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Dangerous Pets, Misguided Owners: The Pitfalls of Pet-Keeping in T.C. Boyle's Stories

Abstract: The present article is an attempt to look at the human-animal relationship in selected stories from T. Coraghessan Boyle's two collections: *Tooth and Claw* (2006) and *Wild Child* (2010). In "Thirteen Hundred Rats," "Tooth and Claw" and "Admiral" Boyle ponders on human motivations behind such controversial contemporary practices as keeping exotic pets, hoarding animals and cloning dogs. The stories focus on the dark side of pet-keeping, rarely touched upon in literary representations of this widespread social practice. Boyle seems to doubt the sincerity of human devotion to animal companions, presenting characters who acquire unusual or exotic pets for purely utilitarian or egotistical reasons. In Boyle's stories human dominance over life and death of pets symbolizes human power over nature. Yet these fantasies of power prove illusionary when exotic or unusual pets (python, serval, rats) transform civilized domestic space of the characters' homes into the uncivilized "jungle." In a sense, abused animals take symbolic revenge on their irresponsible caretakers. Dog-cloning, in turn, is presented as a misguided attempt to combat death, a means to provide immortality for a dog, which is treated both as a surrogate child and a status symbol by his millionaire owners.

Keywords: T.C. Boyle, short story, pet-keeping in literature, exotic pets, animal hoarding, dog cloning, human-animal relationship

Pets became an integral part of the middle-class family life in the United States in the nineteenth century. A happy and respectable middle-class household could not be complete without a family dog on the front lawn or cats, canaries or parrots in the living room. Pets were not only kept for pleasure—love and kindness to animals were also a visible proof of high moral standards of the family members. According to Katherine C. Grier, "the domestic ethic of kindness evolved from ideas that defined middle-class, or 'Victorian,' culture in America: gentility, liberal evangelical Protestant religion, and domesticity" (131). Prior to the Victorian era, pet-keeping was seen at best as a leisurely pursuit of the rich, stemming from personal extravagance or perverted maternal instinct. It was in the nineteenth century that care for domestic animals came to be seen as instrumental in teaching children important moral values and useful social virtues. As a result, pet-human relationship was idealized with happy pets cast in the stereotypical roles of loyal friends and children's playmates.

While most proponents of pet-keeping at that time focused on childhood, some of them also commented on the therapeutic value of pets for lonely adults: "The companionship of cats and birds in solitary lives has unquestionably kept more people than we suspect out of the insane asylum; and if friendless men took kindly to them, there would be fewer misers, drunkards, and criminals than there are now"

(qtd. in Grier 179). The tendency to associate pets with the quality of life—quite a novel idea at the turn of the nineteenth century—is at present seen as a dominant rationale behind pet-keeping. Positive influence of companion animals, especially dogs, upon human health has been confirmed by medical research (Wells 145-156). Sociologists who study interactions with pets have recently argued that dogs and cats not only function as non-human family members for many single people but also provide much needed social support as their presence helps to overcome social isolation and to make new friends in the neighborhood (Wood et al. 1-2).

Even though companion animals are no longer expected to improve one's moral character but rather one's health and social life, present-day Americans, much like their Victorian ancestors, are eager to find out more about various aspects of the human-animal relationship. There is a surge of interest in animal ethology and animal psychology. "The secret life of pets" has been analyzed and explained in countless training manuals and popular science books addressed at a general reader. Animals and human interactions with them have also recently become a legitimate topic of scholarly research. Explaining "the animal turn" in the humanities, Kari Weil suggests that it "grows out of, on the one hand, a weariness with post-structuralism's linguistic turn and a resulting search for a postlinguistic and perhaps posthuman sublime and, on the other hand, an often conflicting turn to ethics that raises the question of our human responsibility to the animal-other" (xx). Ethical concerns are in fact of primary importance to Critical Animal Studies (CAS) whose practitioners combine scholarly research with animal advocacy hoping "to eliminate the oppression of nonhuman animals in all social contexts" (DeMello 17). While Human-Animal studies (HAS), as DeMello asserts, are "not about animal advocacy" they cannot be seen as divorced from real-life human-animal interactions. Cultural or literary scholars who examine the bond with animals in culture or literature produce knowledge which is likely to affect their readers' attitude to the animal question (DeMello 17). In other words, taking real animals and their literary representations seriously may make readers aware of the existence of some ethical quandaries inherent, for example, in such a popular social practice as pet-keeping.

The present article is an attempt to look at the human-animal relationship in selected stories from T. Coraghessan Boyle's two collections: *Tooth and Claw* (2006) and *Wild Child* (2010). The titles point to some recurrent themes in Boyle's oeuvre, namely his preoccupation with mankind's place in nature and the human/animal divide. The stories—"Thirteen Hundred Rats," "Tooth and Claw" and "Admiral"—can also be read from Animal Studies' perspective as Boyle ponders in them on human motivations behind such controversial contemporary practices as keeping exotic pets, hoarding animals and cloning dogs. In fact, Boyle's objections to these phenomena raised in the stories evoke—indirectly or directly—arguments used in similar cases in the real life.

The species earliest domesticated by humans—dogs and cats—are still the most popular animals kept as pets in American households. According to *American Pet Product Manufacturers Association*, there are more than 94 million cats and

almost 90 million dogs living in the American houses in 2017 (“Pet Industry”). A prevalent view that a dog or a cat (rather than a fish, bird or exotic snake) is an appropriate companion for a lonely person is the premise for “Thirteen Hundred Rats.” The story is set in a secluded village—“a model of Utopian living”—which was designed and built one hundred years ago by some wealthy industrialist (Boyle, *Wild Child* 182). The fact that it is now inhabited by affluent, upper-middle class professionals, frequently childless by choice, has fostered “a closeness and uniformity of outlook you wouldn’t find in some of the newer developments” as the story’s narrator proudly claims (182). The members of this sheltered and privileged community, which evokes John Cheever’s vision of American suburbs, think of themselves as model neighbors.

The narrator, acting as a voice of the village, tells a curious tale of Gerard, a man “who never in his life had a pet of any kind until his wife died” (182). The opening sentence not only sets Gerard apart from most Americans but also seems to suggest that such lack of experience with pets may have some dire consequences. After his wife’s death Gerard succumbs to depression. He is thin and haggard, he wears dirty clothes and he neglects his house so the concerned neighbors suggest a perfect solution: “He should have a dog, people said” (182). At first, Gerard stubbornly refuses to follow this folk wisdom but eventually he does buy a pet—young Burmese python. As can be expected, the narrator is dismayed at this extravagant choice: “It was just that a snake wasn’t what we’d in mind. Snakes didn’t fetch, didn’t bound into the car panting their joy, didn’t speak when you held a rawhide bone just above shoulder level and twitched it invitingly. As far as I knew, they didn’t do much of anything except exist. And bite” (185). In short, wild and potentially dangerous snakes do not make proper pets. In this comment, the narrator refers back to his own experiences with companion animals, experiences which Gerard unfortunately lacks. However, when the narrator ponders on his own relationship with pets, it becomes clear that his attitude is more utilitarian than emotional. The narrator’s dogs—a pair of shelties named Tim and Tim II—are kept to provide daily exercise during the walks. Additionally, their energy and friendliness is to cheer one’s up—according to the article quoted in the story “ninety-three percent of pet owners say their pets make them smile at least once a day” (182). The role of the two chattering lorikeets is to create “a tranquil background to our evening by the fireplace” with their chatter, while a fat angelfish in a tank serves as a decoration of his otherwise austere study (182).

Satirizing both the narrator’s expertise about pets and his snug complacency, Boyle seems to ask about the real motivations behind contemporary pet-keeping fad. Have not pets simply become one more commodity required to live a healthy and comfortable life? According to a recent APPA survey, American pet owners tend to perceive themselves as people who are “health conscious, like to look [their] best and like to exercise with [their] pet. [They] are also happy and maintain a well-organized home” (Anderson 84). All the inhabitants of the village, except for Gerard, fit the above description and it is quite obvious to the reader that their devotion to companion animals stems from practical, rather than sentimental, reasons.

In the light of these largely anthropocentric and utilitarian views on the role of pets in human life, the narrator's dismay at the snake is understandable—it is not really a domesticated animal and it is neither useful as a companion nor can it create a cozy, domestic atmosphere. As such, it has no therapeutic potential for Gerard. Moreover, Gerard is far from a responsible pet guardian as he has bought the snake on a whim and treats it only as a curiosity, clearly enjoying the narrator's reaction of shocked disbelief. The name he wants to give to the young python—Siddhartha—evokes Oriental mysticism rather than closeness and familiarity. As can be predicted, Gerard quickly gets bored with the python and when the snake freezes to death during a power cut, it is not missed. In the meantime, the lonely widower becomes fascinated with a live rat, originally bought for the snake's dinner. Again acting on a whim, Gerard saves its life and the rat, named Robbie after Gerard's brother, soon becomes his true pet—it sleeps in his bed, eats morsels of his food and accompanies him everywhere, perched on his arm. Since rats are social creatures, Gerard decides to buy more rodents to keep Robbie's company, disregarding the warning of the pet store shop assistant that the species breed quickly.

Unlike a dog, which would facilitate interaction with neighbors during the walks, the “pets” that Gerard has chosen deepen his social seclusion. He loses interest in any contacts with the neighbors, rejects invitations to dinners and turns into a recluse, leaving the unkempt house only to buy food for his growing colony of rats. When the smell emanating from the house finally alarms the neighbors, it is too late. Gerard is found dead—ostensibly from pneumonia—among approximately thirteen hundred rats. Wondering what made his neighbor “sunk so low” the narrator states:

There must have been some deep character flaw in him that none of us had recognized—he'd chosen a snake for a pet, for God's sake, and that low animal had somehow morphed into this horde of creatures that could only be described as pests, as vermin, as enemies of mankind that should be exterminated, not nurtured.... [H]ow could he allow even a single one of them to come near him, to fall under the caress of his hand, to sleep with him, eat with him, breathe the same air? (195)

Rats, associated in Western culture with poverty, dirt, plague and death, have always been treated as humans' rivals and enemies, and they inspired revulsion and terror rather than sympathy (Sax 201). By adopting “pests” as his pets Gerard violates the arbitrary yet still powerful social and cultural division between tame/safe versus wild/dangerous animals. From a functional and symbolic perspective pets are “kept in or near a human household, are relatively controllable and cared for by humans, and are either domesticated or at least tame” (DeMello 149). While a single rat can perhaps become a pet, a whole colony of them cannot be tamed or kept under control. As a result, in his final period of life Gerard is at the mercy of these “low” animals, living only to satisfy their needs and neglecting his own. His horrifying demise reveals the scope of his self-deception. He has symbolically and literally forsaken

the civilized human world with its norms and rules in order to share with his pe(s)ts chaotic and violent world of nature “red in tooth and claw.” This is no place for a psychologically unstable and physically frail widower, who feels “overwhelmed” by the “force of nature” as he confesses in his final conversation with the narrator (Boyle, *Wild Child* 194).

In classic horror tales, for example in Lovecraft's “Rats in the Wall,” the rat is the agent of fear and human dissolution not only in a physical but also in a mental sense (Burt 10). In “Thirteen Hundred Rats” Boyle relies on the same trope—the growing number of rats in the house symbolizes Gerard's growing insanity. The abhorrent smell—first the smell of unwashed human body, then the smell of deposited animal excrements in the house—suggests the character's regression into the animal state of existence, beyond cleanliness, reason and rationality. Unlike his neighbors, who are nauseated by the idea of sharing a house with a colony of rats, Gerard finds rats oddly fascinating. His inability or unwillingness to interfere with the breeding habits of pests remains a mystery but the results are disastrous. Hungry, maddened rats which breed, fight and cannibalistically devour one another, transform a safe domestic space into a nightmarish arena of primal struggle. Not merely dirty and chaotic, Gerard's house becomes uncivilized because the conventional societal norms regulating domestic animals' behavior, eating and excretion have been abandoned.

On another level, for all its stock horror elements, the story can also be read as an fictionalized account of a mental disorder called “animal hoarding” characterized by the compulsive need to collect and own pets. According to the recent estimates, there are 700 to 2000 cases of animal hoarding reported in the United States every year (Arluke et al. 114). Some researchers point out that this “deviant expression of the human-animal bond” should be in fact treated as a third dimension of animal abuse because it leads to physical and psychological suffering of animals and frequently ends in their death (Patronek 221). Typically, the collected animals are concealed inside the hoarder's homes which, as a result, become unsanitary and unfit for human habitation (Patronek 222-223). Paradoxically, animal hoarders often act on good intentions but then are unable to provide adequate amount of food and proper living conditions for a growing number of animals (Arluke et al. 114). “Thirteen Hundred Rats,” much like real-life press reports of animal hoarding, mixes drama, revulsion and humor in its presentation of Gerard's case. However, while most actual hoarders are motivated by “love” for animals and wish to “rescue” feral cats or stray dogs from the harsh life on the streets, Gerard starts his collection primarily because it gives him a sense of power. As the narrator asserts: “He felt like a god, like a Roman emperor with the power of fatality in his thumb” (189). Yet, as the story develops, this sense of power proves illusory because the animals eventually take control of the house and cause his death.

A similar motif of a wild animal which is supposed to function as a pet but instead wreaks havoc in the domestic space and in his owner's life is employed in “Tooth and Claw.” The title of the story clearly alludes to Tennyson's famous phrase “Nature red in tooth and claw,” which sums up a post-Darwinian concept of nature

as brutal and amoral. A first-person narrator of “Tooth and Claw” is Junior, a young worker in his twenties, living in a town where he has no friends or relatives. Every afternoon he goes to Daggett’s, a local bar, where, one day, he unexpectedly wins a serval—the feral African cat. The caged cat is won in a play of dice; this fact as well as the title of the story suggest that Junior is a pawn in a play of forces he can neither understand nor control.

The plot of the story may seem unusual but servals and other wild cats, including tigers, are indeed kept as pets in the United States. It is estimated that there are more tigers currently living in the American homes or being displayed in private zoos (between 5,000-10,000) than there are left in the wild worldwide (approx. 3,200) (Mosbergen). Unfortunately, proper supervision of exotic pets’ owners and control over their treatment of animals is poor because state laws and regulations are insufficient or even non-existent. Animal welfare organizations, which try to monitor exotic pets, point out that nobody knows how many such animals are owned and bred by the individuals or what happens to them when they die (Mosbergen). There is a suspicion that some exotic animals may fuel the exotic pet trade, which has become a multi-billion dollar industry in the United States, making it the second largest importer of wildlife after China (qtd. in Klossner).

Why do people keep wild animals as pets? Some Animal studies scholars see an analogy between economic and cultural subordination of the foreign, exotic peoples by the European colonial powers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the contemporary desire to possess and display an exotic animal in one’s home (Klossner). In the past, only the kings and princes could afford to maintain zoos or menageries which testified to their wealth and power (Ritvo 206). Even today exotic animals are much rarer, harder to obtain and more difficult to maintain so tigers, bears or apes kept in the house point to the high social status of their owners. Moreover, the wild animal may be attractive for some people precisely because of its wildness: “it is less subservient... unpredictable and won’t take orders. The owners also often want to prove that they have power over it and to shock people” (Derr). It is noteworthy that gender may also influence exotic pet preferences. While male owners prefer dangerous predators, women are more likely to adopt “cute” creatures (Derr).

In Boyle’s story, the wild cat certainly functions as a symbol of masculine power and sexual attractiveness. The first owner of the serval is presented as an intriguing and self-confident young man. As soon as he enters the bar, he attracts everyone’s attention with an extravagant order of two raw eggs for his wild cat. Clearly, owning the wild animal puts this man in a position of power, the position Junior himself craves, that is why he agrees to play dice with a stranger. Immediately, the regulars take notice of the shy young man and Daria, an attractive waitress, offers to drive him home, helps with carrying the cage and feeding the animal.

For Junior, the animal is first and foremost a means to get closer to the girl. He is fascinated with the cat’s otherness but also afraid of it: “The cat flowed like a molten ore from one corner of the room to the other, its yellow eyes fixed

on the door, the dun, faintly spotted skin stretched like spandex over its seething muscles (Boyle, *Tooth and Claw* 218). Daria, in turn, is definitely more interested in the exotic cat than its accidental owner but she chooses to erase the animal's otherness by treating the pacing predator as if it were a scared domestic cat: "Nice kitty," Daria cooed. "Does he want out of that awful cage? Hmm? Does he? And meat—does he want meat?" (215). The girl's reaction seems absurd yet somehow understandable—she simply resorts to the type interaction familiar to her from her personal experiences with domestic cats. Daria wishes to tame the wild serval, turn it into "a nice kitty." According to Serpell, keeping wild animals at home is always a source of tension because "People want them wild, but they also want them to behave" (qtd. in Derr). Most exotic species, including big cats, cannot fulfill these contradictory expectations and it is no different with the cat in the story.

Nevertheless, Junior has homemaking fantasies connected with the wild cat—he envisions the girl falling in love with him and moving into his flat. They will "look after the big cat together, see to its needs, tame it and make it happy in its new home—no more cages, and meat, plenty of meat" (224). In other words, he dreams about them as a happy couple with the serval in the role of a pet child which strengthens the bond between the parents. This vision of domestic bliss is as naïve and unrealistic as Daria's syrupy baby-talk directed at the cat yet it is not totally divorced from life since at least some young couples treat caring for a pet as a good practice before becoming parents.

Just like Gerard in "Thirteen Hundred Rats," Junior has no prior experience with pets and treats the animal as an object that can be exchanged and discarded at will. In contrast to Daria, he feels no sympathy for the cat. He is afraid of being left on his own with the dangerous animal. The cat, released from the cage, is pacing the tiny bedroom and soon starts demolishing it: "The carpeting—every last strip of it—had been torn out of the floor, leaving an expanse of dirty plywood studded with nails, and there seemed to be a hole in the plasterboard just to the left of the window. A substantial hole. Even through the closed door I could smell the reek of cat piss or spray or whatever it was" (222). Even though Daria assures Junior that the cat will soon settle down, this seems very unlikely and he feels even more resentment towards the unlucky serval: "The only thing I did know was that there was no way I was going to attempt to feed that thing on my own, not without Daria there. It could starve for all I cared, starve and rot" (226). In his interior monologue the cat has now become a dangerous, unpredictable "thing." There is no possibility of taming it, the only solution seems to be releasing the animal before it attacks the owner.

Junior's immaturity and lack of control over his life is evident not only from the fact that a stranger in the bar so easily maneuvered him into accepting the wild cat but also from his internal dilemmas. Junior lacks self-assurance, he constantly wonders about how he should act or what people may think of him or say to him. He gets drunk to give himself some confidence but alcohol only makes him rash and reckless. When he finally decides to solve the problem of the cat he acts in a totally irresponsible way as he steals a ladder and leaves it below the open bedroom

window. Only after that decision, as he returns to the flat and looks at a makeshift den that the serval has built in the ruined room, he begins “to feel something for the cat, for its bewilderment, its fear and distrust of an alien environment: this was no rocky *kopje*, this was my bedroom on the second floor of a run-down apartment building in a seaside town a whole continent and a fathomless ocean away from its home” (228). At this point Boyle establishes a parallel between the lost young man and the restless young cat—both are far away from home and both feel out of place. The story has an open ending since it is unclear whether the cat has really escaped the room. In the last scene Junior enters the bedroom and suddenly closes the door shut behind him as if ready to face the possible predator’s attack.

Both “Thirteen Thousand Rats” and “Tooth and Claw” present cases of pet-keeping gone awry, mainly because the animals kept as pets do not really belong into this category. The wildness of snakes, rats or servals makes them act on their instincts. These species are not social, expecting them to become companion animals stems from human ignorance. They cannot adapt to life in a closed space. Moreover, these animals have been acquired to boost their owners self-esteem and attract attention of others. Gerard is pleased when the snake causes a stir among his neighbors. Since no one has even thought about buying such an extravagant pet, he may feel superior to those who keep ordinary dogs and cats. The wild serval in “Tooth and Claw” is also an exotic “pet” which ensures Junior’s instant, if short-lasting, popularity with Daria and recognition from the people at Daggett’s. It is obvious that he does not want the animal but human interest that comes with it. In both stories animals are treated in an instrumental way and their actual needs are disregarded. Introduced into domestic space, semi-tamed rats and the wild cat gnaw and tear at house furnishings, urinate and defecate on the carpets thus transforming orderly “civilized” space of a human house into “uncivilized” smelly dens unfit for human habitation. In a sense, abused animals take symbolic revenge on their irresponsible caretakers and dispel their fantasies of male power and domination.

Gerard and Junior’s fascination with otherness proves disastrous—confrontation with “the beast” introduced into the house reveals fundamental weakness of these men. Dangerous pets get out of control because their owners are unable to exercise control over their own lives and destinies. Gerard’s rat-like existence in the final days of his life means he has indeed “sunk so low” as to violate all the taboos regarding personal and domestic cleanliness, order and safety. The price for forsaking humanity is high—Gerard loses his house, his mind, and eventually his life. Compared to Gerard, Junior has fared better and survived his failed pet-keeping experiment, yet there is no indication that he has learned any lesson from it.

The third story I want to discuss—“Admiral”—also offers a comment on pet-keeping as a social practice but this time the target of Boyle’s satire is excessive love for a dog combined with complete disregard for the feelings of fellow humans who happen to be below the owners on a socio-economic scale. Obviously, this is a familiar theme in literature devoted to pets and their masters. Eighteenth-century British moralists often relied “on a common contemporary association between

women, fashion and pet keeping” castigating aristocratic ladies for lavishing all their love and tenderness on spoiled lap-dogs while neglecting needs of the poor (Tague 293). In Boyle’s contemporary rendition of this familiar narrative the role of heartless aristocrats is played by the Strikers, middle-aged Californian millionaires and the pampered dog is Admiral, a purebred Afghan hound. When the beloved dog is hit by a car and dies, the Strikers decide to clone him and in order to complete the process of upbringing, they employ Nisha, an African-American college graduate who used to take care of Admiral I. The girls’ task is to repeat all the youthful experiences—except for the risky ones—of the original dog in order to “produce” exact replica of the dead Admiral.

The story is narrated from Nisha’s point of view and centers on her internal conflict: she accepts the Strikers’ generous offer because she needs this easy money for her sick mother, yet, at the same time, she feels exploited and doing the job much below her qualifications and aspirations.

As for the dog, she tried to be conscientious about the whole business of imprinting it with the past—or a past—though she felt ridiculous. Four years of college for this? Wars were being fought, people were starving, there were diseases to conquer, children to educate, good to do in the world, and here she was reliving her adolescence in the company of an inbred semi-retarded clown of a cloned Afghan hound because two childless rich people decreed it should be so. (*Tooth and Claw* 153)

For Nisha, the idea to spend so much money and energy to (re)create the “perfect dog” seems crazy and absurd but initially she treats it only as an extravagance of the very rich and does not think about any ethical implications of the process or her own role in it.

“Admiral” can be read as a fictional equivalent of “the pampered pet tale,” a subcategory of pet reportage about the dogs owned by the millionaires (Schaffer 26). Such purebred pet celebrities like Paris Hilton’s tiny chihuahuas are usually treated as status symbols. Much like other fashionable accessories they are displayed in order to confirm celebrity status of their mistress. Even though these dogs have their own staff and all their needs—both real and imagined—are immediately satisfied, they function mainly as ornaments, not as companions. Pampered pet tales speak of extravagant lifestyles of the very rich and usually evoke a combination of amazement and disdain in the general reader.

Little Admiral II also enjoys a celebrity status in Boyle’s story. Moreover, much like purebred dogs of the European royal families or the English gentry, this unique puppy confirms high social position of the Strikers—after all not everybody can afford to pay 250 000 \$ to clone a dog. No wonder his owners are eager to talk to the press and proudly inform Nisha about the articles in both *Newsweek* and *USA Today* featuring their story. It is interesting to contrast the Strikers’ self-promotion and thirst for fame with the much more reserved behavior of their real life counterparts—a millionaire couple from Texas who launched the Missyplicity

Project in 1998 to clone their family dog—Missy. Missy’s owners wished to remain anonymous, redirecting instead the media’s attention to Missy and the project itself. Another crucial difference lies in Admiral’s and Missy’s respective pedigree—while the former is a purebred Afghan hound, Missy was a mixed-breed bitch. According to Susan McHugh, the fact that her owners invested two millions dollars to clone a mongrel family dog sets the Missyplicity Project apart from earlier cloning experiments: “By attempting to clone an animal who, from the standpoint of the burgeoning ‘technoscientific’ animal industries, represents a non-human-regulated and therefore worthless genetic record, the Missyplicity Project, in its object-choice, moves against the tide of economically driven science in the Genetic Age” (181). Though the researchers engaged in the original project did not manage to produce Missy’s clone, genetic material from Missy has been later used to produce her three clones at the Sooam Biotech Research Foundation in Seoul in 2005. Missy was not the world’s first cloned dog, however, because earlier in 2005 South Korean researcher Woo Suk Hwang and his team at Seoul National University proudly presented Snuppy to the world.¹ Like the Striker’s Admiral, Snuppy was an Afghan hound. In his tale, Boyle combines elements from these two, much publicized, real-life stories of cloned dogs but he seems less interested in bioethical dilemmas² than in human motivations behind the decision to clone a family dog.

In “Admiral” these motivations are far from noble. In the words of Erhard, animal right activist and journalist who befriends Nisha, the Strikers clone their dog “to satisfy their own solipsistic desires” (160). Indeed, the Strikers are presented as one-dimensional, stereotypical millionaires: egotistical, emotionally withdrawn, convinced that money can provide solutions to all the problems. They have no children so the dog clearly functions as a surrogate “perfect” offspring—well-bred and well-mannered. Admiral’s oil portrait in the living room confirms the dog’s high position in the family. Erhard, with his leftist views, dismisses the couple’s love for the dog as an example of “bourgeois excess” and certainly Mrs. Striker’s emphasis on her dog’s pedigree and its exceptionality can be read as a manifestation of upper-class snobbery.

It is probably not accidental that the story is set in California, the state whose inhabitants are known for their obsession with wealth, youth, and fitness. Death is not allowed into an enclave of wealth and comfort that the Strikers created, isolating themselves from the mundane reality by state-of-the-art security systems and high walls. They refuse to accept any changes—when Nisha reenters their house after a

1 The decision to clone the dog was considered controversial because, unlike cloning for agricultural purposes or for biomedical research it could not have been justified with advancement of science or medicine for the greater human good (Fiester 34). Moreover, the procedure was exorbitantly costly and detrimental to health of the animal donors involved in the procedures; out of more than a thousand extracted eggs implanted in 123 surrogates only two embryos developed properly and only one puppy survived to grow into an adult dog (Brownlee 83).

2 Some of these dilemmas are discussed in Haraway 133-157.

few years' absence she is surprised that everything looks exactly as it did in the past. Their refusal to accept death as a part of life speaks about "a larger symptom in our culture of not dealing with death" (qtd. in Fiester 37). By cloning a pet, the owners are making a statement about its irreplaceability—they do not wish to adopt or buy another dog of the same breed. They seem emotionally unprepared to face grief and too afraid of change to open up to the possibility of loving another pet. Thus, cloning becomes a biotechnological weapon to win the war with death, a means to provide immortality for a beloved animal.

Sadly, both for Erhard and for the Strikers, the dogs are more important than people. Convinced of his own righteousness, the young man wishes to prove that the couple would not be able to distinguish their precious pup from another, ordinarily bred Afghan hound. Nisha, infatuated with him, agrees to have Admiral II replaced with Erhard's dog but Mrs. Striker immediately recognizes the switch. Even though Erhard's animal rights zeal seems sincere it is obvious that he treats Nisha in an instrumental way. The Strikers buy her dog-sitting services with money while Erhard uses his masculine charm to seduce the girl and thus ensure her assistance. When the plan fails, he disappears without a word. Once again, Nisha has been treated as a pawn in a big game played by others. Eventually, as the conclusion of the story suggests, her quiet rebellion is likely to undo the whole perfect scheme as she is planning to teach Admiral II all the risky behaviors that contributed to his predecessor's death.

"Show me your pet and I will tell you who you are"—Boyle is telling the readers in his animal stories. Unlike the authors of funny, sentimental pet memoirs like Grogan's *Marley and Me*, he does not focus on positive aspects of pet-keeping and is far from exploring the depth of emotional bonds between pets and their guardians. Exotic or unusual pets in his stories become a source of problems, rather than a source of joy. The very decision to welcome them into the civilized domestic space defies both common sense and self-preservation instinct. Principal characters in "Thirteen Hundred Rats" and "Tooth and Claw" believe in human control over the natural world. Confrontation with a colony of rodents or an African predator reveals their physical and psychological weaknesses and inability to supervise these dangerous pe(s)ts. Consequently, wild animals transform the civilized human space into "the jungle" where only the fittest will survive and the weak will perish.

Though fictitious, Boyle stories are based on sound observations of the American society. As a humorist, he is interested both in some general trends in pet-keeping (exotic pets, pet cloning) as well as aberrations in the human-animal relationship (instrumental treatment of animals, animal hoarding). To some extent, these stories can be read as cautionary tales, warning the readers against a role reversal in the human-animal relationship. According to Thomas Cusick, president of the American Animal Hospital Association: "Pets are clearly becoming an integral part of the American family, enjoying much of the same attention, care, and treatment that is given to a child or spouse" (qtd. in Fiester 37). Indeed, Boyle's characters invest time, money and feelings in a relationship with an animal "child"

instead of caring for their own offspring. It is hardly a coincidence that all the married couples presented in these stories are childless by choice. As the narrator in “Thirteen Hundred Rats” recalls, he and Gerard used to “bask in an air of mutual congratulation over our separate decisions not to complicate our lives with the burden of children” (183). What seemed a complication and burden in the days of youth is not necessarily perceived in the same way by an elderly, lonely person. Pets are easier to care of but cannot help their elderly owners and satisfy their needs in the same way as their children would. Far from alleviating the loneliness, inappropriate pets may even deepen the sense of social isolation and plunge their misguided owners into madness.

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