

Animal Loss in Film; Understanding the Emotional Weight and Narrative  
Purpose of Animal Deaths

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## **Declaration of Originality**

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) Animation. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

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Your name

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## Abstract

This thesis examines why the deaths of animal characters in film often evoke more profound emotional responses from the audiences than the deaths of human characters. Drawing on the concepts surrounding classical narratology, animal narratology, and phenomenological theory the study investigates how narrative structure, perspective and cinematic techniques shape audience empathy toward non-human protagonists. The analysis of this thesis focuses on the case study of *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* (2009), directed by Lasse Hallström, a film which despite the death of a human character the, the emotional impact cultivates in the death of a central animal character. Using narratological concepts such as focalisation, narrative voice, and temporal structuring alongside the insights of animal studies into narratology, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodied perception, this research explores how film form encourages viewers to engage empathetically with animal experiences. The study demonstrates that certain techniques including restrained narration, repetition, visual perspective and time manipulation are critical and intensify the emotional attachment the audience feels to animal characters, shaping their perception of loss. By integrating structural narrative analysis with theories of interspecies empathy, this thesis argues that animal deaths function as powerful narrative strategies that challenge anthropocentric storytelling and encourage audience reflection on the emotional and ethical connections of human-animal relationships.

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## Introduction

Death is considered a taboo subject, yet onscreen deaths in cinema are familiar to audiences. Across all media and genres, death is critical for telling narratives and, in some cases, drives the story. Such scenes reveal emotional connections between characters and the love they share, even for pets. In these films, the companion is always a secondary character, viewed through a human-centred lens, and we usually have no real connection to the animal. However, when they do pass, why are their deaths so impactful? Why do animal deaths sometimes hold more emotional power than human ones?

This thesis investigates the emotional impact of animal deaths in film and analyses the narrative mechanisms that elicit strong audience responses. Specifically, it explores how traditional narrative films employ animal deaths as conventions, cultural storytelling tools, and symbols. While narrative theory has generally focused on anthropocentric perspectives where human cognition, language, and experience shape meaning and story progression this thesis interrogates what occurs when non-human animals take central roles, thereby revealing limitations in existing narratological frameworks.

Focusing on the iconic story of Hachi and the film *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* (2009), directed by Lasse Hallström, this study explores how narrative structure, focalisation, and cinematic techniques construct profound empathy for non-human characters and intensify the emotional resonance of their deaths. Drawing on classical narratology alongside concepts from animal studies, analysing through narrative structure, focalisation and temporality, while scholarship in animal narratology interrogates how narratives represent non-human perspectives and agency. These approaches are further informed by the phenomenological philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose emphasis on embodied perception offers a unique framework for understanding empathy as an affective and sensory engaging experience between character and audience.

Despite the richness of research across these fields, current scholarship does not sufficiently examine or explain the representation of animal deaths in film, particularly the distinctive emotional weight such events carry in comparison to the deaths of human characters. Studies in animal narratology tend to primarily be focused on literary texts rather than visual media such as cinema, while classical narratology rarely acknowledges and centres on non-human narratives, reflecting the fields largely anthropocentric orientation of study. Furthermore, phenomenological studies of spectatorship often overlook considerations of animal suffering and non-human consciousness in perceptual experience, focusing primarily on human subjects. As a result, a significant gap remains within such existing scholarship. This gap concerns the intersection of narrative structure, cinematic form and interspecies empathy that shapes powerful emotional resonance of animal deaths in film, or therefore more broadly, within narrative media.

By integrating these frameworks into examining and filling the gaps, this thesis builds its own method for analysing how narrative form, cinematic technique, and

embodied perspective shape the emotional weight of animal deaths in film. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing debates in narratology, film studies, and animal studies. The study examines gaps in understanding non-human perspectives, challenges human-centred storytelling, and reveals new dimensions of narrative empathy.



## **Chapter One: Literature Review**

This chapter examines three interconnected bodies of scholarship that collectively establish the theoretical, analytical and structural foundations for this thesis, which investigates why animal deaths often carry more emotional weight in films than those of human characters. Foundational work on narrative structure by theorists such as Tzvetan Todorov and Gérard Genette has provided extensive insight into plot construction, temporality, and focalization. Yet understanding the definitions and techniques deeper to this is critical in being able to cohesively analyse my case study. However, these frameworks have rarely been applied to the roles of non-human species characters or to the question concerning how audiences respond to their narrative representation, particularly in relation to animal death.

In parallel, the past two decades have witnessed significant growth in scholarship on the representation of animal lives and their perspectives within literature studies. These studies lie and are part of a broader study into the complex ideals and constructs we have around non-human species and our understanding and connection to them. Yet despite this, comparatively little attention has been paid to how these concerns shift when narrative moves from written form to visual media such as film, television and animation. There remains limited analysis of how narrative structures when combined with cinematography and visual conventions shapes distinctive emotional response. This chapter therefore identifies and synthesises the gaps across these bodies of literature, situating the present study with ongoing debates about narrative form, medium specifics and audience engagement in creative outputs. The analysis and examination of my chosen literatures can be divided upon thematic observations, broadly grouping them into three main themes: Empathy, Narrative and Time.

Animal deaths in film often tend to carry more emotional weight in film than those of human characters, understanding this requires a critical cohesive analysis of varying fields of study. In understanding these fields structural frameworks and concepts only then can a defined analysis be complete. Through understanding the structural foundations of narratology, only then can a systematic analysis of the elementary basis of a narrative be understood. Whilst the expansion of research into animal studies in relation to narratology, aids in understanding the complexities and complications that arise from non-human character centred narratives in literary media in relation to agency and authenticity, highlighting the lack of study into visual media. Finally, bridging narrative techniques and cinematography through the phenomenological study of perception and embodiment through the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, identify the connections between such techniques and the perspectives which encourage audience engagement with emotional responses to the deaths of non-human characters.

Noting the three themes, these are the sources within this thematic review respective to their primary field of focus:

### **Animal Studies**

*“Animal Narratology”*, edited by Joela Jacobs, is a comprehensive interdisciplinary collection that brings together scholarly essays and articles originally published in the special issue of *Humanities* on the theme of *Animal Narratology*, now reprinted as a stand-alone volume. This volume explores explicitly what it means to narrate beyond the human, expressing their voice, representing their experience and agency, whilst acknowledging the complexity of this medium of narrative expression and storytelling. A central theme conceptualised by the collaborators of this journal illustrates the complex issues that arise from representing non-human life in human languages, delving into cultural, moral, ethical, environmental and philosophical fields of concern.

Jacobs’s introduction sets the scope for the book by centring on the theoretical questions about animal narration, emphasising that such narrations do not simply represent animals but approximate the animal perspective in human terms and understanding. Whilst each animal narrator is unique and the experience or narrative they present is exclusive, the volume’s contributors collectively argue that exploring these narratives reveals assumptions and relations in connection to human entanglement into the interpretative horizons of the story. Given this journal’s format and structure, I will draw my focus to the works of David Herman, Tirza Bruggemann and Cristina Gerhardt. (Joela Jacobs)

### **Narratology**

*‘Handbook of Narratology’* edited by Peter Hühn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier, and Wolf Schmid is a comprehensive reference work that examines major topics, theories and debates in narratology, the study of narrative structures, interpretations and forms. Initially published in 2009 by Walter de Gruyter, this current edition is the second printing, with the original thirty-two articles from the first edition updated and thirty-five new articles added. The volume brings together contributions from numerous leading scholars in the field, situating the theoretical frameworks of the structure alongside contemporary, cultural and interdisciplinary approaches, offering new and old in-depth research into narrative studies. I will specifically focus my research on a couple of articles that align with my analytical methodology. I will draw my focus on the works of Suzanne Keen, Burkhard Nierderhoff, Michael Scheffel, Antonius Weixler and Lucas Werner.

One of the core strengths of this text is its deep grounding in the foundational work of narratologists such as Gérard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov. These scholars established key categories within the concept, including story versus discourse, narrative voice, focalization, and narrative time. All key elements of my analysis methodology for my chosen case studies are included in this thesis topic. Such concepts help dissect how narratives function and present themselves to the

audience. Due to the in-depth nature of this source, I will focus my research on a couple of articles that align with my analytical methodology.

Despite classical narratological study focusing on human subjects and narratives, the constructs of the concept are core and consistent in application to both mediums which are not of literature form and characters which are not defined a human.(Hühn et al.)

Narratology emerged as a discipline concerned with the structures underlying all stories. The foundational theorists, Tzvetan Todorov, Gérard Genette, and Seymour Chatman conceptualized such a discipline by focusing on distinguishing and recognising the underlying elements foundational in building the structural fundamentals in narratives. Disassembling a once complex concept into a cohesive framework bound and built by a myriad of structural fundamentals. The distinguishment between the notions of '*fabula*' (the story, the progressive sequence of events within the story world) and '*syuzhet*' (discourse, the manner in which those events are presented to the audience)(Studies). This notable distinction allowed analysts to examine how narratives employ, structure, perspectives, and influences to engage and direct audience perception and emotional response.

Todorov's study into narrative theory unveiled the existence of defined sequence of distinct events. Todorov proved that stories were built on a special arrangement of events, one which based a chronological progression through the narrative structured around a specialised framework of plot evolution. He recognised that successful narratives contain five major states, a start with a stable setting, a break by a disturbance in the equilibrium that creates an imbalance, the character recognition of said disturbance, the proceeding to overcome and repair this disruption, leading to a newly resolved and stable equilibrium. "*The two moments of equilibrium, similar and different, are separated by a period of imbalance, which is composed of a process of degeneration and a process of improvement*"(Todorov and Weinstein 75). Fundamentally this structure can be broken down into three acts, proposing the recognisable three act structure; Act 1:Equilibrium, Act 2: Disturbance, Act 3: New Equilibrium.(Studies) Understanding the existence of this structural framework of narrative aids my studies in this thesis topic by allowing me to recognise and distinguishes the key moments and shots within the films that exemplify and exhibit these core states of narrative.

Genette's model of narrative identifies a three dimensional structure to the discipline of narratology: narrative time (the relation between events and their presentation, referring to the connection of time and the time of the narration), narrative instance (the narrative agent and perspective at the moment and time of the narration), and narrative levels (the relationship of the acts narrated to narration itself) (*Gerard Genette and Structural Narratology – Literary Theory and Criticism*). Defining the notion that within a narrative, time and discourse are two definitively separate elements which despite being co-dependant on the fundamental existence of one another within the story narrative, they are singular and unique complex structures in themselves joining together to tell a complex

story, understanding the significance of these two elements independently helps understand the progression and emotional connection to both characters and the story. “*But, as we will see, analysis of narrative discourse as I understand it constantly implies a study of relationships: on the one hand the relationship between a discourse and the events that it recounts (narrative in its second meaning), on the other hand the relationship between the same discourse and the act that produces it...*” (Genette 27). Notably as we view and observe a human reality and familiar happenings from non-human species, we can begin to understand the emotional significance on the concepts and differences in our perception of time and connection to that that we observe Hachi experience.

Seymour Chatman’s model distinguishes and splits narrative into two parts: a story ‘*historie*’ (the sequence of events, characters, setting, focused on the happenings, the actions and occurrences within the narrative that define the setting), and discourse ‘*discours*’ (the style, medium, and expression of said events and occurrences within the narrative ) (Chatman 295). Terms that one may connect and recognise as both ‘*fabula*’ and ‘*syuhet*’, a recognition already previously developed and used by Russian formalists Vladimir Propp and Viktor Shklovsky in connection to understanding narrative texts (ehawkes). Similarly to Genette’s theory on the matter, Chatman’s analyses help in understanding the tellings and significance of the connections between the two elements. Understanding the occurrences and accompanying narration aids in building a cohesive understanding to the relationship and emotions the character has to the events. Understanding this distinction of modes, aids in cohesively analysing the difference between the sequence of events at play in the narrative to Hachi’s perception of their progression and his acknowledgement of time.

Integrating these methodologies with film techniques and devices establishes a strong bridge between theory and cinematic practice. Constructing the story effectively through chosen camera movements, specific sound design, and precise editing, enables filmmakers to guide spectators in constructing a coherent story world. Camera utilisation and imagination further connect narratological concepts to the emotional and visual perspectives that shape audience empathy and knowledge. Furthermore, the conjunction of these techniques and ideas bridge together to form a unique storytelling experience enticing audience engagement through the visual, audible and emotional perception, aiding us as the audience envision and interact with the narrative in a much more personal deeper form.

Thus, these frameworks collectively provide a solid foundation for analysing how film narration manipulates empathy, suspense, and emotional tension—essential elements in the effective portrayal of animal deaths.

## Phenomenology

***The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy***’s entry on Maurice Merleau-Ponty presents him as one of the most influential 20th-century phenomenologists, notable for his development of a distinctive account of perception, embodiment, language, art, politics and ontology that bridges gaps in earlier philosophical

traditions. At the heart of his work, rather than treating the world as a ready-made set of defined objective facts or reducing perception to mere sensory notions, he shows how experiences rooted in perception are embodied, reflective and presently meaningful, fundamentally interweaving the body and the world. With such a conceptual approach, Merleau-Ponty's ideas reject Cartesian splits between the mind and the body and insist that our lived bodily engagements are the primary force in experience and meaning.

*The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* article summarises yet underscores Merleau-Ponty's interdisciplinary reach, acknowledging his profound influence in multiple fields of study, ranging from critical phenomenology to cultural studies. To this day, scholars continue to engage with, debate, and expand his concepts, reflecting his ongoing relevance and foundations across fields.(Toadvine)

## 1.1 Empathy

Empathy forms the central foundations for this thesis, especially in relation to embodied experience, interspecies entanglement and emotional engagement with non-human mortality and suffering.

### **Animal Poetry and Empathy - Tirza Bruggemann**

In her article "*Animal Poetry and Empathy*"(2017), Tirza Bruggemann examines the complexities of such an emotion as empathy when it comes to understanding non-human life experiences. Supporting her arguments with concepts from theorists such as Amy Coplan and French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Bruggemann explores the complexities around empathy in case studies focused on animal poetry. Specifically delving into how traditional notions of empathy are shaped by the dichotomy of mind versus body, otherwise known as Cartesian Dualism. Though, applying these concepts to film, we are presented with complications in connection to the difference between mediums. Bringing to question how the addition and presentations of visuals change our perception and perspective in connection to empathy towards animal characters. Where in literature the imagery is up for personal interpretation, in visual media a new form of influence to our emotions is presented to us through a defined and set perspective.

Furthermore, Bruggemann delves into the phenomenon of empathy, a state that many theorists believe cannot be identified by a singular unified definition. Bruggemann employs Amy Coplan as the key representative from a range of theorists for this concept. Exploring ideas such as 'high-level empathy versus low-level mirroring'. Expressing how empathy presents in two different forms: a personal attachment and acknowledgement of the events presented, experiencing them through deeper personal sensations and feelings, versus the presumption of understanding presented through unconscious mimicry and mirroring of bodily movements, expressions and presentations. A concept which ultimately defines almost two drastically different emotions of its own. "*To illustrate the two routes,*

*Goldman refers to a situation in which someone sees a friend with a happy face and mirrors that happy state, while “the object of the stranger’s happiness remains undisclosed by mirroring” . Mirroring reproduces in the observer only happiness, not happiness about X or about Y” The ‘aboutness’ of the happiness can be reconstructed through other-oriented perspective taking, which can only be consciously done and is therefore a high-level process.” (Tirza Bruggemann 88,89)*

Through this split, narrative empathy is presented as the ‘high-level empathy’, suggesting the traditional concept of a definition of empathy, whilst the latter ‘low-level mirroring’, is prompted and associated with non-fictional narratives, as it is unconscious and an automatic response. Presenting a concept of ‘my smile is not your smile’. *“Goldman divides the smile itself from the ‘aboutness’ of the smile. Reconstructing the ‘aboutness’ is the conscious, reconstructive method, whereas mirroring the smile is only unconsciously mirroring the surface.”(Tirza Bruggemann 89,91)*

Bruggemann disagrees with these notions and dichotomies, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, who views consciousness as something that is embodied and not physically separated from oneself. *“biological existence is synchronized with human existence and is never indifferent to its distinctive rhythm”(Maurice Merleau-Ponty 185)* You are your body, your body is you.

By focusing her case studies specifically on animal poetry, she analyses how animals are represented in such literature, and how, with the concepts presented by Merleau-Ponty, such texts cannot be subjectively presumed and divided into the dichotomy of mind versus body. By understanding the significance of definition between high level and low level empathy mirroring, through analytical analysis of narrative technique we can distinguish our connection to the character and the affiliations of our emotions to theirs. Her analysis of Meghan O’Rourke’s *“Inventing a Horse”* and Les Murray’s *“Spermaceti”* suggests that animal poetry demands a re-evaluation of how empathy is defined, not only in the realm of non-human life perception but also as a whole. (Tirza Bruggemann)

### **Narrating Entanglement: Cixous’ ‘Stigmata, or Job the Dog’” - Cristina Gerhardt**

In her essay article *“Narrating Entanglement: Cixous’ ‘Stigmata, or Job the Dog’”(2017)*, Cristina Gerhardt explores how narrative voice shifts in Helene Cixous’s text from human to entangled to animal, challenging conventional distinctions between human subjectivity and animal experience. The article focuses on what it would mean for a narrative to move beyond anthropocentric frameworks so that an animal ‘voice’ can genuinely emerge in autobiography-like texts. Gerhardt traces how the narrative voice in *“Stigmata, or Job the Dog”* destabilises traditional autobiographical authority by intertwining the human and canine perspectives, revealing that any attempt to represent a non-human being’s story inevitably involves entanglement with human linguistics and philosophical structures.

Based on this wavering and progression in the subject’s voice and narration throughout the literature, Gerhardt argues for a ‘zoo poetic mindfulness of

entanglement', one that presents to us that even in autobiographical texts and voice, the human I, personal I will always be intertwined in the narrative, whether it be alone or alongside the other. Although one can try acknowledging the narrative as something that is not their own in an attempt to distance from personal entanglements, an unconscious forgery of one's personal relations to the narrative whether it be through experience or memory will always be an underlying force, intermingling with one's perception and cohesion of events to a narrative.(Christina Gerhardt 83)

Nevertheless, Gerhardt acknowledges Cixous's recognition of the notion that despite this entanglement of oneself with the subject, oneself cannot be the animal, understand the animal or therefore speak the animal:

*"For our inevitable misfortune, I, the child-of-man, I considered him in the beginning as a dog of man, and bêtément ineluctably like every child-of-man I spoke to him as we do inadvertently with foreign visitors up to the day I stopped addressing him forever"* (Christina Gerhardt 82; Helene Cixous 186)

In her study of Cixous's work, Gerhardt acknowledges that although her work does not necessarily define or answer the question of what a non-anthropocentric autobiography or an animal's narratological point of view would entail, it opens up a new possibility and a starting point for such a complex inquiry. Bringing forth Cixous questions, specifically, "how can we understand or translate the other's speech without betraying it?".(Christina Gerhardt 82) Recognising that such entanglement may bring about new levels of infringement and liability of truth.

Her deep analysis of philosophical theory and literary theory, asking,

*What shifts in epistemology are necessary for an animal's narrative voice to be recognised as such?  
What engagements need to be made for it to be perceived authentically and without fault as such, an animal autobiography void of human entanglement?*

Gerhardt ultimately positions Cixous' text as an example of how animal narrators can expose the limits of human-centred autobiography while inviting readers to consider more complex configurations of narrative identity and interspecies entanglement. (Christina Gerhardt)

**Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy – Maurice Merleau Ponty, written by Ted Toadvine & Phenomenology of Perception, written by Maurice Merleau-Ponty**

My primary focus in this article will be *'Expression, Language and Art'*, due to its emphasis and summary on an evolving philosophy beyond perception and embodiment. This section highlights how Merleau-Ponty progressively reframes expression, not as a peripheral feature of human life but as a crucial understanding behind meaning and truth. Within *'Expression, Language and Art'*, Merleau-Ponty reconceptualises expression as a fundamental mode of human engagement with

deeper meaning, rather than a secondary phenomenon. Presenting us with the concept of language and the arts not merely as cultural artefacts but as ontological revelations, disclosing how our embodied existences make sense of the world, each other, and others' experiences.

This article on Merleau-Ponty presents him as a thinker who reoriented phenomenology toward the power and importance of embodied experience and developed innovative theories of language and art, all of which have become foundational in both philosophy and interdisciplinary research. (Toadvine)

In doing so I will also reference the original source and text of Merleau-Ponty to emphasise and define my arguments and points of focus. The source written by Ted Toadvine will aid in me in understanding the vast and complex nature of phenomenology of perception in a more simple and cohesive terms and context.(Maurice Merleau-Ponty)

Although all three concepts focus on the same phenomenon they cover a very broad notion of the concept. Taken together these theories and concepts of embodiment, entanglement and empathy dualism will enable me to examine why Hachi's death carries such emotional weight, particularly in relation to how viewers are positioned cinematically to feel with not just merely observe the endurance of this non-human character.

## 1.2 Narrative

Narrative theory is one of the critical underlying concepts which are key to understanding and analysing the structural foundations of texts but also films. Built of numerous complex elements bound together seamlessly, successful narratives which evoke engagement take shape. In essence narrative techniques are what bring stories to life. Without understanding the narrative techniques which exist in both mediums, this thesis topic could not be studied.

### **Animal Autobiography; Or, Narration Beyond the Human – David Herman**

The opening essay, David Herman's *Animal Autobiography; Or, Narration Beyond the Human* (2016), sets a predominant theme and point of reference for not only the other contributors to the book but also scholars alike. Identifying the key thematic issue of anthropocentrism in traditional narrative studies. Drawing on Erving Goffman's analysis of framing and footing, Herman interweaves discourse analysis and linguistics to explore the relevance and relationships that arise within narration, speaking from the human but also extending beyond. Through his studies, Herman establishes and defines two categories of autobiographical acts that cross species lines.

- 1) Anthropocentric Autobiographical Acts: In these acts, the human narrator is both the key subject and the author, using the animal primarily as a means of expression or a tool and focusing on the human experiences and perspectives, with the animal relegated to a secondary role.
- 2) Biocentric Autobiographical Acts: These acts, which involve a more collaborative or co-authored approach, where the animal's voice is projected to build solidarity and present a more hybrid, "humanimal" principal approach that emphasises mutual influence and a shared narrative space between humans and animals.(Joela Jacobs xii)

Herman's *"Animal Autobiography; Or, Narration Beyond the Human"* illustrates how animal autobiographies problematize standard narrative assumptions, and it can be argued that the human narrator's manifestation of self lies in the presumptive subjectivity of the narrative and the perspective of non-human character experience. Considering these arguments, the possibility of a non-biased, non human-influenced discourse in the presentation and portrayal of non-human lives, not only in literature but also in visual formats, is a complex undertaking. Despite the unique nature of each animal narrative, the possibility of escaping human entanglement is one of dire cause and possibility. Herman suggests the urgent need for a;

*"comprehensive model of what storytelling practices, in domains ranging from conservationist discourse and instructional literature to avant-garde fiction and life writing, reveal about (human attitudes toward) the nonhuman world and its inhabitants."*(David Herman 17)

With such a structure presented, only then can human entanglement be mediated and the complexities of topics such as agency, representation, and authenticity in relation to non-human narratives be addressed. (David Herman)

### **Focalisation – Burkhard Niederhoff**

To research understanding narrative voice and narration, I focus on the 'Focalisation' article within the volume, written by Burkhard Niederhoff. The article discusses classical questions of who tells the story and from what perspective, building on Genette's influence. Understanding the functionality of a narrative structural technique, such as focalisation, is key to distinguishing between character perspective and the reader's (viewer's, in my case) interpretation of the story. (Burkhard Niederhoff 243)

### **Narrative Empathy – Suzanne Keen**

Due to the nature of my thesis topic, I will research the narrative connection to empathy within Suzanne Keen's article 'Narrative Empathy'. This article focuses on the mental stimulation that narrative indulges, and how such motions can connect to identification with the characters. Keen's work on narrative empathy provides a thoughtful and critical framework for understanding how and why narratives can evoke emotional and cognitive engagement with other's experiences Keen defines narrative empathy as the sharing of feelings and perspective generated when the audience engages with the stories about another's situation and condition. This concept goes beyond simple identification

with a character and encompasses the complex process by which narrative techniques invite audiences into the emotional world of a story.

Although, Keen's study primarily focuses on the 'narrative empathy' surrounding fictional literary narratives. The foundations and constructs of the concept are consistent throughout all narrative mediums and genres, including cinema. The mechanisms through which empathy is stimulated are not medium-specific but text embedded within storytelling processes broadly.

Keen notes that even within professional laboratory settings, psychologists have identified immersion and high-level imagery as key features that define an engaged empathetic response. This underlines the importance of a confident and believable world-building strategy that transports audiences into the narrative not only through perception but through emotion. Explicitly linking empathy with immersion. (Suzanne Keen 612)

Keen also recognises that much of the empathy an audience experiences is not solely personal connection and individual perception, but is also shaped by the constructed influence of the author's own personal reflection and bias to the narrative. Through world-building, character creation and discourse, such constructs influence the author's biases and choices about the narrative structure but also the techniques utilised in creating the story. Although, this does not indicate a forceful manipulation of perception, it acknowledges an often unconscious shaping of perception and emotional alignment. (Suzanne Keen 613)

Because empathy is an experience that is embodied and affective, Keen identifies a series of narrative techniques that are dominant in the creation of emotional weight and resonance. Techniques such as point of view, repetition of events, vivid use of setting, time, indirect speech to name a few are critical in cultivating empathetic engagement. (Suzanne Keen 613)

By allowing me to identify the specific narrative techniques that intensify audience attachment to non-human characters, this framework will assist my analysis of animal deaths in film. By examining how immersion, repetition, focalisation and temporal structuring operate within cinematic film, I can assess how empathy toward animal characters is constructed and sustained overtime. Keen's model therefore provides a structural explanation for why the death of an animal in film may generate profound emotional resonance, not simply because of the events itself but because of the narrative techniques that have carefully cultivated empathetic investment in that non-human character.

## 1.3 Time

### **Time - Michael Scheffel, Antonius Weixler, and Lucas Werner**

Time plays a huge part in my case study, therefore, I will focus on an article in the volume, written by Michael Scheffel, Antonius Weixler, and Lucas Werner, titled '*Time*'. This article on narrative time offers an apparent and systematic overview of how temporality functions in narrative theory, defining 'time' as both a fundamental dimension of the narrative world and a key analytical category that helps distinguish the different temporal layers in narrative. This is exceptionally efficient for distinguishing techniques and aspects such as story time, discourse time, and narrating time. The authors highlight how narrative time is constructed through linguistic markers and narrative strategies, and how it interacts with other narrative elements, such as events, characters, and space. Overall, this article emphasises that temporality is not a simple chronological sequence but a complex dimension crucial to understanding how narratives create meaning and shape readers' experience through the essence of time.

The narrative use of time is something we observe in many films. Temporal manipulation intensifies the anticipation, reflection and perception of events and emotions surrounding death, emphasising the impacts of the inevitable. Time is a concept that is critical to Hachi's story, as its presence and manipulation defines not only his life but also his death.(Michael Scheffel et al. 1002–05)

In conclusion, the literature reviewed in this chapter demonstrates the interdisciplinary nature of this thesis study topic into understanding the emotional impact of animal deaths in film. Sources on animal narratology foreground the narrative possibilities and aspects of presenting non-human experiences, highlighting the narrative and emotional implications of depicting non-human lives and experiences, acknowledging the complexities of authenticity and agency. In contrast classical narratology offers the analytical tools needed to be able to examine how not just the narrative but also the cinematic techniques frame the story and shape audience engagement and response. Defining the necessities and presence of focalisation, narrative voice and temporality. Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology further enriches this framework by offering an account of embodiment and perception that bridges narrative technique and lived experience, through this allowing animal deaths to be understood as affective experiences. Taken together these three areas do not function independently but intersect to form a cohesive analytical framework. Animal narratology raises the ethical and representational questions surrounding anthropocentrism, classical narratology provides the structural vocabulary for analysing how stories are constructed and perceived whilst phenomenology explains how these constructed narrative works become and develop into embodied, affective personal experiences for the audience. Their synthesis enables a multi-layered analysis account that underscores the structure, representation and character-viewer embodiment of the narrative.

Despite the richness of research in these fields, current examinations do not sufficiently delve into or explain animal deaths in film, specifically the emotional weight which such events carry in contrast to that of human characters. Studies into animal narratology tends to focus primarily on literary texts rather than visual cinema or entertainment, classical narratology rarely discusses or centres on non-human narratives, underscoring the anthropocentric nature of such a complex study, and furthermore phenomenological studies of spectatorship completely isolate and disregard animal suffering and cognitive consciousness in perception. As a result of these studies lacking expansion into these branches of research, a gap forges and remains. One which covers the most critical aspects of understanding the emotional weight of animal death in films but in retrospect also other narratives.

This thesis intervenes into these fields bringing them together in a focused analytical study of animal deaths in film. Demonstrating how narrative frameworks combined with temporal structuring and focal perspective intensify emotional response. In doing so it offers an account of how such techniques enforce the distinctive emotional and ethical resonance of animal deaths in film.



## Chapter Two: Methodology

This study aims to use an analytical framework that combines such classical narratology with animal narratology to examine animal deaths in film. This approach clarifies both structural and emotional aspects of narrative: classical narratology provides tools for dissecting narrative organization, while animal narratology considers nonhuman perspectives. I will engage in analysing my case studies through the following steps and targets of focus, which are grounded in narrative theory, and will support in recognising the key elements which will define a comprehensive review of how animal deaths are depicted in films:

1. Narrative Structure (Fabula and Syuzhet): mapping the chronological and presented order of events to identify how each film sets up the exposition of the animal deaths.
2. Focalization and Point of View: Examining who 'sees' and 'knows' within the narrative. Whether we perceive through external (narrator's or camera's) or internal (the perspective of the human or animal protagonist and/or other characters) focalisation.
3. Voice, Narration and Discourse: Analyse modes of narration—character focalization, omniscient perspective, or cinematic technique—that signal the animal's presence or absence within the narrative, recognising how the absence of a vocal narrative is interchanged with visual cinematic narration.
4. Character Function and Agency: Determine the narrative role of the animal whether its function is instrumental or thematically significant to the narrative. Unique to their human character counterparts, animal characters interestingly function within both roles, therefore understanding the significance and functions of both in a narrative is key.
5. Narrative Time and Emotion: Examining and considering how pacing, repetition, and breaks in continuity build emotional resonance around death scenes.

By systematically applying narratological tools, this analysis will clarify how animal death is depicted and functions as a narrative strategy, prompting critical reflection on human-animal relationships in film. This integration reveals how animal death scenes disrupt traditional narrative expectations, evoke emotional response, and encourage ethical contemplation.

This chapter has established the theoretical and methodological foundations I will use for analysing animal deaths in narrative film for this thesis. Classical narratology provides a structural method for examining story configuration, focalisation, and narrative voice, while animal narratology extends this to include

nonhuman subjectivity and impressions. Together, these approaches allow systematic analysis of how films like *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* create meaning and emotion around animal death. The next chapter applies this framework in detail, showing how narrative form shapes ethical and emotional responses to loss.



## **Chapter Three:** ***Hachi: A Dog's Tale* Analysis**

This chapter provides a comprehensive narrative analysis of *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* (2009), directed by Lasse Hallström. In analysing the film narrative, this chapter aims to discover and explore the core features that exemplify and heighten the emotional resonance of Hachi's death. The focus is not only on his final moments but also on the narrative structure and developments forged throughout the film, detailing key story moments and techniques that build the emotional tension leading to his ultimately tragic passing.

*Hachi: A Dog's Tale* (2009), directed by Lasse Hallström, is not an original story but a Western retelling and remake of the Japanese film *Hachikō Monogatari* (1987) by Seijirō Kōyama. Both films are based on a true story that pay homage to the profound themes of loyalty and devotion between companion and owner ('Hachikō'). I will examine how Hallström's remake employs narrative theory and emotional resonance to portray the deep bond between companion animals and humans, and the significant impact their loss has on audiences. Drawing on various sources on classical narratology and animal narratology, I will analyse the storytelling devices and techniques that influence viewers' emotional responses to animal death in film, focusing on the interspecies relationship between a man and a dog, a species notably and famously referred to as 'a man's best friend', due to their deep history of loyalty, companionship and emotional connection.

Through the application of narrative theory, I will analyse elements such as narrative structure, focalization and point of view, narration and discourse, and narrative time and emotion to assess how the story of Hachi evokes a strong emotional response from the audience. In doing so, my analysis will define how Merleau-Ponty's philosophy surrounding empathy interwoven with the complexities of both classical narrative techniques and non-human perspectives advance the emotional leverage animal deaths in film have over the audience.

Given the origins and history of the tale, and its transformation from a true story into a fictionalized narrative, like numerous other 'true story' films, the depiction of Hachiko's experience at the station has been adapted for media feature film entertainment and to suit the conventions of the Western family film genre (Hauglann). Therefore, although my case study of focus for this thesis is the Westernized retelling of the original tale directed by Lasse Hallström, I will acknowledge the original story. Additionally, for consistency, I will refer to the non-human protagonist as Hachi rather than '*Hachikō*', which is the chosen abbreviated form of the name used within the film.

### 3.1 Context

*Hachi: A Dog's Tale* follows the quiet but deeply moving bond between an Akita puppy, Hachi, and Parker Wilson, a reserved college music professor played by Richard Gere. After Hachi is found wandering alone at a suburban train station, separated from the crate meant to carry him to his new home, Parker feels an immediate, almost instinctual responsibility over the dog. What begins as a temporary act of kindness gradually becomes a life-defining relationship as Parker's gentle persistence and Hachi's cheeky intelligence draw them closer together.

At home, Hachi's presence slowly reshapes the Wilson household dynamic. Parker's wife, Cate, played by Joan Allen, is initially displeased and hesitant, viewing the dog as an unexpected burden rather than a blessing. Overtime, however, Hachi's quiet dignity and unassuming affection softens her resistance. A situation many viewers may relate to reflecting their own lives as their companions integrated into their households. He does not demand attention or disrupt the family, instead, he settles into their lives with patience, becoming a steady and reassuring presence that seems to mirror Parker's own temperament. This demonstrates the loyalty and deep connection that dogs share with their owners, while also highlighting the compelling idea that dogs often mirror their owners, not in appearance or physique, but in temperament and personality.

The heart of this story lies in the ritualistic everyday life that develops between man and dog. Each day, Hachi escorts Parker to the train station, watching intently as the train departs, and each afternoon he returns at precisely the right moment to greet him. Once again detailing an act many like myself may have come to notice reflected in their own companion's devotion. This routine becomes symbolic rather than merely habitual, it represents trust, consistency, and an unspoken promise between the two. The surrounding community gradually take notice, and Hachi becomes a familiar face, a symbol of devotion observed but not exactly fully understood by those passing through the station.

When Parker's sudden death disrupts this rhythm, the film shifts in tone from a binding warmth to a quiet devastation. Hachi, unaware of Parker's misfortunate passing, unable to comprehend loss in human terms, clings to certainty waiting for Parker's return just like he has before. Day after day, season after season, he returns to the station, undeterred by time, weather and age. His vigil becomes a recognised living memorial, not only to Parker but to the idea of unconditional loyalty itself. Though years pass and the world around him changes, Hachi's faith remains untouched transforming his story into a symbol of love that endures beyond death itself.

Rather than relying on dramatic dialogue or overt sentimentality, the film allows Hachi's silence and persistence to carry the emotional weight of the narrative, making his loyalty all the more profound and heartbreaking. (*Hachi: A Dog's Tale* / *Rotten Tomatoes*)

## 3.2 Narrative Structure

The story of Hachi and his loyalty is widely recognised, whether encountered through personal anecdotes or felt firsthand through the deeply emotional experience of watching the film. This narrative exemplifies the notion of the dog as 'a man's best friend'. A concept bound to loyalty, love devotion and connection. While many infamous accounts of canine loyalty exist, Hachi's story is particularly impactful and extraordinary. His devotion so profound, inspiring the creation of memorial monuments. A bronze statue at Shibuya Station in Tokyo, the original tales location but also the western filming location in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. A tribute commemorating his enduring vigil.(Hauglann; *Hachiko Monument / Woonsocket, RI 02895*)

The significance of Hachi's story is acknowledged within the film itself, as the narrative is framed through a flashback recounted by Parker's own grandson, Ronnie, played by Kevin DeCoste. While the film primarily follows a linear, chronological structure tracing Hachi's life throughout, it also includes a notable flashback from Hachi's own perspective, informing us that this is his story. Overall, the narrative is presented through Ronnie's retelling. This unique framing of the narrative brings to light the possibility that this story distinguishes itself as an autobiographical narrative of Hachi's life. *"Some life stories told by nonhumans can be read as co-authored acts of narrating in behalf of equally hybrid (or humanimal) principals; these experiments with narration beyond the human afford solidarity-building projections of other creatures' ways of being-in-the-world—projections that enable a reassessment, in turn, of forms of human being. But other animal autobiographies, or at least segments of them, correlate with acts of telling for which humans themselves remain the principals as well as authors, with their animal animators relegated to the role of commenting on human institutions, values, practices, and artifacts"* (David Herman 16) Depicting a conundrum of a situation in which we are presented a narrative, within a narrative.

In the classroom, Ronnie presents Hachi's story to his peers, explicitly honouring Hachi as his 'hero'. Although Ronnie appears in the narrative as an infant, the storytelling adopts a third-person, non-diegetic perspective, impersonating the audience as his classmates. This framing device is employed at two key moments: at the film's opening, to engage viewers and establish the story's significance, and at the conclusion, where Ronnie again refers to Hachi as his 'forever hero'. The film ends with a poignant scene in which Ronnie forms a loyal bond with his own Akita puppy, also named Hachi, underscoring the lasting influence of the original dog's devotion. This decision is not merely sentimental but by passing on the name, Ronnie symbolically extends Hachi's legacy, transforming the story from a past event into a living tradition and reinforcing the enduring values of loyalty and devotion. This act mirrors a familiar human tradition, much like passing down the names of grandparents and parents to younger generations. In doing so, preserving memories, values and emotional connections. Allowing Hachi to live on.(Jen)

At first glance, the authenticity of such a retelling may present itself as questionable. Ronnie recounts events even he could not consciously remember, speaking with compassion about a companion from a time when he himself was only a baby. Considering the intricacies and complexities of human entanglement within such animal autobiographical narratives, one can expect that to be heightened by that of the imagination of a child. Yet it is precisely this tension between memory and belief that strengthens the narrative. Ronnie's role as a storyteller does not undermine the truth of Hachi's loyalty, instead, it affirms it. His confidence and pride in sharing the story demonstrate how Hachi's devotion transcends personal recollection and becomes a legacy that will be passed down through generations. By naming a mere dog as his hero, a choice that defies conventional expectations of childhood admiration, deviating from parental and guardian ties. (*Kids and Role Models - Family Education*) Ronnie's presentation to his peers highlights the film's central message: that loyalty, love and selfless dedication can be just as heroic as any traditional figure, even when embodied by an animal.

The narrative structure of the film forms to Todorov's three act structure, which in this case is best defined in its five act structure; presenting a stable condition (a strong growing bond between Hachi and Parker), a disturbance breaking the equilibrium (the news of Parker's death), an imbalance (Parker's death), attempt of repair (Hachi's devotion to wait), and a new equilibrium (Hachi's inevitable peaceful death) (Studies). Despite the melancholic nature of this new equilibrium, it still functions as a form of resolution, as we see Hachi acquire his long-lasting wish and promise to see Parker once again. The narrative unfolds in a predominantly linear, chronological format, allowing viewers to witness the development of the bond between Hachi and Parker, presenting the narrative in a familiar format, one tied to reality. This structure encourages audiences to reflect on their own relationships with companion animals, fostering a sense of shared experience. As Herman notes a concept distinguished by John Coetzee's protagonist, Elizabeth Costello's suggestion in *"The Lives of Animals"*, a shared foundation of life enables access to another being's world. *"She answers that she once wrote a book about a fictional character and had to "think [her] way into [her] existence" and then states about this "thinking into: If I can think my way into the existence of a being who has never existed, then I can think my way into the existence of a bat or a chimpanzee or an oyster, any being with whom I share the substrate of life"* (David Herman 97)

The film also highlights the dependency among species, illustrating the autonomy humans possess compared to the singular focus of animal companions. While human lives are shaped by diverse experiences and relationships, the lives of companion animals, as depicted in *Hachi: A Dog's Tale*, often centre entirely on their human counterparts. Parker lives a life structured by roles and obligations: job, family, aging, and schedule. His identity as a whole is fragmented across numerous responsibilities. However, Hachi, by contrast is defined by singularity: devotion to Parker is not one part of his life, it is his life. Fostering implications that human meaning in life is contingent, constantly shifting and demanding on circumstance, whilst Hachi's is absolute undaunted by death, absence or futility. This frames devotion as a concept humans rarely sustain, but animals can fully

embody, representing an ideal of fidelity we as humans long for but structurally fail to maintain due to nature. By defining Parker through work and Hachi through devotion, the story subtly questions the viewers: what do we choose to centre our lives around, and what does that cost us?

### 3.3 Point of View and Narration

The film employs external focalization, presenting the narrative through a reflective storytelling perspective. Although the story is recounted as a familial reminiscence, the perspective is not strictly anthropocentric. Instead, the use of internal focalization, particularly point-of-view (POV) shots from Hachi's perspective, shifts the narrative toward a biocentric focus. This approach positions the film as a potential animal autobiography. Solidifying the emotions we witness but also experience.(David Herman 5)

The film incorporates several distinct point-of-view sequences shot from Hachi's perspective. These moments are not defined solely by lower, ground-level camera angles with brisker movement and direction, but also by a noticeably altered visual style. Marked by a desaturated, almost polarised filter, these shots are visually separated from the rest of the film, creating an embodied perspective in which the audience is invited to see the world as Hachi does. *"to tell a story from a character's point of view means to present the events as they are perceived, felt, interpreted and evaluated by her at a particular moment"* (Burkhard Niederhoff 244) In contrast the rest of the film cinematography is subtle yet intentional. Ron Fortunato, the cinematographer of *Hachi : A Dog's Tale*, has constructed a visual world centred on conveying emotional experience surrounding empathy over prideful competence. Fortunato's use of camera movement and composition contrasts from the conventions of modern, momentum-driven cinema, instead focusing on visual intimacy between the characters and the audience. Rather than prioritising excitement, the film's visual language is grounded in stillness and restraint, mirroring the patience and quiet endurance critical in Hachi's act of waiting. This deliberate slowness allows time to be felt rather than merely observed, aligning the viewer emotionally with Hachi's experience.(Waquas). Here our experience of events no longer seems to differ, and we as an audience Hachi, an embodiment felt and experienced solely through understanding.(Christina Gerhardt 80).

Fortunato's deliberate restraint in camera movement often opting for complete stillness result in frequent static shots held on Hachi as he waits intently. By locking the frame during these moments, the film compels the audience to linger, to notice subtle shifts in posture and fleeting micro-expressions. In the absence of vocal narration these static shots become essential exemplifying the contrast in human and animal language, for where naturally we vocalise our grief and emotional turmoil through vocal response, Hachi, a dog is bound mute. In a case

where physical language because his primary form of communication immortalising his emotions and answers through actions and reactions rather than response. His feelings are not spoken but preserved in ritual and behaviour, transforming waiting itself into an emotional response. In this way, the film immortalises Hachi's inner life through what he does rather than what he says, reinforcing the depth and sincerity of his devotion.

Although the remake is set within a Western context, its aesthetic sensibility echoes the Japanese origins of the story. This influence is particularly evident in the film's embrace of simplicity and attentiveness to the everyday. An approach that resonates with the Japanese philosophy of *Wabi-Sabi*, which finds beauty in transience, imperfection, and quiet persistence. ('What Is Wabi Sabi?') A quiet and steadfast approach mimicking the tale. Through this lens, the film invites the audience to feel the physical and emotional weight of Hachi's commitment. We are not simply watching Hachi wait; we are positioned beside him, sharing his fixed gaze toward the train station doors. In doing so, the emotional centre of the film subtly shifts, and the visual choices begin to suggest something beyond the material world, an enduring connection or heightened awareness. Implying that Hachi perceives a presence or meaning that eludes the human characters, and perhaps even the audience themselves. Bringing to question can we as humans comprehend his emotions.

Empathy is a complex emotion. Amy Coplan argues that its definition is often too broad, noting that while sharing emotions is essential to empathy, it is not sufficient. Empathy, according to Tirza Bruggemann, involves both mental connection and physical embodiment. *"...since someone's body only gives me an inkling of her closed-off inner mental states, I assume that my reconstruction of her perspective is far more likely to be successful when I judge her to be like myself"* (Tirza Bruggemann 90). Bruggemann, drawing on Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodied consciousness, contends that empathy arises from shared sensory and bodily experiences through already familiar events to us. (Tirza Bruggemann 91) In the context of Hachi's story, viewers may feel sorrow for him based on narrative cues and perceived emotional states. However, the internal focalization provided by the film bridges the gap between presumption and genuine empathy. By seeing events through Hachi's eyes, viewers are drawn into his experience, fulfilling a crucial aspect of empathy through and deepening their understanding of his loneliness and commitment. (Tirza Bruggemann 88)

Experiencing key moments from Hachi's point of view enables viewers to perceive events and decisions through his perspective. For example, the audience's initial introduction to Parker comes through Hachi's eyes as he navigates the crowded station of commuters. Hachi is instantaneously characterised as a dog of an independent nature, making his own choices as he weaves through commuters to what seems to be his chosen hero, Parker. This internal perspective fosters empathy and allows viewers to witness Hachi's emotional development. As Herman notes on Savvides statement, canine autobiographies "allow their human readers to understand...soi dogs as not-unlike-humans, or, perhaps, to understand that humans are not unlike-soi dogs." This shift in perspective encourages reflection on human-animal relationships and highlights the similarities between

species(David Herman 5; Nikki Savvides). Cate's startled reaction to Hachi's curiosity, seen from his point-of-view, deepens empathy for his innocence and prompts consideration of how human responses may confuse companion animals. Herman notes that Amy Ratelle observes that in animal autobiographies, "*the animal's-eye view compels the human reader into a close emotional bond with the animal as it relates the story of its difficult life.*"(David Herman 5; Amy Ratelle) The internal perspective emphasises Hachi's devotion and dependence on Parker, reinforcing the singular focus of his existence. After Parker's death, the narrative shifts away from Hachi's internal perspective, leaving viewers to infer his experience through external observation, which underscores the emotional toll of Parker's absence. The interplay of internal and external perspectives allows Hachi's story to be conveyed authentically throughout the narrative, even without vocal narration.

### 3.4 Narrative Time and Emotion

The film traces Hachi's life from his earliest days to his final moments, depicting both the years of affectionate companionship and the profound solitude he endures as he waits in hope.

Humans generally outlive most non-human species, including companion animals such as dogs and cats, whose lifespans rarely exceed twenty years. This disparity allows humans to form deep emotional bonds and accumulate experiences over time, while the lives of companion animals are comparatively brief. Despite their short lifespans, the emotional impact and memories they leave are enduring. *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* illustrates this reality after Parker's death, his family gradually moves forward with their lives, but Hachi remains anchored in his devote routine. Demonstrated to us through a brisk cyclic chronological progression of seasons, the narrative emphasises Hachi's new ritualistic normality, exposing both the harshness of time and the unsettling speed with which it passes. While Cate and the daughter appear largely unchanged, Hachi's entire life unfolds in waiting, underscoring the profound imbalance between human and animal mortality. Such a narrative structure implies Chatman's own distinction between the story and its discourse.(Seymour Chatman 295). At the level of story, time moves forward in a straightforward direction, Parker dies, his family continue on living and poor Hachi waits until the end of his life. However, at the level of discourse, the film manipulates time through visual repetition and seasonal montage. By compressing years of waiting into brief sequences of changing weather, the discourse highlights Hachi's endurance in waiting rather than the family's gradual adjustment. This separation allows the viewers to experience time unevenly, mirroring Hachi's perspective. While the story logic tells us that many years have passed, the discourse minimises visible change in Cate when we see her return at the station, making Hachi's ageing and eventual death feel abrupt and devastating. In Chatman's terms, the discourse favours emotional meaning over narrative, using duration and repetition to emphasise how the singularity of an animal's life

can be consumed entirely by loyalty. As a result, the film does not simply tell us that time has passed, it makes us feel its weight and its cruelty, particularly in relation to animal loss.

The extended lifespan of humans allows for the accumulation of experiences and the formation of deep emotional connections, a privilege not shared by most companion species. Dogs and cats typically live no more than twenty years, averaging at the age of typically twelve years old, many pets unfortunately do not live much longer (Montoya et al., sect. Results). While their physical presence is brief compared to our own, the memories and emotional bonds they create endure. This disparity in lifespans amplifies the emotional resonance of Hachi's story, highlighting the enduring devotion that persists even after a companion's physical absence.

Hachi's persistent loyalty, combined with his characteristic stubbornness, compels him to wait at the station for Parker over an extended period. While the audience understands Parker's absence, Hachi cannot comprehend the loss, intensifying the emotional impact. The film's depiction of changing seasons underscores Hachi's unwavering tenacity. This repetitive cycle, spanning a decade, evokes empathy and prompts viewers to reflect on their own experiences of longing for loved ones. Hachi's hope remains steadfast as he examines each face at the station, searching in hope, undeterred by Cate's presence or comfort. Over time, the physical effects of ageing become evident in Hachi as he grows slower and less energetic, yet his hope never diminishes. This portrayal resonates with viewers who have witnessed their own pets age, encouraging reflection on the finite time shared with companion animals.

This chapter has demonstrated that *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* employs both classical narratology and animal narratology to construct a compelling account of interspecies loyalty. By utilizing framing devices from Todorov's and Chatman's theories in addition to the assistance of animal theory cohesion, shifts in point of view, and deliberate management of narrative time, the film encourages empathetic engagement with Hachi's experience and prompts reflection on the distinctive emotional bonds between humans and their companion animals. The comparison of human longevity with the shorter lifespans of companion species amplifies the story's emotional impact, presenting Hachi's devotion as both remarkable and relatable to audiences familiar with the loss of animals. Exposing an extraordinary loyalty and purpose of life we as humans cannot maintain due to circumstance. A central contributor to the film's profound emotional impact lies in its detail and focus on restraint, as the deliberate absence of excessive dialogue and dramatic spectacle through cinematography allows empathy to emerge organically within the audience through stillness, repetition and quiet devotion. Ultimately, the film's narrative strategies honour the historical origins of Hachiko's tale and reaffirm its enduring cultural significance, demonstrating how narratives of loyalty shape human conceptions of companionship, grief, and memory.



## **Chapter Four:** ***Hachi: A Dog's Tale* Death Scene Analysis**

While *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* consistently builds emotional resonance throughout its narrative, the film's final death scene represents a distinct and crucial moment that warrants its own focused analysis. After all, it is the topic of this thesis study. The ongoing narrative establishes the depth of Hachi's devotion through repetition, temporal progression and sustained audience empathy, however, the moment of his death functions as a concentrated culmination of these narrative and cinematic strategies. The scene itself is remarkable not for dramatic spectacle, but its restraint, tranquillity and visual composition, which combined intensifies the emotional impact established across the film. By isolating and closely examining Hachi's death, it becomes possible to comprehend how specific cinematic and narratological techniques transform Hachi's death from a narrative conclusion into a profound affective experience. Therefore this chapter analyses the construction of the death scene in relation to the rest of the film. Exploring how its visual language, temporal framing and narrative positioning amplify the emotional and symbolic significance of Hachi's final moments.

Hachi's death scene functions as the emotional and structural culmination of the film's long meditation on loyalty and waiting. Rather than presenting death as a sudden dramatic climax much like that of human death scenes. The narrative prepares for it gradually through repetition and time compression. By the time Hachi reaches his resting place and collapses at the station, the audience has already endured years of seasonal transitions and his ritualistic returns to wait. Because of this, his death is not perceived as a shock, but as an inevitability, the ending beat in a cyclic pattern the audience has come to know and recognise intimately. The predictability of the moment intensifies its emotional force, as we understand what is happening before it truly unfolds before us.

From a narrative perspective, the scene like many others, lacks dialogue. There is no explanatory voiceover, no dramatic farewell. We are left in the same quiet and uncertainty as Hachi himself. This minimalistic approach reinforces empathy by removing emotional distance through a third-party voice. The absence of such human speech foregrounds the physical vulnerability of such an emotional moment, his body slowly weakening and his movements coming to slow and stop as he draws his last slow and final breaths closing his eyes one final time. Allowing the audience to witness his state and passing rather than be told and sheltered from it. Where in contrast, human character deaths are shrouded and enveloped in articulations of speeches engrossed in love, forgiveness, regret and closure. The moments driven by dialogue, confession or final words. Where as in contrast, Hachi's death is marked by silence and solitude. There is no final exchange, no farewell and no witness or comfort in his final moments. Human death scenes often centre the dying character's relationships with others in the room highlighting the impact and communal loss. Hachi's death however, emphasises a sense of loneliness. The absence of Parker, the very reason for his waiting makes the scene even the more pungent. The tragedy is not simply that he dies, but that

he dies still waiting. This shifts the emotional emphasis from immediate grief to appreciation to an enduring devotion.

In its cinematography the film relies heavily on stillness. Even more so we feel the significance of such choices, as the camera lingers quietly in static compositions, positioned at Hachi's level it maintains visual continuity with earlier waiting scenes. Although this choice is not one focused on cinematic flow. This choice recalls and reminisces the countless moments in which we have watched and joined him in waiting staring towards the station doors in hope through him. (Burkhard Niederhoff 244) However, this scene differs. In the death scene, that familiar visual structure shifts subtly, the waiting no longer anticipates and longs for reunion but transitions, fading into soft and desaturated tones creating almost this liminal atmosphere, blurring the boundary between physical reality and memory, enforcing a sense of peace and tranquillity.

One of the most effectively and emotionally powerful cinematic techniques occurs in the implied reunion vision. As Hachi appears to see Parker approaching him, the editorial choice to soften the imagery and bloom its colours emphasise the emotional release of the moment. By grading the scene to be warmer and more luminous, the implications of it are heavenly. Though, this does not function as an explicit confirmation of the existence of an afterlife, but as a subjective experience, aligning the audience with Hachi's internal perception in his final moments. By granting him the reunion he spent his entire lifetime longing, the film resolves the narrative tension symbolically rather than realistically through events. To Hachi, his time and dedication waiting has been fulfilled. In presenting this critical and final exposition in its warm bright harmony, one can not deny that Hachi was a 'good boy', defining and being the true embodiment of 'a man's best friend'.

Together these purposefully yet delicately chosen techniques of restrained narration, static camerawork, temporal repetition and subjective visual framing merge to build and develop the profound empathy we as the audience experience. The audience is not manipulated into their emotions through framing, lighting or intensity but through time, lingering moments and sympathy. We as an audience have waited with Hachi. We have watched seasons change. We have internalised and learned the ritual. Therefore, his death does not feel like the end of a film story, but the end of a life we have quietly inhabited. The scene evolves empathy by collapsing the emotional boundary between spectator and subject, we are no longer observing loyalty, we have experienced its cost. We have become Hachi, unconsciously adapting Merleau-Ponty's ideations and expectations of truly understanding and being empathetic with another. And to add furthermore defining Gerhardt's notion and recognition that we must become the dog to understand it within Cixous writing, " *To be sure, it is a physical entanglement. "I have his teeth and his rage, painted on my left foot and on my hands", Cixous writes, "I never think about it, because the little mute lips of the wounds have traveled, what remains of them on my feet and my hands is only an insensible embossment, the marks of the cries are lodged on the sensitive very sensitive membranes of my brain. I have that dog in my skull, like an unrecognizable twin ... The focus is not on one or the other but on both human and animal, Cixous and Fips.*" (Christina Gerhardt 80) Emphasising Merleau-Ponty's concepts of one having to first be presented with

events and experiences familiar to us to truly be able to accomplish a sense of embodiment and understanding of another's experience.

*“ ‘living’ (leben) is a primary process from which, as a starting point, it becomes possible to ‘live’ (erleben) this or that world, and we must eat and breathe before perceiving and awakening to relational living, belonging to colours and lights through sight, to sounds through hearing, to the body of another through sexuality, before arriving at the life of human relations”*  
(Maurice Merleau-Ponty 185)

Most importantly Hachi's death does not resolve any narrative arc, like how a human character's death would answer and end conflicts or teach lessons. Hachi's death does not resolve and repair an imbalance in the narrative in a traditional sense. Instead, it completes a ritual. His story does not end in a resolution but in consistency. This unwavering loyalty sustained until his final breath in the end, reunites him with Parker, equalising and settling a new equilibrium. (Studies) In this way Hachi's death feels less like a dramatic event and more like a quiet extinguishing of presence and existence, which uniquely feels even more devastating than many of the human death scenes presented in cinema, precisely because of its simple restraining nature.

In conclusion, the death scene represents the emotional culmination of the narrative strategies developed throughout the film. While the broader story gradually builds audience empathy through repetition, focalisation and temporal progression, the final scene stands out and intensifies this emotional investment through its restraint and visual simplicity. The absence of dialogue, the use of stillness in cinematography, and presence in time allow the moment to unfold with quiet inevitability. Throughout this combination of narrative and cinematic devices, the scene reinforces the film's central themes of loyalty, devotion and loss. Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates that the emotional power of Hachi's death lies not only in the previous narrative events themselves but in the careful construction of the final scene, which invites the audience to experience the costs and endurance of devotion from the perspective of the animal protagonist.



## Conclusion

In conclusion, this thesis has argued that the profound emotional resonance of animal deaths in film arises not simply from the event of death itself, but from the narrative structures and cinematic techniques that cultivate sustained empathetic engagement on the part of the audience with non-human characters. By bringing together classical narratology, animal narratology and the phenomenological perspectives of Merleau-Ponty, this study has demonstrated how films such as *Hachi: A Dog's Tale* challenge the anthropocentric assumptions embedded within traditional narrative theory.

Through the deliberate use of focalisation, temporal manipulation, restrained narration, and visual embodiment through perspective, this film positions the audience into a closer connection with animal experience, transforming the death of a non-human character into a moment of profound emotional resonance and ethical reflection, rather than a symbol. In doing so, animal-centred narratives reveal the limitations of human-centred storytelling and expand the possibilities of narrative empathy. Ultimately, this thesis shows that the representation of animal death in cinema is not merely a sentimental device and a plot-driving mechanism but a powerful narrative strategy that foregrounds loyalty, vulnerability, and interspecies connection, prompting audiences to reconsider the emotional and ethical significance of human-animal relationships. Igniting a motivation to reflect on their own personal experiences in connection to their own companions.

Furthermore, the analysis of this study brings upon an awareness for a need of deeper intervention and examination into animal studies in relation to similar fields, but also broader scholarship related to non-human characters. Questions surrounding agency, authenticity and ethical representation become increasingly complex when narratives attempt to convey experiences beyond the human perspective. Studies into empathy highlighting the influences and complexities around it are vast and detailed, however, such research fails to acknowledge the existence and manipulative nature of human perception. Greater critical attention to these dynamics is therefore essential in order to better understand how empathy is constructed, experienced, and interpreted in narratives involving non-human lives.



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