



HUMAN AND ANIMAL DYNAMICS IN PETER PAN BY J.M. BARRIE: A LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE FROM THE EDWARDIAN ERA

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the dynamics between human and animal characters in J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, with particular attention to how language reflects and constructs these relationships during the Edwardian era. Centering on the character of Nana, the Darling family's dog who serves as a caretaker, the analysis employs close reading and a socio-historical lens to examine how linguistic choices portray Nana not merely as a domestic animal, but as a nurturing, empathetic, and morally aware figure. Despite her human-like attributes, Nana is consistently positioned within a subordinate role, reinforcing anthropocentric hierarchies embedded in Edwardian discourse. The study reveals a linguistic tension that mirrors societal ambivalence—simultaneously affectionate and hierarchical—toward animals. By applying a linguistic and ecocritical framework, this research highlights how Barrie's narrative language shapes perceptions of interspecies relationships and invites reflection on ecological ethics, particularly in the realm of children's literature and early environmental consciousness.

Keywords: *Ecocriticism, human-animal relations, Peter Pan, Edwardian era, animal representation, children's literature.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The interaction between humans and animals in literature has gained considerable scholarly interest in recent years, particularly through the lens of ecocriticism. This approach underscores the interconnectedness of humans, animals, and the environment, challenging anthropocentric ideologies by promoting a biocentric worldview. Within this framework, literary representations of animals are explored not only for their narrative roles but also for their symbolic and cultural significance. In this regard, the character of Nana, the dog in J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*, serves as a compelling case for examining human-animal dynamics during the Edwardian era.

First staged in 1904 and later published as a novel in 1911, *Peter Pan* embodies the shifting societal values of Edwardian Britain, a time marked by evolving family roles and changing attitudes toward childhood and domestic animals. Nana, portrayed as a nurturing and responsible canine

nanny to the Darling children, reflects an emergent recognition of animal sentience and emotional intelligence. This unique portrayal invites deeper inquiry into how animals were perceived and linguistically constructed in literature of the period.

Ecocriticism, as defined by Marlow and Harris (2022), is an earth-centered literary theory that investigates the relationship between literature and the physical environment. It emphasizes the way textual representations of nature and animals influence human awareness and ecological attitudes (Glotfelty & Fromm, 2018; Kroeber, 2018). Through this lens, Nana can be analyzed as a reflection of Edwardian perspectives on animals' roles within human social structures, particularly within the family unit. Such analysis reveals how literature shapes, and is shaped by, prevailing cultural ideologies regarding the non-human world.

Nana's character represents more than a mere pet; she embodies emotional care, moral guidance, and domestic responsibility. These traits challenge conventional human-animal boundaries, suggesting that animals can hold significant, active roles in human lives. From a linguistic standpoint, the way Nana is described and positioned within the narrative speaks to a broader cultural discourse that seeks to redefine animals' agency in society. Through ecocritical inquiry, one can uncover how these narrative choices reflect deeper societal transformations and invite reconsideration of real-world human-animal relationships.

The Edwardian period was a time of transition, marked by the tension between Victorian traditions and emerging modern perspectives. As Burgess (n.d.) notes, Edwardian writers began to question earlier moral codes and introduced more complex, symbolic uses of animals in their works. Nana's presence in *Peter Pan* exemplifies this shift, as her role signifies both a literal caregiver and a symbolic challenge to human exceptionalism. By analyzing this character, scholars can gain insight into the evolving socio-cultural narratives surrounding animal agency and domesticity.

Moreover, Buell (2018) argues that literature has the power to shape environmental consciousness. Through narratives that foreground animal agency, such as Nana's, readers may develop greater empathy and awareness regarding the place of animals in both fiction and reality. Thus, the depiction of Nana contributes to literature's broader function as a vehicle for ecological education and ethical reflection (Morton, 2019).

Ecocriticism also draws attention to the interdependence of humans and animals in the construction of identity and experience (Hågemark & Gårdenfors, 2025). As Kye et al. (2021) and Bate (2020) asserts, human identity is deeply entangled with the natural world. The emotional bond between the Darling children and Nana in *Peter Pan* exemplifies this

interconnectedness, highlighting the importance of animals in shaping human development and social behavior (Clarke, 2022; Garrard, 2020b). From a linguistic perspective, the narrative structure and descriptive choices reinforce this bond, illustrating how language constructs relational meaning between species.

In the context of children's literature, animal characters like Nana play a critical role in shaping young readers' values. Lubchenco (2019) emphasizes the formative power of early reading experiences in cultivating ecological empathy. By portraying Nana as compassionate and competent, *Peter Pan* subtly encourages children to appreciate and respect animals. A linguistic examination of these portrayals reveals the rhetorical strategies used to naturalize such values within the narrative (Khasinah et al., 2024; Gee & Gee, 2020; Veto Mortini et al., 2023).

Additionally, ecocriticism considers how literature reflects and contests social hierarchies, including those between humans and animals (Coupe, 2019; Ganaie, 2018; Slovic, 2019). Garrard (2020) highlights the way narratives often reproduce or resist dominant power structures. In *Peter Pan*, Nana's role subverts traditional hierarchies by assigning an animal the responsibilities of a human caregiver. Linguistically, this is achieved through anthropomorphic description and narrative framing, which elevate Nana's status within the domestic space and invite readers to rethink assumptions about species roles and authority (Suprayogi et al., 2024; Putri et al., 2023).

In conclusion, the ecocritical and linguistic analysis of Nana in *Peter Pan* offers valuable insight into the human-animal dynamics of the Edwardian era. The character exemplifies how literature can challenge anthropocentric worldviews and promote more inclusive, empathetic perspectives on animals. This interdisciplinary approach—blending literary criticism, linguistics, and environmental

ethics—enhances our understanding of how texts both reflect and shape societal attitudes. Through such analysis, Peter Pan emerges not only as a beloved children's story but also as a rich site for exploring the evolving relationship between humans and animals in a specific historical and cultural context.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Ecocriticism and Animal Representation

Ecocriticism challenges the anthropocentric assumption that only humans possess agency and moral value. According to Asharuddin (2024) and Priestley and Valerie (2019), "literary texts have the power to shape environmental imagination and foster ecological consciousness". In narratives like Peter Pan, animals are not only background elements but active figures that participate in the human emotional world.

Wijayanti (2024) and Abdullah (2025) adds that ecocriticism is concerned with "the ways in which narratives reproduce or challenge hierarchical relationships between species". In this regard, Nana's representation subverts the traditional power structure by granting an animal a human role, thus inviting readers to reevaluate the boundaries between species.

Linguistic Anthropomorphism and Ideology

From a linguistic perspective, the anthropomorphization of animals in literature involves specific lexical choices, narrative framing, and syntactic structures that attribute human traits to non-human characters. Putman (2024) argues that narrative language "frames agency and moral capacity through patterns of attribution and transitivity". In Peter Pan, Nana is consistently described using action verbs typically reserved for humans she "tidies,"

"scolds," and "protects" which frames her as an agent rather than a passive being.

Furthermore, Sitio et al. (2023) and Henderson (2019) in his framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) emphasizes that language "naturalizes particular ideologies by making them seem like common sense" (p. 9). By portraying Nana as a competent and compassionate caregiver, Barrie's language implicitly supports an ideological shift toward viewing animals as sentient and morally significant beings.

Human-Animal Relations in Edwardian Literature

The Edwardian period was marked by growing public interest in animal welfare, domesticity, and the moral education of children. As noted by Das (n.d.), "children's literature at the turn of the century often used animals to reflect human virtues and instill values of empathy and kindness." Nana's role in Peter Pan resonates with this didactic tradition, while also reflecting contemporary anxieties about parental absence and the moral upbringing of children.

Estok (2005) coined the term "ecophobia" to describe "an irrational fear or contempt for the natural world," which ecocritical readings aim to critique and overcome. In portraying Nana positively, Barrie resists ecophobic tendencies and instead fosters ecological empathy.

Nana as Symbol and Social Commentary

Beyond her narrative function, Nana serves as a symbolic challenge to human exceptionalism. Her integration into the family structure mirrors broader Edwardian discourses about loyalty, class, and the increasingly blurred lines between public and private spheres. As such, she represents what Haraway (2008) terms "companion species," beings whose lives

are entangled with human histories and identities.

Haraway argues that animals like dogs are not merely biological organisms but "participants in the worlding of human existence" (p. 16). Through this lens, Nana is not just a character but a cultural artifact reflecting early 20th-century shifts in understanding animal sentience and social roles.

3. METHODS

This research uses a qualitative approach with a focus on non-numerical data or descriptive verbal data (Tisdell et al., 2025; Miles & Huberman, 2019). The qualitative approach was chosen because it is suitable for exploring meanings, symbols, and representations in literary works in depth, especially in examining the relationship between humans and animals represented in literary texts.

Meanwhile, the research object is divided into two, namely material objects and formal objects. The material object in this paper is the novel *Peter Pan* by J.M. Barrie. This novel was chosen because it presents an animal character, Nana, who has a significant role in the narrative. Meanwhile, the formal object of this research is the relationship between humans and animals as represented in the literary work.

This paper uses a qualitative approach with a close reading method of J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* text. The aim is to examine in depth the representation of Nana's character, and how she shapes and reflects human-animal relationships in the context of Edwardian culture. Close reading allows the researcher to carefully evaluate language structure, narrative, and symbolism (Tyson, 2023).

The data sources in this study can be divided into main data sources and secondary data sources. The main data source is the novel *Peter Pan* as the directly analyzed text. Secondary data sources include journal articles, reference books, newspapers, and other sources that support and enrich the analysis of the main text. Secondary data is used to provide

theoretical context and depth to the critical reading of the literary work under study.

In addition to the interpretative method, a historical contextual approach is also used to understand the cultural values that developed in the early 20th century in England. This is important so that the representation of animal characters can be understood within the social framework in which the text was created. The analysis was conducted by considering class dynamics, family values, and the position of animals in Edwardian society (Fudge, 2019). The main theory used is ecocriticism, as developed by Garrard (2020). This approach focuses on the relationship between humans and non-human beings and how literature reflects, negotiates, or challenges structures of domination over nature. In this case, Nana's characters are treated as ecological agents in the human-animal relational system (Glottfelty & Fromm, 2018).

The researcher in this case acts as the main instrument in the process of data collection, analysis and interpretation. All analysis activities are actively carried out by the researcher, starting from reading and understanding the text, identifying issues related to the relationship between humans and animals, to interpreting these representations through the lens of the theory used. The researcher's sensitivity in capturing the meaning and context in the text becomes an important element in producing a valid and in-depth interpretation.

The data collection technique is done through literature study. This process involved reading and reviewing *Peter Pan*'s text thoroughly to identify parts relevant to the focus of the research. In addition, relevant secondary literature, such as theories of ecocriticism, especially Lawrence Buell's thoughts, as well as other references that support the study, were also used to strengthen the understanding of the context and meaning in the text (Buell, 2019).

The data was analyzed using the ecocriticism approach developed by Lawrence Buell. This approach is used to examine how

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nature and animals are represented in literary texts and how the relationship between humans and non-humans is built in the narrative. The analysis process is carried out in several stages, namely the description of the representation of animal characters, the interpretation of the symbolic meaning of the relationship, and the contextualization of the analysis results within the framework of ecocriticism theory and broader environmental issues. Thus, this approach allows the disclosure of ideological and ethical meanings hidden in the representation of human and animal relationships in literature.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**Results****Nana as a Representation of "Humanized" Animals**

In Peter Pan, the character of Nana a dog embodies a deeply nurturing role, caring attentively for the Darling children by managing their routines and responding to their emotional states with apparent sensitivity (Barrie, 2019). Through this depiction, Nana surpasses the traditional boundaries of a household pet and emerges as a maternal figure whose caregiving abilities even eclipse those of the adult humans around her.

Her characterization represents a strong instance of anthropomorphism, wherein she not only performs human duties but also exhibits the capacity to comprehend instructions and engage in social interactions much like a human being (Garrard, 2020a). This duality illustrates the complex human-animal dynamic of the Edwardian period where animals were simultaneously adored and subjugated within human-defined roles.

Despite her significant contributions to the family, Nana is physically confined outside the children's room and symbolically excluded from full familial status. This reflects the underlying power imbalance embedded in human-animal relationships of the time, where emotional attachment often masked systemic exploitation (Fudge, 2019). From an ecocritical standpoint, such treatment underscores the

persistence of human authority over animals, even under the guise of affection and harmony.

Moreover, Nana's role can be interpreted as a critique of the Edwardian caregiving system. By presenting a non-human character as the most competent caregiver, Barrie implicitly questions the warmth and efficacy of human-provided care during this era (Rose, 2019). Thus, Nana may be seen as a symbolic representation of nature—a force portrayed as more nurturing and emotionally responsive than the human caregivers surrounding her.

In Peter Pan, Nana is depicted as a dog who performs a nurturing role with the responsibility and care usually associated with adult humans. Barrie writes,

"Nana was the dog of this nursery. No nursery could possibly have been conducted more correctly" (Barrie, 2019, p. 2).

This quote suggests that Nana's presence is not considered strange, but ideal—an implicit commentary on the absence of emotionally involved parents in Edwardian middle-class households.

Furthermore, Barrie describes Nana's almost human-like cognitive abilities, especially when it comes to reading emotions and situations. He writes,

"She had a genius for knowing when a cough is a thing to have no patience with and when it needs stocking round your throat" (Barrie, 2019, p. 2).

This description reinforces the anthropomorphism inherent in Nana's character. In terms of ecocriticism, this reflects the shifting boundaries between species and demonstrates the human desire to see animals as reflections of themselves, yet remain in a subordinate position.

In the social context of the Darling family, Nana is treated like a servant as well as a family member. She takes the children to and from school, closes the windows, and even makes the beds. One of the most famous quotes about Nana's duties is:

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“She was a treasure of a nurse, who proved to be quite a treasure, and no doubt was the children's nurse because George Darling, being a rather pompous man, liked things to be just so” (Barrie, 1911, p. 3).

Here it appears that the owner's motivation is based more on social pride than true recognition of Nana's emotional and moral capacities.

Social Structure and Animal Position

Barrie also describes how Nana is treated as an animal in the context of human authority. When George Darling was embarrassed that the neighbors saw they had a dog as a caretaker, he said:

“Am I master in this house, or is she?” dan akhirnya mengusir Nana ke halaman (Barrie, 1911, p. 7).

This event shows the limits of Nana's power, as well as emphasizing the hierarchical structure that places animals as controllable entities, even though they contribute greatly.

The emotional climax involving Nana occurs when the children disappear, and only Nana feels a deep sense of loss. Barrie writes:

“She never wholly gave up hope, and every evening would lie waiting at the nursery window, her head on her paws, her eyes on the sky” (Barrie, 1911, p. 42).

This image contains powerful symbolism about the loyalty and suffering of a non-human lifeform, which despite being considered "less" than humans, shows the most empathy and commitment. In the context of ecocriticism, it shows that humans often ignore the emotional and ethical value of other creatures in favor of maintaining control.

Overall, the relationship between humans and Nana in the text shows an ambivalence between symbiosis and subordination. She acts as an emotional bridge in the family, but still lacks autonomy. Through ecocriticism, we can see how this representation illustrates the way humans desire closeness with

animals, yet are reluctant to recognize their ontological equality (DeMello, 2021).

Symbiotic or Exploitative Relationship?

In the context of ecocriticism, which examines the relationship between humans and nature and the representation of nature in literature, the relationship between the Darling family and their dog, Nana, presents a complex dynamic. On the surface, this relationship appears to be a form of symbiosis: Nana takes care of the Darling children, looking after them like a human caregiver. However, underneath lies a subtle but significant nuance of exploitation.

Nana is portrayed in a very anthropomorphic way. She is not just a pet, but behaves like a human nanny, performing household tasks and taking care of the children. J.M. Barrie wrote:

“She was a large Newfoundland dog, who had belonged to no one in particular until the Darlings engaged her. She had always thought children important, however, and the Darlings had become acquainted with her in Kensington Gardens, where she spent most of her spare time peeping into perambulators, and was much hated by careless nursemaids, whom she followed to their homes and complained of to their mistresses.”

(Quoted from Peter Pan, the first chapter)

From this quote, it is clear that Nana is considered more than just an animal; she has morality and a sense of responsibility. However, what is questionable is her social position in the family. Although she is described as loving and caring, her status remains that of an animal. She lives in a cage and has no equal authority in the Darling household. This reflects a moral contradiction in Edwardian culture - people want to feel that they have treated animals well, but still maintain a hierarchy that places humans as superior.

Symbolically, this relationship illustrates the tension between affection and domination, between care and utilization. In an ecocritical lens, this can be seen as a form of Edwardian greenwashing: showing concern for

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nature (or animals) as a way to soften the collective conscience, while continuing to perpetuate the hierarchical structure between humans and non-humans.

Nana's role in the novel can also be seen as a representation of animals being "accepted" to the extent that they are useful to humans. This becomes a veiled form of exploitative relationship, where affection and moral recognition for animals is only given when they fulfill a certain role in the human structure. Barrie himself seems aware of this contradiction, as shown in his ironic tone:

"There never was a simpler happier family until the coming of Peter Pan."

—as if to illustrate that the domestic order that has been based on Nana's silent work is false, and ready to collapse as soon as external factors enter (Carson, 2019).

The relationship between the Darling family and Nana reflects the duality of human-animal relations in Edwardian culture: seemingly symbiotic, but actually exploitative. Through an ecocritical approach, this relationship becomes a reflection of human domination over other creatures wrapped in a narrative of love. Nana's role shows how animals can be positioned as moral tools as well as subordinate subjects in the human household.

Discussion

The depiction of human-animal interactions in *Peter Pan* by J.M. Barrie reveals the intricate and often contradictory role animals occupied within Edwardian society. By assigning caregiving responsibilities—typically associated with adults—to an animal figure, Barrie blurs the rigid distinction between human and non-human entities, inviting readers to reconsider established social hierarchies. As Erica Fudge (2002) asserts, animals in literature during this period often served as "mirrors to human behavior and misbehavior," challenging the boundaries of human exceptionalism (Fudge, 2019, p.8)

Animals in the narrative are not confined to the role of passive companions or household pets; instead, they are imbued with emotional sensitivity, moral awareness, and

social responsibility. These attributes, commonly perceived as uniquely human, elevate the animal characters to the status of ecological agents, capable of influencing the human world through their affective and ethical presence. This aligns with Greg Garrard's notion that animals in ecocritical texts often function as "figures of ethical reflection," especially when portrayed with human-like emotional capacities (Garrard, 2020a, p. 152).

Nonetheless, despite their empathetic roles and indispensable contributions to human life, these animal figures remain confined within a structure of human authority and control. Their agency is ultimately restricted, as they continue to be viewed through an anthropocentric lens that denies them equal status. This paradox reflects the ambivalence of Edwardian values—an era that simultaneously revered animals as emotionally significant, while reinforcing their subjugation. As Fudge points out, "the sentimentalization of animals often masks systems of power that maintain their inferiority" (Fudge, 2019, p. 23).

From an ecocritical standpoint, this portrayal underscores the persistent dynamics of human domination masked under the guise of emotional attachment. The narrative reveals how affective bonds with animals often function to maintain control rather than to promote equity or autonomy. As Clare Palmer notes, such relationships often "perpetuate hierarchical distinctions while appearing to collapse them" (Palmer, 2019). The affectionate treatment of animals in the story thus conceals a deeper asymmetry in human-nonhuman relationships.

Moreover, the presence of nurturing animal characters in *Peter Pan* serves as a subtle critique of Edwardian domestic life. By positioning animals as more compassionate and emotionally available than the adult human caregivers, Barrie critiques the inadequacy of the family system in cultivating genuine emotional connections between parents and children. This sentiment is echoed by Jacqueline Rose, who suggests that Barrie uses such contrasts to "expose the emotional

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emptiness at the heart of the Edwardian bourgeois family" (Rose, 2019, p. 47). These animals become symbolic stand-ins for nature's empathetic potential, highlighting a failure in human relational ethics.

The novel also situates animals within a broader cultural negotiation occurring in the Edwardian period a time marked by shifting values and questioning of traditional roles. In this transitional context, Barrie utilizes animal characters to explore evolving social expectations and to challenge the binary oppositions between humans and non-humans embedded within the social fabric. According to Lawrence Buell, "literary ecocriticism often draws its power from works that expose the tenuousness of such binaries and propose alternative modes of interrelation" (Buell, 2019, p. 158).

In conclusion, the portrayal of animals in *Peter Pan* offers a nuanced lens for understanding not only ecological interconnectedness but also the socio-cultural critique embedded in literary representations. Through a linguistic and ecocritical reading, the text invites a reevaluation of human superiority, advocating for a more ethical and inclusive recognition of non-human life within the structures of care, morality, and social identity.

5. CONCLUSION

Through an ecocriticism approach, the analysis of the character of Nana in *Peter Pan* opens up a new understanding of how Edwardian literature depicts the relationship between humans and animals. Nana not only functions as an entertaining narrative element, but also as an ideological representation of the social dynamics between humans and other living creatures. Barrie creates an ambiguous character: a dog who exhibits human qualities, yet remains constrained within the social structure of being an animal.

This research shows that although there is an element of affection in the relationship between the Darling family and Nana, the relationship is not fully equal. Animals remain positioned in a subordinate structure that

reflects the anthropocentric values of Edwardian society. This representation reflects the tension between empathy for animals and the desire of humans to control nature for their own comfort and benefit.

In the context of ecocriticism, Nana's character illustrates how animals in literary texts can be a window to understanding cultural attitudes towards nature and the environment. Nana's portrayal as a loyal and wise caregiver shows the potential for harmonious human-animal relationships, while still being constrained by restrictive social power structures.

This study also emphasizes the importance of analyzing children's literature from an environmental perspective, as works such as *Peter Pan* have a great influence on the formation of ethical values in their readers. By re-reading classic texts through an ecological lens, we can foster a critical awareness of human relationships with other living beings and with the environment as a whole.

This study reaffirms that literary works such as *Peter Pan* are not merely children's stories or fantastical narratives, but also cultural texts that carry embedded ideologies about the human relationship with the non-human world. By situating Nana's character within the context of the Edwardian era and analyzing her representation through an ecocritical lens, this research contributes to broader conversations about how literature reflects and constructs perceptions of animals. Nana's dual position—as both beloved and subordinate—illustrates the persistence of anthropocentric structures that continue to shape society's treatment of animals today.

Furthermore, the character of Nana acts as a critical site through which the contradictions in Edwardian domestic ideology are revealed. As a nurturing caregiver, she subverts the conventional boundaries between species, taking on emotional labor typically reserved for humans—especially women and mothers. Yet her lack of recognition and autonomy as a non-human subject underscores the limitations of societal empathy when

filtered through hierarchical norms. In this sense, Peter Pan can be seen as not only a story of childhood and adventure, but also a subtle critique of human exceptionalism and social power dynamics.

The findings of this research also point to the importance of ecocritical approaches in children's literature. Since literary texts for young audiences significantly shape early ethical frameworks, the portrayal of animals like Nana can influence how children perceive animal agency, care, and justice. Nana serves not only as a narrative device but also as an ethical symbol a reminder that compassion must transcend species boundaries if ecological awareness is to be meaningfully cultivated.

In contemporary times marked by ecological crises, climate change, and growing discourse on animal rights, revisiting classical literature from an ecocritical standpoint becomes not only relevant but urgent. Characters like Nana offer a lens through which we can interrogate historical attitudes and reimagine more equitable interspecies relationships. As literary critics, educators, and readers, embracing such perspectives enables us to foster a deeper ecological consciousness and to challenge systems of domination that alienate humans from the broader web of life.

Ultimately, Peter Pan through Nana's characterization becomes a powerful reminder that literature holds transformative potential—not only to entertain or preserve tradition, but to question, disrupt, and inspire new ways of relating to the world and its myriad beings. Literature, thus, becomes a bridge between imagination and responsibility—between storytelling and the ethical choices that shape our coexistence with nature.

To conclude, this article recommends that the study of animal representation in literature continues to be developed, not only to understand the cultural heritage of the past, but also to formulate new environmental ethics in the midst of the ecological crisis we face today. Characters like Nana can be an effective entry point to talk about how we treat other living beings in real life.

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