

## *The Creative Launcher*

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### **Neotenic Representations in Gerald Durrell's Works**

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#### **Abstract**

Neoteny refers to a set of infant-like characteristics which, if present in even adult non-human animals, are found endearing by humans and activates nurturing responses in them. These features are large eyes, short limbs, a large head compared to the body, upright posture and a generally rounded configuration etc. Konrad Lorenz calls these features collectively as 'child schema.' In culture industries, toy and doll-makers, as well as cartoon film-makers, exploit this tendency of their consumers to increase their sales by representing animals neotenually. It is a process of deliberate juvenilization. Though a form of anthropocentric representation, Gerald Durrell has shown in his works how neoteny can be used ecocentrically to change human attitudes towards neglected and so-called 'ugly' creatures. Combined often with anthropomorphism, neoteny becomes a potent tool in Durrell's hands to fight anthropocentrism and promote ecocentrism.

**Keywords-** Neoteny, Juvenalization, Child Schema, Eyes, Anthropocentric, Ecocentric

Among the many kinds of anthropocentric representations found in the works of the naturalist-writer Gerald Durrell, one is the neotenuous– or simply– neoteny. Neoteny is defined as "the set of characteristics we instinctively associate with infant humans and animals: large eyes, a big head relative to the body, short limbs and a generally rounded configuration. Both the real panda and the WWF logo in which it appears exemplify neoteny, and also the dignified 'cutesy' relation to nature that it implies" (Garrard 142). It is also called juvenilization. The word neoteny is borrowed from the German *neotenie*, the latter constructed from the Greek (*neos*, young) and (*teinein*, tend

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to). In *Picturing the Beast* (1993), Steve Baker says that “in the field of visual representation, especially in its high-street manifestations”, “we find a world constructed in the image of popular culture’s preconceptions, a photographic mirroring of a desired reality, a preposterous Athena-print world of cuddly coexistence with even the wildest of animals: ‘Boy or girl plus leopard – it’s what’s called the “aaah” factor (181). In the next paragraph, he mentions something most pertinent. It is that “As often as not, the ‘aaah’ factor extends to the preferred *look* of the animal body” (Baker 181). He quotes Elizabeth Lawrence’s words on the subject:

Neoteny refers to a condition in which there is retention of youthful characteristics in the adult form.... No doubt unconsciously, but yet methodically, in order to satisfy our own tastes, human beings have selectively created animals which are neotenous. Shedding light on this process, ethologist Konrad Lorenz has described and diagrammed the innate releasing ‘schema’ for human parental care responses. He proposes that the physical configuration of a high and slightly bulging forehead, large brain case in proportion to the face, big eyes, rounded cheeks, and short, stubby limbs calls forth an adult nurturing response to such a ‘lovable’ object, moving people to tenderness. The same positive reactions are elicited by animals who exhibit these juvenile traits. ... Roundness is the essence of the neotenous configuration – round heads, round cheeks, short rounded limbs, and plump, rounded bodies characterize juvenile forms in both man and animals (Lawrence qtd. in Baker 181).

Baker further says that “Lawrence notes that doll and toy manufacturers intuitively grasped this ‘cuteness’ principle long ago, and she also refers to Stephen Jay Gould’s famous demonstration of the increasing pictorial neotenization of Mickey Mouse since that character’s early appearances in the 1920s” (181).

Bob Mullan and Garry Marvin, in their book *Zoo Culture* (1987; revised 1999), add two more characteristics of neoteny to those already enumerated above. These are “soft elasticity of body surface” (24) and an upright posture (25). They observe that “Even mature adult animals which retain these characteristics are likely to be treated as though they were human infants” (25). All these characteristics or elements put together constitutes the ‘child schema’, a term coined by Konrad Lorenz, who developed the concept of neoteny (24).

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Prior to becoming a popular writer, Gerald Durrell had grave doubts as to whether anybody would care to read his books if he focussed primarily on animals. His doubts were laid to rest by his eldest brother, the renowned novelist Lawrence Durrell, who knew the minds of the reading public well. The elder Durrell, who never lost an opportunity to encourage his youngest brother to write, told him: “‘Why on earth don’t you write a book about these dreadful trips you go on, and make some money for a change’ ... . ‘After all, the British simply love stories about *fluffy* [italics mine] animals and jungles, and it’s so easy to do” (Botting 193-194). As Lawrence was like a father figure to him, Gerald seems to have taken his advice to heart in some of his descriptions. In his early books, when he was just an animal collector, the neotenic descriptions might have been to make his books popular and are wholly anthropocentric. But later on, when he became an ardent conservationist, the purpose of the neotenic descriptions might have been to create sympathy and garner public support for endangered animals, especially the ones which were small and judged ugly and unspectacular by the average member of the public. ‘I feel sympathy for the small and the ugly’, Gerald once told a reporter in Indianapolis. ‘Since I am big and ugly, I try to preserve the little ones’ (Botting 480). Thus, these representations become ecocentric as well.

*The Bafut Beagles* (1954), “his best-selling book about his second Cameroons venture” (Botting 166), has a couple of such representations. The first example describes “a pair of large and beautiful toads” (Durrell 201). He says: “They were each about the circumference of a saucer, with enormous liquid eyes and short, fat legs that seemed to have some difficulty in supporting their heavy bodies” (201-202). Sometime later in the narrative, he also calls them his “plump room-mates” (202) and finding that “They were actually shy and easily embarrassed beasts, completely lacking in self-confidence” (202), Durrell comments “that they had no faith in their fat selves” (203).

The second example involves a very rare creature called the Hairy Frog:

My Hairy Frog was, as frogs go, quite large: with his legs tucked neatly in he would have fitted on to a saucer without very much room left over. His head was broad and rather flat, with very protuberant eyes and a mouth with an extraordinarily wide gape. ... The eyes were very large, jet black netted with a

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fine filigree of golden marks. The most astonishing thing about the creature – the hair– was confined to the sides of the body and the thighs, where it grew thick and black, about a quarter of an inch long. The adornment is not really hair at all, but consists of fine, elongated filaments of skin, which on close examination resemble the tentacles of a sea anemone. Until you examine the creature closely, however, the illusion that its hindquarters are clothed in a thick layer of fur is complete (238).

*The Bafut Beagles* is Durrell's third book. But these two examples show how even in his early works, he was thinking of how to make the usually sidelined creatures interesting to the public eye. The normal jungle writer would not bother about neotenizing animals considered “ugly” and “unattractive” by the populace, but would and did work on big creatures thought to be sufficiently engaging to the imagination of the laity. In short, Durrell uses neotenous language, which is usually reserved for animals having high exhibition value, to make animals having low or no exhibition value appear cute and lovable. Therefore, in his attempts to bring some marginalised creatures to the centre, the anthropocentric device of neoteny becomes ecocentric in his hands for a change.

In *The Drunken Forest* (1956), Durrell's fifth book, which is about his trip to Argentina and Paraguay in 1954, there are a couple of neotenic depictions as well. He portrays a creature known as Budgett's frog thus:

It was black with a pale yellowish-white belly, and was almost completely *circular in shape* [italics mine]. Its golden eyes were perched up on the top of its broad, flat head, like those of a miniature hippo. But it was the mouth of the beast that startled me: it had thick, yellow lips which stretched from side to side of the frog's head in a great, grinning curve, exactly like the Tenniel illustration of Humpty Dumpty. As I watched it, it suddenly blew up its body like a balloon, stood up on its *short, stubby legs* [italics mine], opened its mouth wide (showing that the inside was a bright primrose yellow) and proceeded to give another series of yarring trumpet-blasts. When I took it in my hand, it struggled wildly, so I put it on the ground. It stood up on its small legs, opened wide its

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mouth, and took little jumps towards me, snapping its mouth fiercely and giving trumpet blasts of rage. It was an enchanting beast (365).

In the next chapter, Durrell describes a Horned toad, one among three, thus:

He was about the circumference of a saucer, and three-quarters of his bulk seemed to consist of head. He had short, thick legs, a paunchy body, and this enormous head in which were set two large eyes filigreed with a pattern of gold and silver. Above each of these the skin was raised into an isosceles triangle, like the horns of a baby goat. His mouth was incredible, for it was so large it almost appeared to split him in two. The toad, with his rubbery lips, horned head and sulkily drooping mouth, managed to achieve an expression that was a combination of extreme malevolence with the arrogant bearing of an obese monarch (*The Drunken Forest* 374).

Durrell presents a flagrantly neotenic portrait of an adult female hippopotamus, as if it was a human infant, in *A Zoo in My Luggage* (1960), where he recounts the incidents of his third Cameroons expedition. At one point in the book, Durrell and some others are crossing a hippo-infested river. When they are very near to the opposite bank, we have the following, 'Nearly there', I said gaily, 'and not a hippo in sight.'

The words were hardly out of my mouth when a rock we were passing some fifteen feet away suddenly rose out of the water and gazed at us with *bulbous* astonished eyes [italics mine], snorting out two slender fountains of spray, like a miniature whale.

Fortunately, our gallant crew resisted the impulse to leap out of the canoe *en masse* and swim for the bank. The old man drew in his breath with a sharp hiss, and dug his paddle deep into the water, so the canoe pulled up short in a swirl and clop of bubbles. Then we sat and stared at the hippo, and the hippo sat and stared at us. Of the two, the hippo seemed the more astonished. The *chubby, pinky-grey* [italics mine] face floated on the surface of the water like a disembodied head at a séance. The *great eyes* [italics mine] stared at us with the *innocent appraisal of ababy* [italics mine]. The ears flicked back and forth, as if waving to us. The hippo sighed deeply and moved a few feet nearer,

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still looking at us with *wide-eyedinnocence* [italics mine] (*The Gerald Durrell Omnibus* 530).

Finally, the hippo does not attack and after satisfying its curiosity, gives “a gigantic yawn” (530), sinks “beneath the surface” (530) of the water and reappears “to our relief, about twenty yards up-river” (530) first, sinks again and is seen again “in a moment or so still farther up-stream” (530). Augustine, one of the local people Durrell has with him in the canoe, explains that the hippo did not attack because it was a “woman [sic]”. The laws of human patriarchal society which stipulates that women are or should be submissive and not aggressive are conveniently used to explain away a non-human animal’s behaviour. This is an example of what Randall Lockwood would probably regard as *explanatory anthropomorphism* “whereby we are inclined to offer circular definitions and explanations of animal behaviour...” (Mullan and Marvin 13). This extract also bears out Mullan and Marvin’s claim that “We [the Westerners] ... have a tendency to turn animals into juveniles and infants” (24). In this instance, this neotenic representation of the hippo at first, coupled with its subsequent actions helps to dispel some of the inherent theriophobia that human beings have with regard to the larger animals.

In *Two in the Bush* (1966), a book of his later years, where Durrell narrates what he saw in the Malaysian sanctuary called “The Taman Nagara” (175), “a gigantic slab of untouched forest” (175), we find a perfect example of a neotenic anthropomorphic representation, where the neotenic effect has been greatly heightened by the use of anthropomorphism:

Another night-time prowler was the Slow Loris, which looks somewhat like a miniature, silver-pink teddy bear. Its *enormous*, owl-like *eyes* [italics mine] stare wildly through the branches as though the creature were on the borders of an acute and sustained nervous breakdown. This effect is enhanced by the fact that it has a dark rim of fur round each eye which makes it look as though it is suffering from two permanent black eyes. Normally the Loris moves with all the speed and bounce of an elderly and excessively corpulent clergyman suffering from angina pectoris and in-growing toe-nails. This slow movement is, of course, useful to him in capturing his prey, but it is deceiving, for try to

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catch a Loris up a tree and he will put on a turn of speed that is amazing (Durrell 178-179).

In the same book, which is a chronicle of a journey he undertook to New Zealand, Australia and Malaysia, Durrell describes a wombat in a Melbourne sanctuary thus:

The next inhabitant of the forest was even more unexpected than the Kookaburras had been. I was standing at the edge of the undergrowth, moodily wondering which way was the best to go in search of Lyrebirds, when there was a faint crackling of twigs and a *portly* [italics mine] grey animal about the size of a large bulldog suddenly shuffled out of the undergrowth. I recognised it instantly as a Wombat, for in the past (when I had been a keeper at Whipsnade Zoo) I had once had a long and passionate love affair with one of these enchanting animals, and I have been enamoured of the species ever since. Superficially they resemble Koala Bears, but are, in fact, much more stocky and bear-like in appearance, since they are adapted to ground living. They have short, strong legs – slightly bowed – which give them a rolling gait very reminiscent of a bear; but their heads look more like a Koala, with round boot-button eyes, oval plush-like nose patches, and a tattered fringe round the edge of the ears. The Wombat, having appeared out of the undergrowth, paused for a moment and then sneezed violently and with a melancholy air. Then he shook himself and walked up the path towards me with the slow flat-footed, resigned walk of a *teddy bear* [italics mine] who knows he is no longer favourite of the nursery (*Two in the Bush* 112-113).

However, Durrell spoils the neotenic or “juvenilization” effect of the wombat very soon when he informs us that the wombat “had been the Grand Old Man of the forest for about ten years” (114).

Some pages later in the same chapter, Durrell describes a pair of endangered animals called Leadbeater’s Possum, “a small and enchanting animal” (120). He is shown these by Mr. Butcher, “the head of the Wildlife Department” (109), who takes him to “a pair of wide-eyed, fat and exceedingly friendly Leadbeater’s Possums” (121). In the next paragraph, he writes:

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It was as incredible and as thrilling as suddenly being presented with a pair of live Dodos or a baby dinosaur. They crouched, soft as velvet, in my cupped hands, peering up at me, their noses and ears twitching, their *big, dark eyes* [italics mine] still slightly bleary from having been extracted from a pleasant siesta so unceremoniously. They were about the size of a Bushbaby, with sleek, soft, mole-like fur, handsomely patterned in ash grey, white and black, the hair on their bushy tails so fine that it looked like spun glass. They had rather squat, *fat*, good-natured looking faces, and *tiny, delicate paws* [italics mine]. When they had recovered consciousness to a certain extent, they *sat up on their hind legs* [italics mine] in my hands, *portly* [italics mine] and sedate, and accepted a couple of mealworms with an air of condescension (121-122).

In the passage above, which has all the usual characteristics of a neotenic representation like large eyes, small limbs and a rounded configuration, we encounter three new features of neoteny not present in the other ones discussed here. The first is the colour combination of ‘white and black’. Mullan and Marvin in *Zoo Culture* note that “incidentally, contrasting black and white coloration often seems to attract – witness the popularity of zebras, killer whales and penguins” (26). They inform us that “Dr Gu of the Shanghai Zoological Gardens suggested that the popularity of the giant panda in China was in part a result of a similar process to that in the west – it was a ‘funny animal’, its black and white markings were appealing, and it was regarded as a toy-like creature rather than as a zoological specimen” (Mullan and Marvin 26). The second neotenic feature is the fact that Durrell mentions that the Leadbeater’s Possums ‘sat up on their hind legs’. By sitting up on their hind legs, they assume an *upright posture*. It is one of the characteristics which, even if shown by an adult non-human creature, prompts humans to treat it as a human infant. Ramona and Desmond Morris opine that “Man is an upright species and any creature that regularly assumes the vertical position scores strong points, anthropomorphically. Penguins, for instance, are the most vertical of birds and are also the most popular” (qtd. in Mullan and Marvin 27). The third neotenic aspect is *the soft elasticity of body surface*. Durrell specifically mentions that the creatures *felt* ‘soft as velvet in his ... hands’ and reiterates it by stating that they had ‘sleek, soft, mole-like fur’. On this, Ramona and

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Desmond Morris note: “Babies are soft to their mother’s touch and vice-versa. Softness in animals is always appealing” (qtd. in Mullan and Marvin 27 ). Therefore, this passage is one of the neatest fits imaginable into Konrad Lorenz’s *child schema*.

However, it should not be assumed that the neotenous attitude of human beings toward non-human animals has gone unchallenged throughout Gerald Durrell’s works. In a short, excoriating passage towards the end of *Two in the Bush*, he has this to say:

The attitude of the average person to the world they live in is completely selfish. When I take people round to see my animals, one of the first questions they ask (unless the animal is *cuddly and appealing* [italics mine]) is, ‘what use is it?’ by which they mean, what use is it to them? To this one can only reply, ‘what use is the Acropolis?’ Does a creature have to be of direct material use to mankind in order to exist? By and large, by asking the question ‘what use is it?’ you are asking the animal to justify its existence without having justified your own (215).

Thus, after carefully reading Durrell’s neotenic representations, one comes to the conclusion that his use of this device is multi-dimensional. In some places, it is like a double-edged sword which cuts both ways. At others, it is used traditionally and anthropocentrically like in the case of the hippo. But here too, one must bear in mind that Durrell’s attitudes underwent huge transformations in the course of his dealings with animals. The hippo depiction occurs in *A Zoo in My Luggage*, a period in his life when his chief focus was on founding a zoo of his own, simply because he was loath to part with animals he had grown fond of after a collecting trip. His ideas of setting up zoos as wildlife preservation centres were only in a rudimentary stage then. However, this is reflected in such representations in his later works, most notably in *Two in the Bush*, written at a point in his life when he was not just any zookeeper but one of the world’s foremost conservationists who was trying to negotiate various terms and conditions with different governments of the world which would aid in protecting the various endangered species of the world.

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