
Unveiling Ted Hughes's Insight into Man and Animal Relationship

Dr. Babu Lal,

Assistant Professor, Department of English,

Pt. J.L.N. Govt. College, Faridabad, Haryana.

ABSTRACT

Ted Hughes, unlike some modern poets, is profoundly concerned with the subject matter of his poetry. His poetry offers a wide range and variety. His subjects range from animals, landscapes and war to the philosophical and metaphysical queries about the universe. But the world of animals is Hughes's favourite territory. His description of the animals observed is remarkably vivid, startling and yet truthful. The animals actually observed and described by Ted Hughes in his poems cover a wide range. The Hawk, the thrush, the pike, the Jaguar, the bull, the skylark, the mouse, the horse, the cat, the pig, the otter and several others figure in his poems. Ted Hughes discovers symbolic significance in the animals which he observes and describes. He uses metaphors to unveil man and animal relationship. His purpose in writing these animal poems is to ridicule and to mock at the struggle and strive going on in the human world and at the same time, directly and symbolically depicting the contrasts and sometimes the similarity between animals and mankind.

Key Words: *Man, Animal, Relationship, Contrast, Similarity, Violence*

Edward James Hughes, known as Ted Hughes, was a great poet, dramatist, critic and short story writer. His poetry offers a wide range and variety. His subjects range from animals, landscapes, war to the philosophical and metaphysical queries about the universe. His early childhood in the Calder valley had an everlasting impact on him. The local animals of the valley became his archetypes. They were of tremendous importance to Hughes from the beginning, they were living representative of another world. Hughes's poetry covers a wide range of variety of animals in a remarkably vivid and startling way. The Crow, the pike, the skylark the Jaguar, the horse, the cat, the hawk and several others figure in his poems. In all his poems, Ted Hughes has very significantly related a particular animal to all other creatures and also to human experiences and human concepts. His early poems 'The Hawk in the Rain' and 'Lupercal' very well express Man's relation with the animal world. The originality and vivid description of animals make his poetry unique. Through metaphors and images, Ted Hughes has portrayed the animals very vividly and poetically. In most of his poems, Hughes has indirectly and symbolically depicted the contrast and sometimes the similarity between animals and mankind.

Ted Hughes's first collection of poems 'The Hawk in the Rain' came with the theme of contrast between the mightiness of a hawk and

unsteadiness and the sense of danger of human beings. According to Alan Bold¹, Hughes believes that the strength of animals lies in their instinct and precise function. In an interview with *The Guardian*², he said, “My poems are not about violence and vitality. Animals are not violent, they are so much more completely controlled than men”

Hughes’s first collection ‘The Hawk in the Rain’ clearly reflects his interest in animals as well as this relation to man, the earth, the weather, time and morality. Keith Sagar comments on it :

“The eye of the hawk hangs as still as a polestar at the eye of the storm. The poet’s eyes are his most vulnerable part. Numbed by wind and rain but the hawk seems as impervious as immortal diamond”³.

Ted Hughes’s poems portray in a most intense form the typical stresses and contradictions of human behaviour. Most of Hughes’s poems in 1960’s and 70’s are not really about things or animals but are rather attempts to free oneself from what the stare suggests is unnatural or unreal within oneself. In the Jaguar, for example, the stare of the crowd at the animal (The Crowd stands, stares mesmerized) is related to the downing narrator’s role. While the other animals, the apes, the lion and the tiger, the parrots and the boa-constrictor have willy-nilly accepted their imprisonment in the cage or are still in some kind of pretext against it. The Jaguar is in a cage and yet unmindful of it, since its fierce energy can’t be so easily caged. This is evident from the relationship between the uncaged

visitors and the caged Jaguar. The caged Jaguar is totally unaware of the crowd since he is lost in his vision of light and cosmic energy, the visitors are attracted to the cage of the Jaguar, hypnotized by his power and energy. The passive Jaguar thus becomes active and the active spectators unconsciously become passive. ‘Jaguar’, in fact, no longer remains an animal but becomes representative of man in certain aspects. Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts⁴ commenting on this aspect write: “The fact that it is caged makes the Jaguar, of course, a natural representative of a man’s imprisoned animal energies. He is an example to the man who longs to live fully in those energies.”

Ted Hughes’s ‘Crow’ poems manifest the poet’s insight into man and animal relationship. In ‘Crow Alights’ Hughes using the crow’s bird-eye-view has presented the picture of modern man, proud of his achievements but who is completely alienated from communion with his race and from the world he seems to dominate. This poem presents a gloomy picture of de-humanization.

The crow alighting down from the deep spaces looks at the motionless hand of the modern man who is unable to speak and who speaks of a crippled humanity which has lost its spiritual and cultural props and finds itself out of harmony not only, with the universe but even with itself. The ‘Crow’ describes the horrible condition of the modern man :

“He saw this shoe, with no sole, rain sodden, lying on a moor. And there was the garbage can, bottom rusted away, A playing place for the wind, in a waste of puddles. There was his coat, in the dark

cupboard, in the silent room, in the silent house. There was his face, smoking its cigarettes between the dusk window and fire's embers. Near the fire, this hand, motionless. Near the hand, this cup. Crow blinked. He blinked. Nothing faded. He stared at the evidence."

Hughes's animal poems have been described as a 'modern bestiary'. It has also been remarked that 'his poetry fastens on to the animal world a cartoonery of human struggle and destiny'. This means that Hughes's purpose in writing these animal poems is to ridicule and to mock at all the struggle and strife going on in human world.

Hughes is interested in animals as creatures, deserving our attention because of their inherent qualities or flaws. He has indirectly and symbolically depicted the contrasts and sometimes the similarity between animals and mankind. As for the struggle and strife, these are as much in evidence among animals as among human beings.

In the poem entitled 'The Howling of Wolves' from the volume entitled 'Wodwo', Hughes wonderfully portrays animals as victims. The narrator in the poem thinks that the howling of the wolves, indicative of their suffering can't occur in this world of ours. He expresses his sympathy for animals in pain. The wolves are caught by human beings by means of steel traps. Human beings are surely justified in setting traps for wolves. Hughes is not ignorant of the danger which wolves pose to human beings. What he seems to be objecting to in this poem is the cruel and brutal treatment which the captured wolves receive from human

beings. Hughes has written a number of animal poems, some of these depict the fierceness, the cruelty and the violence of animals, but this poem depicts the brutality which human being inflict upon animals. The following line is extremely painful even to every reader because it enables him to visualize a trapped wolf.

"It goes to and fro, trailing its haunches and whimpering horribly".

Parker⁵ says that "The Howling of Wolves' and 'Song of a Rat' bear striking similarities, in theme and language, to many poems written by poets of Eastern Europe who had witnessed most of the excesses of the Communist Dictatorship, then ruling most of the European countries."

The cruelty and pathos of the universe have effectively been captured in 'The Howling of Wolves'. Leonard M.Scigaj makes the following remark in this context :

"The Wolves of 'The Howling of Wolves' are pitiable; unlike the feared carriers of ancestral evil or re-empowering wolf mask divinities of February in Lupercal, these wolves are uncomprehending creatures living by a blind instinct"⁶.

Hughes's empathy with the animals he contemplates is so thorough and specific that the effect is of magical incantation, a conjuring of another possible kind of self. It is sheer bitter endurance and the devouring ferocity lurking in every depth and crevice of life that obsess him. In another poem 'November' the poet has directed our attention not to the animal world but to the human world in a degraded form.



Hughes has observed animals more accurately than any other poet, capturing every characteristic upto the limits of the languages. His insight is so deep, his rendering is so vivid that the reader is left spell-bound. The poem which really establishes Hughes reputation as a poet of the world of animals is 'Hawk Roosting'. The poem presents the meditation of the hawk from his point of view. Hughes's Hawk retains all of its predatory characteristics and yet symbolizes the Darwinian aspect of Nature. Ted Hughes himself explained this symbolism in an interview to the London Magazine in January 1971.

"The bird is accused of being a fascist.., the symbol of some horrible genocide dictator," The fact is that 'Hawk Roosting' is the only poem in 'Lupercal' in which Hughes speaks with the voice of an animal and endows this anti-human creature with a kind of human consciousness. It seems to be that Ted Hughes has taken him as a representative of an irrational force outside human beings which governs the whole world in its own mysterious, ruthless and incomprehensible manner. "It took the whole of creation to produce my foot, my each feather / Now I hold creation in my foot...". It is the egotistical hawk which resembles the egotistical man.

Another poem 'The Otter' is less a description of the otter than an invocation of the spirit of the otter. The otter is depicted as almost the opposite of hawk who rules the air with a feeling of authority. However, the otter, like the hawk is a predator. Symbolically speaking, the otter, 'crying without answer for his lost paradise is surely, to some extent, an

image of dualism in Man. The otter, like man, is neither wholly body nor wholly spirit, neither wholly beast nor wholly angel and like Man he is yearning for his Eden home where Death does not exist.

In the poem entitled 'The Bull Moses' the speaker keenly perceives the presence of the bull and so he says: 'But the warm weight of his breathing / The ammoniac reek of his litter, the hotly tongued / Mash of the Cud, steamed against me...'

The bull seems to the speaker to belong to another world, beyond the world of human consciousness. In fact, the bull seems to stand at the meeting point of the two worlds. The bull, which in this poem, has the name Moses, resembles a visionary or dreamer confined to a cell, but not treating the cell as a prison. The consciousness of Moses is only a link in the unbroken continuity from his wild ancestors to his wild descendants because a time would come when Man would cease to rule. Moses is a progenitor, a patriarch; and like the Biblical Moses, he beholds the promised land which he will never himself enter, feeling satisfied that simply by ensuring the continuity of the race, he has played his part. The original and vivid picture of the bull is combined in this poem with a symbolic view of the animal. The human figure in the poem, the speaker and the farmer certainly enhance the poem's interest because without animals there would be nobody to behold the animal and interpret the meaning of their existence. At the same time the gulf between Man and Animal represents also the gulf between civilized man and man's animal self.



Another poem which deserves consideration is 'Pike'. The first four stanzas of the poem contain a description of the pike as is usual with Hughes. The description is remarkably original and graphic. The pike is a killer from the very egg in which it existed before it came into the world. The pike has a malevolent grin, and it dances on the surface of the water among the flies or moves over a bed of emerald. The pike feels stunned by its own grandeur. Though it is not a long creature, yet in terms of its own watery world, it is a hundred feet long. It has jaws which with their hooked clamp and fangs can't be changed in their shape or in their fierceness at this date in its existence. The next three stanzas of the poem contain two wonderfully economical anecdotes. The poem ends with the speaker or the narrator describing its terror while fishing at night. In fact, he is not fishing for pike but for the nameless horror which night's darkness produces from the depth of his dream or from his conscious mind. Thus, in the poem, the ferocity of the pike, despite its small size, gives rise to feeling of terror and awe.

In a letter, Hughes wrote that he did not mind killing as such, because he believed in wrath and the gnashing of teeth. He also said that the tiger, the hawk and the weasel were beautiful things to him and that if they attacked and ate up the dove and the hare, it was God's will and a consummation which brought two extremes together and made a perfect one from the duality. Hughes comes very close to this position in his poem 'Crow Table Talk'. Hughes actually lives through the fear, the pains and the sorrow which some of his animals have to endure. For instance he shares the terror

of the mouse staring out the chance it dared not take and he knows that a man stands in God's eye as no better than the mouse in cats : "Whether to two feet or four, how are prayers contracted / whether in God's eye or the eye of a cat..."

Violence which has been the subject matter of Ted Hughes's poetry and which is no doubt one of the dominant themes of his poetry, has been a common factor in Man as well as animals. Hughes is fascinated by all kinds of violence – violence in love as well as in hatred, violence in the jungle, violence in battles and violence in the form of murder and sudden death. Ted has broken new grounds by dealing with the dark, psychic, violent forces latent in modern life. On the contrary, Michael Parker has expressed the view that Hughes violent imagery in his poems shows the continuance of the imperialistic sense of power among the English people. According to this critic, Hughes's violent imagery is closely allied with authoritarian politics. But it not only the egotism of violence which interests Hughes. At the heart of much of his poetry is violence as a pure expression of spirit, violence as an assertion of identity. In this connection, the closing lines of the poem 'Pike' are significant. The narrator's dream here is a dream of violence. This is not without a basis because the English people have always been more aggressive and war-like than they think, and the imperialism which the critic has talked about in connection with Hughes is really dear to the heart of England.

Hughes certainly seems to be endorsing this violence and the imperialism which it



seems to convey through his pictures of ruthless predatoriness of the thrushes, the hawk and the pike, Hughes seems to be saying there is no alternative to this violence. According to A.E.D. Dyson, the quality of violence, which many of English novelists explore as moralists, is presented in Hughes's poems in a manner which makes us more alive to what certain forces in modern politics and life really are.

Unlike some modern poets who believe that 'a poem should not mean, but be', Ted Hughes is profoundly concerned with the subject matter of his poetry. The major theme of his poetry as well as short stories and plays is of course Man, that is the Question of human existence. Man's relation with the universe, with the natural world and with his own inner self. He is awfully serious about this last aspect of the problem of Being, namely the problem of human consciousness, Ted Hughes's endeavour is to gain access to and give expression to, a level of Being at which the continuity between the processes of nature experienced within and observed without is unimpeded by consciousness. Individual consciousness, insisting all the time of its separateness, is the cause of painful and destructive alienation from this inner life – the unhappiness of many of the human protagonists of Hughes's poems and stories. But the consciousness is inescapable and poems are ultimately acts of consciousness. The subterranean world that Hughes's poems explore can never be completely projected into language, nor anyone permanently live in it. Poetry for Hughes has been a life long vocation and commitment as he himself has written.

"You choose a subject because it serves, because you need it. We go on writing poems because one poem never gets the whole account right. There is always something missed."⁷

No poet has observed animals more accurately, never taking his eyes off from the object, capturing every characteristics upto the limits of the language. So vivid is his description, so starting and deep is his insight that we are spellbound. In the early poems, the metaphors he found were so often animals because animals live out in such naked extremity, the primary struggles, particulars between vitality and death. They roar or bellow the evidence which men wrap in sophistry or turn a blind eye to their reality which seems less questionable than ours.

Hughes is fascinated with those moments when Man is involuntarily exposed to the energies – when he is born. Hughes knows the horror with which we view 'Nature red in tooth and claw' and which is partly a product of our own preconceptions, and tendency to take 'portions of existence' and fancy them to be whole. To conclude, it can be said that in Ted Hughes's poetry the animals represent one of the important aspects of God's creation; and each kind of animal 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.

Notes

1. Alan Bold; 'Contemporary Poets' (London : Cambridge Press 1989 P 57)



2. 'The Guardian; 'An Interview with Ted Hughes' (New York Uni Press 1965)
3. Keith Sagar : 'The Achievements of Ted Hughes' (London; Manchester Uni Press 1983) P. 57.
4. Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts : 'Ted Hughes : A Critical Study'
5. Michael Parker : 'Poetry in the Making' (New York Uni Press 1960 P. 163)
6. Leonard M. Scigaj : 'Study of Ted Hughes's Poetry' (London Oxford Press 1979) P. 127
7. Alan Bold : 'Tom Gunn & Ted Hughes' (London : Faber & Faber P. 72)