Joanna Kłos, "Entry on: Sheep in the Big City by Mo Willems", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska and Lisa Maurice. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2018). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/69. Entry version as of September 14, 2026.

Mo Willems

Sheep in the Big City

United States (2000)

TAGS: Ancient Sacrifice Arcadia Calydonian Boar Centaur(s) Erymanthian Boar Greece Medusa

We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Sheep in the Big City
Studio/Production Company	Cartoon Network and Curious Pictures
Country of the First Edition	United States of America
Original Language	English
First Edition Date	2000
First Edition Details	*Sheep in the Big City*. Mo Willems, creator and one of the directors. Atlanta, GA: Cartoon Network and New York, NY: Curious Pictures, 2000–2002, 22 min.
Running time	22 min
Available Onllne	Theme song (accessed: August 17, 2018)
Genre	Alternative histories (Fiction), Animated films, Animated television programs, Humor, Television series, Time-Slip Fantasy*
Author of the Entry	Joanna Kłos, University of Warsaw, joanna.klos@student.uw.edu.pl
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Creators

Mo Willems , b. 1968
(Author, Director, Illustrator, Scriptwriter)

Although his official birthdate is February 11, 1968, at one of his website (accessed: January 31, 2017) Mo Willems claims to have been alive already when the dinosaurs were – but they "didn't go to the same restaurants"; he also claims that he is not dead yet – but he is "working on it". This can serve as a sample of Willems' ironical sense of humor, widely used in his works. A graduate in Animation of the New York University–Tisch School of the Arts, Willems is a scriptwriter and animator of numerous TV shows, such as *Sesame Street* (which brought him four Emmy awards) or *The Off-Beats* (1996–1998) and *Sheep in the Big City* (2000–2002), both individually created by him. In 2003 he ended his TV career and became a stay-at-home dad, and at the same time a very successful author and illustrator of children's books, starting with his most popular Pigeon series' first volume *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* To-date he has published dozens of books and won several book awards: 3 Caldecott Honors, 2 Theodor Seuss Geisel Medals, 5 Geisel Honors. Willems feels very devoted to his writing activity, because according to him the experience of is one of the most creative and engaging ones, as it requires interactivity with the very book itself and lets the imagination work, making the reader create the story once again after the author has done it.

Willems also designs bubble gum cards, and runs a few websites and blogs for his fans, including gomo.net (accessed: January 31, 2017) with games and videos about the characters of his *Cat the Cat* (2010–2014) book series, and pigeonpresents.com devoted to his *Pigeon* (2003–2014) series.

Ofificial website, which includes links to his several websites (accessed: January 30, 2017).

Faceebok profile (accessed: January 30, 2017).

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Additional information

Casting

Kevin Seal – Sheep, General Specific, The Ranting Swede; Ken Schatz – Ben Plotz (narrator); James Edmund Godwin – Private Public, Farmer John; Mo Willems – The Angry Scientist; Stephanie D'Abruzzo – The Plot Device, Lisa Rental, Lady Virginia Richington, Swanky the Poodle.

Summary

A male (thus, referred to as "he" during the whole show) sheep – called Sheep, escaped from his owner, Farmer John, because a certain military organization (The Top-Secret Military Organization) owns a sheep-powered ray gun invented by The Angry Scientist (a scientist persistently called by mistake The Mad Scientist by the other characters, which of course makes him angrier). Sheep is the only sheep that can power the ray gun, because the weapon has a hole exactly his size. Thus, General Specific, who leads the Top-Secret Military Organization, along with his henchman Private Public and other soldiers, tries to catch Sheep who, after leaving the farm, went to live in the Big City. There Sheep also has enemies, among them Lisa Rental, a little girl who wants to own Sheep as if he were a toy; and an enormously rich lady, Virginia Richington, who owns Swanky the Poodle, whom Sheep loves and tries to date. But this is difficult, as Lady Richington feels an obsessive hatred for Sheep and every time she sees him, she beats him with her stainless steel wig.

The series has a specific structure – every episode is divided into three chapters, introduced and commented by the narrator, Ben Plotz, and titled with the use of word-plays and puns somehow connected to sheep and wool. It is clearly stated that the story of Sheep is a TV show, the narrator does not belong to the same world as Sheep and other characters – but, on the other hand, both worlds connect whenever the so-called *fourth wall* is broken, something that occurs frequently. All episodes start with a scene parodying a TV genre, contain fake commercials inserted between the chapters, and end with the performance of Ranting Swede, a Swedish man who enters the scene in order to complain loudly about something that most truly annoyed him.

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Episode 9 of Season 1, entitled “Baa-ck In Time,” starts with the presentation of The Big City as a place dominated by high-tech sophisticated gadgets. In the beginning of Chapter 1: “Baaa-ck In Time!” we see Sheep, who cannot use a hi-tech can opener, loses control over his movements, and lands in the street with the gadget still working and indiscriminately cutting things.

Meanwhile, in the Top-Secret Military Organization, the Angry Scientist presents his newest invention: a time-travel machine. According to him, travelling back in time in order to see where Sheep went at a specific moment, should guarantee catching him when he comes back to the present time. Shortly after that, a computer-character called the Plot Device arrives with a second identical machine.

In the next scene Sheep still rides through the city dragged by the can opener. He meets Swanky with Lady Richington and accidentally cuts her wig in half with the can opener. He tries to escape the rich lady’s madness, but she manages to catch him blocked by the automatic door to the mall. Badly beaten with the wig, Sheep soars in the air and lands on board an electronic bus, which he leaves in the park. Confused and tired, he unfortunately enters the base of the Top-Secret Military Organization. Yet the soldiers, busy discussing the time-machine plan, do not notice it.

In Chapter 2: “It Was Many Sheares Ago”, General Specific finally notices Sheep who panics and jumps on one of the time machines. The machine stops in the beautiful, sunny, idyllic land, which the narrator calls “the Big City’s past – somewhere in ancient Greece”. The Sheep definitely likes what he sees there (blue sky, green grass) and the people he meets there: there are kind men and women who feed him, bathe him, fan him with leaves, and let him rest at the small column. He also admires the Dancing Centaurs that look like a crossbreed between humans, sheep, and horse. Extremely happy, Sheep decides to destroy the time machine and not to come back to the Big City with all its high technologies causing so many problems.

Asked if he is happy, Sheep confirms and hears: “Good, because Lady Medusington likes her sacrifice to be happy before they are sacrificed.” Astonished, Sheep sees a terrifying angry woman who looks like Lady Richington wearing a tunic instead of a dress, with a wig full of angry bunnies instead of a stainless steel wig. It is said that her look can turn into scone (sic – not a stone, but a cake-scone).

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In the meantime, General Specific and Private Public decide to use the other time machine in order to find Sheep, but they continuously miss their destination. At first, they land in pre-historic times and meet a huge dinosaur, and later in the era of the discovery of the Big City by General Specific's conquistador-ancestor.

Chapter 3: "Turning the Flock Ahead" starts with the narrator's question: "Can our hero escape?" (note the most probably deliberate use of the word "hero"). We can see Lady Medusington beating Sheep with her wig full of angry bunnies.

General and Private this time land in their own time, where the Renaissance Festival is taking place.

Sheep manages to calm the angry bunnies by feeding them carrots. Running from Lady Medusington, he regrets the absence of high tech, as there is no telephone to call for help. When the female monster catches him and throws, he lands on the tusk of a boar (which is probably an allusion to the Calydonian and Erymanthian Boars). Surprisingly, Sheep finds the solution: he escapes the screen, steals some tools from the shooting plan of the show, repairs the machine and comes back to The Big City. Then comes the moral of the whole episode: "Technology may not be perfect, but it surely beats a wig of angry bunnies".

The usual Ranting Swede ending also concerns problems with technology, as this time he became annoyed by answering machines.

Analysis

The episode evokes the most common stereotype of ancient Greece as an Arcadian, idyllic land ablaze with sunlight and rich in fruit; what is more, it alludes to the formative motif for American identity, i.e. search for American roots in the ancient civilization – as Greece is equated to the past of The Big City. The episode also unusually represents Medusa as villain, a greedy, murderous woman-monster – a rare occurrence, as the 20th-century feminist thought recreated Medusa as a positive icon of female identity, and the pop-culture adapted Medusa's image to fashion and commercials (e.g. Versace logo, AGF insurance company's TV commercial, Thermasilk shampoo TV commercial).

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Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and Concepts	Ancient Sacrifice Arcadia Calydonian Boar Centaur(s) Erymanthian Boar Greece Medusa
Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Adventure Animals Heroism Travel

Further Reading

Galchen, Rivka, "Mo Willems's Funny Failures", *New Yorker* (February 6, 2017), available at newyorker.com (accessed: August 17, 2018).

Goodman, Martin, "Talking in His Sheep. A Conversation with Mo Willems", *ANIMATIONWorld* (June 25, 2001), available at awn.com (accessed: August 17, 2018).

Hesse, Monica, "Mo Willems is the go-to author for children – and their parents", *The Washington Post* (January 6, 2012), available at washingtonpost.com (accessed: January 30, 2017).

Messinger, Jonathan, "Guilt for dinner: The Mo Willems interview", *TimeOut Chicago* (May 5, 2011), available at timeout.com (accessed: August 17, 2018).

Russo, Maria, "Mo Willems and the Art of the Children's Book", *The New York Times* (March 17, 2016), available at nytimes.com (accessed: August 17, 2018).

Willems, Mo, "Why Books – The Zena Sutherland Lecture", *The Horn Book* (October 21, 2011), available at hbook.com (accessed: August 18, 2018).

Addenda

Broadcast Date:

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2000–2002 (Episode 9, discussed below, aired March 2, 2001). Two seasons were produced with a total of 28 episodes.

There is a two-disc release of the 1st season containing 14 episodes, available at ioffer.com (accessed: August 17, 2018).

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