

Symbolic Significance of Hughes' Animals: Psychological Interpretations and Overtones

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Abstract:

Ted Hughes is a prolific poet whose poetry is replete with animal symbolism, which on critical examination highlights his preoccupation with the psyche of man and his relation to nature and animals. The present study is a modest attempt at digging under the layers of human psyche in Hughes' animal poems. All his animals, in fact, represent the dark forces lurking inside the human sub consciousness, the forces that modern civilization tries to crush in the name of rationalism. His poems are a 'drama of consciousnesses', a desire to explore an unpretentious animal life, to be one with it and to regain the 'lost paradise' on earth. Man has come away from the primitive energies and finds himself as an alien in the natural world. Carl Jung also stresses that the animal stands for the subhuman instincts. Each of Hughes' animals symbolizes one or the other human instinct. Through animals as his ostensible subjects, Hughes inspires us to identify and reconcile with what is at war with us, both within and without.

Key words: Animal symbolism, psyche, dark forces, sub conscious, rationalism, drama of consciousness, lost paradise.

Introduction:

Right from his childhood, Ted Hughes had been interested in animals. When his parents lived in the Calder Valley, Yorkshire, Ted Hughes had a chance to see the world of the animals from close quarters. The imagery of Zoological violence used in the poetry of Ted Hughes urges one to delve deep into the relation of man and animal. Hughes' animals along with their distinctive features, their movements, shapes, colours and their energy, have been of utmost importance in their relationship with man. The symbolism of any given animal varies according to its position in the symbolic pattern of images, and to the attitude and context in which it is depicted.

The different stages of animal evolution and the varying degrees of biological complexity reflect the hierarchy of the animal instincts. It is believed in all the major cultures of the world that the victory of a higher over a lower animal stands for the victory of the higher life over lower instincts, of the superior self over the inferior self. Ted Hughes says in 'Poetry in the making' that as he grew older, he started feeling that the world of animals was at the mercy of the ordered human world. Hughes realized the cause of man's fascination for animals in terms of a longing for the vast and untamed energies which the animals still possessed. His animals serve as a metaphor for something else, some hidden instincts which the poet seeks to explore.

What emerges out of Hughes's treatment of animals whether they are ferocious like the jaguar in 'The Jaguar' or patient like the horses in 'The Horses' is a thorough knowledge of their habits, nature and more significantly, of their symbolic value for poetry. Many animals, in fact, represent the dark forces inside the human subconscious, the forces that modern civilization tries to crush in the name of rationalism.

Discussion:

In the best of Hughes' earlier poems, the imaginative process is triggered by the observation of something in the 'external' nature, usually an animal. Hughes' animal poems are unlike Lawrence's feeling of alienation from the animals. It was Lawrence's achievement to honour the animal creation by asserting its independence of human ideas. Hughes, instead of honouring his animal subjects, presents their 'otherness' and inevitable invasion in the poems. Hughes' animals are unmistakably 'other' in the sense that they present a shock and a challenge to the poet. But Hughes would not say, with Lawrence, 'I did not know his God' (Fish). On the contrary, Hughes' poems are inspired by the conviction that he does know the God of the hawk, jaguar or thrushes. 'Know', that is, not in the sense of being able to define, but of being intimately acquainted with. For him, the animal is not merely an analogue or emblem of the inner self but a part, with that self, of an indivisible whole, the universal power circuit. Hughes' treatment of this indivisible reality is something on which all life is founded. The interdependence of creation and destruction, in which the relationship of consciousness to natural process is again of paramount importance.

J.E.Cirlot talks about the symbolic significance of animals, their relationship with the primitive energies of the 'origin' and the 'primitive man':

...that the symbol is a vehicle at once universal and particular. Universal since it transcends history, particular because it relates to a definite period of history. Without going into questions of 'origin', most writers agree in tracing the beginnings of symbolist thought to prehistoric times – to the latter part of the Paleolithic Age. The constellations, animals and plants, stones and the countryside were the tutors of primitive man.¹ (Cirlot,1962)

Animals, thus, correspond to the essence of the inner life (intensive and quantitative) of human existence. They had a major contribution in the formative influences on Hughes and in making him a poet. Hughes, too, thinks of his poems as some 'sort of animals'. He says in 'Poetry in the Making' that poems have:

...their own life, like animals, by which I mean that they seem quite separate from any person, even from their author, and nothing can be added to them or taken away without maiming and perhaps even killing them. And they have certain wisdom. They know something special.... Something perhaps which we are very curious to learn May be my concern has been to capture not animals particularly and not poems, but simply things which have a vivid life of their own, outside mine.² (Hughes Ted, 1967)

Hughes further goes on to explain his poems as:

How can a poem, for instance, about a walk in the rain, be like an animal? Well, perhaps it cannot look much like a giraffe, or an emu or an octopus, or anything you might find in a menagerie. It is better to call it an assembly of living parts moved by a single spirit. The living pets are the words, the images, the rhythms. The spirit is the life which inhabits them when they all work together It is impossible to say w dead...if any of the words or images or rhythms do not jump to life as you read them...then the Creature is going to be maimed and the spirit sickly."³ (Hughes Ted, 1967)

About writing one of his strong poems 'The Thought- Fox' , he says that there was one animal he never succeeded in keeping alive. He was always frustrated: twice by a farmer, who killed cubs he had caught before he could get to them, and once by a poultry keeper who freed his cub while his dog waited. Years after those incidents he was sitting up late one snowy night in dreary lodging in London. He had written nothing for a year or so but that night he got the idea that he might write something and he wrote in a few minutes 'The Thought-Fox.' Hughes says:

It is about a fox, obviously enough, but a fox that is both a fox and not a fox. What sort of a fox is it that can sit right into my head where presumably it still sits... smiling to itself what the dogs bark. 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 this, 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.⁴ (Hughes Ted, 1967)

Therefore Hughes' animals reflect what human consciousness fails to identify. Antedating the modern man possessed by passion, in Hughes' poetry we find a man possessed by another form of violence, which he confronts in animals, i.e., zoological violence. The situation of 'The Jaguar', the earliest poem in 'The Hawk in the Rain', is the simple contrast between the animal and human, between the enraged freedom of the caged jaguar at the zoo and the fear and attraction of the mesmerized zoo crowd, between the violence in the animal and the violence that is submerged beneath rational control. Hughes' animals are both - animals and spirits, i.e., creatures different from man and also representatives of something deeply embedded in human consciousness. Out of fear of their power, man has clamped the lost wild animals into cages, but even there they continue to exert their magnetic force on the human imagination.

Hughes subtly describes another caged animal as a fugitive aristocrat from some thunderous mythological hierarchy in 'Macaw and Little Miss', where the macaw lashes out "in conflagration and frenzy" against its captivity. In that poem the animal embodies some sexual power, latent in 'The Jaguar' as well, that the repressed little miss mistakenly thinks to fondle and cajole until "his shriek shakes the house". But the jaguar, a tamed animal, symbolizes the tamed energies of civilized man. It signifies the reversal of those symbolic meanings associated with the same animal when wild.

According to J.E.Cirlot:

The jaguar, like tiger is associated with Dionysos, and a symbol of wrath and cruelty. In China, it is symbolic of darkness and of the new moon. For darkness is always identical with the darkness of the soul and corresponds to that state, which the Hindus call 'tamas'. It also denotes the unbridled expression of the base powers of the instincts. It is also a defender of the spatial order against the forces of chaos.⁵ (Cirlot, 1962)

The animals symbolize that energy to which man has responded (or failed to respond) throughout history. One man, responsive to this energy, is the poet in 'The Thought fox', who is alert to the fact that "something else is alive", "Something more near / through deeper within darkness." This receptivity to the other, to "A widening deepening greenness / brilliantly concentratedly / coming about its own business", allows the "sudden sharp hot stink of fox" "to enter the dark hole of the head". In 'The Thought Fox', the fox serves as a metaphor for something else. His interest in fox, and what one can only call the foxiness of the fox, is there to serve a deeper interest in individual feeling and experience. J.E.Cirlot says about the symbol of fox as:

Fox has been a common symbol for the devil during the middle ages, expressive of baser attitudes and of the wiles of the adversary. And within the general symbolism of landscape, forests occupy a notable place, and are often found in myths, legends and folktales. Forest symbolism is complex, but it is connected at all levels with the symbolism of the female principle or of the great mother. The forest is the place where vegetable life thrives and luxuriates, free from any control or cultivation. Since the female principle is identified with the unconscious in man, it follows that the forest is also a symbol of the unconscious. Night is also related to the passive principle, the feminine and the unconscious. Hesiod gave it the name of 'mother of the gods', for the Greeks believed that night and darkness preceded the creation of all things. So 'fox',

'forest' and 'night' together from a strong atmosphere for the dark energies to take a positive or creative form.⁶ (Cirlot, 1962)

Hughes's subject matter is usually drawn from anthropomorphized nature i.e. ascribing human form, qualities to God or nature or animals. All his poems in the collection 'Crow' deal with the crow's arrival on this earth and with his immediate observations and experiences. He has been described as a trickster, greedy, over-sexed, selfish, covetous, aggressively mischievous, capable of wiliness and cleverness. In short, a creature, that is as we say 'all too human'. Using the crow's bird eye-view, Hughes here presents the picture of modern man, proud of his achievements but totally alienated from communion with his race and from the world he seems to dominate.

The crow, because of its black colour is symbolically associated with the idea of beginning, night and darkness. In 'Crow Alights', the crow alights from the deeper spaces and arrives on the earth. The darkness of the crow is in contrast with the darkness of the human world. Mountains no longer seem to be mountains; rather, they appear like cows herded together and steaming in the early heat of the morning sun. Similarly, the sea is no longer the usual sea as it appears to us. Instead, it appears to be a snake that coils the continents of the earth. The cockiness of the crow is seen in the way in which he comments upon God's creation and its corruption. In other words, the present day universe is such that whatever was beautiful now appears ugly and diseased. Even the crow, a traditional symbol of the chaos and nightmare in many mythologies, is horrified at the present day world in which the light of God has become diseased and appears faint and dim.

The Poem 'The Hawk is the Rain' presents a man, slogging through a rainstorm and dragging his heels from "the swallowing of the earth's mouth, who sees the hawk's 'diamond point of will' as he strains towards "the master- / fulcrum of

violence where the hawk hangs still". The contrast seems simple, although Hughes' mention of the hawk's will makes the animal's stance a little less effortless than the poem suggests. The hawk exists for no other reasons than to kill and eat, what is more, he is completely at ease with these functions.

According to 'A dictionary of symbols':

hawk is an emblem of the soul in ancient Egypt, with the implication of solar transfiguration nevertheless, Pinedo maintains that it may have been mediaeval allegory of the evil mind of the sinner. There have been references of hawks tearing hares to pieces, and it appears to carry this significance although, given the negative significance of the hare (it symbolizes fecundity, but also lasciviousness), the hawk might be taken as a symbol of victory over concupiscence (since it destroyed the lascivious hares).⁷ (Cirlot,1962)

But even when Hughes' animal becomes the centre of the universe in which man, like Hamlet, is a "dazed last – moment-counting" alien, the poet says that the hawk, too, will in his own time meet the weather:

Coming the wrong way, suffers the air, hurled upside down,
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. (The Hawk in the Rain)

The insistence⁸ (Uroff Margaret, 1980) on "crash on him", "trap him", "mix his heart's blood", is a reflection of man's revengeful feeling that compels him to taunt his efforts and give an ironic twist to 'the round angelic eye' of the predator which reduces the hawk's mastery to helplessness in the face of the natural forces. The hawk, too, is subject to the order of the universe. He is both the hunter and the hunted. But this kind of struggle is better represented by the perpetual conflict frequent in all myths and folklores of various parts of the world, presenting all struggling one against the other so that

each appears at once as executioner and victim, the conqueror and the conquered [of the rock incident at Calder Valley].

And a similar kind of symbolic significance can be traced in all of Hughes' animal poems whether they deal with the horses, a jaguar, a hawk, thrushes, aspens or crow.

Psychological Overtones:

Care Jung says in 'Man and his symbols:

The animal motif is usually symbolic of man's primitive and instinctual nature. Even civilized men must realize the violence of their instinctual drives and their powerlessness in the face of the autonomous emotions erupting from the unconscious⁹.(Jung,1978)

What we call a symbol, is a term, a name, or even a picture that may be familiar in daily life.... It implies something vague, unknown, or hidden from us.... We all worship animals, because we had found Eagles, lions, and oxen, lions having mythological significance. There is no gainsaying the fact that animals have always possessed a place of importance in the natural world with all their primitive instincts.

Animals have always been the human subject to solve existential dilemma. Once the subject has been chosen, the unbridled desires explode to surface, and many things that are usually hidden find themselves rushed into the open. Barriers break down; prisoners come out of their cells. Jung further says:

Greek mythology is full of animal symbolism. Zeus, the father of the gods, often approaches a girl whom he desires in the shape of a swan, a bull, or an eagle.... But in man, the "animal being" (which lives in him as his instinctual psyche) may become dangerous if it is not recognized and integrated in life. Man is the only creature with the power to control instinct by his own will, but he is also to suppress, distort, and wound it- and an animal, to speak metaphorically, is never so wild and dangerous as when it is wounded. Suppressed instincts can

gain control of a a man; they can even destroy him.¹⁰ (Jung, 1978)

Almost all of Ted Hughes' poems can be attributed to the psyche of man as the main impulse of his poetry. Even the violence and energy of the animals presented in his poems are limited to a purely psychological event. In the form of poems, he creates words to symbolize his perception of reality. In 'poetry in the making', Hughes said that the inner life that the poet attempts to discover and make public is the world of 'final reality'. He calls it:

The thinking process by which we break into that inner life and capture answers and evidence to support the answers out of it... the kind of thinking we have to learn and if we do not learn it, then our minds lie in us like the fish in the pond of a man who cannot fish.¹¹ (Hughes Ted, 1967)

Jung stresses that the animal stands for the non-human psyche, for the world of subhuman instincts, and for the unconscious areas of the psyche. The more primitive the animal, the deeper the consciousness of which it is an expression. In the religious art of practically every clan, animal attributes are ascribed to the supreme gods, or the gods are represented as animals. Ganesha, the Hindu god of good fortune, has a human body but the head of an elephant, Vishnu is a 'Narsimha', half lion-half man, Hanumana is an ape-god etc. In Christianity, St Luke has the Ox, St. Mark the Lion, and St. John the eagle. Greek mythology is also full of animal symbolism. Hence religious significance of animals can not be ignored, that reiterates the superiority of animal over man.

Though many of Hughes' best poems have animals, fish or birds as their explicit subjects, yet for all the sympathetic clarity and intuitive force with which a particular beast is evoked, Hughes is ultimately more concerned with individual human nature than with animal.

Hughes takes a plunge into human consciousness. Man, as is alienated from his primitive energies, feels that the wild creatures, rural emblems and nature seem links with a vanishing past. For example, his poem 'The Jaguar' is not just a poem of observation but of longing and affirmation, particularly in its final lines which broaden out to suggest a human possibility: an enticing possibility but one retains the predatory ferocity, rage, blindness and deafness of our own nature. The fact that it is caged makes the jaguar, of course, a natural representation of a man's imprisoned animal energies.

Civilization has created consciousness of so many things, and it is this consciousness, says Hughes: that cuts man off from the source of his own energy. The jaguar, in contrast, knows no prison because he does not have its consciousness.

The Jaguar's freedom in his early poem was the poet's illusion, which is implied in his much later poem 'Second Glance at a Jaguar' collected in 'Wodwo', a decade after the first volume. He is perhaps in Hughes' own words:

A symbol of man's base nature shoved down
into the id and Growing cannibal with deprivation.¹²
(Faas.1971)

The familiar dream in which the dreamer is pursued by an animal nearly always indicates that an instinct has been split off from consciousness and ought to be readmitted and integrated into life. Yet another aspect of our consciousness is 'dream'. Freud's definition [every dream is a repressed desire] points that our desires are the index of our aspiration and our potentialities. Hughes also takes up the concept of dreams to present the nightmarish crabs in 'Ghost Crabs' that emerge from the gap between day and night, sea and land, known and unknown, conscious and unconscious. These crabs appear as ghosts till they are identified as ghost crabs. So in 'Ghost Crabs' Hughes gives poetic shape to the inner horrors and nightmares that lurk just below human consciousness and are part of the unconscious:

Our walls, our bodies are no problem to them
Their hungers are homing elsewhere
We cannot see them or turn our minds from them. (Ghost
Crabs)

'Wodwo' is also a poem of inner quest, the mental process of disencumberment that leads to wodwohood, life of half man and half beast, amongst wolves and serpents, bulls and bears.

Hughes's poetry can also be seen as a poetry of senses. He has tried to express his perception towards present human plight through a drama between the self of man and what he experiences through his senses. Hughes admits in 'Poetry in the Making':

... imagine what you are writing about. See it and live it... just look at it, touch it, smell it, listen to it, turn yourself in it... You keep your eyes, you ears, your nose, your taste your touch, your whole being on the thing you are turning into words.¹³ (Hughes Ted, 1967)

A psycho-drama is presented through the strong use of senses in Hughes's poems. In many of his poems, this drama is dramatized through the 'Eye Image'. This eye image can be assigned to the Calder Valley, whose evil eye aroused two kinds of responses from Hughes-on the one hand 'suicide', and on the other 'conquest or counter attack' on that thought. At some stage in life the young Hughes felt vividly the conflicting roles of this mental drama, a drama of 'to be or not to be' in the psyche of modern man. One of the earliest and best poems 'The Hawk in the Rain' is based on a drama of opposing forces. The speaker is at once attracted and repelled (because threatened by the Hawk's still eye) and imagines himself as the terrified and mesmerized victim of the hawk. The sensual images of the poem, therefore, need to be seen as an encounter between the dark forces of the victim self 'I' and the light forces of the self 'eye' that knows about the hawk's powers.

And I
Bloodily grabbed dazed last-moment-counting
Morsel in the earth's mouth. (The Hawk in the Rain)

This 'I' acts out momentarily the victim's role and commits a kind of suicide-within the imagination. The voice that speaks in these lines is distant, almost like that of an omniscient narrator, stepping back from both the bloodily dazed 'I' (i.e. ego or self sense) and the intimidating eye of the hawk.

'The thought Fox' also deals with the drama of two selves-through sensual images. The first begins as a disembodied imagining [I imagine this midnight....] which takes on life, passing from emptiness to a more sensuous form and finally to words printed on a page. We witness the imaginary or imagining 'I' (or eye) confront a perceiving 'I' (or eye) The 'hot stink of fox' refers to the sense of smell entering into head.

Hughes has presented the sexuality of modern man which he curbs and results in creating psychological repressions. He emphasizes the sensual form of nature through the images of serpents, asps, crow etc. The presence of pre-existing myths in "Crow" is of a different kind from Eliot's use of the grail legend or the exploitation of mythical and historical material for specifically cultural purposes by such poets as David Jones and Geoffrey Hill. It is impossible to understand the references to fishing in 'The Wasteland' without knowing the story of the fisher king. 'Apple Tragedy' exemplifies eve's sensual relationship with the serpent:

...the serpent had a good drink
And curled up into a question mark.
Adam drank and said: 'Be my god'
Eve drank and opened her legs
And called to the cockeyed serpent
And gave him a wild time. (*Apple Tragedy*)

The world of senses is juxtaposed with the world of spirit in Hughes' poems. Denying senses is to live a kind of death and to accept them is to be controlled by them, so, the best solution is to identify them and to keep them under control.

Conclusion:

Ted Hughes belongs to the post war era. The post war poetry was the "Poetry of the movement" or the "Movement poetry". All the contemporary British poets of this "Movement Poetry" were trying to refuse to accept the revelation after war and writing against what is mythic, emotive, and romantic. But Hughes went against this movement in the form of an exploration of the inner world of man. Hughes is influenced by several older and earlier poetic traditions. He shares Wordsworthian and Tennysonian outlook. He is also influenced by Yeats, Blake and Spenser. Hughes is quite close to the post war-east-European poets in his exposure of the blackest, innermost recesses of man's being and his questioning of the entire metaphysical structure of the universe. Through the discussion of Hughes' poems one can feel the presence of the conflict between nostalgic past and disintegrated present, inner world and outer world, sensuality and spiritualism, all of which is exhibited through the behavior, energy and disposition of his animals. The poet's purpose behind the use of using uncorrupted and unpretentious animals as subjects is to identify and reconcile what is at war within and without us. Through all his poems, Hughes has drawn a pattern to inspire us to live in harmony with nature and to make a constructive use of our energies to lead a purposeful life. Hughes was always interested in reviving the primitive psychological balance between man and nature. He is interested in the sophistication of the primitive culture in areas dealing with the inner life and the natural world, where the modern world is barbaric.

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