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Becoming animal – becoming posthuman: Of hybridity and mutability of characters in Terry Pratchett’s fiction

Abstract

The current dissertation explores how the postmodern and post-human Subjects may be reflected through the idea of fantastical shape-shifting. It focuses on the depictions of these shape-shifters in Sir Terry Pratchett’s Discworld series, which includes substantial amounts of intertextuality and social commentary. The unique blend of tradition and innovation that Pratchett is able to seamlessly achieve can present a fertile ground for insights regarding human nature, social dynamics and our relationship with nature and the world around us. Pratchett’s writing is comedic and angry, and through an exploration of his shape-shifting characters, one may be able to tap into, and understand said social anger.

In the first chapter, the dissertation reviews theory surrounding Terry Pratchett’s body of work, as well as theories of identity, monstrosity and post-humanity. The dissertation briefly delves into the works of Cixous, Kristeva, Butler, Bakhtin, as well as Deleuze and Guattari. It draws on the connection between said scholars, body identity, and by extension shape-shifting and Pratchett. The second chapter presents a brief overview of shape-shifting as it appears in Western folklore, as well as in the works of notable contemporary authors, such as J.R.R. Tolkien, George R.R. Martin, Andrzej Sapkowski, Diana Wynne Jones, J.K. Rowling and Angela Carter. A connection will be made between folklore tropes, the work of the aforementioned authors, and the work of Terry Pratchett. The third chapter will start with an exploration of notable Discworld races and beings through which the relationship between body and soul can be explored. Afterwards, the dissertation will focus on a number of shape-shifting characters and/or groups of characters, which will be divided into “types” of shape-shifters named after Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of Becoming. The chapter will include human characters that become animals, animal character that become human, and a witch who is able to embody “multiplicity” through her connection with the world of nature and her own “self”. The dissertation concludes by making a connection between said transformations and the characters’ hybridity and post-humanity. In an ever-changing reality, fraught with a lack of stability, marginalization and othering, it is increasingly vital to understand our own mutability,

or as Deleuze and Guattari would term it – our constant state of becoming. It is my hope that this dissertation contributes to the discussion in-question.