



## Unveiling Animal Individuality: Depictions of Equine Personalities in Jane Smiley’s Fiction

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### Abstract

This paper explores the representation of animal individuality and personality in Jane Smiley’s literary works, specifically focusing on equine characters in *Horse Heaven* and *The Horses of Oak Valley Ranch* series. Smiley’s narrative vividly delineates distinct equine personalities, challenging traditional anthropocentric biases and highlighting the uniqueness of each animal. Animals in her novels cease to serve merely as symbols or metaphors for humans; instead, they emerge as fully realized characters, each possessing its own crucial status and distinct personality. Smiley’s narrative intention is to portray animals not as a collective entity but as individuals with their own complexities. The novels underscore the significance of recognizing and appreciating animal individuality, challenging readers to view animals through a lens of uniqueness rather than uniformity.

**Key words:** Animal individuality; Personality; Subjectivity; Equine characters; Jane Smiley

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Individuality is closely connected with subjectivity. “The term ‘individual’ and ‘subject’ are so closely related that the phrase ‘the individual subject’ has become a

common one...Foucault uses the term ‘individual,’ that is, individuum, to signify the human material entity (including mind); for him this is the stage prior to becoming a subject, that is, a cultural subject” (Strozier, p.9). In Jane Smiley’s writings, animal subjectivity is exhibited via the depictions of different animals’ individuality. The intention of presenting animal individuality goes through many of Smiley’s works, just like what she writes in her nonfiction book *A Year at the Races*:

But horses are individuals, and humans do have an authentic response to their individuality that offers as many revelations as any other kind of love... What I am hoping to do is somewhat different— not to evoke horseness, but to evoke horse individuality; to do what a novelist naturally does, which is to limn idiosyncrasy and character, and thereby to shade in some things about identity. (Smiley, 2004, pp.4-5)

Therefore, animals depicted in Smiley’s novels are distinct from one another. Each animal character has his or her own individuality, and each one of them is unique. Animals are no more the symbols or metaphors serving for human beings, but characters themselves with a status no less crucial than their peer human partners. Accordingly, their distinct personalities are on full display in her fiction.

Personality refers to “those characteristics of a person that account for consistent patterns of feeling, thinking and behaving” (Pervin and John, p.4). With the development of ethology, animal psychology as well as other fields, animal personalities receive more and more attention. Animal personality research has “focused on the assessment of observed behaviour in order to demonstrate individual differences” (Lloyd, et al, p.370). In her nonfiction book *A Year at the Races*, Jane Smiley dedicates one chapter to equine personality. Smiley leads into the topic of equine personality by mentioning the Myers-Briggs personality test with four sets of opposites which yield sixty-four types for an analysis of human

personality. After that, she summarizes several pairs of obvious equine characteristics that add up to equine personalities. They are “dominant/submissive; curious/afraid; energetic/phlegmatic; friendly/alooof” (Smiley, 2004, p.170), and “as with the Myers-Briggs scale, a horse could manifest each quality more or less decidedly. The result, to an observer, would be greater or lesser vividness of personality” (Smiley, 2004, pp.170-171). In Jane Smiley’s fiction, each individual character of horses, dogs, pigs, etc. has his or her own personality. This paper will focus on the depictions of distinct equine personalities in *Horse Heaven* and *The Horses of Oak Valley Ranch* series as examples for the exhibition of animal individuality in Smiley’s fiction.

## 2. DISTINCT EQUINE PERSONALITIES IN HORSE HEAVEN

Horses have their own personalities in Jane Smiley’s *Horse Heaven*. Smiley emphasizes the uniqueness of each horse by depicting some equine characters as the epitome. There are six key horse characters in *Horse Heaven*: Mr. T., a gray gelding, stakes winner in France, bred in Germany; Justa Bob, a brown gelding, bred in California; Residual, a chestnut filly, bred in Kentucky; Limitless, a bay colt, bred in Maryland; Froney’s Sis, a gray or roan filly, bred in California; and Epic Steam, a dark-bay or brown colt, bred in Kentucky. In regard to the depiction of horses’ personalities in *Horse Heaven*, Donald Pizer thinks that “Race horses, as Smiley depicts them, have characters and careers that resemble those of humans” (p.162), which implies humans’ continuity to nonhuman animals, and breaks the anthropocentric bias against animals.

The prologue “Who They Are” of the novel gives an introduction to four of the six equine heroes and heroines—Residual, Epic Steam, Froney’s Sis and Limitless (Bay colt). Besides giving a genealogy-like description of where they come from, Smiley makes a summary of some common characteristics shared by them as Thoroughbreds, such as being active, exuberant, inquisitive, intelligent, sensitive, having opinions, and loving running and galloping. Then comes a brief introduction to each horse’s distinct characteristics, just as Smiley states “Nevertheless, even if they were all the same color, you could readily tell them apart” (Smiley, 2000, p.4). Epic steam knows who he is. He is easily offended, unapproachable for humans, bossy but not mean to other horses and “has high standard of behavior with regard to his own person, and every human he has met so far has offended them” (Smiley, 2000, p.5). Residual knows who she is, too. She is friendly, easygoing, calm, and she likes walking around the pasture with a meditative air and acting after a momentary pause. Limitless knows who he is, too. His eyes are soulful. He enjoys galloping around the

pasture as a way of relaxing. He is the youngest of the four and undeveloped, pleasant to get along with but distracted, half ignoring people, always waiting to go back outside. Besides the detailed description of the horses’ personalities, Smiley’s repetitive emphasis on their knowing who they are in the novel implies the horses’ self-consciousness, which according to Marc Bekoff, is “an awareness of who one is in the world” (p.93).

Different from Epic Steam, Residual, and Limitless, Froney’s Sis is the only one who isn’t sure who she is, mainly because she is orphaned at a month old after the death of her dam. During her growth, there is a lack of a mare’s attention, interference, body language as guidance. “Already culture has interfered with nature in the case of Froney’s Sis—the twigs of her personality are like the shoots of an espaliered apricot tree; however nice she becomes, she may never know who she is” (Smiley, 2000, p.6). The consequence of the absence of motherhood is also mentioned in Smiley’s book *A Year at the Races* as she quotes from *A General Theory of Love*: “The lack of an attuned mother is a nonevent for a reptile and a shattering injury to the complex and fragile brain of a mammal” (Smiley, 2004, p.63).

Though Mr. T and Justa Bob are not in the prologue, they play an important role in the novel, especially Justa Bob. Most of their personalities are exhibited from their contact with humans and other horses. Mr. T is an aged gelding of nineteen years old, “a horse of excellent manners and great reserve” (Smiley, 2000, p.308). He is gentle, calm, reserved, and able to get along. However, “Mr. T didn’t quite have the temperament for a pony horse. He didn’t like male horses to be inside his personal space and he was well mannered but not in the least phlegmatic, the way a pony horse needed to be to be utterly reliable” (Smiley, 2000, pp.454-455). He is picky about his food and cranky at times and nervous about certain things. Justa Bob is a six-year-old gelding with a general air of “perfect self-possession and confidence” and “a sense of humor” (Smiley, 2000, p.94). He is patient, well disposed, sensible, calm and alert. He “knew some things and could be taught more, that, though he wasn’t pretty or hugely athletic, he was worthy” (Smiley, 2000, p.305).

In addition to the depiction of the above six main equine characters, Smiley reiterates her idea on horses’ individuality through some human characters’ perspectives. For example, Dick’s horse masseur Luciano says: “Of course, horses are all different” (Smiley, 2000, p.88). Leo, a theorist of track life and a racetrack aficionado, thinks “The coolest thing about them was that they were all different” (Smiley, 2000, p.157). Horse trainer Deirdre also has similar feeling— “How was it, Deirdre thought, that all horses’ eyes were brown and large and set in the same spot on the horses’ heads, and yet all looked different?” (Smiley, 2000, p.82).

### 3. EQUINE CHARACTERS WITH DISTINCT PERSONALITIES IN *THE HORSES OF OAK VALLEY RANCH* SERIES

Similar to *Horse Heaven*, the five novels in *The Horses of Oak Valley Ranch* series also present the reader equine characters with distinct personalities. Each novel contains one equine protagonist and main equine characters. Some equine characters go through the whole series.

In the first book of this series, *The Georges and the Jewels*, Abby's father Mr. Lovitt owns a horse ranch in California. Abby is a seventh-grader and helps her family to do some ranch work. She starts riding at three years old, and begins training horses for her father at eight years old. Mr. Lovitt calls all the geldings George and all the mares Jewel, while forbidding Abby to name a single one for fear that she will get attached to them. However, after the birth of a colt, Abby names him Jack after her father's permission. This ban on naming horses is completely lifted at the end of the novel after Abby's insistence and her father's concession. The first main equine character in the book is Ornerly George. He is a brown horse with a smallish head, good legs, great feet, an arched neck, and a short back. He is curious, grumpy, energetic, dominant, and "always wanted to do things his way" (Smiley, 2009, p.71). Another equine character is Jack, who goes through all the five novels. Right after his birth, he is already a colt of ideas. "He wasn't crowding against the mare, either—he already had a mind of his own" (Smiley, 2009, p.16). He is alert, curious, self-confident, sweet, and energetic. The third main equine character is Black George. He is friendly, curious, good-natured, nice, agreeable, energetic, athletic, and cooperative.

In the second book of this series, *A Good Horse*, Black George and Jack are still the main equine characters. Their personalities almost remain the same as the first book. In Abby's eyes, Black George is so "easy and agreeable and comfortable and willing" (Smiley, 2010, p.191) that he is "as good as gold" (Smiley, 2010, p.12). Besides them, there are some other equine characters with their own personalities. For example, Lincoln is an easygoing, quiet, and reliable gelding. Jefferson is quiet, curious, and dominant. Sunshine is a kind, friendly mare. Happy is a small mare, muscular and strong. She is athletic, energetic, curious, and bossy. Lester is an energetic, dominant gelding. On top of the depiction of those horses, Smiley also expresses her belief in horses' uniqueness through Abby's eyes: "Every horse feels different. It's like looking at people's faces—each face is itself, and you can always tell them apart" (Smiley, 2010, p.191).

In the third book of this series, *True Blue*, Jack, Lincoln, Jefferson, Lester, Happy, and some other equine characters continue appearing in this book. Nevertheless, True Blue or Blue is the protagonist in the third book.

He is sensitive, observant, attentive, polite, kind, smart, and considerate. Different from Happy and some other curious horses, Blue doesn't investigate things, but avoids things—"he remembered the spots where he had been worried before, and he stayed away from them" (Smiley, 2011, p.139).

In the fourth book of this series, *Pie in the Sky*, some of the equine characters in the third book still play a role in the fourth book, such as Blue and Jack. There are also some new horses, such as Pie in the Sky, Oh My, and Nobby. Pie in the Sky is the protagonist of this book. He is a chestnut owned by Sophia Rosebury. Pie in the Sky is prancy, stiff, energetic, easily-offended, prideful, and dominant. "In some ways, he was most like Jack—he had what I would have to call pride. He wanted to do things his way and he felt his way was right, but his way wasn't always right" (Smiley, 2012, p.173). Oh My is a mare with a beautiful overo paint—black and white with one blue eye and a question mark on her shoulder. She is intelligent and investigative, and enjoys "getting out and having a look at things" (Smiley, 2012, p.69). Nobby is a dark bay. She is friendly, comfortable, easygoing, and cooperative. In this book, Smiley expresses her idea on equine uniqueness through Abby's mind: "No horse feels the same as any other horse" (Smiley, 2012, 80). In Abby's opinion, to name the horses special names helps remembering them respectively, which further proves their individuality:

But when they had names, I remembered everything about them. Lester was the one Daddy loved the most. Sapphire was the one who licked me all over like a foal once when I was upset, Amazon was totally responsible and bossy, Jack was the one who was just too amazing to be named like all the others, and Blue, True Blue, was the kind and faithful one, the best friend... (Smiley, 2012, p.154)

The last book of this series is entitled *Gee Whiz*. Some new horses arrive on the ranch, such as Gee Whiz and Beebop. Gee Whiz is an eight-year-old Thoroughbred brought home by Danny, Abby's brother. He is almost pure white with a few dapples around his knees. Gee Whiz is polite, intelligent, graceful, athletic, curious, and dominant. "He was a horse who wanted something" (Smiley, 2013, p.118). Beebop is a liver chestnut of medium height and build. He is friendly, serious, quiet, and tough.

In sum, *The Horses of Oak Valley Ranch* series present the reader animal characters with distinct personalities, which show their individuality and uniqueness. Their personalities are reflected mostly from their reaction to and interaction with the other animals, either of the same species or of different species. In the novels, different equine personalities are felt by human characters through their observation of and interaction with the horses. The depictions of those equine characters as well as Abby's awareness reveal the truth that nonhuman animals also possess their personalities, and each one of them is unique in the world.

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#### 4. CONCLUSION

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In conclusion, to know animals as individuals instead of as a monotonous group is very crucial. In essence, Jane Smiley's literary works serve as a testament to the rich tapestry of animal personalities, urging a shift in perspective from perceiving animals as a collective entity to appreciating their distinct individuality.

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