

What is it Like to Be a Trope?

From Literature and Animal Studies by Mario Ortiz-Robles

Introduction: The Question of Animals in Literature

Mario Ortiz-Robles's "What is it Like to Be a Trope?" serves as the introductory chapter to his book *Literature and Animal Studies*. The essay opens with a thought-provoking question: *What does it mean for an animal to exist in literature?* Ortiz-Robles argues that animals in literature are not merely background figures or realistic depictions of real creatures, but **tropes**—that is, figures of language and imagination that carry meaning. Through this idea, he explores how literature shapes the way humans think about animals and, in turn, how animals help humans understand themselves.

This essay connects two major fields: **literary studies** and **animal studies**. While literary studies focuses on interpretation, form, and meaning, animal studies investigates ethical, biological, and philosophical relationships between humans and animals. Ortiz-Robles brings these together to show that literature is not simply about humans but also about how we imagine the **nonhuman world**.

Animals in Literature: Always Present but Often Ignored

Ortiz-Robles begins by reminding readers that animals have always been present in literature. From ancient fables and myths to modern novels, animals appear everywhere—talking foxes, noble horses, loyal dogs, monstrous serpents, and mythical birds. They populate religious texts like the Bible, epic tales like the *Iliad*, and children's stories like *The Jungle Book*.

Yet, despite this long presence, animals are often treated as **secondary** or **symbolic**. In most cases, they are used to reflect human behavior, morality, or social values rather than being recognized as independent beings. Literature, Ortiz-Robles says, has often used animals as **mirrors for humanity** rather than as subjects with their own lives. This marginalization reflects the larger human tendency to think of animals only in relation to ourselves.

The Animal as a Trope: More Than a Symbol

The central idea of the essay is that **animals in literature function as tropes**. A "trope" is a figure of speech or a figurative device—like a metaphor or symbol—used to express meaning. Ortiz-Robles explains that when a writer includes an animal in a text, that animal rarely represents itself literally. Instead, it becomes part of a figurative structure that helps humans think about concepts such as freedom, instinct, loyalty, or savagery.

For example, in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the animals symbolize political figures and ideologies, while in Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa's transformation

into an insect represents alienation and loss of identity. These examples show that animals in literature often carry **human meanings**, performing “work” for human imagination.

However, Ortiz-Robles also cautions that this figurative use can be both powerful and problematic. It allows literature to explore deep moral and emotional questions, but it also risks reducing animals to mere signs—empty vessels filled with human meaning.

Inventing the Animal: Language and Representation

Ortiz-Robles argues that **the very idea of “the animal” is a human invention**. We use the single term *animal* to describe countless different species—birds, insects, fish, mammals—as if they all shared one identity. This linguistic act already creates a distance between humans and nonhumans. He refers to Jacques Derrida’s idea of “*animot*” (a play on the French words *animal* and *mot*, meaning “word”) to suggest that the word “animal” is a human construction that lumps all nonhuman beings into one category.

This linguistic boundary shapes the **human-animal divide**. Literature, being a form of language, plays a major role in inventing and maintaining this distinction. Every time a story portrays a “talking animal” or a “wild beast,” it tells us something about what humans think animals are—and what humans think they are *not*.

Thus, the act of representing an animal in literature is not neutral; it is a creative, imaginative act that reveals human cultural assumptions.

The Paradox of Representation

Ortiz-Robles identifies a major paradox at the heart of animal representation: humans use language to “speak for” animals, but animals themselves **cannot speak human language**. Therefore, any representation of an animal is already filtered through human imagination. Literature wants to make animals visible and audible, but it can never escape the limits of human understanding.

This raises ethical questions: Can we truly know what an animal feels or thinks? Can we ever represent their perspective faithfully? Ortiz-Robles points out that there is always a **gap** between the human attempt to represent animals and the animals themselves. This gap is called **alterity**, meaning “otherness.” Recognizing this otherness is crucial because it helps us respect animals as beings beyond our control or imagination.

The Work of Tropes: Animals as Meaning-Makers

Ortiz-Robles further explains that animals in literature are not passive decorations. They **perform the work of metaphor**. They help writers express emotions, conflicts, and philosophical questions. For instance:

- A lion might represent courage or nobility.
- A snake might symbolize evil or temptation.
- A bird might stand for freedom or the soul.

By performing these roles, animals become **tools of thought**. They help humans express things that are otherwise difficult to explain. Through animals, we imagine moral lessons (as in fables), political systems (as in allegories), or psychological states (as in modernist fiction).

However, Ortiz-Robles emphasizes that this also transforms animals into **inventions of culture**. In other words, when we read an animal in literature, we are reading a human creation—a version of the animal shaped by imagination, history, and language.

Reading Tropologically: A New Method

To understand animals in literature properly, Ortiz-Robles suggests we read **tropologically**—that is, by studying the kinds of figurative patterns through which animals appear. Instead of asking what a particular animal “represents,” we should ask **how** it functions in the story.

For example, we can classify animal tropes based on recurring patterns:

- **Metamorphosis** – humans turning into animals (as in *The Metamorphosis* or *The Odyssey*).
- **Speech** – animals talking, revealing wisdom or satire (as in *Aesop’s Fables*).
- **Domestication and Wildness** – the relationship between the human home and the natural world.
- **Naming** – the act of giving names to animals, asserting control.

By identifying these tropes, we see how literature creates meaning out of animal figures and how those meanings change across cultures and time periods. Tropological reading, therefore, is both a literary and philosophical method.

The Human-Animal Relationship in Literature

Ortiz-Robles’s essay also explores how literature has helped define **what it means to be human**. Human identity often depends on being different from animals. For centuries, thinkers defined humans as rational, moral, and linguistic beings—traits supposedly absent in animals. Yet, literature often challenges this difference. When animals talk, think, or show emotion in stories, they blur the line between species.

Through such portrayals, literature becomes a space where **the boundary between human and animal can be questioned, crossed, or reimagined**. For instance, when a horse in a novel expresses loyalty or suffering, readers are invited to empathize with a nonhuman being, thus extending the limits of human sympathy.

Ethical and Philosophical Implications

Ortiz-Robles’s argument has deep ethical meaning. If our understanding of animals is shaped by literature, then **how we represent animals matters**. The way stories portray animals can influence how society treats them in real life.

When literature represents animals as inferior or mechanical, it supports human domination. But when literature gives animals emotions or agency, it encourages empathy and ethical reflection. Therefore, studying animals in literature is not just a literary exercise—it is a **moral and philosophical responsibility**.

He also reminds readers that empathy through fiction should not be confused with full understanding. We can never completely know what it is like to be an animal, but we can recognize their difference and dignity.

The Title: “What is it Like to Be a Trope?”

The title of the essay is a playful reference to philosopher **Thomas Nagel**’s famous essay “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” Nagel’s essay argues that humans can never truly know what it feels like to be another creature because experience is subjective. Ortiz-Robles adapts this idea to literature.

Instead of asking what it is like to be an animal, he asks what it is like to be a **trope**—a figure that stands for something else. The title suggests that animals in literature live a double life: they exist as imagined creatures and as carriers of meaning. Their “experience” in literature is therefore not biological but **figurative**.

This title captures the paradox of literary animals: they are both **present** (in words and images) and **absent** (as real beings).

Conclusion: Literature as the Space of Imagination

In conclusion, Ortiz-Robles’s essay “What is it Like to Be a Trope?” shows that animals are not marginal decorations in literature but essential to the very way literature thinks and creates meaning. Through the concept of **tropes**, he reveals that animals help humans understand identity, difference, and ethics.

Literature, he argues, does not simply imitate the natural world—it **invents** it. The way animals are imagined in stories tells us as much about human culture as it does about the natural world. Reading animals tropologically allows us to see literature as a living field where the boundaries between human and animal are constantly negotiated.

Ultimately, Ortiz-Robles invites us to read with sensitivity and awareness—to recognize that every animal in literature is both a creation of language and a reminder of the real creatures who share our world.

Summary of Main Ideas

- Animals in literature are **tropes**, not just characters.
- The word “animal” is a **human invention** that unites diverse species.
- Representation of animals reveals human imagination and limitations.
- Literature maintains and questions the **human-animal divide**.
- Reading **tropologically** helps us understand figurative meanings.
- The essay promotes **ethical awareness** in how we read and represent animals.