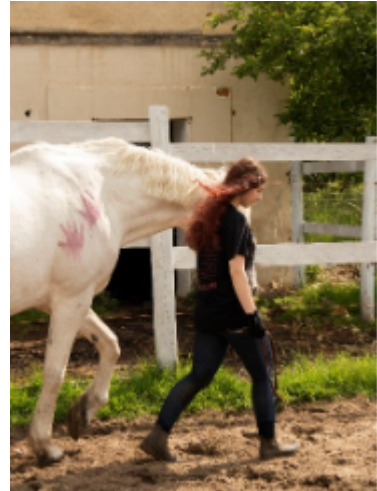
horses, art, animal suffering, wit(h)nessing

That animals were present in humans' lives since the very beginning of the humankind is a fact. However, the question is what exactly they are to humans? Sometimes it is hard to draw the clear line between barnyard animals as tools needed for work and them being pets, friends or family. Furthermore, we should ask whether it is really necessary to draw this line. Shaun Tan addresses this problem in his collection of stories *Tales from the Inner City*. One of the untitled stories in the volume is about horses told from the perspective of a two-year-old child. It may provide some kind of answer to the above questions.

The little child in the story sees and understands souls of all the horses who have died in the city and are now running wild, seeking "some green and grassy ancestral plain" (Tan, 2018, n.p.). The horses tell her their whole history using language of understanding without words, only the language of feelings and a mystical connection. The horses recall how they have been exploited by humans for ages and how people treated them as tools and materials without appreciation for animals' devotion and loyalty. The child hears this story directly from horses through a kind of telepathic connection. This motif may lead us to the idea of wit(h)nessing. The term is a neologism coined by Bracha Ettinger and according to Nike Romano it means "being with and bearing witness to the trauma of the other" (2020, p. 75). People are not able to feel exactly the same things that animals feel but can live through the same events seeing them from their own perspective and experience similar emotions. The girl is a wit(h)ness who both sees the suffering of the horses and also experiences it in her own way. Tan's story does not provide the full answer how it influences the girl's future life, apart from a quote from the last paragraph: "Later you'll come to love horses with a depth you can't explain and many horses will love you back" (ibid) The rest is left to readers' imaginations.

According to Suvilehto and Latomaa, creative writing "has been largely studied and considered among other elements as a vehicle for self-knowledge and is commonly used for education and well-being among different age groups" (2018, p. 225). Suvilehto and Latomaa describe in detail the very process of creative writing, especially in relation to horses. They highlight the therapeutic aspect of poetry and other forms of art and suggest that horses may function as a mirror to people's well-being because of their high sensitivity to emotions. The role of understanding opposed to instrumentalizing is emphasized. Following that, I have created a poetic response to this tale, which explores this topic and presents a possible scenario of the child's future attitude to horses.

I could tell from your first trot  
 The breeder was very proud of you  
 Your saddle was ready  
 From the start  
 You were destined to accept it  
 Too early  
 Bending your bones  
 Permanently  
 I have seen every stumble  
 Every fall  
 Every bullet  
 You have taken for us  
 It was never for you  
 Nothing ever was for you  
 I have heard your bones snapping  
 It was even on the news  
 "The famous race-horse  
 Euthanized"  
 Everyone thought it was sad  
 I wonder what you have thought  
 When you died watched by thousands  
 I was there when they were waging your fate  
 You were supposed to become  
 Someone's meal  
 Because you were no longer needed  
 Your presence was redundant  
 Was it really?



*Figs. 1 and 2: The author and Kredka*



*Fig. 3: The author and United Melody*

In the proposed scenario, the child—now older and with more experience—tries to understand horses' burden and is present in their lives regardless of how those lives look like. The important thing to mention is that the lyrical "I" does not speak on the horses' behalf and does not guess their thoughts but rather wonders what they think and feel at particular moments, including the moment of tragic death.

Personal experience may be helpful in understanding the pain of others. Most of the events described in the forementioned poem are events I have witnessed myself. I have encountered many horses forced to accept the saddle at the age of two, whereas the proper age for starting the training under the saddle is at least three years old. Many horses need even more time to mature enough not to bend their bones under the weight of a human. I have also seen a racehorse being euthanized on a racetrack after breaking several bones in his hind leg. This horse named Reki died after an accident during a race on 4 September 2022 being only ten years old.

However, one of the most prominent events in my life was helping to rescue an ill horse. Kredka was diagnosed with stomach ulcers and anemia with a possibility of skin cancer as well. Her previous owner did not want to pay for her treatment and considered selling her to a butcher. Her current owner and I decided to purchase Kredka and give her the treatment she needed. Now, after three months of taking necessary medicaments and food



*Fig. 4: The author and Kredka*

supplements, she is as energetic as she has never been before. In honor of all those horses who had suffered from humans, the author held a photoshoot starring Kredka, United Melody (a two-year-old pony), and myself. The photographs focus on suffering the of horses and yet they also give some hope. None of those pictures present the horse alone; in all of them there is a human who may be concerned with the horse's wellbeing. The human who is a wit(h)ness of their pain. The person may not understand or feel those feelings, but they are there with the animal to see and acknowledge the horse's suffering. Both Shaun Tan and the poem emphasize that it is the acknowledgement that is the first step to real understanding, and therefore, help.

This essay has already established the role of people in horses' lives. Still, this relationship is not one-sided. Horses, as well as any other animals, can substantially influence a person's worldview; they may teach patience, sensitivity and sensibility. It might be beneficial for people to construct art based on this connection, similarly to the poem, the photographs or Tan's stories. This brings us back to Suvilehto and Latomaa's creative writing.

Such a practice may be transferred to the classroom reality and used for pedagogical purposes. In fact, any form of art and creativity may be used in this way. Teachers may encourage their students to express emotions towards various animals in

a creative way, thereby strengthening the connection between humans and animals and raising children's sensitivity towards nature.

What are horses to humans? Should the line be drawn between friends and tools? Every person is different and the same applies to animals, but there are possibilities of developing the emotional connection between people and horses. Some people are just like the child from Tan's story. With certain amount of sensibility and the ability to listen, not only hear, but people can also wit(h)ness what animals experience and feel deep connection (often mutual). The only condition that has to be fulfilled is for people to be sensitive to the suffering of the other and be attentive to it across species. It is important not to be a passive witness, but to wit(h)ness and experience certain events together with the animals.

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