Black Beauty Study Guide

Black Beauty by Anna Sewell

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Sewell's intention in writing the book was to promote the humane treatment of horses. Called the "Uncle Tom's Cabin of the Horse," *Black Beauty* is credited with having the greatest effect on the treatment of animals of any publication in history. The book resulted in legislation protecting horses and a changed public attitude about animal pain and the traditional and fashionable practices that caused suffering for horses.

Black Beauty was the only book that Sewell wrote, and she sold the manuscript for only twenty pounds. It is still one of the most widely read books in the world, with numerous translations and multiple media versions. Barely a year goes by without a new print edition being published, thus continuing the life of this timeless classic.

Author Biography

Anna Sewell may have written only one book in her lifetime, but *Black Beauty* has proven to be a book of great importance and popularity.

Born in Yarmouth, England, on March 30, 1820, Sewell lived in several cities due to her father Isaac's restlessness and financial misfortunes. She spent summers with her grandparents at Dudwick Farm and based Birtwick Park in the novel on Dudwick House. Until 1832, Sewell's mother, Mary, provided her education, emphasizing natural history, moral virtues, and self-reliance. In school, Sewell had exposure to mathematics, foreign languages, and art. Sewell demonstrated a talent for art, but her mother saw art as a frivolous activity and dissuaded her daughter from painting. At age 14, Sewell had an accident that permanently damaged her ankles and made walking difficult for the rest of her life, even though she was taken to European spas on several occasions to seek rehabilitation.

Around 1850, Sewell's mother began a successful career as the author of moralistic books and verse for children. Sewell served as her mother's editor and was otherwise very interested in literature. Living as an invalid did not prevent Sewell from pursuing a few outside interests. Sewell taught Sunday school and evening classes to workers and participated in her mother's temperance activities. She learned horse driving from her brother Philip and would converse about horses with other drivers she encountered when on errands. It is from this experience and from reading American minister Horace Bushnell's "Essay on Animals" that she developed her knowledge about and sympathy for horses.

When she was 51 years old, Sewell contracted an unidentified illness that left her in great pain and restricted her to her house for the remainder of her life. At this point, she began working on *Black Beauty*, sometimes writing and sometimes dictating the text of the novel to her mother. It was published just five months before she died on April 25, 1878. She never knew the success of her novel, but her mother made certain that the horses pulling Sewell's hearse were not subjected to bearing reins, a device that Sewell preached against. Sewell is buried in Lamas, a village just north of her birthplace.

Plot Summary

Part 1

Black Beauty opens with its main character describing his first memory as that of a "pleasant meadow." The reader is told about his life as a colt, his mother's advice on how to behave as a well-bred horse, and his master's kind care. When Black Beauty is two, he witnesses the brutality of a hunt for a hare and the tragedy of one of the riders being killed in a fall from his horse. At age four, Black Beauty is broken in to the use of the saddle, bridle, and carriage harness. He describes how bad the bit feels as well as getting his first shoes. Then he is sent to a neighbor's pasture near a railroad to get used to the sounds he might hear when out on the road and is thus prepared to start work. He is sold to Squire Gordon and is named by Mrs. Gordon. Birtwick Hall becomes his pleasant home for more than three years. Here he meets the horses Merrylegs, Ginger, and Sir Oliver, and the grooms James Howard and John Manly. He learns that Ginger got her ill-tempered nature from a hard life with previous owners, and that Sir Oliver got a shortened tail when a thoughtless fashion dictated that it be cut. Sir Oliver also reveals the painful practices of bobbing tails and ears on dogs. Merrylegs, a pony, is a trusted playmate of the Gordon and Blomefield children. Squire Gordon and John Manly are both known to take issue with those who mistreat horses. Stable hand James gets an opportunity for a better position elsewhere and leaves Birtwick, but before he goes, he drives the Gordons on a trip to see friends. At a stop on the way, the stable catches on fire, but James calmly and valiantly manages to save Beauty and Ginger. Little Joe Green replaces James. Joe does not know how to properly put up the hot and tired Beauty after an emergency run to get the doctor for Mrs. Gordon, and as a result, Beauty becomes very sick. Joe grieves over his mistake and thereafter devotes himself to learning horse care. He even testifies against a man he sees flogging two horses. Life changes, though, when the Gordons must move to a warmer climate for Mrs. Gordon's health. Joe and Merrylegs go to the Vicar Blomefield's, and Beauty and Ginger are sold to Earlshall Park.

Part 2

The mistress at Earlshall insists on using the bearing rein, which is very painful for the horses, but the stable manager, Mr. York cannot object. One day Ginger rebels and goes wild. She is then used as a hunter. When the Earl and some of the family go to London, the Lady Anne takes to riding Beauty, calling him Black Auster. When she tries another horse on one ride and is thrown, Beauty races for help and is much praised. He thinks he has settled into a good home, but then the stable hand Reuben Smith gets drunk and takes Beauty on a dangerous ride that results in Smith's death and ruined knees for Beauty. Ginger is also ruined by hard riding, but is given a chance to recover. Beauty, however, is sold to a livery stable. As a job horse, Beauty is subjected to being hired by people with poor driving skills and little knowledge of the care of horses. One customer, though, recognizes Beauty's value and arranges for him to be sold to Mr.

Barry, a gentleman who hires a groom for Beauty. The groom steals Beauty's feed and has to be arrested. The next groom is too lazy to take care of Beauty and causes him to get thrush. Disgusted by all the trouble of keeping a horse, Mr. Barry sells Beauty.

Part 3

Beauty is sold at a horse fair to Jerry Barker, a London cab driver, and is called Jack. His stable mate is Captain, a former cavalry horse. Beauty learns the ropes of pulling a cab in the busy streets of London. The hard life is made bearable by Jerry's skillful and kind treatment. Jerry has a loving family with his wife Polly and children Harry and Dolly. He is a very ethical man who will not drink and will not work on Sundays or take fares that will needlessly overwork his horses. He will, however, take pains to do a charitable act. One of Jerry's friends is a sensible and good-hearted cab driver called Governor Grant who serves as the elder advisor for the other drivers. While many customers are thoughtless, some are considerate of the horses. Similarly, some cab drivers are negligent of their horses because they do not own the horses, but work for shares. For these men, life is nearly as hard as it is for the horses. By chance, one day Black Beauty sees Ginger, who has become one of these leased cab horses and very mistreated. She is in such pain that she yearns for death. Later, Beauty happens to see Ginger's body being carted away. Shortly afterwards, Jerry and Captain are involved in a carriage accident that causes Captain to be put down and replaced by Hotspur. At New Year's, a couple of customers keep Jerry waiting in the bitter cold while they party. As a result, Jerry becomes very ill with bronchitis and cannot work. Grant helps out by giving the energetic Hotspur a half-day's work each day and giving half the fares to Polly. When Jerry recovers, the doctor says that he can no longer work as a cab driver. However, Mrs. Fowler, Polly's former employer, hires Jerry to be her coachman in the country and provides a cottage for the family. They go on to a wonderful new life, but the horses have to be sold. Grant buys Hotspur, and promises Jerry to find a good place for Beauty.

Part 4

Beauty is sold to a corn dealer who is good to him, but the dealer's foreman, Jakes, overworks the horses and uses the bearing rein. However, he takes the advice of a lady who advises that Beauty could work better if the bearing rein is removed. Jakes is so impressed by the lady's concern that he is easier on Beauty after that. However, the dark stables nearly make Beauty blind, and he is sold to a cab business again. This time his owner, Nicholas Skinner, has several shabby cabs and a group of overworked drivers who take out their frustration over their hardships by abusing the horses. When a customer insists on the cab carrying a load too heavy for Beauty, the horse collapses. He is saved from being put down by a farrier who finds that Beauty's wind is not broken. Beauty is taken to auction where he is bought by Farmer Thoroughgood and his compassionate grandson who believe that they can rehabilitate Beauty in their country meadow. They are successful and sell Beauty to Ellen and Lavinia Blomefield. Joe

Green is still working for the Blomefield family and recognizes Black Beauty, who then settles into a long, happy life in his last home.

Characters

Lady Anne

Black Beauty is Lady Anne's riding horse for a while at Earlshall Park, but she calls him Black Auster.

Dolly Barker

Dolly is the eight-year-old daughter of Jerry, the cab driver who owned Beauty. Dolly would bring food to her father at the cab stand.

Harry Barker

Harry is Jerry the cab driver's twelve-year-old son. Harry capably helped with the care of the horses.

Jeremiah Barker

Jeremiah, called Jerry, was Beauty's owner for three years. Jerry is a kindly and decent London cab driver. Jerry takes excellent care of his horses and does not believe that either he or they should work seven days a week. He is Sewell's example of honesty and integrity in the working class and is the character she uses to express a number of moral lessons. Jerry finds reward in a job well done and is always willing to perform acts of charity. He loves his wife and children dearly and does not linger in taverns as the other drivers do, since he has been a teetotaler for ten years. When Jerry becomes so ill that he can no longer work as a cab driver, he sells Beauty to a friend he thinks will treat Beauty well.

Polly Barker

Polly is the wife of Jerry Barker. Polly is a merry, kindly woman who provides loving care to all around her. Her former employer thinks so highly of Polly that she keeps in touch through the years and offers Jerry a job and the family a home when Jerry has to give up his cab business.

Mr. Barry

Mr. Barry is one of Black Beauty's owners after his knees are ruined. Mr. Barry is a gentleman who must rely on grooms to take care of Beauty, but after two dishonest grooms, he gives up on having his own horse and sells Beauty.

Black Beauty

Black Beauty is the narrator of the novel and is a "well bred and well born" handsome black horse with one white foot and a white star on his forehead. The character is possibly based on Sewell's brother's beautiful carriage horse Black Bess, or Bessie. Black Beauty is the son of a wise older mare named Duchess and the grandson of the winner of a famous race. Following his mother's advice always to be good of heart and a hard worker, Beauty encounters a variety of good and bad owners and grooms, as well as enjoyable and miserable jobs during his life as a horse in Victorian England. Through Beauty and the other horses he meets, the reader learns about the mistreatment that horses often endure and the difficult nature of some of the work imposed on horses. The character of Beauty is Sewell's device for making the public more aware of the need for more humane treatment of horses and other animals.

Beauty has a good start in life under the skillful care of Farmer Grey, then enjoys a happy time at Birtwick Park where his master is a knowledgeable advocate of humane treatment for horses. But that master must leave England, and Beauty's life takes a downward spiral, thanks to a drunken groom who ruins Beauty's knees in an accident. Fashion dictates that a blemished horse cannot pull a carriage, so Beauty begins an odyssey through a series of middle and lower class labors. While he enjoys three years with a wonderful cab driver, the work is hard and debilitating. Fate sends him to even harder work where he collapses and is almost sent to the slaughterhouse, but is fortunate instead to be sold to a farmer who rehabilitates Beauty's health and finds him a pleasant home for the rest of his life.

The people and horses that Beauty meets in each of his jobs all have stories to tell that illuminate the situation of horses in that time period and reveal the natures of the people who are charged with their care. Beauty's gentility and goodness, even during hard times, make him an enduring favorite among readers.

Blantyre

Blantyre is a guest at Earlshall Park and is riding Beauty when Lady Anne has an accident. He sends a workman and Beauty for help, and later praises Beauty.

Ellen Blomefield

Ellen is one of Black Beauty's last owner. She and her sister employ Joe Green.

Miss Lavinia Blomefield

With her sister Ellen, Lavinia is Black Beauty's last owner and Joe Green's employer.

Mr. Blomefield

Mr. Blomefield is the vicar at Birkwick. He buys Merrylegs and hires Joe Green when the Gordons leave England.

The Butcher

The purpose of the character of the butcher is to give another example of a business owner who must cater to thoughtless customers and whose horse suffers as a consequence.

Captain

Captain is Beauty's companion as a cab horse at Jerry Barker's. Captain was in the cavalry during the Crimean War, and tells Beauty of his experiences as a horse in combat. Captain is injured in an accident caused by a drunk drayman and must then be put down.

Prince Charlie

Prince Charlie is a coster-boy whom Jerry nicknamed because of the loving relationship he has with his cart pony that will one day make him a king of drivers.

Duchess

Duchess is Black Beauty's mother. She was named Duchess but was often called "Pet" by Farmer Grey because she was so amiable. An old horse, she advised Black Beauty to be gentle and good, to do his work with a good will, and never bite or kick.

Lord George

When Ginger refuses to wear the bearing rein at Earlshall Park, she is given to young Lord George for hunting, but he ruins her with hard riding.

Ginger

Ginger is a tall, chestnut mare with a "long handsome neck." Ginger is ill-tempered from having been poorly treated. Beauty first met her at Birtwick Park, and they are sold together to Earlshall Park. There, Ginger rebels against the bearing rein, so she is used as a hunter. Ruined with hard riding, Ginger is put to pasture for a year to attempt a recovery but never completely regains her health and goes through a series of owners until she is reduced to being one of Skinner's cab horses. Beauty finds Ginger so

overworked and abused she wants to die. Soon after, Beauty sees her tortured body being carted away.

Miss Flora Gordon

Flora is one of Squire Gordon's two daughters at Birtwick Hall.

Miss Jessie Gordon

Jessie is one of Squire Gordon's two daughters at Birtwick Hall.

Mrs. Gordon

Mrs. Gordon is the wife of Squire Gordon. She named Black Beauty. It was her illness that caused the Gordons to leave England and sell all their horses.

Squire Gordon

Squire Gordon is the owner of Birtwick Park. Squire Gordon is Black Beauty's first owner when he is old enough to be sold away from Farmer Grey's. The Squire is a good man who is known for his advocacy of kind treatment for horses.

Governor Grey Grant

Governor Grant is a fellow cab driver and friend of Jerry Barker. He is peacemaker and advisor for all the cab drivers. Grant helps out when Jerry is sick and buys Hotspur when the Barkers leave London.

Joe Green

Joe Green is the stable boy who replaces James Howard at Birtwick Hall. Joe nearly kills Black Beauty by putting him up improperly after a hard ride but later learns good horse care. Joe reports a man for beating two horses, and the man is jailed as a result. Joe and Merrylegs go to live at the Vicar's when the Gordons leave England. Still working for two of the Blomefield sisters when Beauty happens to be bought by them, Joe recognizes Beauty from Birtwick and rejoices to find him again.

Farmer Grey

Until he is four years old, Black Beauty resides in the meadow of Farmer Grey, who carefully breeds and trains quality horses.

Hotspur

Hotspur is the horse that replaces Captain in Jerry's stable. He is bought by Governor Grant when Jerry moves to the country.

James Howard

James is the stable boy at Birtwick Hall who saved Beauty and Ginger from a barn fire. James is so good with horses that Squire Gordon and John Manly recommend him to be the head groom at another estate. James is then replaced by Joe Green.

Jakes

Jakes is the foreman for the baker to whom Jerry sells Beauty. Jake responds to the admonition of a lady who begs him to take the bearing rein off Beauty when pulling a heavy load.

Justice

At Birtwick Hall, Beauty sometimes chats with Justice, the strong, good-tempered roan cob used for riding or the luggage cart.

John Manly

John Manly is the coachman for Birtwick Hall. He is an expert at and advocate of good care for horses. He gives wise advice to James Howard before advancing his career, and trains Joe to be a good groom. John Manly is one of the first characters that Sewell uses to voice moral opinions.

Merrylegs

Amiable Merrylegs is the fat gray pony who plays with the children at Birtwick Park but will not tolerate bad behavior. This character is possibly based on Sewell's own favorite gray pony. Merrylegs goes to the Vicar's with Joe Green when the Gordons move away.

Old Ba-a-ar Hoo

Old Ba-a-ar Hoo is an old gentleman who delivers coal and is proof, Jerry says, that a horse can be happy even in a poor place if properly treated.

Sir Oliver

Sir Oliver is an older, brown horse at Birkwick Hall. He has a shortened tail that was cut to meet a demand of fashion. His story leads to a discussion of the tail and ear clippings on dogs.

Peggy

Peggy is a pretty, dappled brown mare who works with Beauty at the livery stable. Peggy has an awkward gait because of short legs and mishandling by bad drivers. A gentle horse, Peggy is fortunate to be sold to some ladies for country driving and given a good life.

Rory

Beauty is paired with Rory at the livery stable until they are involved in a carriage accident that disables Rory and sends him to work pulling a coal cart.

Seedy Sam

Seedy Sam is a cab driver who works for the disreputable Nicholas Skinner. He describes to Jerry the wretched lives that men and horses have who must work on shares for owners like Skinner and the compromises he feels he must make to earn a living. Sam dies from overwork.

Nicholas Skinner

Nicholas Skinner is the owner of a low set of cabs and horses that he leases to drivers. Skinner so overworks Beauty that Beauty collapses and is almost sent to slaughter.

Reuben Smith

Reuben Smith is placed in charge of the stables at Earlshall Park when York is gone. Smith is competent with horses but has a problem with drink. On one of his binges, he has a riding accident that kills him and leaves Beauty with the blemished knees that prevent him from being a carriage horse anymore.

Farmer Thoroughgood

Farmer Thoroughgood is convinced by his grandson to buy Beauty at auction and to attempt rehabilitating him. Thoroughgood finds Beauty's final home with the Blomefield sisters.

Willie Thoroughgood

Willie is Farmer Thouroughgood's grandson. After convincing his grandfather to buy Beauty, Willie meticulously cares for Beauty and enables him to recover well enough to be sold to the Blomefield sisters. Willie's rescue allows Beauty to have a good life in his last years.

Mr. York

Mr. York is the head of the stables at Earlshall Park. York is good to the horses and soft-hearted enough to hire Reuben Smith despite his alcoholism, but he does not stand up to the mistress when she wants to use the bearing rein on the horses.

Setting

Written during a major period of growth in the movement for humane treatment of animals, Black Beauty became the work that represented the movement. Humane societies across the United States bought and distributed thousands of copies of the book, espousing animal rights.

Black Beauty takes place in the same period in which Sewell lived: mid- to late-nineteenth-century England.

Showing the range of uses for horses during this period, Black Beauty works as a saddle and carriage horse on a wealthy country estate, is rented as a beast of burden from a livery stable, pulls a cab, and draws a cart through the crowded London streets. The frequent changes in setting provide a good overview of British life during this era.

The first week of my life as a cab horse was very trying.

Horses were not only the primary mode of transportation during Sewell's lifetime, they were also becoming popular among the middle class for recreation and exercise, and as status symbols. The need for new riders to learn about good horse care and the increasing popularity of the harmful bearing rein, which often damaged the horses by forcing them to hold their heads too high, inspired Sewell to write Black Beauty. She decided that a creative format would be the most effective means of voicing her concerns because it would appeal to a large audience.

Social Sensitivity

Aside from the obvious stance on the humane treatment of animals. Black Beauty addresses several other social issues. The character Reuben Smith kills himself, injures Black Beauty, and drives his family into poverty with his alcoholism, illustrating a problem that continues to confront society. The antiwar sentiments expressed by Captain echo the philosophy of nonviolence, particularly as defined by Quakerism.

Less relevant to modern times but of interest to a discussion of nineteenthcentury British life, Sewell addresses the problems of the seven-day work week. While no one argues about the necessity of a day of rest anymore, the issue provides an interesting contrast between the quality of life during Sewell's day and during modern times.

Similarly, the traditional female roles as mother, helpmate, and lady of the manor offer no role models for young women of today, but they can serve to illustrate the progress women have effected in the past century.

Literary Qualities

Black Beauty's literary qualities are best understood in the light of the tradition from which the novel came: the tradition of the nineteenth-century improving book. Black Beauty is very much in the tradition of the moralistic ballads and books of its time, especially those that present self-improvement and social justice lessons in a story written in simple language to suit the reading levels of their intended audiences□children and working class adults with limited education. Sewell's mother, Mary, wrote several popular improving books, which Sewell read and helped to edit. Of Mary Sewell's works, Black Beauty most closely resembles Patience Hart's First Experience in Service, Mary and Anna Sewell both use the literary device of giving some characters names that comment on their personalities. The main character in Mary's book on housemaids is Patience Hart, who is a girl with a patient heart.

Similarly, in Black Beauty, Filcher the groom steals Black Beauty's oats to feed to his rabbits, Alfred Smirk is a lazy and conceited humbug, and Seedy Sam is a down-on-his-luck cab driver who works his horses cruelly hard.

The conflicts and character development provide the book with a circular structure. Raised in the country, Black Beauty undergoes a series of adventures with different masters and companions, ending up back in the country. During the nineteenth century, circular plots were thought to give a sense of completeness and to be the best device to show how characters changed in the course of a book.

Themes

Mistreatment of Animals

In the original introduction to *Black Beauty* that Sewell herself wrote, she seems to indicate that the purpose of the book is that of an equine care manual, and not that of an entertaining story. Education was very important to Sewell, and since she declared, in part, that her intent was to induce "an understanding of the treatment of horses" through her "little book," she had to explain how to treat horses. Consequently, it has been said that one could read *Black Beauty* and come away fairly well prepared to actually care for a horse.

The point of describing appropriate equine care was to provide alternative, replacement behaviors to the practices that Sewell abhorred and wanted to stop. Evidence of abuse that causes pain and suffering for horses is found in nearly every chapter: tail bobbing, blinkers, double bits, check or bearing reins, risky jumps for sport, and long-term confinement in stalls. These practices, and the hope that pointing out their cruelty would bring an end to them, were the real focus of the book. Sewell's audience also learned that mean-tempered horses were not born but made by cruel treatment. It is important to note that Sewell did not lay blame for the mistreatment of horses so much on working men, even though they enacted the mistreatment, as on the owners and customers who exploited these workers and thereby their horses.

Sewell maintains the theme of evoking sympathy and understanding of horses through the different horse characters who appear in the book. Although Beauty experiences several different types of jobs, Sewell couldn't realistically place him in every kind of situation. So, evidencing her storytelling skill, she weaves encounters with different horses throughout the book, and each has a unique story to tell. As a result, Sewell is able to present to the reader the types of mistreatment that arise for horses in the city as well as the country; horses that are used for sport, for individual riding, for pulling carts, cabs, and carriages, and for combat. There are abuses that occur in each of these situations, and Sewell's pointed descriptions bring them to the reader's attention as had never been done before in literature.

Upright Behavior

Sewell was raised as a Quaker, lived in a strict religious house, gave classes to working class men, and did charitable work. Her mother wrote evangelical books for children. As a result, Sewell had a definite opinion about what was and was not acceptable behavior. Sewell was classically Victorian in her beliefs about morality, hard work, self-denial, and charity. These beliefs were expressed frequently throughout *Black Beauty*. Consequently, Sewell's novel was seen not only as a book about the proper treatment of horses, but also about the proper behavior of humans in general. The lessons given by Duchess to Beauty, by the coachman John Manly and the cab driver Jerry Barker,

among others, were purposely placed in the novel for the edification of the reader. These lessons include: Duchess teaching that one should always do one's best and work hard; John Manly explaining the value of following an example of kindness by doing the same for others; and Jerry Barker demonstrating integrity, helping others in need, and establishing the family as a priority. Others, such as Squire Gordon, lecture on Sewell's main theme: the need for kindness to animals. There is also a very strong point made repeatedly by Sewell about the evils of drink. The groom who ruins Beauty's knees was drunk when he caused the calamity. Often, those seen mistreating horses are drunk. It is noted that many of the cab drivers waste time and money drinking. Even the good Governor Grant has a problem with alcohol and asks Jerry how he managed to give it up. Sewell was known to be an ardent advocate of temperance, and she used *Black Beauty* to express her view on this subject of moral concern as well as others.

Style

Animal Autobiography

Black Beauty requires the reader to accept the fact that a horse is the first-person narrator. This point of view quickly becomes believable because Sewell so effectively entered the mind of a horse that everything in the text is skillfully presented in terms of the animal's perceptions and observations. Sewell's triumph with this novel is the artful way she gets reader to feel that they are actually getting the story "straight from the horse's mouth." The reader is able to imagine what it is like to be a horse, how a bit feels in the mouth, how humans appear to animals, and so on. Stating on the cover page that the text was translated from the original equine is a clever way to set up the suspension of disbelief. Knowing that the story is a translation somehow gets readers past the problem that horses do not speak "English" and do not appear to talk at all.

The Use of the Novel Structure

Since the message of Sewell's book would have been suitable for a didactic series of essays, and since her mother wrote moral tales and verse for children, it is somewhat surprising that Sewell chose the form of the novel for her book. However, it is likely that Sewell had a repressed artistic talent that needed the freedom and space of a novel for best expression. In a novel she could explore many more areas of the written word than the structure of an essay would have allowed.

Also, Sewell loved the poetry of the Romantics, and it shows in the descriptive background she gives to her story. The opening paragraph is often quoted in references to the novel because it is this entrancing picture of the "pleasant meadow" at Farmer Grey's that captures the reading audience. Sewell makes the meadow a charming place by including details about "a pond of clear water," surrounded by shady trees, rushes, and waterlilies. The reader is also helped to envision a ploughed field, a plantation of fir trees, and "a running brook overhung by a steep bank." Later in the story, when Beauty stands severely injured next to the body of Ruben Smith, his anxiety and pain are comforted by the "calm, sweet April night" that includes a nightingale's song, "white clouds near the moon and a brown owl that flitted over the hedge."

The advice that Duchess gives to Black Beauty in the third chapter of the book establishes the plan for the novel. The introduction of the main character having been accomplished, Beauty's mother tells him that there are "many kinds of men" and describes the different types that a horse might encounter in his work. Of course, Beauty goes on through the course of the book to meet all these different types of men. The plot is built around these various encounters, their circumstances, and the results.

Historical Context

Victorian Life

The values of the Victorians were largely shaped by the Evangelical movement that emphasized salvation and the Utilitarian movement that emphasized efficiency. Both promoted self-control and self-denial. Victorians believed that one should be in total control of oneself at all times. Thrift and usefulness were highly regarded virtues, so people were expected to spend their time and money reasonably and with good purpose. Hard work was the key to success, so laziness and drunkenness were seen as the road to perdition. Self-help was another honored virtue. Even though class structure was rigid in Victorian England, members of the lower classes were expected to make an attempt to better themselves through education, personal development, and temperance. There was little sympathy for those who did not succeed in bettering their lot because failure was assumed to be a result of lack of effort. Other social forces were not given much consideration for the plight of the poor. This attitude was further reflected in the temperance movement that was aimed at the working class, ignoring any problems with alcohol in the other classes, because what was most important was getting the labor force to work in a sober condition for better productivity, which increased the wealth of the middle and upper classes. Victorian England was a society of great poverty existing alongside a still enormously wealthy aristocracy and a growing middle class. This middle class consisted of people whose improved economic status allowed them to afford their own horses, but an improved lifestyle did not necessarily mean that they learned how to take care of horses. Consequently, the abuse of horses became the serious problem addressed in *Black Beauty*. The Industrial Revolution also provided many new jobs and opportunities for rural people, but it led them into urban slums. Naturally, the working class resented the hypocritical effort of the Temperance Movement that diverted attention away from the problems of sanitation, overcrowded housing, poor working conditions, and other social abuses.

The Temperance Movement in Victorian England

A major social reform effort in Victorian England was the temperance movement. In effect, the temperance movement was also a class conflict because it was led by the middle-class but aimed at the working class. Specifically, the reform target was working-class men, because they drank in public and women usually did not. Drinking practices in the home were of some concern to the feminist movement in later years because of the link to domestic violence, but the original intent of the temperance movement was to affect a wasteful behavior that was contrary to the Victorian ideals of self-control and self-denial. Drunkenness caused one to lose control; therefore, it was logical that the consumption of alcohol was destructive. Besides, spending money on liquor was a wasteful form of entertainment; rather, one should save one's money and avoid useless times spent in self-indulgent leisure.

Morality was not the only driving force behind this movement. Industrialization demanded a reliable work force for the factories. At first, the intent of the movement was not to outlaw drinking, but to control it. Nor was there an attempt to "cure" drunks, who were seen as lost causes. Instead, the movement aimed to curb social drinking. Eventually, however, control was enforced through various forms of legislation. In addition, some temperance organizations took the step of requiring members to abstain entirely from alcohol consumption, but this "teetotalism" was a passing phase of the movement, as were attempts at the total prohibition of the sale of alcoholic beverages. Another tactic was to appeal to workers to refrain from drinking liquor because it was unhealthy and could lead to death.

The Church of England Temperance Society was formed in 1862 and became heavily involved by claiming there were two forms of life: church life and pub life. Its Sunday School Movement was an effort to encourage working-class children to attend church and learn about temperance. Eventually, though, a conflict over the appropriateness of sacramental wine led to the waning of church temperance efforts as well. Temperance stories for children began appearing in the late eighteenth century in Britain, and by the mid-nineteenth century temperance periodicals became common in both Britain and the United States. Other Victorian stories, such as *Black Beauty*, added a temperance moral into the plot. Although the Temperance Movement eventually died out as an organized cause, it did have the effect of creating a culture in Victorian England that no longer tolerated public drunkenness and saw alcohol abuse as dysfunctional, not recreational.

Horses in Victorian Society

Horses played a vital role in nineteenth century life. They provided not only the main means of transportation, but also the labor force for a variety of jobs. They pulled carts, cabs, wagons, and barges on the roads and on city streets, worked as pit ponies in the coal mines, and helped plough rural fields. Writing for *Horsepower*, Margaret Bennett reports that "During the 1890s, there were over 11,000 hansom cabs (the taxis of their day) alone on the streets of London, needing twice that number of horses to operate." Despite their importance, horses were treated miserably. Bennett adds that horses "often died in harness due to overwork and lack of care." As brute labor, they were taken for granted, beaten, and, as Ginger said in the book, simply "used up." Those that pulled carriages were subject to whims of fashion that dictated docking tails or forcing horses to hold their heads up higher than was comfortable or practical. Without a long tail, a horse cannot rid itself of flies. With a head held in a painfully unnatural position by a bearing or check rein, a horse cannot use its full strength for pulling, breathe properly, or move its head from side to side to look about. It was abusive practices such as these that Sewell attacked in *Black Beauty*.

Critical Overview

Sewell saw *Black Beauty* as lessons in equine care more than as a literary story, so it is not surprising that some of the early critics appraised *Black Beauty* as a care guide as well as a novelistic form. Readers often thought that a veterinarian, coachman, or groom must have written the book because it was so accurate in its details. Regardless, *Black Beauty*, classified as "Juvenile" by libraries, is considered a children's classic and one that changed the nature of children's literature. It is true that readers usually first encounter this novel as children, and there are film versions aimed strictly at a juvenile audience. However, many readers, such as Sewell biographer Susan Chitty, realize that if the book was written to educate those who handle horses, then it was written for working class men, not children.

Furthermore, like so many other readers, Lucy Grealy, who wrote the "Afterword" for a recent paperback edition of *Black Beauty*, has discerned additional elements that adults can appreciate. Sewell's novel, Grealy says, goes "into the darker crevices of human failures and frailties, cruelty and indifference to such cruelty." Grealy admits that *Black Beauty* is "a loving fable in so many ways;" however, despite its happy ending for the protagonist, it is "also a deeply sad novel, a tragic account of human failure."

But first, *Black Beauty* is about a horse. Frances Clarke Sayers, in an article entitled "Books That Enchant: What Makes a Classic?," quotes a child as saying, "The fact remains that when you read *Black Beauty* you feel like a horse." In a piece on Sewell for *Children's Books and Their Creators* (Silvey), the comment is made that "Sewell's careful descriptions let readers feel the bit tearing into Black Beauty's mouth or the chills caused by a stable boy who doesn't know enough to throw blankets on an overheated horse." Such skillful detail illustrates and strengthens Sewell's message about the need for kind treatment of horses.

Her detail and artistic talent also enliven the novel with elements of excitement. Critics have noted that the reader is captured by the action of the nighttime run to get the doctor for Mrs. Gordon, the flooded bridge, and the stable fire. A review of *Black Beauty* in *The Critic* in 1890 praises Sewell's "skill in the art of narration," writing that the story is more "readable than the average novel of today."

Vincent Starrett, in an essay for *Literary Appreciation*, says that *Black Beauty* "is unquestionably the most successful animal story ever written." He added that it is "certain that more than any other single agency this humane classic has improved the lot of the captive horse."

The book was eventually adopted by both the British and American Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and thousands of copies were distributed for educational purposes. As a result, in the United States, a million copies were sold between 1890 and 1892, and *Black Beauty* continued to sell at the rate of a quarter million copies each year for another twenty years.

While some critics have found *Black Beauty* too sentimental and didactic, its success belies these criticisms. Sewell was not just a novice writer pounding on her pulpit. Critics have praised the way her sincerity and passionate convictions are combined with skillful characterization, clever juxtaposition of human and animal experiences, eloquent descriptions, and overall good storytelling.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Kerschen is a school district administrator and freelance writer. In this essay, Kerschen discusses the moral lessons, particularly about temperance, that Sewell incorporates into Black Beauty*.*

In the first chapter of *Black Beauty*, Anna Sewell provides her hero with a wise admonition from his mother: "I hope you will grow up gentle and good, and never learn bad ways; do your work with a good will." This advice may have come from an equine mother, but it is the kind of moral instruction that humans could use as well. It was Sewell's stated intent to write a book that would "induce kindness, sympathy, and an understanding treatment of horses." That is, the subject was not horses, but the treatment of horses, and therefore the book was a set of instructions for humans. In the process, Sewell set forth not only the proper care of horses, but the proper behavior of humans in other areas as well.

Considering Sewell's intent for the novel, it is reasonable to believe that an appropriate audience would be the adults, particularly men, who worked with and cared for horses. However, the book is traditionally classified as a juvenile novel and was actually used for moral instruction in schools. As Lucy Grealy noted in her "Afterword" to a recent edition of *Black Beauty*, the Education Act of 1870, which legally established public education in England, "meant that a huge amount of educational material was needed, and *Black Beauty*, viewed as a morally correct book, was eventually being sold by the box rather than the volume." After all, the book contains lessons such as the following from Chapter Three: "She told me the better I behaved, the better I should be treated, and that it was wisest always to do my best." This kind of instruction is wise counsel for school children as well as colts, and the schools hoped their pupils would perceive the application to their own lives. It is also helpful to warn children as well as young horses that

There are a great many kinds of men; there are good, thoughtful men . . . ; but there are bad, cruel men. . .; there are a great many foolish men, vain, ignorant and careless, who never trouble themselves to think; but still I say, do your best, wherever it is, and keep up your good name.

While much of the book is devoted to exposing the various types of cruelty imposed on animals, Sewell expands the point about animal abuse in Chapter 13 to connect it to a general moral deficiency. The chapter is titled "The Devil's Trade Mark" because the schoolmaster who punishes a boy for torturing flies equates hurting the weak and helpless to the hard-heartedness and cowardliness that is the devil's trademark in a person. The teacher says that "the devil was a murderer from the beginning, and a tormentor to the end." In contrast, God's mark is love. When John Manly hears about the incident from James he agrees that people can talk all they want about religion but: "There is no religion without love . . . if it does not teach them to be good and kind to man and beast, it is all a sham." James later asks John if he holds with the saying that a

man should look after himself only and "take care of number one." John replies that such thinking is selfish and heathenish.

Sewell created the character of Jerry Barker to supply most of her lessons on honesty and integrity. In scene after scene, Jerry makes decisions based on his strong moral convictions with statements including: "Every man must look after his own soul; you can't lay it at another man's door like a foundling, and expect him to take care of it"; "If a thing is right, it can be done, and if it is wrong, it *can be done without*; and a good man will find a way." He will not take extra fare for extra effort because he finds sufficient reward in a job well done. Jerry also will not work on Sundays, not only because he believes the day is for church and family, but also because he is sensible enough to know the he and the horses must have a day of rest to stay healthy and work well the rest of the week. When he is criticized by his fellow drivers for turning down a good job just because it is on Sunday, Sewell uses Jerry to voice further lessons: "Real religion is the best and truest thing in the world; and the only thing that can make a man really happy, or make the world better."

Jerry once broke his Sunday rule to drive a friend to her dying mother's bedside. Sewell makes certain that this good deed is rewarded with a refreshing day in the country for Jerry and Beauty. Another good deed with fortunate consequences is that of driving a mother with her sick child to the hospital for no fee. This charitable act results in a chance encounter with Mrs. Fowler, his wife's former employer, that reinforces their relationship and will later tie into the rescue provided by Mrs. Fowler when Jerry becomes too ill to continue work as a cab driver.

Knowing that *Black Beauty* would be her only book, Sewell apparently wanted to include as much as she could on various subjects. Therefore, to express her opinion about the importance of elections, there is a chapter on the heightened activity for cab drivers on election day, and Sewell uses Jerry to teach that: "An election is a very serious thing; at least it ought to be, and every man ought to vote according to his conscience, and let his neighbour do the same."

Sewell inserts other good people into the book to deliver lessons. Jerry's customer who stops an inebriated driver from whipping his horses brutally tells Jerry:

People think only about their own business, and won't trouble themselves to stand up for the oppressed, nor bring the wrong-doer to light. I never see a wicked thing. . . without doing what I can. . . . My doctrine is this, that if we see cruelty or wrong that we have the power to stop, and do nothing, we make ourselves sharers in the guilt.

One of the strongest themes in *Black Beauty* is that of temperance. A major turning point in the story occurs when Beauty's knees are ruined in an accident caused by a drunken groom. To build up the tragedy of the accident, Sewell describes the groom Reuben Smith in glowing terms concerning his abilities and personality but notes that "he had one great fault, and that was the love of drink." Smith could be fine for weeks at a time, but then go on a binge and "be a disgrace to himself, a terror to this wife, and a nuisance to all that had to do with him." Smith had already been dismissed from another

position because of a drunken incident, and it caused his family to have to move out of a nice cottage. York had hired him out of pity when Smith promised never to take another drink. However, Sewell's depiction of the incident with Smith shows how alcoholism causes broken promises and broken lives.

Sewell drops other negatives images of alcohol consumption throughout *Black Beauty*. Sometimes her mention is slight, as when Beauty is explaining that one problem with getting sufficient water is that "[s]ome grooms will go home to their beer and leave us for hours with our dry hay and oats and nothing to moisten them." In the scene in which Joe Green witnesses a man beating his horse, the abuser was described as being in "a towering passion, and the worse for drink." When one of Jerry's customers sees a horse being abused and intervenes, the driver is described as someone "who had clearly been drinking." It was a drayman who "proved to be very drunk" who was responsible for the accident that so injured Captain that he had to be put down.

In her description of Governor Grant, Sewell says that he is "generally a good-humored, sensible man." She adds, however, that when he drinks too much, he becomes short-tempered and combative. Sewell has Grant ask Jerry how he overcame the habit of drinking so that she can provide a prescription for a cure. Jerry says that when he realized that he was no longer his own master "I saw that one of us must knock under the drink devil, or Jerry Barker." He admits that it was a struggle, but with Polly's help and the knowledge that he might lose her and his soul to drink if he did not stop, he succeeded.

A review of *Black Beauty* in *Children's Books and Their Creators* mentions that "[s]ome critics have felt that Sewell's preaching fatally flaws her narrative." Perhaps Sewell anticipated this criticism because she uses a somewhat indirect method to deliver her moral messages. The sermonizing about good conduct is not made as a direct plea but comes as opinions expressed by human characters that the horses overhear. Thus, the horses appear to be objective observers of the human scene and are merely reporting the conversations they have heard.

Even if Sewell was a little obvious in her intent to preach right conduct, one cannot argue with the positive results, not only for horses but for the cab drivers' situation that she highlighted as well. The sympathy that was evoked resulted in the building of shelters for the drivers where they could find respite and instruction in religion and temperance. By adding the element of a human plight in a book about the harsh treatment of horses, Sewell provided a balance to the message of the novel and enriched it with a portrayal of the complexity of the relationship between humans and animals.

Grealy studied a number of introductions that have appeared in various publications of *Black Beauty*. As time passed and literary fashion changed, the conclusions about the strengths and weaknesses of the novel also changed. Grealy found that critics began to focus "not so much on the human failings depicted in the book as they did on the high morals of Beauty himself." Beauty's virtues are designed not only to persuade people that animals deserve to be treated well, but are intended to be applied to humans, too,

concerning "how we ourselves must value honest and hard work under disagreeable circumstances." Therefore, the early response to the book to use it as moral instruction in schools was an understandable and valid reaction. All literature is intended to help the reader to learn and grow, and there are enough lessons about animals and people, about the challenges of life, to give *Black Beauty* timeless value.

Source: Lois Kerschen, Critical Essay on *Black Beauty*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #2

Holm is a short story and novel author, and a freelance writer. In this essay, Holm looks at how Sewell effectively uses a horse's point of view to address issues of cruelty, morality, and class in mid-Victorian England.

The author who decides to tell a story from the point of view of an animal has some tricky challenges. Somehow, the author must use this point of view so that it enhances, rather than detracts from, the story that the author puts on the page. But having an animal as a story's main point of view character also lends advantages. Because of an animal's assumed innocence (in comparison to humans, in this case), the author might more easily make points in the story that could appear preachy or dogmatic if these points were made through a human character. In *Black Beauty*, Sewell uses circumstance and Black Beauty's point of view to effectively make statements about morality, animal treatment, and class division. Sewell uses the horse's point of view to her advantage, and as a result, none of the book's statements about these issues sound overly dogmatic. These issues would run the risk of sounding too much like the author's opinion, if they were voiced through a human character.

Almost immediately, the reader is made aware of the importance of class in the setting of this story. Even among horses, class and breeding are quite important. Black Beauty's mother tells him that he is "well-bred and well-born," and she warns him not to bite or kick in play, as the cart horses (who have not learned manners) do.

In *Black Beauty*, some members of the upper classes will go to any length to appear fashionable. These people are not above making their horses suffer, for the appearance of an upturned neck. Such people force their horses to walk unnaturally all for the sake of appearance. Sewell's detail makes these examples all the more effective, as in the case of Ginger. Ginger is driven with the painful check rein.

Fancy . . . if you tossed your head up high, and were obliged to hold it there, and that for hours together, not able to move it at all except with a jerk still higher, your neck aching till you did not know how to bear it. It was worse when we had to stand by the hour, waiting for our mistress at some grand party or entertainment.

Sewell's detail helps the reader imagine just how painful it could be for a horse to hold its head up continuously, even though the same reader may previously have been ignorant of check reining, and may have imagined that the horse simply looked good with its head forced upright. For additional contrast, the horse is forced to suffer to support the mistress's upper class lifestyle and entertainment. Cruel humans can be male or female in Sewell's world, and women who mistreat horses in *Black Beauty* do so for the sake of fashion and appearance.

Fashion, and its effect on horses, shows up in many variations in *Black Beauty*. An old horse has his tail painfully docked, and is outraged that it was done "for fashion!" The horse notes that this is done on dogs' ears and tails, causing the animals great pain.

And with the subtle irony that Sewell occasionally slips into this story, the old horse mentions that none of the puppies were drowned, "for they were a valuable kind." Animals that have some value, or are perceived as fashionable, are kept by humans, though they are subjected to the pain of docked tails and ears. Animals that are not valuable, or fashionable, are easily expendable. The old horse sums it up by saying that "fashion is one of the wickedest things in the world." And reasonably□and it does seem reasonable from Sewell's well-portrayed animal point of view□the old horse wonders why humans do not dock their own noses for the sake of fashion or to look "plucky."

Sewell makes it apparent to the reader, via situations that the horses observe or are involved in, that the world includes people who are mean to animals, as well as people who care about animal welfare. In the first chapter, Beauty mentions a ploughboy who purposefully throws sticks and stones at the colts to make them gallop. Sewell contrasts the ploughboy's behavior with his master's. The master admonishes the boy and fires him. Sewell does two things here to effectively convey a message about the treatment of animals; she contrasts the boy's bad behavior with a boss who is willing to fire the boy, and she presents the whole event through the eyes of Black Beauty. If Sewell had made a blunt statement directly to the reader about humans' cruelty to animals, it is likely that the reader would feel preached at. Readers do not appreciate being given a sermon by the author. The event may have seemed preachy if it had been told to the reader through the point of view of the farmer, for example. But because the reader assumes that a horse is naturally more innocent, and less judgmental and cynical than a human, the same event through the eyes of a horse is more effective. The horse is simply observing. Sewell uses this technique throughout the book to show the reader instances of friction among the classes, the importance of appearance, and ethical and moral attributes of other people in the story.

Early on, Black Beauty's mother prepares the young horse for the world of humans. She tells him that there are "good, thoughtful men" and "bad, cruel men." Beauty will soon learn this for himself, since Sewell peppers the book with both good and bad people. Throughout this story, Sewell constantly reminds the reader that humans consider themselves superior to the "dumb" animals that live around them. In the hunt that occurs early in the book, Black Beauty and his mother see a horse and a man die. If this incident were told through the point of view of a human, the reader would not find it unusual for more emphasis to be placed on the human's death (rather than the horse's death). But because the event is seen and experienced through the eyes of the horses, the reader realizes that the horses are just as upset (and possibly more upset) about the horse's death. This forces the reader to realize that in a human mindset, man (in this case) is considered more important than horse. The reader also cannot fail to miss the irony that the man is attended much more quickly than the horse is. The horse is left groaning in the field, until the farrier comes to look at the injured animal. Again, because the reader sees this event through the eyes of horses, the reader starts to think from that animal's viewpoint. The reader begins to realize that in this world, humans have power over animals, and humans act as if they are superior to animals.

The reader cannot fail to notice the irony when Black Beauty realizes that the horse killed in the hunt was his brother. Black Beauty says:

So poor Rob Roy who was killed at that hunt was my brother! I did not wonder that my mother was so troubled. It seems that horses have no relations; at least they never know each other after they are sold.

Obviously, as shown by this excerpt, Sewell is pointing out that these horses do care about their relations, just as humans do. But she also makes the point that horse families and relations are routinely split by humans, when humans separate horses and sell them at will.

Even though humans in *Black Beauty* often consider themselves superior to "dumb" animals, Sewell also gives the reader instances where animals clearly understand more than humans. When Black Beauty refuses to cross a bridge because he knows something is wrong, Beauty recalls the words of his kind master, one human in this story who does understand the nuances of animals.

Master said God had given men reason, by which they could find out things for themselves; but He had given animals knowledge, which did not depend on reason, and which was much more prompt and perfect in its way, and by which they often saved the lives of men.

Sewell, through the words of a horse and an enlightened master, makes the point that animals often stand between life and death for a human. Humans lack the ability to sense and read situations as an animal can.

There are many instances in *Black Beauty* when humans intentionally mistreat horses, and there are also many instances when humans are oblivious of their actions and the effects on the horses. These instances of obliviousness are no less cruel□they still cause pain for the horses. Because they are presented from the horses' points of view, the reader feels the greater impact of these events. If Sewell, for example, worked through the point of view of a human, she could mention that this human pulled the horse about, or tugged on the reins to get the horse to turn a certain way. A reader would probably think nothing of these actions through the eyes of the human character. But Sewell's detail and knowledge of horsemanship, along with her sympathetic horse characters, give an entirely different slant on the same situation.

If people knew what a comfort to horses a light hand is, and how it keep a good mouth and a good temper, they surely would not check and drag and pull at the rein as they often do. Our mouths are so tender . . . and we know in an instant what is required of us.

Although *Black Beauty* has its share of eye opening situations that effectively illustrate cruelty and obliviousness regarding animals, several of the people in this book demonstrate outstanding moral character. Again, this is a way that Sewell avoids preachiness. The author's message would have seemed too forced and false if all the humans in the story had been bad (or oblivious, or apathetic) people. On the contrary, several characters demonstrate real strength in the defense of their morals. John takes time to tell boys that cruelty is hard-hearted and cowardly. An old man speaks up

against the hunt, saying that "a man's life and a horse's life are worth more than a fox's tail." When Joe accidentally makes Black Beauty sick by giving the horse cold water, John is quick to point out that ignorance is "the worst thing in the world, next to wickedness." And Jerry demonstrates many acts of kindness□taking a woman with a sick baby to the hospital and refusing payment; getting a young man to the train on time and refusing payment; and treating his animals in the best way possible.

Through Black Beauty's eyes, the reader is given an effective look at a myriad of social issues of the time; including the treatment of animals, fashion, and the influence of the class system. *Black Beauty* will always be a classic because all of these issues are portrayed effectively, and uniquely, through the mind of an animal.

Source: Catherine Dybiec Holm, Critical Essay on *Black Beauty*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #3

Hart is a freelance writer and author of several books. In the following essay, Hart examines Sewell's only novel to find the elements that have created the long-lasting appeal despite the novel's flaws.

Anna Sewell wrote just one novel in her life, most of it composed as she suffered the effects of a debilitating disease. There is a passion evident in her writing, more than likely created by her sense of urgency in communicating a lesson she felt compelled to deliver to the world before dying. In her earnest attempt to appeal to all horse owners to treat their animals in a more humane manner, much of the prose in Sewell's book is recorded in a didactic tone. Messages against animal cruelty are paramount, of course, but there is also other subtle moralizing going on here, making some of the reading, in contemporary times, a little hard to swallow. The author's emphasis on teaching specific lessons has also resulted in characters who fit all too comfortably into stereotypical forms. The good characters, for instance, are very, very good, and the few others who do not match this mold are totally and mercilessly corrupt. But despite the novel's shortcomings, this story has a very specific quality that has allowed it to continue to inspire the very young at heart for more than one hundred years after it was written. So what then is the appeal? Why does this story still engage its modern audience far removed from the times and social issues that plagued the world of the nineteenth century?

The sole purpose of Sewell's novel was to make people take better care of their horses. And one way that Sewell attempts to do this is to make the animals in her story appear more human. She wanted her audience to look at animals as creatures who had thoughts and feelings; rather than seeing them as if they were machines, created to do the work that humans were incapable of doing on their own. As seen through Sewell's eyes, horses were often treated as slaves in her time. Little or no thought was rendered by horse owners as to the effect that their cruelty was having on the physical and mental attitude of their animals. Sewell's hope was that she might change all that.

Another thing that Sewell does in order to open the hearts of her readers is to tell her story through the eyes of a beautiful and sensitive horse. In reading this novel, audiences experience every joyful and every sorrowful moment of Black Beauty's life as if they were living through the same situations of the protagonist. The horse, although he is never made into a cartoon character who talks, does, however, speak his mind in this story. He does so through what might be called his intended thoughts, which he is able to share with other animals. In this way, Sewell makes Black Beauty appear human in his reactions and emotions. This is not a talking-horse gimmick, however, because Black Beauty never exposes his thoughts to the human characters in the novel, except through his gestures, which any horse might make□a nudging with his nose, a neigh, a tossing of his head. Sewell does not, in other words, remove Black Beauty from his "horseness." Rather, she situates him in a very definite horse world but then imbues him with a soul, a spirit that is related to that of every living creature on earth. In this way,

Sewell arouses more sympathy or empathy for her protagonist; and this is seen most evidently in children who hear or read the story of *Black Beauty*.

Not only does Sewell provide an avenue into the mind and heart of her protagonist through his thoughts, she also gives her readers quite an extensive biography of Black Beauty. Readers are introduced to him shortly after he is born. There is even mention of his lineage, supplied not just to give readers an account of his pedigree, but to place Black Beauty in a family□to connect him to a mother and father. This provides a subtle reference for young readers. Black Beauty does not just appear out of nowhere. He is not just a horse, he is also a son and a grandson. His mother was, at one time, pregnant with him, just as children have been told that their mothers once carried them. And like their mothers, Black Beauty's mother carried him, gave birth to him, and nursed him. This also provides Black Beauty with a history, which adds more depth to his character. Beginning a story in this way especially grabs the imagination of children, who are still very much attached to their parents. Then, as the story progresses, young readers relate to Black Beauty's youth. For example, they associate with the feelings of Black Beauty as he plays in the field as a young colt. And Sewell masterfully intensifies these feelings when she provides a playground setting (for horses, that is) and even includes a neighborhood bully who throws stones at the young colts. Young readers, once again, are pulled into the story through these details. Every schoolyard has a bully, so every child can connect with the young colt as he faces this challenge. And when the "master" comes to the rescue of Black Beauty and the other young horses by banishing the bully from the fields where the young horses play, children cheer the strength and power of the good master and protector. This master represents a sense of security for children reading this book. They would like to believe that at every moment that they are challenged by a bully, they too would be protected by some powerful master.

Black Beauty's mother hits another nerve for young readers. She is represented as a loving and gentle counsel for the young horse. She provides instructions about life that Black Beauty never forgets. In the very beginning of the story, Black Beauty's mother tells him: "I hope you will grow up gentle and good, and never learn bad ways; do your work with a good will, lift your feet up well when you trot, and never bite or kick even in play." Ignoring the mention of "lifting your feet up," most children reading this story will reflect on similar advice that their mothers have provided them. And as youngsters continue to read the story, they have many opportunities to remember these words of Black Beauty's mother's counsel. Just as children are often heard speaking to their dolls, repeating advice that their parents have given to them, they might also find themselves silently reminding Black Beauty (as the story progresses) that he must always be good no matter what circumstances he finds himself in. And in this way, they, like the master who chases away the bully, take on the role of Black Beauty's protector. So now young readers are relating to the story on two levels: they personally identify with Black Beauty's need to find love, friendship, and a safe home; and on a second level, they take on the responsibility of guiding Black Beauty in the right direction. When Black Beauty gets into trouble or in a tough situation, children have an urge to tell him to always be good and never to bite or kick. So as the story develops, so does the emotional grasp on children's attention, as their feelings deepen and become more complex.

With these two caps on, the first one relating on a personal level with Black Beauty and the second one playing out the role of Black Beauty's protector, young readers are set for the journey that Black Beauty will now take. The next challenge that the horse must face is that of discipline□Black Beauty must be "tamed." The descriptions of this process are reminiscent, in general, of lessons that all children must learn. Black Beauty's training includes wearing things that do not seem natural to him, such as a rein and a saddle. Children can relate to this in a different way, such as perhaps when they are forced to put on raincoats and boots before going outside in a warm summer rain. Black Beauty also has to learn to "go just the way they (adults who ride him) wish and to go quietly." What child has not heard these admonishments? So again, children anticipate what Black Beauty is feeling. They understand how much they are torn when presented with a chance to do something their way but must take into consideration their parents' needs. They know how difficult it can be when they do not obey their parents and other adults around them; and they also know how thorny the consequences might be if they do not behave according to adults' wishes. This is a process of growing up and learning the rules of society. And even though children might not fully understand all the implications of the discipline they are taught, they know exactly how it feels to go through the "taming."

Black Beauty's next challenge is also one that children know about. That is the act (and fear) of leaving home. Whether, for children, it is going to a babysitter or going to school, leaving home is a trip into the unknown. So when Black Beauty moves away from his mother and is taken to Birtwick Park to his new owners, young readers fully empathize with him again. They completely understand the empty feeling that Black Beauty might be experiencing, as he has to say farewell to the people and the animals that he has known all his young life. And when he arrives at his new destination, as any child would do, Black Beauty assesses his new environment; judges the comfort level of his surroundings and the quality of the food and care; and then searches for friendship. And it is through one of Black Beauty's new friends, especially Ginger, that children experience a new revelation. Ginger gives them a chance to reflect on some of their own behavior patterns. For here, in Ginger, is an explanation that children can handle concerning their own bouts of anger and lashing out that might temporarily corrupt their ordinarily good behavior. While Black Beauty represents the always-be-good aspect of their personalities, Ginger clarifies some of children's other more destructive emotions.

No matter how much he or she is loved or how well she or he is trained, no child is good all the time. Grumpiness or moodiness can invade a child's more pleasant nature from time to time. Seldom do young children fully understand where these moods come from or why they have clouded their minds, but they definitely recognize them. And Ginger provides young readers with a prime example of "naughtiness." Ginger has not been raised well; and so she is not very trusting of the humans or the animals around her. She is known to bite and act unruly. Ginger arouses a lot of questions in children. They want to know why she is acting that way. Why is she not as good as Black Beauty? When adults provide answers such as the fact that someone has not been nice to Ginger, children immediate get it. They understand what it feels like to have someone do something unkind and how that can generate ill feelings in themselves. And as the friendship develops between Ginger and Black Beauty, and Ginger becomes more

accepting of her surroundings and thus behaves better, children often nod their heads, comprehending how powerful a good friendship can be. They might not fully understand how good emotions can banish, or at least minimize, bad ones, but they can feel it.

And thus, young readers are introduced to the characters of this story. By the end of the first part of this novel, they are totally entrenched in the life of Black Beauty. On a simple level, their interest is sparked. And on a more complex level, they have fallen in love with the beautiful protagonist. They eagerly want to follow Black Beauty through all his adventures. They want to console him when he falls and hurts his knees or when he must once again say good-bye to friends. They are very cognizant of both of these painful experiences. They feel sorry for him when he must pull heavy weights, stand outside all night, and bear the chill of a winter's harsh storm. Sewell has carefully crafted a story that has pulled them in and will not let them go. The author, through her careful and affectionate rendering of a sad story with a somewhat happy ending, knew how to tug at her readers' hearts. One can only surmise that she was capable of doing this because her own heart ached for the animals that she had learned to love. And although her style of writing may have some flaws, her ability to convey her love of Black Beauty to her audience, especially to a group of readers as sensitive as young children, is a well honed skill.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on *Black Beauty*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Critical Essay #4

Carter is currently employed as a freelance writer. In this essay, Carter considers the social and historical relevance of Sewell's document as a treatise on animal rights.

Anna Sewell's Black Beauty served in her time not only as a treatise on animal rights, it is an account closely relevant to the author's personal life, as well as her advocacy for horses in a time where females were not a presence in the equine community, their voices more often than not discounted in a male-dominated society. Examples are sprinkled throughout the novel, in the words and actions of the characters, both animal and female, which demonstrate their ability to provoke responses that expose the very underpinnings of a male-dominated Victorian society.

Strikingly different for a Victorian woman, Sewell knew a great deal about an industry long dominated by men. The novel's cast of characters, from stable boys to groomsmen to proprietors—all are men. It is primarily men who openly speak for Sewell in her quest for animal rights. In one scene, for example, one of the novel's main characters goes out of his way to tip off a neighbor of the abuses a pony is suffering as his son needlessly whips, kicks and knocks a "good little pony about shamefully because he would not leap a gate that was too high for him." In another instance, Joe admonishes a carter for flogging or beating a team of horses for failing to pull a load of bricks that is too heavy for them to manage. When the carter tells him to mind his own business, Joe is compelled to knock on the door of the master brick maker to tell him of the trouble. It is Joe's testimony in front of a magistrate that ultimately leads to the carter's undoing. In these and other examples, Sewell uses the male voice to succinctly or clearly drive home her thesis or call to action with respect to animal cruelty, asserting that "with cruelty and oppression it is everyone's business to interfere when they see it."

However, a few of Sewell's female characters are also a leveling presence in the novel, often interceding in equine matters when abuse of an animal is involved. In one such instance, the daughter of one traveler sees the poor condition Black Beauty is in and offers her opinion, telling her father that she is confident that "this poor horse cannot take us and our luggage so far, he is very weak and worn out." Although the young woman implores or begs her father to consider a second cab to accommodate their luggage, her pleas are dismissed. "Nonsense, Grace, get in at once," her father orders, telling her not to make so much of a "fuss." He chastises her for expecting a "man of business to examine every cab horse before he hired it," insistent that the driver knows his business, "of course." Sewell's words do put into context the true nature of women's roles in nineteenth century England. The daughter is openly criticized for questioning, to the point of harassment, a man who, it is implied by her father, a position of unquestionable authority when it comes to the business of cab horses. This scene also puts into stark perspective the colorless victory Grace realizes when Black Beauty tragically collapses under the extreme weight of the overloaded carriage hired by her father.

In yet another scene, however, the frivolity or thoughtlessness of one woman leads to yet another tragic injury for Black Beauty. When Black Beauty is sold to a new owner, John, his former groom warns the new owner of the dangers of using a bearing rein. Although both the former groom and new coachman reach an understanding, the coachman shares that "my lady" is partial to a certain style, requiring carriage horses to be reined up tight, mindful of fashion rather than the horse's well being. And later, when the horses are reined up to satisfy the lady's request, Ginger rebels, then returns to the barn injured. The coachman responds, "I thought we should have some mischief soon□master will be sorely vexed, but there□if a woman's husband can't rule her, of course a servant can't." First, this passage suggests that it is offensive a woman could be so easily swayed by style that she forgets any concern for the horses in her husband's care. Second, it is clear to the coachman that she has too much to say in household affairs, that her behavior is to be dictated by her husband in order to be deemed acceptable, that she must be managed.

Sewell's life seemingly shifts between two worlds, as aptly demonstrated by the text, that of the perfect Victorian lady and outspoken animal activist. In the forward to Black Beauty, Carol Fenner calls Sewell's only novel "surprising," also noting that "it was an unusual thing for a Victorian woman to know so much about horses." Also unusual is the seemingly unanimous opinion of many critics, including Fenner, who aptly remarked that the novel made "a deep impression on men and women alike." What her novel did so skillfully, that none had considered before, was to go into the psyche of the horse, to portray the noble animal from a different point of view. Black Beauty had feelings and shared insights in such a way as to garner or earn sympathy and also implicate the actions of abusive drivers, in a period during which England was known for its abuse of horses. According to Fenner, most horses "suffered badly in the hands of their human keepers." She adds, "The were underfed, they grew lame and sore, and they worked with overloaded carts in burning heat or freezing cold-over ice and mud." They were also beaten to inspire them to work, and often died in the harness. And, there were abuses in the name of fashion including tail cropping and use of the bearing rein.

According to Professor Waller Hastings, in his summary of Sewell's life, her book garnered or gained sympathy from animal anticruelty groups, and "was widely used as propaganda by groups seeking more humane treatment of horses." The book was passed out freely among horse handlers and drivers, and was seen as the strongest form of propaganda used to curb the abuse of their animals. Part of what makes the book such an effective tool in the Sewell crusade, according to some scholars, are veiled references to slavery. Hastings mentions that in the work of at least one critic, through the use of slave language, the horses of the novel are portrayed as slaves rather than servants. For example, Black Beauty relates himself to his handler in the tradition of the servant/master relationship, and is called "Darkie." And, it has been pointed out that the pattern of the narrative itself closely imitates one familiar to slave narratives. The contrast between Black Beauty's acceptance of equine servitude juxtaposed or compared with Ginger's resistance, says Hastings, "reveals the uneasiness with which author and society view overt rebellion, while at the same time revealing the causes of rebellion."

The author introduces readers to a world through the eyes of a horse. And it is from this perspective that Sewell makes a case for the animal, speaking for a horse that cannot advocate or speak for himself. The reader finds in Black Beauty a perfect specimen flawed only by the shortcomings of men who choose to take advantage of his good nature and willingness to work in favor of their own short-sighted, often times brutal agendas. Sewell's passion for the horse, it has been suggested, has perhaps come from deep personal experience with an ankle injury that rendered her an invalid throughout most of her adult life. How closely, too, did the novel manage to parallel Victorian life for women, unintentional or otherwise, with regard to the prevailing notion of her time that women should be seen and not heard. All of the animals in the novel are silenced. They cannot speak up to defend themselves, nor can they possibly fight back given the existing dynamic between animal and handler. It is evident this was a frustration that Sewell herself felt, expressed in the dialogue of her characters. Ironically, it is Ginger who admits to Black Beauty that she has ceased or stopped standing up for herself when she has been ill-used. She tells him,

I did once, but it's no use; men are strongest, and if they are cruel and have no feeling, there is nothing that we can do, but just bear it, bear it on and on to the end.

Certainly, Sewell, and her mother, for that matter, had their convictions about the abuse of horses in nineteenth century England. Fenner in fact notes in the novel's introduction that Sewell was a devoted activist, brazen or bold enough to stand up to abusive drivers, even in the face of a horsewhipping. Her novel, while it is not the reason for English reform, has been identified as one of the most prominent literary works of its type, influenced by Horace Bushnell's "Essay on Animals," or perhaps, it has been suggested, George MacDonald's fantasy "At the Back of the North Wind." According to Hastings, other environmental influences that shaped Sewell's book included knowledge the author gleaned from her brother Philip and from conversations with various drivers. The novel is also strongly influenced by many Christian, moral messages along with Quaker beliefs supporting Sewell's life-long support of the ethical treatment of animals.

To view Anna Sewell's first and only novel, *Black Beauty*, as little more than a charming tale about the trials and tribulations of a gentle-natured animal is a grave oversight. The novel was not written as young adult fiction, but as a treatise on animal rights. What resonates with adult audiences today is its value as a historical document. Asserts Hastings: "Black Beauty's life is a microcosm of Victorian horse experience, with every kind of rider, driver, and event occurring at some point in his life." It also mirrors social conditions during a time in history where women had little autonomy or voice outside of the domestic sphere, despite inroads made in the educational system. Although the author wrote the novel with the fate of the cab horse in mind, it is the horse that somehow advocates for Sewell, revealing her impressions and frustrations with a society long defined by male values.

Source: Laura Carter, Critical Essay on *Black Beauty*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

Twentieth Century Fox produced the best known movie version of Black Beauty in 1946, directed by Max Nosseck and starring Mona Freeman. This version is rather loosely based on Sewell's original work, including a young female character not in the book and recasting Merrylegs as a successor to Black Beauty instead of a companion to him. Several lesser known film adaptations have been produced as well. The ninth and most elaborate film production was a 1978 television miniseries, directed by Daniel Haller and starring Glynnis O'Connor, Eileen Brennan, William Devane, and Edward Albert.

A 1994 film version of *Black Beauty*, produced by Warner Brothers, is now available in both DVD and VHS formats. It is 88 minutes long and was produced by Robert Shapiro and Peter MacGregor Scott with Caroline Thompson as director and writer.

Black Beauty has been adapted for radio and issued as an audio book on records, cassettes, and CDs. One source is the unabridged *Classics for Children of All Ages* audio book (2003).

Topics for Further Study

Anna Sewell's mother was the author of a number of morally instructive children's books and verse. Research Mary Sewell, describing the content and intent of her works and how they fit into Victorian times.

Female novelists were scarce during the Victorian period. Research other notable women writers and their works during the nineteenth century in Britain and the United States, and discuss what they did (or did not) have in common.

The Victorian Age is named after Queen Victoria, who ruled Great Britain longer than any other monarch. Write a summary of the life and reign of Victoria, discussing her impact on the royal families of Europe through the marriages of her children and grandchildren.

The size and influence of the British Empire peaked during the reign of Queen Victoria. Outline the growth of the empire around the world, including the beginning and ending dates of colonization in the various countries.

The horse has been replaced in the workforce by modern technology. Write a report on how horses are used today. What is their role in transportation, entertainment, and fields such as ranching?

Write an opinion piece explaining why you think that *Black Beauty* has remained so popular through the years. What is its appeal for adult and children?

Compare and Contrast

1870s: The Temperance Movement is in full swing in Britain and other countries. In 1874, the Woman's Christian Temperance Movement is founded in Cleveland, Ohio, and in 1883 becomes an international organization.

Today: The temperance movement, per se, is no longer viable, but Alcoholics Anonymous is a well-known organization for those with alcohol-related disorders, and rehabilitation centers abound to assist those with drinking and other drug addictions, while multiple laws exist to deal with issues such as public intoxication and driving under the influence.

1870s: Few women have careers other than that of homemakers, and Anna Sewell spends her entire life in her parents' home, though her mother is a bestselling author of children's morality tales.

Today: Women in the workforce are commonplace in Britain and other developed countries and have a firm place as authors in the world of literature, although there are still fewer female than male Nobel and Pulitzer Prize winners in literature.

1870s: Bedford Park, outside London, is developing as the first modern suburb.

Today: Suburbs are the largest portions of cities and often cause the demise of downtown and inner-city businesses and lifestyles.

1870s: The phonograph is invented, shortly after the introduction of the telephone and telegraph.

Today: The phonograph has been replaced by music tapes, compact disks, and digital music formats; fiber optics, wireless devices, and satellites rather than the telegraph are used for communicating over long distances.

What Do I Read Next?

National Velvet (1935), by Enid Bagnold, was made famous by the 1944 movie starring Elizabeth Taylor. It is a story about a fourteen-year-old girl named Velvet Brown who trains a horse for the top steeplechase competition, the Grand National, and wins against all odds.

A favorite American horse story is *My Friend Flicka* (1941), by Mary O'Hara. It is about a Wyoming boy, his special relationship with a filly, and the complex marriage of his parents. The book was so popular that it was made into a television series in the 1950s.

The original story of *Bambi* (1926), by Felix Salten, gives a serious message about the cycle of life and nature's law as told through the viewpoint of the forest animals.

Probably the best-known animal autobiography following *Black Beauty* is the novel *Beautiful Joe* (1893), by Margaret Marshall Saunders. It depicts the true story of a cruelly abused collie. It was the first book to sell a million copies in Canada.

Sheila Burnford's *Incredible Journey* (1961), about two dogs and a cat traveling together across the wilderness to get back to their human family, is one of the most popular animal stories of all time and was made into a hugely popular film.

The Black Stallion (1941), by Walter Farley, is an adventure story about a boy, a wild horse, a shipwreck, and a desert island. It was made into a popular movie in 1979.

Ideas for Reports and Papers

1. Describe the practical lessons on horse care provided in Black Beauty.

Which of these teachings still apply?

What techniques have been developed since Sewell's time to improve horse care?

2. Captain served in the cavalry in the Crimean War, and his first owner may well have been killed in the Charge of the Light Brigade. Write a report on this war or this battle, or write a story about one of them from Captain's perspective.

3. An early reviewer said that if the movement for humane treatment of animals had produced its own work against cruelty to animals, it could not have written anything more useful than Black Beauty. Find several passages from the book that argue for the humane treatment of animals and explain how each of these arguments is stated.

4. Explain how Sewell's experiences influenced her to be an active advocate for the humane treatment of animals and to write Black Beauty. Among the various influences, consider her Quaker background and her lifelong love of animals, especially horses.

5. Compare the effects Black Beauty had on the movement for the humane treatment of animals with the effects Harriet Beecher Stowe's Uncle Tom's Cabin had on the anti-slavery movement in the U.S.

6. Compare Black Beauty to George MacDonald's At the Back of the North Wind. How do they treat the London cabs? Do you think MacDonald's book influenced Sewell? Why or why not?

Further Study

Altick, Richard Daniel, *The Presence of the Present: Topics of the Day in the Victorian Novel*, Ohio State University Press, 1991.

This informative companion to British novels of the mid-nineteenth century provides historical context by discussing the people, events, or places of everyday Victorian life and explaining references that Victorians understood but the modern reader may not.

Baker, Margaret J., *Anna Sewell and Black Beauty*, George Harrap, 1956.

Written for children, this biography of Sewell also describes the times in which she lived.

Barrows, Susanna, and Robin Room, eds., *Drinking: Behavior and Belief in Modern History*, University of California Press, 1991.

This book is a collection of social science conference papers illuminating drinking practices and societal responses to the effects of drinking□including the Temperance Movement□at various points in history around the world.

Chitty, Susan, *The Woman Who Wrote "Black Beauty,"* Hoder & Stoughton, 1971.

A full-length biography on Sewell, this book includes a family tree with descriptions of Sewell's family, as well as illustrations, and remains a standard reference on Sewell.

Gavin, Adrienne E., *Dark Horse: A Life of Anna Sewell*, Sutton Publishing, 2004.

Dark Horse: A Life of Anna Sewell is a well-researched biography of Sewell that reviewers repeatedly describe as fascinating and an easy read.

Moss, Arthur W., *The Valiant Crusade: The History of the R.S.P.C.A.*, Cassells, 1961.

Black Beauty heavily influenced efforts for the humane treatment of animals and is given credit for its impact in this history of the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

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