Anthropomorphism

DEFINITION

What is anthropomorphism? Here's a quick and simple definition:

> Anthropomorphism is the attribution of human characteristics, emotions, and behaviors to animals or other non-human things (including objects, plants, and supernatural beings). Some famous examples of anthropomorphism include Winnie the Pooh, the Little Engine that Could, and Simba from the movie *The Lion King*.

Some additional key details about anthropomorphism:

- A character is anthropomorphic if they are *not* human but behave like a human.
- Anthropomorphism can occur in many kinds of stories, but it is especially common in folktales, fantasy, and children's stories.
- Anthropomorphism is related to, but distinct from personification, in which things are described figuratively (rather than literally) as having human characteristics.

Anthropomorphism Pronunciation

Here's how to pronounce anthropomorphism: an-thro-poh-**more**-fizz-um.

Anthropomorphism Explained

It's likely that some of your favorite stories from childhood made use of anthropomorphism in one way or another. Classic children's stories like *The Tale of Peter Rabbit*, *The Berenstain Bears* series, *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*, and *The Giving Tree* all feature anthropomorphic characters. Anthropomorphism also features prominently in folk tales, mythology, and religious stories: for example, in the biblical book of Genesis, Eve is tempted into eating from the Tree of Knowledge by a talking serpent. Here are some other important facts about anthropomorphism:

- **Anything physical can be anthropomorphized.** While animals are perhaps the most commonly anthropomorphized creatures, anthropomorphism can be used to turn other kinds of objects and beings into characters with human-like qualities, too. For example, the french fairytale and Disney film, *The Beauty and the Beast,* is full of anthropomorphic furniture like clocks and wardrobes that walk and talk.
- **The degree to which anthropomorphic characters act like humans can also vary.** For example, in Shel Silverstein's *The Giving Tree,* a tree cares for a boy over the course of its life in the same way a human would, and although the tree is limited in the ways it can express its love for the boy—it can't walk or talk, for example, because it's a tree—it is nevertheless anthropomorphic because it feels human emotions.
- **Humans and anthropomorphic characters can exist side-by-side.** Just because a story uses anthropomorphism to bring non-human things to life doesn't mean those stories won't have human characters, as well. Some stories, like Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and the film *Ratatouille,* use anthropomorphism to create non-human characters who behave in human ways, and who interact with humans in the world of the story. In other stories, anthropomorphic characters *stand in for humans*. For example, in the picture book and children's television show *Arthur,* the title character is an aardvark who lives in a world entirely populated by anthropomorphic animals. Some of Arthur's friends are anthropomorphic dogs, rabbits, and so on—but the audience is meant to understand that in the world of the story, these animals *are people.*

Anthropomorphism vs. Personification

Anthropomorphism is easy to confuse with a similar literary device called personification, but they're actually quite different. Here's a quick rundown of personification:

- **Personification** is a type of figurative language in which non-human things are described as having human attributes, as in the sentence, "The rain poured down on the wedding guests, indifferent to their plans." Describing the rain as "indifferent" is an example of personification, because rain can't be "indifferent," nor can it feel any other human emotion. However, *saying* that the rain feels indifferent poetically emphasizes the cruel timing of the rain. Personification can help writers to create more vivid descriptions, to make readers see the world in new ways, and to more powerfully capture the human experience of the world (since people really *do* often interpret the non-human entities of the world as having human traits).

And here are the key differences between the two terms:

- In anthropomorphism, the human qualities assigned to non-human things are *not* just figurative ways of describing them, as they are in personification.
- Rather, in anthropomorphism the non-human entities *actually do* human things like talking, falling in love, wiggling their eyebrows, and generally behaving like people behave.

EXAMPLES

The following examples of anthropomorphism draw from children's books, novels, as well as film. In other words, anthropomorphism is quite common in all types literature and different media.

Anthropomorphism in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll

Lewis Carroll used anthropomorphism to create many of the characters in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. Midway through the novel, Alice, the protagonist, meets a large caterpillar who behaves very much like a human:

> She stretched herself up on tiptoe and peeped over the edge and her eyes immediately met those of a large blue caterpillar, that was sitting on the top, with its arms folded, quietly smoking a long hookah and taking not the smallest notice of her or of anything else.
>
> At last the Caterpillar took the hookah out of its mouth and addressed Alice in a languid, sleepy voice.
>
> "Who are you?" said the Caterpillar.

The Caterpillar in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* is clearly not the kind of caterpillar you might find in your back yard: he smokes, he crosses his arms, he speaks slowly and in a slightly condescending tone. He acts like a human, and more specifically, like a wise and weary old professor.

Anthropomorphism in *Animal Farm* by George Orwell

The satirical novel, *Animal Farm*, is all *about* animals behaving like humans—both for better and for worse. At the beginning of the novel, a pig named Old Major encourages the other animals to rebel against the men running farm, using language reminiscent of Karl Marx's communist manifesto:

> Man is the only real enemy we have. Remove Man from the scene, and the root cause of hunger and overwork is abolished for ever. Man is the only creature that consumes without producing. He does not give milk, he does not lay eggs, he is too weak to pull the plough, he cannot run fast enough to catch rabbits. Yet he is lord of all the animals. He sets them to work, he gives back to them the bare minimum that will prevent them from starving, and the rest he keeps for himself.

Yet once the pigs overthrow the men, they become tyrants who exploit the other animals in the same way that the men once exploited all the animals. In real life, pigs could not make political speeches or stage a rebellion, but in *Animal Farm,* they do. Orwell uses anthropomorphism to critique how the Soviet Union used Marxist ideology to oppress many people, rather than to free them. The hypocrisy of the pigs represents the Soviet Union's failure to create a state where power was truly in the hands of the people.

Anthropomorphism in *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak

Markus Zusak's novel *The Book Thief* is narrated by the figure of Death, who kindly and frankly introduces himself to the reader as follows:

> Where are my manners? I could introduce myself properly, but it's not really necessary. You will know me well enough and soon enough, depending on a diverse range of variables. It suffices to say that at some point in time, I will be standing over you, as genially as possible. Your soul will be in my arms. A color will be perched on my shoulder. I will carry you gently away.

Zusak anthropomorphizes Death by making him a speaking character with feelings and sense of humor. Death has a job to do—he must keep carrying people away when they die—but this doesn't mean he feels indifferent to the suffering of the people he carries away. Instead, Zusak makes Death a soulful witness to human tragedy.

Anthropomorphism in Film

Many popular movies and cartoons feature anthropomorphic characters, non-human objects, or beings who behave in human ways. Movies featuring anthropomorphic characters tend to be animated, but there are live-action movies that feature anthropomorphic characters, too. Here are just a handful of examples:

- Buzz Lightyear and Woody in *Toy Story*
- Simba in *The Lion King*
- Mr. Tinkles in *Cats & Dogs*
- Remy in *Ratatouille*
- Aslan and Mr. & Mrs. Beaver in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*
- Nemo and Dory in *Finding Nemo*
- Buster Moon (and every other character) in *SING*
- Pinocchio in *Pinocchio*

WHY WRITERS USE IT

Here are a few of the main reasons why writers use anthropomorphism to bring their characters to life:

- It helps create vivid, imaginative characters that readers can relate to because they are *more human*. (It's not always easy to relate to inanimate objects, for example.)
- It suggests that certain human characteristics are universal—shared by all creatures.

- It allows writers to imagine and tell different stories than they would be able to tell about humans.
    - *Finding Nemo*, for instance, is a story that could only have been told about fish—but there would be no story to tell if the sea creature characters didn't think, act, and feel like humans.
- It can be used to add a symbolic dimension to a character, and thereby make a story more allegorical.
    - In *Animal Farm,* for example, the pigs represent the ruling class because pigs are associated with greed.

OTHER RESOURCES

- Why We're All Animal Lovers: This blog post discusses anthropomorphism's use in children's literature—and why stories that use anthropomorphism can be so powerful.
- William Wegman And His Legendary Weimaraners: Photographer William Wegman is famous for his photographs that anthropomorphize dogs by showing them doing human activities like roller-skating, playing twister, or wearing overalls.
- Inky the Octopus and the Upsides of Anthropomorphism: This article explores the implication of the human tendency to anthropomorphize animals in everyday life.

HOW TO CITE

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