

---

**“Anthropomorphism in the Animal Fantasy World of E.B. White’s  
*Charlotte’s Web*”**

---

**Dr. Madhushri G. Kallimani<sup>1</sup>**

Associate Professor and Research Guide,

Department of English

Rani Channamma University, Belagavi

**Mr. Thoufiq Panparosh<sup>2</sup>**

Research Scholar, Dept. of English,

Rani Channamma University, Belagavi.

---

**Article Received:** 03/01/2025

**Article Accepted:** 04/02/2025

**Published Online:** 05/02/2025

**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.02.93

---

**Abstract:**

Children's literature deals with approaching various themes from cultural, social, and psychological perspectives. The study of children's literature involves examining numerous features such as themes, character development, cultural settings, narrative structures, and images to better understand how these books affect and reflect social values, views, and ideology. The novel *Charlotte’s Web* depicts the anthropomorphic nature of the child, and it explores the nature of the child and an animal's conversation with an animal fantasy approach. This research discovers the anthropomorphic nature of the children in the animal fantasy world. This study consists of psychoanalytical theory and reader response theory to analyze animal fantasy. The novel *Charlotte’s Web* explores characters like Wilbur (pig), Charlotte (Spider), Templeton(rat), Goose (duck), and Fern (Child). These animal characters have the ability to speak in the human language with a child. Hence, it depicts the animal fantasy and anthropomorphism in the novel *Charlotte’s Web*.

**Keywords:** Children, Fantasy, Animal fantasy, Anthropomorphism

**Introduction**

Children's literature is a literary genre that is specially created for young readers, usually between the ages of young to adolescence. Picture books, fairy tales, folktales, fables, novels, poetry, and educational texts are just a few examples of the diverse range of written and illustrated works that fall under this umbrella and are all intended to captivate, amuse, instruct, and inspire young readers. Children's literature involves examining various elements such as themes, character development, cultural contexts, narrative structures, and illustrations to understand how these texts influence and reflect societal values, beliefs, and ideologies. The history of children's literature traces the evolution of texts and stories specifically intended for young readers, reflecting broader cultural, educational, and societal changes. Oral folk tales and myths depict the cultural values through Aesop’s Fables. The

earliest children's book is frequently cited as John Newbery's *A Little Pretty Pocketbook* (1744) in histories of children's literature.

The history of American children's literature is a complex tapestry that reflects the changing social, cultural, and educational ideals of the country. American children's literature has a rich history that reflects the cultural, social, and political evolution of the United States. Children were taught moral lessons and religious piety through books, and Puritan principles had a strong effect on early American children's literature. In the nineteenth century, children's literature continued to emphasize moral precepts while also including secular subjects. The latter half of the nineteenth century saw a surge in children's literature that was more entertaining and imaginative.

The first significant work of American children's literature is often considered to be "*The New England Primer*," which was first published around 1689. Fantasy remains a popular genre, with series like "*Harry Potter*" and "*Percy Jackson*" captivating young readers with magical worlds and heroic quests. *Fairy Tales* (1837) by Hans Christian Andersen was translated into English; these tales became popular among American children. Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876) and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) portrayed the adventures of young boys in America, reflecting the realities of the time.

Hugh Lofting's book *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* (1920) introduced children to a whimsical world of talking animals and inspired a series of adventures. *The Hardy Boys* series (1927-present) by Franklin W. Dixon (pseudonym) is a Mystery novel featuring two brothers, these books have been cherished by generations of readers.

### **Anthropomorphism**

The Greek word "anthropomorphos" literally means "shaped like man". The range of meanings in Random House dictionary 1966 includes the following: "anthropomorphic is ascribing human forms or attributes to being or thing not to human, esp. to a deity; and anthropomorphize: to ascribe human forms or attributes to (animal, plant, material object, etc)." (Fawcett 14) The attribution of human characteristics, feelings, or motivations to nonhuman things is known as anthropomorphism. This might include actions, emotions, or even traits that are commonly connected to people. People commonly use animals, gods, and inanimate objects to tell stories to children, and they give human characteristics to nonhuman beings.

### **Definitions:**

#### **Stewart Guthrie**

"Anthropomorphism consists of attributing human form or other human characteristic to any nonhuman object." (Guthrie 91). According to Guthrie, anthropomorphism stems from the human predisposition to interpret ambiguous information in a way that assigns human qualities to nonhuman creatures, frequently as a cognitive shortcut to making sense of the universe.

### **Frans de Waal**

“Anthropomorphism is projecting human emotions, intentions, and motivations onto animals, often leading to an understanding of their behaviors in ways that might align with human experiences, but may also oversimplify or misinterpret animal behaviors.” (De Waal 21) According to him, it explores how anthropomorphism may serve as a foundation for empathy and understanding in animal research but cautions against oversimplifying complex animal behaviors by simply putting human emotions onto them.

### **Kenneth Gross**

“Anthropomorphism involves the attribution of human traits, emotions, or intentions to nonhuman entities, particularly animals and deities.” (Gross 44) Gross emphasizes that anthropomorphism involves using human attributes metaphorically to imbue nonhuman entities with a semblance of human life.

### **Fantasy**

The word fantasy refers to an illusion or an imaginative idea. The fantastic, a related word, also describes something imaginary and unrealistic. The literary genre of fantasy refers to stories filled with imaginary and unrealistic elements. Fantasy literature addresses challenges through complex, fascinating plots. A fascinating feature of fantasy literature is its ability to put forward some of the most important questions in life, compelling readers to reflect on issues like the nature of good and evil, universal morality, the afterlife, the significance of cultural diversity, the role of the individual in society, and heroism. The term "fantasy" can refer to the mental process of creating images of objects that do not exist or are conceivable.

J.R.R. Tolkien defines fantasy with a different kind of approach, suggesting that fantasy escapes from reality. He expresses it as free from imprisonment. He says,

"Fantasy is escapist, and that is its glory. If a soldier is imprisoned by the enemy, don't we consider it his duty to escape? . . .If we value the freedom of mind and soul, if we're partisans of liberty, then it's our plain duty to escape and to take as many people with us as we can!" (Tolkien 74)

In the novel *Charlotte's Web*, E.B. White focuses on how a child reacts to animals and their conversation with animals. Their conversation with the animal is where the animal speaks with another animal in human language. E.B White expresses here the fantasy nature of animals where animals have conversations with human beings as well as animals in human language. Fantasy elements of animals have been the bigger part of this selected novel, *Charlotte's Web*.

### **Animal Fantasy**

Animal fantasy tells stories about animals who behave like humans, communicate, experience emotions, and even reason. Nonetheless, animals in animal fantasies retain their respective animal features. Frequently, such fantasies have basic narratives and comprise literary symbolism by presenting symbolic expressions of human counterparts.

Animal fantasy is a type of fantasy fiction in which animals are the main characters, frequently anthropomorphized to varied degrees. In these stories, animals may have human-

like personalities, feelings, and behaviors, and they may interact with one another in a language that the reader may comprehend.

Animal fantasy stories frequently focus on adventure and may explore themes like companionship, loyalty, and courage. The surroundings may be entirely imaginary or inspired by real-world locations, but the animals and their relationships are always at the heart of the story. The first reason is to enable young readers to identify with the animals. The animals in themselves- stripped of all human trappings of speech and clothing may or may not be familiar to the child. The one thing that can unify what different children bring to a given book is that they may identify with an animal that has human attributes in Johnny Crow's Garden. Most children can identify themselves with errant Peter in Beatrix Potte's *The Tale of Peter Rabb*.

### **Child's association with fantasy**

Fantasy literature has an enormous impact on child development, encouraging creativity, emotional growth, and cognitive abilities. Analysing a child's relationship with fantasy involves investigating how these narratives shape their perception of the world, themselves, and their capacity to negotiate complicated emotions and social circumstances. Fantasy literature encourages children's creative thinking by portraying different realms and extraordinary aspects that contradict conventional reasoning. Fantasy requires children to understand and interact with abstract notions, which might help them improve their cognitive flexibility and grasp of difficult ideas.

### **E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web***

E.B. White was a well-known American writer who wrote essays, journalism, and children's fiction. His works are praised for their beauty, humor, and clarity, and they include topics such as nature, human experience, and morality. White's most renowned children's books are *Charlotte's Web*, *Stuart Little*, and *The Trumpet of the Swan*. White's mixture of realism and imagination established new standards in children's literature, proving that novels for young readers could approach challenging issues with sensitivity and intellect.

He has written several classic works of children's literature that have captured generations of readers with their ageless themes, distinctive characters, and graceful style. His efforts substantially influenced the genre, establishing high standards for literary excellence and emotional depth in children's literature. His ability to create stories that are both entertaining and meaningful has set a high standard in the genre. His works are frequently included in school curriculums and recommended reading lists, ensuring that new generations of readers continue to discover and cherish his stories.

E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* is a major work in children's literature, celebrated for its emotional depth, colorful characters, and themes of friendship, mortality, and nature. White's approach in this story represents his unique ability to integrate significant life lessons into a tale that young readers can understand. White depicts the friendship of Wilbur, a pig, and Charlotte, a spider. It also focuses on the support and sacrifice of both characters in terms of troublesome situations. He combines realism with fantasy to create a meaningful atmosphere of belongingness between humans and animals. Fern, a young girl who saves the life of a piglet named Wilbur, shows the human connection with animals.

The novel *Charlotte's Web* expresses the relationship between a child named Fern and a pig named Wilbur. The other animals, like a spider named Charlotte, a rat named Templeton, and lambs, are the key characteristics of this novel. This novel speaks anthropomorphic elements which are connected to a child called Fern. There are other familiar examples where we can find animal fantasy, like Kenneth Grahame's "*The Wind in the Willows*," which chronicles the exploits of anthropomorphic animals in rural England, such as Toad, Rat, Mole, and Badger. C.S. Lewis's "*The Chronicles of Narnia*" series has many talking animals and mythical creatures in the captivated country of Narnia. Rudyard Kipling's "*The Jungle Book*" is about a little boy named Mowgli who is raised by wolves and learns life lessons from other creatures in the forest.

### **Conversation of Child and Animals**

A conversation between a kid and an animal can provide fertile ground for investigating psychological topics, tapping into numerous aspects of child development, cognition, and emotional understanding. Children frequently assume that their toys, pets, and household items have thoughts, feelings, and personalities. This behavior is obvious in the way kids may construct extensive narratives in which these objects and animals interact like humans, engage in discussions, and feel emotions such as happiness, grief, and anger. This innovative and empathic approach not only helps youngsters make sense of their surroundings but also strengthens their empathy and encourages creative development.

Children often display a natural inclination toward anthropomorphism, the attribution of human traits, emotions, and intentions to nonhuman entities. This tendency can be understood through several psychological perspectives, highlighting how anthropomorphism aids in cognitive and emotional development.

For example, Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development emphasizes that throughout the preoperational stage (about ages 2 to 7), infants exhibit egocentrism and animistic thinking—the assumption that inanimate objects have human features like thoughts and feelings. This anthropomorphic attribution helps youngsters navigate their social environments. It offers a secure environment for exploring complicated emotions and social relationships, hence increasing emotional intelligence and cognitive empathy. Understanding how their toys may feel allows children to practice and grasp actual human emotions and relationships in a safe, imaginative environment.

Anthropomorphism allows children to relate to and understand nonhuman entities by projecting their own experiences and emotions onto them. For example, a child might believe that a stuffed animal feels sad when left alone, reflecting their feelings of loneliness. The novel "*Charlotte's Web*" has a similar theme in terms of children having conversations with animals. Fern (child) is expressing her emotions to animals as if animals are understating her talks. Here we can see the child's animistic thinking and her anthropomorphic nature towards animals.

### **Fern's (Child) Conversation with Animals**

The novel begins with Mr. Arable (father of Fern), who comes up with an axe to slaughter a piglet. Fern, the eight-year-old child, was not happy with this kind of approach towards that piglet. She is preventing her father from killing that piglet. The father tells her daughter that it will die sooner or later due to weakness, and the piglet is not strong enough to live as compared to other piglets. Fern was having an argument with her father, saying, "If I had been very small at birth, would you have killed me?" (White 3). Mr. Arable replied that he would not have killed. Fern is trying to save that piglet and assures her father that she will take care of that piglet till it gets stronger than other piglets. Father agrees to her plea and permits her to take care of the weak piglets.

Fern had a great love for the Piglet, and she used to feed it. She named it as Wilbur. Whenever she came back to school, she used to spend most of the time with Wilbur. Fern used to come to the barn every day to visit. The other animal used to have a conversation with Wilbur, and the other animals, too. She was discussing with her mother during breakfast that she used to talk with animals. While having a conversation with Mother, she said these things:

"Did you know that Uncle Homer's goslings had hatched?" asked Fern.

"How many?" asked Mr. Arable.

"Seven," replied Fern. "There were eight eggs but one egg didn't hatch, and the goose told Templeton she didn't want it anymore, so he took it away."

"The goose did what?" asked Mrs. Arable, gazing at her daughter with a queer, worried look.

"Told Templeton she didn't want the egg anymore," repeated Fern.

"Who is Templeton?" asked Mrs. Arable.

"He's the rat," replied Fern. "None of us like him much." (White 53)

Fern comes with this weird kind of conversation, and the parents get shocked and think and start questioning Fern's mental status. Parents can't believe that animals talk to children and child do not understand their language. They thought of taking her to Dr. Dorian to discuss their child in this regard. Here, the author describes the complexities of human behavior, including interactions between children and animals.

### **Conversation of Animals**

The conversation of animals in terms of human language is an intriguing subject that appears frequently in literature, particularly in genres like animal fantasy, in which animals are anthropomorphized—that is, given human characteristics such as the ability to communicate, reason, and develop complicated relationships. In these narratives, animals typically engage in speech like humans, utilizing language to communicate thoughts, feelings, desires, and conflicts.

The reader's own experiences, feelings, and interpretations are emphasized by reader-response theory as being crucial to understanding and deriving meaning from the text.

In connection with children's books, this theory highlights how young readers interact with stories, construct meanings, and how their developmental stages influence to interpret them. In order to understand how children view and relate to animals in literature, this theory helps to understand the child's unique experiences, developmental stage, and emotional reactions.

Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, investigated the interaction between children and animals through a variety of lenses in his conceptual framework. Sigmund Freud speaks of dreams and fantasies often interconnected with symbolism. His work in this area mostly concerns psychosexual development, the significance of animals in the unconscious mind, and symbolic representations in dreams.

Freud's beliefs about the connection between animals and children concentrate on the idea that animals play an important part in the child's unconscious mind, representing diverse fears, wants, and conflicts. Animals are frequently shown in children's dreams, fantasies, and emotional experiences, functioning as significant symbols in their psychosexual growth and expression.

Animals talking in human language speak of unconscious desires. In this novel, animals also have the desire to express themselves in communication in human language. Wilbur (pig) wanted to make friends with other animals in the barn and wished to have a conversation and play with them. Animals like geese and sheep refused to play with Wilbur as they were busy with their work. Finally, it heard the voice of Charlotte (spider), and it agreed to be friends with it. Wilbur was very interested in learning new things about Charlotte. The conversation between Wilbur and Charlotte was quite interesting. It was human language in their conversation. When Wilbur asks about food, Charlotte replies that it eats flies like bugs, grasshoppers, choice beetles, moths, butterflies, tasty cockroaches, gnats, midgets, daddy long legs, centipedes, and mosquitoes and drinks their blood as well.

Wilbur was a little bit worried and scared to know about Charlotte's daily lifestyle, where it prepares traps to eat other insects. Spider's life was filled with cruelty. Even Wilbur was like a child, which expresses a feeling of innocence and kindness. It was thought that killing insects was a cruel act. Charlotte managed to convince it that to live, it must be undergone with steps. Wilbur fears being killed or slaughtered by Zukerman (barn owner). Charlotte promised that she wouldn't allow them to kill his new friend, Wilbur. The conversation had in this way:

“Were you serious when you promised you would keep them from killing me?”

“I was never more serious in my life. I am not going to let you die, Wilbur.”

“How are you going to save me?” asked Wilbur, whose curiosity was very strong on this point.

“Well,” said Charlotte, vaguely, “I don't really know. But I'm working on a plan.” (White 63)

During summer days, Fern used to spend a lot of time with Wilbur. Wilbur was very happy with Fern's company. Wilbur introduced its friends to Fern. Here in this novel, we can see the family setup of human beings and other animals. It might be the case of Fern and Arable, who are part of the family set of human beings. Other animals are set up, like pigs, spiders, goose rats, and sheep. There is a saying by Anatole France: "Until one has loved an animal, a part of one's soul remains Unweakened" (Anatole 46). Here, it depicts the picture of a child of an animal and a human being reacting to each other. It is fantasized in this novel through some situations where children of both animal and human beings are reacting to some tough situation. Hence, White tries to portray the children of both animal and human beings as equal.

The goose has a conversation with Wilbur, and it goes in this way: it advises Wilbur to escape from the barn, which restricts the freedom of the piglet. It starts its conversation in this way:

"How does it feel to be free?" she asked.

"I like it," said Wilbur. "That is, I guess I like it."

Actually, Wilbur felt queer to be outside his fence, with nothing between him and the big world.

"Where do you think I'd better go?" (White 17)

Here Wilbur gets the idea that being in a barn is restricted through several conditions. The goose (duck) gives a direction to Wilbur to escape from that barn to save his life. Wilbur can't escape from that place now. If such efforts were made, they might be slaughtered. After hearing such words from Goose, Wilbur got scared. Wilbur made efforts to move away from that place but it got failed.

It was during Christmas time when Zukerman, Lurvy, and John Arable plotted to slaughter some pigs due to cold weather, and recently born piglets faced problems in living healthy lives. Charlotte also speaks to Wilbur about the cold weather process. Wilbur was very scared and upset to know all about this. He was not ready to be killed. Even Fern pleaded with her father, Mr. Arable, not to slaughter it. Mr. Arable was not ready to listen to her daughter's words, but Fern managed to convince her father to leave Wilbur. Here, the anthropomorphic nature of the child is expressed.

### **Animal Rescue Quest**

In E.B. White's beloved novel "*Charlotte's Web*," the animal rescue quest is central to the storyline and themes of friendship, empathy, and the cycle of life. The novel follows the journey of a pig named Wilbur, who is saved from slaughter by a young girl named Fern Arable. Fern's compassion towards Wilbur sets the stage for a series of interconnected rescue efforts within the barnyard community.

It was again Charlotte who stood in Wilbur's bad time, where it promised that it would save him from being slaughtered. Wilbur was very impatient to learn about its plans. Charlotte says, 'Slowly, slowly!' Said Charlotte. 'Never hurry and never worry!' (White 88). Charlotte was planning to save Wilbur from being slaughtered. Being a spider has fuelled a lot of insects in her trap, so it's not a big task to fool Mr. Zukerman. Charlotte writes on her



web like 'SOME PIG.' Zacherman was very surprised when he saw those words on her web. Zukerman went to the minister's cabin and spoke about this situation of spiders writing Some Pig on their web. The minister asked about the pig. Does the pig have a name? Zukerman replied that his niece calls that pig Wilbur. Zukerman was very much happy about what had happened in his barn. He thought of making his barn to visit places for people. He started to take special care of Wilbur. After some passing, Charlotte again writes a letter on her website titled 'TERRIFIC.' Zukerman was very happy to learn about all these activities in his barn. His barn became famous, and people started to visit it. Even Zukerman also earned money from people's visits.

Fern had a great time with Wilbur and Charlotte. She used to listen to Charlotte's stories. She is an admirer of her stories. She expressed this to her mother, Mrs. Arable. Mrs. Arable asked her daughter if animals spoke to her. Fern replied that animals speak, and she tells stories narrated by spiders. The child was living in the animal fantasy world, where she had conversations with animals like pigs, spiders, rats, geese, and lambs. Mrs. Arable thought of Fern taking her to the hospital due to his vivid nature of the animal fantasy world. Dr. Dorian had the opinion that Fern had a great love for animals, and she spent most of her time in Zukerman's barn.

After some days, Charlotte again writes words like 'RADIANT' and 'HUMBLE' in her web, which attracts people to visit Zukerman's barn. In this way, Wilbur gets a lot of attention from a lot of people. Zukerman was treating it well and feeding it. Wilbur was very much grateful to Charlotte for the work done for him. Now, it was time for Charlotte to say goodbye to his life. In the last, Charlotte says:

"You have been my friend," replied Charlotte. "That in itself is a tremendous thing. I wrote on my website for you because I liked you. After all, what's a life, anyway? We're born, we live a little while, we die. A spider's life can't help being something of a mess, with all this trapping and eating flies. By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle. Heaven knows anyone's life can stand a little of that." (White 222)

E.B. White captures the themes of friendship, selflessness, and the search for purpose. Charlotte, the spider, considers her life's purpose, accepting its inherent messiness while still seeing value in her acts of goodwill to Wilbur, the pig. Her words, "By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle" (White 222), imply that acts of charity and love might lead to the discovery of purpose. The passage also communicates existential undertones, questioning the brevity of life and highlighting that tiny acts of compassion can give life more depth.

### **Conclusion**

The main objective of this novel was to explore how children have unconditional love for animals. It also portrays the anthropomorphism elements in connection with a child in an animal fantasy world where a child has a conversation with a talking animal. In this novel, White speaks of moral values like friendship, selflessness, compassion, and generosity, which help to have good relations with each other. He demonstrates his

sensitivity and respect for the animals' unique personalities and feelings through its vivid animal characters. The narrative highlights White's strong bond with and comprehension of animals while emphasizing themes of friendship, loyalty, and the circle of life.

**References:**

- Charlotte's Web*. Puffin Classics.2014, p.88.  
*Charlotte's Web*. Puffin Classics.2014, p.222.  
Tolkien, J. R. R. '*On Fairy-Stories*. Harper Collins. 2015.  
France, Anatole. *The Works of Anatole France*. Dodd, Mead and Company, 1924, p.45.  
Piaget, Jean, and Barbel Inhelder. *The Psychology of the Child*. Basic Books, 1969.  
Fawcett, Leesa. "Anthropomorphism: In the Web of Culture." *Undercurrents*. 1989, pp.14–20.  
Guthrie, Stewart. *Faces in the Clouds: A New Theory of Religion*. Oxford University Press, 1995.p.91.  
De Waal, Frans. *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?* W.W. Norton & Company, 2016.p.21.  
Gross, Kenneth. *The Dream of the Moving Statue*. Cornell University Press, 1992.p.44.  
White, E.B. *Charlotte's Web*. Puffin Classics.2014, p.3.

**Citation:**

**Dr. Madhushri G. Kallimani & Mr. Thoufiq Panparosh**"Anthropomorphism in the Animal Fantasy World of E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*"*International Journal of English and Studies (IJOES)*, vol. 7, no. 2, 2025, pp. 84-93. DOI: 10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.02.93.