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HUMAN AND ANIMAL RELATIONSHIP IN AMERICAN HUSBANDRY SYSTEM PORTRAYED THROUGH E.B. WHITE'S *CHARLOTTE'S WEB* (1952)

Syahruni Junaid
Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar, Indonesia
Email: syahruni.junaid@gmail.com

Abstract: This research examines the representation of animal protection in E.B. White's novel "Charlotte's Web", published in 1952, in the legal and social context of 20th century America. Using sociology of literature approach, this study analyzes characters such as Fern, Wilbur, Mr. Arable, and Mr. Zuckerman to illustrate the dynamics between humans and animals and the challenges faced by animals in the farming system. The research also connects the development of animal protection laws at the time with the characters' representations in the novel, as well as how literary works can reflect and influence social views on animals. The findings show that the characters in "Charlotte's Web" not only reflect animal protection issues, but also illustrate the changing ideologies and practices of animal husbandry that affect animal welfare. This research provides insight into the evolution of thinking about animal protection in America and the contribution of literature in shaping social consciousness.

Keywords*: animal protection, Charlotte's Web, sociology of literature, animal protection law, animal husbandry system*

INTRODUCTION

In the early 1950s, American society experienced a burgeoning awareness of animal welfare, setting the stage for significant legislative advancements in the ensuing decades. This heightened consciousness culminated in landmark legislation such as the Animal Welfare Act of 1966, which established comprehensive standards for the care and treatment of laboratory animals. The Act addressed critical issues, including humane handling, housing, and transportation, reflecting a societal shift towards recognizing animals as sentient beings deserving of ethical consideration and protection (United States Department of Agriculture, 2020). Beyond the legislative arena, cultural expressions, particularly children's literature,

played a pivotal role in shaping public sentiment towards animals. E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952) stands as a seminal work that not only captivated young readers but also introduced profound themes of empathy, friendship, and the moral complexities surrounding animal husbandry. Through the endearing characters of *Wilbur* the pig and *Charlotte* the spider, White explored the emotional and ethical dimensions of human-animal relationships, prompting readers to reflect on issues of compassion and responsibility.

Children's literature has long served as a mirror to societal values, acting as a conduit for moral and ethical discourse. The 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed a convergence of literary works and the emerging animal rights movement, highlighting the influence of storytelling in fostering empathy and moral reasoning. For instance, Marshall Saunders's *Beautiful Joe* (1893), inspired by a real-life abused dog, not only entertained but also educated readers on the importance of kindness towards animals. Throughout the 20th century, the evolution of animal protection legislation in the United States mirrored a growing societal concern for animal welfare and ethical treatment. E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952), while widely celebrated as a classic of children's literature, also offers a nuanced exploration of human-animal relationships and highlights the ethical dilemmas inherent in animal husbandry practices.

Empirical studies further underscore the impact of literary fiction on attitudes towards animal welfare. This research indicates that exposure to narratives depicting animal suffering can significantly enhance empathy and concern for animal welfare among readers. This finding aligns with the notion that literature can transcend entertainment, serving as a catalyst for social and ethical awareness. E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web* (1952) transcends its classification as a children's book, delving into profound themes of friendship, sacrifice, and the sanctity of life. The narrative follows Wilbur, a young pig, and his deep bond with Charlotte, a wise and compassionate spider. This relationship not only highlights the essence of true friendship but also introduces readers to complex ethical considerations regarding animal welfare and human-animal relationships.

At the heart of *Charlotte's Web* is the depiction of genuine friendship, characterized by unwavering loyalty and selflessness. Charlotte's commitment to saving Wilbur from the slaughterhouse exemplifies the lengths true friends will go for each other. She utilizes her

unique talent of web-spinning to craft messages that elevate Wilbur's status, ultimately preserving his life.

This research aims to find out the human and animal relationship that portrayed the husbandry system in America as presented by the characters in "Charlotte's Web" story written by E.B. White in 1952. The object of this research consists of the novel "Charlotte's Web" by E.B. White analyzed by the theory of literary sociology, Alan Swingewood, to examine is the society treat their animal farms.

The sociology of literature connects literary works with the social context in which they are created and received. This interdisciplinary approach blends literature and sociology to understand social life through literary texts. It explains how society is represented in literature in relation to social, legal, political, and economic conditions.

According to Alan Swingewood in *The Sociology of Literature* (1972), literature should not only be seen as artistic expression but also as a social phenomenon that reflects and influences the structures, values, and ideologies of its time. He introduces three main concepts. First, literature as a reflection of its time suggests that literary works are shaped by and mirror the political, cultural, and social climate of their era. Second, literature as part of the production process highlights the importance of the author's social background, values, and market pressures, indicating that writing is shaped by both internal and external forces. Third, literature in relation to history views literary works as both historical artifacts and active agents of social and political change.

Sociologists of literature also focus on the relationship between authors and their socio-cultural contexts, as well as the conditions under which literature is produced. They argue that the author's personal views are important for analysis. Additionally, they study the role of institutions in the production and distribution of literature. In the past, poets gained social standing through patrons; today, that role is taken over by publishers and book distributors (Poyandeh, 2005).

In the early 1950s, U.S. agriculture was undergoing significant transformation marked by rapid mechanization and farm consolidation. Post–World War II urbanization led to population shifts from rural areas to cities, resulting in larger farms managed by fewer individuals and decreasing the general public's connection to farm life (Gray & Batten, 1966). Technological advances - such as tractors, mechanical feed systems, and barn-based

production - began replacing traditional pasture-based practices, emphasizing efficiency and scale (Cochrane, 1993).

At this time, there were no federal laws specifically regulating farm animal welfare. Farmers prioritized productivity and cost-efficiency, and while state cruelty laws existed, they typically excluded standard farming practices. It was not until the Humane Methods of Livestock Slaughter Act of 1958 that federal standards addressed animal welfare, focusing solely on slaughter methods (United States Congress, 1958). In 1952, on-farm animal care was largely unregulated, with minimal oversight or enforcement.

Husbandry practices are varied by species. In swine production, farmers increasingly moved pigs indoors into climate-controlled barns to ensure steady growth and meat quality. While efficient, this led to more confined living spaces compared to older, pasture-based systems (Jones, 1960). Egg production also evolved, transitioning from floor-based housing to battery cages that improved sanitation and egg collection but significantly restricted hens' movement (Smith & Johnson, 1955). Poultry meat production shifted drastically in 1952 with the rise of specially bred broiler chickens, replacing traditional dual-purpose breeds and marking a move toward intensive, vertically integrated systems (Sumner & Anderson, 1985).

Overall, animals were viewed primarily as production units rather than sentient beings. The growing use of veterinary technologies, such as antibiotics and vaccines, aimed to prevent disease and enhance growth, rather than improve animal welfare. Concerns about animal well-being were not yet mainstream, though the founding of the Animal Welfare Institute in 1951 signaled early advocacy for humane treatment across all animal industries (Animal Welfare Institute, n.d.).

Several scholarly works in the past decade have examined the human-animal relationship as portrayed in E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web*, offering valuable insights for analyzing American husbandry systems through literature. Joshi (2025) employs an eco-critical lens to critique the dichotomy between humans and animals in the novel, highlighting the symbiotic relationship and calling for a sustainable coexistence based on philosophical perspectives.

Boonpromkul (2022) explores the complex moral dimensions of the narrative, focusing on the themes of friendship and humility, particularly through the characters of Charlotte and Wilbur. Yu (2016) offers a comparative study between *Charlotte's Web* and *The One and*

Only Ivan, analyzing how both texts reflect and shape children's understanding of animal-human relationships and their societal roles. Ratelle (2014) investigates ethical questions related to animal consumption in the novel, revealing how the story challenges traditional views of animals as mere food sources. Although slightly older, Rollin's (1990) study remains relevant by examining maternal roles and nurturing behavior in the text, thus contributing to broader discussions on domestication and care in human-animal dynamics.

METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative method because it allows researchers to dig deeper into the social context contained in the novel "Charlotte's Web". Thus, the readers can understand this novel by representing human-animal relationship in America during the period of the novel created. As mentioned by Tracy (2024) qualitative methods reflect the different ways researchers approach the study of human experience, culture and society. By focusing on rich descriptive data, qualitative research emphasizes context and meaning-making, which enables a deeper understanding of complex social phenomena.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Mr. Arable

The line, "*Fern said Mr. Arable, I know more about raising a litter of pigs than you do. A weakling makes trouble"* (White, 1952:8), comes in Chapter 1 of *Charlotte's Web*, just after Mrs. Arable and Mr. Arable have gone out to inspect the new litter of piglets born that morning. They discover one runt so small and frail that Mrs. Arable almost shrieks, and Mr. Arable, following a hard-headed "every pig for himself" farming logic, declares it must be killed. Fern, overhearing this, bursts out defending the piglet. Mr. Arable is insisting that weak animals only "make trouble," and that he knows better than to save it. This exchange sets up the novel's central conflict between Fern's compassion and the more utilitarian view of farm life. Fern's successful argument to spare and raise the runt, whom she names Wilbur, establishes her as the story's empathetic heart, and foreshadows how Wilbur's very survival will hinge on kindness rather than mere economics.

"Mr. Arable fixed a small yard especially for Wilbur under an apple tree, and gave him a large wooden box full of straw, with a doorway cut in it so he could walk in and out as he

pleased." (White, 1952: 9), in this part, immediately after Fern has nursed Wilbur through his first fragile weeks, Mr. Arable steps in with a more practical, fatherly kind of care. Having conceded that the runt must live, he carves out a little pen for Wilbur beneath the shade of an apple tree and provides a straw-filled wooden box as a warm shelter. Unlike Fern's intimate, almost human treatment (bottle-feeding and coddling), the gesture of Mr. Arable is straightforward and functional: he's ensuring Wilbur has a safe, clean place to eat and sleep while keeping him close by the farmhouse.

This moment illustrates the attitude of Mr. Arable toward farm animals in general - a balance between usefulness and basic kindness. He's not emotionally entangled the way Fern is, but he recognizes his responsibility to care for an animal under his charge, laying the groundwork for Wilbur's next chapter on the Zuckerman farm.

2. Fern

> *Fern loved Wilbur more than anything. She loved to stroke him, to feed him, to put him to bed. Every morning, as soon as she got up, she warmed his milk, tied his bib on, and held the bottle for him.*
>
> (White, 1952: 12)

In these lines, White emphasizes Fern's wholehearted devotion. She treats Wilbur not as mere livestock but as a cherished companion, cradling him like a baby with warmth and tender care. Each morning ritual, warming his milk, tying on his bib, holding the bottle, underscores how completely Fern has stepped into the role of Wilbur's guardian. Fern and Wilbur relationship show compassion and friendship transcending conventional boundaries. It is Mr. Arable's representation of the "extensive" enclosure.

3. Mr. Zuckerman

> *Wilbur's new home was in the lower part of the barn, directly underneath the cows. Mr. Zuckerman knew that a manure pile is a good place to keep a young pig.*
>
> (White, 1952: 14)

This line appears early in Chapter 3, right after Wilbur has been sold to Fern's Uncle Homer Zuckerman and moved from the farmhouse yard into the big barn. By tucking Wilbur "directly underneath the cows" and beside the manure pile, Mr. Zuckerman isn't trying to

pamper him so much as ensure he thrives under practical, farm-wise conditions. The warm, fermenting manure acts like a natural heater, keeping the piglet cozy and healthy, while its proximity to the cows means Wilbur is sheltered, monitored, and easy to feed. In choosing this spot, Mr. Zuckerman treats Wilbur first and foremost as livestock whose care must balance animal welfare with efficiency and agricultural know-how. His kindness is expressed through good husbandry rather than affection—he provides what the pig needs to grow strong, but he never quite sees Wilbur as anything more than a productive member of the barnyard.

4. Charlotte

> *It's a good thing you can't see what I see," she said. "What do you see?" asked Wilbur. "There's a pig in the next pen and he's enormous. I'm afraid he's much bigger than you are*.
>
> (White, 1952: 134)

This conversation takes place in Wilbur's pen in the Zuckerman barn shortly after Charlotte has introduced herself and struck up her friendship with him. It is evening, Wilbur is dozing in the straw when he hears Charlotte's thin voice drifting down from her web overhead. Curious, he asks what she can see from her lofty perch. Wilbur, standing floor-level and confined to his small yard, can't survey the barn, so he has no idea what Charlotte's eye, accustomed to spinning silken threads in every corner, takes in. When she tells him there is an enormous pig next door, Wilbur is startled: he is never realized how small he really is. This moment both underscores Charlotte's role as Wise Observer (and, later, life-saver) and plants the seed of Wilbur's insecurity, the very insecurity she will cleverly exploit when she weaves words like "Some Pig" into her web to change how the world views him.

Charlotte's Web, E.B. White presents the relationship between humans and animals as deeply interconnected, but with different layers of understanding and emotion depending on the character. Wilbur's journey reflects the typical cycle of how farm animals are perceived within a working agricultural society. Each character presented different type of treatment toward animal that reflect the society at the era. At first, as a runt, Wilbur is seen by Mr. Arable as a burden, a piglet that is too weak to survive, and therefore not worth the resources needed to raise him. Saving a runt would be considered irrational from a farming perspective

where efficiency and output matter most. It is only through Fern's emotional plea that Wilbur is initially spared, showing that compassion must intervene against pure practicality to grant the animal value beyond economics.

Fern, as the youngest character in the story, is the one who shows her deepest love to Wilbur. White portrays an idealized, compassionate bond between human and animal. Fern sees Wilbur not just as a pig, but almost as a sibling or a child. She nurtures him, protects him, and even claims he can understand her, a belief that symbolizes a pure, empathetic connection unburdened by practical concerns like money, food, or work. The character of Fern, who shows affection and care towards Wilbur, reflects a more humane view of animals, challenging the eugenics ideology that discriminates against animals based on their physical qualities.

Other human characters, like Mr. Arable and Mr. Zuckerman, represent a more utilitarian view. They care for animals responsibly but ultimately see them as part of the farm economy. Mr. Arable and Mr. Zuckerman represent two different approaches to animal husbandry: a broader and humane approach versus a more intensive and productive approach.

Wilbur, for example, is first a potential burden (as a runt), then an animal to be sold, and eventually a source of meat. Their kindness exists, but it is framed by practical needs rather than emotional attachment. Later, when Wilbur grows stronger, Mr. Arable sells him to Mr. Zuckerman. In this transaction, Wilbur is reduced again to a commodity, his life is assigned a monetary value, emphasizing that, to most adults, animals exist within a framework of utility. Wilbur's sentimental worth to Fern does not change his material worth to the adults, who view him as an investment that can yield bacon and ham. As Wilbur matures, the starkest reality sets in: he is being fattened for slaughter. Mr. Zuckerman's growing admiration for Wilbur (especially after Charlotte's miracles) never completely erases the fact that Wilbur's ultimate fate, in the natural course of farm life, is to be killed for food. Even the care he receives—good shelter, feed, and protection—is motivated largely by the hope of producing superior meat.

Charlotte's nightly creation of silk-spun messages—"Some Pig," "Terrific," "Radiant," "Humble", mirrors the rise of mass media branding in 1950s America. Just as advertisers harnessed catchy slogans on radio and the fledgling television networks to shape consumer perceptions, Charlotte instinctively understands how a few simple words, artfully displayed,

can transform Wilbur from an ordinary barnyard pig into a celebrated local (and briefly national) celebrity (Spigel, 1992; Cohen, 2003). Beneath her gentle exterior, Charlotte embodies the decade's pragmatic optimism and confidence in ingenuity: faced with Wilbur's seemingly hopeless fate, she calmly assesses the situation and methodically executes her plan night after night, echoing post–World War II America's faith in technology and clever strategy to reshape society (Cochrane, 1993).

At the same time, Charlotte gives voice to a burgeoning social conscience. In an age when industrial agriculture treated animals primarily as production units, her campaign on Wilbur's behalf insists that every life has intrinsic worth (Animal Welfare Institute, n.d.). She also quietly subverts the rigid gender norms of her era: in a world where female authority was often confined to the domestic sphere, this eight-legged heroine wields influence not through force but through intellect and persuasion—anticipating the broader shifts that would soon open new public roles for women (May, 1988). Finally, Charlotte's work underscores the power of community over competition: rather than seeking personal gain, she pours her own life energy into Wilbur's salvation, uniting farmers, fairgoers, and barnyard creatures in shared wonder—reflecting mid-century America's tension between Cold War rivalries and emerging suburban communitarian ideals (Putnam, 2000).

Among the animals themselves, relationships mirror human society: there are friendships (Charlotte and Wilbur), rivalries (the lamb's teasing), and acts of great loyalty and sacrifice. Charlotte's efforts to save Wilbur, despite knowing her own life is nearing its end, reflect the highest ideals of friendship and moral duty, qualities traditionally attributed to humans.

Overall, Charlotte's Web blurs the line between the human and animal worlds. Animals are given full emotional depth, fear, pride, loyalty, while some humans (especially Fern) are shown as capable of seeing and valuing the individuality and inner life of animals. The story suggests that true compassion crosses species boundaries and that recognizing the worth of even the smallest creature is part of being fully human.

Through these characterizations, the novel not only depicts the relationship between humans and animals, but also criticizes farming practices that often disregard animal welfare in favor of production efficiency. In addition, the animal exhibits depicted in the novel show how subjective judgments of animals can create injustice, where animals that are considered

"superior" get more attention, while "inferior" ones are marginalized.

In the 1950s, when Charlotte's Web was published (1952), American society was undergoing major changes in its relationship with animals, especially farm animals. Industrial agriculture was expanding rapidly: small family farms were being replaced by larger, more mechanized operations. Animals were increasingly viewed not as individual beings, but as units of production, pigs for pork, cows for milk and beef, chickens for eggs and meat. Efficiency and output were the main priorities. American farming was transforming from small, diversified family operations into large, highly specialized enterprises. Mechanization, tractors, harvesters, electric feeders, meant one farmer could manage hundreds or even thousands of animals rather than a few dozen. Pigs were moved into climate-controlled "confinement" barns, poultry into stacked cages, and cattle into feedlots where grain-based rations fattened them for market. Breeding programs produced faster-growing, uniform animals; antibiotics and hormones were introduced not for animal health per se but to accelerate growth and prevent disease in crowded conditions. On one hand, these innovations drove down food prices and bolstered postwar prosperity; on the other, they turned sentient creatures into production units whose welfare, beyond what was strictly necessary to maintain growth and product quality, was largely ignored. Mr. Zuckerman and Mr. Arable are the representations of the farm owners at that time. They see Wilbur as object to elevate their productivity and neglecting the humanity factor. Meanwhile, Fern portrays the one who have a good concern on protecting them. Give right as what it should be.

E.B. White's Charlotte's Web gently pushes back against both trends. Fern's hands-on nurturing harks back to an older agrarian intimacy, where a child could bottle-feed a piglet and call him "brother." Mr. Arable's and Mr. Zuckerman's more functional care, the small yard under the apple tree, then the pen above the manure pile, typifies the new, manager-style of husbandry: adequate, but always motivated by growth and eventual profit. Charlotte herself becomes a bridge between these worlds: she speaks for Wilbur's intrinsic worth even as she operates within the barn's "system," weaving words that force the human characters, and, by extension, the suburban readers, to see him not as pork in waiting, but as "Some Pig."

This research highlights the importance of understanding the social and legal context in which literature is set, as well as how literature can serve as a tool for social reflection and change. As such, "Charlotte's Web" is not only a beloved work of children's literature, but

also a relevant social critique of animal protection and animal husbandry practices in America. The findings open up space for further discussion on the role of literature in shaping animal protection awareness and policy in the present day.

CONCLUSION

This research shows that E.B. White's "Charlotte's Web" serves not only as an entertaining work of children's literature, but also as a profound reflection on animal protection issues relevant to the legal and social context in 20th century America. Through characters such as Fern, Wilbur, and Mr. Arable, the novel illustrates various perspectives on the relationship between humans and animals, as well as the challenges animals face in a farming system that often prioritizes efficiency over welfare.

The analysis reveals that Fern's character represents a more empathetic and humane view of animals, while Mr. Arable and Mr. Zuckerman reflect two different approaches to farming practices that affect animal welfare. In addition, the exhibition of animals in the novel shows how subjective judgment can create injustice among animals, reinforcing existing hierarchies.

Thus, this research emphasizes the importance of understanding the social and legal context behind literary works, as well as how literature can function as a tool for reflection and social change. "Charlotte's Web" not only reflects the evolution of thinking about animal protection in America, but also invites readers to reflect on our responsibilities to animals and the need for better policies in animal protection today. These findings open up opportunities for further research into the role of literature in shaping future animal protection awareness and policy.

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