

Study Questions on *The Book of the Dun Cow*

Using animals to write about the affairs of humans has a long tradition in literature. Walter Wangerin Jr. has written about the influence of Chaucer's "The Nun's Priest's Tale," a beast fable, on *The Book of the Dun Cow*. Beast fables are about very "human" animals and end with strong, instructive morals. Wangerin asserts that *The Book of the Dun Cow* is not a beast fable nor is it, as some have called it, an allegory. Rather it is a novel in which, Wangerin argues, the "meaning ... springs from the reader's experience" (245-246).

Wangerin also credits another genre, the beast epic, as an influence (243-244). Epics traditionally present heroes and their antagonists in battles which define the values which a culture holds dear. *The Book of the Dun Cow* has such a hero-- Chauntecleer, a rooster-- who not only rules his coop, but also a whole community of animals. His final major antagonist is none other than Wrym, a snakelike creature, who embodies evil itself. But using a rooster as the central character also contributes to a playful element in the novel. Pay attention in your reading to the ways in which Wangerin uses the actual characteristics of the animals he is describing, as he is simultaneously describing their humanity for us.

1. In Chaucer's tale, Chauntecleer lives in a coop in a regular barnyard. As you read the novel, pay attention to the "kingdom" of Chauntecleer. What characteristics of a barnyard and a coop do you find and how does Wangerin enlarge the landscape of the poem?
2. One of the most important relationships in the book is that between Chauntecleer and the dog Mundo Cani? How is the dog introduced to us and how would you describe his relationship to the rooster? What is the meaning of his "maroooooned" cry? Does this relationship change during the course of the novel?
3. Chauntecleer's crows are important throughout the book. What are their categories and what is suggested about Chauntecleer's crowing of the canonical hours (Two)? As you move through the novel, note the places where he crows and the effect of his crowing?
4. Why do you think the Weasel is named John Wesley? What is his role ?
5. Wangerin slowly begins to describe the threats to the coop and Chauntecleer's community. How dangerous is the threat posed by Ebenezer Rat (Three)? How does he prepare us for the conflict that Cockatrice will pose, as his birth is described in Five? As you continue reading, observe how these threats grow more and more dangerous. How would you describe the kinds of conflicts that the community faces? How does the community respond to the threats?
6. Read Four carefully. Here Wangerin describes the animals as the keeper of Wrym, a serpentlike creature who is locked up in the center of the earth. Why has God given the animals the key to Wrym's prison? What does it mean that the animals have no knowledge of what lies beneath them? How does Wangerin here connect the presence of evil to the Christian story?
7. One of the themes of the novel is what it means to be the leader of a community. How does Chauntecleer embody both the strengths and the weaknesses of a leader? Think about his loneliness (Seven), and his rescue of the mice and Pertelote (Eight). In Eleven Wangerin implicitly contrasts Chauntecleer as leader to Cockatrice as leader of his community. What important differences do you note? Why does Cockatrice destroy his community?
8. How would you describe Pertelote? What does she know that Chauntecleer doesn't know? How does their relationship grow in the novel and what strengths does she bring to the community?
9. Nature plays an important part in the novel, particularly water. Why does God send the rains to Chauntecleer's land? What does the invading river represent? What role does it serve in Chauntecleer's important dream in Fifteen? Do you see any connections with Noah's flood?

10. Who is responsible for the death of Chauntecleer and Pertelote's children in Fifteen? What kind of evil is represented here? How does Chauntecleer react to their deaths? How does it affect his relationship with Pertelote? the other animals? Why is the Council that Chauntecleer calls important? How does Wangerin expand our knowledge of the community in Seventeen? Why is that important?
11. What is the role of the Dun Cow? Note the places where she appears (Twelve, Sixteen, Seventeen, Eighteen, Twenty and following). Is she a Christlike figure?
12. How do Chauntecleer and Pertelote's children, the Pins, differ from Cocatrice's, the basilisks?
13. An epic battle develops in Eighteen and following. The Leader speaks to his "troops" in Eighteen and the battle begins. Chauntecleer again encourages his troops in Twenty-One. How do the animals exhibit their particular characteristics? How does John Wesley distinguish himself? Chauntecleer finally meets Cockatrice at the end of Twenty-One. Why is it important that Cockatrice is a rooster and that Chauntecleer sees him as a mirror of himself? Twenty-Four describes the epic battle between the two leaders--Chauntecleer and Cockatrice. How important is Pertelote's encouragement in Twenty-Three? Why doesn't the battle between good and evil end with Chauntecleer's victory over Cockatrice? Why can't evil be conquered?
14. Why does the battle cause Chauntecleer to lose faith, and what does his vision in Twenty-Five give to him? The Dun Cow accuses him of little faith ("modicae fidei") and asks him why he doubts ("Quare dubitasti"). What is the role of her horn? Why can't he win the battle alone? What do Mundo Cani and Pertelote give to him? What is the role of laughter in Twenty-Six when Mundo Cani carries the rooster through the land? Why is it that Mundo Cani and not Chauntecleer is responsible for Wyrms being shut up again in his prison? Is the dog a Christ figure? Why is it suggested that he will return?
15. Why must Chauntecleer confess publicly his feelings for Mundo Cani and acknowledge his sin? Why is forgiveness so important? Why does the novel end with the argument between John Wesley and Chauntecleer?
16. How does your human experience inform your understanding of the novel?

Wangerin, Jr. Walter, "Afterword," *The Book of the Dun Cow* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1978, Special 25th Anniversary Edition (243-246).