



**SYMBOLIC TRANSFORMATION OF ANIMAL CHARACTERS IN
MICHAEL MORPURGO'S CHILDREN'S LITERATURE**



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Abstract. *This thesis examines symbolic transformation of animal characters in Michael Morpurgo's novels. Through analysis of War Horse, Running Wild, An Elephant in the Garden, and The Butterfly Lion, the paper argues that Morpurgo uses animal transformation to process trauma, encode memory, and construct fluid identity for child protagonists.*

Keywords: *symbolic transformation, animal characters, Michael Morpurgo, trauma, memory, children's literature*

Annotatsiya. *Ushbu tezis Maykl Morpurgo asarlarida hayvon qahramonlarining ramziy o'zgarishini o'rganadi. Urush oti, Yovvoyi yugurish, Bog'dagi fil va Kapalak sher asarlari tahlili orqali Morpurgo hayvon o'zgarishidan travmani qayta ishlash, xotirani kodlash va bola qahramonlarning o'zgaruvchan shaxsini qurish uchun foydalanishini ko'rsatadi.*

Kalit so'zlar: *ramziy o'zgarish, hayvon qahramonlar, Maykl Morpurgo, trauma, xotira, bolalar adabiyoti*

Аннотация. *В данном тезисе исследуется символическая трансформация животных персонажей в романах Майкла Морпурго. На основе анализа произведений «Боевой конь», «Дикий побег», «Слон в саду» и «Львёнок-бабочка» утверждается, что Морпурго использует трансформацию животных для переработки травмы, кодирования памяти и формирования текучей идентичности юных героев.*

Ключевые слова: *символическая трансформация, животные персонажи, Майкл Морпурго, травма, память, детская литература*

Introduction

Michael Morpurgo, one of the most celebrated contemporary children's authors and former Children's Laureate (2003–2005), has built a literary career around the profound bonds between humans and animals [3]. His works consistently feature animal characters whose symbolic meaning transforms over the course of the narrative. Unlike classical fables where animals embody fixed moral qualities, Morpurgo's creatures—horses, elephants, lions, dogs—undergo symbolic metamorphosis that reflects the psychological development of child protagonists.

The central argument is that Morpurgo employs symbolic transformation of animal characters to serve three primary functions: processing trauma through the animal body,





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encoding fragmented memories in animal form, and constructing fluid identity for child protagonists navigating loss. Drawing on *War Horse* (1982), *Running Wild* (2009), *An Elephant in the Garden* (2010), and *The Butterfly Lion* (1996), this paper demonstrates how Morpurgo's animals become what one critic calls "sites of meaning-making" for young readers confronting overwhelming experiences.

Main Part

The first function of symbolic transformation in Morpurgo's work is the processing of trauma through the animal body. In *Running Wild*, nine-year-old Will loses both parents within two chapters: his father is killed in Iraq, and his mother drowns in the Boxing Day tsunami while they are on holiday in Indonesia [9]. Will survives by clinging to Oona, a terrified elephant who senses the incoming wave and stampedes into the rainforest. The transformation here is double: Oona shifts from a tourist attraction to a lifeline, from a passive creature to an active protector. Will himself undergoes transformation, learning to survive by becoming an "elephant's child"—finding food, water, and shelter under Oona's guidance [5]. The elephant's body becomes a container for Will's grief. He cannot process his parents' deaths directly; instead, he processes survival itself through Oona. As Will later says, "From now on I would remember only the marvellous times, the magical moments that I knew would lift my spirits, that would banish all grieving" [9]. This selective memory is encoded in his relationship with Oona, whose presence allows the traumatic past to be held at a safe symbolic distance.

Similarly, in *War Horse*, the horse Joey witnesses the horrors of the First World War from both sides of the trenches [3]. Because Joey cannot speak human language, the trauma of battle is conveyed through sensory impressions—mud, explosions, the smell of blood, the weight of fallen riders. The horse's body undergoes physical transformation: from a healthy farm animal to a wounded, exhausted creature. But the deeper symbolic transformation is moral. Joey encounters the best and worst of humanity: kind soldiers on both sides, brutal conditions, senseless death [10]. His transformation from a naive colt into a witness who "has seen the power of war and the beauty of peace" [3] allows the child reader to experience the trauma of war indirectly. The animal perspective fragments the violence into bearable pieces, while the horse's survival offers hope. The second function is the encoding of memory in animal form. Morpurgo repeatedly uses animals as living memory vessels. In *The Butterfly Lion*, Bertie rescues an orphaned white lion cub on the African veld. They become inseparable until Bertie is sent to boarding school in England and the lion is sold to a circus [3]. Bertie swears they will meet again, but it is the "butterfly lion"—a statue created from memory—that ensures their friendship is never forgotten. Here, the lion transforms from a living creature into a symbolic representation of loyalty, loss, and the persistence of childhood bonds. The white lion's image becomes a memory aid, externalizing Bertie's inner landscape. As one analysis notes, "the butterfly lion ensures that their friendship will never be forgotten" [3]. This transformation from animal to symbol allows the narrative to process separation trauma without explicit confrontation.





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In *An Elephant in the Garden*, set during the firebombing of Dresden in 1945, a young elephant named Marlene becomes the repository of memory for Lizzie, who narrates the story from her nursing home bed decades later [8]. Marlene is not anthropomorphized; rather, she is “a sort of pachyderm Mother Courage—plodding, obdurate, opportunistic, load-bearing, indestructible, cheering” [2]. The elephant’s symbolic meaning transforms across the narrative: from zoo animal to garden pet, from liability to lifeline, from survivor to teacher. The novel’s framing device—Lizzie telling her story to a nurse and her young son—emphasizes memory transmission. Marlene “represents the stubborn human will to survive” [2], and Lizzie’s final bequest to the boy is not the elephant but her story. As the reviewer notes, “Like the elephant, we should never forget the past, nor forget that the elderly are its gatekeepers” [2]. The animal body carries memory so that human bodies can heal. The third function is the construction of fluid identity for child protagonists. Morpurgo’s children are never stable; they are always becoming. In *Running Wild*, Will’s nine months in the rainforest with Oona transform him utterly. He learns to read animal behavior, to find food, to hide from hunters. When he is captured by a hunter-dealer who kills tigers for their body parts and captures orang-utans for sale, Will is forced to confront human cruelty [5][9]. The hunter tells him, “All I do, Monkey Boy, is provide what the world wants”—a reference to the global demand for palm oil [9]. Will’s identity shifts from victim to protector, from child to surrogate parent to a group of infant orang-utans whose mothers have been killed. This transformation is made possible by his prior identification with Oona. By becoming an “elephant’s child,” Will acquires the flexibility to become other things: a jungle survivor, an animal advocate, a future adult. The animal transformation enables identity fluidity that would be impossible in a purely human narrative. Even in *Private Peaceful*, where animals are not central, they function symbolically. Birds and larks appear as “symbols of the free soul”; during his father’s funeral, Tommo wishes his father could hear the birds singing. Later, a lark flying above no man’s land gives him hope [7]. Mice appear as “reminders of the comfort of home,” particularly associated with the disabled brother Big Joe [7]. These small animal symbols transform across the narrative, carrying emotional weight that shifts with Tommo’s circumstances. They allow the reader to access Tommo’s inner state without explicit psychological exposition.

Conclusion

Michael Morpurgo’s children’s literature demonstrates the power of symbolic transformation of animal characters to process trauma, encode memory, and construct fluid identity. From Joey the war horse to Oona the elephant, from Marlene the garden elephant to the butterfly lion, Morpurgo’s animals undergo transformations that mirror the psychological journeys of his child protagonists. The animal body becomes what one might call a “metamorphic mirror”—reflecting not a fixed self but a self in process, capable of becoming otherwise in response to overwhelming experience. The animal, in Morpurgo’s world, is not an escape from the human but a deeper entry into it. His works remind us that





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the most profound transformations often occur not when we become more human, but when we allow ourselves to become, for a time, animal.

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