

ANIMALS AS SYMBOLS IN TED HUGHES' POEMS

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ABSTRACT

This research article explores the use of animals as potent symbols in Ted Hughes' poetry, examining how these symbols contribute to the thematic depth and emotional resonance of his work. Hughes, renowned for his profound engagement with the natural world, employs animal imagery not merely for its aesthetic appeal but as a vehicle for exploring human experience, existential questions, and the forces of nature. Through a detailed analysis of key poems, this study reveals how Hughes' representation of animals—ranging from the feral and predatory to the domesticated and mythic—serves to reflect and interrogate the complexities of human psychology, mortality, and the interplay between civilization and the wild. By integrating literary theory and ecological criticism, this article illuminates the ways in which Hughes' animal symbols challenge anthropocentric perspectives and offer a nuanced understanding of humanity's place within the natural order. The findings underscore the significance of Hughes' symbolic use of animals in crafting a poetic vision that is both viscerally immediate and philosophically profound.

KEYWORDS: *Animal Symbolism, Poetic Imagery, Nature and Human Experience, Literary Analysis*

Ted Hughes stated that poems, like animals, are each one an assembly of living parts, moved by a single spirit. Many critics call him the 'animal poet'. But it cannot be denied that his poems say much more than merely describing different animals. In his early works, Hughes questions man's function in the universal scheme. Hughes examines in several of his later animal poems the themes of survival and the mystery and destructiveness of the cosmos. The animals serve to be metaphors for human behaviour.

Hughes specialised in mythological systems, which provided much material for his poetry. He graduated in 1954 and moved to London, where he worked as a zoo attendant and as a gardener. Perhaps during this time, when he was with animals, he started finding the mystery of the cosmos through them. He presents image and thought in action through the animals he describes. The narrative and the dramatic elements are combined together. Sometimes he becomes the animal; sometimes he stands outside the animal and expresses the power and violence. Violence becomes the means of survival for many animals. All the animals in his poems are single-minded, vital, have no self-consciousness or no question of conscience.

Geoffrey Thurley says, 'Hughes is possessed at times of an alarming combination of tremulousness and force. This is manifest often in the strange delicacy of the imagery'. He also says that the dramatic relationship between two narrative voices is typical of Hughes' work. One voice represents the ordinary man, at once unknowing and intimidated, yet conscious of larger forces; the other expresses a superior or prenatal vision. Behind these two narrative voices is the moving force of the poet himself, who is always seeking to forge a new, single self, a re-organization which will bridge the eons of time that according to Hughes, separate the natural animal and the human animal.

Commenting on Symbols, Hughes says '...It is my belief that (elemental) symbols work. And the more concrete and electrically charged and fully operational the symbols, the more powerfully it works on any mind that meets it. The way it works depends on the mind... on the nature of that mind'.

Many reviewers and later critics have assumed that the territory Hughes was rapidly staking out was the world of animals. We see a variety of animals in his poems like horses, cats, a hawk, a bull, a mouse, a pig, an otter, thrushes, a bullfrog, a pike, a tiger, a fox, a wolf, a jaguar, etc...No poet has observed animals more accurately. But the description generates metaphors, and the metaphors relate the creature to all other creatures and to human experiences and concepts as well.

Hughes often embodied the primal forces of nature as mythical animals, such as the pike, the hawk and the crow. The element of death is a part of the cycles of nature. Hughes wrote several poems on crow. The protagonist 'Crow' is an embodiment of vitality that challenges the supremacy of 'Death'. In one of his poems, the phrases,

*'Wrung its neck
Plucked it
And ate it'*

describe the ruthless nature of the bird. 'Any form of violence, any form of vehement activity- invokes the bigger energy, the elemental power circuit of the Universe. Once the contact has been made- it becomes difficult to control. Something from beyond human activity enters'. When Hughes expresses his views on Shamanism, he says that the individual is summoned by certain dreams. He further says that a spirit summons an individual, which is usually an animal or a woman.

M. Elaide in Shamanism says, 'In preparing his trance, the shaman drums, summons his spirit helpers, speaks a 'secret language' or the 'animal language', imitating the cries of beasts and especially the songs of birds'. The 'secret language' is partly metaphor; it is also the 'animal language' in the sense that words can communicate as sheer sound beneath their meanings. They can, as Lawrence puts it, 'sound upon the psalm right'.

When he talks about the Crow he says that the crow cannot control the self-transformation. The spirit-light emerges as shattering flame. So, his momentary gain destroys him, and is lost. He re-appears elsewhere as the same old Crow, or rather as not quite the same. He becomes a crow of more fragments, more precariously glued together, more vulnerable. Crow, can be compared to all of us. He directs involuntary aggression against what he most wants to unite within himself, and his distorted attack, and deflect it from himself, against some other substitute. He has the wit to recognise the cause of his fear and fascination, and to hang on to it.

Violence can be seen in the crow's attitude. In Truth kills everybody, as the Crow persists, the proportions of components in each image change: there is less of one thing and more of another; Crow's determination itself can be seen as an advancing thing as we read the poem. The options are open to him: Crow either gives up, or he breaks through to what he wants and is exploded (his ego machinery is exploded which is positive). If he had withdrawn, he would have remained fixed in his error. That he pushes it to the point where he is annihilated means that now nothing remains for him but what has exploded him- his inner link with his creative self: a thing of spirit fire.

In his poem, Crow Aligns, a sharp irony of the modern man is brought out. There is a picture of total desolation, gloom, lifelessness, and degeneration. It gives us a grim picture of death-in-life existence of the modern man. The crow looks at the earth's beauty with horror.

*'And he shivered with the horror of Creation
In the hallucination of the horror
He saw this shoe, with no sole...'*

Everything he sees on earth is ugly and horrific. Even the shoe has no sole, symbolically meaning that the modern man is leading a baseless life. This reminds us of T.S.Eliot who describes modern man as, 'hollow men' and 'scare-crows'. Hughes sees the world as 'wasteland' like that of Eliot.

In Hawk Roosting, the hawk sits in a wood and talks to itself or may be addresses to the readers as,
*'I sit in the top of the wood, my eyes closed.
Inaction, no falsifying dream
Between my hooked head and hooked feet:
Or in sleep rehearse perfect kills and eat'*

The bird is accused of being a fascist... the symbol of some horrible totalitarian dictator by some of them. According to the poet, the hawk Nature was thinking. Simply Nature. By attributing to the hawk a consciousness which can express itself in our language and concepts, the poem also invites us, though we envy the hawk his centrality, his freedom from the falsifying dreams, sophistries and arguments which distract and deflect, to count the cost of letting such energies loose in a man.

In Hawk-Roosting, the hawk's victorious moment of triumph, might without mercy, conquest without effort, privilege without responsibility, energy without consciousness of end is explored in vividly memorable phrases. The words and statements suggest animal consciousness deeper than either words or sentences.

*'I kill where I please because it is all mine...
My manners are tearing off heads-
The allotment of death'.*

In another poem, The Hawk In The Rain, the poet also enters imaginatively into the hawk's victory, as it rides 'Effortlessly at height' above the storm. But, here, he remains conscious, also, of the 'habit of the dogged grave' which keeps him earthbound, and which in the end will smash the bird, too- though in symbol and fact, eternity and time.

The hawk's time is its 'own time', a choice that enables the bird to submit to its fate, and so snatch a martyr's triumph even in destruction.

*'Fall from his eye, the ponderous shires crash on him,
The horizon trap him; the round angelic eye
Smashed, mix his heart's blood with the mire of the land'.*

Moving on to the poem, The Jaguar, the animal can be received in several different aspects. He is seen as beautiful, powerful nature spirit, he is a homicidal maniac, he is a supercharged piece of cosmic machinery, he is a symbol of man's baser nature shoved down into the id and growing cannibal murderous with deprivation, he is an ancient symbol of Dionysus since he is a leopard raised to the ninth power, he is a precise historical symbol to the bloody-minded Aztecs and so on. Or he is simply a demon, a lump of ectoplasm, a lump of astral energy.

The symbol opens all these things...it is the readers own nature that selects, according to Hughes. The tradition is that energy of this sort once invoked will destroy an impure nature and serve a pure one. In a perfectly cultured society one imagines that only self-disciplinarians of a very advanced grade would invoke jaguar-like elementals.

Dennis. (1976) says 'Ted Hughes is concerned to recreate and participate in experience, not to reflect upon it from a distance...the major theme in the poems is power; and power thought of not morally, or in time, but absolutely- in a present which is often violent and self-destructive, but isolated from motive or consequence, and so unmodified by the irony which time confers. For Ted Hughes power and violence go together: his own dark Gods are makers of the tiger, not the lamb. He is fascinated by the violence of all kinds, in love and in hatred, in the jungle and the arena, in battle, murder and sudden death. Violence, for him, is the occasion not for reflection, but for being; it is a guarantee of energy, of life, and most so, paradoxically, when it knows in moments of captivity, pain or death'.

He looks at the caged jaguar and finds victory in his untamed will.

*'There's no cage to him
More than to the visionary his cell.
His stride is wilderness of freedom'.*

The rhythms of the last stanza echo the long strides of the jaguar. The fierce stare of the jaguar, like an electric drill, pierces the onlooker and the darkness. It is like gunpowder with a short fuse, likely to explode at any moment. Even in captivity the sheer ferocity of the jaguar enables it to achieve a degree of freedom as though it were a creature roaming at will in its natural habitat. Beast and visionary are linked in the triumph of will over circumstance.

The rage of the jaguar is captured in the lines,

*'...a jaguar hurrying enraged
Through prison darkness after the drills of his eyes
On a short fierce fuse. Not in boredom-
The eye satisfied to be blind in fire...'*

The poems recreate the intensity, the absolute quality of each state-union and disunion, romanticism and cynicism-treating experience not as parable or text but as a sacrament. Articulation itself becomes a mode of participation, at least for the moment when feeling is being grasped. One can see the poems dividing into two groups; those in which the poet seems wholly identified with some moment of power and violence, and vicariously elated; and those in which he realises such a moment fully, but remains a human and time bound intelligence outside the experience, aware of the unbridgeable gulf between symbol and fact, eternity and time.

In The Thought Fox, the poem embodies an abstraction, suggested by the title; a thought coming to life on the printed page, like a wild beast invading the speaker's mind. The fox might be a real fox, or the fox may be in his mind. We understand that he is focussing on the process of creating poetry. The process is described in exquisite gradations, from the first moment when

*'I imagine this midnight moment's forest:
Something else is alive
Beside the clock's loneliness
And this blank page where my fingers move'.*

After an interval, the living metaphor moves into the poem:

*'Cold, delicately as the dark snow,
A fox's nose touches twig, leaf,
Two eyes serve a movement...'*

The words slowly appear on the page like the footprints on the snow. The landscape is his own mind. The movement is completed in the last stanza:

*'Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink of fox
It enters the dark hole of the head.
The wind is starless still, the clock ticks,
The page is printed'.*

The union of the two images is seen towards the end of the poem. This poem was Hughes' first animal poem. When he talks about this poem he says, 'This poem does not have anything you could easily call a meaning. It is about a fox, obviously enough, but a fox that is both a fox and not a fox. What sort of fox is it that can step right into my head where presumably it still sits...smiling to itself when the dog barks? It is both a fox and a spirit. It is a real fox; as I read the poem, I see it move. I see it setting its prints; I see its shadow going over the irregular surface of the snow. The words show me all these, bringing it nearer and nearer. It is very real to me. The words have made a body for it and given it somewhere to walk'.

In The Pig Organ, when he tells us about a dead pig, he says,

*'Pigs must have hot blood, they feel like ovens.
Their bite is worse than a horse's-
They chop a half-moon clean out.
They eat cinders, dead cats'.*

The devouring nature of the pig is seen here. In his poems, there is a constant striving towards moments of significance; moments of greatness which will last, as symbols if not as facts; ideal events more enduring than their agents, whose death, indeed, is their own occasion to be. He values such moments for their intensity; but he has to isolate them from past and future, cause and effect, reflection and evaluation before he can savour them to the full. Hence, the absence of compassion, anger, humility, nostalgia, disgust and the other attitudes belonging to the perspectives of time. A critic rightly points out that his intelligence is often wholly absorbed in the battle to embody moments of power in words: 'It is the purity of intoxication, not the complexities of hangover that engage him'.

In Pike the sheer bitter endurance and the devouring ferocity lurking in every depth and crevice of life obsessing him can be seen. His empathy with the animals he contemplates is so thorough and so concretely specific that the effect is of magical incantation, a conjuring up of another possible kind of a self. The pike, though they can be caught and killed by man, are given supernatural attributions by the language that Hughes sometimes employs in

describing them, and by his awestruck feeling of the mystery of their existential reality, so different from our own though constantly suggestive of the human. The pike are described as, '*killers from the egg, the malevolent aged grin*', '*and indeed they spare nobody*'.

*'Three we kept behind glass,
Jungled in weed: three inches, four,
And four and a half: fed fry to them-
Suddenly there were two. Finally one'*.

Pike is Hughes' supreme construct, a series of descriptions, anecdotes, impressions building up the single theme...the horror is in the pitch of specialization when this fish as reached as killer. The pike, by nature is destructive. At the end, the narrator fishes in terror at night. He is no longer fishing for pike, but for the nameless horror which night's darkness frees to rise up from the legendary depth of his dream, his unconsciousness. He is in a trance his hidden depths, power, violence rises up in the darkness of his subconscious mind. It is a process of self-discovery not only for the persona of the poem but also for the readers.

In the early poems the metaphors he found were so often animals because animals live out in such naked extremity the primary struggles, particularly that between vitality and death. They roar or bellow the evidence, which men wrap in sophistry or turn a blind eye to. Their reality seems less questionable than ours.

In the Thrushes, the thrushes are terrifying not only for their ravaging of writhing things, but for the too streamlined efficiency with which they pursue their unwavering purpose.

*'Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn,...
Triggered to stirrings beyond sense-with a start, a bounce, a stab
Overtake the instant and drag out some writhing thing'*.

The admiration for and kinship with a primitive and barbaric strain in the animal world has led Hughes to a contempt for 'mere' civilization and, even more, for the particular configuration of values and attitudes that has strangled man's native energy and perverted his force. He explains that a primal violence exists within the civilised man.

Gifford, Terry (2009)says, 'The power of Ted Hughes' verse derives substantially from the containment of force, not from the release or indulgence of it'. This is also evident in his poem, Tiger-Psalm. In this poem, there is a contrast between the tiger and the machine-gun. Machine-guns stand as a symbol for human beings. Psalm is a religious song of praise. The title suggests that he does not treat his experience as a parable or a text but as a sacrament. He explains the nature of tiger's killing as,

*'The tiger
Kills expertly, with anaesthetic hand...
The tiger kills by thunderbolt...
Does not kill. The tiger blesses with a fang'*.

The contrast is seen when human beings kill.

*'The machine-guns
Leave a crust of blood hanging on the nails'*.

When the tiger kills it is seen as natural but when a human being kills it is seen as destructive, inhuman, and artificial.

In the Cave Birds, the basic theme is that of the discovery of the universal in the self. The sequence begins with a kind of psychic trauma in which the hero's complacent view of the world and his place in it is shattered by the visitations of the various terrifying bird-beings who confront him with the evidence of his material nature and morality. He is taken on a journey into himself, the first stage of which is a classic process of death and rebirth. This death is both the destruction of the complacent ego and a full conscious realisation of his own actual physical death. He is changed from a cockerel to a '*flayed crow in the hall of judgement*'. After an interlude in which he is offered and rejects various illusory heavens he enters the second major stage, the symbolic marriage with a female who is both his hitherto imprisoned daimon or inner self and the spirit of material nature. The last poem, an apotheosis of the transformed hero as a falcon, is followed by a brief Finale which undermines any complacent

sense of finality the reader may have about the process he has been taken through. The hero's cockerel innocence turns out to be his guilt. His own self finally, the innate nature of his flesh and blood, brings him to court.

We see the obsession of the poet with one aspect of nature- the power and the gift of animals to make the kill, and behind that the intransigent force of being itself that is so indifferent to suffering and weakness. The symbolic application to man is fairly clear. No poet of the past has quite managed to 'internalise' the murderousness of nature through such brilliantly objective means, and with such economy. Hence, he celebrates, in his own poems, the frozen moments of greatness like the hawk riding the storm, the jaguar free in his cage, the tiger killing expertly etc.

Keith Sagar (2001) says, 'The poems are explorations, reconnaissance's, bulletins from an internal internecine battleground'. For Hughes, a poem is a new species of creature; a new specimen of the life outside its own. It is very much like modern day poetry. It is simple yet complicated. There is fragmentation of the self, cry of the soul, quest for inner peace. He studies both contrasting elements of both the beauty and ferocity of animal life. His poems are noteworthy for their symbols that evoke life-like pictures of birds and animals. His poems to a large extent provide visual effect. All the animals are seen as supernatural elements.

We can therefore trace the developing transformation in Hughes' poetry quite clearly, from the complete identification of the self with the natural, the animal, and the literal processes of nature, perceived of as the only reality. Thomas. (1985) says, 'The most striking single figure to emerge among the British poets since the last war is undoubtedly Ted Hughes'.

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