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“Mutations of nature, parodies of mankind”: Monsters and Urban Wildlife in Johanna Sinisalo’s *Troll: A Love Story*

Although not widely known in the United States, Johanna Sinisalo’s *Troll: A Love Story* has earned critical acclaim, including the Finlandia Prize for the best novel published in Finnish in 2000. Translated into English in 2003, the novel is sometimes described as a work of science fiction and other times merely as surreal. *Troll* presents a Finland that is true to history with one crucial exception; in the book, the trolls of Finnish mythology were scientifically proven to exist in 1907 and classified as a species of mammal called the “cat-ape.” The novel begins when the protagonist, Angel, finds an injured troll cub next to a dumpster and takes it home to nurse it back to health. Angel, a successful commercial photographer in the city of Tampere, Finland, scours the Internet and the city’s library to find out more about trolls — what they eat, their natural history, and why this one continues to look unhealthy. He finally discovers a treatment for the parasite causing the illness and the troll gains back its health. Angel grows increasingly emotionally attached to the animal and even names it Pessi after a troll from a children’s book. However, right up until the very end of the novel, the narrative raises the question: just how “animal” is the troll?

The novel sets up and interrogates the dichotomy between animals and humanity and, consequently, between natural and unnatural. This work of the novel is inherently connected to the text’s urban setting. The city, as the epitome of man-made, unnatural space, has been seen as a “refuge” from the dangers of the wilderness (Gehrt, et al. 11).\(^1\) Constructed, developed, and controlled, the city is a symbol of humans’ dominance over their environment and, consequently, how they envision themselves as distinct from animals. Sinisalo’s book takes place in a historical moment in which rapid and powerful urbanization and the adaptation of wild animals to a changing landscape have, together, become a common concern. The increasing presence of animals (especially carnivores) in cities seems to demonstrate that the movement, and more specifically the success, of these animals in urban space threaten the idea of the city as an unquestionably unnatural environment. Consequently, the presence of these animals in urban space disrupts the binary between natural and unnatural, the story that people tell themselves about what separates them from animals. *Troll* explores the ways in which city dwellers attempt to re-stabilize that binary, namely, the construction of a supernatural, monstrous alternative external to the binary. Sinisalo’s novel reveals the
monstrous to be an entirely constructed category used to mask the lack of true difference between the natural and unnatural. The figure of the troll is the primary focus of this argument, as the novel clearly treats it as the “problem” to be solved by its characters and its readers. However, the troll offers a vocabulary of liminality that encompasses other beings in the novel. Therefore, I will also pay attention to how other (arguably human) figures in the novel echo these claims. In this paper, I will first explore the novel’s context by examining ecological and critical materials engaged with animality and its place in the city. I will then consider monstrosity, both in this context and in the novel, through the lens of the term “grotesque” in order to show the constructedness of the concept. Using the grotesque, I will examine how the novel destabilizes the distinction between natural and unnatural through the figure of the troll and, lastly, through homosexuality.

A substantial amount of scholarship, including in the interdisciplinary field of Human-Animal Studies (HAS), has tried to explain the workings of the human-animal relationship. Animality has long performed a function essential to the category of “human”: a collection of beings against which humanity defines itself and affirms its difference. The stability of these categories of “animal” and “human” become contingent on a variety of “requirements” or limitations. In this formulation, humans thus become the sole possessors of things like culture, language, memory, institutions, etc., while animals become characterized by their lack of these things. Yet scholars such as Joan Gordon are realizing, “As we ask more and more questions about the nature of consciousness, the answers become more and more suggestive of kinship with other species rather than separation from them” (189-90). Such assertions trouble this traditionally subject-object relationship and push toward the complexity of seeing the human as animal.

Some of these critical discussions are deeply indebted to philosophy and therefore rely on the concepts of “human” and “animal” largely in the abstract. While theorists from Descartes to Derrida have offered valuable ways of thinking through this relationship, it is equally important to mobilize these ideas in specific settings, moments in history, and social contexts to see how they work in particular human-animal relationships. As Donna Haraway writes in When Species Meet, “actual encounters are what make beings” (67). A novel such as Troll is a literary representation of such a specific encounter. It introduces the necessary complication of space, and more specifically urban space, to

Katja Jylkka -- "Monsters and Urban Wildlife in Johanna Sinisalo’s Troll: A Love Story"
the equation and reminds us that the categories of human and animal carry with them spatial and cultural connotations.

To consider these categories in their urban context, then, we must turn to a different set of materials. The juncture of natural animal and unnatural city has gained public attention in recent years, appearing in journalism, works of ecology and urban planning, as well as fictional texts. Sinisalo’s novel draws on a number of fictional and non-fictional sources over the course of Angel’s investigation of troll biology and lore. Angel reads articles from websites and newspaper archives, as well as books on biology, mythology, and folklore, all of which are reproduced in the pages of the novel as sections distinct from the characters’ narration. A look at the real-world analogues of these materials can offer a better understanding of the language and concerns of the social and ecological context of Troll.

Perhaps an ideal representative of this context is the recent publication of Urban Carnivores: Ecology, Conflict, and Conservation. Stanley Gehrt, et al. have been hailed as pioneering the study of the urban landscape as an ecological system in its own right. Ecology and biology have previously focused their efforts on understanding wild or, at most, less developed spaces. Consequently, “urban systems,” they assert, “the areas in which most ecologists live and work, remain frontiers for ecology and conservation. This is especially true for mammalian carnivores, often considered symbols for wilderness” (Gehrt, et al. 4). The fact that such a work has only been published in 2010 suggests at least two things: first, the increased urgency of this issue, as urban sprawl continues and animals adapt to increasingly developed environments, and second, humanity’s reluctance to acknowledge urban space as an “environment” or habitat with its own ecological systems, preferring to see such space as the absence or negation of such systems.

Urban Carnivores uses studies of a variety of carnivorous species, including red and kit foxes, coyotes, skunks, and raccoons, to reveal how some species actually thrive in urban environments. Due to certain conditions of urban life, such as the absence of hunting and trapping and the lack of larger carnivores, these species show equivalent or greater population densities than their country cousins. Lynxes, skunks, and coyotes are just a few of the species that find urban areas particularly “attractive,” either for the shelter or food sources they provide (Gehrt, et al. 104). These animals often adapt their behavior to life in the city, either through becoming more active at night, when people aren’t around, or changing their diet to include more of what is readily available in the city (i.e. people’s leftovers and trash) (86).
Integral to the issue of urban wildlife is the human response to these animals. Gehrt, et al. see human response to urban carnivores on a scale ranging from the mild nuisance of skunk spray to the paralyzing fear of mountain lion attacks (202). Such responses to the threat posed by wildlife appear amplified by a sense of betrayal. Life in the city is supposed to offer safety from the wildness and unpredictability of nature; thus, when animal attacks occur within the city limits, a breaching of some sort of “rule” has apparently occurred. Gehrt, et al., in discussing the panic surrounding mountain lions, state, “When humans detect mountain lions in urban areas, it often becomes a newspaper or TV story. Quite reasonably, reporters and citizens ask, Does this animal live in our community all the time? Is this behavior alarming? Does every near-urban mountain lion visit town occasionally? Do mountain lions actively seek out urban areas as habitat?” (145). The killer potential of the mountain lion is, evidently, not the only cause for public concern. The hypothetical questions Gehrt, et al. pose relate to concerns about what the city promises in opposition to nature — knowledge and control. These questions demonstrate a lack of knowledge about the workings of the city and an inability to control and regulate who (or what) can enter it. The dichotomy between city and nature promises that the city boundary is impermeable to undesirable natural elements, that animals are ill equipped to deal with an urban, human life. However, the appearance of an animal such as a mountain lion rocks these convictions.

Current journalism acts out the observations of these urban ecologists in a very real way. One article about the launching of the Urban Wildlife Institute in Chicago in 2010 begins, “You may not think about raccoons in Ravenswood, or coyotes in Lincoln Park, but Chicago is crawling with critters” (Keefe). The Institute goes on to announce that its research “could influence city planning, which could mean fewer deer getting hit by cars, and fewer raccoons in your attic” (Keefe). More knowledge brings a greater capacity for human control over the city, such as creating barriers and channels for wildlife to move around the city (in knowable, manageable ways), thus making urban space once again impermeable to the non-human. Regaining knowledge and control thus becomes about reaffirming the humanity of the city in the face of growing numbers of animals who recognize no such boundaries.

One might argue that urban wildlife management needn’t involve this self-serving tone and that it is just as much for the maintenance of biodiversity as for the maintenance of the city as unnatural space. Certainly, endeavors such as the construction of wildlife

Katja Jylkka -- "Monsters and Urban Wildlife in Johanna Sinisalo’s Troll: A Love Story"
corridors are, ideally, ways to share space peacefully with animals and plants. However, as we move from studying works of ecology to journalism to fiction, we see how culture and perception color representations of urban wildlife to suggest a more anxious, if not antagonistic, mentality. The above examples have come from American urban spaces such as Chicago, yet the urban wildlife “problem” is an international one, appearing in the real-life setting of Sinisalo’s novel. The most widely read newspaper in Finland, *Helsingin Sanomat*, published a pair of stories in 2004 about a sighting of a large brown bear “trundling around the normally well-ordered streets of Kauniainen,” part of the city of Espoo (“If you go down…”). A week later, the newspaper published a follow-up story, recalling how the bear “stirred up some near-hysterical tabloid headlines” (Tuppurainen). However, the article reminds the reader, “large game and large predators are not completely unknown in these parts, even in the capital” (Tuppurainen).

The language of the articles indicates two things that make the story potentially “hysteria”-inducing. First is the problem of knowledge, as alluded to in the last quote. The space between knowing and not knowing of the presence of large animals in the city creates room for the “hysteria” noted in the article. Second, the drama of the article also comes from the way it contrasts the bear, as an emblem of wilderness and savagery, and the controlled, “well-ordered” streets of the city. Journalist and non-fiction writer Mike Davis reframes this phenomenon slightly when he states that the animal inhabitants of a city (in his case, Los Angeles) are “only episodically visible” to its human citizens, and then only in a “phantasmagorical mode. The unexpected appearance of large wildlife in the city’s backyards is occasionally charming, but more often threatening” (207). Within this “phantasmagorical mode” — a fear of something unknown and uncontrollable infiltrating the city, a space of human knowledge and control — such animals become figured as aberrant and monstrous.

Imagining urban wildlife as monstrous allows for a sort of third space that combines all that is unknowable, uncontrollable, and unnervingly human about the natural. Take, for example, the chupacabra, the fantastical “goat-sucker” of Puerto Rico, Mexico, and the American southwest that created a craze of fascination and terror in the 1990s. The corpses and images of alleged chupacabras found in and near cities were often revealed to be merely coyotes suffering from mange. In a recent article for National Geographic, wildlife-disease researcher Kevin Keel stated, upon seeing images of the supposed monster, “It still looks like a coyote, just a really sorry excuse for a coyote … I wouldn’t think it’s a chupacabras if I saw it in the woods, but then I’ve been looking at coyotes and foxes with mange for a while. A layperson, however, might be confused as to its

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identity” (Than). Keel’s assertion that the animal wouldn’t have appeared monstrous if he “saw it in the woods” implies the important link between setting and perception in how people think about wild animals. The coyote’s skin condition in combination with its presence outside of the woods remove it far enough from the common conception of “coyote” to give it a monstrous, supernatural identity.

Perhaps a more subtle example of monstrous representations of urban wildlife are the responses in the past twenty years to increased sightings of mountain lions (also known as cougars or pumas) in urban and suburban spaces in the western United States. David Baron’s *The Beast in the Garden* capitalized on the panicked discourse surrounding these sightings, focusing on the killing of a runner in Colorado by a mountain lion. Baron argues that such tragedies illustrate that the animals no longer fear humans and consider them “fair game,” so to speak. In his narration of how the runner’s body was found, Baron describes the mountain lion as “large,” “muscular,” “its visage unmistakably feline” as it “sat sphinxlike in a copse of trees just five yards away and watched the men intently” (6). In Baron’s words, its musculature is clearly “animal” in its strength, but it has a “visage,” a distinctly human term for the face. Further complicating this blend of animal and human is the allusion to the mythological monster of the sphinx.

Later, Baron cites another mountain lion attack, this one “in sight of an interstate highway and a high school” (8). Why is it significant that the attack occurred near such markers of human civilization? Such phrasing suggests that the killer mountain lion only becomes monstrous when it kills within sight of a city, a view confirmed in Baron’s final paragraph of the introduction: “This book tells the story of a death that was not supposed to happen and the forces that made it inevitable. It is a tale of politics and history, and ecology gone awry, all come to life in feline form” [emphasis mine] (8). Although Baron doesn’t resort to the explicitly supernatural accounts of the chupacabra, his tone clearly opens a space between the traditional division of natural and unnatural, something that is neither the effect of human action nor “ecology.” When the wild appears where it is not “supposed to” be, the public imagination offers a third, monstrous alternative to the binary between human and animal. Such a displacement affirms the stability of the binary and, therefore, of what it means to be human.

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*Katja Jylkka -- "Monsters and Urban Wildlife in Johanna Sinisalo’s Troll: A Love Story"*
The word “grotesque” and a few of its definitions can help to articulate this complication of the human-animal relationship when placed in the phantasmagorical mode. In the 1600s, the word was originally defined as “a kind of decorative painting or sculpture, consisting of representations of portions of human and animal forms, fantastically combined and interwoven with foliage and flowers” (“grotesque, n. and adj.”). From this definition came the later “ludicrous from incongruity” used in the nineteenth century (“grotesque, n. and adj.”). Finally, the popular current definition is something “abnormal and hideous” (“grotesque”). We can see how this word and its various meanings can tell a story about the human-animal relationship: over the course of hundreds of years, the artistic combination of human and animal forms later becomes “incongruous,” and, finally, “hideous.” Darja Malcolm-Clarke alludes to the term’s multiple definitions in asserting that “the grotesque as that which is ‘ambivalently abnormal’ draws attention to the process of representation and reveals the artificiality of the symbolic order” (141). However, Malcolm-Clarke considers the grotesque in the realm of New Weird fiction, and thus the objects of her study are often characters literally composed of animal and human parts, such as China Miéville’s khepri with their human bodies and scarab heads (142). The grotesque also causes the human subject to feel “fearful awe at the possibility that one’s own mind — and again, the human mind in general — cannot keep up with the metamorphoses of materiality; that the categorical containments of natural physicality that we wish to see as scientific truths ... are unstable” (Csicsery-Ronay 188). The grotesque, then, causes a problem both for its revelation of artificiality, but also of the potential failure of the human mind to comprehend nature, i.e. the non-human.

Troll’s use of the grotesque in its portrayal of the troll pieces together all three of the word’s definitions. Explicitly described several times in the novel as “grotesque,” Pessi embodies the word in more ways than one. In exploring these ways, an examination of the novel also must consider Davis’s “phantasmagorical mode”: when the uncomfortable proximity or blending of the unnatural and natural creates a need for the construction of a supernatural otherness. The troll reflects aspects of each of these definitions of the grotesque and, consequently, how the novel as a whole engages with the problem of urban wildlife.

The troll’s combination of human and animal characteristics reflects the original, artistic meaning of “grotesque.” Angel’s confusion when he first finds the creature indicates this blending. He initially describes the troll as “some young person” curled up next to the trash cans, but then, as he walks closer, as “a mere cub” (Sinisalo 6). This oscillation between emphasizing human or animal features continues throughout the rest of the
novel. Accordingly, Angel sometimes identifies the troll as unquestionably animal in nature. For instance, when it sleeps in his apartment that first night, Angel describes how it “lets out that half-moan/half-sigh of a dog falling asleep” (8). Angel compares the troll’s movement to that of other animals when he says, “He plays just like a cat, trying to catch any old object, for as long as I can be bothered to wave it about,” thus confirming its difference from humanity (109). A number of the troll’s actions appear distinctly that of an animal: drinking from the toilet, leaving “trollshit” under a carpet in Angel’s hallway, and shedding its winter coat all over the apartment (53).

Despite these apparently clear markers of the troll’s animal nature, Angel also cannot help but note Pessi’s humanoid appearance, emotions, and, at times, intelligence. Both Angel and Palomita, Angel’s downstairs neighbor, notice that the troll’s face is “like an ape’s. Or a person’s” (78). Pessi’s actions, however, are the more surprising indicators of his possible link to humanity. One night in his apartment, Angel becomes concerned that Pessi is “suspiciously quiet” and goes to investigate what the troll is up to: “his tail swaying as a sign of extreme concentration … Pessi has taken the building blocks and, with hisprehensile long-nailed fingers, is at this very moment putting one on the summit of an almost faultless pyramid” (111). Planning, construction, and manipulation of the environment thus become one of the unnerving markers of Pessi’s intelligence.

Later in the novel, Angel takes a picture of Pessi wearing a small pair of jeans for an advertising campaign he has been contracted for. When the magazine with the ad in it comes to Angel’s apartment, Pessi finds it first and tears the magazine angrily. On coming home to the shredded magazine, Angel realizes, “He’s seen it. He knows what it is. He can read pictures. And he hates them. Or this one at any rate” (220). The narrative aligns this event with a very human self-consciousness when it follows Pessi’s tearing up of the magazine with an excerpt from a children’s book in which the troll first knows himself when he sees “his image in the smooth surface of a gloomy, deep pool” (221). Previously thought as solely a human trait, self-awareness has been “discovered” in certain animals since the invention of the mirror test in the 1970s, in which scientists test whether a being can recognize itself in a mirror. Pessi clearly passes the test with flying colors. The narrative implies Pessi’s self-awareness and his outrage at how he and his image have been used for Angel’s work, yet it remains unclear whether this awareness of self is a trait that separates man from animal.

Katja Jylkka -- "Monsters and Urban Wildlife in Johanna Sinisalo’s Troll: A Love Story"
The narrative is careful to never fully privilege one definitive answer to the question of what the troll is. Consequently, the reader is put in the same position as Angel, constantly negotiating the human-animal relationship to figure out how to relate to Pessi. When Pessi maims Martes, an acquaintance of Angel’s who forces his way into the apartment, Angel later finds that Pessi has used some of Martes’s blood to paint a picture of a man’s body on the wall. “Or was it a painting, after all?”, Angel wonders, “Was it perhaps nothing but fortuitous pawmarks and smudges my guilty and hysterical mind fused into a configuration?” (210). To test Pessi’s intelligence once and for all, Angel places “two mugs upside down and quickly switch[es] them about, and Pessi doesn’t point out which has the tidbit underneath but looks at [him] swiftly, as if weighing the situation up. And then, quick as a flash, he pushes over both mugs, grabs the pat of cat food in his claws, and dashes off to the windowsill to eat it … And I wonder which of us is the fool” (211). Pessi’s combination of human and animal characteristics, both in his features and his actions, also induce a sense of frustration in the reader, who is left wondering when the troll’s true nature will be revealed.

The troll also demonstrates the secondary connotations of the term “grotesque” in its appearance in the city of Tampere. However, before we can fully understand how Pessi and the city interact, we must see how the novel envisions the city itself and the particular problems the novel’s city poses for its inhabitants, both human and animal. The real-life city of Tampere, Finland in many ways follows the prototypical trajectory of urban life in the last century. Now the third largest and most quickly developing in Finland, Tampere began as an industrial city, using its location near rivers to power a number of paper and cotton industries (“The City of Tampere”). In the city’s transition from an industrial to a postindustrial economy, these old factory buildings were renovated and transformed into restaurants, cafes, and offices for Tampere’s new leading industry — information and technology (“The City of Tampere”).

Sinisalo’s novel acknowledges this cultural shift through Angel’s profession as a creator and digital manipulator of images for use by advertising firms, and thus a trader in symbols and information. In fact, the Tampere of Troll seems to have taken one step further from a reliance on the physical city and become a city of the Internet, images, and information. Before returning home to do work on the Internet, Angel laments, “Back to the cursed highway of knowledge, to the electronic asphalt, stretching in all directions, with no path leading where it should: to the forest” (Sinisalo 33). Such a depiction of the “electronic asphalt” of the new city envisions an even sharper distinction between “forest” and man-made urban space.
The narrative structure of the novel reflects the displacement and fragmentation of this digital city. The first-person narration is split up amongst the novel’s characters, with each character’s section usually lasting two pages at most before switching to another point of view or textual source. The first-person perspective of each section is often so myopic and disconnected from other points of view that each character often drastically misinterprets or misunderstands another. The segregation of each character’s voice and the lack of emphasis on physical movement between these sections of narrative suggest the impermeability of the city, even, significantly, to humans. If the city is the epitome of “culture” and, consequently, of humanity, what does it mean that the novel figures so many humans impeded by the city itself? Such obstructions to human movement are at their most dramatic in the sections narrated by Palomita, a mail-order bride from the Philippines. Totally and miserably at the mercy of her husband, Palomita is trapped in her apartment. Her physical seclusion is only mitigated by a magazine given to her by Angel, for “every page is a letter, every picture a little colored doorway out of this apartment” (102). Only forms of media such as the magazine offer the freedom of figurative movement previously offered by the city. These characters attempt to maintain their humanity through the new city of the media, while animals such as Pessi encroach upon the physical city. Consequently, the majority of Troll takes place in Angel’s apartment or in the world of the websites and books that the characters read.

Upon first finding Pessi next to the dumpster, Angel remarks, “It’s been hurt or abandoned, or else it’s strayed away from the others. How did it get to the courtyard of an apartment building in the middle of town?” (7). As a wild animal, the troll should not be as mobile as it is in urban space; consequently, Angel figures its appearance in the city as a fluke, the result of some ecological mistake such as injury or abandonment. Thus, not only does the troll physically embody a combination of human and animal characteristics, but its appearance next to the dumpster and, later, in Angel’s apartment highlights the incongruity between urban, man-made space and wild animal. Angel’s apartment is the embodiment of the domestic urban (as well as urbane) environment: “Everything in sight cries out style. Glass and chrome, natural wood, white, grey and black. Lithographs on the wall” (251). When Ecke, Angel’s boyfriend, enters Angel’s sitting room for the first time, he describes himself as entering “the kingdom of light tones, the wonderland of careful consideration. Straight into an interior-design magazine” (251). Incongruity strikes when the reader keeps this picture in mind and then imagines the troll hunting and killing a guinea pig in the bathroom of such an apartment, spraying rodent blood across Angel’s clean white tile (52). If we take Ecke at

Katja Jylkka -- "Monsters and Urban Wildlife in Johanna Sinisalo’s Troll: A Love Story"
his word, then Pessi has even infiltrated the new human “city” of the media and the Internet, establishing his dominance in Angel’s magazine-like apartment and tearing up the advertisement with his image.

Ultimately, these incongruities of body and space create a phantasmagorical mode that produces the third definition of “grotesque,” thus engaging with the process of transforming natural wildlife into supernatural monster. In this way, the previous two definitions lead to an integrally significant aspect of the human-animal binary: perception. In order to address the importance of perception and representation, one must first ask of the novel — why a troll? Sinisalo could have written this novel featuring a bear, a squirrel, or any number of other animals actually extant in Finland at this time. One answer to this question is that, as discussed above, the troll blends the human and the animal in its appearance: it has “reddish-orange feline eyes with vertical pupils,” “the ridge of its nose protrudes rather more than a cat’s, and its nostrils are large and expressive,” yet, “the mouth is in no way like the split muzzle of a cat or a dog: it’s a narrow, horizontal slit” and “the whole face is so human-looking” (7). The use of the troll allows for a more explicit rendering of the grotesque in terms of a literal combining of human and animal traits. Pessi thus embodies a special physical ambiguity that leaves open space for interpretation.

Such ambiguity not only makes room for interpretation, but also for fear. One book that Angel reads over the course of his research is Aki Barman’s *The Beast in Man: An Enquiry Concerning the Kinship Between Man and Wild Animal in Myth and Fantasy*, which states that Finnish folklore has a long history of depicting trolls as “simple-minded fiends” easily duped by “cunning” humans (28). Barman explains this tradition as arising from humanity’s need to “emphasize their superiority and pre-eminence in comparison with this somewhat anthropomorphic animal” (28-9). In other words, the troll’s form and characteristics are reminiscent enough of those of humanity to confuse and threaten how humanity defines itself. Thus, more characteristics of trolls are invented and repeated to re-differentiate trolls from humans.

The fact that the novel features trolls, originally mythological beings, also draws attention to the process of representation, a key element in understanding the discourse surrounding urban wildlife. The novel’s use of the troll and all of its mythological “baggage” demonstrates how fantasies of an animal are just as, if not more, powerful than its biological reality. The texts Angel reads in his research on trolls are essentially a whirlwind tour of how context influences representation, creating many views of the troll in a variety of media. In an excerpt from a modern newspaper, a woman asks,
“How long will it have to be before we wake up and realize a full-grown troll is a wild beast two meters tall and that a little child’s just a snack for it?” (61). In the urban legends and folklore of the novel, trolls often abduct human women for their brides or leave changelings in the place of human babies. In some works of children’s literature, they appear to be objects of sympathy and friendly to human beings. One excerpt from a work of history tells of how, even after the “collapse of the mythological paradigm” with the confirmation of the trolls’ existence in 1907, cults still formed around real troll populations in the early twentieth century (193). This continued reimagining of the troll suggests the power of human perception and imagination over and above concrete evidence. The novel defamiliarizes and draws attention to the process of making urban wildlife grotesque by essentially reversing the process and revealing the layers of representation such creatures accumulate.

The constructed, representational quality of making the urban animal monstrous or grotesque becomes particularly clear when Martes breaks into the apartment. Angel tries to keep Martes out, but he pushes past and sees Pessi, who is primed to attack the intruder. Since this occurs during Martes’s narration, we see the troll from his point of view:

It stands on two legs. It’s a snarling demon. It’s a sci-fi movie monster. This steep-angled spotlight’s sharpening its bony body, its long claws, its nervously twitching limbs. It walks with a spooky softness, sways closer to me... Its claws are aimed at me. Its grotesque face splits in a hideous snarl as it lets out a hissing growl from its throat ... And the monster’s going for me. (188)

Martes’s use of cinematic imagery and diction in his description of the troll is another way the novel encourages the reader to think about the process of representation and depiction. None of Angel’s descriptions of the troll contain this sort of monstrous language, suggesting how Martes’s fear powerfully colors his perception.

The ways in which the troll is perceived as grotesque, abnormal, and hideous indicates the instability of an easy dichotomy between the natural and the unnatural. The novel’s characters, however, often seem all too ready to embrace the truth of that dichotomy. Angel, after taking the troll home, thinks, “I’ve tried to capture part of the forest, and now the forest has captured me” (166). Dr. Spiderman, Angel’s ex-boyfriend, expresses
a similar duality when he thinks, “His troll’s like a shred of night torn from the landscape smuggled inside. It’s a sliver of tempestuous darkness, a black angel, a nature spirit. Can you tame darkness?” (202). The tension between the two poles of this binary appears again at the end of the novel, this time with regard to the landscape and the novel’s physical setting. Angel makes the distinction between the ancient, unknowable forest surrounding the city and “the fake woods adjoining cities — the so-called nature reserves that, in reality, are more like parks: embroidered with paths, cleared of undergrowth, illuminated, provided with benches and full of trees almost all exactly the same age” (274). Such descriptions suggest a nature and a city that, if not actively at odds with each other, are certainly diametrically opposed.

From the ways in which the troll acts out the first two definitions of “grotesque,” it would appear that the novel would support a reading that agreed with the characters above, a vision that natural and unnatural are indeed polar opposites. However, the constructed nature of monstrosity suggests that another reading of the novel is necessary. The troll’s grotesqueness in this final sense reveals, to borrow Mike Davis’s words, a vision of “the ‘wild’ and the ‘urban’ … as variable qualities or processes, rather than neatly bounded little boxes” (204). Consequently, as often as the novel constructs the binaries between human and animal, between city and wilderness, it undercuts them. Pessi’s appearance, of course, never resolves into coherent human or animal features. Equally, the troll’s incongruent existence in the city refuses to stay predictable or stable. As a wild animal in a man-made urban space, the troll’s life in the city should be a failure, if the binary holds true — it should become lost, trapped, killed by the thugs that threatened it at the beginning of the novel, or any number of other ways in which the city could stop the movement of a wild animal. However, the troll seems to adapt quickly to Angel’s building, particularly when it learns to open doors. This begins with merely opening cabinet doors in Angel’s kitchen, but leads to Pessi opening the front door of the apartment and running down the stairs. Although it is eventually retrieved by Palomita, it continues to, in some senses, take over Angel’s apartment. Angel tries to explain away the troll’s success in the man-made space, thinking, “He doesn’t seem to be suffering from being indoors — perhaps because he’s a natural cave-dweller” (100). The novel leaves Angel’s conclusion unconfirmed and leaves the question open: What if the troll’s ability to thrive in the apartment is because there is no inherent difference between natural and unnatural space? Such a reading of Pessi’s actions sees the apartment as just another animal “den,” or, conversely, the troll’s natural cave-dwelling as merely another type of “house.”
Confirming the permeability of the boundary between human and animal are moments in the novel that emphasize the animality of humans. The novel also tells the story of ostensibly human characters that show that the troll is not the novel’s only character trapped in the city’s liminal space between animal and human. Shortly after one of the passages illustrating Pessi’s adaptation to the urban environment is a news article entitled “Calvin Klein Stimulates Ocelots” (123). The article explains that, in trying to encourage reproduction among the endangered ocelot species, researchers discovered that the popular cologne had the same effect as ocelot pheromones in stimulating the animals. Even though the article excerpt is not followed by any relevant narration from Angel, its insertion suggests the impossibility of dividing the human from the animal at the biological level. Later, the reader learns from Dr. Spiderman that the scent of troll pheromones completely fills Angel’s apartment, thus explaining Angel’s sexual attraction to the troll. “Pheromones,” Spiderman explains, “manipulate and control and tempt other members of the troop and species” (206). Angel’s previously ineffable, problematic attraction to Pessi could therefore be potentially explained by a biological, animalistic response.

In the ways in which the troll is both human and animal, yet neither, Angel’s attraction to Pessi deliberately obfuscates the boundary between a “natural” and “unnatural” affection. Angel’s homosexuality, then, offers another way to examine the novel’s participation in the discourse of “naturalness.” Like the troll, Angel and the other gay characters in Troll seem to act as objects by which others understand and construct their sense of normalcy or what is natural. However, also like the troll, these gay men also become imagined as monstrous because of the ways in which they threaten a stable, normative sense of a “natural” sexuality. Martes, who the novel implies is gay but has always made a shell game of his sexuality in order to string Angel along, says in anger to him, “I’ve never taken it in before — the link between bestiality and pedophilia” (236). Martes’s knowledge of Angel’s homosexuality and his fear of the troll create the occasion for a blurring of the boundaries between human and animal, in this case between animal cubs and human children in the context of a “monstrous” sexuality.

In fact, although homosexuality is important thematically to the work of the novel, it is more the text’s use of pedophilia that explores the conflict of the natural and unnatural. For instance, Ecke at one point looks through a book that depicts trolls, “swaggering, full-grown, exaggeratedly muscular, exaggeratedly human-looking beasts, endowed with … outrageous genitals … Page after page, I see how the cartoonist has thrust all

Katja Jylkka -- "Monsters and Urban Wildlife in Johanna Sinisalo’s Troll: A Love Story"
inhibition aside and invented frightful, bestial erotica, where the other partners are slim, blond, pouting boys, joyously submitting themselves to all sorts of abuses” (222-3). The explicit anthropomorphizing of the trolls in these images conflates pedophilia and homosexuality and poses the two as monstrous by closely associating them with the practice of bestiality.

However, the touch of the wilderness in the homosexual community is also attractive to some inhabitants of the unnatural city. Ecke, Angel’s boyfriend for the last half of the novel, describes an apparently straight woman who has come to a gay club as a sort of spectator: “Someone might argue we’re zoo animals for her. But I’ve another theory. For her, we’re noble savages, a kind of gray area outside the respectable, minutely organized community, an untamed wilderness it takes a lot of guts to step into” (107). Ecke figures his status as part of the gay community in terms of a middle ground between “civilization” and the freedom of the wilderness, an ambiguous “gray area” which is attractive to some for its possibilities, and a source of anxiety for others because of those same possibilities. Like the troll, the novel’s gay characters are a source of both desire and fear; the narrative supports a reading in which both occupy a liminal space, that “gray area,” which is constantly the object of interpretation and reinterpretation.

Animals and homosexuals also seem to play a similar role when it comes to their relationship with the city’s landscape. Angel certainly sees the two demographics as similar in some way when he says, “I can’t let [the troll] outside. Out there are the thugs in their steel-toe-capped boots, getting their thrills by drenching drunks with gasoline, throwing cats from the roofs of multi-story blocks, and mugging gays” (33). Just as the city can pose a certain kind of threat to animals who become vulnerable within it, certain elements of the city are also threatening to the gay community. Despite these dangers, animals are able to find a space in the city that can be interpreted and manipulated, as can be seen in Pessi’s mobility. In a similar fashion, the gay characters in the novel use their ability to “read” the city and seek out their community. Ecke explains, “Our city’s unique, but with a slightly different nuance for each of us” and an “individual hidden topography” including “holes and corners and lanes and gateways that have a significance entirely their own” (106). This vision of the city recalls the importance of perception and interpretation: the natural and the unnatural can only remain distinct if the city is represented as unnatural and opposed to the wild.

What is natural or unnatural, then, is more a consensus of perception than distinct categories. The conclusion of the novel further defers a concrete resolution to these
issues. Ecke enters Angel’s apartment to surprise him. Pessi, prepared to kill any intruder after the incident with Martes, kills Ecke. When word of Ecke’s death gets out, Angel becomes wanted for the murder and decides to flee the city with the troll. Like many other narratives of the city, Troll ends with an escape to nature and the promise of a fresh start. However, the novel once again undercuts the simplicity of the binary. Walking through the woods outside Tampere, Angel and Pessi are suddenly stopped by a fully grown male troll … holding a military rifle. “It waves the gun barrel with a movement that’s idiotically well known from the movies and yet chillingly strange when performed by — An animal. An animal? But the signal’s clear. We’re on our way now, and I’m a prisoner” (272). The novel ends with Angel taking Pessi’s paw and stepping into the troll’s cave, ushered in by the troll with the gun. Just as the novel reveals the city to be a not-entirely human space, the novel’s conclusion suggests a natural space colored by a human intelligence and, in fact, human technology. The military rifle, a marker of human if not specifically urban conflict, appears in the hands of an “animal” in the heart of “nature.” Thus, until the very end, the novel questions the simplicity and stability of the human-animal dichotomy.

In one section of Troll, Angel asks himself: “So what does the troll mean to me? A protégé, somewhat like a pigeon with a broken wing? Or an exotic pet? Or maybe a stranger on a short visit, rather oddly behaved but altogether captivating, who’ll be leaving one day when the time’s right?” (39). The novel’s concern with what it means to be a human and what it means to be an animal suggests that, when Angel asks “What does the troll mean to me?”, he also asks “What does the troll mean about me?”, a question which has repercussions for the human-animal relationship both in and beyond the novel. Variations on this question are the focus of much valuable scholarly work, namely how humans, in the famous words of Claude Lévi-Strauss, use animals to “think with,” and, more specifically, to think with about themselves as humans. An analysis of a novel such as Troll reveals how the application of a particular cultural context — in this case, the discourse surrounding urban wildlife and urban monsters — shows even more about how we use animals to think about ourselves and the world around us. The city, as the supposedly ultimate human space, becomes a fruitful place to consider what constitutes an animal and what makes a human. However, Troll provides a complicating factor to the binary in its emphasis on the role of perception and public imagination, thus revealing the supernatural as not merely a relic of folklore, but an important rhetorical construct in affirming humanity.
To return to the Gehrt, et al. study, they conclude one section with the following: “Perhaps because of the intense reactions (of all kinds) that people in cities can have to them, urban carnivores represent an interesting study for the human dimensions of wildlife, specifically the attitudes of people toward carnivores and the implications of those attitudes. A potentially rich research subject is the difference between urban and nonurban residents in their attitudes about carnivores” (225). The beauty of Gehrt et al.’s hypothetical future study is what it could gain from a number of fields, including literary analysis. Troll offers one answer to Gehrt et al.’s call for future research in its exploration of the process of representing animals in the city, whether they be human or raccoon.

Notes

1. An alternate, but similar, argument about the role of the wild in the city is that animals represent the natural and that seeing them in the city functions as a critique of the city’s own aberrant, monstrous, and dangerous unnaturalness.

2. Akira Lippit writes, “The effort to define the human being has usually required a preliminary gesture of exclusion: a rhetorical animal’s sacrifice” (8). For more on the intellectual history of this idea, Lippit’s Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife provides a useful overview of philosophy’s struggles with the man-animal divide. Also see Giorgio Agamben’s The Open: Man and Animal, Claire Molloy’s “Dreaming of Electric Sheep and Negotiating Animality,” Barbara Noske’s Humans and Other Animals: Beyond the Boundaries of Anthropology, Steve Baker’s Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation and Joan Gordon’s “Gazing Across the Abyss: The Amborg Gaze in Sheri S. Tepper’s Six Moon Dance,” among others.

3. Of course, there are also many species that suffer in urban environments. Gehrt, et al. discuss the threat to the Eurasian badger, for example, in its inability to adapt to the development of its natural habitat.

4. “Wildlife corridors,” as such channels are called, are “narrow strips of habitat linking bigger wild habitat patches” constructed to appeal to specific species (Beeland).

5. There are two other significant ways of envisioning wild animals in the city that allow humans to cope with their incongruity with urban space — making them into pets (humanizing and/or Disneyfying them) or making them into spectacles, even...
tourist attractions. While outside of the scope of this paper, these responses merit additional research.

6. Urban legends, tabloids, and cryptozoology websites offer countless other examples, including the Montauk monster and the supposed giant, blind alligators of the New York City sewer system.

7. Sherryl Vint’s *Animal Alterity: Science Fiction and the Question of the Animal* discusses the mirror test, as both material phenomenon and metaphor for the human/animal interface, in Chapter 2: “The Mirror Test: Humans, Animals, and Sentience.” Primates tend to pass the test, but so do whales, orcas, and magpies. Humans tend to fail it before a certain stage of infant development.

8. It is interesting to note that the troll, in its appearance and actions, embodies similar definitions of the “grotesque” and Joan Gordon’s concept of the “amborg,” an “interface” between human and animal that is “‘multiple, without clear boundary,’ holding ‘incompatible things together.’ It, too, acknowledges both nature and culture” (191)

9. Gehrt, et al. also indicate the powerful nature of perception – despite the very low number of urban coyote attacks on either humans or pets, for example, coyotes produce a great deal of anxiety among city-dwellers.

10. *King Kong* serves as an example of when the city triumphs over the loose wild animal, thereby affirming the binary.

11. Lippit argues that animality is “a kind of seduction, a magnetic force or gaze that brings humanity to the threshold of its subjectivity” (51). The language of seduction here suggests that it is not just within Troll that the man/animal interface functions around problems of desire, similarity, and difference.

12. Indeed, the novel’s refusal to resolve the binary is, according to Csicsery-Ronay, Jr., a natural consequence of the sf grotesque. While the grotesque being may become known and controlled, it also “may resist and remain unassimilable … becoming a constant source of hermeneutic anxiety” (187).

**Works Cited**

*Katja Jylkka -- "Monsters and Urban Wildlife in Johanna Sinisalo’s Troll: A Love Story"*


