Why That’s Just Plain Horse Sense!:
An Examination of the Use of Horses in Stories
A Thematic Story Collection Study

Thematic Description and Rationale

Project Description:

Horses have been part of writings and art for centuries. They have been used as symbols of power, courage, strength, and wealth. The training of horses, based on intuition and kindness, has also been a part of expert’s writings for centuries as evident in the writings of Greek statesman, Xenophen, 2400 years ago. This research project is a look at the representation of horses in today’s writings.

Purpose:

The purpose of this research is to compare and contrast ten different stories through three forms of analysis. The characters, the complicating action, and the plot will be analyzed as follows:

- Characters: gender, age, personalities, motives, goals, good, evil, humanistic or fictional, origin
- Complicating action: How is it introduced? Where is it introduced? What kind of solution is expected?
- Plot: What’s the situation? Who is involved? What are opposing forces? What is the climatic event?

The projected outcome will be to show how horses are used as therapeutic devices and/or as sources of success.

Items Found:

The items used were found in the West Intermediate School’s collection and in the researcher’s personal collection. The stories consist of fairytales, picture books, fiction, a legend and a nonfiction autobiography. One book is based on an animated film. A few of the other resources are available in book and video form. The analysis and synopsis for each resource is based on the book form.

Bibliographic Citation and Story Synopsis
Jennifer is counting on getting her first real-live horse on her eleventh birthday. Disappointment quickly sets in as she discovers the china horse her dad has so proudly given her. But the gift turns out to be more than she first believes. The tiny figurine becomes a palomino stallion, visible only to her. Moonseeker, as they discover his name to be, is beautiful but also arrogant, full of irrational fears, and able to converse with Jennifer. They set out on an adventure that leaves them struggling in a river and lost in a cave. Jennifer realizes however that she must control her quick tongue and anger to help rescue herself and her horse. On their return home, Jennifer's dad finds her wet and slightly injured. Moonseeker has magically transformed back into a China figurine. Jennifer tries to explain her adventure and surprisingly her dad seems to understand completely. “Was it real or imaginary?” seems to be an unanswered question for Jennifer and her dad who, as a young boy, knew Moonseeker too.

A wild and rambunctious mustang stallion leads the Cimarron herd on a journey through the untamed American frontier. Spirit is captured by the military but defies being broken and never gives up his dream of freedom. During his capture, Spirit develops a friendship with a young Lakota brave named Little Creek and a love for a beautiful paint mare named Rain. Spirit realizes that the herd is being forced to build a railroad that will divide the American frontier. He develops and follows through with a plan that will stop the progression of the railroad and thus becomes one of the greatest unsung heroes of the Old West.
Teenager, Grace Maclean, survives a terrible accident with her beloved horse Pilgrim. Both Grace and Pilgrim are scared emotionally as well as physically. Grace’s mother Anne acquires the help of a horse whisperer, Tom Booker, to heal the scars of Pilgrim. Booker is known for his almost mythical skills with horses. Anne takes Grace and Pilgrim to Montana where Tom’s work to retrain and heal Pilgrim lead to the healing of all of the lives shattered by the accident. Grace, who lost a leg, learns to live life with a prosthetic and how to deal with the loss of her friend. Through the friendships gained during her stay in Montana and the rebuilding of her trust in Pilgrim and in herself, she learns to love life again. There are underlying plots involved as well, as Anne and Grace deal with their relationship and Anne and Booker develop romantic feelings, though Anne is still married to Grace’s father, Robert. The story concludes with tragedy and success as Anne, Robert, and Grace use their experiences and newly acquired lessons as a foundation for their new life together.


Young Alec Ramsey is shipwrecked on a deserted island with a bold black stallion. Alec and the stallion realize that they need each other for survival and learn to trust each other. This trust turns into a devotion that they carry with them as they are rescued and travel all the way back to America. Alec soon realizes, with the help of his new friend Henry, that the Black (as Alec calls him) is a great racer. Working their way through obstacles, they train and prepare the Black for the race of the century. Alec’s experiences and dedication turn him into a mature responsible and proud young man.


A young Indian boy goes to the highest hill to pray for help for his hungry people. The Great Spirit answers his prayers by sending the gift of the sacred dogs, which are horses. These horses enable the tribe to hunt for buffalo. The young boy instructs the tribe that the horses must be well looked after and the people must live as relatives with them.

For a warhorse, Clyde is an abysmal coward. His owner, a brave young knight named Sir Galavant, pursues an ogre that has been wreaking havoc on the kingdom. Sir Galavant leads Clyde into the forest where they find the ogre sleeping. Clyde’s first instinct is to run and in doing so, loses his master and places him in terrible danger. Clyde faces his fears and decides that even if he isn’t brave he can at least act brave. He goes back into the forest, saves the knight, and leads the ogre to sunlight and consequently his demise. Though Sir Galavant claims responsibility for the death of the ogre and becomes an instant hero, Clyde prances proudly with his new found bravery.


Monty Roberts, with the help of co-author Lucy Grealy, provides a vivid and lively memoir of a successful and influential horse trainer. Roberts grew up in the 40’s on a horse farm and, at the age of thirteen, he spent time studying wild horses in the Nevada Desert. Despite being raised under the very harsh thumb of his father, Roberts developed his compassion for horses and the idea that horses should be “started” (trained) not “broken”. He developed a system of nonverbally communicating with horses that has led to a very successful career in the horse business. Roberts claims he “knows what a horse is thinking by noting the position of its body, head, tongue, ears, legs, and tail, as well as the focus of its eyes”. Because of his success, Roberts has acquired an ardent amount of followers, including Queen Elizabeth II, who instituted his system for her royal mounts. Most remarkably, Roberts takes his unprecedented understanding of this nonverbal communication and applies it to human relationships. Through public speaking engagements, clinics, and educational videos, Roberts teaches that between parent and child, employee and employer, abuser and abused, there are forms of communication far stronger than the spoken word and that they are accessible to all who will learn to listen.

Alexi, a worthy young man looking for work and adventure, finds and befriends a magical golden mare. When Alexi spares the mare’s life, the mare pledges to serve him forever. They go to meet the czar who turns out to be greedy and jealous. He sends Alexi on numerous dangerous and seemingly impossible deeds. With the mares help, Alexi meets all of the czar’s demands; he fetches the firebird, the beautiful Yelena, and Yelena’s grandmother’s magic wedding ring. The wise equine is the true hero of the story, valiantly coming to Alexi’s rescue in each episode. When the czar is removed from power, Alexi becomes the new czar, marries Yelena and sets the firebird and the golden mare free so that they may all live happily-ever-after. This beautifully illustrated book is a rich mixture of several traditional Russian fairy tales.


Ten-year-old Jody Tiflin learns about life and death when he becomes owner of a little red pony. Being raised on a ranch, with a very strict father, Jody’s true friend is the middle-aged ranch hand, Billy Buck. Billy teaches Jody many lessons on the care and raising of horses and the trials and tribulations of life. Though Billy lets Jody down, with tragic results, Jody continues to seek his guidance and advice. The memories of raising the pony and losing it tragically also guides Jody through his emotions as he deals with an old dying man passing through, a visit from his grandfather, and the birth of a new colt at the unfortunate demise of its mother.


Eleven-year-old Luke is not happy about the move he and his mother have had to make to his grandfather’s farm in Oklahoma. Luke’s dad, now divorced from his mother, does not follow through with promises of spending time together. As Luke adjusts to a rural lifestyle, he befriends a lovable mare names Beauty. Luke’s grandfather tries to teach him resilience and determination but often comes off as being just plain ole cranky. Luke slowly comes to understand and learn from his grandfather. However, it is his love and friendship with Beauty that holds the true lessons of life that Luke must accept.
Due to a tragic accident, Luke must accept the responsibility of putting Beatuy out of her misery and thus faces manhood and the responsibilities that it entails.

**Story Analysis**

**The Characters**

The characters in the chosen stories are predominately male. However, two stories deal with girls and their relationships with their horses. The main characters are also predominately very young, but are accompanied by at least one strong adult male.

The human characters are often confused and struggling with emotional problems and fears. The horses however are characterized with strength and boldness. Cowardly Clyde is the only horse that does not fit this mold, at least not until the end of the story. Pilgrim, in *The Horse Whisperer*, has to rebuild his strength and trust in humans.

The human characters are all very real, (or at least realistic), yet the horses vary from real to imaginary. Nevertheless, even the imaginary horses are given real-life qualities that lead to real-life struggles and consequences.

All but one of the horses in the stories grows or comes about, real or fictionally, by the love and desire of their owner. Spirit is the only horse that relies upon its freedom to defeat the odds.

**The Complicating Action**

The complicating action varies greatly within the ten stories. It is however introduced very soon in each story. The accident in *The Horse Whisperer*, the shipwreck in *The Black Stallion*, the divorce and moving in *Beauty*, the disappointment in *Touch The Moon*, and the illness that overtakes the red pony, all happen within the first few chapters. Even in the fairy tales and legend, the problems the fictional horses must adhere to are introduced early.

The initial complicating action routinely turns out to be the central theme for struggle throughout the story and is often the basis for dealing with smaller struggles throughout the story. It seems to be expected that in dealing with this initial complication, the characters will overcome other adversities in their life and in the life of those around them.

**The Plot**

Out of the ten stories there are really only two underlying plots. One can be found in *Spirit* and *Cowardly Clyde*. This plot is the horse itself, dealing with its own inner feelings and its struggle with humans to overcome adversities.
The other plot can be found in the other eight stories. A young teen, dealing with complicating struggles, uses their relationship and communication with a horse to deal with these struggles. In doing so, they overcome the adversities and learn to deal with society.

The similarity between all of the plots is that the horse serves as the true unsung hero.

**Summary**

In conclusion, the primary factor in each of the ten stories show that the horses are often seen as therapeutic and lead to the success and the acceptance of the characters into society. This success comes through the communication that exists between humans and the horses themselves. This communication exists verbally in the magical, mythical world and is most obvious. But it also exists nonverbally and here lies as a true lesson. In *The Red Pony*, Billy Buck tells Jody that horses love conversation and that he must always tell the pony the reasons for everything he is doing. He teaches Jody how the pony talks with his ears. In *Beauty*, Luke talks with Beauty and shares his feelings in a way that he can’t with any human. Beauty seems to listen and understand and truly care. In *The Horse Whisperer*, Tom Booker teaches that you need to know a horse’s “history” and understand what it’s thinking to deal with any problems it has. The native people in *The Gift of the Sacred Dog* believe that the horses were a gift from the Great Spirit and that people need to live as relatives with them. Monty Roberts himself believes that the nonverbal communication he has with horses is the key to dealing with human relationships as well.

Readers can walk away from these stories with the hope and desire to communicate more openly and understand that physical or emotional pain can lead to stronger and happier lives.

**Personal Response**

As I started this paper, I was not completely sure where it was going to go. I knew that horses are often seen as bold, strong, and courageous and I thought that would be the theme of the research. I was surprised to realize that the outcome of the research proved to be much deeper than that. To take the lessons learned in these stories and put them in my own perspective has been emotive. I’ve discovered that horses aren’t the important factor, it’s the open communication and learning to deal with what life gives you, good or bad, that can make one successful and happier in today’s real world. It is evident to me that these stories can be useful to children and adults that are fraught with their own misfortunes.

I am eager to share the ideas found in this research with our school counselor and principal. I hope that the knowledge I’ve gained here will help me to better the life of some students as well as myself.