

David Lattanzi

Kim McCollum-Clark

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Animals and Religion

Of all the films that are within the dystopian genre, *Children of Men* ranks as one of the best. *Children of Men*, directed by Alfonso Cuarón is an incredible film following main character Theo and his journey to help transport the only pregnant woman left on Earth to safety. *Children of Men* is full of imagery and symbolism that correlate to one another, and when dissected, it paints a picture that enhances the message and story of the film. One such piece of imagery and symbolism is the constant use of animals throughout the film. Despite seeming like run-of-the-mill mise-en-scene to the average viewer, the animals throughout the film have multiple different meanings that relate to the world of *Children of Men* that include messages of fertility (or lack thereof), capitalism, and many strong religious messages.

The Importance of Animals

Within the film, animals are constantly presented to the viewer. As stated earlier, this is not just set dressing. This is a deliberate inclusion by the filmmakers to suggest an overall theme to the viewer. To the average viewer, they might not notice the high frequency that we see animals within *Children of Men*. But if they were to go back and keep track of how many times animals are present, the viewer would be astounded by the frequency of how many times animals are present. The animals that we see all have their individual meanings which will be

expanded upon with this essay. The animals that we see within the film are cows, pigs, dogs, and sheep.

Burning Cows

Children of Men first and foremost is a film about fertility. It is the entire driving plot of the entire film. In the world of this story, women lost the ability to have babies twenty years before the film starts. It is never explicitly explained why women lost the ability to have children, but because of this, the world is in shambles. We see ads about how other nations have fallen and that “only Britain soldiers on”. Although it isn’t explicitly explained why women aren’t able to have children, the audience can look at the symbolism of animals for an answer. One of the first notable visuals of animals the audience sees is the field of burnt cow carcasses near Jasper’s home in the country. Cows are commonly known throughout literature as a symbol for fertility and motherhood. Environmental catastrophe is something common throughout dystopian literature. In the novel *Feed*, another story with rampant pollution in a dystopian society, we know the world is suffering from heavy pollution despite it not being in the forefront of the story. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, which also has infertility as a major plot device, has the cause of said infertility attributed to environmental catastrophe. Something that we see frequently in the film is grey skies, sludge coming from pipes, and an overall bleak look to nature. It is easy to assume that people burnt those cow carcasses as it isn’t something that happens within nature. What can be dissected from this quick clip is that the infertility in the film comes from humankind’s mistreatment and pollution of its environment. While it is a quick and simple scene, the dead cows show the audience that the reason people are no longer able to have kids is due to the fact that humanity has polluted the earth.

Pigs on the Wing

Something notable that should be mentioned is the *Animals* imagery. In the scene where Theo visits Nigel at his home, you can see a giant pig blimp floating next to a large smokestack behind where Nigel stands. This is important for dissecting three of the animals seen in the film. *Animals* is a concept album by Pink Floyd which has stark commentary of the terrors of capitalism. Additionally, *Animals* is said to be based off of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* and the animals within the book as well as the album are seen within *Children of Men* itself. Within all of these mediums, the ruthless leaders of the society are the pigs, dogs are seen as executors of will, and the mass populace are the sheep. All of these animals are seen throughout the film.

We see the pig blimp when Theo visits Nigel. Nigel is seen as a rich man in the upper echelon of British society. When Theo enters the home, he is greeted by the statue of David and Nigel exclaiming that they could have saved another statue, but it was destroyed before they could get to it. Despite seeing the rest of Britain where everything is bleak and grey, we see that Nigel lives in an expensive home in a gated area where bands are playing and the sun shines on manicured lawns. We see that Nigel has recovered and restored numerous high value and significant art pieces. Although this is seemingly a noble cause, this sends a message of the shortcomings of capitalism as well as the imperialism of Britain. Despite the fact that the world has fallen into disrepair, and the peoples of other nations need help and refuge, the British government has pooled resources to take other countries art and artifacts. This shows the capitalist idea of money before man. Despite people desperately needing help within this world, the British government is taking other nations belongings. This overall scene is highlighted by the pig blimp. The pigs in *Children of Men* are likened to the pigs in *Animal Farm*. The pigs in this

society will take art and artifacts from other nations but brutalize immigrants fleeing those countries. The stealing shown also highlights Britain's past imperialism as well as hinting at a possible future of an imperialistic Britain in a dystopia.

The pigs in this society are the rich upper class who are more worried about leaving the earth with as much wealth and riches they can get their hands on, while pushing down the poor and needy that they steal from. This is important to this dystopian society as the pigs are so worried about protecting and saving art and artifact yet they hold those items above the lives of innocent people who are seeking refuge.

Dogs

Dogs are seen numerous times throughout the film and we can see dogs with every group of people within the film. The police and soldiers have angry and vicious dogs that snap at Theo as he passes, Jasper has a dog at his home in the woods, Nigel has dogs at his home laying under the statue of David, the Fishes have dogs at their farm, and Marichka has a small dog that she clings onto throughout her time on the screen. The only person who doesn't have a dog is Theo. Yet, throughout the time in the movie, we see that dogs are constantly attracted to him. If we take *Animal Farm* and *Animals* and look at the usage of dogs, we know that in those mediums' dogs are hungry businessmen or the secret police. Dogs do the bidding of what the pigs want. We can see this by the British military seen throughout the film who are often seen with vicious dogs who snap at Theo as he passes. But dogs aren't all on the side of the pigs. They are also seen with people who are going against the pigs. We can see dogs as the executors of will. Everybody who has a dog, affects the plot and fights against the pigs or for them.

The usage of dogs can be seen as people who fight in any capacity to uphold the establishment or destroy it. Despite the Fishes being an antagonistic group to Theo and Kee, they are still attempting to overthrow a government that they believe is wrong. But they do it in methods and ways that are more detrimental to their cause than beneficial. Although the Fishes are fighting the pigs, they kill other dogs and ultimately end up inadvertently helping the pigs in the process. On the other hand, Marichka is a refugee and her dog symbolizes how the refugees are helping to get Theo and Kee to safety. These refugee 'dogs' are the only dogs who are worried about getting baby Dylan to safety. Many of these refugees die or risk their lives for the cause of getting Dylan to safety. Notably, this dog is the smallest dog that we see throughout the whole film. This represents how the refugees have the smallest sway in this society.

Sheep and Their Shepherd

The sheep in *Children of Men*, are the refugees within Bexhill as well as the common class of people in this society. Every party that is in Bexhill is trying to, or has, influenced the sheep. The British army is there to silence the sheep and willing to cull the herd to prevent upheaval and dissent. We see that the British soldiers are absolutely ruthless when dealing with the refugees. We see them shooting and killing the surrendering civilian refugees rather than take them hostage as the British soldiers want to squash the uprising as quickly as possible. The other two parties that are at Bexhill are Luke and his band of rebels, and Theo and his refugee allies. Luke has a noble goal of trying to free the people within Bexhill and unify the country but is willing to kill his own allies and obtain leadership of the Fishes to do it. Luke's noble cause becomes muddled by personal interest and his want for power. But Theo on the other hand is a truly noble shepherd. As stated before, dogs are constantly attracted to him throughout the

film. This, to me, is because Theo is the shepherd in this world. He is the shepherd of the sheep as well as to the dogs. The dogs who want to help the pigs are trying to stop him and the dogs who fight the pigs help him. He becomes a shepherd purely to try and save the first baby born in twenty years. In the madness of everything going on in this film, through the cries of Baby Dylan, a ceasefire is called. Theo is then able to lead Kee to the boat and to safety and thus Theo becomes the shepherd of humanity and protects the mother and child by bringing Kee to the *Tomorrow*.

Religion

Theo being a shepherd has strong religious connotations. Theo is the Jesus figure within this dystopian society. By the end of the film, he dies to save Kee and Dylan. There are many biblical references within the film. Theo being a shepherd is the most obvious. Him being barefoot through most of the film and getting two large red welts on his feet is another biblical reference. The use of religion is constantly seen throughout the film. There are repenters who sit in public and speak about how the infertility in the movie is God's punishment for sin. Theo dying at the end of the film is his sacrifice to hopefully ensure a better future. Theo is helping to guide the world into a better future. He literally leads Kee to the ship *Tomorrow*.

Why This Matters

The usage of animals within this film helps the viewer to highlight and categorize the aspects of tyranny in a dystopian society. The visuals allow for viewers to, whether it be consciously or subconsciously, see the different aspects of tyranny and the lengths people will go to control the masses or overthrow tyrannical leaders. The usage of animals gives a digestible

analogy for these themes. The animals show the viewer how a dystopian society can operate and how these worlds can be perpetuated or overthrown.