

Rebecca Jamieson

Instructor Cowan

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## Humanity's Complex Relationship With The Natural World:

### an Exploration of Donald Hall's "Names of Horses"

In "Names of Horses," Donald Hall describes the hard work of generations of horses on a family farm and shows the complex and often troubling relationship between humans and animals. The horses in the poem are treated almost like machines – valued only for their use to the family, then killed when they are too old to work. This creates a seeming paradox: even though the act of farming puts the farmer in intimate relationship with the land and nature, by viewing the horses as expendable tools, the farmer is simultaneously creating a disconnect from the natural world, a preference for domination. If the farmer sees the horses simply as a means to an end, do they view the land in the same way – a resource to be exploited until there is nothing left to use?

Although Hall never states his relationship to the farm or the horses in the poem, he makes himself complicit simply by displaying his knowledge of the intimate details of the horses' lives and deaths. Hall also shows his own struggle with the necessity of the horses' labor to the family's survival, and the reality of how they are treated. His use of reverent and mournful language throughout the poem underscores this, and indeed, "Names of Horses" could be read as a elegy for not only the horses, but for humanity's disconnect from the natural world as well.

“Names of Horses” follows the cycle of nature, linked with the cycle of the farm-horses’ lives, beginning in winter and ending in autumn, with images of nature used throughout the poem. Farming and animals are also central to the poem, and Hall includes images of machinery as well, all topics that ecocriticism uses to analyze literature. Images of tools and machinery Hall references include the Glenwood stove, mowing machine, clawed rake, wagon, buggy, and shotgun. That the images of tools and machinery so consistently appear throughout the poem, interwoven with the lives and work of the horses, conveys the feeling that the horses are also tools, part of the larger system of production the family uses to sustain themselves. The second and fifth stanzas each contain one line that is indented and contains only one word: “machine” in the second and “morning” in the fifth (qtd. in Kennedy and Gioia, 420). These stand-alone words, when combined with the first and last words of the poem, “Winter” and “Ghost,” show the heart of what Hall is conveying: the cycles of nature are tied to the passage of the horses’ lives, and the horses are used as machines by the humans and eventually turned into ghosts by them as well (420).

Hall uses other images to show the horses’ role: “All winter your brute shoulders strained against collars,” simultaneously evokes the harshness of winter, the strength of the horses, and the fact that their energy is being used in servitude to humans (qtd. in Kennedy and Gioia, 420). “In April, you pulled cartloads of manure to spread on the fields, dark manure of Holsteins, and knobs of your own clustered with oats,” creates an image of the horses actually recycling themselves back into the ground – something that is necessary for any functional ecosystem. But it becomes eerie when coupled with a similar image at the poem’s end – when they are no longer of use to the farmer the horses are shot, their bodies also recycled into the ground in “the pasture of dead horses,” where the “roots of pine trees pushed through the pale curves of your ribs”

(420). The line, “Sundays you trotted two miles to church with a light load,” is ironic because although the humans are the “light load,” in reality they are the ones asking this endless toil from the horses – quite a heavy load indeed (420).

One could argue that using horses for agrarian needs was justifiable since the family couldn't survive without them, and that the horses are being fed and sheltered in “exchange” for their labor. This argument could be seen as valid from a limited perspective, but it fails to address the larger-reaching mentality of domination over animals and nature that has been taken to an extreme by today's culture and is wreaking catastrophic damage to the environment. Jonathan Bate, one of the foremost scholars on ecocriticism, says in his foreword to *The Green Studies Reader*, “The relationship between nature and culture is the key intellectual problem of the twenty-first century” (xvii). And indeed, this problem does seem to be at the very heart of the current environmental dilemma our planet faces: how do we change a system of environmental exploitation when we have forgotten how to survive in any other way, and in fact our entire culture is based around it? The tragedy is that we are deluding ourselves by thinking we will survive with this limited mentality. By degrading everything around us, we are destroying our own lives and our future as a species, not to mention the future of countless other beings.

An explication of “Names of Horses” Chris Semansky takes a different view of the poem: “A seemingly unblinking and unsentimental paean to the generations of horses which have labored on the Hall farm, Donald Hall's poem, 'Names of Horses,' praises the idea of work, particularly physical work, as much as it praises the horses themselves. By describing the typical life of one family horse, Hall characterizes all of them and their importance to his family” (Semansky). Although Semansky's analysis highlights the importance of the horses to the farm, he does not address the larger implications of humanity's dominance over animals and nature and

the problems caused by it. But by focusing on Hall's reverence for work, Semansky raises an interesting point – he references Hall's book *Life Work*, in which he quotes Hall as saying he never “worked” a day in his life – at least in the way that his ancestors (and the horses in the poem) did by engaging in manual labor. Semansky theorizes that Hall romanticizes manual labor and perhaps the pastoral life as well, a view that relates to an excerpt from Jonathan Bate's essay “From Red to Green.” Bate says of pastoral poetry, “...it is not really written by shepherds, it is a comforting aristocratic fantasy that covers up the real conditions of oppression and exploitation in the feudal and neo-feudal agrarian economies” (qtd. in Coupe, 170).

The idea that Hall may in fact be romanticizing the pastoral even as he struggles to come to terms with the exploitation of farm-horses is especially interesting when we consider that the farm Hall writes of, Eagle Pond, is actually his grandparents' farm. Hall spent many childhood summers there and it had a profound affect on him and his development as a poet. He said in an interview, “All my life I've written about this place. Prose and poetry both. When I came up here from Connecticut, from the age of twelve when I started writing poems, this was the place of poetry. Although I worked on poems in the suburbs where I spent the school-time of the year, I always felt like a stranger there” (Hall).

Although Hall's connection to the Eagle Pond is obvious, the humans in the poem are strangely absent of any distinguishing characteristics – we learn nothing of their physical appearance, names, etc., though at the poem's end, the names of the horses are given their own line. The humans in the poem are only important in how they shape the horses' lives and deaths and Hall takes a somewhat detached tone when speaking about them – the reader feels no connection to them and empathizes solely with the horses, which suggests Hall's conflicting feelings. This is especially apparent in the description of “the man, who fed you and kept you,

and harnessed you every morning,” who with no discernible emotion, “lay the shotgun's muzzle in the boneless hollow behind your ear, and fired the slug into your brain, and felled you into your grave” (qtd. in Kennedy and Gioia, 420). The word “muzzle” evokes an image of the horse's own muzzle, creating an eerie parallel between a machine designed to kill and a living being. The matter-of-fact description of the man killing an animal who has served him for its entire life is juxtaposed with last line of the poem, standing alone, almost a hymn in itself, cementing the feeling that we are reading an elegy: “O Roger, Mackerel, Riley, Ned, Nellie, Chester, Lady Ghost” (420). But it is not an unknown person who has benefitted from the horses and then slaughter them – it is Hall's own family, and by inheritance, Hall is also part of this relationship with and exploitation of the horses. This leads the reader to conclude that the poem was written, at least in part, as a way for Hall to come to terms with his family's – and indeed, humanity's – complicity in the cycle of exploitation he describes.

### Works Cited

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