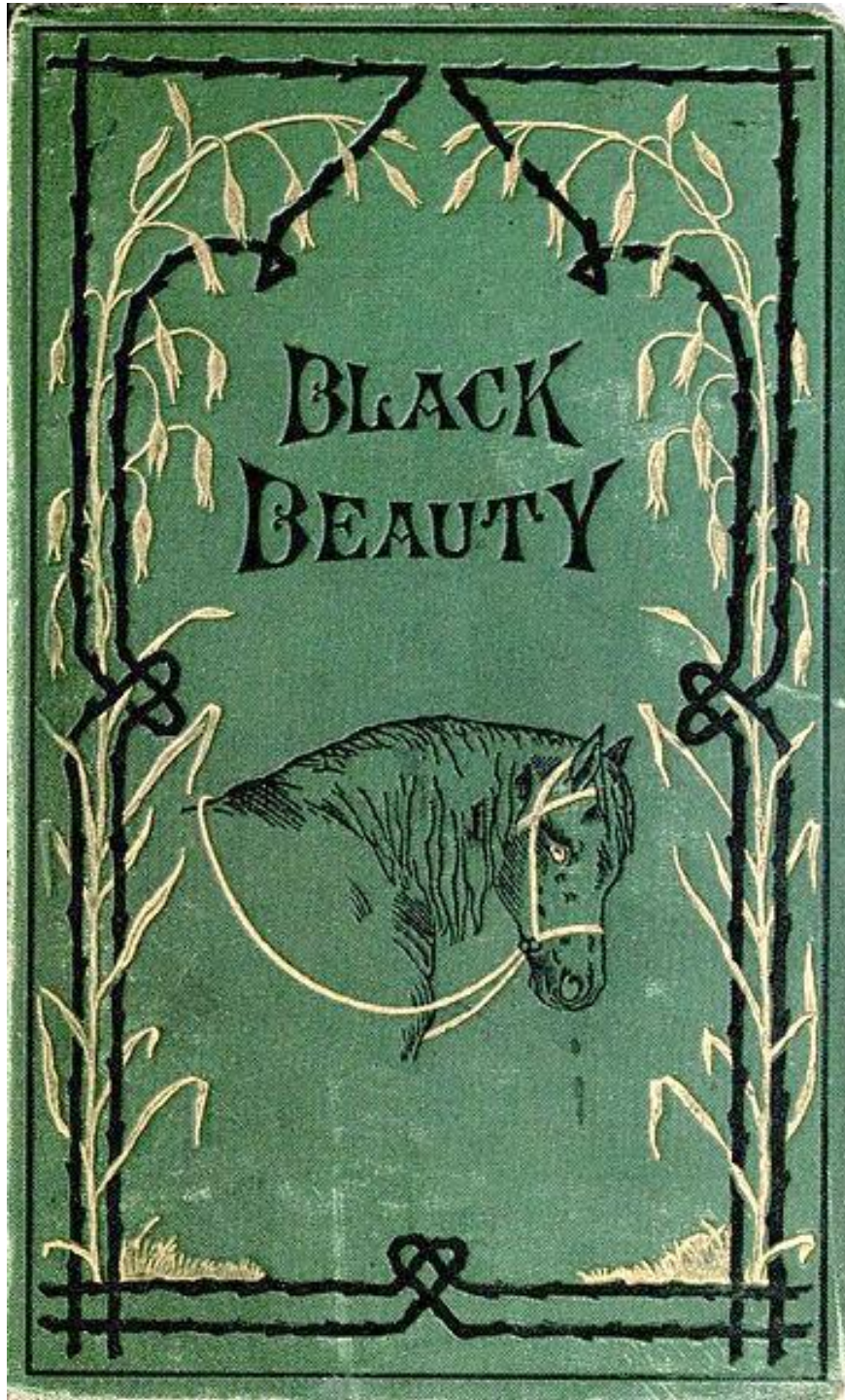


# BLACK BEAUTY



ESSAY BY GARRY VICTOR HILL

Since its publication in 1877 Anna Sewell's only novel *Black Beauty: The Auto biography of a Horse* has become one of the best selling novels of all time, selling around fifty million copies, being translated into scores of languages and apparently never going out of print. It has inspired much art and also television and film versions.

Sewell intended it to be a work for adults, but it has become a children's classic. On reading it in adulthood subtleties, shrewdness in depicting human motivation and depictions of the ugly side of life are all more obvious than in bowdlerized childhood readings.

Sewell was not doing anything new by personification, even by making a horse the first person narrator and central character. Anthropomorphic stories are older than Aesop's fables, but like them are usually of short length and fantastical. What was different was her skill in creating her realistic character, surely literature's most innocent narrator. Her sustained narrative revealed more than a horses' blinkered worldview, instead she created a view of English society, rural, city and town, rich and poor, working class and upper class, all described by a horse.

A superficial acquaintance with the novel or one of its derivatives on screen gives a suspicion that Sewell was an upper class or genteel do-gooder, remote from the world she mistakenly describes. The reality the novel reveals shows that she knew a good deal, not only about horses and their uses, but about people and her society. This knowledge would have come from her regular contact with the poor and the workmen's groups, her charitable and church work brought her into regular contact with these groups. Her character's observation that cruelty is often caused by ignorance permeates the book, which is a didactic attempt to end such ignorance and so reduce cruelty, especially to horses. An impassioned passage from John an estate staff worker is at the core of both the problems horses suffer and goes beyond the treatment of horses:

"Only ignorance ! only ignorance ! how can you talk about only ignorance? Don't you know that it is the worst

thing in the world, next to wickedness? And which does the most mischief Heaven only knows. If people can say, 'Oh I did not know, I did not mean any harm,' they think it is all right." (sic) pp, 102-103

John and his audience then exchange examples from the human world of death and insanity caused by ignorance. Sewell focuses on how ignorance causes death, misery and physical suffering in the equine world. Positively she shows horses benefitting from kind and wise treatment. Clearly educating people out of ignorance and into beneficial behaviour through didactic stories is very Victorian, even so, that old outlook has some validity, as Sewell shows.

The story starts with Black Beauty being born on a rural estate owned by wealthy, but decent people. As a colt his life is happy there until he sees a hunt, where the son of his owner is killed in a fall and his horse has to be destroyed, all because people on horseback want to kill a hare, which is soon killed by dogs, a process Sewell does not pass over with euphemisms:

The hare tried to get through the fence; it was too thick, and she turned sharp around to make for the road, but it was too late; the dogs were upon her with their wild cries. We heard one shriek, and that was the end of her. One of the huntsmen rode up and whipped off the dogs, who would soon have torn her to pieces. He held her up by the leg torn and bleeding, and all the gentlemen seemed well pleased. (p. 7)

The sardonic tone in the last six words will appear again several times in the story as was perhaps as close to describing these blood sports as cruel as Sewell could get in 1877. To Black Beauty this hunt is senseless, the first of Sewell's depictions of cruel, senseless behavior. In contrast being broken in has a purpose, but his description of what the steel bit in the mouth feels like is cruel. Breaking in involves a general loss of freedom, it being replaced by manipulation into obedience. The horse's viewpoint shows this to be another cruel task, albeit one not done in ignorance. Unlike bits, blinkers serve no useful purpose, although some humans think they do, but Sewell's reality is that they annoy the horses for no other

reason than fashion. Another foolish misuse of horses leaves Black Beauty with injured knees. This occurs when the usually highly competent chief stableman Ruben Smith, becomes drunk and then becomes another person, foolishly forcing Black Beauty over slippery ground and gravel. He slips, falling on his knees and Smith is killed in the fall. Black Beauty's knees are now swollen for life. This reveals a mistreated horse and one that cannot be perfect in looks again, so he is sold, eventually being sold several more times and by doing so, goes down the social scale. He becomes a cab horse and after that a hired out load carrier. The latter is almost a living death from overwork and depravation for horses and an old friend, Ginger, does die from this work, telling Black Beauty that a bullet in the head would be a mercy. After enduring this work he comes to the same conclusion, but as in so much Victorian fiction (if rarely in reality) salvation comes at the worst moment.

Through these changing locales and owners, Sewell shows in explanatory detail different ways to be cruel or kind to horses.

Positive kindness includes the following:

well lit, airy large stables,  
 varied, abundant diets,  
 light, infrequent loads  
 free time to gallop  
 gentle talk and praise  
 giving lukewarm water a rub down and a blanket after strenuous work or exercise.

Cruelty involves:

Breaking in  
 Mouth bits  
 Relentless cartage (especially on steep slopes)  
 Whips  
 Docking (the practice of cutting off or reducing horses' tails)  
 High jumps  
 Waiting motionless for prolonged periods, especially in inclement weather or late at night

Using blinkers

Being in cavalry battles.

Using short reins. These force the horse to hold its head high for a good show, but strain its neck and shoulders and disallows relieving movements or stances which make hauling or riding much less strenuous..

Coming fifth with Sewell after ignorance, greed, fashion and financial necessity for cruelty to horses was drunkenness. Rueben Smith was not Sewell's only example of where alcohol could lead. She was not only concerned with equine welfare, but with the welfare of working men through activities. Jerry, Black Beauty's cabby, remonstrates with another cabby about overworking his horse and the response reveals what a cabby's life is like. They endure abuse and being patronized when given difficult or sometimes impossible expectations. They are paid minimal wages for long hours. This frequently combines with enduring exposure. They live with the fear of losing even that work if they do not push the horses with grueling tasks. If they fail they may end up in the rightly dreaded poor houses.

Clearly Sewell sides with of the working classes and is no fan of the ruling class, who usually emerge in this novel as having more money than sense and even less decency than their small amount of sense. A Quaker turned Anglican, Sewell was more of an unorthodox pacifist than a paragon of the establishment church. Concerning war, Sewell was a rare realist when Captain, a surviving cavalry mount from the charge of the light brigade, describes that disastrous battle. Focusing on the way the English travelled to the Crimea to fight the Russians Black Beauty asks a surviving cavalry horse what the war was about and gets a shrewd reply:

“that is more than a horse can understand; but the enemy must have been awfully wicked people if it were right to go all that way over the sea on purpose to kill them.” (p. 196) Politics gets equally naïve/sardonic views when Election Day is seen from the perspective of the cabbies' horses.

Black Beauty goes through the dismal alternatives most horses endure before finally finding a haven,

Anna Sewell was an invalid for almost all of her life, living just long enough to see her only novel become a huge success. It led to many of the changes she wanted being legislated, but beyond her sensitivity, it was her ability to apparently recreate the mind of an animal and convince people that she had, that made this work great.



ANNA SEWELL 1820-1878

PLATE 2 PUBLIC DOMAIN WIKIPEDIA

## Copyright Matters ©

Plate 1 Cover

Unknown author

Unknown author, Public domain, via Wikimedia

Commons <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/dc/BlackBeautyCoverFirstEd1877.JPG>

Plate 2 Portrait

Public Domain/Wikipedia

*Black Beauty* went into the public domain in January 2021.

**Illustrations:** Both pictures are from Wikipedia/Wikimedia, One is from Creative Commons and the other is from the Public Domain. They are also allowable under Australian law through two rules. Permission is granted for using illustrations for review purposes. Teachers are also allowed to recreate and use images for study from websites, but are not allowed to print or distribute multiple copies. The author is a qualified, registered and active teacher. Similarly under American law 'Fair Use' allows images for non-profit, educational purposes and these apply here.

Those same laws indicate that attribution should be given. Where this is easy, as with a source such as Wikipedia or Creative Commons, attribution comes with the caption. Others have attribution problems. Ownership can change as companies buy up sources. Others give their names with images that may not originate with them. In both cases, I recommend that readers find the original attribution by holding the cursor arrow over an image. This will give the first credit, which may or may not be the original source. Frequently further links can be made by holding shift and a left click simultaneously. If any illustration used here appears against the owner's wishes, the owner can either request acknowledgement under the caption in words of their choosing or ask for removal.

Unless you are a reviewer working under Australian law or a qualified Australian teacher doing your own research, do not lift pictures from this work as you might be in legal trouble with the owners for copyright violations.

Under American law, “fair use” is allowed for non-commercial, educational purposes with attribution.

**Text:** © The essay text is copyright. Fair dealings for purposes of study or criticism are allowed.

Storage in electronic systems or bound printed out copies for library research is also allowed. Communication on this would be appreciated. Selling copies becomes another matter and is not allowed without permission.