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# "Don't Say Neigh, Say Yay"

## Human-Animal Relationships in TV's *The Great* and Their Potential Impact on Modern Audiences

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## Introduction

The television series *The Great* offers a sophisticated, satirical interpretation of Catherine the Great's rise to power in the Russian Empire. Set in the eighteenth-century aristocracy, it successfully blends historical facts with intentional anachronisms, showcasing Catherine's evolution from a naïve outsider to a powerful, enlightened Empress. The series is notable for its sharp wit and deliberate anachronisms, transcending mere entertainment to provide a reflective commentary on societal and ethical themes.

Crucially, *The Great* delves into the symbolic representation of animal treatment in the royal court, mirroring the era's hierarchical structures and ethical standards. It juxtaposes the archaic, often barbaric, practices against modern views on animal welfare, prompting audiences to reevaluate contemporary moral perspectives on human-animal relationships.

This article aims to explore the complex interplay between ethical considerations and the human-animal relationship as depicted in *The Great*. It will examine the historical backdrop of animal treatment in the realm of eighteenth-century Russian nobility, contrasting with contemporary perspectives on animal treatment, and explore how the series utilises these contrasting viewpoints to stimulate viewers' introspection on our current societal ethics.

## **“It is the way of things, a tradition for royalty”: *The Great*, and Eighteenth-Century Russia**

*The Great*, a satirical, pseudo-historical series, depicts Catherine the Great's ascent in Russia. It blends historical facts with fiction, showcasing her transformation within the eighteenth-century Russian court (see for instance Greenleaf). Known for its sharp humour and anachronisms, the series thoughtfully examines themes of power, gender dynamics, and societal evolution. A notable aspect is the portrayal of animal treatment as a symbol of the era's values and power structures, challenging viewers to contrast historical and contemporary societal norms. This article focusses on the ethics of human-animal relationships, as depicted in the series.

The eighteenth-century Russian aristocracy's use of animals as power symbols reflected more than cultural peculiarities; it was an ingrained societal norm (Klemun, Loskutova, and Fedotova; Renner; Slezkine). Authors such as Cavender and Cartmill have noted that human-animal relationships, and in particular hunting, can symbolise dominance and social hierarchy, going beyond recreation or subsistence to signify human dominion over nature and societal status (Knoll). This historical backdrop is vividly brought to life in *The Great*, where scenes of aristocratic hunting and animal symbolism reflect these deeply ingrained societal norms.

## **“As we hunt, we shall discuss whether or not to kill the empress”: ‘Normal’ Royal-Animal Interactions**

*The Great* explores themes such as the abuse of power, the role of enlightenment in a traditional society, and the complexities of leadership and governance. The series uses character development to explore these themes, offering a satirical and insightful look at the societal and cultural dynamics of the time. The show often achieves this by playing with our expectations of how we believe monarchs should behave. For instance, in season one episode one, Peter is stalking through a forest followed by members of the court. Unlike typical royal hunts, Peter is hunting alone, not as part of a hunting party. Upon spotting a rabbit, he shoots, and misses

("The Great", 1.1). We are used to royals hunting, and the hunt being analogous to the monarch's rule: a sign of strength, power, and dominion. But we are not used to them hunting poorly. A good monarch should be a good hunter. In this scene, we learn: one, Peter is alone with his alliances; and two, Peter is not a good emperor.

While Peter and Catherine are walking through a forest hunting deer, Peter explains that "hunting is listening", essentially saying that *ruling is listening*, to which Catherine retorts, "which is why you're so bad at it" ("The Bullet or the Bear", 3.1). During the same scene, unbeknownst to both characters, Catherine's longtime ally secretly hides in the bushes to assassinate Peter. Catherine, hearing a slight noise that Peter misses, fires into the bushes, inadvertently killing Orlo. Neither character realises what has occurred, and with Orlo later consumed by bears, the truth of the event is likely to remain unknown. As hunting is analogous with ruling, this scene is narratively important. For instance, Catherine is a better listener and therefore a better ruler, and merely listening does not always tell the full story.

The connection between animals and ruling is extended to nature by Elizabeth, who explains to Peter on the cusp of a revolution: "I am going to the country for a week. I love to sit in nature and just watch it. It is beautiful, and sometimes harsh. But you realise, it is always right. That is what I know" ("The Beaver's Nose", 1.10).

## **"If we had a philosophy, a criteria for action, I just wonder what a difference that would make": Influences on Animal Perception in the Eighteenth Century**

In the eighteenth century, under the influence of thinkers like René Descartes, animals were perceived as mere automata, lacking consciousness or soul. This view, treating animals as emotionless machines, shaped the era's ethical attitudes towards animal welfare (Descartes). Contrastingly, modern perspectives show a significant shift, marked by an increased awareness of animal rights (Foster). Contemporary society has seen a rise in animal welfare advocacy, vegetarian and vegan lifestyles, and anti-cruelty legislation (Dawkins; Herzog *et al.*). The trend of recognising animals as sentient beings, especially pets as integral family members, reflects a major cultural and ethical transformation in human-animal relationships (Zuolo). This shift represents a departure from historical norms, highlighting a profound change in the way many people view animals. This change to recognising animals as sentient beings demonstrates an important difference between historical views and contemporary ethical perspectives. This transition in human-animal relationships sets the stage for exploring Allan G. Johnson's theories on societal systems and individual behaviours. Johnson's work delves into how societal structures shape personal actions and beliefs, offering a lens through which to examine the evolving societal attitudes towards animals and their treatment (Johnson *Privilege, Power*).

## **"It's a barren wasteland of aloneness that you try to push us towards": Johnson's Societal Systems and Individual Behaviours**

This evolving attitude towards animals, characterised by increased empathy and ethical consideration, aligns with Allan G. Johnson's theories on the interplay between societal systems



and individual behaviours (Johnson *Privilege*). Johnson's insights into how societal norms and structures influence personal actions and beliefs provide a framework for understanding the shift in how society views and treats animals.

Allan G. Johnson's analogy of Monopoly and social systems offers an insight into the functioning of societal structures and individual behaviour (Johnson "[People](#)"). In his analogy, Johnson compares the societal system to a game of Monopoly, a board game where players accumulate wealth and property, often at the expense of others. In his analogy, Johnson demonstrates how greed is needed to win Monopoly, but this does not necessarily make one greedy. This analogy serves to illustrate how individuals, even without explicit malicious intent, can perpetuate inequality and injustice simply by playing within the rules of the prevailing system.

Johnson's concept of the "path of least resistance" (Johnson *Privilege*, 86) refers to the natural human tendency to follow the course of action that requires the least effort or causes the least conflict. In societal terms, this path often aligns with existing norms, values, and structures, irrespective of their fairness or justice. By following this path, individuals, often unconsciously, reinforce and perpetuate the status quo.

This analogy is powerful in demonstrating the social systems' influence on individual behaviour. It suggests that tackling societal issues like inequality and injustice requires more than individual goodwill; systemic change is necessary. Johnson's perspective encourages us to look beyond our actions and consider the systems that we are a part of. Johnson points out that the game itself might be flawed and by simply participating, we may be inadvertently supporting these flaws.

## **"... have any of you read the latest Rousseau, The Social Contract?" Contractarianism in *The Great*, Ethical Frameworks, and Power Dynamics**

Viewing the historical fiction through contemporary moral sensibilities is tempting. Indeed, the blend of modern and historic elements invites the audience to do just this. However, it is crucial to understand that the characters in *The Great* are bound by the rules of their world. It prompts the question: under what ethical frameworks can we judge the 'moral rightness' of the characters' actions?

One option is that *The Great's* narrative situates Russian morality within a state of contractarianism, an ethical theory proposing that governmental authority derives from a hypothetical social contract among individuals. This concept is reflected in the depiction of eighteenth-century Russian society, particularly through its royal family, hierarchy and power dynamics (Rousseau; Hobbes). For contractarian philosophers like Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, there are no intrinsic ethical imperatives. What is ethical and moral is decided by society and enforced through a social contract.

The series illustrates a society bound by enforced rules and implicit agreements, aligning with contractarian principles. These 'contracts' shape the roles, behaviours, and expectations within the court, from the monarch to the commoners, reinforcing the existing ruling system (Hobbes). To the viewer, these rules appear absurd and often immoral. However, to the characters they are unquestionable norms.

Catherine: "We cannot just burn fathers, mothers, and children alive."

Peter: "Yes, we can, they are serfs." ("A Pox on Hope", 1.7)

Despite both representing contractarian views, Peter and Catherine represent two different approaches to contractarianism: firstly, as described by Hobbes, and secondly, by Rousseau.

Peter leans towards Thomas Hobbes's representation of the state of nature, a hypothetical scenario which illustrates the conditions of human existence without the constraints of social order or political authority. Hobbes, in his seminal work *Leviathan*, describes a state of nature as a state of war. "To this war of every man against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be unjust" (79). Within this state, "the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (78). As Catherine says,

in a moment, this man's blood will gush and my husband will have blackened his soul and ours with it ... . And you will all be reassured that we are all alone and living at the whim of each other's pain and madness, that any moment could be your last, that there is no rhyme or reason to our lives. This is the Russia I try to leave behind. ("You the People", 3.3)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's version of social contract theory, outlined in his work *The Social Contract*, is referenced by Catherine in the first episode. Rousseau posits that the social contract arises from the collective will of the people, emphasising the general will as the foundation of a just society. Rousseau envisions a state of nature as harmonious, asserting that social inequalities and corruption emerge through private property and societal structures. Rousseau's contractarianism underscores the importance of preserving individual freedoms while promoting a collective agreement for the common good, advocating for a society that aligns with the general will of its citizens. Although the rights of animals are never openly discussed, Catherine is trying to remake Russia into a more civilised place. When attempting to pass her anti-murder bill, she explains:

We should live free of the state deciding our lives.

Or as Voltaire said, "don't be fucking animals anymore, is the point. Simple". ("You the People", 3.3)

Catherine's role in *The Great* is to fight against the path of least resistance. Recognising that the entrenched societal norms are part of a social contract and not intrinsic ethical imperatives, from the moment Catherine arrives in Russia she begins attempting to change the status quo.

This portrayal in *The Great* underscores the anthropocentric contractarian nature of societal interactions and governance, suggesting that characters' actions, including their interactions with animals and each other, are influenced by the social contract of their era, and that, importantly, these contracts are not immutable (Rousseau). The show thus critiques historical social contracts, encouraging viewers to consider how social contracts underpin current societal norms, behaviours, governance, and contemporary ethics. Now we understand the setting for *The Great* and its ethical framework, we can begin to see not only how the use of animals throughout the series highlights the actions of the aristocracy, but how these actions invite us to reflect on our own human-animal relationships.

# "Am I the Empress of Russia or a gamekeeper?" Truffle Dogs, Moose Lips and Trained Butterflies

Domestic animals are animals that have in some way co-evolved with humans, generally through selective breeding and/or genetic modification (Serpell). This relationship is distinctly different from taming. Taming is an individual process, not a genetic one. A tamed animal is a wild animal that has been acclimated to human presence and may be trained to tolerate human interaction, perform tasks, or exhibit less fear of humans.

The domestic animals in *The Great* are mostly dogs and horses. Horses remain a monarchic symbol of status. Monika Greenleaf wrote about the real Catherine the Great that "a ruler masters her steed as she does the nation, with finesse, not brutality" (417). In *The Great*, horses are regularly ridden and used to pull carriages. But they also serve to highlight the brutality of war:

Catherine: what is that smell?

Velementov: Bodies, mud, horse shit, smoke of cannons. It is not a place for women. ("War and Vomit", 1.5)

The most famous use of a horse is in retelling the famous real-world rumour that Catherine the Great had sex with a horse ([Solly](#)). The incorporation of this rumour was used throughout the series to ridicule, demean, and frustrate Catherine as a leader. It simultaneously sets a taboo within the aristocracy and is used to shock the audience with our current societal laws and perception of bestiality. As a ruler, this act of bestiality is one of brutality and not finesse.

Dogs are often used as familiar dual-purpose pets. Some of Peter's dogs are working dogs, such as his truffle dog from Italy, while others appear to be mere companions. In season 1 episode 2 ("The Beard"), we are introduced to a form of raccoon-baiting, whereby a dog and raccoon enter a hollow log at opposite ends, fight through the centre, and to the delight of the court, only one animal exits. Peter's dog Zeus is regularly seen around the breakfast table until his death in episode three of season one ("And You, Sir, Are No Peter the Great").

The court's interactions with wild animals strike a stark contrast to modern, Western sensibilities. Unique remedies and theories were utilised to show the prominence of the court in what society now sees as more modern-day personal or private matters, such as draping a dead mouse around Peter's neck to draw out toxins or placing a frog on Catherine's pregnant belly to determine when she will give birth. The court takes the opportunity during late pregnancy of the monarch to make some money, with different bets including the gender, whether the baby will be part horse (again ridiculing the leader), and if Catherine will die in childbirth. In addition to unconventional medicinal practices, the aristocracy indulges in peculiar culinary preferences, like raw pheasant or black bread with moose lips.

Lady Svenska: Empress, you look radiant. We would love for you to join us. We have cakes in the shape of woodland animals, and it is a lark to dunk their faces in vodka and eat them.

Catherine: It sounds interminable, Lady Svenska, so I shall pass. ("The Beard", 1.2)

Wild and domestic animals also appear in folk tales and allegories. When a crocodile is loose in the palace, the members of the aristocracy believe it to be an omen. Spurred on by the crocodile, characters recant stories of other animal omens, such as donkeys that vomit blood and a dozen white doves before the birth of a child.

There is an exotic relationship with tamed wild animals which represents the monarch's dominion over beasts. Upon arriving in Russia, Peter gifts Catherine a bear, a gift Catherine had dreamed of receiving. However, Peter thoughtlessly shoots the bear mere moments later. Aunt Elizabeth has a mutual relationship between her animal companions. For instance, in an early episode we see Elizabeth training butterflies, the implication being that this is one of her absurd and childish quirks. However, in season three, we see that she has indeed trained a butterfly, subverting the audience's perspectives on the natural world.

## **"I feel bad, watching like this": The Modern Audience's Response to Historical Animal Treatment**

The response of modern audiences to the portrayal of animals in *The Great* may involve discomfort and ethical scrutiny, as we are forced to simultaneously observe how animals are treated in the show through the lens of history and reflect on what is done now. Contemporary viewers, influenced by current norms and the animal rights movement, may find historical practices depicted in *The Great* to be morally troubling or unacceptable. Conversely, viewers might experience dissonance or a sense of exonerative comparison (*sensu* Bandura) watching the treatment of animals in the historical drama, believing we have come so far since the archaic on-screen period.

Reflecting on personal and societal values through historical narratives and contemporary media, such as *The Great*, facilitates a critical reassessment of our moral compass and societal norms, in this instance the treatment of animals, and its broader ethical considerations. Contemporary media that contrast historical practices with modern ethics prompt introspection among viewers, encouraging them to evaluate the progression of our ethical standards and how these historical practices diverge from contemporary values (Frentzel-Beyme and Krämer). This introspection is vital for understanding the evolution of societal norms and aligning personal values with current ethical expectations.

Furthermore, such introspection could transcend animal treatment, encompassing broader social justice, human rights, and environmental stewardship issues, advocating for a comprehensive perspective on progress towards a more compassionate and ethical society (Francione; Tamborini).

The series' depiction of animal-related activities encourages viewers to question modern practices. It prompts us to explore our current societal contracts, examining why certain actions are acceptable and others are not. As viewers, we can ask what are the modern equivalences of Russia's past behaviours. What is different about the royal hunting in the show, compared to royal hunting today? What makes duck liver or ox tail any less strange than moose lips? And, what leads us to believe that Elizabeth's attempts to train butterflies are ridiculous?



# "The journey ends in the inescapable conclusion: Death": Conclusion

*The Great* not only explores the relationship between animals and royalty in eighteenth-century Russia, but also reflects on broader themes of power, status, and emotional connections with animals in royal life. It juxtaposes the regal and animalistic, probing the complex roles animals played in asserting dominance and luxury, alongside being subjects of affection. Incorporating Allan G. Johnson's insights, the series encourages viewers to reflect on the historical treatment of animals within the framework of societal systems and social contracts. Catherine's story is one of struggle for progress against the *path of least resistance*. This narrative highlights the ongoing conflict between old and new ways of thinking, symbolising her efforts to redefine the social contract. *The Great* challenges modern audiences to consider how these historical perspectives and practices resonate with contemporary attitudes towards animal welfare, urging a deeper understanding of human-animal relationships and ethical standards across different eras and cultures. This reflection is crucial for understanding the dynamics of societal norms and the subsequent impact on our current ethical viewpoints.

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version of this article. Huzzah!

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Huw is an Animal Welfare Scientist, his research centres on assessing the ramifications of human imagination, beliefs, and intuitions on the welfare of animals and the environment. His research is dedicated to scrutinizing the ethical dimensions associated with representations of animals in popular culture and their consequential impact on societal attitudes and animal treatment.

### Amy Tait, The University Of New England

Dr Amy Tait is a Lecturer in Animal Science in the School of Environmental and Rural Science at the University of New England. How we provide the best care for our livestock and how they interact with their environment are research areas which inspire Dr Amy Tait from the University of New England to dive deep to find answers. This drive to understand animals, especially cattle and sheep, has directed Amy towards working on many livestock farms across Australia and also in the United States all while gaining a tertiary education through The University of Queensland including a Certificate in Animal Husbandry, Associate Diploma in Animal Production, Bachelor of Applied Science (Animal Studies) with first class honours. Over the last decade Amy has been more involved with research specifically looking at animal welfare in intensive housing systems. Amy's PhD investigated ways to alleviate heat stress in live export cattle and she is now continuing in this area of research as Project Leader of a large four-year research project at the University of New England focusing on various welfare aspects of sheep and cattle that are exported live.

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