

Human Animals in Ted Hughes' Poetry: A Thorough Study of the Animal Poems of Ted Hughes

Ashik Istiak

Department of English, Green University of Bangladesh
220/D, Begum Rokeya Sarani, Shewrapara, Dhaka, Bangladesh
Corresponding Author: ashik.eng@green.edu.bd

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to explain the animal poems of Ted Hughes in the light of Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis. The paper first presents the physical description of the violent and sometimes exotic animals in many of his animal poems. The basic aim of the study is to provide enough logic to declare the vicious animals of Ted Hughes are more humans than animals. The theories: Deconstruction and Psychoanalysis will be applied to find out how the the cruelty, the vendetta and the ferociousness of the animals in Hughes' poems go beyond their animal identities. Overall, the article promises food for thought for the readers of Ted Hughes and the English literature learners.

Keywords: Animalia, Break-free Attitude, Deconstruction, Instinct, Violence, Metaphor

Introduction

Background and Context

In the writings of Ted Hughes, a reader may find certain different aspects but his most celebrated and discussed ones are- 'war' and 'animal' subject matters. Of these two, if one takes the second area, it will be found that no other poet excelled (Shekhawat, 2012) as much as Ted Hughes to create metaphors in animal imageries. This paper elaborates and inspects these metaphors to disclose the symbolic identity created in the back of animal visage.

Ted Hughes has twenty eight animal poems which present his indirect attempt to describe the animal identity in human beings. In many of these twenty eight poems, he glorified the instinctive, impulsive nature of vulnerable and sometimes exotic animals. He glorified the animal view of the surroundings (Naeem, 2010). He presented animals as daunting, dominating and unafraid in any circumstances. Sometimes, he positively described the cruelty, the vehemence in them. The readers of Ted Hughes often shared a different view of animals and their nature in interpreting his poems. Many went on to say that this 'glorification of animal life' is a kind of satire to 'the rigid and chained life of human beings'. Human beings have to camouflage their basic instincts (Freud, 1923) as those are sometimes considered to be inherent flaws and weaknesses, demeaning their worth as the nature's best creations but such is not the case with the animals. Animals are free to be the slaves of their instincts unlike the superior creations, who are not allowed to respond to their inner calls and are restrained by the social restraints. So, thinkers often compare animal and human nature. But the question arises whether these animals have any further identity as a whole except this comparison.

For the argument raised above, there will be detailed analysis of the following poems: "Pike", venting the cruelty and the killer instinct of this fish; "The Jaguar", offering an imprisoned Jaguar but surprisingly very expressive for the visitors; "The Thought Fox", conveying a very unusual way of describing the production of a poem;

“Hawk Roosting”, expressing controversy in the critics’ opinions about the interpretation of the hawk; “The Crow” poems, suggesting an alternative voice in this rigid, “industrialized mass society” (Walder, 1987).

Research Objective

The objective of this research is to declare the animals of Ted Hughes directly as humans. The research claims that the instinctive, impulsive, and care-free animals should not only be compared with human nature but also they represent out an out humans allegorically. Ted Hughes basically offered human cruelty metaphorically beneath the physical description of animals and sometimes the ‘id’ in human beings. Hence, this paper tries to deconstruct some of the most celebrated animal poems of Ted Hughes.

Significance and Uniqueness of the Study

There is not that much recent study on Ted Hughes. The researchers often have to depend upon the older researches and the available researches focus all the aspects such as war, animalia, violence (Hasan, 2012) etc. But this research focuses only the animal poems to portray the depth analysis and allegorical findings of these poems. Apart from that the theoretical analysis regarding the animal poems will add new value to the study of Ted Hughes.

The researches available have attempted to compare the exotic animals of Ted Hughes with humans. But this research directly claims that the violent animals portrayed in Ted Hughes’ poems are humans. For this declaration, many poems of Ted Hughes will get a very new identity in the world of literature. The researchers, learners and literature lovers will get a new outlook while reading Ted Hughes and applying different theory to interpret a particular text.

Research Questions

1. Should the animal nature only be compared with humans?
2. Do they have any direct allegorical identity?
3. How are the animals more than animals in Ted Hughes’ poems?

The questions raised above will be answered in the analysis of the poems mentioned earlier. The scholarly articles of different researchers will definitely help getting the answers of these questions. By the answer of the questions this research aims to fulfill the ultimate purpose of the research that the brutal animals portrayed in Ted Hughes are without any doubt humans.

Research Methodology

Considering the research objectives, the study is qualitative and reading based. The analysis and findings of scholars researched in the same subject will be added to enhance the logic of the research objective. This research does not pursue any primary source for data collection. The researches of literature are mostly dependent upon the previous scholarly writings rather than any direct empirical activity. This study also like many other research articles of literature has lesser chances to provide empirical data from the primary sources. Hence The research follows secondary sources of data collection. The findings are manually added from the secondary sources.

Major Findings

'Human Pikes' in the Poem 'Pike'

The book *Lupercal* (1960) has earned Edward James Hughes Somerset Maugham Award in 1960 and Hawthornden Prize in 1961. So, unquestionably with this second book he established himself as one of the major poets in the history of English literature. Certainly, the poem 'Pike' from this book *Lupercal* (1960) best suits his style of creating violent imageries which provides the opportunity for the readers to seek allegorical significance. In 'Pike', Hughes describes the corporeal structure and the violent nature of the pike fish. In fact, through the corporeal structure Hughes expressed the royal, majestic, elegant, and daunting attitude of pike. The poem is very suggestive right from the beginning stanza. It says-

Pike, three inches long, perfect
Pike in all parts, green tigering the gold.
Killers from the egg: the malevolent aged grin.
They dance on the surface among the flies.

The phrase 'three inches long' refers to the body shape of a young pike which is 'perfect'. All the parts of it have the mixture of green and tiger like 'gold' color. By this description one thing is pretty clear that Hughes is trying to establish the commanding picture of 'pike' which will later provide him the opportunity to portray its destructive aspects. The adjective 'perfect' makes the poem special (A, 2015). From here the readers may become curious. One may ask if there is any other thing that the poet is suggesting with this very word 'perfect'. The word 'perfection', at least in the corporeal shape, best suits with none other than human beings. Obviously, human beings have the perfect body structure in the whole creation. That is why they have been the 'lord' of all the creatures. They dominate the whole world. So, can this 'perfect' figured pike fish be deconstructed as human beings? The next line anyway has a metaphor with the word 'tigering'. Hughes here compares the golden stripes of the body of a pike to a tiger. Hughes creates this metaphor only to establish that if a tiger is the 'don' of land, there should be no doubt to consider a pike the same in water (Yudi, 2007). Tigers hunt and kill in land and pikes do it in water. The next phrase 'killers from the egg' brings every mystery into light. Hughes points the print on the fish's body which very well justifies its being a killer from birth. It knows the art of hunting from the very 'instinct' they are born with. Now, humans also have the 'killer instinct' from their birth. No other creature kills more than the humans for their daily survival. Prof. Aupama Shekhawat points out the same in her article, "The human-being also has this killer/survival instinct right after his birth. This instinct is inborn, but the sophistication that he develops is acquired. Nevertheless, this aggressive behavior remains in the subconscious" (Shekhawat, 2012). Humans not only kill for survival but also out of malice, aggression and even without any reason (Walcott, 1962). It enjoys upon inflicting pain on others including other humans and fellow creatures. Celebrated poet Derek Alton Walcott also pointed out this unusual nature of human beings in his one of the most famous poems 'A Far Cry from Africa' from the book *The Poetry of Derek Walcott*. Walcott writes-

The violence of beast on beast is read
As natural law, but upright man
Seeks his divinity by inflicting pain.

Ted Hughes here pointed out this care-free instinctive killing in pike which can be deconstructed as the psychopathic nature of humans (Hasan, 2012). The phrase 'malevolent aged grin' helps to portray the dominating and commanding nature of pike. And this dominance is openly stated in the last line of this stanza '[t]hey dance on the surface among the flies'. Since the main diet of the pike at birth is the flies, the word dance can be taken as a metaphor implying the hunt (Shekhawat, 2012). Hughes is trying to say that hunting is so easy a deed for the pikes as if they were dancing among their prey flies when actually they were hunting them. It seems others are there in the pond just to serve and be the food of them. The same it is in the case of humans as it is considered that all the other creatures in this world are just to serve the humans in this way or the other. The dance here implies the authority of pikes over the other creatures of the pond and symbolically it implies the authority of humans over all the other creatures of the world.

The last line of the second stanza '[a] hundred feet long in their world' has the exaggeration to prove the dominance of pikes in water over the other fishes (A, 2015). It may be only 'three inches long' in its figure but it is 'hundred feet long' in its dominance and power. The readers may deconstruct this line again with the same human interpretation. Humans have been dominating the whole world and they have left no animal untamed or unhunted. Hence, the idea of human metaphor is vibrantly suggested here.

Later Hughes presents two anecdotes. The first anecdote talks about three pike fishes of different sizes- three, four, and four and half kept in a glass. Surprisingly, the narrator finds two after sometimes instead of three, and later the number becomes one 'with a sag belly'. It seems very clear that the bigger pike has eaten the other two. In the second anecdote, the two similar sized pikes kill each other.

One jammed past its gills down the other's gullet:
The Outside eye stared: as a vice locks-

The smaller pikes were eaten by the bigger ones, and here, the pikes of similar size and strength are destroying each other. 'Indeed they spare nobody', said Hughes. Aren't the human beings the same? Aren't they actively taking part in the competition of killing the members of their own species? Isn't it very much evident in the modern so called civilized capitalistic society where the rich and the powerful survive each day dominating the poor, helpless and commoners? In a broad perspective, aren't the big gun countries of the first world taking advantage of the submission of the smaller ones? Aren't the giant countries in conflict politically and culturally?

The last question of the previous paragraph is well-answered when Ted Hughes compares the depth of the pond where the narrator was fishing, to the country England, saying 'as deep as England'. Why England? Why not any other country from the third world? The answer is that England has been the biggest 'pike' in this world of dominance. Very few countries had been free from the colonial grasp of this giant country. If the pike is a ferocious and violent fish, England has proved itself alike. Prof. Anupama Shekhawat raises this point also in her article, "This killer instinct is a metaphor for the revolutionary instinct of England" (Shekhawat, 2012).

The poem ends with 'horror'. The speaker paradoxically says-

Darkness beneath night's darkness had freed,
That rose slowly towards me, watching.

Keith Sagar rightly expresses about this situation in one of his articles on Ted Hughes works, "[I]t was both a pike and a thought-pike or a nightmare pike" (Sagar). It reveals the terror the humans feel every day, in their every action, in their every step of life. The society runs on horror. There are thousands of 'pike' or 'human pikes' watching our actions, demanding submission. Indeed, humans live being terrified.

Imprisoned Jaguar or Imprisoned Humans?

Before *Lupercal*(1960), Ted Hughes showed his glorification of animals in his very impressive first book *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957). Not only the title poem 'The Hawk in the Rain' but also poems like 'The Jaguar', and 'The Thought Fox' show the depth of animal favour as the subject matter. For the argument showed at the beginning, the poem 'The Jaguar' will be elaborated here.

'The Jaguar' portrays different types of animals caged at a zoo. There are apes yawning as if they had no interest upon the visitors, totally submitted to the condition. The parrots are trying hard with their shrieking to vainly attract the visitors. The lion and the tiger are '[f]atigued with indolence'. The boa-constrictor is lying like a 'fossil'. It seems very calm for a real zoo. It seems more like a zoo painted on a wall. Hughes writes-

Cage after cage seems empty, or
Strinks of sleepers from the breathing straw.
It might be painted on a nursery wall.

The picture is totally opposite in front of the cell of a jaguar. Most of the crowd stands there watching keenly the kingly, majestic, and lively jaguar. Where the other creatures are so idly lying or seem very boring, the jaguar seems very energetic, spinning from bar to bar as if it is not caged. It seems that the cage is actually the forest he once lived in. And the jaguar is as ferocious as it used to be when it was in a forest. It may be imprisoned but its action seems not. That is why the crowd 'stands, stares, mesmerized, / As a child at a dream.' Hughes describes the free flowing jaguar like this-

[B]ut there's no cage to him
More than to the visionary his cell:
His stride is wildernesses of freedom:
The world rolls under the long thrust of his heel.

So, the freedom of wilderness comes very vividly here. Now, the question can be raised why the visitors are only crowding in front of the cage of this jaguar. Why not the other animals? Is it only because the other animals are lazy? Is there anything else? The human crowd is mesmerized watching the break-free kingly action of the jaguar but the jaguar is imprisoned. But in reality aren't the humans caged too? What can be the biggest cage in this world except the human society? Richard Lovelace writes about a cage too in his famous poem 'To Althea, from Prison' -

Stone walls do not a prison make,
Nor iron bars a cage; (Lovelace & Wilkinson, 1925)

To build a prison or a cage, one does not necessarily need the stones or iron bars. One creates a cage with social rules and regulation, morality, religion etc. Ted Hughes points towards the crowd which is mesmerized not basically seeing the jaguar but seeing the freedom it holds though being caged. Humans envy this freedom as they get a very

little of that in this society. Prof. Anupama Shekhawat points the same here as well, "The Jaguar is a poem about a fierce animal from the image of which Ted Hughes unearths something about human nature" (Shekhawat, 2012). Humans crave for freedom inside; to do things as they want to do but most of the times the shackles of human society chain their desires and wishes. The jaguar is caged and so are the humans. But, they cannot act willingly like this jaguar.

The jaguar can be deconstructed as the symbolic presentation of the free spirit of human beings. The free spirit of human beings is always imprisoned like this jaguar. The instinctive psyche of humans cannot come out and break the shackles. Apparently it seems that humans enjoy the ultimate freedom in this world but in reality it is not so. How can it be freedom when the spirit is chained?

The Metaphor in the Thought-fox

The poem 'The Thought-fox' talks about the production of a poem. Very surprisingly, Ted Hughes has presented a fox to be the metaphor of the poem itself. Critics are divided in their opinion that the fox symbolizes the poem or the poet himself. In fact, the fox has both the chances. Hughes himself points out that it is 'about a fox, obviously enough, but a fox that is both a fox and not a fox' (Hughes, *Poetry in the Making*, 1967). This animalia in human beings is a very common metaphor. Way back in the Jacobean period Ben Jonson proposed this animalia in human beings in one of his famous comedies *Volpone or the Fox* (Jonson, 1967) where the centre character Volpone suggests 'fox'. Ben Jonson used this metaphor just to offer the shrewdness in that character to portray the negative shrewdness in him, but here the purpose of Ted Hughes is different. Hughes rather presented the fox very positively in this poem.

The fox is first '[c]old, delicately as the dark snow' in the third stanza. The poet tries to create a 'hypnotic kind' (Walder, 1987) of environment with the repetition of 'now/ And again now, and now, and now' in the same stanza. The pun in the phrase 'neat print' provides the opportunity to claim that Hughes means the print of the paw is creating the words in the poem. Thus at the end Hughes writes '[t]he page is printed'. So, with the last line when readers finally know that the poem is not about a fox but about the production of a poem, they tend to get back to these lines to find out the real attempts Hughes has made. Hughes thinks that a poet goes through a dizzy, obscure kind of situation carrying the idea, plot and the conception of a poem. The fox represents this situation. Hence, Hughes offered the concept of 'thought-fox'. The fox is alive, the fox moves back and forth until the creation of the poem. Surprisingly, the creation of the poem is the death of this fox. May be the fox will get a rebirth in the mind of the readers.

The death of the 'thought fox' can be described best as 'The Death of the Author' (1968) proposed by Roland Barthes (Belsey, 2002). As soon as the poem is created, it separates itself from the author and becomes the object of reading for the readers. The poem can be analyzed from a variety of perspectives of the various readers. Individual readers enjoy the liberty of interpreting the poem in their own individual ways. The 'fox' enters the mind of the readers and hence, it gets its rebirth. Hughes commonly describes animals and indirectly connects them with humans. In this poem, it is rather direct. He compares the mind of a poet with the fox as a poet has to be sharp, witty and delicate while creating a poem.

Dictator Hawk in the 'Hawk Roosting'

'Hawk Roosting', another poem from *Lupercal*, describes a tyrant hawk that thinks the world is at its feet. The supreme hawk behaves cruelly with the other creatures. In cruelty, it even surpasses the 'pike' described in the poem 'Pike'. It flies in the sky as if it

were inspecting its subjects' actions. The vehemence comes so vividly in this hawk image. Perhaps this is the most brutally described animal poem of all by Ted Hughes.

Hughes exaggerated the dominance of this hawk that sits at 'the top of the wood' having no 'falsifying dream'. It 'rehearses perfect kills and eat'. Hughes goes on to say in this hawk voice that 'the earth's face upward for my inspection.' So, very vibrantly the human interpretation can take its place here. The authoritative attitude can be deconstructed as the authoritative attitude of the humans endowed with power. The 'top of the wood' may suggest the very humans who are in the top powerful positions. This idea gets much more stability in the last line of the third stanza, "Now I hold Creation in my foot."

Here a question may come why the word 'creation' is capitalized? Usually the capitalization suggests the images of God. So, is the hawk playing the role of a God? Certainly, it is. The hawk here plays the role of an autocrat. Like the hawk in this poem, the authoritative humans act as Gods in human world. Prof. Anupama Shekhawat in this context points out, "In this poem Ted Hughes portrays the thought process that goes in the mind of the Hawk and relates it with the mind of every megalomaniac who considers other people around him as of no or little importance." (Shekhawat, 2012) The cruelty becomes even more expressive when Hughes writes, "I kill wherever I please because it is all mine."

The last stanza again makes an overstatement to prove the dominance of the hawk. The dictator hawk asserts that it has eclipsed the sun. Nothing changes here in this world and nothing is going to be changed as the hawk will not permit any. Here the phrase 'my eye' presents the 'insight' (Walder, 1987) of the hawk. And the hawk wants 'to keep things like this.' Now, a number of critics interpreted this attitude of the hawk as 'fascism'. The critics include Carol Bere, Colin Falck and Christopher Porterfield (Shekhawat, 2012). Many find connection of this fascist attitude of the hawk with the history of World War I and II. Many believe it to be a satire to the fascist leader Hitler. But whatever it is, the attitude of the hawk definitely talks about power practice, dominance and dictatorship. When the poem came in the second book of Ted Hughes called *Lupercal* (1960), the time definitely did have many dictator leaders ruling in different countries. So, it will not be surprising to interpret this poem as a satire to the practice of dictatorship and dominance in that period.

Human Voice in Crow Poems

The *Crow* poems bear a voice, a voice that can defeat all the violence, all the malice, all the dominance, and all the reactionary authoritative practices. Hughes is a poet. He writes. He has his own voice there. Through the voice of this Crow, Hughes expresses his purpose to be a poet, his responsibility in the society he belongs to. The Crow first comes in the poem 'Examination at the Womb-Door'. The crow here judges the world even before coming into this world. It observes the mighty death everywhere in the human society.

Who owns these scrawny little feet? Death.
Who owns this bristly scorched-looking face? Death.
Who owns these still-working lungs? Death.
Who owns this utility coat of muscles? Death.
Who owns these unspeakable guts? Death.

The poem goes on like this. It seems that Hughes here is trying to show the inevitability of the mighty death. Death is the ultimate possibility. Death seems to be the

sole consequence of any action of human beings. The anaphora in the phrase 'who owns' emphasizes the might of death as well. Every rhetorical question here has only one answer and that is 'death'. But Hughes makes a complete turnaround in the last three lines with which the readers get the royal entry of the Crow in Hughes' realm of poems. The poem says-

But who is stronger than death?
Me, evidently.
Pass, Crow.

This majestic entrance of the Crow with the bold assertion that it is stronger than even the death, paves the way for the readers to seek symbolism. Can the Crow be deconstructed? What is the purpose of this crow? On this Walder points out, "Crow is just a cocky, humorous, tough, surviving voice that defeats even death. Amazingly, absurdly, Crow (and therefore humanity) can survive everything" (Walder, 1987).

The voice of Humanity through this Crow becomes clearer in the poem 'A Childish Prank'. It can be taken as a satire to the Christianity. The poem presents God not knowing what to do after creating 'Man' and 'Woman' respectively. To God '[t]he problem was so great, it dragged him asleep.' God's sleeping definitely clarifies that God is playing no role after creating this world. The poem continues-

Man awoke being dragged across the grass.
Woman awoke to see him coming.
Neither knew what had happened.

God went on sleeping.

Crow went on laughing.

About this God, Ted Hughes, himself, comments that it is 'man-created, broken-down, corrupt despot of [this] ramshackle religion who bears about the same relationship to the creator as, say, ordinary English does to reality' (Walder, 1987). Hughes directly opposes the Christian God, hence Christianity. He specifies that in this human world God has nothing to do. Here only humanity can play the role of the savior; humanity that is even stronger in will than the death itself. The other Crow poems continue to ignore Christianity proposing an altered instinctual, break-free attitude of humans that is present both in humans and beasts.

Thus the matter of concern after analyzing the crow poems and studying the researchers' overview about it, one hypothesis can easily be created that the 'Crow' is a new soul offered to the human beings. It is a soul that has come with a mission. This soul is vibrant, this soul is expressive and bold in its assertion. Quite naturally this soul represents the poet himself who has new ideas about leading human life. He proposes a new attitude to the humans that is very opposite to the common way of behavior. Thus the entity of the 'Crow' is a free human presented to the regular chained humans of the modern world.

Conclusion

The 'Pike', the 'Jaguar', the 'Fox', the 'Crow' all are thus different types of humans. If one presents the cruelty or the animosity of humans, the other urges for the break free spirit missed in the ordinary human attitude. Every animal exemplifies distinctive human personalities. Therefore, reading Ted Hughes poems may offer the

readers a way into an alternative world of animals, where the readers can experience the instinctive, impulsive and care-free attitude of human life. One can imagine a world of humans without any moral or religious bindings where restrictions or confinements of human expressions, emotions and wishes do not exist. As Walder says that Hughes appeals 'to our yearning for a wild freedom which, in our highly complex, industrialized, mass society we feel we have lost, and that we might find in nature, and nature's currents within ourselves.' May be that is why Hughes presents the violence in animals only to express the very violence rooted deep beneath the human nature itself. Sometimes, he glorifies this violence only to drive humans to understand the impulsive, instinctive psyche of their own race. Ted Hughes hence presents his 'Human Animals' to the acquiescent humans of the society to make them listen to their free spirit and act accordingly.

References

- A, D. (2015, August 23). *Youtube*. Retrieved from Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Mf1d9GUHto>
- Belsey, C. (2002). *Poststructuralism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bentley, P. (1998). *The Poetry of Ted Hughes: Language, Illusion & Beyond*. (S. Smith, Ed.) Longman.
- Freud, S. (1923). *Das Ich und das Es*. Vienna: Internationaler Psycho- analytischer Verlag (Vienna), W. W. Norton & Company.
- Hasan, S. M. (2012). Ted Hughes' Animal Poems: An Embodiment of Violence or Vitality? *The Dawn Journal*, 1 (2), 174-188.
- Hughes, T. (1960). *Lupercal*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Hughes, T. (1967). *Poetry in the Making*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Hughes, T. (1982). *Selected Poems 1957-1981*. London: Faber and Faber Limited.
- Hughes, T. (1957). *The Hawk in the Rain*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Jonson, B. (1967). *Volpone or The Fox*. (D. Cook, Ed.) London: Routledge.
- Lovelace, R., & Wilkinson, C. H. (1925). *The Poems of Richard Lovelace*. The Calrendon Press .
- Naeem, M. (2010, December 10). *Major Themes in the Poetry of Ted Hughes*. Retrieved from <http://neoenglishsystem.blogspot.com/2010/12/major-themes-in-poetry-of-ted-hughes.html>
- Sagar, K. (n.d.). *Keith Sagar Literary Critic and Poet*. Retrieved from Keith Sagar: <http://www.keithsagar.co.uk/Downloads/Hughes/Ted%20Hughes%20Fishing%20and%20Poetry.pdf>
- Shekhawat, P. A. (2012). The Cohesive Use of Animal Imagery in the Poems of Ted Hughes- A Study. (G. B. Prof, Ed.) *The Indian Review of World Literature in English*, 8, 5.
- Walcott, D. A. (1962). *In a Green Night: Poems 1948-1960*. London: London, J. Cape.
- Walder, D. (1987). *Open Guide to Literature*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.
- Yudi, L. (2007). The Relationship between Man and Animal in Ted Hughes' Poems. *Canadian Social Science*, 3 (1), 95-98.