



Symbolic Significance of Animal Imagery in Ted Hughes's Poetry

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Abstract:

Ted Hughes is a philosophical and psychological poet as well as a poet of nature and of the animal world. He has interpreted modern life and modern man in terms of myths and symbols. Hughes's works has considerably enriched English poetry and enlarged its scope and its bounds. Hughes's animal poems are among the best in his work, and among the finest in the whole range of English poetry. The Imagery in his poems has its own appeal. This imagery shows Hughes's enormous powers of observation and an exceptional capacity to embody his observations in words. The emphasis in this imagery is on the vitality or energy of the animals concerned and also on the violence, the fierceness, and cruelty of most of those animals. This animal imagery, with its emphasis on the destructive power of certain animals, has largely contributed to Hughes's reputation or notoriety as a poet specializing in the poetry of violence. The primary purpose if this animal imagery is to convey to us Hughes's visual impressions of the animals whom he has actually observed; there is a symbolic purpose behind this animal also.

Keyword: Animal Imagery

Ted Hughes was an eminent British poet. He was born on August 17, 1930 in London, England. He also remained Poet Laureate from 1984 till his death in 1998. He married to a famous poetess of America Sylvia Plath. Ted Hughes remained in controversy over death of his wife Sylvia Plath. After her death he married to Carol Orchard. He wrote *Birthday Letters*, which explored their complex relationship with his first wife Sylvia Plath.

Before Ted Hughes no poet has observed animals so accurately and his depiction of the animal observation is remarkably vivid, startling and yet truthful. The animals observed and

described by him cover a wide range, the hawk, the thrush, the pike, the jaguar, the skylark, the horse, the cat, the mouse, the bull, the pig and several others in his poems. Indeed, we can say that the world of animals is Hughes's favorite territory. What makes Hughes's poetry unique is the symbolic significance which he discovers in animals that he observes and describes. Hughes's treatment of animals is different, it is highly poetic, fanciful, symbolic, significant, illuminating and highly 'modern; both in content and style.

In the poem '*The Hawk in the Rain*' the hawk is depicted as perched at a height with his still eyes and with his wings holding all creation in a weightless quiet. In final stanza of this poem the Hawk's ultimate fate is described in striking language, "the ponderous shires crash on him." In the poem '*Hawk Roosting*' it is the fierceness and cruelty of the hawk which are emphasized. The Hawk can kill where he pleases because the whole world is his domain. To tear off head is a routine performance by him. He is an arbiter of life and death. The "allotment of death" is his privilege. The one path of his flight lies directly through the bones of living. The egoistical Hawk says:

*It took the whole of creation
To produce my foot, my each feather:
Now I hold creation in my foot...(11-13)*

The poem '*Thrushes*' is also characterized by the same kind of vivid and realistic imagery. Here the violence and ferocity of the birds has most vividly been conveyed to us through the use of forceful vocabulary and striking combination of words. The thrushes are terrifying; they have dark deadly eyes. They operate suddenly, with a bounce and stab, dragging out some writing insect which is to serve as their morsel of food, there is nothing sluggish about their movements. "Nothing but bounce and stab and ravening second." They have bullet and automatic purpose, and they are no less full of energy than Mozart's brain and the shark's mouth. The swiftness of purpose of these thrushes is contrasted with the dilatoriness and procrastinations of human beings.

In the poem '*Pike*' the first four stanzas contain a description of the Pike which is remarkably original and graphic. The Pike is a killer from the very egg in which he exists before he enters in the new world. Then the ferocity of the pike is conveyed to us by a brief anecdote of

how one of them had eaten the other two in a glass jar where all three were being kept “indeed they spare nobody” says the author. Thus, in this poem the ferocity of the Pike despite its small size, gives rise to the feelings of terror and awe.

In the poem ‘*The Jaguar*’ the animal depicted as brimming with energy, thus offering a contrast to some of the other animals in the zoo. The Jaguar has eyes which are sharp and penetrating, and which are almost blind because of the fire of rage in them. Here, is an example of Hughes’s visual imagination like “by the bang of blood in the brain” the drills job his eye, his stride is wildness of freedom. In the poem other animals too have been depicted vividly. The apes yawn, the parrots shriek as if they were on fire, or they strut like cheap prostitutes to attack the visitors; the tiger and the lion lie still; and the boa constrictor’s coil looks like a fossil.

The symbolic significance of the imagery can simply not be ignored. It is the symbolic significance which imparts to this imagery, a certain depth and profundity. He doesn’t write about animals as if he regarded them as mere animals. He finds in them certain qualities which link them to human life. The symbolic animal imagery thus yields a significance which enhances our understanding of ourselves. Hughes believes that the strength of animals lay in their instinct and precise functions. The animals, according to him, are much more adapted to their environment than human beings. Thus in the poem ‘*The Hawk in the Rain*’ the birds sit effortlessly, at a height while the speaker in the poem is assailed by the ferocious wind which thumbs his eyes, throws his breath and tackles his heart, while the rain hacks his head to the bone. Thus Hughes puts a human being at disadvantage by comparison with a bird. Besides, Hughes believed that animals were not, like man, undermined by a false morality or incapacitated by doubt. A Hawk is to be God like and is therefore permanently frustrated. In the poem ‘*The Jaguar*’ it’s made clear to us that, while man may imprison an animal, he cannot imprison an animal’s energy and instinct, especially the energy and instinct of jaguar. Even in a manmade cage, a Jaguar remains true to itself. Evidently Hughes believes that human beings are more caged in their domestic and social environment than animals are in their cages.

‘*The Thought Fox*’ is also partly an animal poem in which the poet’s inspiration is compared to a fox making a sudden and silent entry into his head. In this case, instinct replaces intellect. As the poet says, “*Till, with a sudden sharp hot stink/ of fox/ it enters the dark hole of the head./ The window is starless still/, the clock ticks,/ The page is printed.*”(25-30)

'An Otter' is the finest animal poem which Hughes has written. This poem reveals Hughes as a wonderfully gifted observer and also a man who can formulate weightily conclusion about animal's behavior. What really fascinated Hughes are the Otter store of endless energy and his ingenuity of movement and when man enters the Otter element, he merely begins his "tobacco-smoke, hounds and parsly." Besides, man kills the Otter only to have sense of conquest, and to transform the skin of this animal into a decoration for his drawing room. The Otter kills for a purpose, but man's killing of the otter and otter's energy is an act of violence which has not the least justification. Man destroys nature only to satisfy his ego and also to reduce nature to ornamentation. The significance of Ted Hughes' animal poems is the relationship between human and animals. It is analyzed from three aspects: man strives to acquire animal power; animal reflects man and enlightenment from animals. His feelings towards animals were aptly remarkable. As a perspective and speculative poet, he not only vividly portrayed an animal world in his poems, but also revealed his philosophical bent of mind, between human beings and animals. There are several complicated and profound relationships. Apparently, Hughes was serving animals in wild nature, but by deeper analysis of the relationship between animals and human being, we can find that actually he was expressing his mystical beliefs on human beings through those animals.

Ted Hughes has always given a sympathetic view to animals in his works. He created a mythical connection between animals and humans. He perceived a kind of feral energy at the heart of the cosmos and animals are the symbols of this energy. He strongly advocates animal rights in his poems. He is preoccupied with the animal world which for him is superior to the world inhabited by man because the former is guided by instinct and not by rationalizing grayness.

His animal poems are informed by empathy as well as detachment. Simultaneously in his poems he protest against phony civilization under whose cover man destroys his fellow beings and wild life and corrupts nature. He has been accused of glorifying violence by many critics, but he defends his intention by calling it vitality not violence.

Conclusion:

Hughes's animal poems have been described "a modern bestiary" it has also been remarked that his poetry fastens on to the animal world a cartoonery of human struggle and destiny. But we don't except this interpretation. He is interested in animals' creatures deserving our attention because of their own inherent qualities or flaws. The animals represent one of the important aspects of God's creation and each kind of animals has its own identity and its distinctive character. At the same time, Hughes indirectly and symbolically, depicts the contrast and sometimes the similarity between animals and mankind. On the whole, his animal poems are a formidable, awful, spectacular and fascinating array of God's creatures in a universe which is mysterious and inscrutable.

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