

DUAL NATURE OF VIOLENCE AND DIVIDED SELF OF MAN IN THE POEMS OF TED HUGHES

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ABSTRACT

Considering the period in which he lived, known as the ‘Violent 70s’, it is not surprising that Ted Hughes deals with the theme of violence in his poems. Unlike Hughes’ contemporaries, man and animal dichotomy in his ecologically conscious poems does not serve to set man apart from the rest of the creation, or to show his distinguishing features, but to criticize the modern man that lost his bonds with nature and his own self. What he conveys through animal imagery is that once man had strong bonds with nature, just like animals, yet technology and urbanisation pull him away from his own nature. His distinctive ecopoems associates nature with violence in an unconventional manner. Unlike the conventional depictions of violence as merely a destructive deadly physical force, Hughes depicts it as the primal and indispensable energy of nature. ‘Hughesian’ violence essentially is an expression of energy that splits up with moral implications of mankind. While the Nature’s violence is represented as a life-giver, vital and powerful energy in a positive way, modern man in his early poems is the representative of negative violence.

This paper argues that Hughes’ animal poems can be classified under the recently emerged subgenre, ecopoetry. Ecopoetry addresses contemporary problems and issues in ways that are ecocentric and respects the integrity of the other-than-human world, challenging the belief that humans are meant to have dominion over nature (Gray and Wirth, 2013). In this regard, Hughes’ poems remind man of his capacity and real place in nature through the animals and criticize the so-called civilised man challenging his superiority through depicting him weak and pacified in nature, due to his disengagement with his own nature. His poetry gives the message that once man stops ignoring his bonds with Nature and uses Culture to strengthen this bond, he will reunite his divided self and live harmoniously within the ecological system.

Keywords: Ted Hughes, ecopoetry, ecocriticism, violence, culture, nature, man, duality

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“My interest in animals began when I began” (as cited in Wormald, 2013), says Ted Hughes when he is asked about the frequent use of animal imagery in his poetry. He writes extensively about

wild life, hunting, and survival in nature. What makes him a distinctive poet is his inclination for extraordinary depictions of natural scenes, as well as his approach to the incessant activity of Nature. His portrayal of Nature differs from those of other poets in his aim of connecting and making man equal to non-human entities rather than favoring him among other species in an ecological system. As Lidstorm and Garrard (2014) also state, Ted Hughes casts doubt on the uniqueness of man in Nature and highlights the intricacy and complexity of the non-human world.

Primarily, his animal poems carry an environmental awareness that favors violence as the pure energy of Nature, and emphasizes Culture's divisive effect on man's own self. In consideration of what he deals with, while some critics regard him as an animal poet, some others name him nature poet. Indeed, his poems do not only regard nature as subject matter and inspiration as nature poetry does, but also carry a strong ecological emphasis (Maling, 2013). The ideas that he conveys through his poems and the way he deals with animal, man and Nature are corresponding to subsequent ecopoetry definitions. Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge the term 'ecopoetry' and its significance in terms of environmentalism.

The Ecopoetry Anthology, a recognized work in terms of defining ecopoetry and collecting numerous poems written with environmental concerns, emphasizes that ecopoetry addresses contemporary problems and issues in ways that are ecocentric and respects the integrity of the other-than-human world, challenging the belief that humans are meant to have dominion over nature (Gray and Wirth, 2013). Such kinds of poems have strong environmental messages and are deeply interested in the current ecological problems. In this sense, ecopoetry is highly concerned with the environmental issues. Nature is not only an image, nor a setting but a live entity enabling every kind of interaction and, most importantly, giving life. The leading role does not belong to mankind anymore.

Taking into consideration his ecopoetic leanings, Hughes attempts to reconcile the corrupt human consciousness with unreflecting, instinctive involvement in Nature: consciousness must learn to understand, and speak for, the Earth it is alienated from (Johnson, 1991). Through his poetry, Hughes attempts to create awareness about the fact that it is the Earth, not the man, that actually holds creation under its foot and that every living being in Nature is at the same stage of reaching perfection. His poetry gives the message that once man stops ignoring his bonds with Nature and uses Culture to strengthen this bond, he will reunite his divided self and live harmoniously within the ecological system.

Another term that comes to mind in association with Hughes' poetry at this point is Inhumanism, which is a philosophy introduced by Robinson Jeffers as "a shifting of emphasis and significance from man to not-man" (1) that may explain Hughes' fascination with the natural world and confirms his stance in his environmentally concerned poems. He is a poet, who recognizes the astonishing beauty of Nature's elements and their living wholeness, and rationally accepts the fact that mankind is neither central, nor necessarily indispensable in the universe (Lidstorm and Garrard, 2014). His inhumanist approach to nature and other living beings fortifies the argument of this paper that his poems are pertinent to the newly acknowledged subgenre ecopoetry.

In his poem, "Pike", Hughes challenges the authority of the persona that represents all mankind. Reflecting on this matter, Reagan (1973) states that "Hughes knows that frequently human beings 'are stunned by their own grandeur'", yet in the poem, he subverts the accustomed depictions of the hunting scene:

[The Pond] was as deep as England. It held
Pike too immense to stir, so immense and old
That past nightfall I dared not cast
But silently cast and fished

With the hair frozen on my head (Hughes, 1960).

Hughes depicts a dark and frightening atmosphere for the persona, who goes fishing in the pond. This depiction challenges the image of powerful and dominant man. Hughes does not only put forward a frightened and silent man image, but also challenges the place of man through changing the roles. In the last line the observer says, the animals "r[i]se slowly toward [him], watching (Hughes, 1960)." He is not a hunter anymore, but the prey of the animals. Switching the roles of hunter and hunted, man realizes that he is also an instinctual being, trying to survive and is no different from other beings living in the ecological system. Just like his poem "Pike", his other poems also involve many violent scenes. In fact, it is not surprising that Ted Hughes makes use of the theme of violence in a period that directly precedes the "Violent 70s". He foresees the upcoming increase of violence in society and tries to bring a new perspective to prevent the further corruption of modern man.

Unlike his contemporaries, who interpret violence as a physical force intended to hurt, damage, or kill under the influence of the tense times, Ted Hughes brings a new understanding to the issue of violence. Lawrence R. Rites remarks that "[t]he only contemporary British poet who has consistently explored and examined the problem of violence is Ted Hughes" (as cited in Baby, 2010). Hughes urges man to change his interpretation of Nature by starting with the redefinition of violence and bringing a new apprehension of Culture. His distinctive interpretation, known as "Hughesian violence", is a creative energy, according to Bentley (2011). Hughes (1995), himself, also describes this violence in his essay "Poetry and Violence" as "a life-bringing assertion of sacred law which demolishes, in some abrupt way, a force that oppressed and violated it".

He affirms that there are two kinds of violence: negative and positive, represented by man and animal respectively. The poet observes animals to understand the operation of the natural system and finds out that violence used by animals is only a precondition for survival. Edmonds (2014) says that animals "[a]re not violent in the negative sense that their physical vehemence incurs guilt and blame and unacceptably endangers the rule of law. On the contrary, they are innocent, obedient, and their energy reaffirms the divine law that created them as they are".

In the early review of *The Hawk in the Rain*, Muir names the positive violence of Ted Hughes as "[a]dmirable violence"(as cited in Gifford, 2011). In "Thrushes", Hughes offers a non-censored portrayal of it through the representation of birds:

Terrifying are the attent sleek thrushes on the lawn,
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.

No indolent procrastinations and no yawning states (“Thrushes”, 1960).

Even though he uses expressions like “deadly”, “terrifying” and “beyond senses”, which can be associated with the disapproval of the observer, toward the end, the undertone turns out to be complete amazement:

Is it their single-mind-sized skulls, or a trained
Body, or genius, or a nestful of brats
Gives their days this bullet and automatic
Purpose? (“Thrushes”, 1960)

He is fascinated with this familiar, but still somewhat recondite energy. The observer, who watches the thrushes, witnesses the essential inner energy that keeps them alive. This energy has nothing to do with the violence that man exerts to his fellow man through wars, terror and physical force, but it is the assurance of continuity and order in natural world. Therefore, this “automatic purpose” (1960) of the birds is considered by Hughes merely admirable violence.

Appreciation of the impulse behind the decisive, yet unconscious behaviour of the animals foregrounded in his works, may remind the reader of the Darwinian perspective of Nature. Among animals, the sole trigger is survival. The brutal rivalry among the fishes, described in “Pike”, may be a proper illustration of Darwin’s theory, ‘the survival of the fittest’. In the poem, the observer expresses his fascination with the violence exerted by the fish in order to survive, as it is the sap of their lives. For the sole purpose of survival, the weak one is destroyed and the strongest one is left to live. The pikes are “[k]illers from the egg” with all their perfection “in all parts”, including “the malevolent” features (“Pike”, 1960). They are the survivors with their inborn excellence and powerful appearance. When it comes to the civilized, modern man, Hughes associates him with negative violence. As Guha expresses, “Man and his civilization do not seem to Hughes an optimistic venture decked with positive yearning. It is a diseased civilization ...” (Guha, 2014). Urban life, technology and mechanization desensitize mankind and deteriorate his nature. Therefore, in the hands of man, the energy he possesses, turns out to be an abusive force.

Hughes’s opinion about the corruption of man parallels Nietzsche’s suggestion that “an animal, a species, an individual [is] corrupt when it has lost its instincts, when it chooses, when it *prefers*, what is detrimental to it” (Nietzsche, 2004). According to Ted Hughes’s description of the

modern man, he is the most morbid being that has strayed most dangerously from his instincts (Nietzsche, 2004). The distance created as a result of man-made advancements causes a fracture in the wholeness of man's self. He fights against his animalistic side and innate energy inside of him; thus, he always feels a kind of dilemma about whether, or when, he should hold these feelings back or release them.

Hughes emphasizes that man has only a biological reality in the ecological system (Baby, 2010) and this existence is only ensured by the primal energy. Guha (2014) says, "The energy is necessary because it is partly the life force that keeps man enlivened— without it nothing remains but 'a kind of death'— but the total consumption of this energy would also be fatal." (478) For Hughes, Culture's creative energy, especially artistic creation, can prevent such total consumption. In the poem "Thrushes", he praises this artistic creativity that is found in "Mozart's brain". Mozart's brain shared the "bullet and automatic purpose" with his art (1970). His compositions are the positive manifestation of the primal energy that exists in the thrushes at the same time (Ingelbien, 2002). Hughes criticizes man who tries to ignore this positive expression of violence and preoccupies himself with the negative side of it. He believes that Culture's real role is to consolidate man's own self with Nature, not to separate them. He plays down man's so-called achievements through Culture, which exploit Nature and change the centre of man from Eco to Ego:

With a man it is otherwise. Heroisms on horseback,
Outstripping his desk-diary at a broad desk,
Carving at a tiny ivory ornament
For years ... ("Thrushes", 1960).

In comparison to the whole ecosystem's perfect functionality, these accomplishments are comparatively insignificant. Hughes acknowledges that man continuously aims to create a counterpart entity against Nature, but for him it is a vain endeavour. Nature is always superior to every living being. He emphasizes the magnificence and long lasting splendour of Nature in "Pike":

A pond I fished, fifty yards across,
Whose lilies and muscular tench
Had outlasted every visible stone
Of the monastery that planted them ("Pike", 1960).

Everything man-made is doomed to perish or deteriorate, whereas Nature outlives man and regenerates itself. To demonstrate his heroism through the captivation of animals, man also tries to create artificial adaptations of Nature, where he captures animals and holds them under control. In his poem, "Jaguar", Ted Hughes depicts a zoo, a cultural artefact, in which animals are imprisoned in cages under the constant gaze of man.

Fatigued with indolence, tiger and lion

Lie still as the sun

...

Cage after cage seems empty, or

Stinks of sleepers from the breathing straw ("Jaguar", 1960).

These animals are commodified for exhibition to mankind and they are kept away from their habitats and confined to boredom and idleness. Even though they belong to different geographies, man brings them together and forces them to live in an unnatural environment.

This imagery is quite symbolic because, just like the animals at the zoos, man also imprisons his animalistic side. Unlike pacified animals at the zoo, the jaguar symbolizes the unconscious of man, all the desires, urges and instincts that man tries to hold under control.

On a short fierce fuse. Not in boredom—

The eye satisfied to be blind in fire,

By the bang of blood in the brain deaf the ear—

He spins from the bars, but there's no cage to him ("Jaguar", 1957).

It disregards captivation and behaves wildly inside the cage, reminding man of his true and unrestrained nature. The jaguar, with his violent energy that assures freedom and vitality, is positioned in stark contrast to the men visiting the zoo, as they have already numbed these feelings and instincts. Hughes does not address them in person but simply call them 'crowd'. All of them seem undifferentiated and react in the same way. Just like other animals, this crowd is also isolated from their nature under the name of civilization and technology that create the imaginary bars surrounding them. Man also surrenders and becomes drowsy and indolent like the tiger and the lion in the poem. However, Hughes believes that man has the jaguar inside, no matter how hard he tries to suppress it. Therefore, when the crowd sees the jaguar, they are astonished and, in a way, they see a sign of life. The jaguar symbolizes the creative and powerful energy that enables man to resist against the supposedly civilizing environment of the urban life.

In his numerous poems, the poet makes use of anthropomorphism, a risky way of conveying environmental messages, since it attributes human characteristics to non/human beings. However, considering human beings as equal to animals, anthropomorphism enables to recognize the human in the animal since there is no other way for human beings to acknowledge the familiarity between animals and human kind in the natural system. It can create a point where deeper understanding/enlightenment about man's relationships with other animals becomes possible (Barton, 2004). For this purpose, Hughes attributes human characteristics or behaviours to the animal in his poem, "Hawk Roosting". Nature is presented from the viewpoint of the hawk:

The convenience of the high trees!

The air's buoyancy and the sun's ray

Are of advantage to me;
And the earth's face upward for my inspection.

...

I kill where I please because it is all mine (" Hawk Roosting", 1960).

Hughes tells us nothing about the actuality of the animal 'hawk' or its features in general, but it is a reflection of our human selves, a parody of an element of humanity that lacks the ability to empathize with other living beings because of man's hubris.

Considering the definition and interests of ecopoetry, Ted Hughes's animal poems, such as those analysed above, completely fit into this categorization. Even if Hughes depicts wild animals and nature through a persona, the role of man is no more than a gazing eye. Instead of the feeling of superiority, modern man is afraid of the power of nature that once he was completely familiar with. In addition, the existence of man in his animal poems give the hints of a fact that Hughes regards man no different from the animal world. What is more, he appreciates the real nature of man and considers him the very part of nature. Hughes relates instinctual animal to human unconscious and aims to subvert the general attitude that essentially regards man as a superior species.

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