

# Talking with Animals: Animal Representation in *Doctor Dolittle* (1967)

動物と話すこと : *Doctor Dolittle* (1967) における動物表象

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## 1. Introduction

As if the desire to be able to talk to animals<sup>1</sup> has never changed, the series of *Doctor Dolittle* written by Hugh Lofting, featuring a doctor who can talk with animals, has been made into movies many times. The original *Doctor Dolittle* series includes *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* (1920), *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle* (1922), *Doctor Dolittle's Post Office* (1923), *Doctor Dolittle's Circus* (1924), *Doctor Dolittle's Zoo* (1925), *Doctor Dolittle's Caravan* (1926), *Doctor Dolittle's Garden* (1927), *Doctor Dolittle in the Moon* (1928), *Gub Gub's Book: An Encyclopedia of Food* (1932), *Doctor Dolittle's Return* (1933), *Doctor Dolittle and the Secret Lake* (1948), *Doctor Dolittle and the Green Canary*, (1950), and *Doctor Dolittle's Puddleby Adventures* (1952). Lofting got the idea for the *Doctor Dolittle* series while serving as an officer in the Irish Army during World War I. In those days, war horses were used to carry people and cargo. However, if a human soldier was seriously injured, he would not be easily abandoned, while if a warhorse was injured, it was shot to death to lessen its suffering. Lofting was dissatisfied with the fact that although horses and humans had to take the same risks, they were not treated equally when injured. He thought that, in order to treat horses as equal with humans, doctors had to understand the language of horses. In this way he created the character of *Doctor Dolittle*, who talks with animals and treats every animal without distinction.<sup>2</sup> We can see the series of *Doctor Dolittle* was created from the perspective of an animal advocacy that is still prevalent today, in which animals and human beings should be treated equally.

The first film based on Lofting's *Doctor Dolittle* series is *Doctor Dolittle* (1967), directed by Richard Fleischer. This is a musical film that joins the stories from each of the original novels together and features some of the animals that made the biggest impression from the original books, such as the two-headed llama and the giant sea snail, as animals that help John Dolittle (Rex Harrison). However, some changes from the original novels were made, such as a female character named Emma Fairfax (Samantha Eggar), who does not appear in the original story, accompanying Dr. Dolittle on his journey.

Betty Thomas' *Dr. Dolittle* (1998) is also based on Lofting's *Doctor Dolittle* series, but the only thing it has in common with the books is that the main character is a doctor named John Dolittle (Eddie Murphy) who can talk with animals. The setting of the story is the United States in the late 1990s, and Dr. Dolittle has a wife and daughters. The main story is Dr. Dolittle helping animals, and how he and his family come

to accept his exceptional talent. After the success of *Dr. Dolittle* in 1998, a sequel, *Dr. Dolittle 2*, was released in 2001, followed by *Dr. Dolittle 3* (2006), *Doctor Dolittle 4* (2008), and *Doctor Dolittle: Million Dollar Mutts* (2009).

The latest is *Dolittle* (2020) directed by Stephen Gaghan. It also features an original story. Even though the setting is in Britain in the Age of Queen Victoria, the purpose of Dr. Dolittle's journey is to obtain "the magical fruit of Eden," which never appeared in the novels, to cure Queen Victoria of a deadly illness.

While these films are based on the Doctor Dolittle series by Lofting, the remarkable distinction between *Doctor Dolittle* (1967) and other films is that the animals do not talk in human language in the film. In the other Dr. Dolittle films, animal characters are dubbed by actors so the audience can understand what they are saying, which means the audience understands the voices of the animals just as Dr. Dolittle does. Even in the novels, the speech of animals is represented using quotation marks. However, in the 1967 film, no animal characters except for a parrot, Polynesia, who teaches Dr. Dolittle "animal language," have dubbed voices. As Polynesia explains, "Most animal languages are a mixture of sounds and movements" (33:43-33:47), the speech of animal characters is expressed using noises, and the audience understands what the animals are talking about only after they watch the response of Dr. Dolittle.

Why are the animal characters in the 1967 film voiceless? One possible explanation is that it was technically challenging to add voices to the animals' movement. However, the filmmakers achieved this perfectly well with Polynesia, so it could not have been impossible to dub voices for all the animal characters. In this paper, I would like to consider why the filmmakers did not add the voices of animal characters; I conclude that the aim of the film is to criticize humans, including the audience. First, I would like to review the social background of the 1960s, when this film was made. It was a time when marginalized groups such as women and African-Americans, who had previously been invisible and unnoticed in society, spoke out, and people paid attention to those who had been discriminated against. In response to these social conditions, *Doctor Dolittle* puts Dr. Dolittle on the side of the marginalized animals and criticizes the treatment of animals by humans from that standpoint. I would like to point out the possibility of disturbing the society in which this work was made by analyzing how Dr. Dolittle, the only one who understands the language of animals both inside and outside the film, is portrayed.

## 2. Historical Background of the 1960s

One of the significant changes in the United States after World War II was the spread of television. By the mid-1950s, 88% of households owned a television set, and many people shared a common set of information and images (Aruga 374). In politics, too, "the age of consensus," or "the atmosphere of conformity to the masses," prevailed (Aruga 375). In the midst of this uniformity of information, there were certainly some people who were not included in that information—for example, the suffering of housewives after the War. Many women had worked in military factories in place of the men who went off to the War, and made their way into society. However, after the War ended and men returned, these women were forced to back into their homes in order to secure work for the men. With the spread of television, the traditional value of "a woman's happiness lies in her home" spread again in society. Some of these

women were faced with the problem of how to define their identity in response to these changes (Aruga 376-377). The problems of these women gave rise to the birth of the second-wave feminist movement. Feminists called for the emancipation of women from the family and “femininity” and called for women’s advancement in society (Yoshihara 13).

Second-wave feminism was divided into liberal feminism and radical feminism. Liberal feminism called for equal rights for men and women and aimed to eliminate sex discrimination in the public sphere (Yoshihara 37). Radical feminism believed that the cause of women’s oppression was the patriarchal system, rejected the principle of cooperation with men. They called for social reform and liberation of women’s oppression in places that were considered “personal,” such as the family and sexuality (Yoshihara 44). Furthermore, it was also in the late 1960s that lesbian feminist groups and African-American feminist groups were formed to object to the fact that both liberal and radical feminism focused on white middle-class women but singled out all women in the category of “women” (Yoshihara 25-28).

On the other hand, African-American men were also “invisible” in American society. While engaged in the War, they were treated as soldiers, but when they returned to their homes afterwards, some of them were dissatisfied with the discriminatory treatment they once again received. Against this backdrop, the civil rights movement began following the Brown decision in 1954. The following year in Montgomery, Alabama, Rosa Parks, an African-American seamstress, refused an order to give up her seat on a bus to a white passenger. At that time, whites and non-whites were segregated in all public places in Alabama and other parts of the southern United States by Jim Crow laws, but white people were given priority on buses, and drivers were free to set the boundary between white and non-white seats according to the number of white passengers. When the driver ordered her to give up her seat due to the increasing number of white passengers, Parks refused and was arrested. Her arrest led to the start of the bus boycott movements by African-Americans (Aruga 381-382).

The civil rights movement also had a significant impact on the field of literature. African-American writers, Native American writers, and women writers, who had previously been marginalized, began to receive more attention, and by the end of the 20th century, many of them were recognized as the canon of American literature (Baym 1080-1081).

As the feminist and civil rights movements flourished, people’s interest in various forms of discrimination increased, and they began to pay attention to animals and nature, which were thought to be marginalized when humans were placed at the center. In the 1970s, although later than the civil rights movement, there was an increase in discussions about the minds of animals, such as Donald Griffin’s *The Question of Animal Awareness* (1976) and Peter Singer’s *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (1975), in which the anthropocentric view was questioned (DeGrazia 8).

The 1967 film was produced during the height of the civil rights movement and people were finally paying attention to the marginalized. In the 1960s women and African-Americans, who had been invisible in the unification of information established in the 1950s and marginalized under white male-centrism, raised their voices and made themselves visible. Their activities, such as the feminist marches, African-American sit-ins, and the March on Washington, were clearly visible forms of resistance to existing power.

Furthermore, it is worth noting that this marginalized existence includes animals. In the 1967 film, Dr. Dolittle also raises his voice for animals.

### 3. The Representation of Dr. Dolittle

In this section, I will discuss how the character of Dr. Dolittle is described in *Doctor Dolittle* (1967). At the beginning of the film, a flashback to the day when Dr. Dolittle learns the language of animals and decides to become a veterinarian is inserted (0:22:00 - 0:32:13). In this scene the dichotomy of human and animal is presented, and Dr. Dolittle is depicted as a person who stands on the side of animals, not on the side of humans. Although he was originally a doctor who treated people, he was always interested in animals, and his house was filled with various animals. The number of his human patients dwindles as their symptoms worsen indirectly due to the animals. His sister, Sarah (Portia Nelson), who does the housework, gets angry and confronts him to get rid of the animals or she will leave. He then reveals his feelings to his friend, Matthew (Anthony Newley), who often visits Dr. Dolittle's house and sells food for cats and dogs on the street:

I'm a terrible doctor. I'm probably the worst doctor in the world...I have absolutely no interest in the health and welfare of my patients. I can't begin to communicate with them. I don't even want to communicate with them. In fact, I've come to the conclusion that, with the exception of yourself, I have nothing in common with the human race. (27:57-28:22)

Dr. Dolittle says that, except Matthew, he is not interested in people and has nothing in common with people. In response, Matthew points out that Dr. Dolittle likes animals more than people, to which he replies, "But animals are so much more fun than people" (28:29-28:31). He confesses to himself that he is more interested in animals than people and that he is a person who does not get along well with human society. Even though he is a white male and one of the people assumed to be at the center of society throughout human history, he feels he is not a part of it. His dialogue suggests that there is a premise of conflict between humans and animals, and at the same time he is presented as a person who takes the position of animals rather than that of humans. He is put in the position of a representative of animals, which are marginalized in human society.

The characters who become his companions also stand in marginalized positions. It is difficult to judge whether a child, Tom (William Dix), is a marginalized being or not, but since he is a socially immature child, it is difficult to say that he plays a central role in society in that the adults around him do not take his comments seriously even if he speaks out. Matthew mentions that he is Irish at the beginning of the film, and there are lines in which he seems proud of it. At the beginning of the story, the film informs us that the setting of the film is the fictional town of Puddleby in England, and considering this, it is conceivable that Matthew is also socially marginalized among the inhabitants. Furthermore, the original character of the film, Emma, is a woman. She is the niece of General Bellows (Peter Bull), who has a high-handed attitude toward Dr. Dolittle, such as assuming that Dr. Dolittle is a horse thief, even though the horse comes to Dr. Dolittle for a medical examination because the horse is nearsighted. Emma sings angrily on the way home against Dr. Dolittle and Matthew, who make remarks that mock General Bellows and disparage women

(45:47-49:21). At first, the lyrics express her anger at Dr. Dolittle, saying that if she were a man, she would claw his eyes out, kick him in the shins, and kill him without hesitation. However, in the middle of the song, she reveals her distress as a woman.

It seems a man can be as rude as he likes,  
crude as he likes, lewd as he likes to  
But a girl must be discreet as she can,  
sweet as she can, neat as she can too.  
But that's not the life that I want to lead  
Normal and formal as homespun tweed  
I need the freedom to go where I please  
But where do I please?  
I don't know... that's the trouble ...  
I don't know (46:25-47:25)

Men have no problem being rude or vulgar, but women have to be modest, pretty, and elegant, and she says she does not want to be that way. She wants freedom, but she wonders where she wants to go, and her complicated feelings are expressed in the lyrics. She is portrayed as a woman who questions traditional female roles, as feminists were claiming at the time of production. Thus, although Dr. Dolittle and the other characters around him have different positions, they all share the commonality of being marginalized.

As the story progresses, the audience understands Dr. Dolittle is not only described as a marginalized being but also criticizes humans from the standpoint of representing the marginalized animals. He works in a circus, where he meets Sophie, a seal that is sadly separated from her husband. Dr. Dolittle takes pity on her and lets her escape from the circus. When villagers see from the distance that she is dressed in human clothes and returns to the sea from a cliff, they mistake it for murder (1:05:57-1:15:42). Dr. Dolittle is arrested and put on trial. At the trial, he proves that he can talk with animals by talking with General Bellows' dog and is found not guilty of murder. However, General Bellows wants to commit Dr. Dolittle to asylum because, according to General Bellows, he is unable to distinguish between animals and humans and may be a threat to public safety (1:15:43-1:22:53). After being sentenced to the asylum, Dr. Dolittle sings a song criticizing the treatment of animals by humans (1:23:04-1:27:08). The first verse of the song is as follows:

I do not understand the human race,  
That has so little love  
for creatures with a different face  
Treating animals like people  
is no madness or disgrace  
I do not understand the human race. (1:23:04-1:23:21)

To exclude the marginalized who wish to speak as “different” and the lack of affection for creatures with a different face, as shown in the lyrics, are reminiscent of people of color who are subjected to racism. Furthermore, his song criticizes the treatment of animals by humans with specific examples of human

behavior—for example, being malicious toward animals, such as eating and beating them, metaphorical expressions that use animals to describe bad things, such as “eating like pigs,” and the use of animal skins and furs for clothing. Finally, he sings, “It’s true we do not live in a zoo, but man is an animal, too!” (1:26:45-1:26:55). He does not insist that he can talk with animals, but he criticizes humans from the standpoint of animals. The song is a powerful criticism of humans, who are animals themselves, but who mistreat them. It means that he is a representative of animals.

In this scene there are some shots of people reacting to Dr. Dolittle’s criticism, such as the judge who looks at Dr. Dolittle’s statement with surprise and the observers who cast their eyes down as if they look back at their own behavior and regret it. However, the scene basically consists of shots of Dr. Dolittle looking at the observers or the judge. The film is designed to give the impression that he is criticizing not only the humans in the film but also all humans, including the audience, and demanding that they correct their treatment of animals. It is worth noting that throughout the film there are few subjective shots of Dr. Dolittle. Furthermore, as I mentioned in the introduction, animal languages are expressed by animals’ sounds and movements, and the audience never hears what animals say. In *Film Art: An Introduction* (1979) Bordwell and Thompson state:

We might see shots taken from a character’s optical standpoint, the point-of-view shot, or hear sounds as the character would hear them what sound recordists call *sound perspective*. This would offer greater degree of subjectivity, one we might call *perceptual subjectivity*. (85)

By giving the audience what the characters in the film see or hear as well, they can achieve a deeper degree of subjectivity. In this film, on the other hand, the audience does not share what Dr. Dolittle sees and hears with him; instead they view his actions and statements at a distance from him. From this, we can see the filmmakers’ intention to include the audience in his criticism.

Thus, from the standpoint of marginalized animals, Dr. Dolittle criticizes the actions of humans who exist at the center. However, this does not change his sentence, and he is about to be transferred from jail to asylum. Matthew and his friends plan to help him escape, but it is Polynesia who actually lets him go: she gives orders to the horses pulling the carriage and the police dogs (1:36:04-1:37:02). In the original story, it is a nobleman named Sir William Peabody who gets Dr. Dolittle released from jail after he is accused of murder in the escape of Sophie. Sir William, who had previously debated with Dr. Dolittle about the appropriateness of fox hunting, tries to get the charges against Dr. Dolittle dropped, and Dr. Dolittle is released after an apology from the police sergeant (Lofting, *Doctor Dolittle The Complete Collection, Vol. 2* 157-161). Thus, in the novels, even people who would normally be the target of Dr. Dolittle’s criticism help him, and he is set free without violating any laws. On the other hand, in the film no humans appear to help him except for his companions, who are marginalized, and he is illegally set free with the help of animals. Here, again, the conflict between humans and animals is emphasized, giving the impression that Dr. Dolittle is a person who has been excluded from human society.

As mentioned above, the 1967 film reinforces the human-animal conflict by depicting Dr. Dolittle and his companions as marginalized people. He then criticizes the treatment of animals by humans and appeals to them to correct their behavior. The fact that Dr. Dolittle’s argument is presented in a distanced

manner, rather than directing the audience to sympathize with him, suggests that he is also condemning the audience. Catherine Elick describes the character of Lofting's Dr. Dolittle as follows:

After all, the subversive and liberating power of carnival is already at work in the world of these novels through the Doctor himself, who is a figure of misrule, a carnival king who mocks human authority and works to upend the hierarchy that places animals beneath people. (331)

According to Elick, Dr. Dolittle in novels is a figure of a carnival king who tries to overturn the hierarchy of human society that places animals under humans. Dr. Dolittle in the 1967 film is trying to disturb human society even more. He distances himself from humans and criticizes humans as a representative of marginalized animals.

Coincidentally, the representation of Dr. Dolittle matches Edward Said's vision of an intellectual. Said delivered what it means to be an intellectual in the BBC's Reith Lectures in 1993 and later, published *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994). In the book, he defines an intellectual as:

...the intellectual belongs on the same side with the weak and unrepresented...the intellectual, in my sense of the word, is neither a pacifier nor a consensus-builder, but someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do. Not just passively unwillingly, but actively willing to say so in public. (22-23)

Dr. Dolittle is an intellectual who has left the human side, standing with the animals, who are vulnerable and unrepresented, and criticizing humans on their behalf. Furthermore, Said states the task for an intellectual:

To this terribly important task of representing the collective suffering of your own people, testifying to its travails, reasserting its enduring presence, reinforcing its memory, there must be added something else, which only an intellectual, I believe, has the obligation to fulfill...For the intellectual the task, I believe, is explicitly to universalize the crisis, to give greater human scope to what a particular race or nation suffered, to associate that experience with the sufferings of others. (44)

Said insists that an intellectual should represent the weak, that is, the marginalized, and appeal to people to the problem of one group as a problem for all people. Through the character of Dr. Dolittle, the filmmakers are trying to fulfill the task of intellectual. They place minorities among his friends, and through their cooperation with Dr. Dolittle, they suggest that not only animals are marginalized and that the marginalized exist in humans.

#### 4. Conclusion

This paper takes as its starting point a feature found only in the 1967 film—animal characters in the film being voiceless—among the films based on Lofting's *Doctor Dolittle*. This film was produced at a time when people started to focus on the marginalized. It corresponds to the social context at the time of film production in which marginalized women and African-Americans were speaking out. Dr. Dolittle in the film is portrayed as a representative of the marginalized, and his words are critical of the humans at the



center in society. Dr. Dolittle, along with his marginalized companions, disturbs society by speaking for animals and criticizing humans. The fact that the animals do not speak makes this criticism all the more powerful. The audience does not experience what Dr. Dolittle hears in the same way that he does. The audience is not included in the marginalized Dr. Dolittle's group: the audience exists as the object of his criticism. It is not just a story of Dr. Dolittle's adventures but appeals to society as a whole to reflect on its own behavior toward the marginalized.

### Notes

This paper is an English translation of a part of my doctoral thesis presented to Nagoya University on November 30, 2020, with some additions and corrections.

1. In this paper, “animals” refers to “non-human animals,” which does not include humans as animals.
2. For the story of how Lofting got the idea for Dr. Dolittle, refer to the Afterword of the Japanese edition of *The Story of Doctor Dolittle* written by Masuji Ibuse in 1951.

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