

E.b. white's faith in  
nature: the critique of  
christianity in  
'charlotte's web'



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In *Charlotte's Web*, E. B. White juxtaposes a conventional children's story surrounding the anthropomorphism of farm animals with relatively difficult concepts such as death in order to call readers to question their own faith and morality. This is an intriguing structure, for it goes against the traditional tendency to use children's books to impose values, historically Christian values, on children. It is from this structure that White is able to comment on concepts of mortality, salvation, after life, and the existence of God, all of which are themes one may find striking or alarming in a children's book. E. B. White effectively utilizes themes of faith, mortality, and nature to argue against a more traditional Christian understanding of morality, while simultaneously emphasizing a naturalistic vision of morality in which the laws and forces of nature are the basis of morality.

It is first necessary to understand the way in which White trivializes religion in order to understand the way in which he wants to move beyond traditional morality to a more naturalistic understanding of values in the world. White most profoundly trivializes faith in God, through *Charlotte's web*. He begins this process by repeatedly utilizing the word "trick" to refer to Charlotte's plan. From the first mention of the plan, Charlotte emphasizes the gullibility of humans and the way in which she could "trick" them into the most outrageous of beliefs (67). As Charlotte's engagement in trickery is developed and she spins the first web, Mr. Zuckerman immediately identifies the "trick" with a miracle from God. White draws out the way in which Mr. Zuckerman immediately appeals to God, as Mr. Zuckerman goes to discuss the trick with the minister (82-83). The juxtaposition between a trick and a miracle intends to reveal how easily the work of a mere spider is confused

with divine intervention. He forms a contrast between a trick, something trivial and childish, and a miracle, something that traditionally holds incredible weight. Further, the way in which White depicts the animals as essentially the ones with true knowledge of the situation, as opposed to humans, he portrays an unusual hierarchy in which humans are confusing lesser beings, animals, with the work of God. Thus, White ultimately equates the animal to God, which is an attempt to trivialize the concept of God, for he suggests that an act of God is truly the work of a lesser being. This is an excellent commentary on the ways in which faith can bring people to irrational conclusions, for he demonstrates how the work of something as trivial as a spider can be misunderstood for the work of the highest divine entity. This is not the only instance in which White questions the blind faith of religious persons through reference to the words on Charlotte's webs. In Chapter 11, the goose suggests that Charlotte use the word "terrific" to which Wilbur disagrees on the basis that he does not believe himself to be terrific. Charlotte responds, "People believe almost anything they see in print," (89). Here, White is again highlight the Christian practice of putting faith into religious books such as the Bible. One may go so far as to suggest that White is critiquing the Creationist tendency to interpret the Bible in a literal sense. Again, White trivializes this concept by having a lesser being, a spider, critique the complex idea of blind faith in a manner which portrays such blind faith as absurd. From this attempt to draw away from a faith-based understanding of the world through the trivialization of miracles and the Bible, White can successfully lead his readers to a new sense of morality away from religion.

The new understanding of morality that White proposed throughout the book is one that has a naturalistic understanding of values, relations, and guiding principles. Perhaps the most famous instance of this naturalistic understanding of morality, as well as the way it impacts views of mortality, is in Chapter 21 when Charlotte states, “ After all, what’s a life, anyway? We’re born, we live a little while, we die. A spider’s life can’t help being something of a mess, with all this trapping and eating flies. By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle. Heaven knows anyone’s life can stand a little of that,” (164). Here, Charlotte describes the natural cycle of life without any mention of salvation or afterlife. Again, this goes against traditional Christian tendency to remain hopeful in an afterlife or to work towards salvation, in favor of a more naturalistic perspective. It is also important to note the ironic use of the phrase “ Heaven knows...” for White is drawing attention to Charlotte’s lack of reference to heaven even though she clearly has knowledge of the existence of the concept. White continues his attack on the Christian understanding of working toward salvation as a guiding moral principle when he describes Charlotte’s death stating, “ No one was with her when she died,” (171). This is White’s final attempt to comment on the Christian notion of salvation. One may argue that this statement directly implies that no one was with Charlotte, not even God. From a Christian viewpoint this statement would be absurd, as they ascribe to the belief that God is always with his followers. Further, it is at death that Christians believe they will be judged by God for their actions. Again, White wants readers to turn away from these religious understandings and instead turn to nature. From this statement, he is remaining true to the natural world by stating that Charlotte, a spider, dies alone. However, the phrases “ We’re

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born, we live a little, we die,” as well as “ No one was with her when she died,” have slightly nihilistic undertones which is not White’s ultimate intention. One may argue that this is clarified by Charlotte’s statement to Wilbur, “ Maybe you’ll live forever—who knows?” (142). Here, White attempts to address the fact that humans do not have access to such information regarding mortality, for it is something that neither humankind, nor the animal kingdom, may ever understand. It is from this quote that White shows that it is not necessary to become nihilistic towards the naturalistic interpretation of mortality, yet at the same time he argues that we must willfully admit partial ignorance towards the subject.

By laying out his attack on Christianity, White’s argument for a naturalistic morality in which the laws of nature hold moral value becomes clear. White proposes nature to be a powerful force, perhaps subliminally competing with the excessive power that religion carries. White uses the forceful, ever-present cycle of the seasons to demonstrate nature’s power. He argues that despite the acts of humans or animals, seasons continue to cycle. Further, they determine natural events without anyone’s say. Thus, nature has a power over humans and animals alike. The cyclic nature of the seasons as a representation of the powerful force of nature ensures throughout the book that life and death coexist in harmony. This is exemplified by the way in which Charlotte leaves behind her children who become friends with nature. These children, like Charlotte, will also die in a year. However, they too leave behind children for Wilbur to become friends with. White states, “ But Charlotte’s children and grandchildren and great grandchildren, year after year, lived in the doorway. Each spring there were new little spiders hatching

out to take the place of the old. Most of them sailed away, on their balloons. But always two or three stayed and set up housekeeping in the doorway," (183). Here, White reinforces the power of nature and the continuous cycle of season, not in a nihilistic way, but in a manner which produces a hopeful, more naturalistic understanding of mortality. This morality is more orderly and logical, going hand in hand with the natural world. White's preference for this morality is exemplified through Dr. Dorian who states, " When the words appeared, everyone said they were a miracle. But nobody pointed out the web itself is a miracle," (109). White uses the doctor, who represents science and reason, to point out that the web's existence itself is miraculous. This sets up a contrast between religion and science, and White effectively uses it to demonstrate to readers that one who adheres to a naturalistic, perhaps more scientific, morality is left with miracles, as well. It is a moment where White highlights the way in which the naturalistic morality can and does provide a sense of hope and mystery, the same hope and mystery people often find attractive in religion.

Charlotte's Web is an unexpected critique of religion, faith, and Christian values, yet White does not fall victim to the often nihilistic attitude of the atheist. Rather, White turns to nature and its tendencies to propose a more logical, impartial, yet ultimately hopeful conception of morality. From the cyclical nature of the seasons, to the promise of recurring generations, to the rationality of scientific claims, White exposes his youthful audience to a new understanding of the world, one which is not often found in books for children.