

# Humans and Other Animals

by Bronwen Wallace

## Learning Goals

- identify the thesis in an essay
- examine the effectiveness of first-person point of view
- evaluate the use of quotations
- create and present a short speech and a media study

There's a poem by Earle Birney called "The Bear on the Delhi Road," in which he describes seeing a huge Himalayan bear being brought down from the mountains by two "men of Kashmir." The men have captured the bear, not to kill him, but "simply to teach him to dance"—to become a dancing bear, in the great markets of Delhi where his owners will earn a living from his performances.

Birney talks about the work it takes for these trainers to wear from the bear's "shaggy body the tranced / wish forever to stay / only an ambling bear / four-footed in berries." And the poem ends by widening that picture of this one bear into a larger image of our relationship to many other animals:

It is not easy to free  
myth from reality  
or rear this fellow up  
to lurch-lurch with them  
in the tranced dancing of men.

Birney's poem came to mind when I saw Klass Act recently at the local shopping centre. Klass Act, an outfit from Ohio, offered several lionesses performing tricks in a small cage in the parking lot. And inside, another cage held lion and tiger cubs—cute little fellas; you could have your kids' (or your own) picture taken with them.

I find the appearance of Klass Act, like Birney's bear on the Delhi road, disturbing. Seeing those lionesses in that tiny cage and those cubs being picked up for endless photographic sessions gave me that sick feeling that animal acts in the circus often give me—or the appearance of wild animals at a zoo.

I am not talking here about how "well" or how "cruelly" the animals are treated, though that is an important issue. The Klass Act animals had the bored, listless look that the big cats often have when seen through bars. The cubs were even more listless and I couldn't help wondering how

they had been rendered "safe" for close-up photos with young children. Still, we are talking about animals born and raised in captivity. Given that, to talk about the specific "cruelty" of Klass Act is to single out one rather tawdry example from a long list. If Klass Act is where we "end up," it is, as far as I'm concerned, different only in degree from the zoo or the circus. Once we have decided, as a species, that other animals can be caged and trained for our entertainment, we have made a decision as well about our relationship to those other animals. It's that relationship I want to explore.

Let me start by saying that I think the relationship between our species and other animals is a very complex one. I think, too, that there is a difference between our relationship to lions and tigers and our relationship to house cats, dogs and horses. For those who want to explore some of the complexities of the latter relationship, I recommend Vicki Hearne's book *Adam's Task* as one particularly challenging viewpoint.

I also believe that the relationship between humans and other animals varies from culture to culture. I've talked before about the work of Hugh Brody, an anthropologist who has lived for many years among the hunting tribes of the Canadian North. In his latest work—*Living Arctic*—Brody explores the complex relationship between these hunters and the animals they hunt. He recognizes that in all these cultures, this relationship is seen as spiritual as well as practical. It is a relationship of dependence, primarily, because the hunter depends on the animal for survival. "Dependence," Brody points out, "entails vulnerability. The relationship between the hunter and the hunted, therefore, has a certain equality. Ultimately, no one can be superior to that upon which he depends."

This spiritual complexity is evident in Native literature, in their religious views, and in the reliance of some peoples (the Athapascan and the Alonquian, for example) on dreams to guide them to the right hunting spots. The sense of interdependency, which is at the centre of this relationship with other animals, also accounts for the fact that these peoples kill only what they need and, in doing so, do not usually deplete the species.

Brody also recognizes the argument often put forward by biologists that northern hunters' belief systems may only take into account one part of a species' cycle and that they may engage in ecologically dangerous practices. But he envisages a situation of "northern hunters and white biologists sitting down together, agreeing about wildlife problems and discovering

ways in which these can be ameliorated." Brody also believes that Southern attitudes about meat diets and about hunting in general have fuelled animal-rights campaigns which do not look at the full complexity of these relationships.

Another person who has written extensively about the meaning of our relationship to other animals is John Berger. Berger is an art critic, novelist, and scriptwriter who is best known for a book called *Ways of Seeing*, a series of essays on European art. For the past 20 years, however, he has lived and worked in a peasant village in the south of France. From there he has continued to write essays on art and on the lives of the people around him.

Like Brody, Berger recognizes that the relationship between the peasant farmer and the animals he kills and eats is a spiritual as well as a practical one. Again, he sees it as a relationship of interdependence which those of us who buy our food (be it vegetable or animal) wrapped in plastic at the supermarket cannot understand. Within our culture, perhaps it would be the dairy farmer who comes closest to this understanding of interdependence, this recognition that your life is dependent on the animals you care for—as their lives are dependent on you.

But back to Klass Act. In another essay, "Why Look at Animals," in a book called *About Looking*, Berger explores what has happened to the city-dwellers' relationship to animals—and why shows like Klass Act are such an apt expression of it. As we move further and further away from a life which is directly dependent on animals for survival, we also move further away from an understanding of ourselves in relationship with them. Other animals become simply—animals, beings completely separate from us.

One element in this process is the romanticization of animals. Birney's bear is the forbearer, if you will, of *The Three Bears* and the Teddy Bear and even Yogi Bear. As we become more and more separate from real animals in the real world, their appearance as stuffed toys and nostalgic creatures in books and movies becomes more apparent. This becomes more marked, Berger argues, in the 19th century, as cities grow and the human species loses contact with animals. They become "things we look at," rather than beings with which we are engaged. Zoos—the London Zoo opened in 1828—become more and more popular.

Real animals are rapidly disappearing from our lives. They have become marginalized—whether to egg and poultry farms where the hens never see the sun or to zoos or to displays like Klass Act. They are no longer at the centre of our lives. As well, the people who still relate to animals in a whole way—Native peoples, for example, and peasant cultures—are also marginalized. We think of them as "past" or "primitive," we display their tools in museums as artifacts, we do not think we have anything at all to learn from their way of life.

So we go to see Klass Act. We let our children be photographed with that cute tiger cub who has become as mythical a creature as Santa Claus or the Easter Bunny, whose appearances in shopping centres are also the occasion for photographs. We know nothing, anymore, about real animals.

Meanwhile, at least 20 500 dolphins are killed every year by the tuna industry, a situation allowed by the US Marine Mammal Protection Act. Sometimes as many as 200 dolphins are killed for 10 tuna. They are usually bombed or netted and chopped to pieces.

Meanwhile, Beluga whales in the Gulf of St. Lawrence are producing grotesquely deformed young, if they produce any at all, mainly because of the excessive industrial pollution of the Great Lakes.

Meanwhile, thousands—think of it, *thousands*—of other species become extinct or endangered every year.

When are we going to realize—or remember? We are not on the planet alone. We are in relationship with everything that lives here. And we are only one more species, after all.

5 Poet and essayist Bronwen Wallace was born in Kingston, Ontario, and educated at Queen's University. Her political activism led her to work with auto workers, to co-found a women's bookstore, and to work in a battered women's shelter. She was also a creative writing teacher and filmmaker. Publications after her death in 1989 include the book of short stories *People You'd Trust Your Life To* (1990). "Humans and Other Animals" is from *Arguments with the World: Essays by Bronwen Wallace* published in 1992. (Born Kingston, Ontario 1945; died 1989)

## RESPONDING

### Meaning

1. We are given the topic of this essay in its title—the relationship between animals and humans. What is the author's *thesis* or controlling idea? Where do we find it in the essay? Justify your answer.
2. Explain the meaning of the following statements:
  - a) "Once we have decided, as a species, that other animals can be caged and trained for our entertainment, we have made a decision as well about our relationship to those other animals."
  - b) "The relationship between the hunter and the hunted, therefore, has a certain equality. Ultimately, no one can be superior to that upon which he depends."
  - c) "Other animals become simply—animals, beings completely separate from us."

### Form and Style

3. This essay is written in first-person point of view. Rewrite the third and fourth paragraphs in the third-person point of view. How does this different point of view change the impact of Wallace's ideas on you, the reader? Why did the author choose the first-person point of view?
4. Cite two examples of how Bronwen Wallace uses quotations in this essay. What is the purpose of these quotations? How do they affect you as a reader? Did they help to illustrate the author's point, or would it have been better for her to leave out the literary references? Explain your views.

### Creative Extension

5. Bronwen Wallace clearly thinks humans need to be reminded of their intimate relationship with animals. The more distant the human/animal relationship, the more dangerous humans become for the planet. She says this is particularly true for city dwellers, who have very little contact with wild animals. Write and present a short speech that suggests ways humans can re-establish a healthy relationship with animals. Record your speech on audio or videotape.
6. Create a media log by making notes on human/animal relationships you observe on television, in magazines, in newspapers, and in other media over one week. Include copies of any pictures or illustrations you find. Present your findings to the class and state your conclusions on how the media depicts human/animal relationships.