

# The Exploration of Human Alter Ego in Animals: An Evaluation of Ted Hughes's Animal Poems

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## Abstract

Ted Hughes, inarguably one of the greatest poets of the 20th century, occupies an unparalleled position in contemporary English poetry chiefly because of his poetics of animal imagery that has so far been approached from different perspectives. This paper focuses on Hughes's representative poems and puts forth the theory that his *arts poetica* actually develops from two simultaneous feelings, firstly his conviction in pristine animal energy, and secondly, his disillusionment about the humanization of man through the suppression of his primeval energy. These diametrical feelings make Hughes speak in favour of the suppressed elements of the psyche which alone promise resilience in the face of uncaring reality. Hughes thinks the civilizing ideologies actually result in the subversion of the primal imperviousness of the alter ego which is spontaneously manifested in non-human beings. A corollary of this paper is that Hughes's signature poems encompassing 'The Hawk in the Rain', 'The Jaguar', 'Hawk Roosting', 'Pike', 'Snowdrop', 'Second Glance at a Jaguar' etc. and the Crow Poems make more sense when studied with reference to human alter ego represented through the poet's conscious delineation of non-human instincts.

**Keywords:** Ted Hughes, animal imagery, primal instincts, alter ego

In the Hollywood film *Hulk* (2003) and its sequel *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), Hulk, the male protagonist functions as the alter ego of Bruce Banner, a socially withdrawn and precocious

atomic physicist who physically transforms into a living behemoth under some negative emotional stress. This alter ego imperceptibly inhabiting in Banner's personality appears as the personification of rage and pure stamina which ordinary people around him watch in fright and cannot but cringe as Banner the vulnerable human figure switches to Hulk the indomitable monster. It is as if the monstrosity is hidden as the alter ego of Banner and can be called to action under circumstances. Both the films seem to suggest that the vulnerability of humans can be balanced with something non-human. Actually, the idea of superheroes in film industries across the world dominates public imagination to the extent that monstrosity has acquired metaphorical dimensions of all that is good and evil. As a whole, 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 (Sharma and Sharma, 2015). Ted Hughes's representative animal poems (or poems illustrating animal instincts) like 'The Thought-Fox', 'The Hawk in the Rain', 'The Jaguar', 'Hawk Roosting', 'Tiger-Psalm', 'Pike', 'Snowdrop', 'And the Falcon Came', 'Second Glance at a Jaguar' 'Thrushes', etc. and the Crow Poems anthologized in his successive poetry collections celebrate the dark forces and vivacity of nature and animal world. These might be the "couple of dozen poems" that, Anthony Thwaite (2003) projects in his review of Hughes's *Collected Poems* (2003), "will last a long time" because of their "not enough smell of the human—too much messing-about with myths and magic". Through these poems, Hughes explores an alter ego impervious to the contrary rules and manifested by animals and birds and this alter ego, as Hughes thinks, is essentially an aspect of human nature that remains suppressed in conformity with external reality. Disappointed by man's disposition to conceal the primal attributes and more by his epiphany of human vulnerability to natural forces, Hughes turned to non-human life forms for the unrestrained expressions of inner power, for the independent alter ego immanent in the Jungian unconscious that he seems to have always craved for in his early years. This realization follows an unprecedented psychosomatic impact, which, he admits in a letter to his sister Olwyn Hughes, has made his existence "confined & stunted". In this letter from the late summer of 1962, Hughes frankly regrets the inextricable dichotomy of his self: "What I am is completely a consequence of certain ideas which I arrived at quite rationally & imposed like laws" (Hughes 2007, p. 204). To him, both religious belief and rationality in different ways are destructive to man's unity with nature (Madhukumar, 2011). This distancing from the natural world causes a rift between the conscious apparent and the unconscious intrinsic.

In the dichotomy of conscious and unconscious, man cannot thrust aside what comes from the external reality. Thus his dualistic intervention results in a rather vulnerable state which denies resilience and survival. In other words, the sense of despair about the consequences of external intervention with the spontaneous self has made Hughes aware of the unbridled spirit of animals that exhibit the best exemplars of vitality, resilience and survival. Exempt from institutional rules, Hughes' animals are as they are, roving with regalia. But human life in the era of civilization is under the sway of codes and conducts that fundamentally require suppression of the primal self, resulting in a division between his natural instincts and cultural ego.

In view of this realization about limitations and weaknesses imposed on man by civilization, Hughes's self-consciousness seems to be like that of Jake Sully in the film *Avatar* (2009). A paraplegic former marine, Jake is seen watching intently a sprightly fight, as the movie opens, between two tigers that probably makes him more aware of his physical handicap. Eventually he overcomes his disability, though not in his human form, as he eventually agrees to take on an avatar to appear among the Na'vi, 10-foot tall, blue-skinned, sapient humanoids who live in harmony with nature and worship a mother goddess called Eywa. The alter ego Jake gains in his avatar of the Na'vi figure – a human mind in an alien body activated – gives him the only chance to overcome his lameness. Vis-à-vis, Hughes' simultaneous awareness of human weaknesses and his witnesses of animals flourishing in their original spirits converge at a certain point where the first person "I" can be taken for the poet himself. Hughes himself too considers of his poems as some sorts of animals. In his edited work *Poetry in the Making* (1967), he says 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 (p. 15).

Thus, the confined self of the poet seeks its avatar in poems which are analogous to animals so that only an animal or a poem boasts an indivisible existence and the poet's self is regrettably stripped of his more genuine alter ego by his civilizing ideas. Therefore, we find Hughes discontented with the kind of humanness generally dignified by the suppression of inner forces for outer refinement and embracement of restrictions, and eventually turns to the exemplars of the genuine strength of life – the animals. He believes the more suppressed an evil, the more devilish it becomes. Thus while animals revel in their pristine energy instinctively, man suppresses it and makes a devil of it. When man's alter ego surfaces at the cue, it becomes far more destructive. In 'Tiger-Psalm', Hughes shows that the tiger limits itself to biological desiderata whereas the modern killing machine is geared to the barbaric act of killing in undetermined numbers:

The tiger  
 Kills frugally, after close inspection of the map.  
 The machine-guns shake their heads,  
 They go no chattering statistics.  
 The tiger kills by thunderbolt:  
 God of his own salvation.  
 The machine-guns  
 Proclaim the Absolute, according to morse,  
 In a code of bangs and holes that makes men frown. ('Tiger-Psalm':  
 8-16)

There is a contrast between killing instincts of the human being who mows down lives in great numbers with his machine-guns and that of the tiger that zeros in on its biological need for killing. While proclivity to kill as an alter ego remains repressed in the human unconscious but erupts with the direst consequences, killing is a conscious, limited act of necessity for the beast.

Remarkably enough, Hughes' inclination towards animals and their instincts is manifested in his earlier poems where he celebrates the unyielding nature of animals. He thinks the alter ego embodying vitality and imperviousness lies in the deep recess of the personal unconscious located at the fringe of consciousness, and the preeminence of this facet culminates in the creation of expressions. His credence that the precedence of his unconscious would "compensate with an increased activity" is manifested in 'The Thought-Fox' which is considered to be his *ars poetica* entwining "the *act* of writing with the *action* of the animal written about" (Webb, 2013, p. 35). He sits in the midnight 'beside the clock's loneliness' with a blank page and conjures up the fox 'deeper within darkness' culminating in an animal-poetry synergy:

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. ('The Thought-Fox': 21-24)

As the poem progresses, the fox emerges gradually from obscurity to conspicuousness from the dark unconscious mind of the poet and gets a more concrete shape, in a printed form so that it eventually pervades the eidetic structure of Hughes' consciousness, manifesting the poet's own alter ego in parenthetical distinctness, which he admits candidly: "...every time I read the poem the fox comes up again out of the darkness and steps into my head. And I suppose that long after I am gone, as long as a copy of the poem exists, every time anyone reads it the fox will get up somewhere out in the darkness and come walking towards them (qtd. in Lawless, 2009, Pp. 11-12). The ubiquitous accompaniment of the fox with each reading of the poem after its inceptive descent from the darkness into the conscious, into the language, facilitates for the poet the analogical apprehension of 'the other' – the alter ego – as Husserl's phenomenological philosophy, discovers it in light of live experience:

My alter ego is all of those accidental empirical qualities that I bracket off in order to uncover the eidetic structure of my consciousness. In addition, my alter ego is all of those possibilities that I imagine for myself that allow me to delineate my sphere of ownness. I am who I am by virtue of my relation with my own ego. It is through a fundamental split in my ego that I am. It is through a process of disowning the alter ego that I intuit my ownness. In order to apperceive another, I merely reproduce this experience of disowning to redefine myself, my ownness, in relation to my alter ego. The alter ego is not only "demonstrated precisely within the experiencing intentionality of my ego" in the sense that it is constituted through a relationship with my ego, but also in the sense that it is experienced in the intuition of my ego itself. (qtd. in Oliver, 1998, p. 138)

The alter ego immanent in Hughes' personal unconscious is equidistant between the exterior or spatial world and the interior or psychic objective world (Ellenberger, 1970) and is confirmed both by his intentionality in perceiving the animals and, at the same time, by his awareness of the sophisticated ego that he as a social being has to maintain in the external reality. Apparently, he is a citizen of the civilized world, but deep in his heart he fosters the desire to be adamant and resilient like the animals that he comes across. The contrasted realizations are especially noted in 'The Hawk in the Rain', where the speaker feels his weaknesses in the face of nature's rage in comparison with the sustainability of the hawk:

I drown in the drumming ploughland, I drag up  
Heel after heel from the swallowing of the earth's mouth,  
From clay that clutches my each step to the ankle  
With the habit of the dogged grave, but the hawk  
Effortlessly at height hangs his still eye.  
His wings hold all creation in a weightless quiet,  
Steady as a hallucination in the streaming air. ('The Hawk in the Rain': 1-7)

In this poem, "I" suggests a kind of individual consciousness about the speaker's discovery of the effervescent self in and reminds him of his effete self as he sets his expressions "I drown" against "the hawk hangs" in time of such life-threatening natural phenomena as man-devouring wet earth from excessive precipitation and thrashing storms. The theme of this poem is the contrast between human weakness and animal's vivacity. At the same environmental context while the poet is walking laboriously on the ground, a hawk perched at higher and higher ignoring the heavy rainfall and storm. It is essentially contrasting that during storm a man fights against the mud on earth, feeling afraid lest he would be swallowed by the ground. The implication is that during danger man seeks shelter but animals like hawk shows courage to overcome and face it. In case of the speaker in 'The Hawk in the Rain', we can feel his emotions - a combination of envy, reverence and awe to his own circumstances in relation to that of the hawk, if we get at his point of view as a "sea drowner" and his description of the hawk as both a hanger of a polestar of endurance and will power and having "wings (that) hold all creation in a weightless quiet. The speaker definitely yearns for the freedom, power and peace that the hawk seemingly possesses. Walder (1985) asserts that through all the poems called animal poems, Hughes celebrates the pristine energy of his animals, birds or fishes to create a reference to "human suffering, creativity and survival". Walder continues: "If Hughes explores 'extreme' emotions in his poetry, he does so under the pressure of a vision which is constantly aware of the massive ebb and flow of natural forces underlying all life" (p.91).

In 'Hawk Roosting', the poet possesses the shape and mentality of a resting hawk and declares his control over the world with perfect satisfaction. Sitting on the top of a tree he expresses:

I took the whole of Creation  
 Produce my foot, my feather:  
 Now I hold Creation in my foot  
 Or fly up, and revolve it all slowly-  
 I kill where I please because it is all mine.  
 There is no sophistry in my body;  
 My manners are tearing off heads-('Hawk Roosting': Lines 10-16)

He directly flies to his prey, pierces with his beak and claws and kills his prey. Besides the hawk assumes that he is the center of all creations, means all have been created to satisfy his hunger. The hawk also confesses that he has none of men's 'falsifying dream', no self-deception or doubt like men. Rawson (1965) regards 'Hawk Roosting' as a glorification of totalitarianism and fascism. His hawk in "Hawk Roosting" is taken as a symbol of fascism. However, in an interview with Faas (1971), Hughes attributes Nature complex in its mechanism to the whole situation of hawk versus human. Hughes continues:

I intended some Creator like Jehova in Job but more feminine, when Christianity kicked the devil out of Job what they actually kicked out was Nature . . . and Nature became the devil. He does not sound like Isis, mother of gods, which he is. He sounds like Hitler's familiar spirit. There is a line in the poem almost verbatim from Job (Faas, 1971, p. 8).

Therefore, the hawk is a spokesman for nature and he is vastly superior to men who are victims of self-deception and dissociation. Similarly, in the poem 'And the Falcon Came', the falcon boasts of "gunmetal feathers" that "would not falter." The regality of the falcon masters seems to be capable of "dividing the mountain, of hurling the world away behind him," "of grasping complete the crux of rays," and also of "plucking out the ghost/And feeding it to his eye-flame." The falcon radiates strength and determination to reform reality as per its convenience:

Of stripping down the loose, hot flutter of earth  
 To its component parts  
 For the reconstitution of Falcon. ('And the Falcon Came': 15-17)

In his eulogy of the animal spirit, Hughes is constantly aware of man's weaknesses in natural circumstances. He regrets that man's pursuit of rationality has the power that cannot be contained or exhibited as a human being becomes compatible with non-human beings that intrinsically enjoy freedom of action in the fullest measure. This power and resilience Hughes conceived in the separate world of animals whose unrestrained behavioral traits actually embody human alter egos lie repressed in the unconscious in conformity with civilizing theories, which eventually leads to depraved conditions and hence the concealment of original characteristics under the veneer of sophistication.

Such man-animal contrast is seen in 'Pike' as well, where Hughes shows how human is different from the pike, a malevolent species of fish, act—while we are silent and with hair frozen on our heads, the fish lie 'too immense to stir'. In the poem 'Pike', there were three pikes in a glass jar and the strongest one of those three had eaten the other two, which were physically weaker and smaller than it. On another occasion, the speaker found one pike mercilessly killing another. In this poem the speaker describes pike with its brutal and vicious nature. By nature, a pike tries to establish itself superior to another which is deeply rooted by birth in every creature. And such survival and supremacy of animal world is supported by Darwinian determinism that one's strength determines another's fate; only the stronger can survive. Bentley (1998) asserts that in the poem 'Pike', the pike elaborates a similar intuition to the jaguar, but with more subtly and irony (p.16). Here brutal human alter egos are tantamount to the killers from the egg, with a malevolent aged grin characteristic of 'submarine delicacy and horror'. Equally impressed by the beauty of pike, Hughes evinces how in one simple, often overlooked animal exist two profundities of existence, the good and the bad, analogically implying that this duality or double standard nature can be camouflaged in human persona too. While trying to keep pikes as pets behind glass, to no avail, the poet discovered the cannibalistic lifestyle and gruesome aggressiveness in the wild fish.

Likewise, in 'The Jaguar', Hughes reads the untamed instincts of the jaguar locked in a cage at a zoo. The poet is in awe of the jaguar's briskness and rage perennially exhibited in defiance of confinement. While the apes are seen yawning out of fatigue or boredom; the parrots are busy showing off their colorful features to draw the attention of the visitors who might throw a nut towards them; and the boa-constrictor, a ferocious serpent is found motionless, the Jaguar, in its own merit, asserts his indomitable existence and presence 'hurrying enraged' in his case. Even the tiger and the lion of the zoo look tired and lethargic and perhaps they have lost faith in their inborn power. But the jaguar is full of optimism and tenacity to break free of his physical captivity and exhibits his bestial furies to the crowd that stands and stares. The jaguar is careless of his confinement and he denies the existence of any case around him. Actually, Hughes' s animal poems with 'The Jaguar' in question "are more open to the charge of naïve anthropomorphism precisely because their tendency to melodramatic, all-too-human, insistence on the inhuman; a point Costello goes on to acknowledge in commenting on the ultimately ideal, or Platonic, significance of Hughes' jaguar" (Bell, 2006, p. 178).

In another animal poem, 'Thrushes', the birds' (small to medium-sized ground living birds that feed on insects) legs are elusive but the poet discovers their 'dark deadly eye', swift movement and single-minded purpose in action. When they see their prey, they indulge in no indecisiveness, no laziness and no postponing and think of nothing except the target prey. The poet compares their efficiency of preying with that of sharks not inclined towards fame or appreciation. Their swiftness and action contrast with man's habit of planning, thinking and patience, means they are indeed different from an average man who spends years before working on an action. Here Hughes's obsession is clear for the exploration of swiftness, energy and efficiency as alter egos of human. Furthermore, Hughes posits the inner world as the



receptacle of dispositions, the source of motion and vitality – a world that humans suppress as if it did not exist. Hughes' point is that to suppress the beastly vigor means to become subject to lurking detrimental forces.

There is a shared nature between the human and animal world, and such discovery becomes more conspicuous with the view of poet himself regarding his poetry, "I think of poems as a sort of animals", (Hughes, 1967, p. 15). This concept is mirrored by BBC poetry (2013) where it is said that Hughes poetry attempts to more sense of human world forced by primitive and animal forces. Though animals are denizens of their own world generally characterized by what is not human, they were of tremendous importance to Hughes from the beginning, living representatives of another world, 'the true world' (Sagar, 1983, Pp. 2-13). Hughes took up poetry as the expression of whatever humanly characteristics he figured out in non-human beings. Hughes' inclination to non-human beings representing the suppressed elements in the human unconscious signifies his interspecies awareness speculating attributive similarities between the species.

However, Hughes does not point out the genesis of similarities of basic instincts of humans and non-humans; rather he appreciates animal's obdurate, resilient, and resistive faces that, he believes, can be developed in the human personality too. He refers to the pristine energy that promises resilience if let unbridled against external adversities and threats. This energy is underpinned by the animal instincts lying in the inner world of humans but invariably finding paradigmatic expressions in the behaviors of animals.

In his academic novella *The Lives of Animals*, Coetzee (1999) introduced his focalized character, Elizabeth Costello, as committed to the freedom of animals, who professes exploiting Descartes' dictum "Cogito ergo sum": "To be alive is to be a living soul. An animal—and we are all animals—is an embodied soul" (p. 33). She further points out that Hughes shows us how to bring the living body into being within ourselves (p. 53). When we read the jaguar poem, when we recollect it afterwards in tranquility, we are for a brief while the jaguar. He ripples within us, he takes over our body, and he is with us.

As Hughes undertook his exploration into "the tensions and connections between our inner nature and the external nature, in both of which he "believed that we must find a way to be at home" (Gifford, 2009, p. 7), he found that the basic human alter egos could be unveiled by analogizing the instincts of non-human living beings like a hawk, a jaguar and a fish with those of man. But as Hughes reveres stubborn survival against the odds (Morrison, 2011), he cannot accept the idea that man should check his genuine vitality for the sake of conformity to external rules of nature denying what comprises the real self. Because of the ignorance or suppression of pristine stamina, man has been rendered vulnerable to hardships and weaknesses that come to shape his existence as a passive being. Matheikal (2007) illustrates Hughes saying:



That modern man has lost faith in the old rituals and dogma but has not found any alternative which can contain the violent energy. Hence, he suppresses this energy into the deep resources of the unconscious by different means such as rationalization and philosophisation. The more suppressed an evil, the more devilish it becomes. Thus, while animals revel in their pristine energy instinctively, man suppresses it and makes a devil of it. (p. 138)

The savage and homicidal self-exposed in Hughes' animal poems is what lies in the unconscious that sometimes invokes in man intolerance and aggression towards others.

Hughes' adoration for the obdurate human alter ego found in animals is undermined by criticism of his delineation of the images of violence. Hughes seems to make it clear that animals do not harbor bellicosity out of deliberate malice as humans do. Even like humans, the animals have never learnt to suppress their unyielding, aggressive inner self. Ingrained in their nature is the will to challenge adversities, to wander in the horizon of freedom, and to respond to their Thanatos—the force that negates all such attempts to establish boundaries separating individual from self from Atman (Zimmerman, 1994, p. 104). Hughes' point is that the suppressed human alter egos are spontaneously manipulated by animals like the jaguar and the hawk—all endowed with Thanatos, which we all carry within us (Sorrell, 2009, p. 104) but which we cannot utilize for our own protection. Therefore, Hughes ultimately search salvation for human through the spirit of non-humanistic creatures and uses animals as metaphor.

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