

**A STUDY OF ANIMAL IMAGERY IN TED HUGHES' POETRY**

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Ted Hughes, one of the most prolific poets of the 20<sup>th</sup> century English poetry, has written a very large number of poetry collections. His animal poetry is his best poetry. His animal poetry has earned him international fame. He has written a plenty of poems which are rich in animal imagery due to which he is popularly known as an animal poet. Through his animal poetry, the poet requests human beings not to interfere with the world of animals. Violence is a recurrent theme in his animal poems. This physical violence of the animals has been used as a symbol for the inner violence in human beings. The chief motive behind writing this paper is to bring out the importance of animal imagery in Ted Hughes' poetry. This paper also explores the themes underlying the physical images of animals in his poetry.

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Ted Hughes (17 August 1930 -20 October 1998), born—Edward James Hughes, was a poet of great importance in 20<sup>th</sup> century English literature. He is known for the use of animal imagery in his poems. He uses animal imagery to represent the inner life of human beings. On the basis of his adequate use of animal imagery in his poetry, he is also called an animal poet. He was a very genius

poet. The theme of violence is also there along with animal imagery in most of his animal poems. He has given English literature more than a dozen of poetry collections. In the whole treasure of his poetry, his animal poems have always been regarded as his best poems. He shows a very vivid picture of the physical features of the animals in his poems. Ted Hughes not only portrays animals but animals also become his



inspiration for some of his best poems. His poetry is marked by harsh language. Most of his animal poems are collected in his collections *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) and *Lupercal* (1960).

The poem *The Jaguar* is one of his best animal poems. This poem describes the scene of a zoo. It is a response to a popular poem by German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, 'The Panther'. The poem *The Jaguar* is included in his collection *The Hawk in the Rain*. It gives a vivid description of animals in a zoo. The poet, in this poem, contrasts the Jaguar an animal which is full of energy, with the other animals such as apes, tiger, lion, and a boa constrictor. All the animals, except Jaguar, are extremely lazy. The Jaguar is looking full of energy. All other animals look as if they are painted on a wall. But the crowd is mesmerised at the fierce movements of the Jaguar. The bars of cage cannot restraint the monstrous spirit of the Jaguar. The inner spirit of the Jaguar is as if he were in the jungle. His inner freedom is not dampened with the bars of the cage. The bars of cage can't restraint the imagination of the Jaguar.

This poem is not just a poem of observation but also of longing and affirmation. The Jaguar, in this poem, can be understood as a beautiful as well as a powerful maniac. The eyes of Jaguar are sharp and penetrating. The Jaguar in this poem symbolises all the visionaries of the world who kept alive the desire for freedom.

His poem *Thrushes* is also marked by a vivid animal imagery. In this poem the poet has used very striking words to convey the violence of the small birds:

*"Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes  
On the law,  
More coiled steel than living- a poised  
Dark deadly eye, those delicate legs  
Triggered to stirrings beyond sense-  
With a start, a bounce,  
a stab  
Overtake the instant and drag out some  
writhing thing."*

The poet observes thrushes very closely in his lawn. Thrushes are described as very energetic. They attack on worms very quickly. The poet wonders what gives these small birds such a lightning quickness. The images used in this poem, by

comparing the birds to the mechanisms, and especially to the machinery of modern warfare, imply a more conflicted attitude to the subject. The poem is extremely complex and interesting.

Written in first person, Hughes' poem *Hawk Roosting* is rich in animal imagery. The image of a hawk created in this poem is wild and ferocious. This poem is a sort of an internal monologue. The words of this poem flow through the mind of a hawk. The poem depicts a hawk sitting on a tree and ideas are flowing through the mind of the hawk. The hawk thinks about its power, its arrogance and its superiority. The beginning of the poem with first person 'I' is a sign of supreme ego of the hawk. It is not the basic necessity of killing and eating that concerns him, but the style of doing so. The stark lack of emotion in this voice has led some readers to believe that the author's attention in writing this poem was to glorify violence, or at least to make violent behaviour acceptable. Most of the critics have labelled this poem as a symbol of violence and the hawk in this poem is understood as a symbol for an egoistic dictator. The poet has defended this charge of glorifying violence in this way:

*"The poem of mine is usually cited for violence is the one about the hawk roosting, this drowsy hawk sitting in a wood and talking to itself. That bird is accused of being a fascist...the symbol of some horrible genocidal dictator. Actually what I had in my mind was that in this hawk Nature was thinking. Simply Nature. It is not simple because may be Nature is no longer simple."*

-Ted Hughes, London Magazine, January 1971.

So the poet Ted Hughes denied this poem to be a poem of violence. According to the poet this poem highlights the enormous power of nature. Hawk is used as a metaphor for nature. So the intention of the poet was not to promote violence.

*The Hawk in the Rain* is Ted Hughes' most important poem. This poem contains powerful animal determination. The language of this poem is also very emphatic. The Hawk shown in this poem is not as ferocious as the Hawk of the poem *Hawk Roosting*. The Hawk is sitting on a tree and the speaker is walking on the ground. The speaker is dragging himself through the mud in the heavy rain. The hawk, on the other hand, is sitting effortlessly.



The weather has a negative effect on the speaker. But the Hawk is not shaken by this harsh weather and sitting comfortably on a tree. Then the speaker imagines that one day the storm will force the Hawk downwards to the earth and the Hawk will be killed. Thus Ted Hughes in this poem puts a human being at a disadvantage by a comparison with a bird. Hughes shows in this poem that animals are not vitiated by spurious mortality or incapacitated by doubt.

In the poem *The Horses* the poet creates an image of ten horses in darkness. These horses seem to be inanimate as if they are statues. They seem to be inanimate objects, not living beings. There are plenty of things happening around these horses. But these ten horses are timeless. They inhibit their own world. The horses are shown, in the poem, as stoic creature. It is completely a different image of animals because in most of his other animal poems the poet Ted Hughes has depicted animals which are ferocious and full of energy. The horses are standing silent with no move. The poet writes:

*"They breathed, making no  
Move,  
With draped manes titled hind hooves,  
Making no sound."*

These horses can fully tolerate the freezing cold of the morning while the poet is unable to do so. In the poem these horses stand for a number of things. They symbolise strength, beauty, freedom and grace.

*The Thought Fox* is Hughes' another important poem with animal imagery. This poem is partly an animal poem. In this poem, the movements of a fox are compared to a process of writing poetry. In this poem instinct replaces intellect. This poem is not a product of this one particular poem but an aspect of his whole poetry. At first the idea is seen but not felt. So the task of a poet is to transform an idea into a poem. The movements of the fox are metaphor for the stages that are followed by a poet in writing a poem. The poem is about conflict of sensibilities.

In the poem *Pike*, the poet Ted Hughes describes violent pikes. This poem is an animal poem with violence as an underlying theme. The pikes have an innate skill to kill other fishes. They are so violent that they do not spare one another to satiate their

hunger. They dance on the surface of water. The poet has kept three pikes in a fish bowl. The keeping of fishes in a bowl is a symbol for the interference of humans in the world of animals. Then the poet describes the pike in the pond. They move elevated by their grandeur. The alga is a bed of emerald for them. Pike thinks of itself grand. As pike thinks itself grand, similarly in this world everyone thinks of being superior to another. This happens because of the inborn ego implanted in every creature.

In his poem *Black Beast* which is a crow poem a crow tries to know the source of evil. In fact, the evil lies in the crow itself and it is unaware of this evil inside it. This poem, symbolically, implies that man makes large number of efforts to root out evil from this society but he does not know about the evil which is deeply rooted in his own self.

Ted Hughes animal poetry is appreciated universally. He earned international popularity just because of his animal poetry. Ted Hughes always abhorred man's interference in the world of nature and animals. Hughes has portrayed animals as better creatures than humans because they do not live under the fear of mortality. His vehement use of animal imagery in his poetry shows his devotion for nature and animals.

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